

Post planning in Mumbai

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मुंबई में भविष्य की योजना

POST PLANNING IN MUMBAI

Rahul Mehrotra

«Tactics is knowing what to do when there is something to do.
Strategy is knowing what to do when there is nothing to do.»

Savielly Tartakover, polish Chess Grand Master

In Mumbai today, planning is about tactics without necessarily looking for any strategy. The city has clearly moved into an era where laissez-faire as well as large-scale infrastructure development is combining to morph into a peculiar urban landscape. A landscape that is clearly not the result of a discernable strategy or vision for the city, but rather one that has evolved out of a series of incremental moves or tactics played out independently by different constituent groups in the city.

These tactics are employed by a range of constituent groups in the city and range from the creation of self-help housing (slums), to the re-development of the mill lands and to the creation of infrastructure such as roads and flyovers – all driven by specific needs and aspirations but without any articulation of how all this would add up to make the city a better functioning entity. Such a situation puts in question the role of planning authorities, with the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority (MMRDA) and Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai

(MCGM) quickly shifting their roles from 'visioning' and city administering agencies to contracting, executing, and crisis management bodies. In addition, their politicisation by the Government of Maharashtra has transformed them from 'planning authorities' led by technocrats, into powerless agencies run by bureaucrats that are often easily manipulated by their politician bosses! The pathetic responses by these city agencies to both the floods of 26 July 2005 and the train bombings of 11 July 2006 vividly demonstrate their inability to respond in any effective manner to a crisis, or even connect at a humane level to the citizens of Mumbai.

POST PLANNING

How then does the city position itself to grapple with this explosive urbanisation during a period of economic liberalisation? A phase in which commercial gains are not only taking precedence over everything else, but, in fact, are also challenging and actually erasing all traditional planning processes. The term 'post-planning', coined by Chinese art critic, Hou Hanru, seems appropriate in describing the condition of Mumbai. This is a situation where any planning is systematically 'posterior' – as a recuperative and securing action. In this post-planning condition, economics and profits are the central players. They have clearly replaced traditional ideological, social, environmental, historical and aesthetic elements as the main driving forces behind the creation and expansion of cities. In this condition then, citizens have to confront urgent questions of instability, indecision, changeability and survival, while established social and urban fabrics are continuously being deconstructed and reorganised at an alarming rate. In the process, major urban interventions have often resulted in dramatic, chaotic and unexpected visual arrangements – a new emergent landscape.¹

The case of the mill lands vividly illustrates this post-planning condition in Mumbai. In the development of these lands, located in the crowded central Mumbai district of Parel, only economic gain by a few has driven the conversion of this rare asset of the city into private commercial development. It is indeed shocking that for such an important planning decision in the city, no planning agency in Mumbai even prepared a master or strategy plan for the processes by which these lands could be integrated for the benefit of the city.

Shrouding the issue in ambiguity, politicians, mill owners and bureaucrats manipulated legislation and essentially deprived the city of a fantastic moment to balance its desperate shortage of affordable housing, open spaces, public amenities and social infrastructure like schools and hospitals. The fatal combination of greed and myopic thinking in dealing with the recycling of mill lands, has resulted in Mumbai losing an important opportunity to reinvent

itself. Concerned citizens, environmentalists and planners, disadvantaged by scanty and inadequate public notifications, moved in too late after the event, to salvage whatever could be retrieved through Public Interest Litigation (PIL) within an already biased set of legislative moves to divide this prime land.

In fact, looking at Mumbai over the last four decades, planning has largely been about rearguard actions versus the avant-garde actions that have traditionally led planning. The last avant-garde action experienced, was the planning of the vision for New Bombay – a vision where a new future was imagined on a tabula rasa condition, where policy, planning, infrastructure, architecture and urban design were to lead the way; not just to arrive on the scene after the effects of development, but to clean up the debris of laissez-faire growth.

What then are the challenges facing Bombay-Mumbai today? Perhaps the effects of globalisation and the urgency of integrating with a broader economic system, have completely changed the priorities of the governing authorities that are responsible for making the city? Their mandate (encouraged by commercial interests such as the Chambers of Commerce, Bombay First, etc.) is about the need for this integration to very quickly become part of a global urban order!

The Singapore architect, William Lim, describes this phenomenon that has swept several Asian cities, and refers to these cities as being 'Shanghaied'! Here, the metaphor of Shanghai (it used to be Singapore in the 1990s) as a city that has effectively and with great speed transformed its urban landscape to embrace a global identity is one that politicians in Mumbai use as their benchmark for progress. Ironically, the use of this metaphor is blind to the crucial fact that it grows out of a political system that is far removed from the democracy we are fundamentally steeped in.

In any case, it is useful to look at the patterns that characterise this process of being 'Shanghaied'. The first critical move is the radical transformation in the city's physical arrangement, to make it viable for exchange and flow of capital. The usual pattern (in the global context) is the introduction of new highways, airports, stations, corporate hotels, convention centres and malls as part of the necessary kit for a territory to be integrated in the global order. Once this phase is completed, the next wave usually comprises of infrastructure which is deployed to remain competitive: progressive urban regulations with inclusive protection of historic buildings, creation or refurbishment of parks, promenades and museums, are all kicked into place to demonstrate further compliance with culture and international standards.

Planners, Architects and NGOs get involved in this process in a variety of ways and generally in three phases with various forms of overlap. First, to be partners in a clean-up operation, to relocate slums, fix up sidewalks, street furniture and restore heritage buildings. Once some infrastructure is in place, politicians demonstrate that the city is ripe for foreign investment. Planning agencies, who have by now devolved their planning powers and responsibilities, float global tenders and call in multinational consultants as well as some international architects to demonstrate their concern for sophistication. These agencies essentially become middlemen in this process of privatising the delivery system for urban amenities.

The third phase is generally driven by a group of relatively young entrepreneurs, who are able to integrate global practices with local specificities. These agents are well educated, curate an extensive international network and engage with contemporary debates and technologies. They have access to capital in the global market and are in demand to represent foreign investments in the locale. This is a sort of cyclic motion with all phases reinforcing each other.²

Fortunately, in Mumbai, the resistance to this otherwise sweeping phenomenon has been substantial. Citizens and professionals have, at all levels, organised themselves to challenge these mindless transformative forces. However, the Government has clearly been on the other side of the fence. The case of the mill lands and now the attitude and lethargy demonstrated by the Maharashtra Government to the development of Mumbai's eastern waterfronts, demonstrates an acute insensitivity to the city's basic needs and aspirations. It demonstrates a complete seduction of the government by an emergent global pattern, where entire cities will be recast in a similar image without any concern for the assets and strength of the local fabric – social, physical or economic.

It also demonstrates the state of the profession of urban planning and the culture of architecture in the city. Here, professionals and institutions are seemingly unequipped to grapple with emergent issues in the city. Thus, the profession is being largely engaged in recuperative action – of intervening post-facto to clean up the mess! It is therefore no coincidence that in Mumbai, we are increasingly celebrating projects involving 'cleaning up' – whether they involve the restoration of our historic buildings, precincts or districts, or waterfronts and sidewalks, or the relocation of slums to make way for infrastructure. While critical to the functioning of the city, these projects are an indication of the limited role of the architectural or engineering professions and all the other agencies involved in the making of the city.

1 Lim, William S. W., *Asian Ethical Urbanism – A Radical Postmodern Perspective*, Introduction by Leon Van Schaik, Singapore 2005, p. 31, 32
2 Zaera-Polo, Alejandro, Dean Berlage Institute, in an email dated 19 December 2005 to the Author discussing emergent issues and patterns of physical transformation in Global Cities.

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