Mahatma Gandhi Road, or MG Road, is one of the busiest thoroughfares in Dharavi. Photograph: Niccoló Morgan Gandolfi

Dharavi, in the heart of Mumbai, is supposed to represent the quintessential Asian slum. Crowded streets and busy markets; domestic workshops cheek by jowl with sweatshops producing both real and fake Pepe jeans; brick houses rising as high as their microscopic footprints allow; high-rises mushrooming here and there like gigantic shacks; schools in Kannada, Tamil, Hindi, English, Marathi, Urdu and other languages, usually with more than 50 pupils per class; temples of every Buddhist and Hindu denomination; flamboyant mosques so crowded that people have to pray on the streets during *namaz*; old churches with full congregations – remnants of the region's seventeenth-century Portuguese history – and new evangelical missions converting low-caste Hindus by the dozen; community toilets that double up as marriage halls; piles of garbage waiting to be picked over by scavengers; open drains running along narrow back streets; thousands of water pipes branching off in every direction.

Dharavi invariably confuses those eager to capture its reality in shorthand. Visitors looking for an essence of the place often land on its edges and corners, in spots that most Dharavi residents themselves have seen only on TV. They may be rewarded for their intrepidness by the sight of barefoot children walking on water pipes against the obligatory backdrop of garbage – a cliché that resonates so powerfully with familiar discourses on poverty and inequality that it obliterates the depth and complexity of the place. Dharavi is diverse and rapidly transforming, and it deceives as much as it overwhelms. It is an enigma that cannot be resolved by simply labelling it one thing or the other.

From the rooftop of Mohan Kanle's two-storey house, the neighbourhood seems part of the immutable story of urbanism, recalling medieval Italian towns, Istanbul's bazaars, the by-lanes of Benares, old Delhi, Guangzhou's urban villages and even Tokyo's dense residential suburbs. From this vantage point, it seems embedded

in the shadow history of human settlements anywhere in the world where planning and control give way to incremental and small-scale development. In some parts, one sees hundreds of low-rise structures so tightly packed that they appear to share one single cement-sheet roof. No wonder urban designers and architecture students love to imagine bridges connecting all of these houses, with new roofs acting as public spaces and gardens.

Mohan's house was built by his father in the early 1990s. Mumbai's extreme weather, with monsoon rain for four months and hot, saline air most of the year, has tested the limits of this humble structure. The roof has been leaking for a few years, forcing Mohan to install a shed as protection from the violent rains. About 18 people share seven rooms, which can be accessed from multiple entrances. The structure consists of a maze of connecting doorways and passages, and its uneven proportions are a legacy of its incremental growth. While not abnormally big for Dharavi, the house is larger than most others. There is no rule when it comes to the housing typology of Dharavi. Diversity is the only norm.

Mohan works with us. From our office in Dharavi we run URBZ,[1] an experimental platform for collaborative urban practices, and the Institute of Urbanology,[2] an urban planning and research studio. Our practice operates on the boundary between urban planning and anthropology, reflecting our own academic training. But more than anything else, we define ourselves as 'urbanologists'. To us, urbanology is the art and science of engaging with local processes and narratives, through collaboration with users. We believe that the inhabitants of a place are experts in their habitats.

http://www.urbz.net

http://www.urbanology.org

As followers of Patrick Geddes, Jane Jacobs, John FC Turner and Ivan Illich, we see ourselves as part of a tradition of activists and thinkers who are sceptical of grand urban gestures and meta-narratives of order and efficiency. These gestures tend to reduce rich and diverse

urban fabrics into simplistic plans, and typically favour technocratic and capitalist logics over local economies and incremental improvement. We are not, however, opposed in any way to architectural and urban creativity. One of our goals is to establish better communication between residents and local builders and professionals in the fields of architecture, planning and engineering. We think that professional and local expertise can be combined to produce outcomes that could never have been foreseen by any of the parties independently. And rather than advocating *laissez-faire*, we believe that the government has a responsibility to provide a high standard of services for every neighbourhood – regardless of its history or demographics – and to actively support local initiatives geared towards the improvement of habitat and society.

If that sounds like common sense, it is light-years away from what the government is planning for Dharavi. True, the situation is unusually complex. Dharavi is an expression of the best and the worst of what can happen when residents and 'users' have to take charge of the development of their habitats. This is the contrary reality we must engage with. And it is precisely because we felt that professionally trained architects and urbanists have so much to learn from user-generated neighbourhoods that we set up our office in Dharavi.

The office is located on the last stretch of Mahatma Gandhi Road, in New Transit Camp. The area was created to house people displaced in an earlier effort at transforming Dharavi, but since no one was able to decide on their final destination the residents stayed put, many others moved in, and the area took on a life of its own. The street is lined by trees planted by our landlord, who arrived here 30-odd years ago from the southern state of Kerala. His house – acquired from one of the original residents of the camp – is used as both a family home and a source of revenue. Besides our office, the incrementally expanded three-storey structure now contains a communications centre, a soft-drinks shop, a Chinese fast-food

restaurant, three families and an embroidery workshop, which doubles up as a dormitory by night.

Deafening music often blasts from Ambedkar Community Hall across the street, congratulating newly weds or celebrating traditional festivals from Ganpati to Eid Ul Fitar or Christmas. Right next to the hall is a gym used by Schwarzenegger-wannabes, a karambol parlour, a Tamil temple, a fish market, a busy public toilet and a garbage dump that is not regularly serviced. A municipal truck periodically picks up the accumulated garbage, but we often have to tiptoe around piles of organic and inorganic waste. Incidentally, this up-close acquaintance with garbage is a fact of life even in middle-class areas of Mumbai, especially near local railway stations and bazaars. In Dharavi you have the same DNA of crowds, the same density and intertwining of human lives, that you find in the city's older neighbourhoods or in small towns all over the country – only perhaps in more concentrated form.

Knowing this, we started wondering how the subtle differences between Dharavi and other parts of Mumbai got magnified to create a narrative about the *Great Slum* – one that belongs to Mumbai but at the same time remains firmly outside it. Even after decades of debate and reporting, Dharavi remains in the popular imagination an anachronistic collection of temporary shacks inhabited by migrants from Tamil Nadu and Bihar.

This image is far from the reality we have been observing, documenting and engaging with over the past seven years. It is as important to understand what is so special about Dharavi as it is to debunk its mythified image. But the issue is not just an intellectual or an academic one: there are immediate practical concerns to address, relating to the many proposals put forward by the government and developers for the makeover of Dharavi. A series of interventions has so far led nowhere, because no one has been willing to negotiate the many dimensions that make up Dharavi's complex fabric.

All talk of participation and people-centric planning has

remained at a superficial level. Every proposed 'solution' has ignored the vital fact that transforming Dharavi's appearance without engaging with its social and economic reality is a recipe for failure. It is our contention that any serious attempt at imagining Dharavi's future must begin with the recognition of its multi-faceted quality. Its diverse habitats, modes of subsistence and aspirations must not be bulldozed by a masterplan – even at a conceptual level. Nor can anyone continue to pretend that, after more than 100 years of growth and development, Dharavi is still an illegitimate zone populated by squatters.

This essay is about the lived experience of Dharavi and the particular ways its inhabitants have shaped their environments over the years. It is also a plea to all those who are involved in imagining the future of Dharavi to begin from a consideration of its morphology. The point is not to preserve Dharavi in its present form: on the contrary, the history of this place is one of constant change and adaptation. Rather than freezing Dharavi into a masterplan defined by speculative interests and old-school urban planning – which are biased, respectively, against its population and its spontaneous spatial arrangement – we must invent another model of urban development entirely. This model has at its centre the 'end-users', considered as 'generators' of urban form. In Dharavi the user-generated city is not a theoretical proposition, but a reality. And although this reality may be far from perfect and in need of professional engagement, it needs to be factored in as a starting point. While we are not laying out a specific methodology of engagement in this essay, we try to share our knowledge and experience of Dharavi. We also present concepts that we have generated in our efforts to make sense of its complexity.

Despite the ban on new construction, Dharavi's houses are constantly being repaired, expanded and rebuilt. Photograph: Niccoló Morgan Gandolfi

1. THE MAKING OF DHARAVI

Dharavi as we know it today is the product of a collision between history, bureaucratic pressures, political interests and a wildly expensive real-estate industry. A century ago the East Indian community owned significant amounts of land in Mumbai,[3] but their rights were gradually eroded by the state's land reform initiatives, which limited the size of holdings. Village commons and attached agricultural land were progressively sold off for redevelopment, or simply taken over by builders and local Mafiosi with the connivance of politicians. Instead of finding legitimate ways in which middle-class and poor communities could share subsidised land, the city's political elite and the builder-developer lobby created one of the most expensive real-estate territories in the world. The result was the growth of informal settlements all over Mumbai – some of them as big as Dharavi, if not bigger.

Locals converted to Christianity by the Portuguese, whose presence grew substantially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and overlapped with British rule. The name is not determined by geography, but is apparently a reference of loyalty to the East India Company, which ruled parts of the region.

Dharavi began to form around the fishing village of Koliwada in the late nineteenth century, when early settlers joined the existing Koli community. According to some accounts they were escaping – or being expelled from – a city in the grip of the plague. Mumbai's population was famously cosmopolitan, dominated by Parsis, the British rulers, Baghdadi and native Jews, along with a variety of Muslim communities and working classes from the Konkan region, among others. Dharavi was just as much a melting pot, but of poorer families from historically marginal communities. Many of its new inhabitants belonged to low-caste artisanal groups who settled in the marshy areas between Mahim, Sion and Matunga, in tracts of land deemed to be undesirable – and in some cases even uninhabitable –

because it allowed them to continue practising crafts that were considered polluting in one way or another. Communities involved with leather tanning and pottery were among the earliest migrants. A group of *Kumbhars* – traditional potters from Gujarat – were even given an official 99-year lease by the government in the late nineteenth century.

In 1924 the city's first Tamil-language school was set up in Dharavi by the Bombay Municipal Corporation, in response to the demands of local residents who belonged to what was then a stigmatised, though highly politicised, 'ex-untouchable' community from the southern state of Tamil Nadu. This move acknowledged that even marginalised migrant groups were upwardly mobile and set great store by formal education. For Dharavi's diverse communities, moving to the city and establishing a modern identity through work and education was a crucial mode of emancipation. At the same time they made the most out of their physical surroundings using every means at their disposal, constructing sacred spaces and homes and crafting new modes of livelihood, applying old techniques and styles but adapting them to a free and modern urban environment.

In the 1930s the government constructed chawls in Dharavi – barrack-like structures ostensibly intended to improve the housing conditions and hygiene of municipal workers. Tellingly, many of these workers belonged to similar social groups as the existing residents. The authorities' concerted efforts to keep the more destitute migrants out of the colonial city meant that Dharavi was saddled – deliberately or not – with housing ever-increasing numbers of poor migrant families from all over the country. In Dharavi, however, the newcomers encountered a relatively open atmosphere, a useful aid to survival in a modern city that had still not overcome its traditional hang-ups about caste.

Soon after political independence, India officially adopted Soviet-style planning strategies. Mumbai's colonial trading legacy, as a bustling, globally connected port, now became suspect. The

government frowned on entrepreneurial activity, which it saw as being motivated solely by profit, and the city's economic life became subject to stronger regulation. New laws prohibiting alcohol consumption and the circulation of large amounts of (tax-evading) cash opened up a whole new set of practices and narratives with messy complications. For example, Muslim communities with historical connections to overseas trading activities started to be accused of 'smuggling'. The culturally vibrant neighbourhoods in which they traditionally lived – such as Bhendi Bazaar or Mohammadali Road – were suddenly branded as 'dangerous'.

Dharavi also began to acquire a darker reputation around this time. Always perceived to exist on the frontiers of the colonial city, it now became – in the mindset of the police – a hotbed of criminal activity. These projections were mostly connected to its tradition of toddy tapping and alcohol brewing – which, in the age of prohibition, had become the basis of a grey economy that enmeshed everyone, from the police to local politicians.

In the late 1960s or early 1970s Dharavi acquired the dubious distinction of being labelled the largest slum in Asia. This was the period in which the economic aspirations of the neighbourhood – driven by its new schools, its settled families eager to embrace middle-class values, and its genuinely enterprising spirit – ran up against a wall of social prejudice. For the bureaucracy, the city elite and the media, the people of Dharavi were condemned to be eternally criminals or victims. What made them think they could change their lot? Dharavi was trapped between the well-intentioned but patronising welfare state (which made some moves to improve life for its residents), a suspicious civic bureaucracy (that did not take too kindly to its community-based enterprising energy) and an electoral democratic system in which it was seen as a voters' constituency (and always allowed to exist but never improve). The rest of the city saw it through a lens of caste prejudice or as a source of cheap labour.

Economic activities that nonetheless started to thrive in Dharavi

around this time included processing food, making clothes, embroidering, tanning leather (subsequently banned), producing leather goods and recycling the city's garbage. In 1971 the passing of the Slum Act, which promised deprived areas priority access to basic infrastructure, caused a short-lived stampede of settlements actively trying to get categorised as 'slum areas'. The Act also recognised occupancy as a right, which meant the government had to provide alternative housing options if it wanted to 'reclaim' land from occupants. Although this principle wasn't always respected, it did provide respite for many, since it made expropriation more costly for the government and private landowners.

From the late 1970s on the concept of the 'informal economy' became more prominent in development policies. A few of the surveys and academic accounts of the time even acknowledge Dharavi's economic contribution to the city – long before its famed enterprise came under the global spotlight. From time to time the state also invested money, to show it was doing its bit. In 1985 Rajiv Gandhi announced the Prime Minister's Grant Project (PMGP), an ambitious scheme for the redevelopment of the area. The budget of Rs100 crores (*c.*US$160,000) was spent on infrastructure and housing, but it was not enough to take the 'slum' out of Dharavi. To benefit from the PMGP scheme, residents had to be able to pay the construction costs of their new dwelling and to have been a registered voter by or before 1985. These were conditions that disqualified most.

From the mid-1980s, the authorities experimented with various World Bank-financed 'sites and services' and slum-upgrading schemes in many parts of Mumbai. During these years, tens of thousands of people benefited from policies that encouraged them to build their own dwellings on land that the state had equipped with basic infrastructure. Others were encouraged to form cooperative societies to qualify to lease the land they occupied – an effective way to give their residency a more permanent status without simply 'giving away'

the land or privatising it.[4] It is unclear whether any part of Dharavi benefited from these schemes, since the area was already under the PMGP. Generally, however, upgrading, retrofitting and user participation were part of a range of strategies deployed to rehabilitate slum areas.

The Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto advocated individual land titling for slum-dwellers, which has been criticised by the likes of Mike Davis and others for promoting speculative takeovers of small plots by real-estate developers. For a good summary of the thesis and critique of de Soto see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hernando_de_Soto_Polar#

By this time Dharavi was being mythologised by Indian cinema. One of its controversial figures, Vardarajan, a famed underworld leader, was first immortalised not by Bollywood – tellingly – but by Tamil cinema in the 1987 movie *Nayagan*. The Bollywood version, *Dayavan*, came out a year later and was a blockbuster hit. In 1991 another film, simply called *Dharavi*, portrayed the neighbourhood in a more complex and nuanced way, as a place that gave the poor some means of surviving in a brutal city.

From the 1990s onwards the Indian state increasingly gave up its socialist pretensions and began the process of liberalising the economy. For Mumbai this meant opening up the land to more development. Many more settlements had already grown around the city's new peripheries in the previous decade. As land became more expensive and real-estate speculation more lucrative, large-scale industrial production began to be dismantled. Depending on the ideological prejudices of the observer, this economic imbalance is blamed either on manipulative de-unionisation or on a rise in aggressive and overtly politicised unions. Either way, it pushed the city towards decentralised production practices and a growing informal economy in which settlements like Dharavi started to play a bigger role. At the same time, upgrading and self-help projects were abandoned as public land became too valuable for the poor to be

allowed to occupy it. Officials refused to regularise the situation of slum-dwellers, routinely referring to them as squatters and thieves even though the land they'd reclaimed had often been uninhabitable to start with.

The 'Slum Rehabilitation Scheme', launched in 1996, became the authorities' chief response to the challenge of improving the living conditions of slum-dwellers in Mumbai. Against a backdrop of heightened real-estate speculation, the new scheme encouraged private developers to clear areas the municipality classified as slums. In exchange for building high-rise housing blocks in which each eligible family received a free *c.*225-square-foot unit, they got valuable 'transferable building rights' on public land. The result was a toxic developer–government nexus and an explosion of land scams and corruption. An internally commissioned government report on the scheme described it as 'nothing but a fraud, designed to enrich Mumbai's powerful construction lobby by robbing both public assets and the urban poor'.[5]

Alternative Law Forum, Slum Policies, Part 3, 2011

In most cases, schemes of this sort also end up dividing the residents. Not everyone is eligible for free homes. Established residents, who have lived in a neighbourhood from the early phase of its growth, remain the main beneficiaries. The majority of residents – those who rent space as tenants and cannot prove older connections – are shunted out. For all practical purposes these schemes are less about rehabilitating slums and more about developing real estate for the market, with a minimum of local resistance. The quality of housing they produce is generally appalling, with new buildings quickly becoming less habitable than the slums they replace. Moreover, they erase the intricate enmeshing of economic activities and flexible construction practices characteristic of the older habitats and put in its place typologies – standardised blocks with little access to common spaces, streets and terraces – that make home-based livelihood practices virtually impossible.

From 2000 onwards, global players entered a fierce bidding war for the rights to redevelop Dharavi. An epic battle between diverse groups of residents, activists, developers and the government made the headlines week after week. Architecture studios from top-notch universities, prize-winning journalists, entertainers and other commentators all participated in the speculative frenzy that surrounded Dharavi and its future. The Dharavi Redevelopment Plan (or DRP) of 2004 imagined the construction of some 6,500,000m². By far the largest part of this – 3,700,000m² – was to be new residential and commercial space for sale. The remainder consisted of new facilities – housing, schools, parks – for the existing residents. But only those who had settled in Dharavi before 2001 were to benefit. And even then, each family was allocated only 25m².

Major players in this drama included a real-estate consultant who had made his fortune in New York, some of the city's best-known NGOs, Janus-faced political parties and various representatives of 'the people' from Dharavi and elsewhere. The DRP rode the wave produced by the real-estate boom that had, over a generation, made land that was once abandoned seem 'scarce' and thus now eminently valuable. The battles were fierce and intense, but ended with the credibility of the global consultant being severely scrutinised.

On the one hand, a consultant to the DRP asserted that: 'If a city has ever had a chance to reinvent itself, to make its mark on the international world, I believe that the process through which it will happen is through slum rehabilitation. The whole country is waiting and watching for the first bulldozer to go in and bulldoze those slums so they can start doing it in their cities, too. I think this is really a pilot project for the rest of India and maybe even the rest of the world, as far as slums are concerned.'[6] On the other hand, social commentators insisted that 'we have a tragic way of dealing with rehabilitation in this country. We believe that we need to take people out from where they are, put them into multi-storey buildings, consume that land, and hope that we've succeeded. The Dharavi issue

is not about relocation. It is about avarice. It is not about genuine benevolence. It's about greed.'[7]
Quote attributed to Shaan Mehta, from the MM Consultants group then working on the plan. Source:
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/asia-jan-june09-mumbai_04-07/
Ibid., quote by Suhel Seth, Journalist and Social Commentator.

Bhau Korde – a social activist and life-long resident of Dharavi who is also an adviser to URBZ and Urbanology – is not impressed with the redevelopment project. In his view it is just another way in which the people of Dharavi are exploited. The 'free flats' that the government is promising in exchange for their land come at a great hidden cost. Even the 'lucky' ones who qualify for a flat and move into the new scheme will be disconnected from communities that have consolidated over generations. Many will lose their livelihoods. 'Where will the local shops and workshops go when Dharavi's houses are replaced by skyscrapers? People in Dharavi have made it on their own. What they need is recognition and support – not a free house. Any plan for Dharavi should be about people's development, not land development', says Bhau.[8]
Bhau Korde, resident of Dharavi – private discussions.

While the city's activist groups remained unrelenting in their criticism, many people were seduced by the vision being unfolded in Powerpoint presentations. However, this dreamworld would collapse (and some local hopes soar) when the world economy imploded and several interested parties, including Lehman Brothers, went bankrupt. Unwilling to let go, the municipal government stepped in and through its official construction wing pushed for the redevelopment of Dharavi sector by sector.

Now no one knows what will become of Dharavi. The neighbourhood still plays a central role in the city's economy, in particular its manufacturing sector, which absorbs a huge workforce. It is also the place where the hundreds of thousands of low-wage workers who service the city (domestic staff, hosts in hotels and restaurants,

deliverymen, municipal workers, policemen and now, increasingly, white-collar workers in call centres and office jobs) find affordable accommodation.

Dharavi has improved incrementally over the years to become a self-confident working-class and lower-middle-class area. From the point of view of the new migrant, or that of the suburban slum-dweller, parts of Dharavi are even aspirational. It is, after all, a centrally located, superbly connected business hub with several municipal schools and dozens of private or NGO-run educational institutions. It has decent medical facilities and countless shrines and temples tailored to its fantastically diverse population. Over the years people have replaced their shacks with houses of brick and concrete, which often double as retail or production spaces. Yet, like many other areas of Mumbai, it remains under-serviced by the municipality. Excess garbage piles up, community toilets are overcrowded, and storm drains double as a sewage system. These are some of the torments that residents of Dharavi cannot solve on their own without the active support of the authorities.

Like Dharavi, many other settlements have matured into neighbourhoods that have more to lose than gain from the rehabilitation schemes and redevelopment projects. We call Dharavi and other incrementally developed settlements of Mumbai 'homegrown neighbourhoods', emphasising the fact that they were built by local builders in response to the residents' needs. We feel that they are full of potential, and that their internal dynamics need to be understood more intimately.

Tower blocks have already begun to replace the low-rise, high-density neighbourhood that caters to the economic life of Dharavi. Photograph: Niccoló Morgan Gandolfi

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