Reflection Report: Architecture

Personal information:
Name: Rohan Varma
Student Number: 4188659
Address: 260 Feldmannweg
Postal Code: 2628 KX
Place of residence: Delft
Telephone Number: +31 630868514
Email address: rohanvarma86@gmail.com
                  r.varma@tudelft.nl
Studio:
Explore Lab
Mentors:
Prof. Dick van Gameren (design mentor), Dr. Roberto Rocco (research mentor), Prof. Jan van de Voort (building technology mentor)
Title:
Integrating Informality: A Case for an Informal Settlement in Mumbai

Introduction:
The site for my graduation project focuses on a vast informal settlement that sits at the very heart of Mumbai’s financial district. Nestled between the World Trade Centre on one end, and Mumbai - and India’s - most expensive residential real estate on the other, the site is in many ways emblematic of the highly schizophrenic relationship that exists between the rich and the poor in Mumbai. As Mike Davis has so poignantly pointed out, Mumbai is the global capital of slumming with estimates of more than 10 million people currently living in informal settlements. The contradiction, of course, is that Mumbai is also India’s richest city, contributing to more than forty percent of the nation’s income tax revenues. This strange dichotomy, coupled with the state’s inability to actively and effectively deal with the country’s rapid urbanization have led to a situation where vast sections of India’s urban poor are being marginalized and excluded from the rest of the so-called ‘formal city’. Thus, as India propels forward, it is at the same time witnessing an ever-increasing gulf between the rich and poor, that in turn give rise to completely contrasting urban landscapes that have become the basis of my architectural project.

1. Aim of the Thesis:
It is my firm belief that policies regarding informal settlements must go beyond mere ‘slum upgrading’ and/or providing just affordable housing. As the title suggests, the primary intention of the project is to conceive of design strategies that could help achieve a more holistic integration of informal settlements with their larger contexts. This integration is thought of at 4 levels:

A) Spatial Integration: To recognize informal settlements not only as isolated islands of poverty, but as valid forms of urbanism that have a right to access the same levels of social and physical infrastructure that are provided to the rest of the city.
B) Economic Integration: To recognize that informal settlements are not only places of sub-standard housing, but are communities full of commerce, manufacturing and employment, making them substantial - and integral - contributors to the city’s economy. Thus, any scheme regarding informal settlements must not only protect the economies that exist there, but actually facilitate for their growth (i.e income creation).
C) Political Integration: To enable residents of such communities to exercise their democratic rights as official citizens of the city, which includes their right to have a say in the development of their own communities.

D) Social Integration: This is largely thought of as an outcome of the above three processes.

2. Method:
In order to achieve the aims that I had set out to achieve at the beginning of the project, my main research question dealt with grasping a better knowledge and understanding of the role that design has played historically in helping bring about increased socio-spatial integration. This research took two forms.

Research Question:
What is the nature of informal settlements in India and abroad, and what role can design play in bringing about increased socio-spatial integration?

Theoretical Research:
The research began by studying the various forces that have led (or contributed) to the rise of informal settlements in India and abroad. A crucial part of this research also dealt with studying and analysing previous approaches and attitudes of governments and other agencies towards the growth of slums in the developing world. The results of this research have been condensed into two brief time lines that also serve as a comparative analysis between global and local approaches, and have in turn greatly influenced the design approaches for my own project.

Empirical research:
While a theoretical approach significantly broadened my understanding of the complexities of informal urbanization, a lot of my design strategies grew out of intensive site visits that took place in the month of February this year. Empirical research gained in the form of observations, mappings and interviews employed a multi- scalar approach that have in turn helped me observe the various similarities and dissimilarities found within the chosen site and its surrounding context.

Relationship between Research and Design:
I believe that the project exhibits a very clear relationship between research and design. In fact, the strategies proposed have in many ways been conceived of as a direct result of the research that had been done. Through the clear and supportive guidance of all three of my mentors I believe that I have been successful in achieving my main aims that had been established at the P2 stage.

Relationship between the Project and wider Social Context:
One of my aims after I graduate from TU Delft would be to see how I could take the ideas and concepts of the thesis forward. In the coming months, I hope to get more opportunities to discuss these ideas with other experts in the field - and in the process articulate my findings even further. I am also very eager to present the design to the residents of the site, who perhaps are the best judges of the work.
In conclusion, I believe that the research that I have undertaken here over the past several months have helped me articulate a strong argument for the need for integration of informal settlements with the city. I think that the relevance of the results of my project could lie in helping the discussion to go beyond the current slum rehabilitation approach, and instead move towards the idea of integration, that is integration at all levels: spatial, economical, political and social. With one billion people already residing in slums, and with estimates of that number set to triple in the next 40 years, it is necessary that we set the bar a bit higher, and begin to look at these issues in a more holistic, collaborative and democratic manner.