





Mill District, Mumbai, 2013.

The vast majority of Mumbai’s 13 million people live in three housing types: slum shacks known as *zopadpattis*; single-room, barrack-like tenements with shared toilet blocks known as *chawls*; and, increasingly, “resettlement buildings,” an emerging housing type composed of single-room residences with attached baths and toilets. These are designed specifically to accommodate people displaced from the slum settlements that stand in the way of Mumbai’s growing number of mega-infrastructure projects and private developments.<sup>1</sup> The “normal” residence in Mumbai is thus a single room, often housing multiple generations.

#### Community as Family, Building as Actor

The *chawls* of Mumbai’s central districts have long provided an enduring image of the urban in Indian cities. Despite enormous variation among particular *chawls*, the shared toilet block and the open, flowing corridors are universal morphological features. These corridors serve as “galleries of life,” to use architect Neera Adarkar’s description. And yet, while *chawls* are often romanticized in popular media for creating organic bonds of community in the otherwise alienating metropolis, they regularly play host to conflict, as Kiran Nagarkar vividly captures in his novel *Ravan and Eddie*. The novel describes daily life in the Central Works Department Chawl No. 17, from the dietary preferences to the erotic fantasies of a group of neighbors speaking different languages

and professing different faiths, furnishing the building with a rich interior life. Alongside the novel’s two boy heroes, the building in which they live is a protagonist in its own right, its morphology creating the conditions for the types of conflicts that drive Nagarkar’s narrative.

The *chawl* became a popular building type in the mid-19th century as Mumbai’s textile industry began to boom, drawing in migrant workers from the coastal districts of the state of Maharashtra. Living alongside these migrant textile workers were migrants from other parts of British India—traders, cloth merchants, moneylenders, musclemen, and municipal workers—bringing previously segregated communities into close proximity. Notions of family association were expanded, with domestic space serving a range of groups—

from groups of single male kinsmen migrating for work to multigenerational families of grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, and nieces. Glimpses into these dwellings reveal dynamic domestic networks that incorporated elements of communal and public life seamlessly into the domestic life of the family: households expanded and contracted according to rhythms of agrarian cycles, when men would return to their villages during the monsoons; or according to birth cycles, when women typically returned to their natal homes; or according to the cycles of school holidays, when families returned to their “native places.”

The relation between community, family, and space is shaped through the acts of adjustment demanded by life in the *chawl*—from adjusting one’s daily ablutions to queuing for toilet seats to expanding singular instances of family and kinship into networks of community prompted by the *chawl* itself. These networks range from mill workers sharing a politics of class struggle to the investment networks of mercantile families in the cloth-trading business in South Mumbai.<sup>2</sup>

Religious associations and spectacular celebrations of festivals are other forms of extended association that are prominent in *chawl* communities and are specifically associated with this form of proximate-yet-flexible living, at once mirroring and redefining familial configurations. One resident of a *chawl* in Mumbai’s Kalbadevi neighborhood, which houses many wholesale cloth markets, described the three-story tenement building he lived in as a single house with many rooms and the residents as members of an extended family. By contrast, he described the modern apartment building as many separate rooms tied together in a common envelope, sharing none of the associations of family and obligation implied by *chawl* living.

At present, a sea change is underway in the built forms of contemporary Mumbai. Nineteenth-century *chawls*, and slum settlements even more so, are targets of rampant redevelopment, ostensibly to create safer and more sanitary forms of living. Accompanying these changes, however, is an anxiety about the breakdown of networks and associations forged by dwelling practices typical of older housing types. These spatial transformations are increasingly common across cities of the Global South, especially as new forms of property and practices of speculative investment drive the development of real estate opportunities by targeting existing built forms for redevelopment.

#### Unsettling Family: The In-Between World of the Building

Among the many encounters I’ve had during a decade of fieldwork on the spatial transformation of Mumbai, the stories of three remarkable activists stand out. The first is Balu Waghmare, formerly associated with the radical Dalit Panthers political movement in Mumbai.<sup>3</sup> I met him in 2012 in his one-room resettlement apartment in the Vashi Naka resettlement colony in northeast Mumbai’s M Ward. Balu moved into the building just a few years earlier when the hutment he owned in a hillside *zopadpatti* settlement or “colony” (*nagar*) was demolished to make way for an expressway. He was a community leader in this colony and routinely settled



Jam Mills Compound *chawl*, Mumbai, 2013.



Sathenagar *zopadpatti*, Mumbai, 2015.

quarrels among residents over space, water, domestic relations, and petty crimes. In his recollection, the boundaries of the individual unit extended well beyond the unit itself, into the lane and beyond to the networks of lanes that shared a common infrastructural ecology.

Prior to living in the colony, Balu was enrolled in Sidharth College, one of Mumbai’s only educational institutions dedicated to educating youth from *dalit* or “oppressed” communities.<sup>4</sup> In the college hostel, he roomed with the future leaders of the Dalit Panther political group and became one of the party’s administrators.<sup>5</sup> Alarmed by his radicalization, his parents moved him out of the hostel and into his aunt’s *zopadpatti* on the northeastern fringes of the city. The move was at once spatial and existential for Balu—he had been removed from friendships and associations with young migrant men, and sent to live in his extended family’s 10-foot-by-10-foot bamboo-frame *zopadpatti*. This space would grow incrementally over time, but it was already embedded in a community joined together by the collective trauma of a hillside deeply impacted by fierce monsoons, mudslides, and municipal demolitions.

These forms of spatial and existential association framed by the *zopadpatti* figured prominently in Balu’s own life story as he recounted it to me in the company of two younger activist friends. Over the course of the afternoon, the three exchanged stories of friendship, activism, and networks forged in the face of collective threat. Although each of them



Migrant men's hostelery, Mumbai, 2013.



Vashi Naka, Mumbai, 2015.

lived in a different *zopadpatti* colony, they had come together to support one another routinely in moments of crisis. What became clear in the stories that they exchanged was the seamless shift across the scales of individual, family, community, and network made possible precisely by the places they occupied at different points in their lives, however precariously.

The Vashi Naka resettlement housing colony, where I listened to these narratives, is a densely packed site with 90 uniform seven-story buildings housing 32,000 residents, on a parcel of land along part of the newly constructed Eastern Freeway, which connects northeastern Mumbai to the central business district. Balu's tiny 225-square-foot home opens onto a double-loaded corridor with 11 identical units on either side. It is one of the largest sites of involuntary densification in Mumbai, a site where the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) relocated residents whose former housing made way for some of Mumbai's many transport mega-projects. The site is surrounded by petroleum refineries and is hemmed in by the freeway on the one side and by active salt pans on the other, trapping its residents in an enclave without easy access to other settled parts of the district.

As Balu contextualized his four decades in this radically changing city and reflected on the different spatial ecologies he had experienced, two breaks punctuated the conversation. The first: Balu's wife came out of the kitchen, which is blocked off from the multipurpose single room that Balu, his

wife, children, and brother share to work, study, and sleep. She returned with tea, and as she passed the cups around he teased her about how long it had taken her to make up her mind to marry him. They had known each other well before marriage but she never wanted to move into the *zopadpatti* where Balu lived with his aunt and her family. This story of conjugal frustration is often heard in Mumbai, where single-room dwellings are so much the norm.

The second break came when two construction workers walked in through the open door with small tools and a bag of cement. Balu explained that they had finally come to fix the toilet after months of his petitioning the MMRDA. He lamented the poor quality of the buildings, which required huge sums for maintenance and repair, especially when the indoor plumbing broke down. Older forms of association that routinely extended the boundaries of self and family across vast networks of human and natural entities—as were present in the hillside community where he'd lived before—were replaced by the new building colony. This new technology for living—where the easily dilapidated rooms range from 225 to 270 square feet; where natural lighting, air circulation, and areas for play spaces, markets, and gatherings do not figure directly into resettlement policies; where buildings are separated by alleys sometimes less than 10 feet wide; and where the corridors and many of the rooms are lit by white fluorescent tube lights, a grim reminder of the near absence of natural light in many of the units—accelerates a new kind of politics.

As Balu and other activists against displacement argue, the resettlement building disallows the flexible, temporal rhythms of incremental extension—and thus the capacity to absorb and extend the joint-family households. Balu's corner unit in the resettlement building seemed to him a dead space, in many ways. He lamented the fact that behind closed doors, each man had become his own master, losing any sense of respect for authority and solidarity. In the process, he asserted that the building itself was also a victim and its state of disrepair betrayed the inability of residents to form new kinds of associations of care and cooperation, let alone real bonds of kinship and solidarity like those that are prominent in the mythologies surrounding the *chawls* of bygone times. Toward the end of our conversation, Balu suggested that a new civic pedagogy was needed to enable the displaced residents to learn to view the building as a living entity requiring constant care. Buried in that appeal, of course, is an acknowledgment of the dispersal of these old ecologies and entanglements of the self, family, community, and the building envelope.

#### Self-Making Strategies in Sathenagar

Further east in M Ward, there is a different kind of debate underway about property, community, and forms of connection. In a *zopadpatti* settlement called Sathenagar, Jamila, a young Muslim woman, works as an activist in Ghar Bachao, Ghar Banao Andolan (GBGB), or “the struggle to save homes and make homes.” In part through their activism and agitation, her settlement was chosen as a pilot for a new policy of slum redevelopment involving self-development and



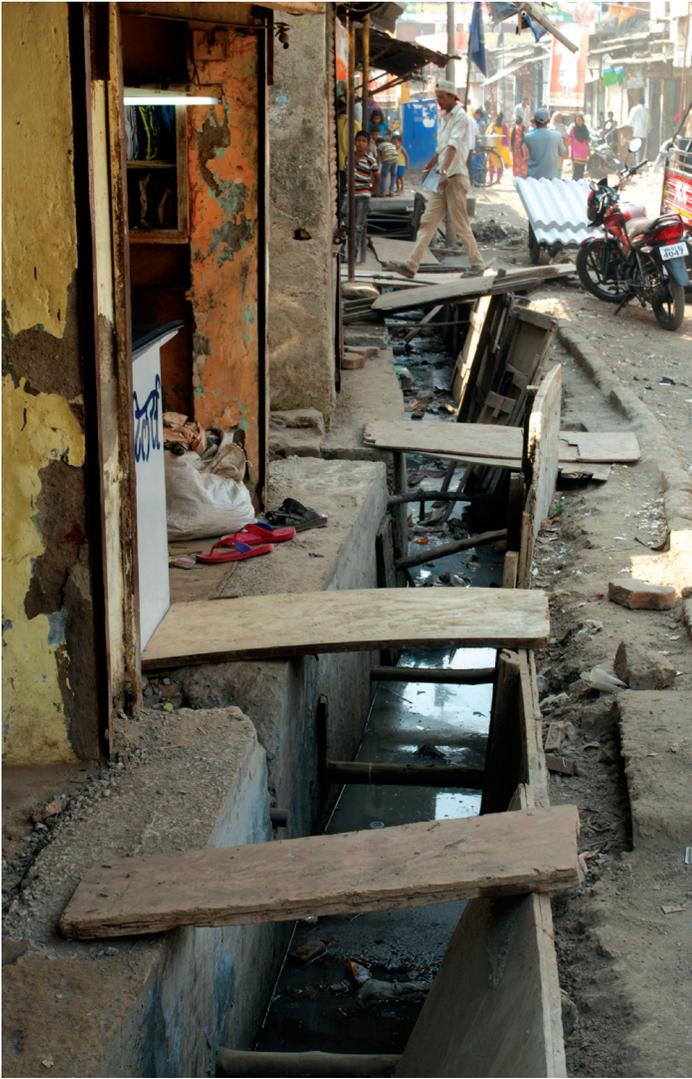
Sathenagar *zopadpatti*, Mumbai, 2015.

ownership called Rajiv Awas Yojana. Jamila works closely with Santosh Thorat, one of the leaders of the GBGB movement in this district. Santosh's father is widely credited with having created the settlement, initially gathering members of the *matang* community (a community of *dalit*) from different slum settlements across Mumbai to this swampy, northeastern edge-zone. The settlement is named Sathenagar after a well-known *dalit* writer and poet, Annabhau Sathé.

Santosh told me of the underlying religious affiliations among the Hindu *matangs* that served as a basis for their political affiliations and the forms of their settlements. He offered a striking explanation for the conditions of the settlement: he said that because the *matangs* had moved from villages following a catastrophic drought in the 1970s, they found themselves settling wherever they found space in a sudden, unplanned fashion, and were therefore caught in a perpetual state of impermanence. The planned move to Sathenagar in 1982 also involved collectively “giving birth” to land or creating it by reclaiming it from land protected from development under coastal zoning rules. Thus, the act of settlement for the *matangs* fundamentally involves the extension of collectivity into territories. Santosh's home is a landmark in Sathenagar; it now stands three floors high, accommodating his family, his brother's family, his parents, and a small flour mill on the ground floor. His political involvement has long involved protecting the home and the family through direct action against eviction and demolition.

Jamila's story struck me as an almost cinematic romance. She met her future husband when he traveled from Mumbai with Jamila's cousin to attend a wedding in her family home in southern India. Following a substantial long-distance relationship, Jamila traveled to Mumbai with an uncle and married Shankar, a Hindu, with little thought about where they would live. After enduring the hardships of migration and the harshness of her bigamous father-in-law, they eventually found their way to Sathenagar to build a home for themselves and another one for Shankar's mother.

While cycles of migration continue to bring single young men (and occasionally single young women like Jamila) into the fold of the *zopadpatti* settlements, dominant patterns of association and affiliation extend domestic household units beyond the individual dwelling into networks that stretch sometimes across vast geographies. Jamila and Shankar, for example, have sent their young children to live with her parents, far from Mumbai and from the *zopadpatti*. For them, the dispersal of their nuclear family was a choice made for their children's sake and to support her activism and their shared aspirations as a couple. They pour their energies into the redevelopment of Sathenagar and into the problems faced by neighboring households with recurrent flooding and subsequent reconstruction. Before he became the owner of a photo studio, Shankar was a “slum builder,” or contractor, who had mastered the art of quickly constructing the ephemeral structures that constitute these settlements. The



Sathenagar zopadpatti, Mumbai, 2015.

*zopadpatti*, he explained, is always a work in progress, subject to constant transformation and reconstruction.

When we spoke about possible forms of reconstruction, however, Shankar returned to the literal meaning of *zopadpatti* in Marathi—a strip of huts—and asked me to imagine the building to come as such a strip, tying a group of residents together around common resources. The difference in the case of a multistoried building, he stressed, was the possibility that the building envelope would order those resources and thereby steady the rhythms of repair and reconstruction. The Sathenagar activists seemed to have a more optimistic view of the new morphologies and contexts that would be generated by the upcoming reconstruction of their settlement; they articulated an understanding of a coming community in the idiom of both family welfare and new forms of communal resource sharing. This optimism may perhaps be attributed to their sense of having control over the process of building and rebuilding rather than their becoming objects of another’s speculations.

### Patchwork Containment and the Coming City

These stories exemplify the many entanglements in the standardized building envelope of the modern multistoried apartment building, which is becoming the standard form of construction in Mumbai as the city’s diverse housing typolo-

gies level down toward a code-driven standard.<sup>6</sup> Throughout Mumbai’s history, however, this envelope has accommodated diverse household configurations tied to class and community rather than to forms of private property that assume nuclear families. It is not surprising then that some of the most thoughtful activists around redevelopment in the city are also astute interpreters of the ambivalent forms that social life will take as the modern apartment building and modernist housing colonies take root as standards.

The coming city is a collage of fragments of the former city. It opens a space for new types of conflict, nostalgia, and mourning as established patterns of migration, collaboration, and cohabitation are supplanted by a regime of value solely focused around profit generation and speculation. The building then is a threshold space of gathering that will continue to mold capital, class, community, potential labor, and desire into a kaleidoscope of family types. As we continue to document these forms, fluid and emergent as they are, what is increasingly clear is that architecture has become a preemptory precursor, and increasingly dominant, in the process of family making, rather than serving as a tool of accommodation as it has done in Mumbai for at least a century. In this moment of transition, architecture should ask how it can transform itself to accommodate the larger networks that constitute urban life—including activities connected to work and labor—rather than serving to order them along conventional property lines and according to inhumane density and profit quotas.

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Opening spread: Shankar’s photo studio, Mumbai, 2015.

<sup>1</sup> According to policies adopted in the 1990s for reconstructing slums and *chawls*, only residents with documentation proving that they lived in Mumbai prior to 1995 were eligible for “free” resettlement when their *chawl* or their officially recognized slum settlement was redeveloped by a third-party, private real estate developer. For unofficial slum settlements or those that were developed after the 1995 cut-off date, there is no resettlement and no protection from eviction. Ironically, the number of slum settlements seems to have increased since these policies were formulated, resulting in a corresponding increase in the numbers of city dwellers vulnerable to eviction and involuntary displacement.

<sup>2</sup> See Vijayanthi Venuturupalli Rao, “Mill, Market, Milieu,” in *The Chawls of Mumbai: Galleries of Life*, ed. Neera Adarkar (Mumbai: Imprint Publishers, 2011). The *chawls* of South Mumbai, occupied by merchant and trading families, tend to be self-segregating, restricting tenancies to members of the same caste, region, and religion. This is unlike the working-class *chawls* of Central Mumbai, which continue to display an immense diversity among neighbors.

<sup>3</sup> Some names have been changed to protect the identities of the individuals. On the Dalit Panthers, see Janet A. Contursi, “Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (May 1993): 320–39; and Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *Dalit* is a self-selected name for the formerly untouchable castes.

<sup>5</sup> See Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner, “The Dalit Panthers and the Radicalisation of the Untouchables,” *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 17, no. 1 (March 1979): 77–93.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of these typologies, see Prasad Shetty et al., *Housing Typologies in Mumbai*, Collective Research Initiatives Trust, May 2007, <http://crit.in/initiatives/housing/housing-typologies>.