

Reflection

Master of Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences - Delft University of Technology Global Housing Graduation Studio: Mixing Mumbai 2018/19

Project: Place for Prosperity
Shirin Hadi
4716809

Aspect 1 | The relationship between research and design.

Mumbai, just as many other cities globally has seen a drastic influx of people over the last decades, which resulted in severe housing shortage, whereby most of demand is coming from the economic weaker section (EWS). Nalasopara in the outskirts of Mumbai, is a suitable example to recognize the arising socio-cultural issues. Since housing is merely seen as a commodity, the standard solution of chawl redevelopment to increase density results in insufficient, almost inhabitable conditions and compromise of basic human needs, creating “vertical slums” and a severely crammed urban fabric.

To initially understand these conditions, a historical, as well as typo-morphological research was conducted in the Dutch and Indian context, combined with a subsequent field trip to Mumbai, where ethnological research was carried out. Especially through the field work and informal interviews, many aspects of inhabitation were discovered which built the foundation of further research and design (e.g. patterns of inhabitation). Additionally, due to personal fascination, the general scientific enquiry on children on a global scale and in India, their behaviour while growing up and defining their needs, opened-up a new perspective on the design task. Creating a prosperous environment for children which breaks the cycle of intergenerational transmission of poverty became the main objective that had to be translated into an architectural language. Concepts such as coexistence, community, conviviality and children’s personal growth are rather abstract terms which needed to be converted into tangible components.

There is a close link between the built environment and quality of life, but also obtaining identity as an individual, particularly in a young age. The design, therefore, aims to provide an alternative schematic approach for densification of the baithi chawls, however, is primarily focused on the incorporation of key aspects such as basic needs, inclusiveness, affordability and diversity instead of pure quantitative numbers. Simultaneously, a feeling of domesticity, stimulation of curiosity and shaping memories were elements necessary to achieve. A 3-courtyard cluster, arranged into blocks with playgrounds and hierarchy of open green spaces forming whole urban sprawls, is the basis to accomplish these goals. Furthermore, local building materials such as CSEB brick, creation of workplaces and other hard factors were considered in the design and strengthened with every step in the process. Many of the aforementioned patterns were further analysed and implemented, so that the bridging between a low-cost affordable housing complex and a prosperous enriching environment can be achieved.

Aspect 2 | The relationship between your graduation project topic, the studio topic, your master track and your master programme.

My project topic is certainly embedded in the Global Housing studio which primarily investigates the urgent dwelling issues in the global south whereby in this case India/Mumbai was chosen as the work site. The cross-cultural character was one of my main interest points, since understanding the relationship of the foreign context, my profession and the subsequent design helped me to analyse and review my own design strategies critically, questioning every step of the process through various methods. At the same time, the interrelation between political/organisational principles, social and spatial design but also technological and sustainability aspects, enabled me to have a multifaceted view on the topic given. Therefore, the studio topic itself created the fundamental framework for my own fascination to evolve and dive deeper into personal research and design. While constantly re-evaluating my own stance and speed of working towards the design synthesis on various scales, the proposed structures encouraged consistency and maintaining quality throughout. These values also fit into the general approach of the TU Delft

Master of Architecture track, since attained interdisciplinary, profound knowledge should be used to deal with technical, social and spatial challenges. In the case of Mumbai, finding sustainable, vernacular ways of building combined with alternative solutions for the rapid urban growth and inequality of space connected my personal project to the overall TU Delft strategy.

Aspect 3 | Elaboration on research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the various variables in the Indian context, which was unknown prior to this thesis eliminated one-dimensional assumptions. To begin with, mapping urban transformation processes, dwelling types and typologies, as well as historical events and their relation to spatial change in Mumbai, was not only useful for our own research but by creating a combined research booklet, can now be relevant for further future projects and analysis. However, looking at certain housing examples in the Dutch context enhanced the general understanding of what it means to dwell, human habitation in the house and their environment. Furthermore, a crucial point of reference was the field trip on site, where patterns, activities and typologies were not only studied but experienced, resulting in a series of notes, maps, drawings and photography which now can be used comparatively to other contexts and more importantly my own project. Since our frame of reference is essentially influenced by our idea of a dwelling, analysing the “others” and their form of dwelling through an objective lens of ethnography, conveys a broader understanding, thus a multi-layered and scientific methodological approach and design hereafter. Globalisation is a phenomenon that is also ubiquitous in the contemporary architectural practice. Hence, these interweaved ways of research and the subsequent findings certainly helped with this specific project, but also taught me a general structural understanding which scientific techniques to use when in a foreign context.

However, my project itself did not aim to use these outcomes, (especially social spaces and dwelling activities) in a replicative way but rather as a point of departure for recreation and improvement with added elements and enhancements, for instance amenities, open and green spaces, hierarchical levels of privacy which can incorporate daily life, safety, etc., while still maintaining a healthy nonetheless high density that can deal with the rapid urbanization of Nalasopara. The additional research on my personal fascination could give a better grasp of the interrelation of the target group children and architecture, since these individuals are often neglected in architectural designs except for schools or other clearly determined child spaces, thus usually don't have a “voice” in the creation of the environments and cities they grow up in.

Aspect 4 | Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project results.

By using quantitative data, historical research but also methods close to human nature, a holistic approach could be generated that does not only have a paternalistically and high-handed view on the topic but gets deeper under the surface of a worldwide problem that should be tackled thoroughly, treating the root cause instead of scratching the surface. Inequality, disparities and the widened gap between rich and poor manifested themselves in Nalasopara to an extreme but are apparent in almost every country in the developing world and even developed world. Nonetheless, including the needs of children into my project enabled me to see the wider social and scientific framework of this topic. In India the young generation constitutes 26% of the urban population and are the ones who are suffering but will also gain the most from a demeaning or prosperous built environment of their home. The development potential of more than 200 million children is not fulfilled globally, therefore, ensuring health, safety, education, integrity and social development through adequate architecture will not only help them as individuals but will also help to achieve the UN's 17 goals in their Agenda for Sustainable Development in the long run against inequality, poverty, segregation and exploitation. Similarly, the Maharashtra State Commission for Protection of Child Rights and other authorities have stated the importance of child development in a broader context and how our architecture and the city are not only spatial definers but contribute to a solidification of certain socio-cultural conditions, whether positive or negative.

The contrast of living in abundance vs. unfulfilled basic needs in the city of Mumbai can thus be transferred to a global perspective which is why the project results are not only of importance for my personal graduation project but can be seen as a strategic and more abstract way of dealing with a pressing social issue in the profession of architecture. Working on various scales from urbanism to architecture to detailing, the social difficulty and complexity of affordable housing has been taken into consideration. Architecturally, the responsive scheme that has been introduced can theoretically be implemented anywhere with regard and adjustment to the specific habitation patterns, climate, materials, etc. A balance between rigidity and flexibility should enable transferability to almost any context with the same issues.

Aspect 5 | Discuss the ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered in doing the research, elaborating the design and potential applications of the results in practice.

One of the first dilemmas that occurred immediately after the first ethnological observations, was simply what to provide the people with and what they make out of it? Appropriation of spaces and spatial practices are significantly stronger elaborated in India/Mumbai than in the Netherlands which thus constituted an unfamiliar factor that had to be taken into account. How much can and should an architect define? Appropriation of spaces is evident with every step in Nalasopara, hence, besides confronting established mentalities, exploring the thresholds of the profession turned the dilemma into new ways of learning. However, concurrently it would be wrong to assume every social or spatial practice being performed is automatically the “right way”. It is essential to rethink one’s own assumptions and prejudices towards accepted principles of dwelling, nevertheless, romanticizing certain ways of living or accepting them without evaluating their origin or value can lead to wrong judgement. Certain aspects could have emerged out of necessity and shortcomings instead of having a distinct positive, instructive aspect. Consciously implementing new patterns or ideas while revisiting existing ones, is a sensible approach towards both sides that can respond to the dialectic relationship between the environment and the emerged practices which is not always optimal.

Ultimately, the biggest ethical issue I faced was finding a balance between what is from a humanitarian point of view morally right to build for the inhabitants, in contrast to the matters the contemporary world realistically obliges us to work with. Policies, governance, investors and eventually the need of capitalist economy to make monetary profit overpowers these solely humanistic approaches. The difficulty lies in mitigating certain ideals and personal values in order to achieve a more realistic design approach, even though the academic approach does not necessarily predetermine this. However, to create a mature in-depth project in the Indian context of Mumbai, it is naive to only take the side of the lower income class or children but must rather find compromises to answer the questions of density and economic interest since the design will otherwise remain purely utopian, thus never coming close to a competitive and viable solution.

Generally, architects can have a profound impact on better development and identity of human beings by investigating the issues of current strategies and presenting a better solution to the pressing problems such as housing shortage or urbanisation. This project also aims at achieving improvement in the long run by taking the existential dimension of dwelling seriously and using the knowledge obtained, whether in research or through my own heritage to propose a feasible design that can accommodate life, growth, and development.