

## A Place for the Precarious.

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### Developing an Idea.

Forming opinions and developing a research topic.

*With a heavy focus on the conflict between the formal and the informal, my project has, I feel, taken a very turbulent and unorthodox development as I have explored and positioned myself within these themes over the last year.*

*The project has been based on precariousness within affordable housing and was located in Nalasopara, an urban periphery of Mumbai, India. The fact that I have been designing for a context which is at odds with my usual expectations of what a; spatial, social, cultural, economic, environmental, and political climate is or could be has put research at the heart of everything I did.*

*My thoughts, opinions, and knowledge of this topic has grown, developed and become more refined throughout the year. My project started by exploring the themes of flux and migration, inspired by the writings of Rahul Mehrotra. I then switched my lens to more socio-economic perspective as focused my research on a group of people currently being labelled the 'Precariat' (a definition I don't fully agree with, but which acted as a catalyst for my research). I think this change in perspective allowed me to approach the project to a more human minded angle. The research quickly became "how can private developers be incentivised to design for the precarious population of Nalasopara?" It considered more the people than the condition itself.*

*In order to study this topic, a variety of methodologies were used and my understanding of these, and their applications has also been a critical component of my development. A combination of ethnography and statistical data were the most predominant techniques used, largely due to the contrasts in my project; one based on soft data and one on hard, in order to provide for the private developer and the potential inhabitants of the building.*

### Ethnography.

Researching and analysing the practise of the everyday.

*As a requirement of our studio I undertook ethnographic studies of dwelling spaces in both The Netherlands and India. To me it was an exploration of the idea of place as being practised space. How do people use space and artefacts in everyday life and how does this relate to social patterns and local cultures.*

*By undertaking this I became much more aware of the differences between my own context and the context to which I was a foreigner. It made me appreciate the subtle differences and similarities between the two extremes. The visual ethnography also helped me reflect on some of the key themes of my research; ideas of openness and porosity. An example of this came in the form of circulation. In The Netherlands there were distinct boundaries and rules; red pavement means cycle path, edges between vehicular and pedestrian were strongly defined by curbs, parking was segregated to car parking spaces, motorbike parking and push-bike parking. In contrast was Nalasopara in Mumbai. Here, people didn't obey by the same rules as The Hague. Cars, buses, rickshaws, pedestrians and cyclists all shared the same space and parking happened wherever there was a suitable space. It was a form of organised chaos. There was a set of rules invented by the people as the spatial conditions were not so strict; people would, in a rapid and swift sequence park their vehicle near the side of the street, jump out, purchase their goods and then straight back in and ride off again. This realisation that both schemes work efficiently and use similar systems, despite seeming to be completely at odds*

*with each other. This critical understanding of place, space and activity really helped me design and think in the bigger social and political picture.*

*When undertaking the ethnographic studies it allowed me to gain very intimate research of how people live. It would generally mean observing, documenting, watching and often interviewing and interacting with the people of the sites. This had to be done in a very precise manner, to get the right kind of information and also to be respectful of people; not trespassing or encroaching whilst undertaking our studies.*

*These investigations in to the relationships between space and place were at the core of my research and I think it has become apparent in the design, my project couldn't be placed in a different context because it wouldn't work at every scale; the urban form, land-use and interior spaces and even the brick details are all defined by the context of Nalasopara and it draws inspiration from the existing context.*

## **Hard Data.**

Investigating the complex world of Mumbai's housing systems.

*In conflict with the more personal, socially-minded ethnographic research was a much more severe research; the data and statistics. Housing, at the end of the day, related to numbers in terms of; density, area, income and costs, especially when you're proposing private developer-led schemes. This meant that a lot of my research ended up being an investigation of the existing systems in place for providing housing; their benefits and problems.*

*The research included reading on the laws and systems which exist in Mumbai's housing production, but also about studying case studies such as Sangharsh Nagar by P.K Das and the SPARC schemes in Dharavi. At the start of the year, this side of the work didn't stimulate me perhaps as much as the ethnographic side of the research, but on reflection I think it is equally as interesting and important, if not more. In order to be able to implement the small scale and intimate research we conducted, on a large scale (something my project desired to do)*

*All of this research coincided with my own morals and perspectives on what I personally felt was the most optimistic way to speculate the future of housing in India. For me personally this was a struggle; the topic of housing in such a context was completely alien to me, so grasping the realities and complexities took a lot of time and my design was constantly shifting to align with the fresh opinions I was forming. I think having a group of peers throughout this to discuss these matters with was extremely fruitful as we debated out opinions on both political and architectural ideas and ideals for solutions to affordable housing.*

## **Design Process.**

The influences and anecdotes on the development of the project and its relation to the research.

*These contrasting forms of research were also extremely prevalent in my design process as I think it is extremely difficult to compartmentalize design and research in a project such as this. The common mantra 'research through design' highlights the reciprocal and dependant nature of the two elements during this process, and is something I have come to believe more and more in throughout this project.*

*Naturally my project began with the research side of the coin and by using this I would generate designs. These designs would give me feedback and allow for external feedback from tutors and peers. This reaction came in the forms of hard data (density, floor areas, etc.), but also soft data (opinions, spatial qualities and models).*

*A simple, yet apt, example of this comes in the development of the urban form of my project. At an early stage in the project, I used my ethnographic research to start imitating some of the existing urban forms in a slightly denser scheme. One of the things this allowed me to do was gain a piece of hard data; the density of the proposal, in terms of a 'floor space index', which was lower than what my research suggested was appropriate. However this also provided me with qualitative comments from tutors and peers that the scheme didn't add any 'alternative' spatial qualities the scheme. This then stimulated research in to new urban forms, and ways of achieving density. This too-and-forth between investigation, reflection and proposal, including investigation of my proposals, was a constant of my project. I think one of the main things I would take from this project, was in fact, that research doesn't have to mean data; it could also be much more ambiguous; was a space nice? Is a courtyard well proportioned? These experiments were all part of the research but were completely qualitative.*

*This combination of balancing between the formal, macro-scale efficiency and a micro-scale understanding of the informal spatial use of a piece of architecture, came as a result of the influence of the global housing studio. Dealing with the unstable is, in my view a critical topic when discussing affordable housing in the 'global south'. It is a theme that I think the global housing studio and the dwelling track has encouraged me to investigate more.*

## **The Bigger Picture.**

Concluding thoughts on the future applications of my project.

*On reflection, there are some aspects of the project which I have been concerned don't align with the overall aspirations of the TU Delft's goals with environmental sustainability. Whilst this project hasn't manifested in a typically environmentally focused scheme, at least in western-terms, the project provides more heavily in other arenas; social sustainability, economic sustainability and it does this in a way which is respectful of its location and its situation in these terms. Due to the extreme situation of Nalasopara, even within the context of Mumbai, it is difficult and often unrealistic to propose the thoughts we typically associate with sustainability; circularity, photovoltaics etc. There are, of course, environmental thoughts in the scheme; educational facilities can help in the management of waste and local water collection all contribute making environmental progress in the local architecture of this area in an affordable and efficient manner.*

*The specificity of the place breeds certain themes for the design. Some of the elements of this project are extremely local in terms of the design output, however many of the themes, topics and research can be applied to a much wider context.*

*In terms of housing design and dealing with issues of density I think the schemes approach, but not result, could be applied elsewhere in Mumbai and perhaps even India. The approach to trying to use the architect, and design, as a resource to find a balance between the needs of the users and the developers is something which I think can be used as an example for future developments, both in Mumbai and other countries which face similar problems.*

*The topic of precariousness and informality is something which I think is a universal, global topic in the built environment. As we can see, even in Europe, more people living precarious lifestyles, with migration and financial uncertainty becoming growing themes, I think it important to consider these themes when building cities. Whilst the built environment doesn't have causal relationship with these themes, it does have a reciprocal one, and the way we design buildings and cities should certainly aim create the types of space which can help to not exacerbate the issues we currently face. As Richard Sennett says in his book 'Building and Dwelling' "Migrant knowledge is what all*

*urbanites need”, so if we can build cities that suit the precarious and a population in flux, we create cities that can benefit all.*