The Chawls and Slums of Mumbai:
Story of Urban Sprawl

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ABSTRACT

In Mumbai, informal dwellings such as slums and tenement housing, or chawls, are an outcome of the exponential increase in the city’s population after the upsurge of mills and industries during 19th-century British rule in India. Due to insufficient housing for the migrant working population, slums and pavement dwelling conditions came up at the doorsteps of factories, mills, and workshops within the city in the 1940s. By looking at the two distinct time periods, Colonial (1858-1947) and Post-Colonial India (1947-present), this paper intends to compare the living and housing condition of the so-called slum neighborhoods to the chawls of the city.

Slums and chawls create unique living and resting scenarios that blur public and private spaces and are understood as informal and flexible, yet extremely functional living possibilities. This paper depicts how chawl settlements, as established and influenced by British colonialism, gave rise to slum settlements and public sleeping, and inspired different living scenarios in formal, informal, and pavement-dwelling conditions in post-colonial Mumbai. Further, the paper investigates how the chawl, through the administration of the state, has not only restructured the overall urban fabric but has also given way to non-conventional ways of living in both formal and informal settlements.

In Mumbai, there is a vast array of unconventional living conditions that arrive out of necessity. Chawls and slums are two striking examples of such unconventional housing arrangements, both being products and producers of flexible living within the city. Overcrowded living conditions in these dense neighborhoods promote social habits like public sleeping in communal areas, people bathing in the open, storing one’s belongings in common spaces, and even the sharing of civic amenities such as water taps and toilets. Originating during early 19th-century British colonial rule in India, these housing conditions have evolved to accommodate a growing population within a limited footprint. The advent of a robust and economical public transportation system in the mid-19th century led to rapid urbanization in post-colonial Mumbai.¹ This urbanization has resulted in a range of housing conditions that are observed in the city from mere tents, one-room concrete structures, and brick units, to chawls, apartments, bungalows, and high-rises.

The paper is structured in a documentary format that begins with a brief description of the chawl, slum, and pavement-dwelling conditions in Mumbai. The paper then contextualizes these unique housing types and their conceptual shifts through historical narratives during the Colonial Period (1661-1947) and the Post-Colonial Period (1947-present) of India. The city historically was known as Bombay during the colonial times and is presently known as Mumbai in post-independent India; for clarity, the city is referred to as Mumbai throughout this account. Additionally, the analysis is carried out from the standpoint of the individual, the neighborhood, and the state. In doing this, the paper seeks to communicate how boundaries between public and private spaces are perceived.
by locals in an informal, flexible, yet extremely functional living condition within each settlement type. The paper closes by illustrating a unique way of living: “Body as Home,” a form of dwelling that draws inspiration from the chawl, the slum, and the pavement dwelling housing types.

**HOUSING MUMBAIKARS**

Mumbai’s geography is characterized by blurred territorial edges arising from the city’s organic growth of formal and informal developments. Social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai articulates the current nature of socially negotiated housing arrangements throughout Mumbai in his paper Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai (2000). He writes,

> . . . there is a vast range of insecure housing from a six-foot stretch of sleeping space to a poorly defined tenancy situation shared by three families, “renting” one room. Pavements [transition] into jopad-pattis (complexes of shacks with few amenities), which [transition] into semi-permanent illegal structures . . . Another continuum links these structures to chawls (tenement housing originally built for mill workers in Central Bombay (Mumbai)) and to other forms of substandard housing. Above this tier are the owned and rented flats of the large middle class and finally, the flats and (in a tiny number of cases) houses owned by the rich and the super rich.²

In this description, these kinds of housing are not neatly segregated by neighborhood boundaries for one simple reason - the insecurely housed poor are everywhere and are only partly concentrated in bastis (slums), jopad-pattis, and chawls.³ Over time, the chawl has had a significant influence in generating informal housing types and living conditions within the city. The chawl is a single, continuous building with either a linear or a courtyard formation. Chawls typically include two to six vertically stacked, identical floors.⁴ Multiple neighboring chawls often come together to form a courtyard, known as a wadi. Historically, these larger courtyards have been sites for social and political gatherings.⁵

Each level of the chawl is comprised of a series of single rooms along a gallery or a corridor. Residents on each floor share common toilets, washing areas, and other public spaces, such as staircases. Each single-room unit is generally eight by eight feet in dimension, with a floor-to-ceiling height of nine feet.⁶ These already cramped conditions are commonly condensed even further when residents use ceiling spaces for bunks or additional storage. Further,
and economically mixed population, without a defining political identity. Usually, “slums provide shelter to the poor, lower classes and . . . migrants who come to the city in search of jobs.”9 However, it is not uncommon for slum dwellers to remain in these units even after securing a steady income. During the colonial rule, slums were architecturally understood as temporary squatter housing situated near places of employment. However, in independent India, these settlements have gradually shifted to undesirable areas in and around the city, such as wastelands or marshy areas adjacent to railway tracks.

Appadurai mentions that the slum also transitions into pavement-dwelling conditions via the use of ephemeral materials such as tarpaulins. Theorist Madhura Swaminathan (2003) defines these dwellings as a “small space enclosed on two sides by gunny sacks or old saris [women’s attire], and covered on top by sack cloth, old sheets of plastics or occasionally, tarpaulin, and held up by a couple of wooden rods. The walls of the buildings adjoining the pavement provide a third wall to the pavement dwelling.”10 These units are generally four-by-five-foot shelters sufficient to seat no more than five members in each. These pavement

*Figure 2: Interior view of a room in the Jam Mill chawl showing a three-by-three-foot open washing area-mori within the kitchen (Rajesh Vora, The Chawls of Mumbai-galleries of life, 2011).*

Like the chawls, slum neighborhoods also have overcrowded living conditions. However, slum settlements are much more diverse in their construction; they range from tent dwellings to mud and thatched structures to cement and brick rooms.8 Each unit is generally under eight by eight feet in size, with no civic amenities. In contrast, slums are typically inhabited by a socially

*Figures 3 & 4: A narrow alley space between two linear chawls similar to the narrow alleys within slum settlement.*
dwellings derive their name from their location – insecure spaces throughout the city such as on the sidewalks or in front of gutters.\textsuperscript{11}

Overall, the informal living conditions in Mumbai can be theorized under the categories of chawls, slums, and pavement dwellings. While the clear distinctions between each category have become more and more blurred over time, their origins can all be traced back to colonial rule in India.

**WORKING-CLASS HOUSING IN COLONIAL MUMBAI**

The Portuguese bestowed the city of Mumbai on the King of England in 1661, and in 1668, the East India Company leased the city for industrial pursuit. At that time, Mumbai was comprised of three entities: the main castle on Bombay Island, the Mahim annexation, and the eight villages of Mezagaon, Varlu, Parel, Vadadla, Naigaum, Matunga, Dharavi and Colaba. With the growth of Bombay Island’s castle population, a fort wall was constructed in place of the castle in 1715.\textsuperscript{12}

The increased encroachment of village dwellings towards the fort area – along with the Great Fire of 1803 that damaged a large portion of Indian merchant property – led to the restructuring of the city. This restructuring initiated the movement of Indians north of the fort wall.\textsuperscript{13} It further led to the British “distilling” the fort area of native groups and expanding development beyond the walls.\textsuperscript{14} North of the walls, the British set up textile mills. Such industrialization triggered the rise of chawls during the 1850s and during the 1860 Cotton Boom. These mills were located in present-day central Mumbai in areas like Tardeo, Lalbag, and West Parel.\textsuperscript{15} The expansion of industries in Mumbai resulted in a demand for both commercial space and housing for the working class.\textsuperscript{16} Poverty drove lower- and middle-class workers to live in the least desirable spaces, which were often near industries. This process led to countless migrant mill workers taking residence in undesirable areas, forming segregated enclaves within the city.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1863, the British orchestrated the construction of a robust and affordable transportation system of local railways. In 1872, the addition of trams, trains, and bus routes throughout the city allowed people to move into the suburbs post-independence.\textsuperscript{18} However, during the inception of public
transportation, local trains were available only to the fortunate classes. This led to further inequity throughout the city; in 1911, approximately 80% of Mumbai’s population lived in chawls.\(^5\) Continued industrialization throughout the early 20th century caused exponential increases in population and contributed to the continued growth of chawls and slums beyond the wall.

According to Adarkar, Pendse, and Finkelstein (2011), living conditions and the fate of working-class dwellings are closely related to urbanization in Mumbai. Industrial land during the early 1900s was inexpensive due to its proximity to the outskirts of the fort area.\(^6\) It was necessary for both workers and employers to have workforce housing within an accessible distance from the industry. It is estimated that at one time, almost 75% of workers lived within a 15-minute walk to their workplace. Incidentally, many textile mills arranged for some social commodities such as bathing areas and barber shops within their premises.\(^7\)^\(^8\)

The chawls were originally permanent housing for male workers and were either mill-owned, constructed by Bombay (Mumbai) Development Department, or privately owned as an investment property. The chawl was meant for both blue- and white-collar workers, though they lived in different buildings.\(^7\) Each chawl formed an unofficial “neighborhood” in and of itself, where occupants were typically people of the same origins, dialects, occupations, or classes. This organization has remained the same over the years. As the population gradually increased, timber and brick chawls soon became overcrowded, and slum settlements began to develop into temporary clustered units.\(^8\) Dwivedi and Mehrotra (1995) describe how these overcrowded conditions made renting space more difficult. This difficulty led chawl owners to seek creative ways to accommodate new members or migrants, such as partitioning single rooms, installing folding wooden planks to serve as bunk beds, and constructing mezzanine lofts for storage and sleeping.\(^9\)

Further, British introduction of reinforced cement concrete (RCC) as a construction material dramatically increased the rate at which developers could build chawls, demonstrating how Indian and British contractors actively promoted these living conditions.\(^10\) Though cement was imported initially, the readily available sand for concrete mixtures paired with cheap labor in Mumbai made RCC an ideal solution.
effectively dominating the lives of the workers beyond the workplace. According to Adarkar, Pendse, and Finkelstein (2011), during colonial rule, the mill-owned tenement housing was quite unpopular, though considered to be the most convenient accommodation at the time. Adarkar (2011) writes, "Absence from work could not be easy if you stayed in one of these chawls. The owners could (and did) threaten to cut off electricity and water supply to the chawls if the workers were on strike, particularly what was termed 'illegal strikes.'"29

The overcrowded scenario of the chawl, with its bare-minimum civic amenities, would become a reference for the layouts of slum dwellings. Similar to chawls, slums during colonial rule were also an outcome of severe housing shortages throughout the city. Lack of housing led new laborers to construct dwellings near their places of work, forming networks of huts and sheds without any civic amenities. These slum neighborhoods were symbolic of the surplus of cheap labor: laborers’ housing needs were neither supported by their employers nor the state; thus, residents, viewed as dispensable, were under constant pressure of eviction.

Indeed, during the 1890s with the addition of

to the local housing shortage. In short, high-rise structures could now be easily and cheaply constructed. Soon, this cement material selection and high-rise structural design became a hasty template for housing that was not limited to the working class but was now also used to house the middle-class group, consisting of educated clerks and professionals. Claude Batley, a renowned British architect from the 1930s, describes chawls constructed out of RCC as "single-room tenements with concrete-louvered-faced verandahs, from which neither heaven nor earth can be seen." 27,28

Both the British-controlled state government and the privately owned East India Company administered the construction of the mills and housing,

Figure 7: Interior view of a room in a working class chawl, Digvijay chawl (Rajesh Vora, The Chawls of Mumbai- galleries of life, 2011).

Figure 8: Interior view of a shared room for single male migrants, Spring Mills Chawl (Rajesh Vora, The Chawls of Mumbai- galleries of life, 2011).

Figure 9: Introduction of reinforced cement concrete (RCC) as a construction material dramatically increased the rate of construction of chawl.
70 textile mills in the city, it was estimated that around one million people slept on roads or footpaths. In the 1940s – with the end of World War II and in the midst of India’s independence and partition – Mumbai experienced yet another influx of migrants and refugees who would find themselves living in slums and pavement dwellings. The census of 1911 shows that 69% of the population lived in one-room dwellings; by the 1930s, an average of around four people lived in each tenement, with over two million tenements throughout the city. Within this context, slums during the colonial era were intended to be only temporary squatter settlements.

WORKING-CLASS HOUSING IN POST-COLONIAL MUMBAI

Unlike the worker-occupied chawls of the 1900s, post-colonial chawls are occupied by families. While workers had little incentive to convert these dwellings into homes, families make continuous efforts to transform their units into a habitable living space. After moving into the chawls, families gradually invest in improvements that display qualities of permanence and stability. Common spaces such as corridors, staircases, courtyards, and roofs change with the needs of the occupants.

Today, modifications tenants make to their chawl units allow them to express their identity as stakeholders of their dwellings. At the micro level, the renovations to the unit may include the removal of connected doors between dwellings and the addition of interior furnishings that represent the individuality of the occupant. At the macro level, the Bombay Rents, Hotel, and Lodging House Rates Control Act 1947 that was introduced due to the acute shortage of housing prevented the exploitation of the tenants and designated them as the
active stakeholders of their buildings.\textsuperscript{36}

In post-colonial India, there is a clear distinction between pavement dwellings and slum settlements. A pavement dwelling is a temporary housing condition for an individual or family before they move into a more permanent setup; the slum settlement is a neighborhood living condition akin to the chawl, where ethnicity, origin, class, and occupational identity are given value.\textsuperscript{37} Appadurai (2000) explains slum and pavement dwelling conditions as different means of self-organizing in post-colonial India, stating:

There is a vast and semi-organized part of [Mumbai’s] population that lives . . . on pavements, and others sleep in the grey spaces between building and streets . . . “pavement dwellers” and “slum dwellers” are no longer external labels but have become self-organizing, empowering labels for a large part of the urban poor in [Mumbai].\textsuperscript{38}

The housing shortage evolved into a major concern for independent India with the advent of both migrants and refugees in the years that followed World War II. By 1951, the average occupancy of the living spaces had risen to six persons per room.\textsuperscript{39} Slum settlements were the physical manifestation of this crisis. As Shashi Shekhar Jha (1986) notes in “Bombay Slums: A Profile,” the British administration did not show concern towards slum development. It was a lucrative scheme, as the cheap labor supported the economy with negligible investment by the state. After independence, the Indian government declared it would provide “conventional” houses for the labor class in efforts to remove the slums.\textsuperscript{40} This conflict of interest between providing improved housing for slum occupants and allowing permanent homes for slum dwellers within their (legally or illegally) occupied land continues today. Further, the slum population still continues to pay for basic necessities such as water, whereas the fortunate class is not charged.

Additionally, the State government and other civic bodies often promote an “urban cleansing” agenda that is frequently manifested in the form of communal violence, eviction, demolition, and other means.\textsuperscript{41} For instance, the 1992 communal violence that was orchestrated by the political party Shiv Sena served as a means to establish a Hindu-dominant city.\textsuperscript{42} This event is similar to the 1803 Great Fire in the fort neighborhoods of Indian merchants mentioned earlier.\textsuperscript{43} In countless similar narratives, violence has become a tool for controlling population density, leaving a history of totalitarian methods used to restructure the urban fabric.

**BODY AS HOME**

So how does the sleeping and living situation in the chawl differ from how slum and pavement dwellers live in the city?
Some of the possible answers lie in the perceptions of permanence and the types of rents that are paid for living or sleeping space. To understand the boundaries between public and private spaces and the agency of the individual upon his dwelling, we need to recognize the concept of “body as home.” There is a culture of public sleeping and the spatial construct of home and dwelling in present-day Mumbai, where “home” is considered to be any place where one can sleep. For the poorest residents in the city, sleep is the sole form of security that connects them to their jobs and families, a necessity for those who can be at home only in their own bodies. 44

This understanding of public sleeping as a “spectral home” is associated not only with pavement and slum dwellers but also with the understanding of the “negotiated spaces” within the chawl.45 Public sleeping still persists even today despite families moving into chawls and combining adjoining rooms to create conventional apartments. Common spaces like galleries, stairs, and corridors provide sleeping spaces for family members, guests with negotiated rents, or individual migrants. Galleries have an unwritten reservation for sleeping spaces, as every possible inch of the chawl is used to spread out sleeping mats at night, including terraces, the staircase landings, spaces under the staircases, and the steps of the ground-floor shops.46

The notion of spectral housing is not limited to the urban poor. Rather, it is a lifestyle common to a wide range of people of different economic standings – anyone who cannot afford to buy or rent in a city where space is a premium. The ideas of being and dwelling experience “complex
transformations in transit,” that is, when one travels a long distance from home to work. Public sleeping or, rather, the idea of “body as home” becomes a necessity rather than a choice. Thus, “homes are often unstable products” for the middle and the working class as they identify themselves with their secured places of work.47

Overall, today’s idea of the slum varies significantly from the slums of the 1900s. Previously, the slum, the pavement dweller, and the body as home formed a single concept. Presently, however, the slums of Mumbai are established as a state of collective permanent living scenarios while pavement dwellings are only temporary housing scenarios. Architecturally, the slum units are constructed of RCC or brick masonry, and the tenant pays rent to the owner. On the other hand, the pavement dwelling is a camping situation that lasts until the state demolishes the establishment. Lastly, the “body as home” is inert, a state of pause with or without a shelter. However, pavement dwellers and people living in their “bodies as homes” are still paying for their spots, whether in monetary transactions or acts of service.

**IN RETROSPECT**

This paper analyzed the living condition of chawls, slums, and street dwellings through their historical origins, and their manifestation into Mumbai’s current formal and informal living conditions. To mitigate the problem of overpopulation and housing, the solutions do not lie in government-initiated acts of violence, demolition of settlements, or mass relocation of communities. Even though formal housing strategies in Mumbai aspire to fulfill housing needs for the people, they still promote overcrowded units without basic amenities such as daylight and water. Planners, architects, and the State need to acknowledge the way people live in these neighborhoods and address the civic and infrastructure requirements of these housing types rather than promoting another entirely different way of living.

The slum and the chawl are physical manifestations of a way of life for the middle and the working class that has not only brought about large-scale restructuring of the urban fabric, but also has given way to newer concepts of living, such as “body as home,” at the micro scale. This understanding of dwelling, from the small scale of a house to the overall British-administered planning of the city, is carried on by Indian governance. As Michel Foucault, philosopher and historian, notes in the book *Society Must Be Defended*, “the biological came under State control, that there was at least a certain tendency that leads to what might be termed State control of the biological.”48 Yet even as the British and the Indian administration in a sense dominated the individual resident until the early 20th century, such regimented living conditions have since evolved into more flexible living scenarios – a sort of lifestyle.
normal to families residing within each unit.

The construction of the chawl, which was intended to attract laborers to work in the textile mills and industries, has now become an ordinary way of living in post-independence India. The chawl is one of the reasons for the fine line between the “body as home” and home as a physical construct, further blurring as it does the boundaries between public and private spaces. In retrospect, colonial dominance promoted cramped conditions for the working class despite the ability to accommodate more spacious units when the original chawl design was first implemented in the city. This compact living condition may not be acceptable in the present day, yet it is continuously included in newer formal and informal developments to accommodate large populations within a small footprint.

Though the slum and the chawl are outcomes of the housing shortage and colonial rule in Mumbai, chawls are legally established, permanent constructs, whereas slum dwellings are defined by their state of legal ambiguity. However, both these types of housing are continuously under threat of redevelopment. The slums appropriated both the land and the technique of construction from the British rule and continuously adapt themselves to the changing times and needs of the occupants. In contrast, the chawls have reached their pinnacle and are now in a state of dilapidation.
Endnotes:


3. Ibid.


5. Dwivedi and Mehrotra, Bombay: The Cities Within, 211.

6. Ibid., 196.

7. Dwivedi and Mehrotra, Bombay: The Cities Within, 211.


11. Ibid.

12. Dwivedi and Mehrotra, Bombay: The Cities Within, 44.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Dwivedi and Mehrotra, Bombay: The Cities Within, 51.

16. Ibid., 194.


20. Ibid., 6.

21. As most workers didn’t have access to toilets, these specific provisions ensured hygienic working conditions and higher standards of products generated in the mills.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 5.


25. Ibid., 196.

26. Ibid., 197.

27. Claude Batley was a prominent British architect, whose works in Mumbai include the Bombay Gymkhana (1917), Bombay Central Station (1930), Bombay Club (1939), Breach Candy Hospital (1950), and more. He was the president of the Bombay Architectural Association from 1925 to 1926. He was also a faculty member (1914) and later the principal (1923-1943) of the JJ School of Architecture in Mumbai.


30. Ibid., 2.


32. Ibid.


36. This act was introduced to prevent exploitation of tenants due to World War II and partition of colonial India after Independence. Rents were kept low to provide relief to the city’s migrants and tenants during these events. The rent control act has gone through multiple amendments and still persist in certain form today.


40. Ibid., 78.


42. Ibid., 646.

43. Dwivedi and Mehrotra, Bombay: The Cities Within, 44.


45. Ibid.

