

UrbLab India 2008

4.163J/11.332J: Urban Design Studio
Tuesdays & Thursdays 2:00 – 7:00 pm
Units: 0-12-9
Room: 10-485

Landscapes and Urbanism: Reclaiming Mumbai's Eastern Waterfront

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INTRODUCTION:

This year's urban design studio is set in Mumbai (Bombay): home to over 13 million, the source of a third of India's federal taxes, and the location of the world's most prolific entertainment (film and music) industry. It is India's richest city, but also home to Asia's largest slum. Architects and planners are repeatedly confronted by these polarities as conflicting aspirations compete for urban space.

The studio will focus on Mumbai's Eastern Waterfront where conflict over land and divergent visions of the city are building to a flash point. The waterfront extends over 40 km and includes 1500 acres designated for use as a port. However, less than half the dock is regularly used, and the infrastructure reserved for ancillary operational activities, like warehousing and cargo evacuation, is considerably underutilized. Older wharves, now too shallow for modern ships, have been turned into (illegal) ship-breaking and salvage yards. Large tracts of land adjacent to the dock are littered with oil storage installations fed by an offshore oil terminal. All these areas along with the Indian Navy's dry dock are officially off-limits to the general public. The only parts of the waterfront connected to rest of the city are smaller jetties used by fishermen and commuter ferries. Consequently, designing a system of public spaces that gives citizens access to the waterfront without displacing the operational activities of the port is a key challenge for this studio.

Although the Mumbai Port was crucial to the city's overall economic development during the first half of the 20th century, by the 1980s it came to be associated with the general decline in manufacturing that characterized the city. Today, as Mumbai's former industrial precincts are transformed into luxury malls and residential enclaves, it is crucial for urban designers to evolve a new model of urban renewal that promotes opportunities for growth across all segments of society. Would an ecological approach to urban renewal meet this goal? What would the protocols, objectives and implications of an ecological approach be? Does it imply a framework for environmentally sensitive development? Would it require a regional, rather than local or exclusively site-specific, outlook? The aim of this studio is to critically examine these questions in the face of competing demands for housing, infrastructure and recreational space in Mumbai.

This studio is an advanced introduction to architecture and urbanism in Indian cities for urban design, planning and architecture graduate students. It is the second studio offered by UrbLab India, a multi-disciplinary research group within the School of Architecture and Planning. As with previous UrbLab projects, the objectives of this studio are to interrogate the social life and form of cities in India, and to investigate different aspects of architectural and planning practice in the South Asia more generally. This year, drawing on Mumbai's specific urban development experience from the past ten years, we will consider

1. how large-scale planning intervention could promote a plurality of visions for the city
2. how historic preservation has been used to renew Mumbai's cultural resources
3. how architects have tried to reconcile sharp dualities in city form
4. how different actors are beginning to negotiate global flows and cultural difference

SITE AND PROGRAM:

The Eastern Waterfront, covering well over 1800 acres (the textile mill lands in contrast consist of 400 acres of non-contiguous parcels), forms a critical portion of the city that must be re-imagined as Mumbai transitions into a post-manufacturing economy. Most of this land is controlled by a single, federally created, public sector agency—the Bombay Port Trust. The low-density of the entire area is in stark contrast to the rest of the city, particularly the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the docklands. This suggests that the largely underutilized rail yards and roads within the port area could be re-configured to support the city's overloaded transit infrastructure, and that vacant warehouses could be re-programmed to meet Mumbai's pressing needs for additional social infrastructure.

We will look at the entire waterfront within the context of a rapidly changing ecological, spatial and economic context. The studio's first task will be to connect the Eastern Waterfront to the rest of the city and to New Bombay, which is just across the harbor from it. Integral to this task will be the definition of new mass transit infrastructure that would intersect with the region's existing public transport systems. This effort will be supplemented by an exercise to re-zone the Eastern Waterfront. Students will be expected to arrive at a mix of programs and densities for the entire area given what they know about the region's changing ecology and economy. Students will work in teams comprising of architects and planners during this initial phase of the studio with the goal of establishing new FAR and urban design guidelines. In the final phase of the studio, students will have the choice of working independently or in teams to develop site-specific projects along the waterfront. The precise site and program for these projects will be decided in consultation with the studio instructors before the mid-semester review.

COURSE FORMAT:

The studio will be organized into three components. The first is a site visit over the summer (in the last week of August) during which students will analyze the Eastern Waterfront in relation to the larger Mumbai Metropolitan Region. This section of the studio will culminate in a charrette on urban infrastructure with local planners, activists and entrepreneurs. The second component of the studio will begin immediately on our return to MIT, and will consist of a series of workshops on planning and environmental history in India. At the end of the workshop series, students will have refined their site analysis and developed a broad vision for the Eastern Waterfront. In the final component, students will create urban and landscape design projects that trigger action towards implementing that collective vision.

SITE VISIT:

Students and faculty will travel to India in late August. Tentative dates for travel are August 15 – 26. UrbLab India will arrange for student travel from Boston to Mumbai and local accommodation. Students are responsible for any other costs associated with studio travel.