

Mumbai 2008

A reflection by Abir Saksouk-Sasso

UDP 2007-08 Alumnus



During the month of May of 2008, UDP students embarked on a fourteen day fieldtrip to Mumbai, India. Organized in teams of twelve, we worked on two out of three case studies: the first reviewed the relocation of pavement dwellers from their vulnerable locations on pavements to new housing projects in the outer fringe of the city, and the second focused on the relocation of slum dwellers living next to railway tracks due to a major, donor-funded infrastructure project. The exercise targeted community-based organizations, local NGOs, the municipal and State governments and actors in the private sector, in order to carry out a diagnosis of the situation given to each group, as well as emerge with recommendations over how processes, outcomes and outputs could be further improved.

In the context of the urban space of Mumbai, the purpose of the fieldtrip was to produce a report that would provide the civil society Alliance of grassroots- and non-governmental organizations with a critical comparative evaluation of the twin processes of relocation of slum dwellers concurrently - yet separately - undertaken by the Alliance and by the municipality of Mumbai, highlighting the problematic aspects and the opportunities for (what in our opinion was) positive change. The project focused on understanding the transformation that the slum dwellers underwent, in terms of the impacts of relocation on livelihoods and the trade-offs between livelihoods and secure housing, as well as stressing on the relocation process itself. It was a space in which we sought to identify a planning of hope; one that simultaneously understands everyday life.



On another level, the fieldtrip also amounted to an exploration of the relationship between the planner and her/his ability to impact urban change. It stemmed from a firm belief in planning as an active mode of resistance, suggesting alternative practices against which we can posit new demands. This innate ability to wholeheartedly change the world, coupled with the will to challenge what constituted the different imaginations of urban India, drove this project towards the empowering potential of planning. It sought to examine the role of field-based practice as a tool to not only better articulate a situation, but to challenge and transform the planner her/himself, continuously seizing power and producing change.

The fieldtrip exercise was also an investigation of planning in its relation to the role of communities in a process of transformation. Over the past twenty years, communities of slum dwellers evolved social institutions, fought political battles for their right to the city, and influenced the economy, politics, culture, and space of the city in innumerable ways. As such, although the exercise was comprised of many phases and had several aims, it above all intended to demonstrate the community as an active agent whose role is essential in the production of better livelihoods and its outcome.

The first phase of the fieldwork was a baseline analysis carried out in London using secondary research. The second phase challenged our (pre)conceptions of Mumbai and mapped narratives through a 14 day fieldwork characterized by a combination of meetings with community leaders, interviews with individual women and men, girls and boys affected by relocation, and presentations by officials and stakeholders. The third and final phase of the exercise took place in London, where each team collated its findings and introduced them into a presentation and a final Report.

On a personal level, this trip was an exploration of the relationship between the planner and an unfamiliar city. It was also an investigation of the role of stories, our own and those of the people, in the production of representations that finally produce schemes/solutions/recommendations. Attempting to articulate a relation between the planner's perceived role and the landscape upon which she/he intervenes, our approach sought to compile stories that accommodate the different socio-economic-spatial cycles that slum dwellers in Mumbai operate within, a confrontation between the city as social space with a history and an internationally renowned 'first class' city. In this sense we constructed a story (our own) wherein the planner intervenes upon the city through a set of assumptions and aims; whether these assumptions were real or not bears only implicitly to the fact that slum dwellers themselves

are the stake of this investigation and their silence or absence, as users of the city, “is indeed a problem - and it is the entire problem” (Lefebvre 1991; 365).

‘Seeing’ Mumbai, eating its food, reading its books, walking its streets and acknowledging our differences vis-à-vis it, we were able to imagine the possibility of an-other relationship between this ‘unfamiliar’ city and ourselves. As such, the fieldtrip set the conditions for further interactions and allowed for more stories to emerge; by highlighting the critical thinking in the process of relocation of slum dwellers, it was the start of new actions, on our part, in any city and any context. In the end, the exercise gave us as participants an understanding of urban change, and prepared us as future planners by enhancing our critical and analytical capacities to respond to such change, always within a general framework of social justice.