

# WELCOME TO DHARAVI INC.

AS INDIAN CITIES SWELL IN DENSITY, MUMBAI'S MEGASLUM DHARAVI, AN EVER-EVOLVING, THRIVING ECOSYSTEM OF MICRO-ECONOMIES INTERCONNECTED WITH RESIDENTIAL SPACES, COULD ALSO PROVE TO BE AN UNCONVENTIONAL ALBEIT IMPORTANT MODEL FOR URBAN PLANNERS.

It's monsoon time. An oily slick of mud runs down the length of the alleyway, here in the industrial area, home to hundreds, thousands even, of small-scale industries. Passageways at most are a few feet wide, through which dozens of workers march, nimbly navigating the narrow lanes, darting in and out of the small rooms on either side.

Rain drips from a corrugated tin awning – but it won't be for long, as the sun is back out. Muslim prayers blare from a tinny radio, while a *bhel puri wallah* with a heavy tub of ingredients balanced on his belly waddles through, calling out to advertise his wares. A dog looks up at us plaintively; he is covered in black paint splatters, thanks to one of the neighbourhood's many busy industries, paint can recycling. Used drums are cleaned, banged back into shape, and sold back to the companies. In another room, wiry men from Bihar are crouched around a low table, painstakingly appliqueing silver beads onto pink silk, while around the corner, white garments are being dipped in vast vats, the workers with forearms stained fuchsia from the dye. Dupattas and saris are hung

out to dry on rooftops, above which drifts smoke from pottery kilns.

Welcome to Dharavi: a megaslum yes, but much, much more. The neighbourhood in central Mumbai is known as a place of mafia and slumdogs, of choleric *dhobi ghats* and shanties. But the reality is different. Sure, it's filthy and cramped, with roughly one million people crammed into 1.75 square kilometres. But it's also a place of great commerce and industry, of soaring land values and roughly Rs 30 billion in annual turnover. And with that many people and that much industry, it has an ecosystem and economy all of its own. Much of what is made here is sold or consumed within the same neighbourhood, or passed on to a nearby factory for the next stage of the manufacturing process.

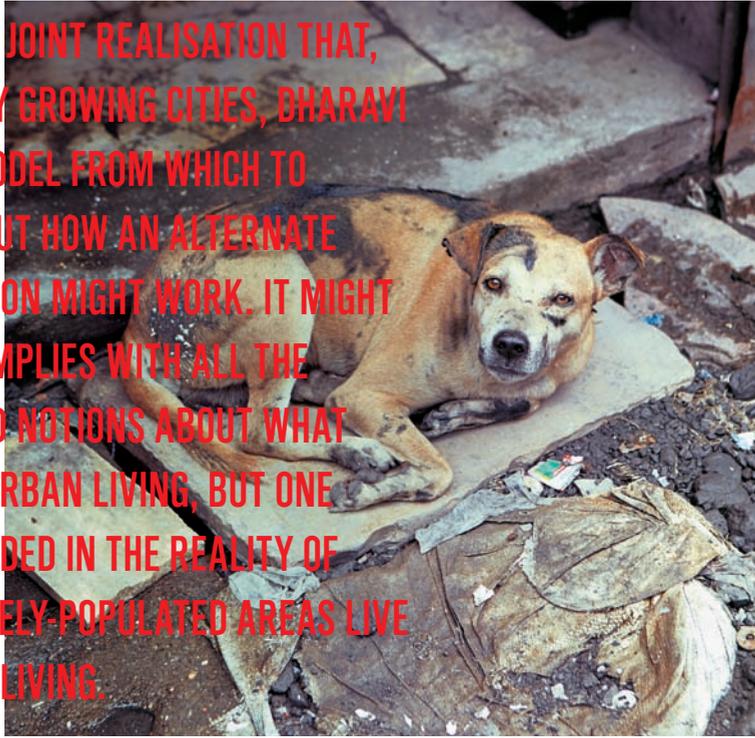
In fact, it might be apt to describe Dharavi as “post-slum”: a place where people might have to sleep curled up under the kitchen bench, but have water and electricity, good jobs, more than enough to eat and strong community ties. There are worse slums in Mumbai, although



INSIDE THE GODOWN OF IRFAN MEMON, a plastic scrap merchant.

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**URBZ GREW OUT OF A JOINT REALISATION THAT, WITH INDIA'S RAPIDLY GROWING CITIES, DHARAVI WOULD BE A GOOD MODEL FROM WHICH TO LEARN LESSONS ABOUT HOW AN ALTERNATE FORM OF URBANISATION MIGHT WORK. IT MIGHT NOT BE ONE THAT COMPLIES WITH ALL THE ACCEPTED RULES AND NOTIONS ABOUT WHAT CONSTITUTES GOOD URBAN LIVING, BUT ONE THAT IS MORE GROUNDED IN THE REALITY OF HOW PEOPLE IN DENSELY-POPULATED AREAS LIVE – OR MIGHT SOON BE LIVING.**



A PAINT-SPLATTERED DOG in the paint can recycling area of Dharavi.

these rarely attract anywhere near the same level of scrutiny as Dharavi.

“There is a very strong sense of organisation here, that’s why it is functional,” says Matias Echanove of Dharavi-based urban development collective Urbz. “Neighbourhoods have developed along the same lines as a village, with homes being built around a market, which sprung up because a temple was there. We’ve counted 90 of these.”

Echanove, a Spanish-Swiss urban planner, moved to Mumbai after studying in Japan and was struck by the similarities between informal neighbourhoods that had developed in different parts of the world that he was familiar with, such as Shimokitazawa in Tokyo, and parts of Perugia, in Italy. He soon came across Rahul Srivastava who was doing similar work. Urbz grew out of a joint realisation that, with India’s rapidly growing cities, Dharavi would be a good model from which to learn lessons about how an alternate form of urbanisation might work. It might

not be one that complies with all the accepted rules and notions about what constitutes good urban living, but one that is more grounded in the reality of how people in densely-populated areas live – or might soon be living.

“One of the organisational principles that has shaped its fabric is how the use of space is maximised,” says Srivastava. “All people need are proper facilities and infrastructure.”

Dharavi is most famous for its leather industry. All stages of the process happen here: leather is bought and sold, then carted to a factory where it is fashioned into bags, belts, wallets, and jackets. These are then either taken around the city, around India, even around the world, to be sold, although many items also end up in one of the dozens of leather shops lining the Sion-Mahim Road bordering the neighbourhood.

My first stop is at the office of a leather wholesaler. Sikander Vhatkar buys leather pieces by the container load, mostly overstock and offcuts from luxury car manu-



A WORKER sits in a storehouse where plastic is sorted before it is ground.

facturers, such as BMW. The leather is then sold on to local Dharavi-based manufacturers for Rs 150 per square foot. This yields a profit of roughly Rs 15 000 per container, adding up to a monthly salary of up to Rs 100 000 per month. Even by Mumbai standards, this makes Sikander a wealthy man – particularly when combined with the value of his Dharavi real estate. He bought his 720 square foot warehouse 15 years ago for Rs 160 000. It is now valued at around one crore.

“Dharavi land is gold,” says his son Siddhant, 22. “It’s because it is in a huge industrial area, it’s one of the largest in Asia.” Dharavi is also situated in a strategically central location: smack-bang between two railway lines and within easy commutable distance to both the southern business district and the emerging new financial centre, the Bandra-Kurla complex, in the city’s north. It is this location that makes developers drool.

“It’s true,” says Krishna Pujari of Reality Tours, which has run slum tours through Dharavi since 2006. “I was

thinking about buying a place here, but it’s too expensive, I can’t afford it.” Pujari now lives with his wife and children in Thane, an outlying suburb of Mumbai.

“More than half of Bombay’s population live in slums,” he says. “All sorts of people live in Dharavi. MNC workers, BPO workers, 60 percent of our police force,” he says.

Inspired by a favela tour Pujari’s business partner took while in Brazil, Reality began its Dharavi tours to provide an insight into the true nature of the neighbourhood, and now up to 20 people each day sign up. Most are tourists but they also get a substantial number of people living in surrounding suburbs who are curious to know how the other half lives.

“Dharavi has 10 000 small-scale industries,” he says. “Infrastructure here is poor. There is a lack of awareness about health and hygiene. But if these small-scale businesses are not allowed, there’s a strong chance that people might get involved in illegal activities.”

With his office located on one of the roads bordering Dharavi, Pujari is now intimately acquainted with the place and its residents, and insists that its murky reputation hails from long ago, when the slum was wholly illegal. Residents who can prove living and working there before the year 2000 are legally recognised under the terms of the redevelopment plan. These days, there are less social problems, partially due to wealth, partially because of the strong community ties, partially due to the cheek-by-jowl living. “If something happens here, everyone knows about it,” says Pujari.

Back in the leather wholesaler’s office, Sikander is cagey about having his photograph taken. He is going to be sitting for local elections soon. But eventually he capitulates, his pride in his achievements overriding his concerns about possibly being seen in a magazine. He proudly tells me, in a mixture of English, Hindi and Marathi, that his father was a mill worker, he came from nothing yet managed to build a business and give his children the education he never had. All this, thanks to Dharavi.

“Here there is location, people, and *prem bhau*, brotherly affection,” he says. “There is a good community and we all live here, all castes and religions, together and peacefully.”

“We have *chhota* Maharashtra, *chhota* Rajasthan, *chhota* Dilli, *chhota* Tamil Nadu.”

Adds Siddhant: “Dharavi: *dil maange more*. Everything is here.”

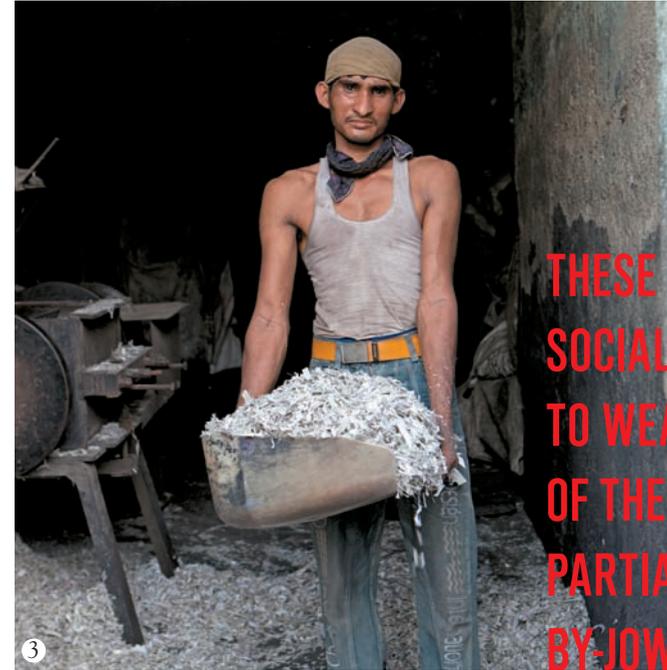
I’d hoped to see a leather factory but Sikander gently resists my requests, saying that they are all closed due to the monsoon. However, it is more likely that the factories are resistant to visitors: there are whispers that some high-end luxury handbag brands take advantage of Dharavi’s low labour costs, so as to maximise the margin on bags priced at well over Rs 45 000, so understandably, there is some sensitivity about this being exposed. The factories are tightly controlled, and even workers who turn up without their ID badges are not allowed in.

A short walk away is the hub of another of Dharavi’s major industries: plastic recycling. Plastic refuse is collected and deposited in huge sacks left lining the small alleys, stacked high in buildings and stored on the roof. It is everything from water bottles to toys, televisions to washing machine tubs. All these are crushed between the rollers of heavy machines into shavings, then carted elsewhere in the slum to be washed in large vats. From here, the shards are taken to yet another factory where they are melted down and turned into pellets, which are spread on sheets on the roof to dry under the sun. They are then sent to locations around the world to get another lease of plastic life. All these are interconnected: just metres from where the crushing machine is doing its noisy and toxic job, in another room another crushing machine is being assembled.

Irfan Memon is a second-generation Dharavi-based plastic scrap merchant and recycler. His business, run out of a tiny office next to a relatively large – and empty – warehouse has been going strong for 40 years. “We buy plastic scrap from Goa, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Pune, Chennai and Gujarat, from the big dealers there. They get it from small shops, which buy from ragpickers.”

When I ask Memon about the value of his business and real estate, his English language skills seem to ebb away, but when talk turns to the Dharavi Redevelopment Project, he becomes animated again. “After development we will like Dharavi, we will get hospitals, gardens, universities,” he says.

The Dharavi Redevelopment Project, which has been in the works for more than a decade, will see the slum razed and redeveloped. Work has already started in one residential district. In addition to apartment complexes for the middle and upper-middle classes, there will be a



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- ① A WORKER sorts through plastic for recycling.
- ② THE INSIDE OF A SMALL FACTORY which makes the machines used for grinding plastic.
- ③ A WORKER holds freshly-crushed plastic shards; there is a plastic grinding machine behind him.
- ④ GROUND plastic chips being washed.



**HOWEVER, IT IS MORE LIKELY THAT THE FACTORIES ARE RESISTANT TO VISITORS: THERE ARE WHISPERS THAT SOME HIGH-END LUXURY HANDBAG BRANDS TAKE ADVANTAGE OF DHARAVI'S LOW LABOUR COSTS, SO AS TO MAXIMISE THE MARGIN ON BAGS PRICED AT WELL OVER Rs 45 000.**



INSIDE A GODOWN where oil tins are cleaned, flattened and resold.

separate industrial zone, and current long-term residents will receive living space. It is this, however, that is causing a wide deal of consternation: residents are agitating for more square footage than they have been allocated – some sources put the sanctioned figure at 225, others cite 300. Additionally, many are disgruntled they will lose rental money from illegally constructed second floors on their shacks. Memon instructs me to scrub out the figure I've written in my notebook, grabbing my pen, while insisting it is not yet decided. Dharavians, it appears, have issues with numbers.

There is another reason that many residents are not happy with plans to be rehoused. Many live and work in the same quarters, so being moved to a residentially zoned area could effectively rob them of their livelihood. "Here, the house is a tool of production," says Echanove.

"This needs to be understood, because it goes against what urban planners say is good practice."

Urbz argues that redevelopment will kill the unique essence of Dharavi, and render it soulless and devoid of character. Pointing out the building noise coming from all around the office, they say that people are constantly improving and updating their dwellings, and this will continue. Elsewhere in the world, former slums have organically developed and gentrified; this too could happen in Dharavi, if given the chance.

The pair also point out that Dharavi was literally built from nothing: before it had any human settlement it was nothing more than marshland. "It's a real example of people creating value out of nothing," says Srivastava. "It is a place that manages to flourish from very little, from a literal ground zero." 🌍

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