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It Takes so Much for a City to Happen

Cities are formally complex, experientially intense, and have logics that are incoherent. They fold spaces, practices, and relationships together to create an enormous, perpetually transforming morph. This morph is characterized by unclear geographies, absurd lives, unstable forms, and the coexistence of sharp contradictions within it. The formulations around grand narratives of globalization, corporate capitalism, neoliberalism, informalization, and so forth; or deficiency-stories of housing and infrastructure shortage, environmental decay, and corrupt governance are inadequate to comprehend how this morph works. What keeps it in a state of perpetual transformation? What are the sources of its energies? These stories from Mumbai offer an agile framework to discuss the complexities, intensities, and incoherence of the morph.

Working Out

An interviewer once asked Charles Correa, one of the most prominent architects in India, why his redevelopment plan for the defunct textile mills of Mumbai failed. Correa responded by saying that it was because of corruption and greed. The textile mills of Mumbai had shut down in the late 1980s and thousands of workers had lost their jobs. As real-estate prices were high, the mill owners had plans to redevelop the old buildings into commercial complexes and luxury apartments. To avoid a piecemeal and haphazard development, the government appointed Charles Correa to prepare a master plan to redevelop all fifty-seven mills in the city. As the industrial neighborhoods were extremely dense, Correa's plan envisaged the creation of large public open spaces and cultural centers over the mill lands. Even though there was much discussion on this plan, it was not implemented. Correa blamed the bureaucrats, the politicians, and the owners for being corrupt and conniving with each other in order to stall the plan and develop the mills into new real estate. He told the interviewer that it was sheer greed that caused this. The interviewer then asked Correa: Why did the workers not respond to the plan and support it? Correa said that he did not know. Correa's plan sought to solve the congestion and density problems of Mumbai. According to him, the failure of his "good plan" was due to internal problems of the "bad city" that he conceptualized as corruption and greed.

Correa had proposed the plan as an external entity to the city, which would work on the city and "solve its problems." The plan probably did not work because it was naive enough not to factor in multiple aspects: the corruption of bureaucrats and politicians, the greed of the mill owners, or even the aspirations of the workers who lost their jobs – instead of employment, the

plan promised them public spaces and cultural centers. The "externalization" of the plan was probably its failure. Correa's plan gave form to his own aspirations, where he imagined the mill lands transformed into ideal public spaces like European plazas. This aspiration did not agree with the workers in the locality, who had a different idea of public space – that of street corners, small playgrounds, multipurpose halls, streets that doubled as festival spaces, markets, and so forth.

However, it does not mean that the plan would have worked as intended if all the aspects were included. It is not possible to factor in all aspects of the city, as they themselves are dynamic. There are several examples where large projects have gotten stuck due to some feeble land claims, or changes in international markets, or the denial of approvals due to changes in laws. Plans, policies, and projects are subject to innumerable factors and get worked out in unimagined ways and through incoherent logics. How else does one explain a mosque changing the alignment of a major road; or rehabilitated slum families moving back to slums; or the failure of a grand plan to create public spaces on defunct industrial lands? Though Correa's plan did not materialize in the manner that he had imagined, it got worked out in completely different ways – it stirred many discussions around the city about mill lands and their futures; it provided information to several activist groups; it mobilized courts and also forged several solidarities.

Another acute example of plans getting worked out differently is the master plan for Mumbai, where after thirty years of making the plan, only 18 percent of the land reservations were implemented. The plan itself underwent changes and amendments more than three hundred times. After a point, the original master plan did not exist – it was a completely transformed plan within its own life span. This cannot be seen as the failure of the plan – instead, the failure is in its "working out." Plans, and everything else, are produced through the city and the work within it. Here, there is no failure or success – there is only "working out."

Correa had also mobilized concepts like "corruption" and "greed" to explain the failure of his plan. Such concepts used to explain the city start dissolving once one starts looking closely at them. For example, the idea of "corruption" is not a straightforward phenomenon of one party giving money to another to get favors. This works through layers of obligations, beliefs, and desires. In the case of Correa's plan for redeveloping the mill lands, there were many in the planning community who believed that the mills in the city should be replaced by

commercial complexes and not cultural centers. In many cases, bureaucrats are under pressure from politicians to gather funds for elections. In one case, a high-ranking bureaucrat, who was a staunch Buddhist, even aided in the building of a pagoda by facilitating a land deal with a Buddhist organization. There was no monetary transcation here, but faith had worked itself out in an awkward manner.

Settling

In the electronic cluster of Mumbai, called Lamington Road, shops are very small and are along street sidewalks. During the daytime, the tiny shops extend themselves slightly by placing empty display cartons on the sidewalk. The awnings over the doorways of these shops are thickened to become storage spaces. The free walls between the doors of two shops are rented to other shops, which dig themselves one foot within the wall and extend themselves one foot outside. These are the classic one-foot shops of Mumbai. When they are shut, they remain folded as a thin relief on the wall. But when they unfold and open, they spill their guts out to reveal the oneiric spaces within. Beyond this play of shop doors, empty cartons, and one-foot shops is another series of shops, which occupy the edge of the sidewalk along the carriageway. These are the sidewalk shops. Like the one-foot shops, these are inventive in their folding in and out. At some places, there are also shops on the carriageway beyond the sidewalk shops. They alternate with parked cars. At certain times of the day, even the surfaces of the parked cars become temporary shops. Most of these shops employ homeless people to keep watch over their wares during the night, while others rent spaces in the shops and houses in the neighborhood to store their goods and possessions.

The street also has a few other shops. Vegetable, fruit, and flower vendors sell most of their stock by the end of the day, leaving only a cadaver of the shop at night that waits to gain life again the next day with fresh stock. Sometimes, different vendors occupy the same space during different hours of the day – for example, a newspaper vendor and a flower vendor may use the same premises in shifts. Or then there is the day-and-night shop – when the day shop shuts, the night shop takes over its closed shutters. A visitor walking on Lamington Road has to pass through capillaries formed by the juxtaposition of various kinds of shops, where it is often difficult to identify where one shop begins and another ends. Everything along the edge of the street, including the visitors and shop owners, diffuse into a blurred space – a *transactional space* – that allows many activities to take place, sometimes even contradictory ones. In this blur, the differences set up by

Workers supervise an embroidery unit at a textile mill in Dharavi, Mumbai.

notions of public and private space, urban property regimes, concepts of inside and outside, and all other ideas that define spaces through clear boundaries get diffused. Here boundaries are constantly made, erased, and remade through numerous claims.

The tiny shops on Lamington Road that display large numbers of empty cardboard boxes make customers believe they can get what they are looking for. Most of the times the shops do not have the requisite items stored. The shopkeeper will pick up the phone and call a few nearby shops for the item. This phone call is made through an internal intercom system that connects the entire electronic cluster. It is called the Beta Phone. The network makes all the shops connected into one large shop. The Beta Phone is a *transactional object* of Lamington Road.

All buildings on Lamington Road are rent controlled, and the eviction of tenants is prohibited. This non-eviction guarantee of sorts creates multiple claims, making the buying and selling of property or a change of tenancy difficult, as neither the landlord nor the tenant can make any property transactions without the other's permission. To deal with this deadlock, the practice of *pagadi* came into existence, where the revenue from property transactions gets shared between landlord and tenant. Though this did not have a legal basis for a long time, thousands of properties were transacted through this practice. *Pagadi* is unique to Mumbai and is one of the most important *transactional practices*.

Transactional spaces, practices, and object are unique to particular cities and may appear unusual to an outsider. It is through them that the city settles. *Settling* is a process through which people come to terms with each other's lives and their landscapes. It is not a process in which contradictions get resolved; instead, through settling, contradictions are able to coexist. It is a set of elaborate mechanics that keep the city in a perpetual state of becoming. However, the city never settles completely. These spaces, practices, and objects get layered further, or change, or disappear. The logic of this transformation is often incremental, sporadic, and based on parameters that are beyond the detection of empirical methods. This transformation changes the *transactional capacities* of the spaces/practices/objects. Transactional capacity is that capacity of the space/practice/object that allows the flow of bodies, commodities, ideas, and money through it: the higher the flow, the higher the transactional capacity. Extensions to shops, the folding shops of street vendors, porting devices, resting apparatuses, fixtures fastened to boundary walls that help occupy them, things

used to claim space, orphaned furniture left for wanderers – all examples of such transactional spaces/practices/objects. These are not just utilitarian, facilitating transactions. They are also instances of dreams trying to take shape and aspirations trying to get worked out. They are usually quirky, erotic, sedimented, and absurd.

Trips and Kicks

In Lamington Road, an old technician has made a surveillance device using a set of rearview mirrors. The rearview mirrors are painstakingly fixed to the doorjamb at the entrance of his tiny shop. This homemade surveillance device helps him keep watch on the other half of his shop. As the electronic repair jobs declined, he had to partition off his shop and rent out half to his friend, who used it as a warehouse. The door of the warehouse was usually open, as porters walked in and out procuring material. The friend had requested that the technician keep watch over the storeroom. The technician then installed a rearview mirror for this. But then he started to enjoy watching things obliquely through the rearview mirror. As many people passed by, there were many things to watch. The technician started fixing more mirrors, which allowed him other angles and views. Watching people secretly through the rearview mirrors brought a voyeuristic joy. For the technician, it is no longer only about safety. It is a trip of the watcher. He seems to be getting a kick from watching other people without their knowledge.

Just down the street from the technician's shop is another shop that sells surveillance cameras. The owner of the shop has developed his own trip, collecting different kinds of cameras – particularly spy cameras. He has cameras that can be hidden in a cap, recorders that look like shirt buttons, and spectacles with hidden recording devices. The fascination with spy gadgets is common amongst several people. It is common to find vendors on Mumbai trains selling cheap pens with invisible ink, recording devices, hidden cameras, and microscopic binoculars. It is also normal to find many people buying these objects. The desire to possess such objects speaks to many personal desires. The objects may never be used to write an invisible note, or to secretly record anything, or to watch anyone. After they've been played with for a couple of days, such objects become part of the large collection of useless things at home. But nevertheless, there is a desire to be a spy even for a short moment. The paraphernalia used for spying resolves that desire.

In many instances, this desire takes over one's life and gets worked out in manners that escape logical explanation. A mechanic who

assembles velvet-making machines has had a considerable reduction in demand for his machines since Chinese companies began exporting cheap velvet. To make things worse, the land under his house is being grabbed by a developer. He lives in a small room in one of the rent-controlled buildings on Lamington Road. He is a classic example of people being dispossessed by globalization, capitalism, and gentrification. But he is on another trip – he enjoys searching for lost people. He belongs to a very orthodox community from which people want to run away and disappear into the city. He likes finding them and has found many so far. Most of his earnings have been spent on tracing people. He loves being a spy.

His neighbor, an electronic technician dealing with antenna parts, loves to make strange-looking antennas. His balconies and windows are infested with them. They pick up strange sounds: foreign radio channels, mobile and other phone conversations, police conversations on wireless networks, and also conversations between airport traffic-control rooms and the cockpits of the aircraft. He loves listening to these conversations. His trip is to make antennas that can hack into more and more obscure sound environments.

In one of the backstreets of Lamington Road lives a sound technician who loves making pens. Until a few years ago he made sound mixers and also repaired sound systems and speakers. But as the components in the newer machines became smaller, repairing them became difficult. His inability to engage with the new-age machines has been extremely traumatic. He has been able to sort out his finances by renting a large part of his shop and occasionally repairing simple household electrical devices. Most of his time nowadays is spent making pens out of waste lying around in his shop – flat acrylic pieces, brass tubes; some sleek, some large and bulky, some making jingling sounds. He has made several iterations of the pens. It is as if he has managed to escape his traumatic present and the uncertain future through his new pens.

While the entirety of Lamington Road seems to be made of people with trips, it appears that the trips are the ones that are actually making Lamington Road. *Trips* here are practices that go beyond the acts of routine. People in the city have trips of different kinds – collecting strange objects, behaving like spies, writing stories, achieving mundane targets, dismantling machines, opposing new ideas, trying to walk across five countries, wanting to build temples, counting every tree, tracking obscure data. These practices are not useful to produce grand conceptualizations of cities and are often discarded as stray individual preoccupations.

While some of these obsessions are related to earning and occupations, others are simply "useless." Everyone seems to have a trip that one lives with and for. Trips seem to provide individuals with their energy. Such energies cumulatively produce a city. Trips are absurd quests, unusual obsessions, and bizarre interests that seem to be making the city. The city seems to be acquiring its generative energy from such trips. In many ways the city seems to be a madhouse and madness seems to be running it.

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