

Rectifying Failure

Imagining the New City and the Power to Create It

Did you know that Mumbai has four rivers?

—OPEN MUMBAI EXHIBITION

Greater Mumbai cannot survive as a concrete jungle.

—BREATHING SPACE EXHIBITION

As the students trained to practice good design, parts of the wider city of Mumbai were caught up in a wave of events, symposia, exhibitions, and spectacles that amplified anticipatory optimism for the city's new development plan. This chapter offers the reader one trajectory—the author's—through a selection of public events that highlighted the possibilities for sustainability suggested by the imminent plan. In doing so, I aim to pause and rescale our focus from the social experience of Institute training to the wider city and its publics. These, after all, form an important dimension of the broader social worlds that all of the students lived among. This chapter addresses the social production of ideas of good design as they were nested within a wider urban frame for the potential place, and composition, of Mumbai's environment. As in the context of the Institute, that frame was produced in real time, its aesthetic and ecosystem service dimensions promoted, contested, and reworked across many specific publics and locations in Mumbai.

I note from the outset that each event I discuss in this chapter indexes specific attempts to influence the extremely complex and layered world of Mumbai's urban politics.¹ Yet, unlike the RSIEA context, this chapter does not attempt an exhaustive analysis of the events or the publics they created or excluded; while these are important issues worthy of their own book-length analytical treatments, they are beyond the scope of the present work. I note them here because their frequency and presence in this period of my fieldwork reinforced in more popular settings the sense of purpose and urgency signaled by the RSIEA concept of good design. Like me, students would daily come and go from the Institute in Prabha Devi only

to pass by, deliberately attend, and often take part in, the events I describe below. They help us understand, then, the wider social climate within which environmental architects were situated—one characterized by the active making of self-designated Mumbai publics who deemed specific social and natural transformations necessary to salvage the city from otherwise inevitable socio-ecological chaos. By highlighting a set of public events, this chapter then proceeds to a question that is central to forging a link between any form of green expertise and engaged social practice: namely, who, precisely, controls urban development in Mumbai?

I proceed, then, to recount a subset of the many spectacles through which the ideal future city's contours were defined, debated, and mapped in the lead-up period to the new development plan. Each was organized by a different group—and therefore enabled different kinds of claims to legitimacy—and each took as its central concern not the question of *whether* one or another vision of an open, greener Mumbai was desirable, but rather which version could be understood and embraced as the most appropriate, representative, and, ultimately, sustainable.

A few weeks after my arrival in Mumbai, I was seated among an audience of Mumbai-based planners, architects, and urban professionals in what, like the RSIEA opening program, might be viewed as both a global and a postcolonial setting. In the quite Victorian assembly hall of the former Victoria and Albert Museum, now the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, the group had convened for an event called Reimagining Mumbai. Organized by the city's Urban Design Research Institute (UDRI) and faculty and students from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, the seminar drew its participants from Mumbai's environmentally interested urban professional public, as well as an internationally mobile, elite group of graduate students and their mentors. The challenge, as the name suggests, was to undertake a daylong, collective visioning exercise: what would a greener blueprint for the city's built form—one that would reorganize its land-use mosaic while meeting the needs expected to accompany a dizzying future population growth scenario—look like? The program comprised speeches from Indian and international "experts," but its singular message was that regardless of one's home context or degree of familiarity with Mumbai (indeed, some speakers were visiting the city for the very first time), all assembled were somehow entitled to register their voice toward the goal of reimagining it.

I was invited to this gathering by the RSIEA Head herself; she was among the urban professionals who had participated in discussions, projects, and preparations that informed the event. As such, I'd expected her work or her presence to be in the relative foreground, but instead the program included some presenters who seemed to have little or sometimes no prior experience working in Mumbai. I sat in the audience, then, alongside Udyavar Yehuda, someone who in the RSIEA context would be leading the group.

The program was eclectic. Some speakers offered comments that seemed to reinforce what by 2012 had become a rather standard, globally circulating narrative

of Mumbai, informed by its iconic status as a planetary epicenter of informal and slum housing.² Without question, the challenge of re-housing, or differently housing, the estimated 8.7 million people living in Mumbai's slums is both critically important and notoriously tenacious, but international discourses of slums in Mumbai at that time sometimes had the effect of allowing slum settlements to stand, in singular dimensionality, for the city more broadly.³ At times this betrayed the complexity of social, political, and material life in slums themselves; it also supplanted more careful attention to the layered social, political, and biophysical challenges the city faces as a whole.⁴

Among the audience gathered for Reimagining Mumbai, invoking discourses of Mumbai as a city of slums certainly underscored the importance of any attempt to reimagine the city's urban landscape; it also placed the focus on the architect's very brief: namely, shelter. As panelists discussed the city's development plan, they rehearsed a dire picture of the present, but connected it to new possibilities. Urban growth projections foretold a massive future buildingscape that did not yet exist but would rise quickly. Between 2012 and the next common demographic benchmark year, 2025, the UN estimated that Mumbai's population would grow to 27 million, a sharp contrast to the city's official 2011 population of 18.4 million.^{5,6} This scenario added urgency to the task of forging a plausible urban material and social fabric; the Mumbai of the present was already famously failing to provide basic services like safe housing, adequate infrastructure, and sufficient reliable utilities.⁷

It is further important to notice the distinctive spatial politics of twenty-first century environmental projects. Not only is an aspiring urban environmental architect guided by analytical questions of identity formation (the "we" of similarly trained and value-oriented architects) and tellings of history (defining *Indian* green architecture), but she is also guided by a somewhat constant scalar code switching between globally circulating metrics of appropriate environmental architectural forms and those considered to be uniquely anchored to scales more accurately defined as "of the place." The converse is also true. As environmental sustainability increasingly figures in urban aspirations for relevance on a global map of cities that "matter," the environmental architect may be regarded as having the potential to hold the power to foreground specific cities on a global stage.

If the iconic global image of Mumbai is so dominated by the idea, aesthetic, and human experience signaled by global imaginaries of "the slum," then the chance to refashion Mumbai's housing into more ecologically desirable forms not only suggests a chance to rectify the majority population's unlivable reality, it also potentially assigns environmental architects a central role in any effort to "reform" or refashion Mumbai's global image.

In addition to housing, the panelists emphasized a second urban failure, one that placed Mumbai's biophysical stresses at its center: flooding vulnerability. In 2005, the eighth heaviest rainfall ever recorded for Mumbai had caused catastrophic floods.⁸ At least 5,000 people died, countless others lost their homes, and

thousands were stranded in life-threatening circumstances on Mumbai's roadways. References to the floods—signaled in the simple mention of the date, July 26—punctuated public events surrounding the new development plan and underscored the city's urgent need to be "open" and "green." At Reimagining Mumbai, the director of the city's Urban Development Research Institute called July 26 a "game changer, because," he declared simply, "on this date the city failed." Environmental catastrophe—the record rainfall—combined with the calamity of decades of specific patterns of landscape transformation, had exposed the city's distinctive and inexcusable vulnerability to complete socioenvironmental breakdown. The city could not stand by and wait for such events to be repeated, panelists argued, reinforcing the imperative to reimagine Mumbai.

While some of the environmentalist alarm over demographic growth projections have rightly been understood through the analytic of "bourgeois environmentalism," those same projections also bear on a biophysically grounded, ecological understanding of the damage that decades of water and infrastructure development patterns have wrought in Mumbai.⁹ As Rohan D'Souza and others have shown through their critical approaches to hydrology management and patterns of development in India, it is only through attention to historical alterations of Mumbai's morphology, watershed, and cityscape—in the Mumbai case, often in the form of landfilling to facilitate urban development—that we are able to see how crucial hydrological patterns may have shifted over time, concentrating and intensifying flooding incidents in specific areas, and ultimately perhaps preventing the city from coping in extreme storm events.¹⁰

Reimagining Mumbai was one of a full range of productions, exhibitions, and spectacles convened in this period, each enabling specific, sometimes highly localized and institution-specific conversations about the possibilities of urban salvage through landscape redesign, city "greening," and aspirations that nearly always reinscribed the urgent mission of the architect and urban planner. As social spectacles, those arenas were simultaneously spaces for delineating specific publics and their audiences and for establishing ideas of appropriate metropolitan engagement, civic duty, and entitlement to undertake the active envirosocial stewardship that would be needed to forge, and follow, whatever the future path toward a reimagined Mumbai might trace. In the event I describe briefly below, the idea of creating and multiplying "open spaces," be they parks, protected zones, or newly vegetated landscapes, was an essential component of realizing a more desirable future Mumbai; as such, open spaces—however they were defined in each event—were regarded as one of the most important attributes of a responsible new development plan.

The events themselves had peculiar parameters. Both the participant pool and related, intended audiences drew from largely elite, relatively young, and otherwise privileged subsets of Mumbai's population. Those who would "reimagine Mumbai" did not formally represent its majority, and at times did not even include its citizens, but they formed a collective category of citizens, government officials, urban

professionals, and international “experts” enacting their concern for the environmental future of Mumbai. Embedded in that group were many who possessed or aspired to possess new forms of green expertise, and many who understood and supported the general contours of the social, cultural, and environmental realities such expertise sought to enact. The sphere derived its legitimacy in part from the spectacles themselves, which often stood for evidence of broader “community consultation.” Each produced an affect that affirmed that open spaces were widely valued and supported. Despite being civic engagements, however, they were rarely, if ever, predicated on a wholly inclusive notion of or consultation with the full range of Mumbaikars who stood to gain or lose from the future form of the city or the open spaces its green experts so adamantly promoted.

A useful way of thinking about open space promotion through public events is as a mode of cultivating the city, which K. Sivaramakrishnan and I discussed in *Cities, Towns, and the Places of Nature: Ecologies of Urbanism in Asia*. In that work, we noted that:

parks and recreation, often twinned concepts, visually evoke the idea that a city must enfold nature within it, and provide amenities to the modern, civil city dweller to afford time, quite literally, to breathe in the park. Cross-culturally, the urban park represents plant life, birds, green vistas, clean air, and the uncluttered, protected space in which mind and body can be united, children can play, and refuge can be taken from the daily grind of city life.¹¹

Although Reimagining Mumbai was temporally bound, its idealized connection between specific characteristics of urban space, in this case open space, and a socioecologically vital city was neither exclusively postcolonial nor exclusively modern. Sivaramakrishnan and I pointed to Ali’s extensive work on Indian gardens from the Buddhist to Mughal periods, among others, as a treatment of this issue in premodern green spaces;^{12,13} we further noted that urban traces of colonial rule are evident in the very form and location of existing “green” amenities like gardens, parks, zoos, botanical collections, and greenways in Mumbai. Across colonial cities, planners often sought to combine precolonial urban forms with Victorian ones, thereby forging modern urban natures as a kind of postcolonial inheritance.¹⁴

Thus Mumbai on the verge of a new development plan marked a period within which specific postcolonial, self-appointed publics cultivated notions of desirable urban open space and the polity that should attend it. To participate in their public events was also an affirmation of entitlement—indeed, duty—to do so. We may in this sense extend the idea of “cultivating the city” to cultivating civic green expertise.

OPEN MUMBAI

A few weeks after the UDRI/Harvard event called Reimagining Mumbai, a provocative exhibition opened at the city’s National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA).



FIGURE 6. An exhibit-goer ponders a map of Mumbai's open spaces at the *Open Mumbai* exhibition. *Photo by the author.*

Open Mumbai was a multi-media spectacle of future urban design ideas, all rendered by the Mumbai-based design firm P.K. Das and Associates.¹⁵ It met with such enthusiastic success that its initial NGMA run, from March 15–April 7, 2012, was extended; it was then re-extended for a month at the city's Nehru Center.

The project on which the exhibition is based, also called “Open Mumbai,” was an extensive, ambitious urban plan and proposal for regulatory reform. Originally intended to be exhibited at the Sir J.J. School of Architecture, the first Indian institution associated with the Royal Institute of British Architects, the move to the NGMA signaled in part the popular purchase of long-term visioning exercises in this period. Various extensions of the exhibit only underline this point. The new venue allowed more public access, and offered the audience a multifaceted, multi-media performance of translating a highly technical urban development proposal to a public-civic spectacle of the possible future city.

The exhibition was organized as a multi-tiered walk through the exhibition hall, and on my first visit, I found that walk to be fully consuming. Traversing exhibit sections simulated a journey across the various urban landscapes that made up the firm's “open space” rubric for Mumbai. Enormous, encompassing mural-maps outlined the city's many and varied neighborhoods, while also typologizing its spaces—as they are in the present, and as, through a highly guided exercise in imagination, Das and Associates argued they could and should be in the future.

Consider the exhibit's introductory text, which is also found in the introduction of its accompanying book:

As Mumbai expands, its open spaces are shrinking. The democratic ‘space’ that ensures accountability and enables dissent is also shrinking, very subtly but surely. The city's shrinking physical open spaces are of course the most visible manifestations as they directly and adversely affect our very quality of life. Open spaces must clearly be

the foundation of city planning. An 'open Mumbai' ensures our physical and democratic well being. Unfortunately, over the years, open spaces have become 'leftovers' or residual spaces, after construction has been exploited. Through this plan, we hope to generate dialogue between people, government, professionals . . . and within movements working for social, cultural, and environmental change. It is a plan that redefines land use and development, placing people and community life at the center of planning—not real estate and construction potential.¹⁶

As the exhibition laid out the social and ecological components of "open space," it also made a clear argument for the impossibility of separating the two. Social and ecological transformation would have to happen simultaneously if Mumbai was to reach the firm's goal that it "go beyond gardens and recreational grounds—to include the vast, diverse natural assets of the city," while at the same time fostering "non-barricaded, non-exclusive, non-elitist spaces that provide access to all our citizens for leisure, relaxation, art, and cultural life." This plan, so the exhibition declared, "will be the beginning of a dialogue to create a truly representative People's Plan for the city."¹⁷

This would be no minor undertaking, so the exhibition space engulfed its visitors in appropriately massive maps. "Before" and "after" photos from previous Das and Associates projects assured the viewer of the plausibility of "Open Mumbai," even those aspects that seemed improbable and fantastic.

The exhibition guided its visitor across the vast ecological terrain of the cityscape: seafronts; beaches; rivers; creeks and mangroves; wetlands; lakes, ponds, and tanks; *nullahs* (drainage canals); parks and gardens; plot and layout recreational grounds; historic forts and precincts; hills and forests; city forests; open, people-friendly railway stations; roads and pedestrian avenues; and area networking all comprised major exhibit stations. Some of these, such as the parks section, were clear elements of the city's biophysical space, while others, like "people-friendly railroad stations," mapped a complex concept of ideal civic society in a specific design. The scale, color, and consuming details of each element were enhanced by a soundscape that mimicked what one might hear in each place; one section featured birdsong, while another repeated the rumbling sound of rolling coastal waves. This was the soundtrack to the biophysical aspects of Mumbai.

The exhibit experience offered its viewer reassurance, and even evidence, that the comprehensive vision of Open Mumbai could be realized through the right combination of urban design, civic advocacy, and governance. While the exhibit itself did not focus on the latter's complex details, the entire undertaking's core objective, made clear throughout, was to accomplish "necessary amendments in the DP (development plan) and accompanying DCR (Development Control Regulations)."¹⁸ The legal apparatus that structured urban development was acknowledged, then, but the chasm between the aspirations depicted in an exhibit space and their enactment in the actual city was left otherwise unproblematic.



FIGURE 7. “City Forests” were highlighted among the many different types of open spaces in Mumbai at the *Open Mumbai* exhibition. *Photo by the author.*

The case for “Open Mumbai’s” exercise in urban aspiration greeted exhibition visitors, and so framed the intentions for visitors’ overall experience:

Open spaces reflect the quality of life in a city. In India’s financial capital, Mumbai, rapid development and expansion of the city has resulted in the erosion of its open spaces at a rate that is truly alarming. The ‘lungs’ of the city, like recreation grounds, parks, and gardens, along with invaluable natural assets like mangroves, wetlands, forests, rivers, creeks, and the natural coastline, are fast shrinking. It is our opinion that the situation simply has to change.¹⁹

Thus prepared, the visitor first met with the seafront (“With 149 km of coastline and seven interconnected islands, Mumbai is a city on the sea”²⁰), then moved through detailed accounts of each element in turn. In most cases, proposals for the possible cityscape were underscored by examples of previous projects.²¹ Some came from the firm’s completed work in Mumbai, while others invoked global icons like New York’s High Line or Berlin’s Spree riverfront. Immersed in Mumbai, but occasionally gesturing to a world of presumably “world-class” urban open spaces, visitors were invited to travel across notions of time, space, and the possible urban landscape of Mumbai all at once.

In a manner that resonated with learning ecology as an “integrated subject” back at RSIEA, portions of Open Mumbai were dedicated to a basic lesson in principles of biophysical ecology. Sections related to seafronts and beaches, for example, included primers in elementary coastal dynamics and drainage. Lessons

in beachfront conservation and coastal nourishment accompanied gorgeous renderings of future seafronts that were at present little more than solid waste dumps. Even aspects of the historical ecosystem, virtually erased in the present by urban development, were reinvigorated:

Did you know that Mumbai has four rivers? Mithi, Oshiwara, Dahisar, and Poisar (are) together 40.7 km long. Almost invisible to the city's population, these rivers are waiting to be 'discovered,' protected, and their shores revitalized as public spaces.²²

The exhibition's visual narrative linked biophysical lessons with social objectives; *nullahs*, once redesigned, for instance, could host pedestrian and cycling pathways (precisely 81.4 km of them, according to the exhibit), and appealing renderings of park-like promenades and pathways reinforced this sweeping potential. Even the city's most notorious environmental problems—like the morphological distortion and pollution along the Mithi River, or the progressive degradation of the Sewri wetlands—could be remedied. Dismal photos of these places in the present were juxtaposed with green, inviting, and imminently redesigned renderings. In these moments, the promise of Open Mumbai seemed nothing short of a gleaming eco-social reawakening, a literal city transformation.

Rather than rehearsing an extensive review and critique of Open Mumbai, my purpose here is to gesture toward the ways the exhibition articulated an explicit and constant coupling of biophysical and social transformation, made possible only through the intentional creation and provision of more open, green spaces in the city. The exhibit showcased the potential power of urban designers to provide their constituency with the contents of a more ecologically and socially vital urban future, and it reminded its visitors that the imminence of a new development plan for Mumbai gave the whole exercise particular urgency. The form of green expertise invoked by PK Das and Associates promised to remake material space while offering coupled environmental and social vitality.

Yet even as it mapped a highly detailed and explicated vision of Mumbai's eco-social future, the exhibition claimed its firm commitment to developing a "People's Plan." This seemed a blatant contradiction, but it signaled reflexive awareness that Open Mumbai could be easily dismissed as a top-down undertaking at best, a savvy business strategy at worst. To fully convince its audience, the initiative had to gesture toward civic agency and inclusion, even if the actual and active input of a broader public could be held in valid question.

Across contemporary urban South Asia, scholars have repeatedly shown how the making of urban green spaces—particularly parks, but also more general modes of environmental restoration—tends to deflect attention from their sometimes violent, and often socially exclusionary, outcome.²³ In such cases, enacting a "clean, green city" has repeatedly obfuscated new and not-so-new forms of marginalization and displacement. Open Mumbai made explicit attempts to mark and reject such forms of exclusion by framing an ecologically sound city precisely as a

critique of the social marginality and exclusivity that had intensified in the wake of urban growth. At the same time, the social sphere included in the making and viewing of Open Mumbai was extremely selective, and hardly representative of Mumbai's vast public.

Urban environmental spectacles such as Reimagining Mumbai and Open Mumbai simultaneously espoused civic participation, promoted social inclusion through the provision of more green spaces, and promoted a particular kind of civic green expertise. The rubrics they invoked framed open and green spaces precisely as the appropriate *antidote* to social exclusion, even as their channels and audiences were exclusive subsets of the broader public.

BREATHING SPACE

I turn to a final spectacle, consistent in mission with Reimagining Mumbai and Open Mumbai, but standing in contrast as well. Breathing Space, organized by the non-governmental organization CitiSpace (Citizens' Forum for Protection of Public Spaces),²⁴ Tribe@Turf (a subgroup of Royal Western India Turf Club members), and Hathautee (which called itself a "cultural platform" and was more an Internet platform than a physical group with constant membership), was a two-day semi-public festival to celebrate Mumbai's existing open space and to advocate for new open space provisions. An extensive exhibition of panels, art installations, and craft vendors, as well as two day-long programs of lectures and panels made this more of a festival than a singular exhibition.

Like Open Mumbai, Breathing Space was held at an elite city venue that is also a spatial artifact of Mumbai's colonial past: Worli's Mahalaxmi Racecourse. One motive for using this twenty-three-acre site was to raise awareness that its lease faced imminent expiration, but its use profile also made for a somewhat ironic stage for open space advocacy. Although technically considered an open space, a combination of security guards, strict social norms of use, and the somewhat erratic schedule that dictates when it opens to the public at all (legislated in large part by the horse racing schedule, as during races the track is closed) make this a difficult space to access. When not in use for racing, the racecourse attracts individuals and families who use it for walks, jogging, and other sports activities. During several stays in nearby Worli, I enjoyed regular access and use; I also observed both subtle and unsubtle modes of social exclusion when those who could not claim or feign a place of "belonging" there were swiftly denied access.

As with Reimagining Mumbai, I learned of Breathing Space through the Head of RSIEA. She invited me to join her, and together with a colleague from the Sir JJ School of Architecture, we headed to the racecourse after RSIEA classes ended one evening. We shared a taxi for the short distance between the Institute and the racecourse, but our cab could only inch its way through rush-hour packed traffic.



FIGURE 8. Entering the *Breathing Space* exhibition at the Mahalaxmi Racecourse. Photo by the author.

In the idling taxi, I asked my colleagues what distinguished *Breathing Space* from the many other similar events in the city that I'd already attended.

The answer was quick, and invoked Open Mumbai for contrast. This exhibition, our colleague explained, was based on “action research,” in part the product of long-term citywide advocacy by the NGO CitiSpace.²⁵ *Breathing Space* would feature installations about each of Mumbai's twenty-four wards, all represented in panels that would each highlight one—perhaps among many—open space issue that the residents of that ward (or presumably those residents who interacted with CitiSpace advocates) identified as important to them. My colleagues preferred this more intentionally consultative model, explaining that Open Mumbai could easily be dismissed as an advertisement for the design firm PK Das. They agreed that *Breathing Space* organizers made a more genuine attempt to report their research findings rather than a presentation of a finished and stylized development proposal. If achieving a “people's plan” for the future of Mumbai's urban landscape was truly an objective, *Breathing Space* exemplified a consultation process more likely to assemble one.

In fact, the successive ward-panel groups that characterized the CitiSpace exhibition of its research created a distinctive visitor experience. In contrast to Open Mumbai's guided path through biophysical spatial categories carefully curated with images, texts, and soundscapes, *Breathing Space* visitors were invited to wander the municipal and social category of “wards.” They were free to linger and move about at will, invited as well to areas devoted to other kinds of information tables, food and craft vendors, lecture panels, and—quite strikingly—to simply



FIGURE 9. *Breathing Space* exhibit-goers explore signboards about open space in each of Mumbai's twenty-four Municipal wards. Photo by the author.

notice being at the racecourse, immersed in outdoor “open space” itself. The light, sound, air, and dirt of the semi-forested event area, its wide, dusty racetrack in the distance, merged the event about open space with *an experience* of open space. One traversed the exhibition and pieced together its messages at one’s own pace, and according to one’s chosen trajectory.

On arriving, my colleagues and I were greeted by various acquaintances; several people active in the city’s urban planning and design communities had also thought this a good evening for *Breathing Space*. We made our way directly to the ward-by-ward exhibition, where we found rows of visual panels—narrative mosaics of text, maps, photos, and satellite images. Stationed nearby each ward’s cluster of interpretive panels was a CitiSpace worker or volunteer, ready to discuss the content of each board, and eager to offer more detail, context, and guidance.

Data reported throughout the exhibition were drawn from a comprehensive survey, completed by CitiSpace in 2011, of six hundred reserved open spaces across twenty-four Mumbai wards.²⁶ Standing before my first panel, I asked the woman stationed there to tell me more about the project.

She explained that each panel was devoted to one issue that citizens living in that ward identified—by no means the only issue, but something that “gave a glimpse of what’s happening” throughout Mumbai. Each ward was presented in light of a profound but well known contrast: official allotments of open space as legislated by the previous official development plan bore little to no resemblance to the map of *actual* open spaces on the ground. The old plan was not a reliable blueprint, then, for determining the active mode of land use, nor was it a tool for

locating actual open green spaces. “There is a terrible mismatch,” the exhibit volunteer told me, “between the ground reality and the development plan; we rely on citizens to tell us, day in and day out, what’s happening.” She explained that a large part of CitiSpace’s mission involves advocacy; once an illegal use of a reserved open space is identified, the group assists in filing Right to Information (RTI) petitions and, when appropriate, in moving court cases forward.

Breathing Space emphasized ward-by-ward derived accounts of the actual land use profile across Mumbai in order to make the case that at present, the urban development plan was of little use for charting the city’s future. The failure of the plan, according to the exhibition’s promotional material, led to a wider failure—a “fatal ratio” of persons to open spaces throughout the city:

Mumbai is a city of remembered open spaces. “There used to be a playground here” and “Where have all the trees gone?” are laments one hears more and more. All too often, the culprits are the very guardians of these assets and we, to whom these persons are responsible, lack the knowledge or the will to act. Saving our parks, gardens and open spaces is not “elitist” or an aesthetic quest. It is protection of health and well-being—physical, mental, social and emotional—of all, especially the most vulnerable: the under-privileged, the young and senior citizens. On this score, Mumbai is in crisis. India’s National Building Code lays down that there should be at least 4 acres of open spaces, accessible to all, per 1,000 population. Mumbai has less than one-hundredth of that: 0.03 acres. Transforming this fatal ratio is a challenge each of us must accept. Greater Mumbai cannot survive as a concrete jungle.²⁷

In contrast to Open Mumbai, Breathing Space relied less on cultivating a collective imaginary of the future possible urban landscape, and more on amplifying accounts of mis-allotments of open space. This placed development plan monitoring and enforcement at the center of its mode of cultivating civic green expertise.

Like Open Mumbai, Breathing Space sought to mark and reject the social exclusions that often accompany efforts to expand urban open spaces. In these cases, the ecologically sound city was invoked and mobilized precisely as a critique of the social marginality and exclusivity that had intensified in the wake of urban growth, even as the very specific public which invoked it was itself quite exclusive. It was a lack of open and green spaces, and a more general lack of environmental sensitivity in Mumbai’s urban design, that had exacerbated the socioeconomic disparities of the present, according to this narrative.

Classic urban anthropological studies such as Caldiera’s *City of Walls* have sensitized scholars to the paired struggles over demands for social inclusion that accompany urban democratization and the material and spatial modes of enacting exclusion that often arise in response. Yet Mumbai at the cusp of a new development plan witnessed an urban environmental arena that simultaneously espoused civic participation, promoted social inclusion through the provision of more green spaces, and forged a kind of civic green expertise. Here, open and green spaces were rhetorically crafted precisely as an *antidote* to social exclusion, even as its

channels and audience were an exclusive subset of the broader public. Urban nature was made meaningful, in this sense, for its attributed power to create equity and inclusivity across public life; at the same time, it was assumed to facilitate greater environmental sustainability and urban “well-being.”

Although Breathing Space did more to point toward the bureaucratic, corporate, and institutional apparatus that operationalizes the city development plan than did Open Mumbai, both were predicated on the idea that the public assembled for these events, however exclusive in the context of the entire civic body, had real power to achieve the goal of more green and open spaces. Left in the background was the necessary and detailed discussion of how the cityscape of the present could be physically transformed according to the expressed will of that civic body, however exclusive or selective.

. . .

Throughout 2012, dozens of exhibitions, from highly commercialized showcase-style conventions intended to display “green” building products or promote and debate specific practical techniques and metrics, to those oriented toward awareness-raising, public education, and advocacy, took place across Mumbai. The outlines of events above suggest just some of the contrasts, issues, and assumptions that characterized urban greening advocacy as Mumbaikars anticipated the new development plan and a future of environmental and social stresses.

Despite the veneer of unprecedented newness, however, neither tensions between architectural design and elitism, nor the relative civic nobility of imagining Mumbai’s future or tracking its present, are necessarily new or novel. In his *House, but no Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay’s Suburbs, 1898–1964*, the historian Nikhil Rao offers important reminders that attach public fervor over remaking the city to a much deeper history of creating the peculiar urban landscape that is Mumbai.

To take just one example, Rao describes the inaugural speech given at then-Bombay’s 1937 Ideal Home Exhibition. Delivered by Prime Minister B.G. Kher, it focused not on the homes of the future—the point of the exhibition—but on urging architects to work to solve the vexing problem of housing the city’s desperate poor. Rao discusses the Director of the Indian Institute for Architecture’s response:

(The Director) acknowledged that the finer details of room design might seem grotesque ‘. . . to those less fortunate . . . who live in squalor and dirt, not to say filth.’ Yet such experiments as the exhibition were necessary, he argued. Through their ‘carefully worked-out rooms,’ they allowed visitors to know ‘what to look for and what to demand when the subject of a *home* is in question.’ The planners of the exhibition thus sought, through a staging of ideal domesticity, to *actually work out the parameters of the home* for all Bombay’s citizens, not just for those few who could afford bath fittings by Garlick and Company or steel furniture by Allwyn and Company or Godrej Boyce and Company.²⁸

If ecology is sometimes shorthand as “the study of home,”²⁹ we might read a similar tension in the events given the most descriptive attention in the previous section. One presented its assembled public with ideas of what they should desire, while the other emphasized existing, already vocalized desires. Both placed the appropriate “place” of open and green city spaces at the center of ideas of the ideal urban home.

Although couched in narratives of the unprecedented, in fact the tension between advocacy-based and more elitist exhibitions captured in the contrasts between Reimagining Mumbai, Open Mumbai, and Breathing Space returns the focus to the social production of good design and green expertise as knowledge forms and ecological practices—whether expressed projects of social justice or as broader exercises in imagining and representing the possible. Here, in an arena filled with claims about the necessary presence of a specific kind of space—open space—and its specific characteristics—socioecological integrity—lies the continuation of that aspiration to finally and “actually work out the parameters of home.” The urban home of the present deemed unacceptable, and the future nothing short of potentially catastrophic, those parameters and their environmental dimensions were undeniable aspects of contemporary civic responsibility, or, as I suggested previously, cultivating civic green expertise. Designers and architects who had mastered good design and citizens who mastered civic green expertise might then claim a place in the work of transforming the social and biophysical city by reshaping its urban material stage. Whether and how those experts were actually empowered to do that remained largely unaddressed.

AGENTS OF “THE MESS”: IMAGINING CHANGE VS. THE POWER TO ENACT IT

If the timely civic task of imagining a new development plan created an excited air of possibility, the contemporary state of Mumbai’s urban development governance regime offered its sobering remedy. Perhaps redefining urban socationature and bringing it more fully into the city was possible in the future, but in the present, those who wished to access such a reality could only “escape” to it.

Long before the sun rose one Friday in June of 2012, I climbed bleary-eyed into the back seat of an SUV, the guest of two colleagues, both RSIEA faculty members. We promptly headed off for a weekend trip outside Mumbai. Our destination was their small plot of land in Ali Bagh, a coastal area 150 km from the city and worlds away from the population dense, open space-starved metropolis of Greater Mumbai. My hosts were eager to walk the land they’d purchased many years before, and that they were now slowly, painstakingly clearing and cultivating. Their core ambition was to eventually design a small, ecologically sensitive home so they could stay at what they called their “patch of paradise” for a few days at a stretch.

For diversion during the long journey, my hosts brought a fresh, thick stack of morning newspapers. We surveyed the front pages, and the same lead story repeated over and over: the day before, a disastrous fire had swept through the Maharashtra state administrative headquarters, the Mumbai Mantralaya. I read aloud for my companions this excerpt from the *Hindu Times*:

A devastating fire swept through the upper echelons of Maharashtra's government offices in Mumbai, killing three people, destroying important files and documents, completely gutting the offices of the chief minister and his deputy, and possibly delaying the under-fire government's plans to overhaul the state's creaky urban infrastructure and housing projects. The fire, which started around 2:45 pm on Thursday June 21 afternoon, roared uncontrollably for more than a few hours, terrifying office goers in the vicinity and throwing traffic on the arterial Madam Cama Road, which leads on to the scenic Marine Drive, in total chaos.³⁰

On hearing this, one of my hosts interrupted. "There go the records on the Adarsh Housing Society scam!" The other replied, only half joking, "It's a good thing we're escaping to nature!"

If Mumbai's floods and an unenforced development plan had come to stand for environmental failure, Adarsh exemplified the opacity and deal-making that distorted so many of the bureaucratic processes that legislated urban development. Specific informal processes, often technically illegal but rarely adjudicated, ensured that the profits and other benefits of construction in the city accrued to those with specific political and economic ties. Despite outrage over flagrant violations of building codes and laws, or the involvement of government officials at very high levels, in some ways the Adarsh scandal's audacity seemed to simply exemplify the banal reality of regulatory practice in Mumbai's urban development sector.³¹ Public outrage over the scandal eventually compelled the Municipal Commissioner to bring hundreds of construction projects to a halt, citing building code violations and demanding compliance. In response, Mumbai's builders threatened to strike. The back-and-forth posturing was in some ways less important than the complex of officials, builders, and financiers it involved. These were the powerful, if dynamic and often elusive, entities that held the most significant control over Mumbai's present form and future urban landscape.

Mumbai's complex of urban development regulatory bodies, and their roots in previous colonial, state, and municipal bureaucracies is perhaps best traced from 1896. At that time, the Bombay City Improvement Trust was inaugurated, largely in response to the devastation of the plague. Before this, the city's primary urban development goal was to attract residents, so both land offers and building activity proceeded on terms that favored property holders. Regulatory leniency became precedent, and eventually the norm, making later attempts to impose new policies very difficult. The City Municipal Act of 1888, for example, had laid out an enforcement regime for a basic set of building regulations (height, ventilation, certain

street widths, setback lines); it also restricted the height of new buildings to 1.5 times the width of the street on the site. Reflective in part of norms and precedent, however, the Act contained no provision for the height of older buildings. Owners of these simply went on making unregulated additions.³² Those subject to the new regulations, meanwhile, often simply ignored or worked around them.

In its quest to use urban planning as a tool for promoting ideas of public health, sanitation, and connective mobility in the city, the Bombay City Improvement Trust joined in a somewhat tense relationship between two prior authoritative bodies: the colonial entity, the Government of Bombay, and the Bombay Municipal Corporation, or BMC, composed largely of Indian landlords, industrialists, and wealthy merchants. In its first decade, the Trust undertook a sanitation mission; it built worker housing and connecting roads to re-pattern settlement and movement across the city.

In the following decade, however, thinking about appropriate schematics of urban development whilst planning for Mumbai's expansion led a new Trust chairman to propose a revised approach to meeting the city's housing and public health objectives. In 1909, he suggested an "indirect attack" on the housing problem by developing residential building stock in what would become new suburban areas in Mumbai.³³ In this scenario, building outward to the suburbs represented the chance to design new landscapes that promoted public health. These suburban landscapes contained elements like carefully placed roads, parks, trees, and a host of environmental amenities associated with promoting human health. Building Mumbai's suburbs, then, had a great deal to do with promoting a "healthier" urban environment.

Rao describes debates within the Trust that actively questioned the relationship between various environmental elements—landscaped boulevards, parks, and other open spaces—and public health. There was clear agreement, however, that certain spatial characteristics connected (or enabled the circulation of) urban social life and nature. This was thought to actively create human social and physical well-being, according to Rao:

Orr (chairman of the Trust) was careful to present the boulevard as part of a 'strong indirect attack on the prevailing unsanitary conditions which are largely due to overcrowding.' The suburbs were presented not as an escape from the crowded city for the privileged classes, but rather as part of a comprehensive citywide strategy to attack the problem of overcrowding in the older parts of the city by attracting some residents northward. Kent (chief engineer of the Trust), meanwhile, attacked . . . suggestions . . . that the amenities of the boulevard—benches, trees, strips of green to separate different functions, and so on—should be relegated to the parks that were also envisioned in the schemes. Kent argued that such suggestions were 'based on the false premise that boulevards and parks fulfill the same purpose, and it may be as well to compare the two and examine the points of similarity and difference.' While the park and the boulevard might have some features in common, parks were essentially

static places. They provided the ‘lungs’ of the city, and they were also pretty to look at and an ‘attractive amenity to those living within easy reach.’ Boulevards, on the other hand, were of greater importance than parks since they constituted the channels through which ‘the life of the place must pass.’³⁴

The exchange reminds us that elements of urban nature may or may not “count” as nature, depending on their placement in urban space. Furthermore, environmental elements and amenities have a long history as tools—contested, at that—in urban planning; not only were they understood to have the potential to positively impact public health, but by regarding them as the city’s “lungs,” a consciousness of their place in broader biophysical processes that interconnect with human social vitality was already present.

Political and economic changes after World War I had important effects on Mumbai’s urban development mechanisms, as well as on land prices and housing policies. Through the 1919 Government of India Act, the colonial state significantly reduced its oversight of Mumbai’s urban development and governance; in its place, ministries elected by a provincial legislative council were granted power to oversee local self governance and public works.

Around this period, the place of architects in urban planning and development also assumed active prominence. Although the Trust had employed architects to oversee the continuity of design in its undertakings for some time, in most cases developers found ways to tailor projects to their own preferences and financial advantage. As a result, despite their presence, architects had virtually no influence; the only exception to this was in the case of large public buildings.

In the 1930s, the BMC endorsed the Trust’s policy of requiring architect-certified drawings for new construction. At the same time, suburban development schemes assumed a new and powerful momentum—the dimension of Mumbai’s early urban growth and development history eloquently recounted by Rao. A new generation of Indian architects, trained at the Sir JJ School of Architecture in Bombay, came on the scene as participants in an urban planning process and turned their attention to creating Mumbai’s suburbs.³⁵

However, observing the rise of the Indian architect, Rao alerts us again to their limited agentive role. He notes as emblematic a debate that played out in the pages of the *Times of India*, in which a former Trust engineer described how the architect’s potential contribution to urban development was thwarted. He wrote:³⁶

Now the average Lessee of the Trust has very great confidence in his own ability in house planning and very little confidence in architects, good or bad. He only employs them because he must, and when possible he confines them to drawing up plans under his direction and obtaining sanction for them from the Municipality and the Improvement Trust. As regards the construction of the building he, if possible, has an arrangement with them by which they give advice when asked and pose as his architects when trouble arises owing to bad work. He pays them as little as he

can and is quite ready to employ an incompetent architect if he thinks him capable to getting the plans passed and consequently capable architects have to cut their fees in order to make a living and reduce their supervision.³⁷

This excerpt suggests that professional roles bore little resemblance to actual practice or agentic power in the translation of building projects from design to implementation. In fact, this early twentieth century description of the function and constrained power of architects in Mumbai's development still resonates, a point to which I return below.

By the post-independence period, a new constitution outlined a land, housing, and urban development administrative apparatus largely within the purview of state-level governments. By allotting resources through a series of Five Year Plans, however, the central government also exercised enormous influence. In contemporary Mumbai, a state-level urban planning department oversees the Maharashtra Town Planning Department, the Urban Development Authority, and provisions for water and sanitation services. A Housing and Special Assistance Department exercises authority over housing policy issues, land ceilings, rent levels, and, in the Mumbai case, a suite of often volatile and always foregrounded slum redevelopment policies.

At the same time, several key statutory urban development and planning bodies operate at the municipal level. The Greater Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC/GMMC) is perhaps most important among them; it exercised considerable authority up until the mid-1980s. It is the BMC that is technically responsible for the city's Master Plan, including enforcement of related development controls and regulations. The BMC also oversees public transport and electricity provision in the city.

In 1992, the Indian Constitution was amended to provide more authority at the level of urban local self-governance. The Mumbai (earlier Bombay) Metropolitan Development Authority (BMRDA/MMRDA), created in 1975, gained new regional planning powers in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, a spatial area that combines the city and suburban areas which include Thane, Navi Mumbai, Ulhasnagar, Mira Road, Vasai, Virar, Bhayandar, Bhiwandi, Karjat, and Alibaug. The MMRDA's contemporary jurisdiction is therefore quite vast; beyond Mumbai city, it encompasses nearly four thousand additional square kilometers and a 2001 population of nearly six million.³⁸

Contemporary Greater Mumbai consists of two separate legal entities: one, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MGCM), oversees most of the services one might associate with municipal responsibility: water supply, sanitation, property taxes, building regulations, public health, roads, and education. It operates through an Administrative Wing, which answers to the state-level authority of an Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officer who is appointed by the state government of Maharashtra. More generalized authority is exercised through the

body's MGCM Deliberative Wing, which is controlled by 227 locally elected and 5 nominated councilors.

Greater Mumbai's second legal entity oversees revenue collection and a host of other governmental functions. Divided between the Mumbai City Collectorate and the Mumbai Suburban District Collectorate, its jurisdiction extends to two city regions. The City Collectorate oversees the old island city of Bombay, while the Suburban District Collectorate does the same for the suburbs.³⁹

One cannot overemphasize the complexity of an urban development apparatus with uneven reach across city, state, and federal agencies. Each has its own jurisdictional boundaries and dynamic politics. Likewise, one cannot responsibly imagine Mumbai as bounded by conventional mappings; its built form, coastal zone, and underlying waste, water, and energy systems are all managed simultaneously, but often without coordination across the multiple scales of government that may have relevant jurisdiction. To think of Mumbai, urban planning, or the social and political ecology of the region in terms of a singular "city," then, is nearly impossible in this sense; it demands a considerable disaggregation across space, scales of power, and historical and contemporary distributions of resource and policy control.

Nevertheless, the two agencies most often invoked, and indeed most directly involved in Mumbai's development planning, are the BMC and the MMRDA. Yet this is not to say they are widely regarded as effective. In his talk at the Reimagining Mumbai session described earlier, Pankaj Joshi called the BMC, "defunct without support or capacities," and the MMRDA "at best a financial institution." Also periodically powerful in specific issues related to planning and development is the Town Planning Department of Maharashtra. Crucially, the Municipal Commissioner is appointed at the *state* level, the implications of which are that Mumbai's new development plan—open space and all—would have to be approved at the Maharashtra state government level.

Thus in sharp contrast, perhaps, to the optimism and sense of the possible generated in exhibitions like Open Mumbai or Breathing Space, my interlocutors who worked inside the urban development bureaucratic apparatus often narrated a general sense of "chaotic development" in Mumbai. They emphasized the opaque political climate, the deregulation of the Indian economy, and a similar deregulation of the built environment over the past two decades in the city, arguing that all have converged to transform the economic, sociocultural and material fabric of Mumbai.

An instructive example may be drawn from my conversations with an urban reform activist, planning scholar, and professor, whom I shall refer to here under the pseudonym Laxmi Deshmukh. In one of our discussions about the actual location of power to remake Mumbai's urban landscape, she cautioned that both the failure of the city's previous development plan and anticipatory spectacles that sought a new urban vision for the coming plan had to be situated in a realistic

understanding of the bureaucratic apparatus that operationalizes city policies. In some moments, she noted, the existing development plan was enacted and enforced, while in others it was not. She encouraged me to focus on the process rather than the contours of the plan:

Now what happened in the last 20 years is that the economy has gone into a big swing. Mills have closed down, offices are coming up, the IT sector has grown only in this period. Services are growing, banking and everything. The complete character of society has changed from industrial areas to services. Now this 20 year plan, which was prepared 30 years back, actually was prepared in 1989—so for 25 years the plan is valid, until 2014. In this 25 year period huge changes happened yet the plan was very rigid. If I have a factory and it's closed down I can't do anything with it—I don't need a factory—my operations have closed and now I don't want a factory; I want an office building. . . . That is not possible with the rigid development plan. So how do I make way for this? . . . The old structures which are not doing good business can't be pulled down, and the old businesses can't close.⁴⁰

Much of the energy of development plan-focused public events seemed to derive from assumptions that citizen awareness could produce action, and that action could influence Mumbai's development trajectory toward a "greener" city. Yet the complex map of regulatory bodies, and the simultaneous involvement of central, state, and local governance regimes and dynamics certainly configured the agentive power of any mobilized public, to say nothing of urban professionals themselves. To bring aspirations for urban ecology into Mumbai's actual experience of development, then, would likely have to directly involve a host of bodies, jurisdictions, and political figures that were almost entirely absent from the public spectacles that encouraged reimagination.

In a series of interviews, Dashmukh described her experience and knowledge of that administrative landscape. Sitting together in her office in the spring of 2012, we began by talking about how the Adarsha scandal, the same issue that had animated the newspapers on my earlier-mentioned "escape to nature" drive with my colleagues, reinvigorated public outrage over disconnections between development legislation and development practice. She began:

For any construction project, people have to give consent. . . . When you apply for building permission, ideally the building plans should go to the fire, water, electric, and sewage departments. . . . The engineers in these four departments have to give clearance for the proposal . . . and a fifth is the overall building permission for the structure. These are all under the BMC; this is a wholly elected body with its own administrative setup to give clearances, except for electric. . . . But what happens, as we understand, is that the building permission is given without (securing the clearances). Proposals are sent, but no comments are received, or comments are received and ignored. So BMC is approving projects without having undergone the approvals. So (consider) the scam of Adarsha: . . . no one bothered (to check the permissions), so a thirty-story building is constructed without the fire authority knowing. Or, he

might have given his comments that (would have prevented) this (but they were ignored). So basically most of the cases where building permissions are (granted) the actual required coordination and approvals doesn't happen.⁴¹

But perhaps as important, if not more so, than the dynamics of oversight and regulation, Dashmukh emphasized again the nested scales of authority that control urban development in Mumbai. Our conversation shifted toward public excitement about greening the city through a new development plan, to which she replied that the most powerful authority in decisions about urban planning was often situated at the state level. In important ways, then, regardless of the political will expressed at Mumbai's municipal scale, it was the political climate in the state of Maharashtra that exercised the most concentrated power over the city's future form. She explained:

Look at Mumbai. You hardly find any green space. Everything is covered with slums or buildings or non-cessed old buildings. Whatever is happening as far as construction is all brownfield development: reconstruction of old buildings or construction of new buildings. This development has to be governed by a certain law, (which) is (the) Maharashtra Regional Town Planning Act. This is overarching, applicable for (the) whole state of Maharashtra, including Mumbai. In it, development plans have to be prepared by a local body, but all the (related) permissions . . . are under the MRTPA act. . . . So, if I am a city, if I prepare a development plan, that's not the end of it. It has to be approved and stamped by the state government.⁴²

Invoking the example of Mumbai's mill lands—those left unconverted to glittering malls now famously mostly defunct, often dilapidated, and certainly located in parts of the city ripe for redevelopment, Dashmukh then turned to the problem of authority and autonomy at all levels. One outcome of bifurcated state and local power was that most development undertakings simply underlined and exacerbated tensions between local autonomy and other scales of bureaucratic authority. She continued,

(So consider that the) mills closed around 1987, following the strike that started in 1984. They were taken over by the central government, and the land and everything went to the textile corporation. Now the mills are not running and the property is dead. The property belongs to the private sector or to National Textile Mills. There was a move by private architects like (Charles) Correa to develop the mill lands into a single redevelopment, and they approached the (Maharashtra) Chief Minister. (They were trying to create) things needed in the city: open space, housing, and (new businesses). . . . They prepared a plan, (but it failed to look closely) at the actual ownership patterns. They made their plan and the government agreed at first that it was a good plan—justified and equitable.

Then came clashes with the scale at which land was owned or could be claimed and controlled:

Now when they said we will develop (the mill lands) like this, all the stakeholders had different views: the mill owners said, “who are you to take away a third of my land for public housing and a third for open spaces and infrastructure, leaving me with (only) a third of my land?” They went to court. The court said they are the legal owners . . . and the government was pulled from all sides.⁴³

Dashmukh described disputes between mill workers, owners, and affiliates with the Correa redevelopment plan, which eventually went to the Indian Supreme Court; but in the process, and afterward, the specific policies and practices of the party then in power at the state level, the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP), framed what was actually possible in practice.⁴⁴ Fiercely opposed to the political climate of that period, Dashmukh continued,

(Those with) influence in government sent proposals and got permission. . . . Instead of fighting it out on the planning, philosophical, and land issues, what happened during the Shiv Sena Raj was that the Chief Minister himself was interested as a builder. So (often the lands) went into the hands of the builders; whoever could grab whatever lands from the mill owners . . . they tried to frame the rules. . . . (This was) not governed by *any* planning principles; the lands were simply handed over one by one without a comprehensive plan. So no housing, no infrastructure, no open spaces were built there. . . . For only five years they (the BJP) were in (power at the) state (level), but for 20 years they were in the municipal level, so everyone had an interest in land and development. . . . All the rules were changed by builders and made by builders in the absolute wrong way. . . . So all this is so messy. Even people like us {in the planning profession} had to work hard to get to the bottom of this, (to figure out what was going on), and this has created a completely distorted mess of a city. And no one knows how to correct it. That is what we are trying to do.⁴⁵

Regardless of one's opinion about the BJP and this particular era in Maharashtra, it was clear that urban professionals—planners, architects, and urban development advocates like Dashmukh herself—were less powerful than the administrative infrastructure and its lived-practice norms. Even planners whose names garner instant recognition, and even RSIEA admiration—Charles Correa—were ultimately powerless in the mill lands redevelopment scenario. For Dashmukh, the absence of any capacity to coordinate redevelopment coherence, or to simply advocate for infrastructure and services appropriate to a coherent redevelopment scenario, produced nothing short of “a completely distorted mess of a city.”

Her assessment went even further to suggest that the kind of individualized and uneven empowerment evident in the mill lands scenario completely prevented any more democratic potential to advocate for what she considered “reasonable” redevelopment.

When I asked about the relative power of large builders, Dashmukh dismissed the suggestion that they retain significant control in the redevelopment arena. Instead, she explained, with redevelopment in the hands of an uneven subset of

everyone, it was “out of the hands of anyone.” And yet, everyone could theoretically engage in practices that maximized their own material gain from a development-related transaction. She explained:

The kind of mess (that has emerged in the past twenty years) now even the builders can't help. Even the *panwalla* is demanding with an old building that is to be demolished . . . the illegal tenant who occupies it has a *goonda*. It's very easy to say that builders have become the leeches who are taking the blood from the city, but now the small fries are also sucking blood from the builders. In huge numbers. The other day the commissioner was saying every small and big citizen of Mumbai has become a blackmailer, because he is in a position to take advantage of the legal system. . . . You'll see the middle class people who are staying in buildings in Hindu Colony, not only do they want the free flats which have been given by law, they want parking and money to maintain it for next 20 years, and in addition to that they want money in huge amounts. Now you can manage that with 10–20 people. How do you manage it with 400–500 tenants? So I don't think builders are very powerful . . . it was much easier to become powerful with the industrial properties because the owners were large owners. . . . Now there are thousands of tenants . . . so the economics don't work for builders. . . . It doesn't work. Even with the black money and all it doesn't work. If I was a builder I would not touch any of the redevelopment properties. I would sit quietly. It's out of the hands of anyone . . . that's the worst thing.⁴⁶

I asked specifically about the group in which I was most interested, architects. Dashmukh's response resonated somewhat eerily with the account to which Rao alluded in his discussion of the 1930s, noted earlier in the chapter. I told her that most architects with whom I worked at RSIEA described a fraught institutional landscape, but claimed that they themselves never engaged in practices that would be considered corrupt. In fact, they made these claims with a sense of honor, invoking them as evidence that practical reform was simply in the hands of individuals. Yet, I noted, they also often located the epicenter of “corrupt” or nefarious architectural practices at the level of the municipality. Dashmukh replied with a knowing smile:

Yes, municipal architects. The old retired people. Every retired person becomes a consultant to a private builder because he (knows) so many things and people, he knows the clauses that can be twisted or used in a twisted form. They can also help bribe people in the right place at the right time. Most of the retired architects from the BMC . . . become consultants to the builders. They are not part of the BMC but their (contacts there) remain. “Municipal architects” is not really accurate—to be employed by the municipality is one thing, and (some) might be building architects . . . and good designers. (The key is in who assigns their own) name when applying to the municipality for permissions. So I may prepare the drawings, but then I give everything to a “municipal architect.” He is the expert who will modify my plan to suit the municipal regulations. He will prepare a face to face drawing and manipulate a few dimensions here and there, and he will sign the drawings as a municipal

architect. Assuming he is a licensed architect he will sign. If anything goes wrong, he will be made responsible . . . not the designer. . . . The “municipal architect” is acting only as a middle person between the municipality and the builder. . . . So this ensures that no single architect is responsible. If somebody is to be punished for wrongdoing this guy who signs the drawing will be punished.⁴⁷

In our last interview, we returned to the Adarsha scandal, and more generally the scope for urban development reform. Is it in any way reasonable, I asked, to regard public interest in the open and green space events as something we might take seriously for its potential to actually implement changes in Mumbai’s landscape? Again, the spheres of municipal and state power framed her response: her organization had proposed clear reforms, she said, but once passed to the state level, they simply had to wait and see. She explained:

Four years back we had a committee in this office (which) . . . prepared (a proposal for) a revised MRTP act. For four years it’s been lying at state level. It has to go through the state assembly because . . . the chief minister can’t take a decision. . . . Everyone agrees that (the act) needs to be changed, but it needs to happen at the state level. . . . (This) has become a big block. Now there is another change which is possible: . . . to revise the MCGM act and say that we don’t need to have consent from the state government to approve the development plan, and we, the municipality, will take all the responsibility of making (and) administering it. The (1992) 74th amendment says why should central government interfere with state government, and why should state interfere with local authority? Everything (planning, construction, development, environment) should (happen under) local authority, but (at the same time) no one wants (all that power) because people want to blame the other level of government when things go wrong.”⁴⁸

Reform could happen, then, but the policy reform proposals that Dashmukh’s advocacy group had put forward—just as the exhibitions described above had also suggested and itemized—would have to yield to a present distribution of political power that pulled between the state and the city.

As if on cue, at the time of these interviews, the then-Municipal Commissioner Subodh Kumar announced that no building permissions would be granted unless Right to Information (RTI) petitions could evidence that they had been granted in full and with accuracy. Permissions were denied and construction was stopped throughout the city. When I asked Dashmukh what had prompted this effort to stand up to builders and finally enforce the importance of legitimate permissions, she offered a singular reply: “Adarsh made the change,” she said, “and many other scams are there.”⁴⁹

. . .

This chapter began with city spectacles, each predicated on aspirations to improve Mumbai’s social and environmental landscape through provisions of open and

green spaces. The specific publics that assembled to be part of initiatives like Reimagining Mumbai, Open Mumbai, and Breathing Space may have differed in composition and focus, but their shared basis was an enthusiastic endorsement of expanding environmental spaces in the city. As the date for a new development plan approached, their mission was buoyed by the promise, or at least the hope, that a new city blueprint would reflect their vision of better Mumbai.

A dual narrative of failure emboldened these events, focused in different ratios on the need to rectify the city's socioeconomic asymmetries and the importance of sustaining environmental functions. Whether they mapped primarily onto poverty and inadequate shelter or the catastrophic floods, the idea of failure itself energized aspirations to imagine a reconfigured urban landscape.

Yet no public exercise in imagining the future city offered a full and nuanced account of the institutional politics and dynamics suggested by the calls for a greener, more open Mumbai. The mechanisms of change were in this sense remote from the events that declared that change to be possible. The many scales of authority and bureaucracy that held urban reconfiguration in their power stood noticeably apart from the passionate, creative arenas in which the city was reimagined and redesigned.

Cultivating civic green expertise, then, itself suffered from a certain kind of subtextual failure. Until the agents of aspiration met the agents of Dashmukh's "mess," the structural reformation needed to remake Mumbai's urban landscape would remain unconnected and unresponsive to any "good design" ideal.

With city-in-the-making spectacles in mind, and the bureaucratic landscape of power to make the city in the balance, let us sharpen the frame even further to focus on a specific case of urban open space advocacy, one curiously separate from the public spectacles described in this chapter. In the chapter to follow, I consider a moment when the cause of protecting and preserving an existing open space was mobilized to serve a highly exclusive public.