P4_Graduation Reflection
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1_Project

The effects of India's shift towards economic liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation in the mid 1990's has drastically altered the landscape of its cities. These powerful forces have imposed further spatial disjuncture on an unplanned city.

More specifically, forces of contemporary urbanisation plague the developing fabric of Mumbai's urban periphery: more specifically Nala Sopara East, in the case of this investigation. As described by Mehrotra, one of the great urban development challenges of traditional Indian towns or colonial settlements is the "integral logic" of their structure (Mehrotra, 2000). This logic is limited in that it is not easily able to be expanded upon in a coordinated manner. Evident in Nala Sopara, this uncoordinated development which is increasingly pressurised by migration and other forces of urbanisation, has produced an incoherent fabric, void of any guiding principles. Mehrotra refers to this inter-scalar phenomenon as 'the unfinished edge'. These urban conditions of illegibility and incoherence, too, dominate Mumbai's urban periphery as it sprawls, and it is within this existing urban reality that affordable housing for the masses must be developed. Since its establishment in 2013, the Global Housing chair has mainly directed its interests and research efforts towards the challenge of affordable housing in two cities; namely Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and, more recently, Mumbai in India.

Nala Sopara lacks an adaptive, secure and inclusive physical identity, which is situated in, and modeled off the existing needs and practices of its locality. The colonisation of the area by newly established 'handshake chawls' has become a dominant condition which disrupts and destroys existing domestic practices and patterns of habitation. These multi-storey developments are constructed by opportunistic local, small-scale contractors, capitalising on the proliferating housing shortage in the area. In addition to their disturbance of everyday practices, these developments stand in stark contrast to the existing low-rise baithi chawls and, as a result, articulate a disjunct urban fabric and agitated locality. The relational proximity of these 'handshake chawls' and their conditions, chronically lacking natural lighting and fresh ventilation, deem these developments inadequate for sustained wellbeing and dampen realistic aspirations for upward mobility. In addition to these neglected basic needs, is an undeveloped range of quality, open-to-sky public spaces within the private realm. The above conditions are acutely manifest in Rahmat Nagar which is the area of focus for this project.

2_Research Method & Approach:

The Global Housing studio primarily approaches architectural design with a typological mindset, focussing on the translation of social aspirations into architectural strategies. Through the process of design, these strategies are translated into clustered dwelling layouts which seek to address practicalities such as density, affordability and feasibility. Despite the stringent design constraints set by the social, political and economic forces at play on site, the studio ultimately strives towards creating an improved quality of life utilising architecture as a tool. This project adopts the above interpretation of the studio's approach, in which aspirational qualities are imbibed through a typological approach. However, where design and research meet, the working method becomes more intrinsic, focussing on the small scale creation of domestic space and its responsiveness to change. The observation and study of human actions in India, in general, contributed towards a reading of the city, where acts of appropriation and the physical environment are equal informers in the morphology and development of the urban fabric. A deep recognition and respect for the nuances of the intimate scale of domestic life is sought to be reflected in this project.

The Global Housing research studio introduced visual ethnography as an empirical research method through which to engage with the social ecology of a locality. This locality is analysed according to its

inter-relation with space, place and people. This technique draws inspiration from Atelier Bow Wow's Harvard Graduate School of Design studio whereby "the act of drawing becomes an instrument of dialogue and engagement". Central to this research method is the translation of observed patterns of habitation into communicative drawings. The process of studying housing developments in the Netherlands assisted in developing an observant eye during on-site analysis and data collection, in preparation for site work in Nala Sopara. Through interviewing, cognitive mapping, sketching and domestic practice pattern identification, an insight into domestic activities in Nala Sopara was gleaned. Observing these practices led to the consideration of a new Nala Soparan housing genealogy, informed by the processes of habitation specific to her locality.

The transformative typological variation and morphological potential of typology present in Mumbai, from the city's first settlement to present day developments, makes the impact of typology on domestic life clear. This process of typological renewal, termed typology genealogy by Atelier Bow Wow is interested in what the various typological shifts or variations afford or disallow their inhabitants. This project aligns with their thinking, which poses the role of the architect as one who observes and applies the efficiencies of user appropriation in the creation of new typologies. In Mumbai, various housing projects were visited, discussed and verbally compared. Strategies around incremental, fractal clustering and variation in public, open-to-sky space were brought to light. The case study visits afforded us the opportunity to experience the manifestation of these strategies ourselves.

In summary, the prevailing response to rising density requirements in this area lacks severely in social sustainability. In combining ethnographic research with a typological approach, the project seeks to primarily address three core themes: [1] flexibility and growth; [2] the urban public/private space spectrum; [3] open space hierarchies. These three inter-related motives work towards creating an urban domestic fabric which is informed by and empowers endemic habitation practices.

3_Research & Design:

The ethnographic research phase of this project looks into uncovering and documenting existing modes of habitation in Nala Sopara and linking them to the physical attributes of typology. In engaging with this dual understanding of locality from such an early point in the research phase, a strong relation between research and design was predetermined by the studio. Additionally, in analysing and visiting case study project in Mumbai, a further understanding of the spatial results of physical relationships and the inhabitation of these schemes was instilled.

Working within the limits set by the existing road infrastructure, the urban proposal seeks to transform and develop the public and private spatial qualities within urban blocks. In choosing sites with irregular edges, site responsive cluster have been developed. Responses to various hierarchical movement intersections are developed, these include [1] primary and secondary roads; [2] secondary and tertiary movement routes; [3] inner community spine and public/private domestic corridors. The argumentation for this approach lies in its ability to produce results which are site responsive but also define distinct relational contributions to the urban fabric which can proliferate elsewhere in the area, creating a more inclusive urban network. Inherent in this approach is the requirement for architectural configuration flexibility, as well as a distinct layering of levels of publicness and hierarchical arrangement of open space. These core themes of interest carry through the project from the research phase, and into the design elaboration of the proposal.

4_Wider Social Relevance and Transferability:

The project situates itself within a contemporary urban condition and discourse which Mehrotra refers to as *Ephemeral Urbanism*. This urbanism recognises that the constantly changing conditions and fluctuating practices which make up the 'kinetic city', are embedded in the planned, 'static city'. The 'static city', driven by capital investment and accumulation, refers to the formal structures and practices of city making (Mehrotra & Vera, 2016: 17). Posing an alternative view on the urban

condition, is the 'kinetic city', whose elasticity is increasingly enacted through patterns of occupation and habitation which give shape to the urban landscape. This ever-present duality between the static and the kinetic has come to govern the nature of the city. The proposal recognises this duality and chooses to work with these forces by accounting for inevitable change over time, thus cultivating the upward mobility of families in tandem with the growth of their home. With the core principle of endemic practice inclusivity, small-scale in-situ upward mobility can catalyst the upward-mobility of Nala Sopara while simultaneously creating a more fluid and coherent urban fabric. Through the above explanation of the wider discourse, the project exemplifies the translation of distinct local social aspirations into an architectural and urban strategy, which contributes to a body of knowledge which can be drawn upon in future.

5_Ethical Dilemmas and Applicability:

The core ethical dilemma faced when approaching a project of this nature is the sever lack of understanding associated with working in a distant and foreign environment. The two and a half weeks spent in India, one week of which was in Mumbai and the two days on site, is a severely insufficient period of time to grasp the complexities and intricacies of any new place. In this sense, attempting to produce a design project with a research question centered around *creating an urban fabric underpinned by endemic habitation practices* is hugely aspirational. However, the project succeeds at isolating specific endemic practices that are worthy of empowerment and inclusion in the design process. By situating the project within a typological genealogy discourse, the proposal develops a strategic response to isolated problems. In this sense, the project project manages to successfully respond to the limits of this theoretical scope.

A further challenge was finding a balance between creating a site responsive project and the studios aspiration for typological replicability. An attempt to marry these requirements was found through the development of a basic block which can retain its integrity and function effectively as a singular block, or cluster, however, brings greater strength to the existing fabric when implemented incrementally as an urban block development. In responding to irregularity on site, the proposal has proven flexible enough to reconfigure to various site limits while retaining its core design principles.

With the above in mind, it is fair to say that the proposal embodies a trans-scalar level of flexibility capable of withstanding a range of varying applications in the real world. Additionally, by situating itself within the discourses of ethnographic study and typological genealogy, it contributes to established bodies of knowledge.