



Delft University of Technology

## Introduction

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# INTRODUCTION

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The search for new models for affordable housing in the world's ever-growing cities has never been more urgent. Good, affordable housing is needed to confront the still accelerating growth of urban populations and the challenges of urban segregation. Also, to enable those with little or no means to access and inhabit the cities, which hold the promise of providing a better future.

Despite India's recent economic success, the state's inability to actively and effectively deal with the country's rapid urbanization has led to megacities such as Mumbai and New Delhi that continue to be crippled by the unrelenting pressures of migration. At the same time, there has been an exponential growth of several smaller cities that are growing at an even faster rate than the large metropolises. So, while India remains a predominantly rural society with only a little over 30 per cent (about 385 million people) of its entire population living in urban areas, it is expected that an additional 500 million people will be living in its cities by the year 2050. However, as urban India propels forward, construction and planning have been unable to keep up with demand, leading to a situation where large informal settlements or slums have become an inevitable consequence of this rapid growth. Today, in India, the enormous task of providing housing for both the new migrants as well as improving the conditions of those living in the already existing self-built informal settlements has never been more acute.

Designing affordable houses in large numbers is a constant process of balancing opposites. The way people can live in the city is a key factor in the transformation of a traditional rural society into a modern urbanized economy. Should affordable dwellings be designed to accommodate a traditional rural way of life, or should they aim immediately for a future urban lifestyle?

The opposites of rural versus urban, of tradition versus modern, local versus global played a key role in the formation of a new and independent India. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, always stressed the origins of Indian society. 'India is to be found not in a few cities, but in its 700,000 villages' is a famous quote of his from 1936. On the other hand, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a firm advocate of the modernization and urbanization of India. Chandigarh, the new state capital designed by Le Corbusier in the 1950s and 1960s came to symbolize Nehru's visions for a new, free and modern India.

It was in this context that the first generation of modern Indian architects found the patronage to address the issue of large-scale affordable housing design and production. Since the country's independence in 1947, these architects produced some wonderfully inventive housing designs that still inspire but also clearly demonstrate the near impossibility of finding successful and lasting solutions, as they remain incidents, and have difficulty surviving the impact of real estate speculation in a housing market characterized by extreme pressures.

One city where the effects of relentless growth and an unbridled free-market economy are overwhelmingly visible is Mumbai – the largest city of India and its economic capital. At first glance, the megalopolis of Mumbai seems to know only two housing conditions: freestanding apartment blocks and towers, and informal settlements scattered throughout the formal city, finding an existence in often hazardous areas such as marshlands or on the fringes of the city's overcrowded road and railway infrastructure.

There hardly seem to be any rules, whether one is confronted with extremely dense and large slums—such as Dharavi, which houses nearly a million people and 30,000 enterprises on a mere two square kilometre site—or with the very opposite condition: glass-clad high-rise towers, some bearing Trump's name, or the Ambani house, a 30-storey high-rise tower built as a single-family home.

Most extreme, however, are the attempts of the last twenty years to reconcile the need for slum rehabilitation with the forces of real estate, leading to projects that create extreme densities and rather inhuman living conditions for the original slum dwellers in order to create space for high-end profit-making commercial developments.

Within this urban chaos, one can still find other places, neighbourhoods, and residential buildings that show that alternatives do exist. Well-documented are the projects of leading Indian architects such as Charles Correa, most famously his incremental housing scheme located in Belapur in Navi Mumbai, which is based on the spatial layering of Indian villages, or Raj Rewal's reinterpretation of traditional urban structures of India, as can be found in his CIDCO Housing project, also located in New Mumbai.

There are, however, other survivors, equally threatened, of much older generations of housing provided for working class people that also show us valid and inspiring alternatives for the current housing production.

*How to Build an Indian House* provides beautiful and carefully made documentation and thorough analysis of these unknown projects, called *chawls*, positioning them in a chronological time frame, followed by an equally precise documentation of both informally built housing and current mass-scale projects for affordable housing and slum rehabilitation. In between the *chawls* and the present-day projects stands an intriguing example of another mode of production: the Charkop sites and services project, developed in the 1980s in collaboration with the World Bank. The *chawls*, the working-class housing projects mostly built between 1865 and 1940, are a unique case in the global history of housing design. As a typology, they are most of all characterized by

the connection of quite minimal private living units to collective spaces of various scales, both in the interior and the exterior. The *chawls* show an amazing variety in organization of spaces, urban structures, materiality and craftsmanship, and together form a rich catalogue of typological figures for collective housing.

The earliest *chawl* documented here, the Mota Mandir Chawl, built around 1865, shows how in a simple but at the same time very effective way the private living units, arranged in a beautiful section, can be opened up to one another to create a continuous collective space for communal celebrations. Another example, the Atmaram Chawl, stands out for the adaptability of its units. But perhaps the most extraordinary project is the Swadeshi Market Chawl of 1909, where linear clusters of stacked dwellings are positioned on a two-storey covered market, creating a second residential 'ground level' in one of the densest pockets right in the heart of Mumbai. Easily fifty years ahead of its time, Swadeshi Market is a hybrid megastructure and an unknown precursor of many post-war modernist projects in Europe and elsewhere that experimented with elevated pedestrian networks and mixing of programmes and functions.

For these *chawls*, but also for all the other studied projects, changes and interventions over time by the residents form an essential component of the documentation. This in addition to the original inventive typological solutions, an aspect that provides today's designers with important insights and lessons. These appropriations range from very small changes in the internal layout and the addition or removal of partitions and window boxes to very drastic extensions such as the entire rebuilding of the original units. Particularly striking are the cases of the apartment buildings of the BDD Chawls, and the low-rise sites and services project at Charkop. These changes over time together form the best brief a designer can have when designing optimal solutions for affordable housing.

In the chronological ordering of the projects, the final ones confront us with the realities of either commercially driven or state-initiated large scale (re)housing projects of the last 15 years in Mumbai. They show how, inevitably, the focus on numbers fails to address those aspects that the study brings forward so strongly; the necessity of social spaces in a dense and crowded city, the importance of community, which is lost in endless repetitions of identical units, and finally the possibilities and beauty of interventions by the residents themselves.

Most of all, the comparisons of projects, in numbers, drawings, and photography vividly describe what can happen if housing is imagined solely as a commodity, and not as a social right and expression of culture and everyday life.

The research can help us understand and find directions for how the architectural project for affordable housing can and should be used as a vehicle to investigate alternative possibilities to current financial models, land policies, systems of ownership, modes of delivery, and typological solutions not only in India but in all places affected by the global housing crisis.

The amazing range of typologies and architectural proposals for affordable housing in Mumbai represented in this research has fascinated me since Sameep Padora, the book's author, took me on an evening expedition to some of the documented *chawls*, on the initiative of our mutual friend Monika Correa. The introduction of his study—a unique example of research from practice—to students in both Delft and Mumbai made a huge impact on their thinking. More recently, an exhibition of the research material in Delft drew interest from all disciplines within the faculty of architecture: urban planners, housing policy researchers, engineers, and architects. The exhibition also showed the author's project for affordable housing that is currently being built in Mumbai, and briefly introduced in the book's epilogue.

The clear connection between the new project and the research is possibly the best proof of the importance and relevance of this publication. The book is at the same time a guide to housing in Mumbai, a designers' toolbox, and an inspiration to continue studying that most urgent question: how to design a house, in India and elsewhere, a house that addresses the needs of its inhabitants, of the community they are part of, and of the city as a whole.

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