CHAPTER 6

Mill, Market, Milieu: Redevelopment and Rights to the City

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Configuring Community

Mumbai’s so-called ‘megamorphosis’ is increasingly associated with aspirations to a new kind of built form, characterized by a generic, global aesthetic vision of tall buildings and privatized living quarters. Actually existing built forms, such as the chawls and the dense low-rise informal settlements on the other hand, are characterized by specific configurations of space that have particular impact upon matters private and public, individual/personal and collective. In many of the conversations that I had with people living in chawls, both in Girangaon and in south Mumbai, several individuals emphasized the distinction between the chawl system and the ‘block’ or apartment system with its closed doors and alienated individualism. The chawl’s flowing, ambulatory corridors define its capacity to puncture boundaries as well as to create community among strangers. In both contemporary and historical accounts of urban political life in Mumbai, the chawl is a significant protagonista. However, as Rajnarayan Chandavarkar emphasizes in his writings on working-class life in Mumbai, utopian visions of collective existence must be balanced by carefully attending to areas of antagonism in the formation of community in order to gain an accurate picture of social life and forms of subjective experience in the metropolis.

The materiality of everyday life in the chawls thus has the conceptual capacity to create different kinds of historical narratives of urban community – of community as organic and harmonious on the one hand, and of community as the product of negotiating conflict and antagonism on the other. From everyday life to the configuration of subjective experiences of social categories such as caste, religion, region and linguistic community, the urban experience of Mumbai is closely tied to the environments proliferating around built forms. In the contemporary transformation of Mumbai into a ‘world-class’ city, however, there is an acceleration of a process of ideologically framing these very milieus as anachronistic and obsolete in relation to the future or aspirational city. This framing works through the rhetoric of images of generic global built environments, dominated by glass curtain walls and the all-important ‘amenities’ of open spaces, gymnasiums, car parks and club houses. Yet, an ethnography of these milieus, through an exploration of these built forms moving from the outside in – from street to home – reveals disjunctures through which social and political subjectivities are now being forged.

The following ethnography is enabled by the stories of certain key figures, all of whom are engaged in a struggle over the norms and forms of occupation under conditions of profound physiognomic transition. Examining chawl redevelopment plans across the textile industry’s spatial spread within the city – from the factories where cloth was produced to the markets where it was sold – this essay argues that the manner in which built forms present themselves today complicates attempts to map community and space and instead makes visible certain investments – of capital, memory and emotion – that revalue space within a speculative universe.

Milieus of Transition

It was almost dark when Mr Vithal Sawant and I walked out of the chawl compound adjoining the Jam Mills – where he lives – to the main road leading to the Saat Rasta junction. But the street lights and lights from the small shops on the ground floors of the buildings on the street brightened the way considerably, heightening a sense of distortion, a sense of
things being off-kilter in the street. The street corner resembled a stage set with props from unconnected scenes casually strewn around. The street's linear authority, its rigidity, was already eroded by the elastic effect that crowds of people—shoppers, vendors, people hurrying towards public transport stops on their way home—impose upon the regimentation of grids, layout and asphalted surfaces, surging as they do like tidal waves.

Dada Savant and I had just finished a long conversation about the fate of the tenants living in the chawls owned by the National Textile Corporation or by private owners after the closure of the mills. We were now standing on the corner of the street, opposite the office of the Kamgar Kalyan Kendra (Workers Welfare Centre) where he had worked since he was a young man. He pointed out the office to me, still busy with people, working late into the evening. Immediately after, we looked across the street and paused, both of us a little shocked by a mutual visual paradox. We were looking at a number of new buildings, 20 to 25 floors in height, right next to a government-constructed cluster of mid-rise buildings only a few years old yet already looking dilapidated and worn out. On our side of the street, we stood with our backs to an old yet already looking dilapidated and worn out. On the outside or from a position that sees redevelopment as a homogenizing juggernaut destroying historic communities by erasing diverse habitats. The answer is also complicated by the problem of the analytic gaze, which superimposes particular populations upon particular built forms. Here, I suggest that it might be useful to explore this notion of community from inside out, from careful ethnographic scrutiny of processes that produce localities and so-c"'

He looked up at the new high-rise towers and said, 'These developments are a problem, but not just for us. Certainly they take away our precious resources, like water. But we too are a problem for them. They will have to endure us, our presence, because the problem of the chawls will take a long time to resolve.' In one moment, he reversed the gaze and looked upon the chawls from the hawk's-eye view of the new neighbours and the real-estate developers. The problem for them is that the 'we' of the chawls will take a while to go away and so gazing outside from their perfectly appointed interiors would be a reminder of their 'problem', starting out at them, plainly in sight. We might argue, then, that this sense of spatial distortion is also productive in many ways—both positive and negative—of new kinds of subjectivities, especially political subjectivities among residents (old and new) and citizens (full and partial) of Mumbai in its 'world-class' avatar.

But who is the 'we' of the chawls of Girangaon or, for that matter, of the chawls of south Mumbai today? This question is particularly difficult to answer from the outside or from a position that sees redevelopment as a homogenizing juggernaut destroying historic communities by erasing diverse habitats. The answer is also complicated by the problem of the analytic gaze, which superimposes particular populations upon particular built forms. Here, I suggest that it might be useful to explore this notion of community from inside out, from careful ethnographic scrutiny of processes that produce localities and social relationships, rather than from the outside in, through narratives that map an assumed community—whether ethnic, linguistic, regional or caste-based—onto a decaying ecology of built forms, as a result of which certain interpretations about survival, community, nostalgia and ethnicity appear to be normal and normative.

This essay will elaborate on the suggestion of moving from the inside by exploring the milieu—on which such spatial and social dislocations—and indeed, distortions—are experienced. Here, milieu is understood as both physical and virtual, spatial and subjective. Following Gilles Deleuze, we could conceptualize a milieu as a composition of trajectories that can be mapped. For understanding the nature of a milieu, Deleuze contrasts a cartographic approach from an archaeological one: maps, he writes, 'are superimposed in such a way that each map finds itself modified in the following map, rather than finding its origin in the preceding one: from one map to the next, it is not a matter of searching for an origin, but of evaluating displacements.' Here we take up the task of simultaneously mapping the trajectories of individuals and of built forms seeking to situate contemporary political struggles in two neighbourhoods of Mumbai—Girangaon and Kalkaji, which constitute the manufacturing and market ends of the textile industry, respectively. In each of these neighbourhoods, an architectural form—the chawl—has become a lens through which narratives about transformation can be mapped and in this sense is the locus of an expansive sense of milieu. Mapping the transformations of the chawl as spatial and subjective form—in the life of its inhabitants and in the development plans of the city—should therefore provide an insight into the sense of milieu and its effects on our understanding of how social and political subjectivities are configured in the global city.

Standing Ground: Tenant or Occupant?

The antechamber of the small office room is like a doctor's waiting room. A partition separates the clients from the experts. In this case the experts are real-estate agents, matching up buyers and sellers, lessors and lessees, landlords and tenants. This was the last place I expected to find Mr Kisan Salunkhe, a man renowned in Girangaon for his leadership in the struggle for permanent housing rights for the tenants residing in mill-owned chawls. More than 25 years have passed since the historic textile mill workers' strike of 1982—the event that became the most immediate excuse for the textile mill owners to realize their goal of finally shutting down the mills on grounds of technological obsolescence and economic inefficiency. The subsequent decimation of working-class social, cultural and political formations in the neighbourhood surrounding the mills in Girangaon is well-documented, as is the struggle to gain public access to the lands on which the mills stand, for civic amenities and social housing. Yet, like much else in the history of this neighbourhood, the quest for permanent rights of occupancy is marked by a struggle against attrition and the erosion of a community's raison d'être within a rapidly transforming milieu. I requested an interview with Mr Salunkhe to talk to him about these tenacious tenancy rights and he invited me to the office. Walking down the street to his office, south from the Darard Central Railway station's main entrance, where long-distance trains halt on their way in and out of Mumbai, I am reminded of childhood journeys out of Mumbai during the summer holidays. Home, for me, lies in the opposite direction, northwards along the leafy roads of the largely middle-class Hindu Colony, passing the busy South Indian marketplace of Matunga and rounding the curve of the King's Circle garden before catching the Eastern Express Highway heading toward the northeastern suburbs. Mr Salunkhe's Mumbai lies just south of this major terminus, through which migrants from all over India have entered Mumbai and made it home for many decades.

The streets are densely packed with commuters hurrying towards the station's entrance, shoppers busy studying the offerings in the small wholesale and retail shops lining the facades of buildings and leaning into the pavements, or looking down at the wares offered by street vendors. I enter a large, squat building, labyrinthe and confusing in its layout, with two rows of rooms arranged concentrically around a ventilation shaft. It takes a little while to find Mr Salunkhe's office. Banks, wholesale cloth merchants, printing shops and agents' offices offering all kinds of trading services line the poorly lighted corridor.

We begin to talk about the rapid transformation in the culture of the neighbourhood and the gradual demise of institutions like the khanwala (eating house) and the gala (rooms owned by village communities/castes and run as dormitories for men of the community who are new migrants to Mumbai). Yet his account of these institutions is anything but nostalgic. He is a man living in the future. 'I read the newspapers every night until two o'clock,' he tells me. 'And I feel tension.' His voice is soft and tired, I lean forward to listen, trying not to miss a word, and I feel his fear wash over me. There is a mix of hope in the defeat,
salunkhe. The message was becoming clear. There was no more defending the picket lines, the battle had moved to home ground. If, for a century or more, the mill itself was home ground and the lines between life and work were blurred for many, if not most of the resi­dents of this neighborhood, that milieu was cleaved through and through during the 1982 strike. Mr Salunkhe and Dada Savant, both veteran organ­izers, spoke about the large number of workers who left the city after the strike due to unemployment, and returned to their native villages. Ironically, during the preceding century, the very definition of home, native place, and migration had been radically reor­ganized, rendering the village home a distant habitat with tenuous ancestral ties as new forms of commu­nity were being forged in the city through political action and active situations of conflict that brought the mill workers into contact with other classes, castes, religious groups and linguistic communities from regions across India. Yet, the village resurfaced in that moment of extreme distress and attrition, an unthinkable situation of exile from the city they now called home. Many workers however left Mumbai as individuals while their extended families continued to stay on in the chawls—both those owned by the mills as well as the latest chawls of the new breed owned by private land­lords. For those who thus remained—out of choice or lack thereof—the chawl became the new front line of defence.

Even before any official end could be written to the strike, the landlords were turning up to evict and to reclaim the spaces not already in their control. Overnight, the mill owner became landlord, possess­or of a limited and therefore valuable commodity in the city.1 But there was still the matter of possession—like demonic rages or hysterical histrionics, possession cannot be pinned down without some degree of madness; this is after all in the etymology of the word it­self. The matter of ownership is difficult to settle even when the laws are sparse and seemingly clear rather than baroque, involved and deliberately opaque as they often tend to be in India. ‘So we went to the po­lice,’ Mr Salunkhe says, to seek clarity on the law. The police simply responded, ‘We have the authority to wield the lathi—who are they [mill owners/landlords] to do so?’ The workers, then, interpreted this cryptic assertion on the part of the police as a license to show strength through resistance. From this point onward, Mr Salunkhe’s story oscillates between the search for justice within the law and the show of strength through threatening violence. What is critical is the maintenance of these two fronts—to win justice it is necessary to buy time, and to buy time it is necessary to defend one’s right even if that right is what is being contested.

The point becomes clearer when I hear Mr Salunkhe speak about taking up the issue of the chawls with the Bombay Tenants’ Association—the all-powerful ten­ants’ rights lobby, which protects all those who come under the auspices of the 1947 Rent Act. It became clear that the class interests of the tenants’ lobby and those of the tenants up in Girangaon—the residents of the mill chawls—were very different. The more or less bourgeoisie world of the activists from south Bombay, who included many industrialists and businessmen enjoying de facto property rights to apartments and tenements that nominally belonged to some other landlord, stood to be radically shaken up by the form and manner of the demands of the residents of the mill chawls.

An imminent violence appeared to attend these demands, by virtue of the fact that they were au­thored by tenants who lived in privately owned chawls in the cities, and who included many industrialists and businessmen enjoying de facto property rights to apartments and tenements that nominally belonged to some other landlord, stood to be radically shaken up by the form and manner of the demands of the residents of the mill chawls. This was an imminent violence that was embedded in the fact that these demands were met by the police simply responding, ‘We have the authority to wield the lathi—who are they [mill owners/landlords] to do so?’ The workers, then, interpreted this cryptic assertion on the part of the police as a license to show strength through resistance. From this point onward, Mr Salunkhe’s story oscillates between the search for justice within the law and the show of strength through threatening violence. What is critical is the maintenance of these two fronts—to win justice it is necessary to buy time, and to buy time it is necessary to defend one’s right even if that right is what is being contested.

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However, an affect that has not completely given in and yet recognizes the limits of possibilities. Perhaps that explains the paradoxical split between his profes­sional life as a real-estate broker and his political life as an activist for renter’s rights. In the one life he sees the future plainly—the scene of the post that goes after big deals, the men who bring news of the sales of old buildings and abandoned mill compounds, and also those of more modest means, seeking to rent a small shop to start a business or to rent a small room to house their family.

All these situations are still available in this neigh­bourhood, but perhaps not for long. When the polit­i­cal gridlock that Mr Salunkhe creates in his other life clears up a little, yet another new development sees the light of day—a road is widened, a glass and con­crete office tower goes up, a post-modern housing tower named with a distinctly foreign ring rises from the ashes of another, more unassuming building. I listen to his and to others’ accounts of their lives and realize how their struggles had progressively come to rest in their homes, how they gradually withdrew from the grander milieu of the factory, the world-his­torical stage of proletarian struggle, to the more mod­est scales of the chawl buildings, the conditions of their continued possibility to livelihoods in the city.

Mr Salunkhe’s biography is instructive. He worked as a maintenance fitter in Spring Mill, a privately owned textile mill. His father before him was also a mill worker and a professional communist. Like many of his background, Mr Salunkhe participated in the ‘82 strike, remaining loyal to the idea of workers’ rights over the decades.* He was a leading activist amongst the strikers and pawned or sold most of his family’s pos­sions to stay afloat during the strike. But that sto­ry to follow closely. The way he tells it, it seems like demonic rages or hysteric histrionics, possession cannot be pinned down without some degree of madness; this is after all in the etymology of the word it­self. The matter of ownership is difficult to settle even when the laws are sparse and seemingly clear rather than baroque, involved and deliberately opaque as they often tend to be in India. ‘So we went to the po­lice,’ Mr Salunkhe says, to seek clarity on the law. The police simply responded, ‘We have the authority to demand their rights—the Girni Chawl Bhadekaru Sangh­shar Sangtmi (GCBSS, Mill Chawls Tenants’ Association) or GCBSS—which was also a rite of pas­sage in their transformation from workers to renters, a category that was previously not of much signifi­cance in their subjective or collective consciousness. So the long agitation for the rights to remain as pro­tected tenants, benefiting from the Rent Act, began in 1982 although the Mill Chands Chawls Tenants’ Association itself was not formed until later. Its abil­ity to show strength through protest and mobilization of large numbers of people in the streets was critical to the success of this organization. The Association drew on arguments about landownership, protesting that since the land on which the mills were built was leased to mill owners by the government, they had no legitimate claim over the land anyway and could not take the liberty of redeveloping mill plots and workers’ housing into luxury residential towers, office complexes and shopping malls.

The GCBSS worked alongside the Girni Kamgar Sangh­shar Sangtmi (GKSS, Mill Workers’ Action Committee) whose leader, Datta Ishwalkar, was also the Association’s President. The organization closely followed the various proposals that came up in the matter of partitioning of the mill lands amongst the owners, various sectors of the State such as MHA, and the BMC, to try to gain voice and leverage for the tenants. The tenancy bill of 1962 was finally passed within the chawls had been changing during the 20 years that passed before a final decision was made in 2002, granting the tenants rights to remain as well as reserving some portion of the lands for constructing housing for former mill workers who were not al­ready tenants in the chawls owned by the mills but lived in privately owned chawls either in Girangaon or elsewhere in the city. The complex formulae for partitioning the properties, it turned out, applied only to a fraction of the 250,000 workers who had been em­ployed in the textile mills on the eve of the 1982 strike. The rest had moved or somehow struggled to retain their tenancies.

The right to continued occupation therefore came at a price, one that Mr Salunkhe acknowledges subtly in his conversation with me. The struggle had taken its toll on cultures of occupation and forms of residence...
in the neighbourhood. New and old tenants were now mixed in the buildings that I visited, including the Jam Mill compound chawls and the Digvijay Mills chawls. Tenancies had been gradually sold, but in most cases the new residents were drawn from the existing networks of the departing tenants – a family member, a moneylender or a village acquaintance might suggest potential buyers interested in moving in.

The interior spaces of a large number of the homes I visited reflected the increasing upward mobility of the tenants, both new and old. In the case of older tenants who had managed to remain, many had younger family members working in white-collar jobs who helped retain the family's hold over the unit. Consumption patterns reflect the new trajectories of the residents. But if the milieu of the neighbourhood is a composition of these trajectories, it is necessary to take into account the disjuncture between exterior and interior, between extensive and intensive trajectories. While the new category of the tenant and his/her rights were being established through mass protest and struggle, a new class of speculative investment increasingly became visible through the discrepancies between inside and outside. As a result, there is a disjuncture between lifestyle and mobility within a new economy on the one hand and the precarious nature of tenancy occupation on the other.

Like many of the chawl buildings in the comparatively more middle-class and affluent parts of south Mumbai, many of the privately owned chawls in Girangaon too are subject to redevelopment under the provisions of the Development Control Regulation, DCR 33(7) which enables MHADA, the cess-collecting authority, to offer subsidies to private developers who undertake the reconstruction of these buildings by providing in situ rehabilitation to the tenant-residents. In these cases, rent assumes a new dimension of value, beyond the right to remain in a central and well-connected district of an important metropolis. It also becomes the means of acquiring accommodations that align better with the generic imaginary of global city architecture.

Here, the rhetoric of dilapidation and infrastructural collapse intersects with a nostalgic yearning for a lost global city architecture. The enormous changes taking place in Girangaon are special precisely because the dominance of the narratives of a rich and vibrant grassroots political movement prevents the reduction of the district into a generic urban renewal 'problem', a neighbourhood where infrastructural collapse comes to dominate the problem of life and its milieu. But precisely the opposite is the case in the effort of groups like ROMF – their rhetoric is dominated by an old-fashioned call for urban renewal of a neighbourhood that they assess as being dangerous and intolerable desire. I spent a considerable amount of time trying to move through this rhetoric to understand the composition of the trajectories that dominate this neighbourhood.

In this quest my guide was a landlord turned activist, Mr Kishore Velji who advises ROMF on their pilot project to redevelop a 30 acre ‘cluster’ around the Phanawadi temple area in Girgaon. Mr Velji's family has lived in Kalbadevi for three or four generations, participating actively as merchants in the cloth trade as well as in the social life of the Bhatia community to which they belong. As we walked together through the neighbourhood, Mr Velji's intimate knowledge of the district is read through a series of sales and transfers of property, renting for over a century to provide accommodation for migrant men such as the loaders who put up in a room that their village association in Raigad has been renting for a quarter of a small but dedicated group of families who have lived in the wadis for multiple generations and for migrant men such as the loaders who put up in a room that their village association in Raigad has been renting for over a century to provide accommodation for their men seeking jobs in Mumbai.

But these activities seem to constitute just the facade of business providing a veneer of continuity in a neighbourhood that is, in reality, at the heart of a very particular debate on redevelopment. Not far from the main Kalbadevi Road, ROMF (Remaking of Mumbai Federation), a civic association dedicated to the complete rebuilding of these neighbourhoods, has rented office space for a small but dedicated group of experts to draw up proposals for and calculate the costs of reconstruction, including the mathematics of mass rehabilitation and rebuilding infrastructure. This calculus depends on the use of planning and finance instruments that convert tenants into marketable instruments that convert tenants into marketable assets - their rhetoric is dominated by an old-fashioned call for urban renewal of a neighbourhood that they assess as being dangerous and intolerable desire.
construct in a corner of the room, changing the charac-
ter of the space from a typical chawl tenement to a
more apartment-like form. Such additions and altera-
tions have radically changed the infrastructural ecol-
ogy of the neighbourhood, one room at a time. Again,
these kinds of innovative fixes, converting one type
or form of habitat to another, follow the individual
or form of habitat to another, follow the individual
between inside and outside, interior and exterior.

Mr Velji blames this situation on a combination of
the constraints on landlords imposed by the Rent Act,
prohibiting them from charging market rents, and
the monopoly assumed by the State (specifically by
MHADA) over the maintenance of a large number
of properties in this and other south Mumbai neigh-
bourhoods. The key factor in his analysis is not just
that landlords have been constrained but also that the
State has pushed itself into a corner by charging ten-
ants a pitance for maintenance as well as by taking
over the responsibility for building maintenance from
the owners since the 1970s.

This impasse is particularly striking and ironic in
a neighbourhood whose foundations are built on con-
siderable ancestral and communal wealth. Caught in
the gridlock over maintenance, the neighbourhood's
infrastructural ecology has slowly decayed. From
Mr Patel's terrace, the back wall of another building
is clearly visible. The sewage pipes running along
the wall are broken at several places and small trees
are already growing in the interspaces. Through the
windows, smartly renovated apartments and offices,
many with private facilities, are visible. These exter-
iors and interiors are held together today by a rhetoric
that facilitates and demands a complete physiognom-
ique transformation of the neighbourhood, obliterat-
ing all traces of the existing built environment with its
damaged infrastructural ecology.

What drives this rhetoric is not just the perception
of a particular ecological situation and its catastroph-
ic implications but also an economy of development
driven by particular kinds of planning and financ-
ing instruments that subsidize private developers.
Mr Velji himself is well aware of this economy. With
his deep sociological and demographic knowledge of
the neighbourhood, he realizes that the composition of
the milieu has altered quite dramatically since the
late 1980s when changes in the Rent Act legalized the
practice of charging pagdi or key money for the trans-
fer of tenancies, a transaction that closely resembled a
'true sale', being disguised only by the continued
presence of the landlord in the picture as the true
and permanent beneficiary of a monopoly-rent-based
economy. Even a cursory calculation will reveal how
much more significant this rent-based economy is in
comparison to any of the business activities that are
supported in this neighbourhood.

After the amendments to the Act, a number of
buildings changed ownership as speculative inves-
tors entered into the area, buying up buildings to
profit from the tenancy transfers that could now be
transacted without resorting to under-the-table sub-
loose agreements. In addition, the rent laws also
allowed the landlord to charge higher rents and
convert residential units into commercial units after
paying appropriate fees. Mr Velji estimates that only
15-20 per cent of the tenants in this neighbourhood
have been in Kalbadevi for more than 60 years - in
other words, throughout the post-Independence pe-
riod - and that the ratio of commercial to residential
units has shifted to 55:45 from the earlier ratio favou-
ring residential units. In his own buildings, which he
took over as landlord in 1995, only 20 per cent of the
original tenants remain. He has bought most of them
out and leased out the rooms to businesses for offices
and workshops. Most of the original tenants in the
building, he says, have moved to the suburbs 'where
they are much happier'.

The convergence of these transitions and innova-
tive fixes, on the one hand, of infrastructure and regulations
alike - from interior renovation and refurbishment to
transitions both in ownership and tenancies - with a
rhetoric of decline, dilapidation and danger is rarely
considered together in analyses of urban renewal.
Yet, the case that is being made for the reconstruc-
tion of these neighbourhoods will result in enormous
profits, especially to the new investor-landlords who
have facilitated the remaking of Kalbadevi once again
into a predominantly business district from a mixed-
use neighbourhood. Although wadis like the Bhata
Mahajanwadi and other similar community-trust-
owned properties continue to command presence as
signs of the neighbourhood's heritage, the composition
of trajectories has altered dramatically if not visibly.
Visual anchors such as Mahajanwadi serve, to some
to, to obscure this change in the composition of
trajectories. Indeed, while some aspects of the facades
and ornamentation of these wadis may be retained as
signs of a dead past, it appears that nothing will sur-
vive - or live beyond - the current plans for redevelop-
ment in clusters, supported by the provisions of the
newly passed DCR 33(9).

Questions of Survival: Life and its Milieus
In this essay I have considered two neighbourhoods
- Girangaon and Kalbadevi - historically connected
through the thread of Mumbai's textile manufacture
industry. More recently they are connected by another
thread - that of an urban development control regu-
lation, DCR 33(7 & 9) and the closely related DCRs
governing the fate of the mill chawl tenancies - through
which Mumbai's development plan - its land-use pat-
terns as well as its historical urban demographic pat-
ters and built forms - are being radically altered. In
both cases the implementation of the provisions of this
particular DCR is being actively debated and rhe-
torically presented as a matter of survival.

In both neighbourhoods, however, the issue of
demographic transition is an important factor in un-
derstanding the social and subjective impact of the
proposed reconstruction. This transition is not only
reflected in the arrival of newer and more affluent
residents into these neighbourhoods through the re-
development of individual plots, but also in the inte-
rior transformations of individual units in the older
buildings by residents trying to balance the precari-
ous occupation of spaces they have lived in - some-
times for generations - with efforts to remain of value
within the globalizing city, where occupation itself is
being converted into a form of value. Yet, the politi-
cal processes by which these transitions are mapped
and plotted into narratives about the necessity of re-
development are complex and serve to obscure these
demographic transitions as well as the active devel-
opment of new economies, based largely on land and
trading in its value, in these neighbourhoods.

In the case of Girangaon, the focus on the par-
titioning of the mill lands and gaining the right to
remain as protected tenants whose tenancy rights
could be converted to permanent ownership rights
in the course of reconstruction is a dominant po-
litical narrative through which various actors un-
derstand survival or living beyond the moment of
loss of livelihood and community. In the case of
Kalbadevi, the coincidence of infrastructure - itself a product
developed by urban policy - is presented as a threat
to itself. To survive or live beyond in this
case could only result from an act of rupture with the
existing infrastructural ecology. In the former
case therefore the engagement with a new econo-
my based in trading around land and trafficking in
new kinds of planning and financing instruments is
considered necessary for survival itself in the trajec-
tories of individuals who have managed to remain
there either through their own political activism and
work or because of the capacities of their children
and grandchildren to support them in their milieu.
For civic groups like ROMF in the Kalbadevi and
Girangaon neighbourhoods, however, the problem of
survival is translated into a 'higher' good of urban
renovation, transformation and redemption. Adopting
these strategies therefore amounts to transforming a
milieu of danger and threat into one of opportunity
for the city as a whole.

However, in both cases there is an aporia or a blind
spot, created by the particular form that the political
narrative takes - in the case of Girangaon, we find a
poignant obscuring of the migration of large numbers
of working-class families from the neighbourhood,
whose ghosts haunt the victories of the CSS and the
Mill Land Chawl Tenants' Association. In the case of
Kalbadevi, obscuring the rise to dominance of a new
class of speculative-investor-landlord and the eclipse
of the protected tenant, both as an idea as well as an
empirical category, enables a generic global form of
turbanization to triumph and dictate urban policy and
development planning. Both owners and tenants are
locked into narratives of impoverishment and of decay,
both of life-worlds and of their infrastructural support. Yet visual research
yields a rich narrative landscape in which these very
objects of decay can be read from inside out to reveal
a maze of complex life trajectories intersecting with
the trajectories of the built environment in multiple,
transformative ways.
In both cases, it is therefore necessary to conceptu­
alize milieu differently – in order to situate milieu as
the enabling condition for the production of locality
and neighbourhood, it is necessary to think of it fund­
damentally as a composition of trajectories that can
be mapped to evaluate displacements effectively. To
understand a milieu as merely a deterministic con­
text, in which the ‘we’ of its community is assumed
rather than emergent, would only serve to propagate
dominant rhetorical strategies connected to generic
forms of urbanisation. These rhetorical strategies play
on narratives of infrastructure collapse and have
become the enabling factor in the redevelopment of
neighbourhoods like Kalbadevi. However, such gen­
ergic narratives of decay and renewal actively come
in the way of understanding the significance and the
political power of Vithal Sawant’s statement that it is
not only the case that high-rises are a problem for the
working class because they are rupturing the neigh­
bourhood’s physical and cultural infrastructure, but
that the chawls of Girangaon themselves will become
politically significant because they will endure in
complex and even virtual ways long after a process of
gentrification may be considered complete.

Notes
1. A term recently used by Bombay First and the World
Bank to describe the ongoing spatial and infrastructur­
al transformation of Mumbai.
2. Jam Mills is one of several private mills whose man­
agement was taken over by the National Textile
Corporation in the 1980s.
3. These buildings were constructed by MHADA (Maha­
rashtra Housing and Area Development Authority), a
body that was mainly responsible for constructing pub­
lie housing and housing for low-income groups until
the last decade when a private housing market developed
by real-estate companies and investors was opened up
on a large scale to individual buyers. It is commonly
known that due to the 1947 Rent Control Act, new
development of rental housing stock had effectively come
to a halt by the 1970s. Most housing stock that was con­
structed in post-Independence Mumbai was developed
for private ownership by groups who were legally con­
stituted into cooperative housing societies. Buying and
selling took place within this cooperative housing soci­
ety framework. Although many of the original tenants
living in the buildings regulated by the Rent Act did
move out and sell their rights, such sales were largely
clandestine and unregulated, especially of residential
premises, which could be held by the tenant in per­
petuity and passed on to his/her heirs. Changes to the
Rent Act in the last decade have made legal transfers of
tenancies more visible.
5. Theoretically, the spatial category of the ‘slum’ has
proven to be especially fertile in this regard – for theo­
rists ranging from Mike Davis to Rem Koolhaas to
Hernando de Soto, the slum signifies wide-ranging
social processes including exploitation, enterprise and
creativity, indicating an analytically productive con­
nection between material and social formations.
6. Gilles Deleuze, Essays Critical and Clinical, London:
7. See especially Meena Monon and Neera Adarkar, One
Hundred Years One Hundred Voices, Calcutta: Seagull
Books, 2004; R. Chandavarkar, The Origins of Industrial
Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working
Classes in Bombay, Cambridge: CUP 2004; Darryl
D’Monte, Rippling the Fabric: The Decline of Mumbai and
9. Owners were permitted to evict residents who no lon­
ger worked in the mills based on the provisions of exist­
ing central government legislation (Act 630) favouring
mill owners. This is a crucial factor in understanding
the struggle of the mill worker chawl renters’ associa­
tion against mill owners. It is estimated that only 6,000
out of approximately 250,000 workers were provided
accommodation in the chawls owned by 16 mills in
Girangaon. The remaining workers rented premises
in chawls owned by private individuals in Girangaon
as well as elsewhere in Mumbai. In chawls owned by
some mills, like Jam Mills where Vithal Sawant lives,
even people who did not work in the mills could rent
premises. Many of the chawls in Girangaon therefore
housed mixed populations of mill workers and others.
10. MHADA began collecting a tax or a cess from tenants
in a number of buildings in 1969 to fund repairs and
reconstructions, which the owners of the buildings
claimed they could no longer afford, given the restricted
amounts they received as rents. Additionally, due to
extremely low property taxes and municipal taxes, it
was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the net­
worked infrastructure of water and sewage pipes and
garbage collection. The number of buildings paying
such a cess to MHADA is estimated to be around 20,000
– all located in the A, B, C, D, E and F wards of the city.
11. See Darryl D’Monte, ed., Mills For Sale, Mumbai: Marg
Publications, 2006, for a detailed timeline of the strug­
gle between mill workers and owners over the mill
lands as well as for details of the legal apportion­
ing of land and the various cases filed against these
provisions.

12. ROMF is a coalition of residents and various experts
as well as private developers and is headed by the
nephew of a well-known local builder. It is not an NGO
in the traditional sense but a civic association that has
become a powerful lobby for the changing of develop­
ment laws.

13. While these neighbourhoods are already among the
densest neighbourhoods anywhere in the world, den­
sity will increase because the provisions for redevelop­
ment specify FSI of 4. Given the small plot sizes, this
will result in tall and narrow buildings, again creating
a sense of spatial distortion.