Embracing Urbanism: The City as Archive

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Anthropology and the Urban Archive

Milton Singer’s classic ethnography, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization*, is one of the earliest texts to consider the city as locus for the anthropological study of India.¹ Until that moment, and even well beyond, the village was considered the proper anthropological object of inquiry for understanding Indian society. Yet the study of the Indian village, both as an object of inquiry and as a place to conduct fieldwork, was also always shrouded in anxiety. M. N. Srinivas’s *The Remembered Village* is the locus classicus of this kind of anxiety—not only was Srinivas writing under the sign of the disappearing village, a place subjected to modernization, he was also writing in the context of the loss of his field notes to fire.² Thus, the village he was writing about was a place consigned to memory in more ways than one—a place that had to be retrieved and revived from the archives of the anthropologist’s memory. More than most anthropological works, this text makes clear a relationship between archive and memory in the work of anthropology.

If memory can be characterized as that faculty of knowledge whose object is always absent and therefore unstable, then the past(s) to which memory provides an anchor are inherently multiple and open to contestation. In relation to memory understood in this sense, archives are no ordinary depositories of empirical evidence about absent subjects and objects, but rather they are sites that serve to constitute authoritative forms of memory. The disappearance of Srinivas’s field notes, burnt in a fire that consumed his office at Stanford, exposed a critical problem in the constitution of the anthropological object—without the backing of the field notes that serve as the anthropologist’s archive, the village as an object is amplified as a fictive locus, a place of subjective memory rather than a site of empirical evidence for making anthropological claims. I begin here with this account of the village to underline the problem of the archive in the constitution of anthropological objects. This prelude is necessary to understand why the city has been such a difficult object of study, for the city constitutes a very messy kind of archive, as I explain

below. It is no wonder that even Singer, whose ethnography was one of the earliest to be set in a metropolis, constituted his object under the sign of “tradition.” He argues that even in the modernizing context of the metropolis—a Western and colonial form of material and social organization—Indian society was still available to ethnographic description and observation because of the persistence of social forms that came from elsewhere. This elsewhere, which constituted the authentic locus of Indian society, is understood as “tradition.”

This intellectual apprehension of Indian society, through the lens of the village and the city as varying sites of Indian “tradition,” always, of course, takes place under the sign of modernization. And it is the idea of treating place in relation to tradition as a means of apprehending tradition as the true and proper object of anthropology that has undergone a radical change in the context of globalization. For globalization has brought about a normative shift in the context of theorizing itself. Instead of the “temporal lag” that modernization theory presumes to exist between the West and the rest, social sciences must now grapple with viral trends by which global processes distribute social, economic, and political outcomes—both good and bad—simultaneously or nearly simultaneously across the globe. This calls into question the very idea of “place” with its connotations of being a stable archive or repository for social forms that are reproduced through time. In this context, the city and urban life have become defining spaces for understanding contemporary society. Moreover, it is no small matter that a global demographic shift seems to have taken place in this first decade of the twenty-first century, shifting the balance of populations from predominantly rural residents to predominantly urban residents.

Simultaneous with this shift, cities of the global South, including the megacities of India, have increasingly begun to serve as exemplars of a particularly negative way of thinking about urbanism. As I have written elsewhere, places like Mumbai and Lagos serve as models for tracking the terminal conditions of modernity in contemporary urban theory. If the nineteenth-century European metropolis exemplified the special nature of metropolitan modernity, the Indian megacity of the early twenty-first century stands in for the corruption of its ideals and its possibilities. And thus, the city continues to serve as a problematic and ambivalent space insofar as the study of India is concerned, although the problem is now of a rather different nature than at the time when Singer and Srinivas were writing. One of the aims of this article is to explore the transformation of the city as a site for an anthropological understanding of India. In particular, the focus on the city in the various disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences exposes the fundamental political geography of disciplinary epistemology, which brings into view class relations as well as relations of colonization.
Furthermore, I argue specifically that the shifts in the study of the Indian city constitute a major conceptual force in understanding what the conveners of this symposium understand to be “multi-faceted, perplexing exchanges” between India and the West. For urban studies have become a core subject for the study of globalization, and the treatment of the Indian city within this emerging field of discourse is therefore symptomatic of the conceptual relationship between India and the West under the sign of globalization. I also wish to argue that while the social sciences continue to be conceptually rooted in a Western epistemological vision, the study of India through its cities throws some fundamental challenges at this vision, challenges that move beyond those of postcolonial studies. Through this analysis, I suggest that a historical understanding of the place of the city in the study of India is critical to outlining some of the major conceptual shifts that have taken place in India’s place as the West’s Other. I explore this claim specifically through the capacity of the city to serve as an archive of social forms.

I begin the article by unpacking the Western notion of the metropolis as it emerges in an early sociological text by Georg Simmel, specifically situating the nature of the metropolis as a particular kind of archive. I then explore the relation between metropolitan form and modernity through the materiality of urban infrastructure, and finally I turn back to the study of the Indian city, tracing the impact of these arguments upon the conceptualization of the Indian city. The paper ends with a discussion of the ways in which the Indian metropolis challenges a dominant notion of the archive and suggests that this challenge has fundamentally altered the terms of the discursive relationship between India and the West.

Metropolis as Medium

Georg Simmel’s seminal article, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” first published in 1903, explores the sensory impact of the city on the urban resident’s perception of space, time, and sense of self.4 “The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected,” writes Simmel, “is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” (11). The metropolis is both the cause and the effect of the forms that social relations have taken in modern times, most notably the transformation of social relations into relations of calculation. Simmel writes, “The relationships and concerns of the typical metropolitan resident are so manifold and complex that, especially as a result of the agglomeration of so many persons with such differentiated interests, their relationships and activities intertwine with one another into a many-membered organism” (13). For Simmel, this
understanding of the metropolis as medium is critical to his theory of the development of the metropolitan personality type.

The metropolitan form itself corresponds to the money economy and thereby becomes a very particular kind of medium within which social relations are transacted. “A person,” writes Simmel, “does not end with the limits of his physical body or with the area to which his physical activity is immediately confined but embraces, rather, the totality of meaningful effects which emanates from him temporally and spatially. In the same way the city exists only in the totality of the effects which transcend their immediate sphere” (17). These effects, connected to the advanced economic division of labor, can be thought of as a form of archive through which the modern metropolis and its residents are constituted. The “external and internal stimuli” that are thrown up by the metropolis have no preordained significance as such, but instead work to produce connections between residents, however temporary and tenuous those connections might be. They also deeply affect the urban personality. Fundamentally, they call into question the role of memory in the context of urban identity. What Simmel’s understanding of the metropolis foregrounds is the idea that the city is a form of media, which saturates the life of its residents. This space of saturation is one of rapid change and transformation of stimuli and hence has a bearing upon forms of social interaction and the reproduction of sociospatial forms within the city, better understood as “place.”

In most commonsense understandings, archives are directly related to preservation of some parts of the past, collectively deemed to be of significance. In the case of the metropolis, founded upon the problem of constant newness and temporary experiences, as well as upon the temporariness of the bond between urban residents, this very notion of the archive itself is problematic. Yet, there is always a struggle against this sense of temporariness and transition engendered by the “metropolis as medium.” In the understanding of “metropolis as medium,” which engenders social exchanges, the archive becomes an emergent notion, a principle of ordering stimuli upon which future transactions are imagined and made present rather than a given notion of the past that has been deemed significant and marked for preservation. This sense of city-as-archive is always in conflict, sometimes productively and sometimes corrosively, with the sense of city-as-archive that emerges in acts of preservation and strategies to inscribe space with particular social and political understandings.

In the social-scientific study of the city in India, the latter notion of archive is predominant. The struggle to understand the city lies in the inherent tension between the metropolis as Western form and the ethnographic certainties of Indian life, driven by forms of kinship,
embracing urbanism, and patronage that are seen to be rooted in a notion of “tradition.” Moreover, these forms are seen to be inherently un- or even antidemocratic and fail to give rise to the individual as the true metropolitan subject. The city, then, has been read as an archive preserving these forms of social life or, in other words, as an already-known space, known through the lens of the village where these forms of kinship, community, and patronage find their “true” or proper locus. As Gyan Prakash has pointed out, the social sciences in general have therefore failed to appreciate struggles within the city as political struggles, instead viewing them as expressions of traditional life, albeit in conflict with forms of metropolitan life.5

Infrastructure as Archive

In the previous section, I introduced two contrasting notions of archive and the diverging readings that each produces of the metropolis in India and in the West. In this section, I turn to urban form and the built environment and the ways in which a normative understanding of modern infrastructure and equipment has produced, and continues to produce, an image of the city in India deeply associated with risk, danger, and threat. These readings are especially magnified in the current moment of globalization as popular works such as Suketu Mehta’s Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found have taken a powerful hold of the global imagination about cities in places like India.6 Mehta’s book portrays a city animated by violence, both everyday and extraordinary, and populated by characters who bear more than a passing resemblance to the stock characters of Bombay cinema—cops, gangsters, and prostitutes. In Maximum City, the stories about these characters are interspersed by the author’s “empirical research” into urban planning, urban politics, and the living conditions of the majority of Mumbai’s urban residents—that is to say, those who constitute the thickness of the city’s social infrastructure. These stories portray the city as a site of risk in the sense of both threat as well as opportunity. Mehta’s approach to Mumbai is through cinema as the infrastructure of the imaginary. He uses that imaginary, constituted by cinema, including its stock characters whose relationship to the real is always already blurred in the everyday life of Mumbai, to dramatize the pernicious nature of urban life in places like Mumbai. But these stories ultimately lead us to the city’s “real” underground, its physical and material infrastructure or lack thereof.

Contemporary urban theory foregrounds a specific political understanding of infrastructure as not only serving to constitute the platform and framework for economic development, but also as the means of
constituting a particular kind of urban public. Infrastructure, in this
view, materially reiterates specific notions about the prospects, capabili-
ties, and rights (or the lack thereof) of specific groups within the city. At
this level, infrastructure literally constitutes an archive in the etymologi-
cal sense of *arche*, or the founding principle, of urban form as well as a
condition of possibility of a modern, democratic public. Through this
interpretation of city as archive, we are in a position to understand how
the messy and always incomplete articulation of the cities of the global
South can be conceptually related to the politically precarious situation
of urban residents in such places.

But it is in fact significant that Mehta’s *Maximum City* reaches this layer
of infrastructure as political instrument through his exploration of the
cinematic city. As a number of scholars have pointed out, Bombay cinema
constituted the city as a very particular kind of political space, one that
powerfully foregrounded the failures of the nationalist imaginary that
was invested in the village as its site of modernization and hope for the
future. In the narrative of Bombay cinema, the city constituted a site of
risk and moral danger to the orderly achievement of national progress.
Political heroes in this cinematic imaginary are often the outcasts of na-
tional society—smugglers, extortionists, and speculators—who are forced
to take to crime due to a lack of choice because of the state’s failure
to provide for them. In this context, Mehta’s *Maximum City* traces the
journey from the city as a place of risk—as a place of morally dangerous
opportunity—to the city as a place at risk. This distinction is significant
because it transforms the notion of risk from one that might promise new
political orders to one that is corrupt and practically impossible to rescue
from self-destruction. The shift from the idea of the city as a place of risk
to one at risk also corresponds to a shift from a nationalist imaginary of
place to a global imaginary within which the India city now occupies a
significant place alongside other, similar postcolonial locations.

This latter view, of the city as a place at risk, therefore signals a signifi-
cant conceptual shift because it has now become normative for urban
theory to turn to the dystopic conditions of places like Mumbai as signs
of the telos of urban life and therefore as frightening signals of the ter-

376  NEW LITERARY HISTORY

minal conditions for modern society. We must bear in mind here that
the transition from the idea of the city as a place of risk to one at risk
has a history in the West that long predates its application to the Indian
city. This is largely a nineteenth-century history that combines the story
of speculative industrial capital with the burgeoning of untenable mate-
rial conditions in cities, akin to the contemporary slums of the cities in
the global South. But the return of the idea today, exemplified by Mike
Davis’s recent and influential book *Planet of Slums*, can be traced to the
continued influence of the distinctly Western modernist interpretation of
embracing urbanism
the power of material infrastructure to constitute the techno-social basis of forms of urban life. However, what remains problematic about this view is that it fails to take into account what constitutes the particularity of urban life in different places and the ways in which generic material infrastructure can and does produce creative attempts on the part of urban residents to carve out a productive space for themselves within the city. I suggest here that these failures of the conceptual imagination return to haunt urban policy in contemporary India and that these failures are not unrelated to the continued hold of the discourse of metropolitanism in urban theory. In the following section, I address an alternative vision of the archive, one that might provide us with a new way of understanding the Indian city as a site of a global yet situated modernity, as well as provide a prototype for studying and understanding contemporary global cities.

City-as-Archive

Archives are neither universal forms nor are they uniform institutions that collect particular kinds of information in the service of particular, universal projects of history. Rather, we might think of archives as languages whose formal characteristics constitute memory in different ways for different groups of people. This position assumes that the past itself, as an absence, is inherently unstable and is constantly reconstituted as memory through active forms of recollection and through institutional forms such as archives. The problem of the archive, as numerous theorists have pointed out, is the assumption of the a priori significance of the information gathered within the formal archive, usually considered to reflect something else, something that is less tangible such as cultural genius or a higher truth. The authority of the archive in fact rests upon this assumption.

As an evident, material archive, the built environment of the city reveals as much as it conceals about the political and historical processes to which cities are subjected through time. For cities are places of continual accumulation as well as destruction and subtraction, and even forms of historic preservation serve destructive ends insofar as they freeze particular political narratives about the city and its communities through acts of "architectural eugenics." Therefore, given this complexity of both cities and archives as historical forms, I suggest an alternative concept of city-as-archive as a tool with which to explore both the complexities of contemporary cities as well as of the processes by which archives are constituted. To clarify, the concept of city-as-archive suggests an analogical relationship between cities and archives in terms of form and raises
the question of the limits of each form. In so formulating the relation
between cities and archives, I suggest that we are able to interrogate
both the limits of the principles by which archives are constituted as
well as the problem of belonging by which the city is constituted as a
demographic space.

In particular, if we conceive of archives not just as institutional forms
but also as processes, this analogical relation between cities and archives
begins to acquire a shape that corresponds to the particular conditions of
all contemporary cities, not just Western ones. The idea of the metropolis
as medium connected to perpetual and ephemeral flows of information
and stimuli, explored above, is a powerful reminder that we would need
a processual understanding of the archive in order to grasp the nature
of these flows, especially if we are to consider the Indian city through
the lens of metropolitan form rather than as an exception. As a prin-
ciple of order, the archive provides a base upon which history, memory,
and recollection takes place. Such memory structures relations between
strangers, thereby producing a sense of urban locality and place. Hence
the abstract, analogical relationship between cities and archives and
the concept of city-as-archive has a significant resonance, especially in
the context of globalization, the profound and epochal socioeconomic
transformation confronting the world today. In the concluding section,
I use this notion of city-as-archive to explore possible alternatives to
the ways in which cities are imagined in the practice of urbanism and
urban policy in contemporary India and to explore the impact of such
an alternative vision on the political framing of the Indian city.

City Beyond Maps

Maps and mapping have historically provided important functional
tools in navigating the relationship between “reality” and its abstractions.
I specifically stress the functional aspects of maps because the concept of
reality is itself highly contested, and philosophical debates on the nature
of reality are many. In one sense, maps provide anchors for the produc-
tion of archives as they mirror the transformations of the urban realm.
As numerous recent analyses have suggested, the epochal transformation
of society into an urban one is taking place at a planetary scale today.
Yet the role of architectural plans in shaping contemporary urbanism is
receding rather than increasing. As the architect Kazys Varnelis suggests,
the workings of the contemporary, information-based economy obviate
“the need for the architectural plan.” In this way, he suggests that a
“city beyond maps” has already come into existence, one that cannot be
mapped in terms of its visible architecture and infrastructure. This insight,
embracing urbanism, is also a phenomenon that has been studied by anthropologists who claim that it is necessary to study the city not only in its physical aspects but also by positioning its people and their network-producing activities as the infrastructure that allows the city to function.12

The physical transformation of cities in the context of globalization is sometimes accompanied by the massive displacement of people—either physically, as in the case of Mumbai and Beirut, or intangibly, as in the case of the Parisian banlieues whose inhabitants find themselves increasingly disenfranchised and imprisoned in place, displaced by being rendered immobile. The “city beyond maps” thus now includes not only the movement of global economic forces but also the informational layers carried by people as they are being displaced from familiar habitats or dangerous, temporary ones as they are being rendered mobile. The city itself acquires a new relationship to density, the characteristic relationship between people and milieu, which defines the production of urban locality. Place-based density is transformed into a physically absurd value, but is recoded into the stories that people carry with them across urban domains as they struggle to reconstitute their place within the city.13 For urban research, it becomes necessary to find ways of mapping these invisible and emergent structures of urban information in order to understand the processes by which residents are being reembedded across diverse geographical spaces and scales into new networks of exchange and interdependency. These kinds of transformations provide a way of exploring the idea of city-as-archive in some depth.

As an example, I will turn here to some of the transformations currently underway in Mumbai as a way of examining the usefulness of the city-as-archive. As is well known, approximately half of Mumbai’s population is estimated to be living in informal settlements, which are poorly serviced and largely disconnected from the infrastructural grid. Popularly referred to as slums, by residents as well as planners, politicians, and developers, these settlements occupy a mere eight percent of the total space of the city within its municipal limits. However, they are geographically spread all over the city and are often in very close proximity to affluent neighborhoods, forming the very antithesis of the isolated apartheid township, the contemporary Parisian banlieue, or the American ghetto. This proximity to better developed neighborhoods has resulted in inflating the notional property values of the parcels of land on which slums are constructed, even if many of these land parcels only exist as a result of painstaking reclamation or are situated on top of infrastructural facilities and thus environmentally precarious or are lands whose ownership is locked in dispute. As the flow of real estate capital has been liberalized and development itself has been privatized,
these informal settlements have become highly prized targets since they stand as obstacles to the complete “makeover” of the city along the lines of Shanghai or Dubai. In this context, a new form of struggle has taken shape, one that is different from the struggle to preserve historic neighborhoods in Mumbai.

As the parcels of land on which these informal settlements sit are absorbed into the formal, built landscape of the new city, with its aspirations to becoming the next Shanghai, large numbers of residents have been displaced into new tower-block buildings, built on designated parcels of land, often at a great distance from their original homes. The slum, in one sense, constitutes a material expression of density in space. But density itself can be reconceptualized, not merely as the spatial occupation of a location by a given population, but also as a network of information and relationships, which can also be detached from space. Thus the displacement of these residents can also be seen as a detachment of the density of their informal infrastructure of relations and networks from place itself. While many of the current struggles in the city are articulated around the idea of asserting a right to the city, these struggles primarily function to produce political gridlock and to maintain the status quo. Meanwhile, speculative capital continues to thrive and even profit from these struggles as bets are laid down on the future shape of the city and profits realized in the present moment on the basis of anticipation.

In this context, the challenge for both planning and politics is the identification of new forms of general or common interest. Normative notions of urban planning take infrastructure as a point of departure and as a terminus, understanding underlying urban conditions in relation to existing infrastructure. As I suggested above, urban theory views infrastructure as providing the organizational glue for an automatically constituted public sphere and an accurate indication of existing conditions, including demographic ones. But this form of understanding the basis for politics is clearly in danger as urbanism advances, marching to the tune of a “city beyond maps,” an invisible architecture of forces. Here, a new concept of urban politics can be usefully articulated by reference to the city-as-archive. Following my earlier analysis, archives can be treated as anchors in the reconstitution of social relations rather than as reflections of an already existing set of underlying conditions. Further, if we can treat density as a reflection of a network of information and relationships rather than as a demographic indicator of the quality and nature of the experience of place, then I suggest that these newly mobile forms of density can themselves be positioned as a form of archive. The new city, coming into being, can then be read as an archive, and urban political struggles might be repositioned in the zone of anticipation rather than in the zone of nostalgia.
embracing urbanism

This city-as-archive, which depends upon a new understanding of urban density as a key factor, can provide an important counterpoint to existing understandings of the Indian city by providing the conceptual tool for understanding emergent urban relationships in the context of globalization. By providing a means of recording and including the fluidities of urban informality as vital information, the city-as-archive creates a lens into the emergent as much as it indexes historical forms. I suggested earlier that rather than highlight the archive’s capacity to accurately represent a past, we use the notion of archive as a way of navigating the voids of the present, as a practice of intervening into and reading the urban fabrics created by these voids, not for reading the urban fabric as a quilt or a palimpsest of historical forms preserved within the archive. These voids of the present are created not only by environmental destruction, catastrophes, or targeted acts of terror, but also by the quotidian transformations of urban space by politicians, developers, and planners. In an age marked both by acts of destruction and corresponding stimulation of memory and identities as well as by the massive proliferation of data, information, its collection, and its organization, we need to rethink the notion of archive to encompass a dynamic sense of ordering and interpretation, unmoored from the politics of preservation and evidence creation for historical understanding.

In contexts such as Mumbai, but also in many other contemporary urban contexts, such an approach is invaluable, for it points to the possibilities of a politics based on anticipation rather than one that is based on known forms of place and demographic arrangement. The notion of the city-as-archive enables the production of tools of urban design that take a very different view of demographic density and its relation to urban infrastructure. In this view, density would be seen as part of a mobile and transforming infrastructural landscape rather than as a static indicator to be rearranged through new infrastructural input. The city’s demographic profile, seen through the lens of the city-as-archive, foregrounds information that has a bearing on the future rather than information that merely has to be reorganized or purged. The city-as-archive, in other words, does not merely plot already known historical transitions and contain information as evidence for those transitions. Thus, beginning with the simple fact of the centrality of spatial transformations in contemporary cities, we move away from considering these spatial transformations as archival evidence in understanding contemporary urban fabric and politics. Instead, we argue for a new methodological move, to posit the transforming city itself as an archive in the making, a form that will have a profound bearing on our understanding of the past as a history of the present.

The Pedagogy of the Urban
Such an approach has practical pedagogical implications, particularly for the design professions engaged in harnessing creativity for the production of urban futures. At the broadest level, it enables us to rethink the kinds of tools necessary for projects of urban regeneration, itself a constant feature of contemporary cities. By providing a theoretical apparatus for mapping emergent relations rather than isolating and classifying certain forms as belonging to the past and others to the present, the city-as-archive also serves as a methodological intervention into the re-creation of everyday relations. In this sense, the city-as-archive is fundamentally a pedagogical tool, one that encourages conceptual creativity as the basis for political transformation. Without such conceptual creativity, the analytic basis for political action remains fundamentally conservative.

If design as a professional activity is fundamentally connected to imagining and producing the future, then the particular concept of the archive advanced in this exposition of city-as-archive can provide the basis of that creativity. In other words, the city-as-archive works as a tool, refashioning our relation to the future.

Both cities and archives play a central role in constituting our understanding of social life. The modern metropolis as medium constantly mediates, produces, and maintains relations among strangers. Similarly, once we free ourselves from the constraints of archives as particular, official, institutional forms, we are in a better position to understand the archive beyond its role as a repository of evidence about the past, always directed toward a putative future. Instead, by taking a more ecumenical view of what kinds of information or activities might be included in an archive, we begin to see an analogical relationship between cities and archives. In the context of the rapid transformation of contemporary cities, it is necessary that we move away from an inherently conservative and preservationist understanding of archives because such a view inevitably influences the way we perceive urban politics.

Beginning with an account of the conceptual exceptionalism of the Indian city and the static notion of archive associated with that exceptionalism, this paper has tried to unpack simultaneously new understandings of both cities and archives in parallel. The point of this exercise is to suggest new ways of understanding the Indian city in the context of globalization and in the context of the shift from a center-periphery conceptual geography. A different understanding of the archive, one that moves away from a place-based sense of urban form, could prove to be a new way of approaching urban form, one that is more in tune with contemporary urban practices. Modernist understandings of infrastructure that underpin normative urban theory are inadequate to describe the complexities of contemporary urban environments at the global scale. These understandings also underwrite the contemporary image of cities of the
embracing urbanism as nothing more than spaces and places at risk. In order to produce an account of the Indian city that transcends this dichotomous understanding of urbanism, rooted in the epistemology of Western social science, I offer an alternative understanding of both archives as emergent processes and of cities through the lens of density. In conclusion, I briefly demonstrated the usefulness of this approach for designing urban futures in places like India under conditions of globalization.

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NOTES

7 This point is made especially by Ravi Vasudevan, “Disreputable and Illegal Publics: Cinematic Allegories in Times of Crisis,” *Crisis/Media, Sarai Reader 04* (New Delhi: Sarai, 2004), 72–3.
10 This term used by Mumbai-based architect Mustansir Dalvi in a personal conversation about how the historic preservation movement in Mumbai connects particular built forms to particular religious and ethnic communities, even when sociological observation suggests that these neighborhoods were spaces of coexistence and conviviality. The imposition of a narrative of singularity on the built environment therefore promotes a certain understanding of the politics of community in the city.
13 This idea of density as physically absurd value is particularly relevant in the context of certain neighborhoods in Mumbai where densities reach up to ninety thousand persons per square kilometer, a figure that can seem absurd under any rational urban master plan in the absence of the infrastructure to sustain such density. Sustainable versions of such densities might be obtained in cities like Hong Kong which are planned and zoned to accommodate these numbers.