

**Graduation Project  
Reflection**

Global Housing Studio - Mixing Mumbai

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In the first place, I chose the Global Housing studio for the relevance of the challenges it addresses. Poverty, education, lack of potable water and sanitation,... to name a few, are present worldwide and so important that the United Nations are addressing them under the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, as a framework aiming for the improvement of the current situation in various domains<sup>1</sup>.

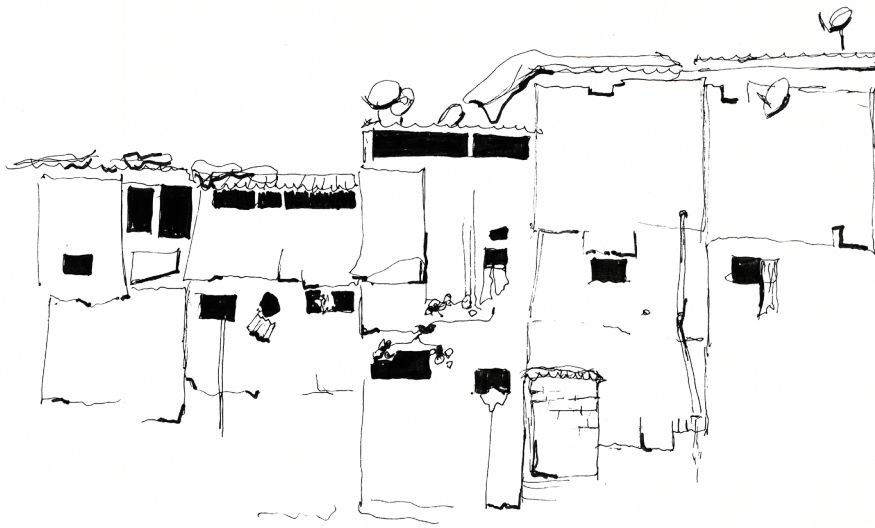
To me, basic primary needs such as decent and humane sanitation facilities, water supply and decent housing are much more necessary and socially relevant than fancy hotels and ever higher skyscrapers, which have a dramatic impact on the environment and the planet. Such architecture is destroying our lived environment instead of making it more liveable and enjoyable.

**«In the developing world [...], cities are expanding too rapidly resulting in the emergence of massive shanty towns. In most cities, these settlements (normally illegal) lack even the most rudimentary services such as drainage, electricity and even clean water»<sup>2</sup>**

These challenges not only restricts economic and social development, but it also impacts people in their daily experience of the built environment. Indeed, “[the] lack of infrastructure restricts the access but also actively prevents people from participating in shaping the future of the city”<sup>3</sup>

In that sense, the role of the architect is very relevant as it has the power to improve and reverse the current situation. His impact goes beyond infrastructure and producing architecture, it affects social development in a positive way, makes places enjoyable, liveable and thus encouraging sustainable developments.

The city of Mumbai does not derogate to these issues. Indeed, the city encountered a massive rapid urbanization, making Mumbai Metropolitan Region «one of the top 5 most dense cities in the world». The consequences are dramatic for the liveability of the city, the living conditions and the quality of life of its inhabitants, as more than 40% of the population of Mumbai lives in slums. Dharavi, the most reknown one, Dharavi houses 340.000 ppl/km<sup>2</sup><sup>4</sup>



*“The ratio of open space per thousand residents in globally aspirational Mumbai is a shameful 0.03 acres, as against more than 3 acres in New Delhi and Kolkata. The National Commission on Urbanization (1988) suggest that the ideal ratio of open spaces is 4 acres/1,000 persons”<sup>3</sup>.*

Following the direction of the studio, I addressed the effects of rapid urbanization under the challenge of mass housing, taking into consideration efficiency, affordability and liveability. This meant constantly referring to low tech and low cost solutions, optimizing the amount of materials used, taking into account the availability of local resources, construction techniques and knowledge.

Added to that, the context of Mumbai was completely foreign for me: I had so far only developed projects in Europe, except for one in Ghana, where I first encountered the reality that the Global South faces. This context was new in many regards: architecturally speaking, but also in terms of practices, habits and perceptions.

From the beginning, I found personal resonance with the approach of the studio, where visual ethnography was presented to us as a research and analysis method. Having studied anthropology and sociology, I approached it with a lot of enthusiasm. The visual aspect of ethnography appealed me as I have been used to sketch during my bachelor studies, employing it as research, design and communication tool.

I decided to follow this visual approach, first during the fieldtrip, using sketches and notes as testimonies and ways to analyse the reality of the city, with a potential relevance for the design project later on. Besides that, I used model making during the design phase as a working, thinking and designing tool. These techniques added a more personal and sensitive layer to my approach, enriching the theoretical and necessary background research done within the studio.

Before going to Mumbai, I already knew I wanted to emphasize the anthropological aspect of design, which during the field trip concretized itself in a specific focus on women. Gender equality is relevant worldwide and still accurate in developed countries. In the Global South especially, gender inequalities are very strong, often related to traditions oppressing and undermining women on a daily basis. In fact, gender equality is considered as major concern by the United Nations, as it is goal number 5 of the Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030. What is more, the fight for female rights is still ongoing today, supported by many national and international feminist movements, gender equality organizations, demonstrations and protests for female rights... The most recent ones in India; the Sabrimala and Shah Bano cases, illustrate how societal constructs restrict women's rights and freedom of access to public spaces in particular.

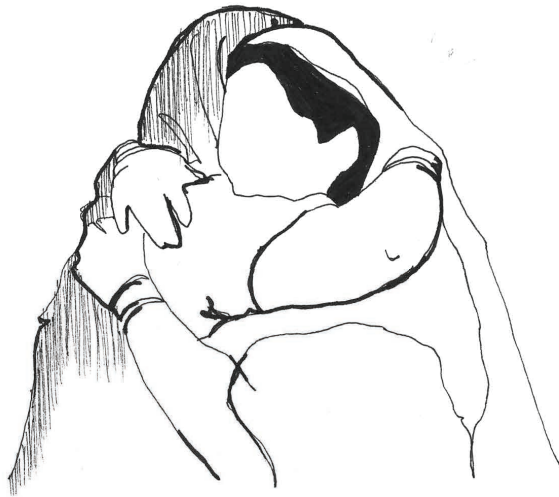
**«As we collectively produce cities, so we collectively produce ourselves... [if] we accept that 'society is made and imagined', then we can also believe that it can be 'remade and reimagined'»**

David Harvey (2000)

The research I conducted on gendered design and women's status in India, nourished my interest for gender concerns and the notion of inclusiveness in design. The reading of «Why loiter?», compiling a three year-research done by a collective of three Indian sociologist women, was very insightful and unveiled to me a whole new scope of considerations.

During the fieldtrip I could only but notice that women were experiencing a different treatment and thus a limited experience of the city, having a restrictive behavioural framework.

sketch from P1  
presentation



This reading made me realize how big of an influence media, societal constructs and the built environment have on people, and women, in India especially.

I had never taken a gendered perspective to analyse and perceive the lived environment before. From that moment on, I reconsidered my architectural approach, being more aware than I was before, that each of my design decisions would have an impact on behaviours, freedom, comfort and safety of people, and women, especially in this context.

**“Vertical development often means a detachment from the ground. In comparison to low-rise horizontal urban forms, the public spaces of a vertical city are less friendly and safe, particularly for women [...] Urban ‘beautification’, clean lines and peopleless streets do not equal comfort or safety for women who often seem to prefer a degree of chaos, ambiguity and multiplicity to univalent notions of cleanliness and order”<sup>3</sup>**

The challenge of the studio took another dimension for me: it became much more than designing nice spaces, it was about projecting, understanding and evaluating all the anthropological consequences that would be caused by my design choices. Thanks to this book, I could build up a richer vision and consideration of architecture’s impacts on its users.

However, addressing women’s status can easily become too women centred, and deviate from the notion of gender equality. I choose to address gender in terms of inclusiveness, and precisely not in order to valorise a specific gender or target group at the expense of another. This would mean reversing the current situation by creating one that is not equalitarian either. I do believe that a comprehensive and good design has to re-equilibrate the unbalance, by being inclusive in addressing all genders and status equally.

To me, addressing women’s condition and empowerment in design, is a way to raise awareness on their oppressed status and under-recognized roles in society. I know that my design proposal might have forgotten some important aspects of inclusiveness, and can become better in technical and social terms. However, my goal is to sensitize people, architects and planners about the importance of inclusive planning and design.

## References

1. 'United Nations Goals for Sustainable Development, Agenda for 2030' retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>
2. R. Rogers, P. Gumuchdjian 'Cities for a small planet', London 1997
3. S. Phadke, S. Khan, S. Ranade, 'Why loiter? Women and risk on Mumbai streets', India, 2011
4. 'Mumbai, a Periodical Investigation', Tu Delfe Global Housing Graduation Studio Research, 2018