

# BE A PART OF IT!

An Itinerary in urban planning tourism



Some buildings prefer to be left alone. Malls, gated communities, and corporate compounds are self-isolating spatial creatures facilitating selective memory loss and escape. As they choreograph their physical and psychological exit strategies from the urban fabric, they invite some of us to retreat to their enclosed environs to forget and to indulge. I accepted their invitations. I went to India to study the emerging landscapes of shopping malls, corporate enclaves and luxury gated residences and their promises for better living. Pune's gated villas enticed me to invest in a home where I could "say ciao" and "live life the Italian way." A corporate charter bus delivered me to the Special Economic Zone of Electronic City on the outskirts of Bangalore, where a Silicon-Valley-style campus of palm trees, food courts, and other mall-like amenities

encapsulate employees. And while riding the escalators of Mumbai's Inorbit Mall, posters instructed me to experience such care-free consumer bliss as to forget my family: "Lose Yourself. Perhaps even your kids."

Like their global counterparts, these Indian lifestyle oases frame shoppers as tourists, residences as resorts, work as play and in general, the everyday as a perpetual vacation. As a visitor to these islands, I capitalized on their amenities, lexicon and captive audiences to devise a form of lifestyle research tourism. I worked with the Urban Design Research Institute and Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action and Research to design communication platforms for the public to speculate on the future of Mumbai in time to influence the 2011 master plan. To do this, I studied the billboards, advertisements and programming of themed leisure and residential enclaves and appropriated their lexicon as a tool to activate discussion. I worked with student researchers to develop a series of postcards and card games that invite the public to share their aspirations for the built environment. I invited teenagers hanging out at The Phoenix Mills Shopping Mall to test the card games, and facilitated discussions about shopping malls and their role in the City. I launched a postcard and web-based advertising campaign for the re-conceptualization of one of the City's parks as an eco mall, in order to lure mall patrons to visit the much under-visited nature park. Each intervention aimed to encourage the public to evaluate the role of privatized-public spaces in fragmenting the City and propose ways in which the new master plan could meet the needs of residents without furthering spatial, social and economic fractures. I offer the following snapshots of research



interventions in the format of a tourist's travelogue – an itinerary that can hopefully be applied to lifestyle research in other global cities. More documentation, downloadable games, and recommended real estate interventions are available at [betterthanliving.com](http://betterthanliving.com).

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#### SUNDAY, JUNE 1, 2008

Went to India.

#### SATURDAY, JUNE 3, 2008

Drank chai and bought a copy of the Hindustan Times. Read the article "No time for nature, Mumbai is at the Mall," comparing the paltry number of park visitors to the thousands of Mumbaikers spending their weekends at shopping mall. Noted the laments of P.N. Munde, forest conservator and park director, "The media is not doing enough to promote these places." Decided to make an un-commissioned ad campaign for the Maharashtra Nature Park.

#### SATURDAY, JUNE 7, 2008

Compared real trees with lifestyle trees.

#### FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 2008

Visited an authentic English home.

Rode the corporate charter bus to Electronic City.

Visited the headquarters of an IT company. Walked past

the Newton conference room and yoga studio. Drank two lattes in the food court and tried on jeans at the company store. Was instructed by security not to take photos. Had lunch at Springville – an "authentic English village." Took a tour of a model home on Cornwallis Street. Took site photos. Was chauffeured back to Bangalore by the realtor's driver. Listened to the driver describe the extinct farmlands that have been replaced by suburbs. Passed billboards telling me to "stop dreaming of a home when a kingdom awaits me."

#### FRIDAY, JUNE 20, 2008

Discovered more.

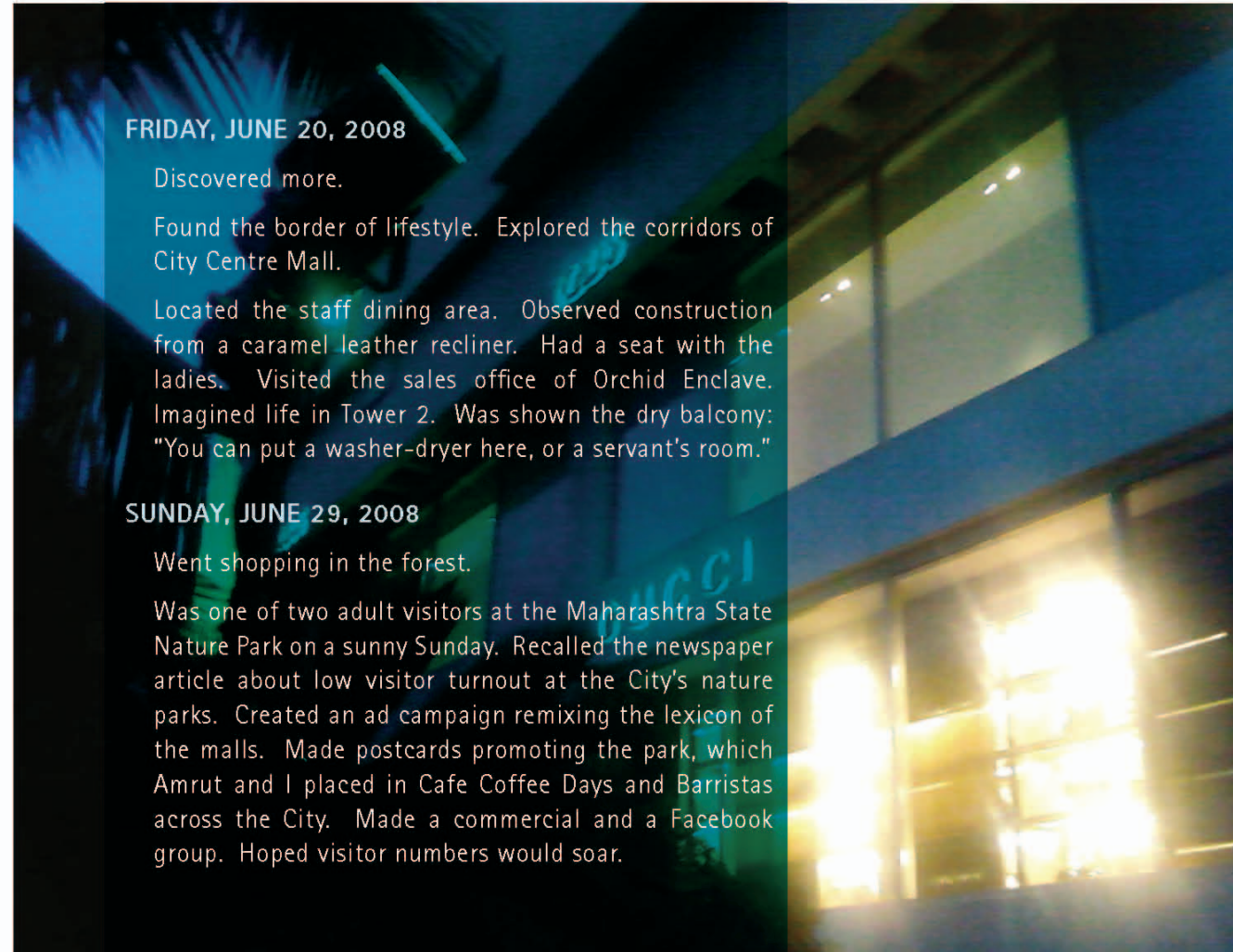
Found the border of lifestyle. Explored the corridors of City Centre Mall.

Located the staff dining area. Observed construction from a caramel leather recliner. Had a seat with the ladies. Visited the sales office of Orchid Enclave. Imagined life in Tower 2. Was shown the dry balcony: "You can put a washer-dryer here, or a servant's room."

#### SUNDAY, JUNE 29, 2008

Went shopping in the forest.

Was one of two adult visitors at the Maharashtra State Nature Park on a sunny Sunday. Recalled the newspaper article about low visitor turnout at the City's nature parks. Created an ad campaign remixing the lexicon of the malls. Made postcards promoting the park, which Amrut and I placed in Cafe Coffee Days and Barristas across the City. Made a commercial and a Facebook group. Hoped visitor numbers would soar.









## FRIDAY, JULY 4, 2008

Visited the "Citi of Joy."

Entered model apartments for "Bliss," "Happiness," and "Hurrah." Learned that "podium gardens" are the playground of choice for the new middle class. Gazed through barred windows at the "labor camp" adjacent to the foundation pit for "Cheer." Wondered which one is more of a prison (the luxury towers or the worker tents?). Smiled because people were living there.

## FRIDAY, JULY 11, 2008

Dreamt the Destination.

Climbed the malls of Navi Mumbai. Visited an Indian Village-themed Indian restaurant. Did not touch the animals. Ate "crazy corn." Felt forever. Hopped over the torn-up sidewalks (demolished by developers installing infrastructure for new IT offices, residences, and more malls). Imagined gliding along the smooth streets presented in renderings parallel to the real-time, pockmarked footpath.

## THURSDAY, JULY 24, 2008

Made postcards that asked the public to envision the city life in 2011.

Addressed them to the Bombay Municipal Corporation, bought stamps, and distributed them to street cleaners.

## FRIDAY, AUGUST 1, 2008

Went to Phoenix Mills Mall. Used Barrista and McDonalds as my research lab. Invited teenagers to play card games speculating on the future of their City. Collected

their drawings of what would replace the mall in 2011. Watched them trade cards with renderings of luxury towers for those with park benches and baskets of mangos. Received a free pocketknife with my McVeggie meal.

## SATURDAY, AUGUST 2, 2008

Went home.

