

PEOPLE CALLED MUMBAI- NARRATIVES IN MAPPING

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Abstract

As architects, urban designer or practitioners of built environment we intervene in contexts embedded with socio, economic, political and cultural meanings. How to embody these meanings in the form of a narrative mapping and in this process develop a comprehensive technique or tool has been the premise of the projects undertaken by **People: Place**, an initiative by **Design [Variable]**- working in the domain of public and community spaces. With an inherent belief that the practice of built environment is deeply rooted in humanities the initiative looks at design, art and writing as tools to activate community and public spaces. This paper takes the case of a pilot urban mapping project '**People called MUMBAI**' by **People: Place** that explores text and narratives in the practice of mapping and understanding contexts associated with built environment. Culminating as a publication project, it is one of the key chapters in the ongoing conversation in exploring narrative mapping devices; in turn providing a re-reading of 'contexts'.

Keywords: Humanities, mapping, urban practice, architecture, people, place.

1 INTRODUCTION

As architects and practitioners of built environment, we constantly deal and intervene in CONTEXTS. These 'contexts' are not only heavily enriched with demographics, logistics and statistics alone, but also with inherent cultural, historical, political and sociological meanings, Thus understanding 'contexts' in the perspective of humanities is an essential exercise, the lack of which leads to many urban-rural crisis we experience today in India. How is that we pause, listen and reflect on these 'contexts'?

In this premise, **People: Place**, an initiative by **Design [Variable]**- an architecture and multidisciplinary practice based in Mumbai, India has conducted an urban mapping exercise in the city of Mumbai. Designed as a three-month programme, with 10 architecture interns, the project explored the idea of storytelling as a mapping device. This curatorial work was spearheaded by principal architect Nisha Nair-Gupta. Further it explored journalistic writing as a medium to communicate the idea not only to an architecture peer community, but to anybody interested in reading about the city. The exercise culminated as a publication.

Mumbai is a city with a diverse population influx each minute. Every person here is a story in its own, often a full-fledged novel. But their story is not theirs alone. Many a times, it belongs to a collective narrative falling in the compartments of the city's history. Being a migrant city, each conversation began with the question-How I came to Mumbai? What followed was a beautiful account of their life.

This is the 'context' the project operates in. Through the case of People Called Mumbai, the paper 'Narratives in Mapping' illustrates a method adopted to explore a 'context' through the technique of narrative mapping. Through 55 stories, immeasurable parameters like aspirations, conflicts, joys, angst, beliefs, traditions, negotiations and so on are captured and explored. Cutting across a geographical and social cross section of the city, the compilation – People Called Mumbai, manages to offer a re-reading of the city. Exploring the blurring boundaries of humanities, architecture, arts and communication, the project operates in the position that humanities should be an inherent parameter in any architecture practice.

1.1 Narratives In Mapping: Samples

Beginning with samples from the project People Called Mumbai, will help illustrate and anchor the further discussion. The stories are to be viewed as a window to understand the city, also being non-fictional personal narratives.

1.1.1 Story #32, 'Synapses Within', Ipshita Karmakar

A city that has always been divided into sectors owned by the government, individuals or some faction of society - an architect happened to mention - that while mapping these various fractions, the Municipal Corporation sometimes chances upon slivers of land owned by nobody. Some tiny bit is left without an owner, and they imagine that land to be a desolate barren space without a soul in sight. But in reality, these slivers are occupied and bustling with life, and are as much a part of the city as the ubiquitous landmarks of Mumbai.

One such sliver is Bhangarwada in Malad, Mumbai wherein resides a strictly Tamilian population of sweepers, housemaids, drivers and the like. The roads are clogged with shanties spilling out onto them, and there is always a loudspeaker blaring remixed Tamil songs. The community has its own temple with a gopuram, its own wedding hall and its own share of independent businesses and tiny enterprises. The area organises its own 10 feet Ganapatimandal¹ and its own processions during Onam² and other religious festivals, but the entire community occupies less than a 700m long road jam packed with shanties.

One such is home to Sarasvati, who works as a housemaid at a residential tower nearby. She came to Mumbai in the 1990s, and it was a decision she made on her own, forcing her husband to comply. "Our small village in Tamil Nadu was in a drought prone area. There was not even a drop of water available. I came from a family of farmers who had to watch their crops fail due to lack of irrigation. In fact, a tap was installed in our village only last year," she laments. "Here in our small shanty, even though we don't have water 24/7, we can store enough water to last us a day. We don't have to travel miles to get water, it is available in our taps."

She remembers, "I got married into a house with all the facilities except water. It was a proper brick house, unlike the temporary shelter we have here. But sometimes all these riches without the essentials are of no use." Her fingers are chafed and raw from washing dishes in four houses every day, but she maintains that it's a job of dignity. "There were no opportunities to work in my village. Here, there is a job for everyone who is willing to work. I can let go of one job and know with an assurance that I can get another," she says in another ode to the City of Opportunity...

...Sarasvati is a self-sufficient woman who at times earns more than her husband does. Yet she prefers the squalor of Mumbai to her village. There is a satisfaction that she feels she has achieved through hard physical labour and a certain contentment that allows her to sleep comfortably under her tin roof at night.

A synapse is the slim space between two nerve endings, a seemingly empty space across which signals are transmitted. It is this void that holds the nervous system together and enables the body to function. And it is in this city, in those slivers, where a population holds the city together.

1.1.2 Story #5, 'A Prolonged Holiday', Vanessa Lobo

It is impossible to miss the silver coloured, big wheeled, flower decorated and disco lit horse carriages that frequent Marine Drive in the evening. These carriages came to be known as Victorias when Bombay was under Queen Victoria's reign during the British Colonial times and were an important form of transport for the whites in the old city. In between the chaiwallas and the bhelwallas³ wandering around the area, one sees Salman Khan, often riding his Victoria with overwhelmed tourists as his passengers.

Dressed in a simple checked shirt, loose trousers and regular flip-flops, Salman has blurred memories. "My parents, my three elder sisters and I came to Bombay by train from Madras on a short vacation to tour the city. After arriving at Mumbai Central, then called Bombay Central station, excited to see the city, we decided to take a short tour of Bombay before even checking into our lodge. We took a taxi and visited the Haji Ali and then went to a small Dargah near Antop Hill at Wadala."

Salman, barely eight years old back then, remembers his first day of travels and says, "While we were at the

¹ Makeshift shelters made during the festival of Ganesh festival, celebrated especially in Maharashtra, western India, to commemorate the birth of Ganesh- the elephant headed god. Usually 10-day long festivity was found by political leaders as a tool to mobilize community.

² It is a harvest festival and is celebrated with joy and enthusiasm all over the state of Kerala, in Southern India, by people of all communities. According to a popular legend, the festival is celebrated to welcome King Mahabali: whose spirit is said to visit Kerala at the time of Onam.

³ Street vendors selling tea and snacks.

Dargah, peacefully walking around, suddenly there was a commotion, with people screaming and running everywhere. In the blink of an eye, I saw a group of men holding swords darting towards us. Not knowing what to do and where to go, my parents tried to gather us and run. Before we could break into a sprint, I saw swords slicing through my parents and sisters, leaving streams of blood.”

These were the Hindu-Muslim riots that occurred in Mumbai in the early 1990s that killed many and changed lives in India. “Devastated and clueless where to go and where not to, I felt uncertain, lost and scared. My senses kept echoing the visions of people collapsing, children crying and women screaming.”

Unfortunately, Salman was alone after the loss of his family. Being a child, all he knew was that he was from Madras. With no access to a telephone, no local guardian and negligible local linguistic skills, he had no choice but to stay in the city. Salman recalls spending days wandering around searching for food and begging passers-by on footpaths for money.

“I had no clue of what was going to come, what I was going to do. Helpless with nothing to do and nowhere to go, I started looking for places to work as a servant. Someone directed me to a Chinese stall near Worli, saying that I would get work there. And so I started working at the stall whose owner provided me with food and shelter, along with daily wages.”...

2 PEOPLE CALLED MUMBAI: A CASE

Sarasvati and Salman Khan’s story are a few stories from the many that are a part of **People Called Mumbai**. Like the other stories, it provides a re-reading about the city through the lens of the citizens and in turn attempting to explore various facets of the city.

The book dives into this sea of people, surfacing with their stories—a photographer at Juhu Chowpatty⁴ doubles as a lifeguard, a successful businessman from Bhuleshwar, a stranded tourist now rides horse carriages, a Bollywood ‘duplicate’, a migrant who runs the city’s only Tibetan restaurant, an artist on the pavements of Kala Ghoda, a Japanese Buddhist monk, Jeeniben relaxing on a cot at Kumbharwada⁵, an unusual social activist operating at a mela near Nariman Point, or a Brazilian martial arts expert.... On your next visit to Mumbai, you may encounter Indresh Singh, who sells grains at the Dadar kabutarkhana⁶, or Navin Rathod, the famous ‘duplicate’ or even Sikander Shah, who sings qawwalis⁷ every Thursday at Haji Ali Dargah. Each has a unique story; each is a hero.

Every conversation began with the question: ‘How did you come to Mumbai?’ The answer - an exciting account of a life. This became a background score for most stories, orchestrating a journey of arriving in the city, and sometimes – the journey to arriving at oneself. Each story tries to understand an immeasurable parameter of the city - aspiration, conflict, joy, angst, success, struggle, belief, tradition, negotiation, shift, routine and more. Cutting across geography and social divides, detailed with snippets, the stories provide a re-reading of the metropolis.

2.1 The Method

2.1.1 Interview

Designed like a workshop, the **publication project** began with the 10 intern-authors, who were giving a three-day basic training on writing, interviewing and discovering story angles. Coming from an architecture background, there was already a common ground in terms of concerns, perspectives and basic research methods. Along with conducting exhaustive site visits across the city, their task had been to map Mumbai through personal narratives, through humanity. After all what makes a city like ‘Mumbai’ is the people! Being architects, the interns were equipped to study and analyze spaces, but to get the stories of people who inhabit it was challenging. Though armed with a basic questionnaire, discovering interesting interviewees was not only about hurdles of communication and drawing respectful boundaries, it was also about

⁴ A vernacular word for beach in Mumbai

⁵ A settlement of potters in a slum area of Dharavi in Mumbai

⁶ A structure often developed near a Hindu or Jain temple, with a small watering hole for pigeons.

⁷ An energetic musical performance of Sufi Muslim poetry that aims to lead listeners to a state of religious ecstasy to a spiritual union with Allah. It is devotional and expresses love for and oneness with God, traditionally sung by a group of men to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

overcoming a lot of personal prejudices and perceptions one has about the city and our co citizens.

The stories were found all over the city, some at railway stations, busy markets, plush malls and office lobbies, others from morning walks at parks, underground cafes, forgotten temples and by lanes of the old city, and a few in quiet living rooms. Every conversation began with the question: 'How did you come to Mumbai? This was the first leg of the narrative mapping exercise.

2.1.2 Documentation

During the process of conducting the interviews, the questionnaire often became an armor to encounter these conversations. After a few interviews, the interns were compelled to adopt more methods of capturing their information and experience, since when they tried to translate their interview after synthesis into a story there would be information missing. The experience fine tuned their questionnaires further. Photographs, sketch books, small videos became accompanying tools to capture the conversation. The open ended questionnaires at the end became crisp enough to be consolidated as five main questions that when answered could be read as a story in itself.

2.1.3 Tracing Trajectories

In case of Mumbai, like any other major metropolis- with a diverse and ever-growing population, every person who makes the city a home has a story in their own right, often a full-fledged novel. But the story is not theirs alone. It belongs to a collective narrative, falling into compartments that make up the city's history. Another important task after having numerous conversations with many Mumbaikars, was to trace out trajectories and connections of the interviewees' with the city's story, accompanied with a lot of research, cross referencing. It was one of the most fulfilling exercises, to see history and cultural stories unravel so closely through these personal narratives. These findings had to be then translated into the written representation. The exercise culminated as a publication.

2.1.4 Narrative Journalism

Further it explored journalistic writing as a medium to communicate the idea not only to an architecture peer community, but to anybody interested in reading about the city. A style of narrative journalism was adopted, to incorporate both the interviewees' voice as well as provide space for the authors to add their findings and provide an interesting reading. Without a formal background in writing, a writing workshop was essential to furnish the authors with writing techniques along with creative and engaging methods of representing their content. Since the intention was to share the content to a wider spectrum of people and not a niche audience, writing in a journalistic manner was essential, along with the use of English being lucid, since for a majority of the local population, English is yet not the first language.

2.2 The Product

After an exhaustive interviewing of over 100 individuals across the geographical and social cross section, three months of writing and editing, 55 stories were compiled as the book – People Called Mumbai. Along with falling in the brackets of a humanities or urban research project, the conscious adopting of a narrative journalism style allowed a lot more outreach and more people to access and share the content of the project.

Thus there are multiple ways to look at this compilation - An anthology of people; or an ethnographic map; a re-reading of Mumbai or simply a short story collection. Developed as a response to the facelessness, a citizen often experiences in a metropolis, the project tries to reach out through these stories and underlines the need to connect and communicate. In the life of a preoccupied citizen there are seldom moments of pause, a time to reflect and assimilate the immediate surroundings.

The book is unique because of the experience it offered to the ten authors. Engaging with the 55 stories has not been just a literary experience, but a relationship was forged with the people who were interviewed. Moreover, some lives have inspired the team beyond words, some have brought joy and some moved everyone. Though many stories have not made it to the final print, they were memorable for the conversations had. Often we have sat in front of our keypads star struck by these so-called 'ordinary' lives, searching for the right words to tell their wonderful tale. This book is an attempt to share the experience.

At the end of our exercise-a compilation of experience rather than a comprehensive catalogue - we came to no singular conclusion. But as practitioners of the built environment it sensitized us, allowing us to experience and engage with life around us. And it definitely brought us closer to the city

3 THE NEXT STEP

Currently the project has transcended beyond being a primarily mapping exercise. The format that has been developed to map the pilot city is now being planned to be being replicated for other cities across the country or even the globe. The next project is intended to be in collaboration with an architectural institute, conducting a similar workshop in their city inviting interns from all over the country and together discover the place through the process of narrative mapping.

As an extension, the project will continue into an online forum. Narrative mapping information will be translated as pixels that will composite and create this mapping. The data will be open source for practitioners from diverse practices to engage with and learn from. This project will further attempt to explore narrative mapping in a digital medium.