

## **BOMBAY REVISITED**

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As they blink into wakefulness, the perpetually jet lagged have a way of starting each day with the same, mixed feelings of doubt and certainty. They may never be entirely sure of where they are in the world, but they do know exactly which hotel chain they are dealing with. So it was for me one Sunday morning at the Hilton Towers at the beginning of November. My surroundings, unmistakable as an international hotel though they were, could at first sight have been anywhere.

The larger than average room was finished in several shades of the kind of cream paint that in my experience tends to be associated with Hiltons, more than say, Hyatts. The desk by the window, the pair of sofas facing each other across a low table, the refrigerator stocked with excess calories, and bottled water that had been flown thousands of miles to get there, spoke of the very particular outcomes of the placelessness that comes with the international corporate hospitality business with its nuanced dance between reassuring familiarity, and carefully measured doses of the exotic. The taps in the adjoining bathroom, with its lurid red marble floor, when turned, obediently and effortlessly delivered a steady stream of cool clean water.

However, while my brain negotiated all these generic signals of international hotel life, I began to realise that I could only be in one very particular place in the world. And it wasn't just the fact that when I arrived on the 2am flight from Europe, room service had managed to deliver a dosa breakfast within ten minutes, and that I needed to remember to take my malaria tablet. Through the window, I could see the hallucinogenic image of Bombay University's gothic towers, a tropical version of South Kensington, formed in florid carved stone of quite unrelenting, and hugely impressive ugliness. Just as impressive was the clock tower that chimed the quarters, ex-

actly like Big Ben. I could see neon advertising signs, and office slabs faced in white marble, with anxious files of Ambassador cars waiting outside. For the Indian official it is still the car of choice, just as it was 40 years ago when the original production line was shipped out from the Morris factory in Cowley that considered it irredeemably redundant.

This was a city that had changed enormously since I first came here 20 years ago. Then it still had the musty, lingering smell of the 1940s about it. There were very few shops selling branded consumer goods, there were no shopping malls, no fast food, and not much advertising. What there was of it had been beautifully hand painted in confident innocence. Now, despite the faintly ramshackle air of much of the city, where the main law courts are roofed in corrugated iron, and their interiors recall a legal system that would have been entirely familiar to Charles Dickens, you see the telltale signs of sustained, near double digit growth everywhere. As you emerge from the hotel, a huge Gucci store eclipses the silvercraft and leatherware shops. Glossy Italian brands are driving out the bespoke shirtmakers. There are Japanese cars on the roads, and new office buildings. The backlit super-size posters show airbrushed pale skinned models. Knowing irony has infected television commercials. In one that promotes mobile phones, you can see a hipster in sunglasses seizing the microphone from a garlanded traditional politician in a Nehru hat to take a picture of himself.

The construction cranes are busy turning the old mills that gave the city its first burst of growth in the wake of the American civil war into gaudy shopping malls. Cows, which were once allowed to graze the roads around the airport, have disappeared. The densely packed city fabric has cracked and fissured to make way for elevated roads that allow the ten per cent of its citizens with cars to float above its packed

streets, and move between the golf clubs, and country clubs, the airport and the business districts that define their Mumbai.

Half an hour after leaving the hotel I am in the midst of an entirely different Mumbai, one in which an extended family could expect to live in a single space no more than half the size of my bedroom at the hotel. Not just the family. For the Gujarati potters I was meeting, home and factory are the same thing. The drive from Sir Dorab Tata Road, that divides Mumbai's hotel strip, from the Arabian sea, to 90 Foot Road, Dharavi's main drag, unpeels the layers of the city's 300 year history. It starts with Mumbai's most recent incarnation, the financial centre of India in the Bandra Kurla Complex, and much of Asia and the Arabian Gulf too, where the hotels are like giant luxury liners blazing light, self-contained worlds floating in the dense urban fabric around them. Full of gold and cut glass, international chefs and grand dinners, film stars, and visiting academics, ecologists and carbon foot print specialists performing tirelessly for one another.

Then there is the Victorian municipal city, its fretwork skyline erupting over the Mumbai Oval, and its balletic cricket players. The ground is ringed by statues of 19th century worthies, with Zoroastrians and Jains rendered in the manner of Non-Conformist Bradford cloth merchants, remembered for their good works for the poor in their day. Today they look over pavement dwellers and double deck busses. Next come the Art Deco tenements of the early years of the 20th century, interspersed with Tudor villas. Modern, utopian India is represented by Charles Correa's deft modernism. As the road leaves the city centre, it winds through railway tracks and elevated roads from which you glimpse the huge illuminated cross above The Church of Christ the Saviour, past mosques and Hindu temples, past business parks that aspire to the condition of an edge city, as a chance to provide India's new business elite with a city that works.

The poor are never out of sight in Mumbai. They are in the city centre, they are clinging to the edges of the runway at the airport. They live on the fringes of the railways. In some areas the rich are rather less visible. Dharavi announces itself with abrupt suddenness, the road is lined with densely packed shacks and roofs piled high with the building materials that sustain

their residents. On the main road, where the stench of open drains is at its worst, past the electric pump workshop and the bicycle store, you see a shop selling gold with a plate glass window, white marble interior, big comfortable and white vinyl covered chairs for visitors to sit in. Despite the poverty outside the door, there are no security shutters, no armed guards, no security tags, no burglar alarms.

Life here puts everything on top of everything else. The open kiln in which cotton waste is being burned to fire batches of clay pots might as well be in the back room as the back yard of the slum dwellers. There are people everywhere, sitting on the back step, keeping an eye on the stock, carrying huge loads on their heads, squeezing past you as they move deeper and deeper into the slum.

This is what a place looks like when it has more than 100,000 people living packed into a single square kilometre. This is what it feels, tastes and smells like. It is, through the blue haze that hangs everywhere like cigar smoke uncoiling in a Berlin bar after midnight, hauntingly beautiful. The repetitive earth red forms of water jugs destined for wholesale markets merge into a sculptural composition. This is a slum that stands on land close to the city centre, with its net of railway lines that makes Mumbai one of the cities best served by public transport in India, surrounded by middle class villas. Its land that could be valuable. Slum clearance here then takes on an aspect familiar from the command and control activities of the Chinese authorities in their efforts to recast Beijing and Shanghai. Here, too, the aim is to upgrade potentially valuable land by moving the densely packed slum dwellers to the city periphery. There are similar compensations: free new accommodations. But either it will be too expensive or so distant that it will cut them off from their existing communities and networks.

The difference is that India countenances dissent. The potters are fighting the attempt to move them as part of the wider slum clearance plan on the grounds that they have legal title to the land on which their little shacks stand. They came here before partition, and have British land grants that should in official eyes exclude their settlement from slum status. "We have appealed to our Member of Parliament for help. We all voted for him, but he doesn't want to do any-

thing”, they tell us. Within 24 hours we will be back at our firework parties in Holland Park, our seminar rooms, or our offices where recycling is a lifestyle choice, not, as it is for Mumbai’s rag pickers, a constant necessity. We can step away from this world in which there is never an escape from the smoke and the dust, from the sheer press of people. But because there is running water here for three hours a day and there are second floors built on many of the houses, with gallows humour, we can describe Dharavi as a middle class slum. For those who live here, education is not necessarily an escape route. The 14-year old who interprets his father’s words for us into English, tells us that when he has finished his learning his family will need him back in Dharavi as an extra pair of hands.

For Bombay and its six million slum dwellers, it’s the way that the majority of its people live, though the slums occupy just nine per cent of the city’s area. And for some, the hundreds of thousands who have nothing more than the pavement to live on, life is unimaginably harder. For the shacks that are illegal and have no running water, or fixed latrines, it’s much worse. Mumbai takes justifiable pride in the way that its citizens pulled together to cope with the flash floods in 2005 that left huge areas of the city underwater, stranding motorists on the highways and cutting off large parts of the city. Hundreds were drowned, but the slum dwellers took people in, and fed them. They formed human chains to rescue people, they got blankets and emergency supplies distributed in a way that puts New Orleans to shame. But life even on a good day, for many Bombay dwellers, looks pretty much like a permanent version of Hurricane Katrina.

Life for the single men who come flooding in from the villages to escape the prison of the caste system to make the few rupees that they can send each month to feed families in the countryside, and who in Mumbai provide the customers for some of the most extensive, and inventive red lights districts in Asia, life is certainly harder. They sleep in beds rented by the hour. They wash in communal latrines. They rarely see their families.

One of the most striking images anybody projected during the three days of the Urban Age conference in Mumbai was a new take on the familiar figure-ground analysis of city fabric. This one put Dharavi

side by side with Shinjuku, the Tokyo bar district with its narrow lanes and courtyards. As an abstract representation, black blocks, sitting on ground split apart by white cracks and pathways, they are apparently all but identical, a picturesque agglomeration that might have been the product of a city planned by Camillo Sitte. Yet one is a reflection of a world of plenty, the other of poverty. What were once Tokyo’s slums, have electricity, air conditioning and computers, and have managed to decant out some of their populations. The society that built it has been transformed by Japan’s tidal wave of post-war affluence. Dharavi’s plan is an abstraction of the realities of a precarious grip that often slips on what might be called the barest decencies of life.

Of all the cities that the Urban Age caravan has stopped in, Mumbai is the one which, despite the gulf of poverty that divides it from London, despite the magnetic pull of the sheer scale of Dharavi, so close and so far, from the air conditioned glare of the conference room in the bowels of the Hilton Towers is in some ways the most familiar. It’s a city in which LSE director Howard Davies can engage in gentle banter with Deutsche Bank’s Chairman Joseph Ackermann about cricket to establish that there are some things about the nature of the relationship between Britain and India that German speakers will never understand.

The researchers from the Tata Institute for Social Sciences could share a table with the Urban Age, and its assumptions, but there are things that can be said here which sound rather different from how they do in London. When Nicholas Stern talks about climate change in a city which has the carbon footprint that Britain ought to have, but is facing the melting of the Himalayan snows, and the destabilisation of the monsoons because of what we have done, he had his audience gripped.

And the shared experiences serve also to highlight the contrasts between, for example, the words of Tessa Jowell, UK Minister for the Olympics and London, reflecting on the relationship between the personal and the political against the background of her attempts to shape the direction of the preparations for the London Olympics, and Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister of Delhi, credited with the successful growth and development of the Indian capital. There

was ceremony in the Convocation Hall of the University of Mumbai, with giant fabric caterpillars in the gothic rafters attempting to air condition this huge 19th century space as slum dwellers collected awards for their work bringing rudimentary sanitation to their communities. And there was sharp debate in the conference room as Mukesh Mehta did a pitch for his glossy power point on his dream of a new Dharavi to the visible disapproval of the director of the National Slum Dwellers Association.

How are we to respond, not as tourists, but as academics? Here not just to observe, but to understand. Is this a place and a way of life that proves the truth of the angry bitterness of Mike Davis' view in *Planet of Slums*? A part of the conceptual apparatus that I have carried with me since I first began writing about cities is the comforting notion that, no matter how divided, or deprived they are, cities are still at one level machines for turning the desperate into the not quite so desperate. They provide an essential first step in a process that will change their new inhabitant's lives for the better. But can one be quite so certain of that essentially positivist view, faced with the realities of life on the pavement.

That figure ground comparison is a sanitised analysis that hides the stench, the wet and the fear.

Are we here to listen and learn, or are we voyeuristic disaster tourists? Is there any real difference in our understanding of the agonising fault lines between the glittering gold plated chauffeur driven luxury of Mumbai's prosperous classes, and the degradation all around it, as objective observers, and those who see it everyday, and blithely ignore it.

We leave secure in our view of the questionable complacency of those who take their personal luxury for granted even as they step over the pavement dwellers. But just because we are eleven hours in a Boeing away from Dharavi, and can no longer see it or smell it, even as we feel the soot still in our hair from the potter's kilns, does not mean that we are any less a part of the same universe.

What if anything do we have to offer such a city? Does our work have any purpose? What kind of experts are we, when we belong to a society that is continually demolishing housing that far surpasses anything that

Bombay's slum dwellers could ever dream of, simply because nobody wants to live in it. Do we have any business being here at all? It is possible to take comfort from Maximum City author Suketu Mehta's words that if only because many of the next generation of Londoners are being born in Mumbai, its important for this generation of Londoners to know as much about Mumbai as we can.

There are things about the lives of the slum dwellers that can seem comforting, or even heartening. Life in a Mumbai slum could be seen as being almost all right. Crime is not an issue for example. The slum is a place in which Jane Jacobs' street under the constant gaze of hundreds of eyes is an everyday reality. This is the polar opposite of the anomie and social isolation of a suburb in Phoenix. And its nothing like a Brazilian favela or a Johannesburg shanty town in terms of the daily level of violence. In terms of its ecological footprint, its does an amazingly good job, making up for the terrible mess of most Westerners who try to limit their negative impact on the plant.

But it can also feel questionable to focus on what slums can do well, and take comfort in the power of human ingenuity and collaboration to achieve remarkable things. Take Mumbai's armies of tiffin wallahs that each day pull off a feat of logistical complexity that would defeat the computer systems of a multinational, to collect the meals that are prepared across the city in domestic kitchens in every suburb, and deliver them to the offices and workshops to feed hundreds of thousands of middle class workers at their desks. With the intricate choreography of a ballet, covered colour-coated aluminium boxes of dahl, flat bread, and cooked vegetables are picked up and taken on by stages to central collecting points, then distributed with extraordinary precision not just to the right building, but to the right floor and the right person. Then in the afternoon the empties are collected up, and returned by stages to the cooks that will fill them up again the next day. This is an object lesson in logistics that TNT could, and does, learn from, and its all done without computers or bar codes. Its not just a convenience for the customers, it's a livelihood for the cooks, and the delivery men.

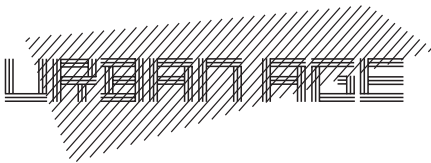
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