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Urban Strategies from the Third World*

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There are half a dozen cities of over 10 million inhabitants each, most of them in the richer countries. By the year 2000 AD, there will be almost 50 cities of over 15 million – of which 40 will be in the Third World. One of them will be Bombay.

Today the city has 8 million people. As recently as 1940, the number was 1.2 million. This scale of growth generates enormous pressures – and perplexing new issues regarding the architect and the political parameters which define his tasks. For in India, as in most third world countries, he is involved, almost exclusively, with a very special clientele – the upper 10% of the population. These are the people who commission the office buildings, apartments, factories and houses, that make up the bulk of his practice. The situation is not of the architect's making; it merely reflects the skewered income profile in society itself.

Ironically enough, of course, it is the remaining 90% whose needs are the most desperate. Today in Bombay, almost 3 million people live on the pavements and in illegal squatter colonies. Is the architect, with his highly specialised skills, of any relevance to them? The buildings he designs (necessarily multi-storeyed because of the high land values) are beyond the resources of the poor, and it isn't just a question of finance: at the national level, there is not enough steel and cement to meet the demand.

Nor has self-help housing provided any panacea; since most of the desirable land in Bombay has already been pre-empted for alternate uses, these schemes usually are on the edge of town, away from jobs and public transport. The poor (at least the smart ones) move back on to the pavements around the railway stations. After all, they are not coming to the city for houses, they are coming for work. To make this kind of housing viable, we will have to increase the supply of urban land (i.e. land related to job opportunities and transport) at a rate commensurate with the scale of the demand. This is going to necessitate changes in the urban structure, i.e. in the deployment of jobs, hence desire lines, etc. across the city. To conceptualise – and help catalyse – such restructuring is, I believe, the key responsibility of the Third World architect.

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It is a responsibility with which he will be increasingly involved during the next decade or two. For Bombay, of course, is not an isolated phenomenon. All over India, there is a mounting wave of distress migration from the rural areas to the cities and towns.

Most of the 'haves' in our urban areas naturally view this phenomenon with great alarm. The idea of some kind of permit system to regulate the exodus becomes increasingly popular. But such a measure, apart from trampling on fundamental constitutional rights, also serves to increase political favouritism and bureaucratic corruption. It is, at best, of questionable morality (what we are saying to the poor in effect is: 'I got here first'), and it totally misunderstands the functional value of these migrations in readjusting socio-economic pressures. After all, bulk migration to urban areas is nothing new. European society was similarly restructured between the 17th and 19th Centuries. That precedent, however, had one crucial difference: the Europeans did not need to readjust themselves within their own boundaries; they felt free to distribute themselves around the globe – an option not open to any Asian country today. To understand this is to begin to perceive the crucial role which our towns and cities are actually playing. They are substitutes for emigration; functioning, in effect, as mechanisms for generating employment – marginally, in industrial jobs, far more widely in tertiary and bazaar sector activities. (Any interventions we make on the urban scene, therefore, should aim to increase these absorbtive qualities.)

By the year 2000, the demographic changes will have begun to stabilise; what we need during the next two decades is a holding action which involves:

(a) increasing incomes at the village and small town level.

(b) stimulating employment and economic growth in middle-sized towns and cities (to act as counter-magnets to the big metropolii).

(c) because both the first two strategies would have a take-off period of at least 10 to 15 years, action must simultaneously be taken to re-structure the existing metropolii so that they can function during this interim period (while their growth rate tapers off).

If the first two strategies fail, it is possible that a city like Bombay will grow into a vast conurbation containing 50 or 60 million by the turn of the century (as some demographers predict). But even if they are successful, there still remains the problem of making Bombay function with as many as 15 million inhabitants.

THE CITY

Like many another seaport, the city itself is one long breakwater, protecting the harbour from the open sea (Fig. 2). The East India Company started the settlement more than three centuries ago, placing the Docks and the Fort (i.e. the protected manufacturing and trading area) at the southern tip of this breakwater. This linear structure provided a natural functional framework – one which sufficed, in a manner, right up to World War II. Subsequent population increases, however, have stretched this structure further and further, until now, like a rubber band, it is ready to snap.

At the southern most tip of the island lies the fastest-growing employment centre in the city; an enormous complex of government and commercial offices which form India's

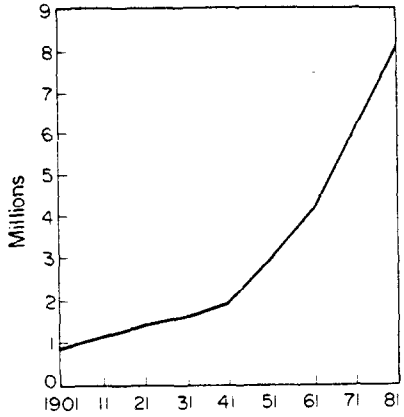

Fig. 1. Bombay: population growth.

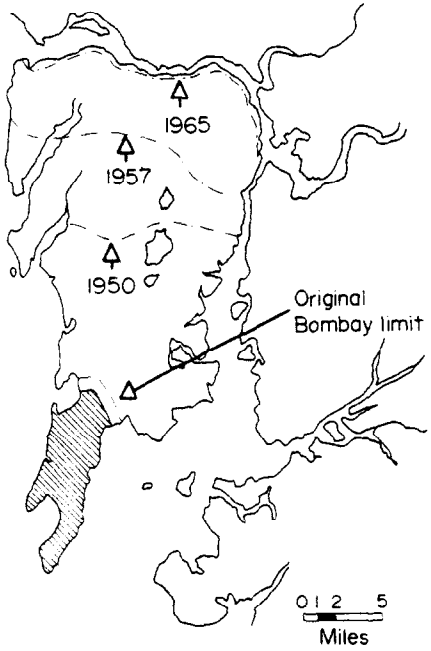

Fig. 2. Successive municipal limits.

financial nerve-centre. These office jobs, together with the vast textile mills next to them, trigger off every day massive flows of traffic, southward in the morning, northward in the evening. To avoid this gruelling commuting (up to four hours, each way), people try to live as close as possible to the southern end – in squatter settlements, or in overcrowded slums, ten or fifteen in a room.

RE-STRUCTURING THE CITY

There is indeed a brutal mis-match between the city's structure and the load it must carry today. To survive the next two decades, the holding capacity of Bombay will have to be considerably increased. This was the basis of the proposals which two colleagues, Pravina Mehta and Shirish Patel, and myself made to the Government some years ago. In essence, we suggested opening of new growth centres so that Bombay's north–south linear structure would metamorphose into a circular poly-centred one, focused around the harbour (turning Bombay again into what it originally was – that finest of things – a city on the water). Several critical – but as yet unrelated – locational decisions had already been taken involving transport, industry, and other crucial ingredients of the urban growth equation; were the authorities to act decisively and add the governmental/commercial function, then they might well be able, through the interaction of these inputs, to generate a new urban centre on a scale commensurate with the dimensions of Bombay's growth (Fig. 5). Furthermore, through public ownership of the land, a cash flow could be set up, using the enhanced value of developed acreage to help finance service infrastructure, public transport and housing for the poor.

In short we would be trying to *use* this new growth itself to re-structure the city. After all, most cities in the past have grown by continuous, incremental, stages. Thus the authorities (in, say, New York or London) never perceived the opportunity to – in Buckminster Fuller's ineffable phrase – re-arrange the scenery. This is the real advantage of Asian cities of today. Hopefully, many of them will be able to use this sudden quantum jump to their permanent advantage; so that they emerge from the tunnel – so to speak – better off than when they entered it.

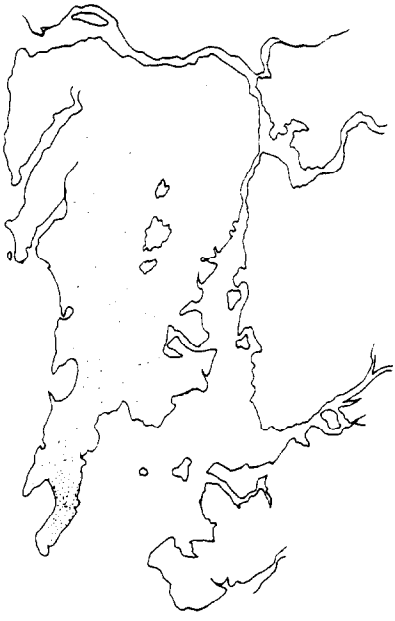

Fig. 3. Job distribution. (• = 10,000 jobs.)

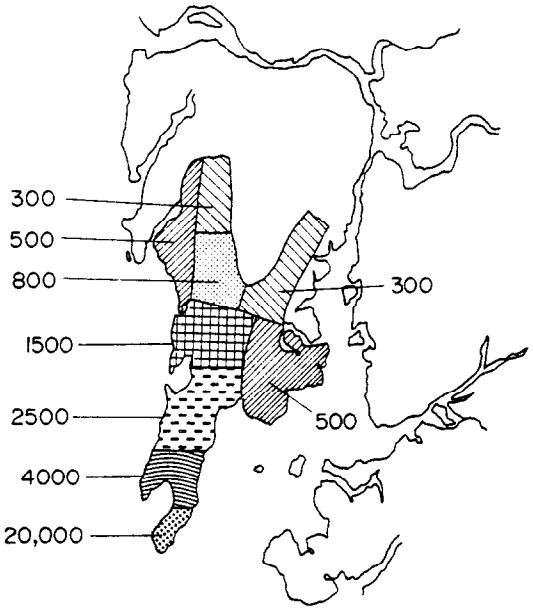

Fig. 4. Land values (in Rs. per sq. metre).

In 1970, the Government of Maharashtra accepted the basic planning concepts and notified 55,000 acres of land for acquisition. It set up CIDCO (the City and Industrial Development Corporation) to design and develop the new city – called NEW BOMBAY. Since the metropolitan region was expected to grow by about 4 million between 1970 and 1985, it was estimated that about half, i.e. 2 million persons, would locate in the new city. To all of us it certainly seemed an extraordinarily hopeful moment.

POLITICAL WILL

I will not go into the planning concepts developed for NEW BOMBAY since they have been described elsewhere; in essence they involve generating a number of growth points within the context of a flexible structural plan. Which was just as well, for the first thing we ran into – head-on! – were a number of unforseen obstacles, and we needed all the flexibility we could muster.

For instance, despite statutory powers of acquisition, there was enormous resistance from the local owners to sell their land (they were not against the idea of the new city; they just wanted to hold on to the land and make the 'profits' themselves). Even today, the land keeps coming to CIDCO in bits and pieces, so the development programme has to be constantly readjusted.

Even more important is the question of job generation – the key to all urban growth. To take the pressure off Bombay, it is essential that the new city centre attracts the office jobs that are otherwise proliferating at the southern tip of the island. But an office can not start on its own in the middle of nowhere. There is a certain bundle of inter-related jobs, a critical mass, which

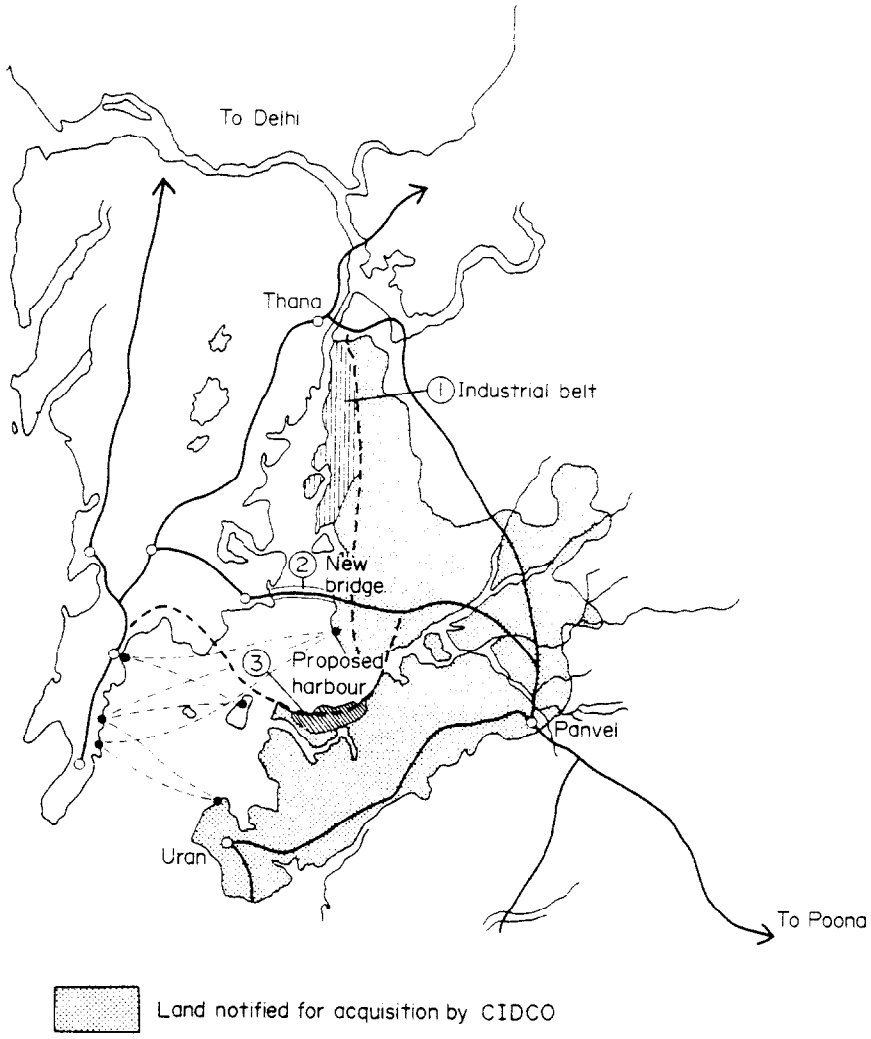

Fig. 5. Bombay re-structured.

has to be attained before the take-off point is reached. In our original proposals, we had suggested that this could be achieved – in one blow – by the State Government moving the capital function across to the new centre, since it was sure to pull private business in its wake. (In fact, one can imagine a time when such a strategy becomes standard procedure in the Third World: in order to generate growth, the Government moves some of its key functions every 20 years or so, rather like a circus pitching tent. Or is tree-grafting a more appropriate metaphor? Such a technique may not increase the total number of jobs generated within the system; but it should allow for their deployment in more economical patterns.)

CIDCO commissioned a number of studies to identify precisely the critical mass involved, but to no purpose – for how do you get the decision-makers (i.e. the ministers, the bureaucrats,

the industrialists, the businessmen) to start a new centre, when they can afford to compete for space in the old one? Because the simple fact is that if you are rich enough, Bombay is quite an easy city to live in. Schools, clubs, colleges, sports stadia, cinemas, housing and offices, are all within a stone's throw of each other at the southern end of the city.

In fact, because of the considerable appeal of that area, the State Government (simultaneously with the development of NEW BOMBAY) started reclaiming land from the sea next to the old centre – selling it for astronomical sums and creating considerable prosperity for a select few in the process. The resulting high-rise jungle has increased enormously the drain on city services, i.e., water supply, public transport, garbage collection, etc.

We finally managed, by taking the issue directly to the public through citizens' groups, to put a stop to the Nariman Point development. But the compilation of the critical mass needed for the new office centre received a severe setback. We lost at least five years in the process.

Only recently has the momentum begun to build again. Some of the key wholesale markets (e.g. iron and steel; onions and potatoes) are being moved to NEW BOMBAY; there have been massive industrial investments; and the State Government has moved some of its offices – albeit rather minor ones – around which a commercial node is growing. Today the total number of jobs is 40,000; a great deal of housing is in progress and by 1985 NEW BOMBAY's population will cross 500,000. It even – and, to me, this is like signs of Spring – has begun attracting its own squatters.

Over the last three years there has been pressure to change our policy and allow private ownership of the land. Ironically enough, this would probably increase the pace of NEW BOMBAY's growth. In fact, one would not be surprised if, given the political clout of some of Bombay's developers, even the Government would then decide to move! However, such a strategy would not produce housing for the poor. For given the desperately low income levels of the majority of citizens, constructing housing in Bombay begins to be profitable only at the level of the top 20% of the population. Which is why there is such an excessive amount of speculative high-income housing getting built – and lying luxuriously vacant – in Bombay (as well as most other Third World cities).

THE ARCHITECT AND SOCIETY

It is indeed extraordinary how easily privilege influences the social context which, in turn, demarcates our tasks. It has never suited architects to look too closely at that equation. Not that we are myopic. On the contrary. The architect is a generalist who goes from over-view to detail and back again with breath-taking ease – because he knows that to change a mullion detail is to change the plan is to change the concept is to change the door knob; at the same time, he is a humanist and an activist – so his concerns get to be much more than just buildings. All the more remarkable indeed that we have managed to avoid recognising the socio-political implications inherent in the very nature of our work. For whenever – and whatever – I build, I am stating something about my relationship to society, and about society's relationship to me. In the case of a Third World city, this has truly tragic implications. By choosing to remain passive, we allow the most important decisions regarding the structuring of space – and of our lives – to be pre-empted by others.

Thus the creation of Fatehpur-Sikhri; a clear manifestation of the political (and financial) power of the Emperor Akbar. And more recently, the Shahestan Pahlavi in Teheran, involving the direct participation of the Shah himself. But, as we have just seen, this kind of decision-making – this kind of monument building – is irrelevant to the poor of Bombay (or Dacca or Jakarta). Furthermore, such commissions merely serve to re-enforce the cocoon that encapsulates the architect in the richest 10% of the population. To reach the 3 million who lie on the pavements and in the shanty towns, is to get involved in a whole new series of issues; issues to which we must bring the instincts – and the skills – of the architect. I emphasise this, because too often, in entering this arena, the architect leaves the best of himself behind. Consider, for instance, the stultifying ugly sites-and-services schemes – all 'justified' on the grounds that an aesthetic sense is something the poor cannot afford. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth! Improving the environment *needs* visual skills. The poor have always understood this. With one stroke of a pink brush, a Mexican artisan transforms his clay pot. It costs him nothing, but it can change your life. It is not a coincidence that the best handicraft comes from the poorest countries of this world – Nepal, Mexico, India. And as Hasan Fathy has pointed out, the Arab had only the simplest tools; mud and sky. So he *had* to be inventive, and in the process produced some of the most glorious oasis towns (low-energy, high-visual!) the world has ever seen.

The grave danger today is that too many of the architects who work on housing for the poor (moving among them like Florence Nightingale among the wounded) are really a-visual – in fact, in some cases, belligerently anti-visual – rejoicing in the acres of ugliness/goodness of it all. What these communities need is not just our compassion, but our professional (i.e. visual and topological) skills. Without these, the squatter colonies will turn out to be night-mares – proliferating, over the next two decades, on a scale which boggles the mind. We cannot just trust to luck and a blind faith in humanity; for every Mykonos or Udaipur history has created, there have been ten other nondescript towns. People often *do* like ugly things (the principle of Miami Beach); if we want to increase the probability of winding up with Udaipur, then strategies for sites-and-services will have to be programmed accordingly (perhaps by giving an extra weight to those of the inhabitants who are more visually sensitive, so as to hasten the process).

To emphasise the visual component in human habitat is not to join the trendy advocates of 'art for art's sake'. Far from it. In today's world, to devote one's energies exclusively to dilettante exercises for glossy magazines must take an extraordinary innocence – or a lobotomy. And to find historical precedents for such efforts is to totally misread the sweep of history as we move into the 21st Century.

On the other hand, can we really abandon our urban future – those 40 cities of 15 million each – to the socially-responsible, anti-visual, do-gooders? They almost make one yearn for Yamasaki's serene pronouncement of a decade or so ago: "the social responsibility of an architect is to produce a work of art."

In truth perhaps there is no easy cop-out from this impasse. Architects are genuinely and truly caught in the crunch of conflicting value systems – territory they have dwelt in ever since the modern movement began. In fact to read Corbusier's classic *Towards a New Architecture* is to be astounded by the schizophrenia of it all: Rolls-Royces and grain silos, science and the Parthenon, elitism and humanism, all coming together in one glorious *trompe d'oeil.*

Perhaps just as disordering the senses was a pre-condition for the 19th Century poet, or being the outsider is the native skin of the 20th Century writer, schizophrenia – this compulsion to try to 'connect' – is the hallmark of the architect; it comes with the territory. Of course architecture has nothing to do with politics; and of course – since the time of the pyramids – it has always been its principal manifestation. Our awareness of this dilemma is only a recent thing, and we should not polarise the issues and limit our choices – at least not for a while. To say like Mies van der Rohe (in another context) "I would rather be good than interesting" is simplistic; it is, in the final analysis, a cop-out. The immeasurable value of our schizophrenia is that it keeps alive the searing compulsion to find – someday – a solution which is both good and interesting, one which bonds the concerns of our profession to those of our society.