

domus

Volume 01 • Issue 10 • September 2012 / **DCOOP** scripting architecture / **RLDA** materiality of ideas / five questions for **David Chipperfield** / when the sky is the context: Shard London Bridge by **Renzo Piano Building Workshop** / **Bradley L Garrett** scaling the Shard / **Julian Jain** region of the rings, cities of the void / **Naresh Fernandes** everybody loves a useful slum / **Grandmother India Design, Emmanuel Grimaud, Sameer Tawde** of gods and robots / **Majlis** archive through practice

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Everybody loves a useful slum

As researchers and artists from world over descend on Mumbai to study its slums, especially Dharavi, a reality check of why this valorisation of a slum has come to take place is important. What conditions of global politics in governance and research organisations has made Dharavi in Mumbai a 'useful' example and the site for a 'rosy vision' is absolutely necessary to investigate

Text

Naresh Fernandes

Photos

Jehangir Sorabjee



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View of Dharavi area (2000)

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View of central Mumbai, Chinchpokli area undergoing fast transformation after the closure of the mills — another area that has been a favourite of urban researchers.

Following pages: View around Bandra railway station showing the slums on the east and the Mithi river in the background (2011)

Title: Takes reference from *Everybody Loves a Good Drought – Stories from India's poorest districts* by P Sainath (Penguin, 1996)



When US President Barack Obama visited Mumbai in November 2010, his mission was clear — he wanted to strengthen trade ties between the US and India. His speech to Indian government officials and businessmen against the backdrop of the iconic Gateway of India made that evident. He said that the US saw India as an emerging economic force and a strategic trade partner. Obama praised India's commercial capital for being a "city of dreams" and then, bafflingly, singled out for special attention the residents of the "winding alleys of Dharavi". Only a few years ago, any reference by a visitor to the central Mumbai neighbourhood popularly (and mistakenly) referred to as Asia's largest slum would have drawn gasps of horror from the upper-crust guests in Obama's audience. India's elite have always been prickly about westerners drawing attention

to their country's poverty (even though the World Bank estimates that about 80 per cent of the nation's population gets by on less than two dollars a day). Instead, Obama's invocation of Dharavi drew enthusiastic applause. Though Mumbai can't begin to match the architectural marvels of Paris or London, the city's elite have long been proud of the art deco buildings of Marine Drive, the nineteenth-century neo-Gothic structures by the Oval and the Indo-Saracenic dome of the Victoria Terminus Railway station. Curiously, to their list of Mumbai's highlights, they have now added a 175-hectare area slum. Of course, very few of the city's affluent set have actually walked through Dharavi or the other slums it has come to represent. If they did, they'd most likely be offended by the faecal odour that

hangs over some parts of the neighbourhood, a consequence of the fact that "open defecation", as bureaucrats know the practice, is widely prevalent here. Many of Dharavi's residents are forced to resort to this indignity because the neighbourhood has only one toilet seat for every 600 people. But in addition to providing homes (with inadequate sanitation) for an estimated 600,000 people, Dharavi is filled with hundreds of workshops in which labourers manufacture everything from garments and biscuits, plastic bottle caps and leather purses. Dharavi is also an important hub in Mumbai's recycling trade. Raggpickers from across the city converge in Dharavi every day to sell plastic bottles, strips of metal and rusty circuit boards to scrap traders here. These raw materials are melted down into ingots, to find life anew as plastic buckets

or biscuit tins. In 2005, the *Economist* estimated the total value of goods produced in Dharavi each year at \$500 million. It is this singular aspect of the neighbourhood that Obama alluded to in his speech, as he praised the Dharavi's residents for their "optimism and determination". Obama's statement was probably intended to demonstrate both to his audience at home, reeling under a recession, and to Indian businessmen and policy makers, that Dharavi's diligent residents proved that the free market really did work. His Indian audience did not take much convincing. A decade into India's policy of structural adjustment, the country's elite have dramatically altered their attitude to slums. They have come to see them as hubs of enterprise, as "special economic zones" even. Dharavi, perhaps because of the global



popularity of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* in 2008, has come to embody the unimagined possibilities of the country's informal settlements.

Never a week seems to go by without a newspaper, magazine or documentary exploring the wonders of Dharavi. A few months ago, it became the focus of a self-help book titled *Poor Little Rich Slum*. In their introduction, the authors, Rashmi Bansal and Deepak Gandhi, explain how they managed to look beyond "the obvious — the garbage, the filth, the 'slumminess' of the slum...[to see] beauty within the chaos". They conclude, "We can be happy, we can be hopeful, we can be enterprising — no matter where we are. The question is — are you? If Dharavi can, so can I." There could scarcely have been a more succinct declaration about why Dharavi is so useful for the elite of a city that houses 54 per cent of its residents in slums. They have come to make a virtue out of very dire necessity, absolving themselves of the guilt of ignoring the congested conditions in which their poorer neighbours live by believing that life in the shanties can't really be so bad if slum residents are able to be so productive.

There's also an ecological edge to this argument. Slum residents are praised for how efficiently they use scarce space and resources. Dharavi's apologists claim that the world can't really afford to live any other way (even though they aren't planning to move into the neighbourhood any time soon).

Most of all, this rosy vision of informal settlements is tinged with a condescending, neo-liberal lining. It implies that Dharavi residents should be allowed to live in the city mainly because they're contributing to the great economic machine — not just because they have the same rights that residents of the formal city do!

The celebration of entrepreneurship is another example of ideological sleight of hand. The metamorphosis of Mumbai's economy from one based on manufacturing to one in which the service sector is dominant has resulted in the casualisation of employment. In 1951, the organised sector provided jobs for 72 per cent of the city's workers. This began to change dramatically with liberalisation: formal sector employment declined by 0.83 per cent between 1981 and 2007. The informal sector now accounts for two-thirds of the city's jobs. Hailing entrepreneurship as a supreme value makes individuals responsible for creating their own sources of employment — and blames them for their poverty.

There is no doubt that the residents of Dharavi and other informal settlements are extremely inventive in their use of space and their abilities to eke out livelihoods with scanty resources. This should indeed be acknowledged. But, at its heart, the valorisation of slum entrepreneurship represents a happy compromise with existing structures of inequality.

The urban geographer Ash Amin describes the irrational optimism about settlements like Dharavi as a result of viewing cities through a "human potential optic". But its advocates, he notes, fail to "talk of the shared urban commons, of modernity's uplift, of duties of the social contract, of dwellers' rights to the basics of life". Until these themes become part of the discussion, the residents of Dharavi and other slum settlements will continue to be symbols in an ideological battle, not real people with problems that require urgent attention.

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NARESH FERNANDES
 Author and urbanist