

After words

Shanghai nightmares

by Vikas Dilawari

With its constantly changing skyline being encroached on by mushrooming skyscrapers, Mumbai looks more like a colossal under-construction site than a city. Imagine what it will be like a decade from now — it's a daunting exercise, with the powers-that-be embracing newer yet seemingly more debauched trends every day. There is an absolute absence — in fact, an abhorrence — of the stringent planning norms relating to scale, form and uniformity which used to characterise this city. Redevelopment has come to signify the most socially desirable path to development, and this new ethos demands the most minimal standards for everything from toilet sizes to ceiling heights.

Let's clarify the problem. Compare redevelopment issues with health issues. Constructing an analogy with medicine, a thoughtful doctor would start the treatment of an illness using the least invasive method, and surgery would only be the last alternative. Yet we blithely sacrifice buildings only three decades old, to conjure up new edifices which we fondly imagine conform to global style. Mumbai, while aspiring to move towards its Shanghai dream, is stubbornly stranded in the midst of a turbulent nightmare.

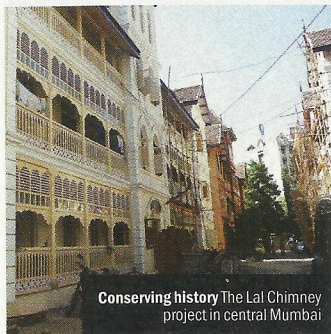
It wasn't always like this — this city (originally comprising seven islands) has throughout its history exhibited an intuitive creativity in dealing with its urban issues. To enumerate a few: envisaging a new urban conglomerate after the disastrous fire of 1803; demolishing the Fort walls, thus opening up large areas of land in the erstwhile Esplanade for planned development; and the innovative, indigenously developed typology of chawls for workers' housing which nurtured

essential social bonding.

One major drawback to sensitive restoration is legislation, with archaic regulations still governing the face of our historic centre. Large numbers of buildings in the heritage precincts fall under the purview of the local authorities as cessed properties, and our antiquated Rent Control Act rings the death knell for them. More than 16,000 such cessed properties face demolition within A, B, C and D wards, of which more than 5,000 are a century old. Incentives for the redevelopment of these cessed properties highlight a growing trend of gentrification in these areas — but such proposals fail to cater to the city's needs of affordable housing.

The new high-rises transforming the city's historic areas fail to acknowledge the context, and stand out as luxury oases. Reality itself is morphed within multi-level basement and stilt parking, sky-decks with swimming pools, sweeping urban vistas and a host of other sanitised facilities which form the graphic imagery of redevelopment. Furthermore, the forerunners of urban redevelopment schemes, cluster developments negate the old city's fabric of interwoven history, and destroy its socio-economic and cultural ethos. As malls replace the people's markets and bazaars, the city hastens its pace towards annihilating its links with its history.

One modest example of an



Conserving history The Lal Chimney project in central Mumbai

alternative approach — of repairs rather than total reconstruction — is the Lal Chimney building complex: good community housing built in the early twentieth century, located opposite Nair Hospital in Mumbai Central. The pioneering aim of the project was to highlight the role of conservation in providing alternative solutions to the city's "affordable housing" problem, while offering good rental apartments of various sizes to suit the needs of the society.

Restoring the dilapidated and neglected cessed buildings (such as this project has done) with skilful repairs undertaken with professional guidance, coupled with legislation granting nominal incentives such as TDR for the repairs, would allow many more such successful ventures. Conservation is not just limited to the built fabric — it aims to understand and preserve the cultural, communal and social ties of the individual with the built form and the surroundings. The project sought to conserve their existing lifestyles and social interactions while giving the buildings a new lease of life, with increased property value. The economics of sustainability played out in such ventures was illuminating. This group of buildings was repaired and restored at one-tenth of the cost of newer construction calculated on a square foot basis and that too without loading the fragile and collapsing infrastructure. Such small steps are actually giant steps for improving the quality of life and retaining a balance between conservation and development.

Overall, such ventures bring hope — they indicate alternatives to the "total redevelopment" sanctified by modern dogma, allowing us in the present to connect with our past as we move into posterity.

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