

# OLD PORT TRUST

lands on the rock



reprinted from <http://www.indiatogether.org/2008/aug/gov-eastern.htm>  
with permission from the author

When it comes to public space, Mumbai is the worst off among Indian cities. This was amply demonstrated during the protracted controversy over land belonging to cotton mills, the final chapter of which is now being written. These lands sprawled over 600 acres, and rightfully, nearly 400 acres should have been surrendered to the city for public housing and amenities such as parks and schools. However, only a fraction of this has come to the city.

But an even bigger opportunity presents itself in the eastern waterfront, which was the subject of a half-day workshop organised by the Urban Development Research Institute (UDRI) at the Max Mueller Bhavan on 23 August. This mostly derelict land, which belongs to the Mumbai Port Trust (MPT), is nearly three times bigger – some 1860

acres. What is more, since it fronts the eastern coast of the island city, it has potentially multiple uses – among them, connections to the mainland and the new international airport, recreation, open space as well as some residential and office construction.

However, as participants at the workshop realised, there are two major problems with this “area of darkness”. One is that it is severed from the public imagination: no one is even aware that the docks occupy a full third of the island city. Since it is not accessible to the public, it doesn’t enter the public consciousness as an area which is potentially available for use. This was also partly true of land belonging to mills: the public perceived the redevelopment of this land as an issue involving the government, owners and unions, and was not aware that it had a stake in it. Environmentalists, collectively, have to accept their share of the blame for not communicating to citizens at large what Mumbai has lost.

The other problem with the eastern waterfront, which is more complex, is that it is by no means clear whom one has to engage with to intervene in this process. The MPT comes under the central government’s Shipping Ministry (similarly, a minority of the 54 mills belonged to the National Textile Corporation, which is more circumspect about redeveloping its land according to the rules, unlike private mill owners). The MPT believes that it doesn’t have any land to spare, because it is going in for major expansion. In any case, it takes the view that its land is for it to dispose of as it sees fit.

The state government has actually opposed the expansion of the ‘old’ port, on the ground that the city needs the space.

( Darryl D'Monte )



It is concerned about a freeway that can pass through this land, providing another north-south axis. The Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC) is already far advanced in planning a 22-km-long Trans-Harbour Sea Link, which would connect Sewri in the docklands with Nhava-Sheva where the new Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) has come up on the mainland across the harbour. When this bridge is built, there will be need for what was formerly called the East Island Freeway to take traffic in and out of the island city.

The state government last year also staked its claim to the dock land for rehousing over 100,000 people who will be displaced by various infrastructure projects in the city. This is for 'mass housing' for slum dwellers whose homes have been demolished.

The MPT seems to be in no mood to listen to any such demands. It is hell-bent on building a huge offshore container terminal. It currently has a low draught, which is why it cannot handle large container ships, unlike JNPT. This is why it is trying to solve this by building a facility offshore, where the draught will be deeper. Last year, MPT officials claimed that it was on the verge of handling a record 50 million tonnes of cargo and that "the port is very much alive and kicking". It also wants a cruise terminal for luxury liners.

According to studies conducted by the Kamala Raheja School of Architecture and UDRI, at least 45 per cent of the 1860 acres is not presently being used or is severely underutilised. What is more, the overall built-up area is small, with a floor-space index (FSI) in the Wadala Estate, for example, of only 0.17. The permissible FSI in this area is 1.33, which gives an idea of its commercial potential. Moreover, the port land has been leased in the past to outsiders under various archaic provisions. These range from 15 months and longer; some

have been renewed for 33 years. Incongruously, huge firms like Hindustan Lever and Tata Cotton Mills were allowed to function on this land.

In all, half the land would easily be available, since it is being put to use which has nothing to do with the port. Even recently, firms have sought to lease dock properties, which demonstrates that they have seen its value.

As the UDRI workshop underlined, there are also environmental considerations. One is simply the availability of space for recreation. Since it looks east, it is not subject to the full fury of the south-west monsoon and, what is more, it is located close to the highly congested parts of the island city which are urgently in need of 'lungs' for the residents.

There is also little concern for the effluents which are regularly being dumped into the water along the docks. There are a host of informal recycling industries, including the salvage of ships, located in the port area, which spew out hazardous effluents. As participants at the workshop underlined, any plan for the redevelopment of the area ought to take into consideration the relocation of such units, as well as the rehabilitation of the remaining dock workers.



This mostly derelict land has potentially multiple uses - among them, connections to the mainland and the new international airport, recreation, open space as well as some residential and office construction (Picture credit: P K Das and Associates)

Mumbai, which ranks as the world's top metropolis so far as its homelessness is concerned, with a full 55% of its 16 million people living in slums, cannot possibly allow such unbridled commercial redevelopment on the last major tract of land that it possesses.

In Mumbai, the problem of tackling the redevelopment of the eastern waterfront is vitiated by the total absence of any semblance of planning. The Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority, which is the apex planning body, has either by default or design not been consulted on or involved in this issue. Indeed, the very fact that the Trans-Harbour Sea Link, like the links on the west coast and the 50 odd fly-overs, has been conceived and executed by the MSRDC, which should only be a construction agency, speaks volumes for the irrelevance to which MMRDA has been relegated.

UDRI plans to hold a full-fledged conference to discuss the eastern waterfront in March next year. This ought to engage with planners and experts, not least elected representatives who are concerned about this vital strip of land in the county's commercial capital. The conference should present comprehensive technical and environmental studies, for which institutes like the IIT and Tata Institute of Social Sciences can be involved.

For instance, the offshore container terminal may involve extensive dredging and it may make more sense to expand container facilities at other ports along the west coast of the country like Kandla. This is all the more imperative, considering that the bulk of goods that come to and out of the old port is not meant for Mumbai at all but elsewhere in the country. The use of hundreds of trucks to transport these goods daily creates tremendous traffic jams and environmental hazards.

There is no question that the issue deserves to be thrown open for larger public discussion, so that all the stakeholders - the MPT, state government, municipal corporation, dock workers, urban planners and environmental groups - are consulted. As it happens, there is an international precedent for this, which representatives of the real estate industry at

the UDRI workshop made complimentary references to. This was the 22 sq km Docklands, a derelict part of east London, which Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher threw open to private builders and dispensed with any planning process worth the name. While it has, after many hiccups, become the symbol of a resurgent high-rise international finance centre - London's famed 'City', with iconic buildings like Canary Wharf - it is criticised for neglecting the needs of the former residents.

Mumbai, which ranks as the world's top metropolis so far as its homelessness is concerned, with a full 55 per cent of its 16 million people living in slums, cannot possibly allow such unbridled commercial redevelopment on the last major tract of land that it possesses. The public deserves to get a fair deal here, to compensate for what was lost in the mill lands.

At the UDRI workshop, the real estate consultants Jones, Lang, LaSalle Meghraj and builders Hiranandani and Raheja, waxed eloquent about the need for 'public-private partnerships' for the eastern waterfront, but their record in Mumbai and other cities shows that they are more often than not the problem rather than the solution.