Re-Centring the City

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Partitioning earth and sky: vertical urbanism in post-socialist Mumbai

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In considering what might be gained from a re-centring of urban scholarship, I am prompted to ask: what is the centre? Or, more precisely, what is at the centre? In a city like Mumbai, the answer somehow lies with the high-rise built form, newly emergent and rapidly normalising across the city. But one area in particular – the textile mill district – has become an intense focus for high-rise construction. Not accidentally, it is also a historically significant neighbourhood, whose character was vital to the city’s cosmopolitan image in its industrial age. It is thus through the lens of the textile mill district that these brief reflections consider the centrality of the high-rise building and, more generally, the meanings of architecture for both its practitioners and its consumers, and different ways in which architecture relates to centrality.

Mumbai is a city full of reclamations. For many centuries, ‘reclamation’ was used for the practice of converting interstitial zones between earth and sea – neither earth nor sea – into solid ground and then into land. Reclamation, in reality, was an inherently generative act, an act of defiance and accumulation. Today, the word might refer to a different interstitial zone, that between earth and sky. This is a space in which an intense air rights game is being played in contemporary Mumbai. This battle has recently intensified, as the municipal corporation frames and sanctions its next twenty-year land-use plan. The protagonists in this battle are groups who proclaim hyper-dense vertical development as the solution to asymmetric urbanisation and others who advocate different urban forms to achieve the same goals.

For over twenty years now, affordable housing for various groups of people has been linked to the redistribution of air rights, and that means
not only opening up occupied land for commodification but specifically extending upward. The high-rise, once the built form of the elite and the privileged, has now inundated the city. But in this place, vertical urbanism is not really monumental in the sense that inspired an analogy with sacred architecture in early twentieth-century New York: the Woolworth building in Lower Manhattan was likened to a ‘cathedral of commerce’ – a bold and very telling analogy. Georges Bataille, in his laconic observations on architecture, described it in this way:

In practice, only the ideal being of society, that which orders and prohibits with authority, expresses itself in what are architectural compositions in the strict sense of the term. Thus, the great monuments are raised up like dams, pitting the logic of majesty and authority against all the shady elements: it is in the form of cathedrals and palaces that Church and State speak and impose silence on the multitudes. It is obvious, actually, that monuments inspire socially acceptable behaviour, and often a very real fear.¹

Mumbai’s contemporary high-rises are not, in this sense, monumental: they are too recent and too mediated to ‘inspire socially acceptable behaviour’. As derivative forms mirroring cities elsewhere, they invoke instead Aldo Rossi’s sense of urban artefacts, monuments to the passage of time and the persistence of patterns of socioeconomic organisation through time.²

One of Mumbai’s earliest laboratories of vertical urbanism, the textile mill district in central Mumbai, housed around 160 working textile mills until the early 1980s. For over a century their numbers grew steadily, at their peak invoking comparisons with Manchester. Occupying large parcels of land in what is now the geographical centre of Mumbai, and surrounded by tenement buildings housing mill workers and their families, these mills were iconic in constructing an image of the city both for itself and for the world. In the 1970s, with new technologies and restrictive labour laws that prevented mill owners from upgrading and from making workers redundant, the mills gradually accumulated massive losses but continued to hold large numbers of formally employed workers on their payrolls. When payments could not be met, a year-long workers’ strike in 1982 hastened the demise of the industry.

Alongside this collapse, the rising tide of economic liberalisation was sweeping India, forcing the government to open up its restricted, autarkic national economy. Although the rhetoric of socialism prevailed in political circles, India’s political economy was a curious, tense coexistence
of protectionism for industrialists and industrial workers, and massive exploitation of other sectors of the economy. The latter included large floating populations of informal workers, what Jan Breman has called ‘footloose labour’, constantly forced to move, sometimes between city and countryside and often within the city itself. Liberalisation focused its early attention on cities, and with the promise of new economic opportunities cities began to experience intensified housing and office space shortages at the same time that many heavy industries concentrated in cities began to lose ground to newer industrial technologies. This may seem to create the conditions for a classic case of post-Fordist restructuring, and though it could be read as such it may be more productive to view what followed as a curious case of the restructuring of rights, specifically the restructuring of air rights. As elsewhere in the world, architecture became, as we shall see, a key tool in generating value.

In Mumbai, extremely restricted development laws and land-use plans calculated and envisaged a city of much lower densities and a much smaller population. Such restrictions had two effects: the massive growth of informal and unauthorised settlements, and the desire for large land parcels which would yield large volumes in the existing context of uniform, low floor-area ratios (FARs) across the city. There remained no district where development could legitimately take place without breaking through these FAR restrictions, and thus a single formula was born that structured the many projects commodifying land for new purposes: for every family resettled from a building or structure targeted for ‘redevelopment’, private real-estate actors received air rights as incentives. This formula involved the creation of exchange value for land, not through its sale and purchase, but rather through the displacement of its occupants, whether they were poor or not, in search of homes or places of work.

This resulted in a city in which the formal–informal exchange algorithm generated an assembly of self-organising patterns, volumes and effects from an extremely limited set of parameters. Among the notable effects of this kind of formulaic parcelling of air rights was the exclusion of the demands of those being resettled. Furthermore, the places where these air rights would land were not exactly predictable in advance, which resulted in a huge market in transferable development rights, distributed to landowners and builders in the form of certificates, whose inflation and deflation corresponded to speculative demands for real estate products.

These displacements of people – sometimes on the same parcel of land, at other times great distances away from their original places – created a form of currency exchange between spatial allotments and
high-rise construction. Architecture, the intentional practice of building, is thus a reflection of this formula, a structuring practice that produces a social experience not just from space but from the invisible, intangible economy of exchanges. It is useful to return to an imaginary dialogue between Aldo Rossi and Georges Bataille. Rossi’s contribution, when viewed favourably, is his insistence on moving beyond the functionalism of architecture. Similarly, Bataille attacked the central metaphysical assumption of modern capitalist economies, that of utility. As Jean Baudrillard puts it, Bataille’s critique was to see the manner in which

[...] all economics are founded on that which no longer can, no longer knows how to expend itself …, on that which is incapable of becoming the stake of a sacrifice. It is therefore entirely residual, it is a limited social fact; and it is against economy as a limited social fact that Bataille wants to raise expenditure, death, and sacrifice as total social facts.\(^4\)

Located between these critiques of functionalism and utilitarianism, the high-rise is a curious figure of both excess and withholding. It restricts or blocks the flow of vital energies from circulating through society. In Mumbai, the textile mill district is significant because it was the first and earliest iteration of this formula of exchange and continues to feature prominently on Mumbai’s real-estate heat map as high-rises grow taller and acquire greater prestige: the lives of those working in the interstitial zones between mill compounds are exchanged for air rights, turning the already agonistic field of worker–owner relationships into something different.

For a brief moment, this turning of the field flared with revolutionary prospects. During an interview with me, Datta Isvalkar, the charismatic leader of the GKSS (Mill Workers’ Action Committee), gave me a memoir of the organisation he had prepared for its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2014. The memoir chronicled the struggles of this community in the years following the strike of 1982, when 250,000 formally employed workers lost their jobs. Like his father before him, Datta worked in the mills and lived in a tenement house owned by the Modern Mills. When it was clear that it was futile to agitate for the reopening of the mills, and that mill owners were already being given permission to sell their land parcels for development surreptitiously, the group changed its tactics to agitate instead for housing for the workers. Agreements between the mill owners and the state culminated, first in 2001 and again in 2014, in the state housing board handing over the keys of hundreds of resettlement
apartments to former mill workers, who were chosen by lottery. The exact numbers are not known but it was in the region of 68,000 workers, according to Datta.

Since the GKSS was founded in 1989 in the long aftermath of the strike and the mill closures, high-rises have grown in the mill district, reaching even greater heights, now vying to be properly called skyscrapers. What they are scraping, however, is air rights, the anabolic energy of transferable development rights and incentive development rights granted to mill owners and developers in exchange for allowing the state to sell affordable units in the vicinity of the super-talls to working-class families. When I asked him where the agitation would move next, Datta, who impresses his visitors as a wise and pragmatic figure, said of course that it would move into development planning; at the time debates were raging between the Municipal Corporation and activist groups about the Mumbai 2034 Development Plan, which would reserve lands for particular uses and would set the template for Mumbai’s future for the next twenty years. As always, Datta’s stories, which are building stories, or ones built on grounded observations, were rooted in having an answer to the question ‘what next?’ I noticed that he never engaged in retrospective speculation, nor asked the question ‘what if?’ His lack of interest in that question stems from a confidence about what the right thing to do would be in that situation.

It was grounded, moreover, in his memories of what appeared to be a ‘good city’: a city where he would walk to work, his children to school and his aged mother to the doctor; a place that was not planned but nevertheless functioned efficiently; a place that was self-sufficient but did not foreclose encounters with the wider city. These thoughts were prompted after I’d returned to his office from visiting another GKSS activist, who had received a housing board allotment flat in one of those new towers. She in turn had taken me to a few other resettlement buildings where the same formula had been applied to individual buildings rather than to the housing board development of twenty-four towers at the site previously occupied by the New Hind Mills, on the eastern edge of the mill district. In my interpretation, this was Datta’s way of realising that architecture contributes to the imaginary of a stable physical world through which we may move and within which we may act, and of asking what happens when the air-rights game starts to undermine even the basic laws that are the conditions of possibility of a stable physical world.

Air rights accelerate certain forms of energy exchange: it is the air itself that is exchanged when the slowness or inertia of the traditional building envelope is replaced with rapidly deteriorating materials that
hasten death of all kinds by building up toxicity in the very medium of existence and exchange. In today’s Mumbai, polluted air has become the medium of urban exchanges, rather than flows on the ground through streets and public spaces; the thickness of social exchange is obscured by the hyper-density of the high-rise. Its sectional isolation vis-à-vis the ground plan generates new paranoias of penetration from the outside, which is so proximate and yet so distant. From the outside, which is also the ground plane, the high-rise appears like a walled void, a world entirely interior to itself. The high-rise can only grow through the virtuosity of the designer, who adjusts the elevation to take in the play of light and shadow, but this high-rise, born of the air-rights game, takes nothing else into account: first it battles those forms different from itself, while later it has to battle others like itself. But the key feature of the high-rise’s ability to centre is that it is utterly Janus-faced. Viewed from one side it may perhaps appear to be totally domineering, but viewed from another side, the process that brought it into being – the socioeconomic and political ‘envelope’ that configures its form and that of its companion, the resettlement building – is nakedly visible.

Elsewhere I have argued that the key transition in this landscape may be the loss of a dialectical sense of the future, one in which ‘the present contains, in the form of a contradiction, a potential that history is necessarily destined to resolve’. It is from this resolution that a social form free of violence and poverty will emerge. But, viewing the air-rights game as it is played out across this former industrial landscape, one sees clearly that the present contains endless potential that might be captured by creative construction represented in the dispersal of speculative energy across the field of the city, not just in the spectacle of the high-rise but in the landscape within which it is set. Centrality, or the story that the city may tell itself about itself, is intimately connected to these emerging verticals.

Notes

1. Bataille, 1997, p. 21 (entry for ‘Architecture’ for the unfinished Documents dictionary).
2. See Rossi, 1982.
3. Breman, 1996.
4. Baudrillard, 1991, p. 136 (original published in French in 1976). The connection between the idea of use-value, the gift and the total social fact is explored at length in Murawski’s contribution to this volume, and in Murawski, 2019, chapter 2.
5. Rao, Krishnamurthy and Kuoni, 2015.
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