

RE-IMAGINING THE CITY

ABSTRACT: In the contexts of new economic reconfigurations, the paper makes three arguments on planning processes. First is towards establishing a necessity for a contextual re-imagination of the city. With the prelude of such a contention, I would focus on the city of Mumbai where I make my second argument of a “tactical city”: that the city could be re-imagined as a playground of innumerable interests and these interests manifest themselves through atypical tactics employed under specific conditions. With such a theoretical backdrop, I make my third argument on the planning process, of “opportunity planning” for certain threatened groups rather than planning for the doubtful idea of an “optimal society”.

Let me begin with making my first argument on a contextual re-imagination of the city.

The Contextual City

Post 90's urban landscapes of developing economies experienced an immense pressure to dismantle and reorganise the conventional control mechanisms in order to make way for something called “economic growth”, thereby causing tremendous reconfigurations in resource managing institutions. Capital and labour exchanges (Sassen, 91) become the backbone argument for explaining the new economic orders popularly bundled into a single term of globalisation. The ideas of labour and capital exchanges and consequent ideas of cultural exchange attempts to imagine various landscapes of various cities in homogeneity. The Urban Convergence Hypothesis of Michael Cohen (Cohen, 96) puts together a whole lot of problems faced by contemporary cities relating to ‘growing unemployment, declining infrastructure, deteriorating environment, collapsing social compact and institutional weakness’ (Cohen, 96) as common problems of (what Cohen decides to call) ‘the cities of the north and the south’. Graphs and tables comparing various aspects of different cities have become important part of our common knowledge. These comparative analyses become one of the most important disseminators of knowledge regarding the “global landscapes”. Inherent to such knowledge formation is the creation of what I chose to call “pan-internationalism”. The question raised in this congress resonates this “pan-internationalism”. Exchanging ideas from different parts of the world has become most fashionable events of this “pan-internationalism”. The growing numbers of international planning conferences these days are clear sign of such an endeavour¹. The problem begins when concepts articulated in different contexts are pushed down the throat of other contexts.

I would briefly describe two projects in Mumbai to make the point clearer. Hernando De Soto's (1989) formulations of giving land tenure and activating the market to solve poverty issues and Habitat resolution towards facilitating housing rather than providing housing gave birth to several strategies in resolving the housing problems. The Site and Services schemes of giving land tenure and basic infrastructure immediately were experimented in the city of Mumbai. What happened however was something that the planners never imagined; these site and service schemes became high opportunity places for middle-class and upper middle-class entrepreneurs. One finds a plethora of architect's offices, beauty parlours, travel agents and such programmes in these sites today. The strategy was noble, but missed completely the dynamic of high land prices and the value of clear tenure in the city like Mumbai. The slum dweller returned back to the slum as instant opportunity to make some money and gentries made their ways into such sites. One could imagine the success of such interventions in the areas with low land values, but site and service schemes in Mumbai remain far from success.

Following the successes of industrial land redevelopment in Europe and America², and assuming that de-industrialisation as an eternal truth of the globalised landscapes, a series of proposals were made for Mumbai city's decaying industrial lands. The planning concerns of the government initiatives were to create new public open spaces in the otherwise highly dense areas (Design Cell, 96). This concern seems to have been blindly appropriated from the learning of western industrial redevelopment. The existing landscape of the area however was not ready for such a concern. Public Space necessarily did not mean classical open space in this area. Instances of Public spaces could be found on a busy street, a neighbourhood pan and cigarette shop, or even a railway compartment. Classical idea of creating an open space as a Public Space was under severe question, and the local population could not relate to such an idea. Moreover, development happened in the area in a manner that never qualified legitimate as per any planning definitions. This development responded to a single large fact: the sky-scraping land price of Mumbai City. This new development brought in big gentry, re-burdened the infrastructure

and changed the place with all new people. It did this without anyone's permission. The planning project seemed failed again. It simply never seems to have recognised the local context.

The argument that I want to put across through these examples is that the concepts created through a pan-international forum might not relate to the contextual conditions specific to any area because they have not undergone the same historical processes nor have similar critical mass. Hence a case for a contextual re-imagining of a city is useful. Here I would want to distinguish that this contextual re-imagining and not for that much sought reactionary "original culture" of the local. The best example to describe this through adopting Arjun Appadurai's thesis (1996) of the new kind of locality that is not pure. Appadurai makes a case for a new transnational/transregional local made of people who have moved away from the so-called "original culture" and formed new communities within the global. Appadurai's favourite example is of the Indian Diaspora living in America. I'll elaborate on the contextual re-imagining in the following arguments of the paper.

I'll introduce the questions raised in my brief and further ask some more fundamental questions on these questions. The brief for the presentation asks two following questions:

1. What makes people choose as a place to live in the city, and what would make him or her stay there when getting older?
2. What would be the right urban mix in order to have an optimal society, and what could planners do in order to enhance that?

I move now to my second argument of the Tactical City re-imagination.

The Tactical City

The primary question raised in my brief is regarding the basis people make choices in the city. This question presumes a conventional grand rule in city-imagination where people's decisions are often conceptualised in grand generalisations. The super idea of the three worlds has dominated global imaginations since the last fifty years. These grand generalisations in the imagination of cities have shaped the way strategies got articulated. In the national imagination, cities follow the generalisations of the planning authorities, and state funds get allocated based on these generalisations. At the level of the city however, mapping practices and history writings have been instrumental in imagining the city.

Mumbai city's history is predominantly classified into eras. The conventional chronological history of the State gazetteer puts together a classification of the ancient, medieval, Muhammedan, Colonial and Modern eras (Chaudhari, 86). A more ambitious history by Mehrotra and Dwivedi (2001) puts together it's classification based on chronological physical development in the city. A recent endeavour by an architectural academy (Design Cell, 2001) in history writing classifies the city as changes in the economy; its classifications: agrarian, mercantile, industrial, socialist and global city.

The Classification of the history in different writings. The following table shows the table of contents of these histories

City Gazetteer	Mehrotra and Dwivedi	Design Cell
1. Ancient Period	1. Genesis of a Settlement: a. A fort on a Fisherman's island b. Beyond the Fort Walls	1. Agrarian Economy
2. Medieval Period		
3. Muhammedan Period		
4. Colonial Period	2. The Evolution of a core: a. The emergence of a centre b. Public Intervention and Private Enterprise	2. Mercantile Economy
	3. The Creation of a city	
5. Modern Period	4. The Growth of a Metropolis: a. Transitions to Modernity b. Exploding City, imploding Centre	3. Industrial Economy
		4. Socialist Economy
		5. Global City

All three histories undertake a periodising task. These watertight compartments of history then become basis for understanding decisions of the people. One can co-relate 'the ancient' in the city gazetteer with the 'fisherman's village' in Mehrotra and Dwivedi and the 'agrarian economy' of the Design Cell, where the native population is seen to be settling in certain parts near the sea and building their landscapes. These histories set a basis to conceptualise decisions made in development, decisions made by people. They, through their nomenclature of the Ancient, the Core, the Modern, and the Global etc. set a dominant mode or "the mainstream" along which all decisions could be classified and understood. Hence the slums and closing of the mills in Mumbai discussed earlier becomes the product of the Global Exploding city. At the level of the city, these conceptualisations become the basis to plan.

I base my second argument on a critique of such imaginations developed by Rupali Gupte (2003) who suggests the imagining a city as a set of tactics of innumerable interests. Her research titled 'Tactical City' focuses on Mumbai and proposes a history of the city through these tactics. She makes a case against the grand universal rule for understanding people's behaviour and suggests that people make tactical choices and interventions that are governed by contextual conditions. Tactical city is a fictitious history of Mumbai's urbanism, told through series of stories. The stories assert two basic arguments against the dominant models of history writing:

The first argument is against the ideas of dominant forces establishing patterns in the city. It argues against benchmarking events in history. It contends an absence of the avant-garde. The chief contention in this argument is that Mumbai's urbanism does not follow the patterns laid by master endeavours. The developments on the other hand happen tactically and these tactics become catalysts for other tactics.

I quote from the Tactical City (Gupte, 03) to illustrate the critique of mainstream conceptualisation and to show how tactics get formed:

"The planners of the era, Tenali noticed, started incorporating these cubes as rectangles in their development plans. After a point there were so many rectangles that they were completely confused with which was what. After all they couldn't just treat these drawings as non hierarchical post modern drawings where the slippages in the way one would read the drawings would inform another way of thinking... .. The planners were sure that tracing was the right medium for them. It conveyed the right message. All they needed to do is colour these in reds, blues, yellows and browns to designate zones of public, residential, commercial, housing and utility places. It was as simple as that. After all, the great Parisian architect, one who our great late prime minister was a fan of, had talked about the need to segregate these functions. One was not to mix residential with work areas as the traditional towns used to be. Modernity was against everything that was traditional and retro. Fixed regulations rendered everything and everyone equal. Everyone was so equal that they all became numbers. They didn't have names anymore. They became known by their professions, their gender and their castes and became entries in the census reports, all trapped in reams of paperwork as numbers, not humans anymore.

"The next day Tenali ventured out towards the white colonial town. Between the colonial town and the native town was a large esplanade. They say it was for shooting range, in case the ignorant, ungrateful army of brown men rebelled again. In the background stood robust stone buildings, a typology that was completely new to him. He was told it was a Gothic style, a replica of some buildings that were built in England, the place where these lovely white men came from. Anthony had told his neighbour very secretly, who in one of their gossip sessions very secretly told Tenali that a lot of those buildings were built with wealth siphoned off from this country and other colonies. But they were good people after all and very intelligent too if they managed to build such impressive buildings for themselves. Rama, impressed with what he saw and filled with awe returned home, still racking his brains as to how he should make a living in this city. What could he sell that would be useful to all? There were a wide variety of religions and languages here, something very different from his homogeneous village. Just then he saw an old Marwari merchant walk by. He smiled at him and greeted him with a "Jai Shri Krishna" and he saw the merchant missing two of his molars. He knew the merchant would have to soon part with the rest of his teeth thanks to all the sweet meat shops that were opening up in the streets of the native town. He was suddenly sure what he wanted to sell. He would sell false teeth. "Teeth are useful to all religions" he thought. His ancestors had been engaged in trade with Vietnam some centuries ago and had learnt from them the art of making water puppets. They made beautiful teeth for the puppets. He had inherited these skills and was sure that they could now be used in making teeth for these puppets of the British Empire. Well, he thought, "I'm not being fair thinking like that about them as puppets. After all I am one too. We all have to be puppets sometimes to survive. Wasn't it that tuneless singer Dylan who once said sometime in the 80s, when some people actually liked him that we all have to serve somebody? Or words to the effect?"

Following the first argument is the contention that there is an extreme reflection of subjectivity. The argument furthers itself suggesting that the blankets of regulation from the authorities that become benchmarks to write earlier histories are not necessarily elements shaping the landscapes, but it is the tactical responses operated within the loopholes of these regulations that determine the city.

The second argument is more a description of the tactics. It suggests that the tactic can have any beginning located anywhere, from the native land, from superstition, from economical condition, from aesthetic values or even from ritual. All conventions of understanding the developments break when any attempt to conceptualise such a dynamic is put into operation. The dynamic here refers to the immense set of complex changing relationship that people enter in a city. To consider a case of Mumbai, a typical *chawl*, an industrial labour housing would get represented purely a rectangle in the city maps, the statistics of the city strip the relational nature of the data from information in its mere obsession for generalisation. The city records mainly focus on the aspects related to revenue collections, sometimes to the aspects of physical structure especially when the price of the land is very high. On the other hand histories render a uniform landscape to the chawl titled under “industrial living conditions”. The Tactical City thesis on the other hand tries to understand a chawl in its multitude of dynamics. I quote from the Tactical City (Gupte, 03):

“Another Tenali Rama sibling was friends with Wilfred who fabricated computers from the various parts that had flooded the Indian market as soon as the country liberalized. Knowledge of computer software and hardware these days, they say, spread like an epidemic in this country. Every graduate, no matter what his/her field of studies was, would take up a crash course in computers and become an engineer. Some these days they say don't even have to go to those computer classes. Little baby Indians are born with computer skills. Their first cry is in 1s and 0s. Till the mother fairly frightened with the mumbo jumbo, teaches them to cry like other humans. Wilfred was such a computer literate. Wilfred used to have an office in Lamington road. But when his lease expired, he couldn't renew it anymore. The Rent control laws in the city had frozen rents at the 1948 rates and it was not a profitable business for the landlords anymore. Subsequently rentals had entered into the domain of the grey market. Wilfred had trouble paying the grey rent or the *pagdi* that the landlord asked of him and moved to another place. The new place was in Parel. Parel was the former centre of the cotton mill lands in the city set up by the British. The mills had shut down due to several reasons. Some attribute this to a prolonged workers strike, some to a lack of modernization of the mills because clearly the profits were being siphoned elsewhere. Some say it went into the city's burgeoning real estate market. But the fact remained that the mills had closed down. The large tract of derelict prime land in the heart of the city was a bone of contention and a highly contested space. The result was the lands lying vacant and the workers out of work. Some of them had been in the mills for so long and thanks to Henry's Fordism had been doing the same thing for so many years that they had got a little rusty with other skills. They were turned down by the rest of the job market because over the years they had started resembling cogs of the machinery they operated and cogs could not so much as calculate in the city's insurance offices or bring tea for a boss with an Anglophone education, in an export company.

The tactic operates in contexts that are not mathematically decipherable; they are not the sum of the conditions, but rather a mutant.

The argument that I am trying to put across is that conceptualisation of cities into grand generalisation is fatal. The choices people make cannot be conceptualised through these generalisations. People make tactical choices in the city, much beyond conventional conceptualisation.

The Opportunistic City

Conventionally, planning concerns strive towards creating an “optimum”. This concern also echoes in the brief of this conference. Inherent to the concern are two things, first, a tendency to seek a “greater common good” reflected generally in modernist agendas of planning and second to imagine a city beyond its people as a third entity requiring sustenance. Nowadays, the quality of the “environment” has become the most important indicator of the city. This is the third entity – popularly celebrated as the common property that needs to be taken care of. One can't imagine a family struggling to get its second meal being bothered of this common property. The question here is who articulates this “optimum” for the greater common good. The state generally considered being the sole trustee of the people is entrusted with this responsibility. The larger question however is “who is the state?” One of the biggest manifestations of the “greater common good” is the creation of laws and regulations by the state. I refer here to Martin Luther King's (1963) arguments on laws being made by a dominant group, which seemingly represents the state. In his mode of popular discourse King argues that the laws are made

by people and cannot be considered eternal. The question he raises is “for whom is this greater common good sought?”

Let me illustrate some examples from development projects in Mumbai to make the point more clear. A powerful industrial house in Mumbai set up a huge private industrial town after acquiring the land from the government³. The land was “tribal land” and since there is a degree of ambiguity regarding the ownership of tribal land (since the constitution does not acknowledge it and all such lands are called forest lands), it was easy to transfer such a land to develop an industrial town. However the land was inhabited by tribes who were forced to vacate. After a long struggle, the industry promised to employ one member from each tribal household in the industry. But soon, under the pretext of modernisation most of the tribal labourers were removed from their jobs. Now the condition is that the tribal people are having neither land nor jobs. They take up odd jobs in the city. The problem here was that much before the state was formed in 1947, the tribal population inhabited the lands and had their own laws regarding the land. Once the big trustee – the state was formed; a new law regarding to whom the land belongs was imposed. The legitimacy of this new law over the older law was explained through the idea of the “greater common good”. The case indicates a tremendous marginalization of a group with the introduction of the law. Let me illustrate another case of the slums in Mumbai. Much before the adoption of the site and service schemes, the attitude of the city towards the slum was different. The city considered the slum as a disease. Anand Pathwardhan, a documentary film maker made a film⁴ on the demolition of the slum that took place in the mid eighties. Pathwardhan undertakes a task of understanding: who this “city” actually was, that was trying to push the slums out. He exposes that the decisions were taken by the Municipal commissioner under severe pressures from the large industrial houses and developers that have stake over the lands. This group floated the idea of the legitimate urban dweller popularly called the “poor tax payer” as the group that should stay in the city and others should leave. The Municipality consequently digs out some law in the constitution and modifies it and passes an order to demolish slums. Again here the issue of a law being made by some interest group is clearly evident.

The discourses and concepts formulated under such a concern of the “optimum” and consequent “greater common good” create immense margins of threatened groups. Then, I would argue that, as against the strive for an optimum, contemporary planning needs realigning with this threatened margin that conventional planning has created. The “tactical city” again provides clues for strategising this realignment. It demolishes the tendencies to seek a greater common good and re-imagines the city as a set of interests and further details an area that is more useful: it maps “opportunities” that people take advantage of through tactics.

I quote from the Tactical City (Gupte, 03), how opportunities are dug from the conditions:

“Tenali started scanning through the development plans of the city. He found that they were made in parts, rectangles that would have to be joined to make the whole city. Tenali out of curiosity started looking for his house on the 1:2500 scale plan. His finger ran over the familiar streets until it slipped from the edge of the sheet. He tried to locate it on the adjoining street and found only a part of it there. Excited at his discovery, Tenali set out to explore the edges of the rest of the Development plans. He found one particular instance that was missing a fractional wedge on the sheet. At 1:2500 scale the fractional wedge was a hairline. Not at 1:100 scale he thought. Tenali further corroborated the mistakes by measuring plans from the Land and Estate Department. He redrafted plans of the area he was scrutinising by transferring the measurements mentioned in the land and property documents of the plots he was examining and the adjacent road. He found an, a wedge of land in the city that was not documented or measured. He appropriated it. He decided to build an urban bedroom on it”.

“It was the year 1992, one year after the country had opened its economy to the world under great international pressure. They say it was a ‘universal path to progress’ - for a greater common good. Tenali Rama owned a plot of land where a major expressway was to be built. The expressway was a state initiative to attract foreign direct investment. The land acquisition act called for Tenali Rama’s land to be acquired for the purpose. A restless Rama couldn’t sleep all night the day he received the letter from the government informing him of the same. He shuddered with the thought that part of his property would be taken away by some foreigners. Tenali had a vision that night. Goddess Kali appeared in his dream and asked him to build her a temple at the edge of his land where the road would cut through and to do this before the break of dawn. Tenali, delighted with the goddess, because he saw through her wit, did as she instructed. Ayappa and Sudama were the engineers who lived in the next district and worked for the Swiss company that was building the infrastructure with money from the World Bank. The next day,

they came by to inspect the land. Both recent migrants to the city, god-fearing Hindus, refused to touch the temple, lest the Goddess curse them. The new road, a global initiative, was built with a bend in it, which housed the temple for Goddess Kali.

Santa and Banta, the truck drivers who would drive to and fro delivering goods for the new companies along the expressway would never fail to pray to the goddess on their journeys or stop to have a cup of tea and meet other fellow truck drivers. The tea stall and the temple were responsible for many bonds of friendship. The temple attached to the tea stall helped because passersby would make monetary offerings probably imagining that the Goddess would use the money herself. When Tenali realized that the goddess did not really need all that money, he started using the money to invest in better facilities for his tea stall. He liked to call it a public space. He was simply a 'tactical caretaker' he thought, not an 'owner' in the strict sense of the word. The temple was a wonderful funding mechanism for the public space and one that was more existential than a bank, as a modern institution, could ever be. In little baby steps the facilities grew from a temple to a tea stall to a public space. He had further plans for expansion. The temple was a catalyst in an expanding urban process.

Of course the Tactical City thesis takes its artistic liberty to write these kinds of fictions, but nevertheless gives immense clues for opportunity planning. My final argument revolves around this area, where a planner could be seen as a tactical worker and planning perhaps needs to shift its impetus from allocation of resources towards mobilisation of opportunities for the threatened margins.

Let me end with an illustration of opportunity planning with the case that I started the paper, the case of the slums. I hate to discuss the case in an international forum, as there is constantly an oriental risk of packaging the slums. Nevertheless, it is the most illustrative example. There have been recent studies⁵ initiated by academies in Mumbai that conceptualise a slum dwelling as an unit of production, and slum dweller as an unit of enterprise. The slum is seen as an industry. The problem is that this industry has several middlemen, all informal, but they are the ones appropriating the large profits created in these industries. The study further proposes an idea of a cooperative, with initial capital finance through the market to redevelop the slums rather than the other schemes of site and services or cross subsidies, which essentially focused around good living conditions, instead of developing opportunities to take care of themselves. The case is of not giving the fish, but facilitating the tools to fish and creating conditions for fishing independently.

So let me conclude with what I was trying to say for so long

In Conclusion

1. The contemporary city requires a contextual re-imagining from its context and the ideas from pan-internationalism only creates more problems to the existing city.
2. Planning cannot conceptualise the decisions of people through conventional modes of understanding. People use innumerable tactics in the city and this renders the city as a constant dynamic phenomenon. The conceptualisation of the tactical city is useful.
3. Planning has been hitherto dealing with seeking for an optimum for some groups, which created its own margins. Contemporary planning requires an aligning with the margins and work towards planning of opportunity for the margins. Planning can be opportunistic, deceitful and shrewd and need not pretend to be honest always-seeking optimums.

REFERENCES:

- Appudurai, Arjun (1996), *Modernity at Large*, University of Minnesota Press
- Chaudhari, K.K. (1986), (ed) *Maharashtra State Gazetteers: Greater Bombay District Volume 1*, Government of Maharashtra.
- Cohen, Michael A. (1996), *The hypothesis of Urban Convergence: Are Cities in the North and South becoming more alike in an age of Globalisation*, in Michael A. Cohen, Blair A. Ruble, Joseph S. Tulchin and Allison M. Garland (eds), *Preparing for the Urban Future: Global Pressures and Local Forces*. Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, Washington, D.C.
- Design Cell (1996), *Redevelopment of Mill Lands*, Charles Correa Committee appointed by the State Government of Maharashtra, Kamla Raheja Vidyaniidhi Institute For Architecture and Environmental Studies, Mumbai
- Design Cell (2001), *Metropolitan Lab: Architecture and Urbanism in Mumbai in the 90's*, Document for the exhibition at the TATE Modern: Century Cities, Kamla Raheja Vidyaniidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies, Mumbai
- Sassen, Saskia (1991), *The Global City*, Princeton.
- De Soto, Hernando (1989), *The Other Path: The invisible revolution in the Third World*, HarperCollins
- Dwivedi, Sharada and Mehrotra, Rahul (2001) *Bombay: The Cities within*, Eminence Designs, Mumbai.
- Gupte, Rupali (2003), *Tactical City*, Post Graduate Thesis at the Cornell University
- King, Martin Luther Jr (1963), *Letter from Birmingham Jail: Dear Fellow Clergymen* <http://members.aol.com/klove01/jailltr.htm>
- Kosambi, Meera (1986), *Bombay in Transition: Growth and Social Ecology of a Colonial City: 1880 – 1980*, Almqvist Witsell International, Stockholm.

NOTES:

¹ If one types in “International Planning Conferences” into Google search engine, one is likely to get about two million entries. On entering one of the web (www.urbancity.org) pages that document such an event, the author found that on a single day an average of four international conferences take place world wide on planning issues.

² The redevelopments of Rotterdam Industrial Area (Port Lands) and London Docklands are often quoted as best practices for Industrial Land Redevelopment. These became seminal cases for the Industrial Land redevelopment in Mumbai. The Idea of creating Public Spaces was the one that was adopted from these schemes when the Government of Maharashtra decided to redevelop the Cotton Textile Mills in Mumbai.

³ Reliance Industries set up chemical industries in Rasaini, outside the city of Mumbai. For more details on the issue of tribal lands see: Kulkarni Sharad, The plight of the Tribal in the website: <http://www.india-seminar.com/2000/492/492%20s.%20kulkarni.htm>

⁴ The reference here is to Anand Patwardhans film “Bombay our city” was made in 1985. The film details all the processes towards the decision of Slum Demolition through elaborate interviews of the city officials and the business houses that were instrumental in the making of this decision.

⁵ The reference is made to the studies on Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia by the students of Kamla Raheja Institute of Architecture and Environmental Studies, University of Mumbai. The study focuses on mapping the work patterns and identifies them as opportunities that could be taken advantage of. As against the earlier efforts of the state to provide or facilitate the provision of housing for slum dwellers, this study proposes a formation of a cooperative so as to enhance the economic generating capabilities of the slum dwellers and expect this move to address the other living condition.