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## Does identity have space in Dharavi's redevelopment? Understanding the Interrelation of Hybridity and Identity in the Indian Context

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# – DOES IDENTITY HAVE SPACE IN DHARAVI'S REDEVELOPMENT? Understanding the Interrelation of Hybridity and Identity in the Indian Context

AYESHA MUELLER-WOLFERTSHOFER

## Abstract

*The goal of this research is to understand the spaces Dharavi's inhabitants require to sustain existing socioeconomic systems and how future redevelopment in the area can facilitate their inclusion. In India, livelihoods are directly linked to identity, as religion or caste often define the trades that individuals practise. Mumbai is the country's financial capital, and Dharavi is its most famous informal settlement, with internationally reputed commercial enterprises reflecting such socioeconomic patterns. In this article I therefore examine how identity—created through factors such as religion, caste, occupation, language and ethnicity—is interlinked with space in the settlements' hybrid fabric. I use a case study of a leather manufacturing complex to exemplify this correlation. Interviews with the business owner were combined with fieldwork to document the unit's establishment in the settlement and its current production processes. Based on these data, essential spaces were identified and methods of integrating them into the upcoming redevelopment project were explored through the lens of hybridity. The research is relevant not just for the redevelopment of informal settlements in Mumbai but also for promoting inclusive urban development that caters to the vast range of user requirements, from the level of the individual to that of cities across the globe.*

## Introducing Dharavi

The area called Dharavi is an informal settlement in Mumbai today. It is known as the largest in Asia and one of the densest in the world. But its origins lie in a small fishing village on one of the seven islands that constituted Mumbai before colonization. The first recorded settlers around Dharavi were the Kolis, fisherfolk who lost their source of livelihood through land reclamation projects undertaken by the British to expand the city (Sharma, 2000; Engqvist and Lantz, 2008). The small area of Koliwada on the periphery of the Mithi River is all that remains of this fishing community, which continues the livelihood of their forefathers (Sharma, 2000; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013). Attempts at connecting the seven islands that constituted Mumbai in colonial times resulted in the Mahim Creek drying out and most of the Kolis abandoning their homes (Edwardes, 1909; Sharma, 2000; Patel and Paul, 2010). This created swampy lands on the city's outskirts, which were used as dumping grounds for industrial and construction waste (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Weinstein, 2014). Migrants began settling on these vacant, marshy lands, and one of the first communities formed was Kumbharwada, by a colony of potters forced to vacate the inner city because of the pollution of their kilns (Burman and Datta, 1971; Sharma, 2000). Leather manufacturers settled here around the same time and helped transform Dharavi into the city's centre of leather

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[Correction made on 14 August 2025, after first online publication: The first paragraph of the section "Demographics" was printed twice and was corrected in this version.]

production, exporting products to Europe and Africa (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013). The settlement continued to expand with other communities and businesses, resulting in ‘an amazing mosaic of villages and townships from all over India’ (Sharma, 2000: xxii). To understand Dharavi’s spatial layout and the implications thereof for redevelopment initiatives, I briefly describe the contexts of religious tensions, demographics, identity and the upcoming redevelopment project before examining the case study that constitutes this research.

– Religious tensions

People of all backgrounds lived in Dharavi in harmony before the riots of 6 December 1992 (Sharma, 2000). The demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya sent a wave of destruction across the country, culminating in over 1,700 deaths and 5,500 injuries (Thakur, 1993). Since Hindus consider Ayodhya the birthplace of Lord Ram, the mosque was demolished by a group of militants, leading to clashes between them and Muslims (Bernbeck and Pollock, 1996). The impact was felt severely in Dharavi as neighbourhoods were burnt down in the name of religion. There were 62 recorded deaths in Dharavi, of which 17 were Hindus and 43 were Muslims (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013: 275). These conflicts changed the layout of the settlement and resulted in industries being shut down. Many inhabitants left the settlement—some for the span of the riots, others permanently—and people of the same faith and ancestry settled down together (Sharma, 2000; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Weinstein, 2014). Although the manufacturing unit I examine in this article did not shift its location, partly owing to its large size and the weight of the machines used, a significant shift was witnessed in individual households and smaller workshops to areas predominantly settled by members of the same religious group. Peace prevails in Dharavi once more, but spatial separation based on cultural differences persists.

Even though political motives attempt to divide Indian citizens based on religion and ancestry time and again (Heath, 2020; Werleman, 2021), this has not worked in Dharavi since the riots of 1992. The incitement of religious groups against each other has been a political tactic for power that can be traced throughout history, including the colonial era in India and the partition of the country in 1947 (Engineer, 2002; Sen and Wagner, 2005; Weinstein, 2014). Since the partition and the rise of Hindu nationalism, Muslims in the country have often struggled with prejudices and communalism against them (Devji, 1992; Shaban, 2018). Mumbai is the capital of Maharashtra, a state with an added identity conflict. Clashes between Maharashtrians and non-Maharashtrians have been incited by political parties such as the Shiv Sena, with emphasis on the reduction of employment and housing for citizens by outsiders (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Weinstein, 2014). When the Shiv Sena changed its agenda from being against non-Maharashtrians to being anti-Muslim, it aligned itself with the Hindutva movement of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The coalition first came to power in Mumbai in 1996 (Sharma, 2000; Weinstein, 2014), promising free housing to the city’s ‘slum dwellers’ (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Indorewala, 2022a). At the time of writing this article, the Shiv Sena has just been replaced by the BJP as the ruling party of Maharashtra, and the BJP has been elected for its third consecutive term at the national level. In January 2024, a few months before the most recent elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the BJP inaugurated a temple commemorating the birth of Lord Ram on the grounds of the former Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, built during his term in office to strengthen Hindu ethnonationalism (Mashal *et al.*, 2024; Yadav, 2024). The owners of the leather manufacturing unit studied in this research and their employees belong to two categories of residents that are subject to discrimination: they are Muslims, and they originate from northern India, outside the state of Maharashtra. On the walls of the production unit, the Indian flag is hung as a demonstration of their allegiance to India–*Hindustan*. Other Muslim families in the area use similar symbols to declare their allegiance. However, these

declarations are meant to convince outsiders and not co-inhabitants of the settlement, because there is a sense of solidarity and shared identity within Dharavi, as will become evident. It is extremely difficult to broach the subject of the riots of 1992 today within Dharavi, and as Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013: 277) confirms, if witnesses do agree to speak, it is 'only to denounce the hatred fomented and manipulated from the outside'.

– Demographics

'Ironically, this heart-shaped settlement is now located literally in the heart of Mumbai' (Sharma, 2000: xxiii). About one million people are estimated to live in Dharavi, on 2.4 square kilometres of prime real estate (Patel *et al.*, 2009). The exact population figure is unknown (Patel and Arputham, 2008). The different communities that comprise it not only differ based on religion; they also have their own cultures, ancestries, languages, cuisine and, at times, economic activities. An example is the Kumbharwada community, which was formed by Hindus from Gujarat who speak Gujarati. The area in which these potters (or kumbhars) settled has evolved to incorporate their socioeconomic activities, with collaboration at different stages of production (Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023). The leather industry is another example. It employs about a third of Dharavi's population and is run by Muslim and some Hindu communities (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013). The Hindus working in this sector belong to the lowest castes such as the Dalits, also known as 'untouchables', as higher castes do not wish to be associated with the slaughter of animals (Sharma, 2000; Weinstein, 2014) and its attendant odours (Lee, 2017; Kapoor, 2021), an example of which will be described in this research. Although Muslims do not have castes per se, those working in the leather sector belong to the poorest groups of their communities. 'Untouchable' Muslim castes are an exception, established by Hindus who converted to Islam but were unable to break free from casteism (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Mirza, 2019). According to Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013), Muslims account for about 20% of Dharavi's population, while Hindu Dalits account for about 50%. Dharavi is home to a large community from Tamil Nadu too, who speak Tamil and constitute between 20% and 30% of the settlement's population (Sharma, 2000; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Weinstein, 2014). They produce South Indian cuisine such as idlis and dosas, distributed for sale throughout Mumbai. Small Christian sub-communities of Roman Catholics and Protestants are also housed among Tamils in Mukund Nagar (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013). Members of the Jain community, by contrast, specialize in jewellery and can be found in Marwadi Compound (Sharma, 2000; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013). In addition to these communities, there are other, more ambiguous communities, such as single men living and working in the area called 13 Compound, which includes the metal and recycling industries. According to Weinstein (2014), it is the industrialists, ethnically and occupationally diverse, who give Dharavi its unique character. Nijman (2015: 413) states that an estimated 67 'slum communities' can be found in this settlement, often with sharp boundaries between them. Although manufacturing firms in the settlement are mainly clustered because of the communities the owners and workers originate from, Nijman (*ibid.*) as well as Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein (2023) argue that this has other benefits: using similar resources, collaboration in production processes and minimizing the areas affected by pollution.

Nijman (*ibid.*) also shares data about research on employment conditions. In Dharavi, only 6% of the heads of households are unemployed. According to Nijman, over half of the inhabitants who work in the private sector are employed within the settlement, and most of them have been employed in their current jobs for a long time, averaging 17 years. Less than 10% are daily wage workers, and 40% of business owners were born in the settlement, with companies operating at the same address for an average of 13 years. Nijman adds that this job stability is surprising and contradicts notions of insecure labour conditions. According to 70% of the residents interviewed by Nijman, the most significant aspect of their integration and reason for living in the

settlement is the sense of community. As many as 30% of the firms interviewed by Nijman stated ‘community’ as the most positive aspect of their location, in stark contrast with public perception. ‘The ugliness of the structures is all that people see, not the vitality of those who live in these tenements’ (Sharma, 2000: 193).

– Identity crisis

Problems relating to identity are not unique to Dharavi. Views of informal settlements are overwhelmingly negative, with dystopian narratives of crime, poverty and pollution dominating public discourse (Ghertner, 2012; Bhide, 2021). Ghertner (2012) explains how the notion of ‘slums as a nuisance’ is perpetuated to deprive these areas of urban improvement, maintain their status of illegality and legitimize their demolition. Ghertner (*ibid.*) examines how nuisance talk reshapes official and public perceptions to unite citizens against these perceived intruders and makes removing informal settlements essential to creating progressive, ‘world-class’ cities. Even during the pandemic, as Bhide (2021) describes, informal settlements were labelled breeding grounds for Covid-19, although the virus was brought in and transmitted by international travellers. The result was government action in these areas that severely impacted the inhabitants’ already precarious situation. Research by Sharma (2000), Angotti (2006), Roy (2011), Nijman (2008; 2015), Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013), Weinstein (2014) and Páv (2023) also contradict the negative connotations of informal areas by demonstrating their inherent qualities and identities, which differ from those in public debate. According to Angotti (2006), the struggle for a better quality of life leads to the formation of such spaces, where grassroots movements frequently begin and turn the victims of anti-urban policies into the strongest defenders of urbanism. Roy (2011: 224), in her discussion of subaltern urbanism, a paradigm that recognises ‘spaces of poverty and forms of popular agency that often remain invisible and neglected in the archives and annals of urban history’, portrays slums as terrains of habitation, livelihood and politics. Páv (2023: 82) describes how informality plays a role in a city’s ‘wholeness’ through cooperation, interaction and constant human creativity. Nijman (2015) goes one step further, arguing that some informal areas can evolve into slum economies. The area of economic production and employment in Dharavi, for example, has developed ‘a degree of resilience that contributes to its stability and longevity’ (*ibid.*: 412). Research by Sharma (2000), Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013) and Weinstein (2014) also documents upward mobility in Dharavi by means of case studies. Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013), who focuses on leather production, considers it the most important sector because of its history and economic importance. Sharma (2000), Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013) and Weinstein also warn against using clichés, which would hinder research attempts to understand these highly complex spaces. Interviews by Behram (2023) as well as by Thakurta and Dasgupta (2024) further demonstrate the settlement’s resilience. Chandrappa, a local Hindu leader, states, for example, that Dharavi is a community for everyone, whether rich or poor, irrespective of religion or caste (Behram, 2023). Such values and identities inherent to the informal context require exposure in public debate. The recognition of informal, home-based economic zones in planning laws is also fundamental for upholding livelihoods, as described by Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein (2023) as well as Sohane and Bhan (2023).

– Future plans

In November 2022, Mumbai authorities announced that the long-postponed redevelopment of Dharavi will now be carried out by the Adani Group, with rehabilitation to be completed within the next seven years (Lewis, 2022; Sharma, 2023). The Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP), launched by the Government of Maharashtra in 2003, aims to redevelop this ‘slum’ into an integrated planned township (Government of Maharashtra, 2023). However, the DRP has been stalled over decades because of

opposition to various aspects, one of which is the top-down nature of the project (Arputham and Patel, 2010; Kamath and Joseph, 2015; Indorewala, 2022b). Slum redevelopment schemes in Mumbai are based on neoliberal principles, where projects are carried out by investors and financed by the sale of additional apartments built on-site (Patel *et al.*, 2007; Nijman, 2008). 'Eligible' inhabitants from these settlements are provided with apartments free of cost in new constructions either on the same site or in relocation areas, often in conditions that are worse than those they were evicted from (Nainan, 2008; Indorewala, 2022a; Bhide, 2023). Such schemes are often considered successful through misrepresentation of informal conditions before redevelopment. It is, therefore, necessary to bridge the gap between ethnographic data and urban planning, such as the DRP, to find new insights for an alternative, more sustainable method of development that retains intrinsic systems, thus truly enabling inhabitants' advancement.

Bhan (2019), addressing the theory–practice disconnect, emphasizes how theory must be rooted in empirical specificity to influence practice, especially in what is often termed the Southern urban context. In the sphere of postcolonial research, Roy (2015) also discusses Abu-Lughod's vision of using monographs of a single 'idiosyncratic' city as the basis for new theory. Within this framework, the research uses a manufacturing ensemble as a basis for understanding the complex socioeconomic systems established in Dharavi. This research builds on existing data about hybridity and collaboration (Fernández Per *et al.*, 2014; Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023) to understand how identity is also entangled with spatial configuration and what measures can be taken to facilitate inclusive, more sustainable development.

### **Methodology and limitations**

The manufacturing ensemble I studied in this research is one example of the multiple small-scale leather units set up in the 1960s (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013) that have managed to persist and expand in Dharavi. The main reason for my selection of this unit as a case study was the brand of finished leather products one of the owners had launched, representing Dharavi with a heart logo as a symbol of its location and of the owner's affection towards it, demonstrating how the settlement is perceived from within. A second reason for selecting the unit was the willingness of the owner to speak with a researcher, which is not common in the area, especially with regard to the DRP. After a phase of acquaintance, data were collected through the owner who agreed to be interviewed. This was mainly done through conversations, some of which I was allowed to record, and on-site observations. I refer to the interviewee as Mr. M to safeguard his anonymity. The examination of a single case enables an in-depth description of the unit, including its history and spatial mapping. An architectural section of the manufacturing unit will be presented but floor plans will not be published to retain anonymity. I began my research in Dharavi in January 2020 with seven data collection visits to the manufacturing unit between February 2022 and January 2023. The questions I asked focused on production processes to understand the unit's spatial requirements, and I formed inferences for identity from these. The research also integrated on-site observations and recordings to corroborate this information with existing literature.

In the next section of this article I examine the establishment and evolution of the business in the settlement, which led to the status Mr. M's family enjoys today. In the following section I examine the spaces the unit requires for its current production processes and the importance of their incorporation into redevelopment plans to safeguard the livelihood of the family and associated actors. I then discuss the role identity plays in the spatial configurations within the settlement, citing documentaries by Behram (2023) and Thakurta and Dasgupta (2024) in this section. Although the contents of the documentary by Behram (2023) are at times misleading, the testimonies of the individuals interviewed are genuine and relevant to this research, as they show

broader sociocultural phenomena. The documentary by Thakurta and Dasgupta (2024)<sup>1</sup> also incorporates information from prominent leaders, researchers and activists in the field. In the final section I illustrate the implications of my findings on the DRP and present ideas for redevelopment based on hybridity.

The results of this qualitative research will have to be complemented by quantitative data for comprehensive plans to be designed for the DRP. In this article I discuss the role identity plays in Dharavi's spatial constellation and make inferences based on the results of this research. There are, however, other factors that must also be considered. These include understanding precarious systems to address inequalities and dependencies, identifying sources of pollution and means to reduce them, finding methods of autonomous design and implementation, as well as acquiring data on the financial capacity of individuals to contribute to redevelopment, taxation and maintenance costs. Addressing these aspects in detail is beyond the scope of this article.

### **A family history of leather production**

The achievements of Mr. M's family are an example of how Dharavi was established through the hard work and struggles of the individuals, families and communities living there (Sharma, 2000; Engqvist and Lantz, 2008; Patel and Paul, 2010; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023). The family's history highlights the importance of leather production as a source of income and its role in their identity.

Mr. M began his conversation with me by stating that his grandfather had been very poor and had worked in a leather production unit in Kanpur. The leather trade bore so much stigma that only the lowest tier of Indian society was employed in it (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013). The grandfather had lived apart from the rest of the family, sending money home to support them. Once Mr. M's father turned 15, he joined the grandfather to work in the same industry, as the family didn't have the resources to send him to school. This was in the 1960s, and his father began by learning how to operate the leather shaving machine. By the time he turned 18, he worked gruelling shifts as an operator while earning only a meagre income. He aspired to move to Mumbai for work and a better life, as he had heard about the leather industry in Dharavi, but neither he nor the grandfather had savings to enable this transition. Since he was engaged to Mr. M's mother at the time, he asked his future mother-in-law for a loan to finance the journey. She gave him 100 rupees to travel to Mumbai and find a job (at the time, this amounted to about 25 USD; today it would correspond to approximately 250 USD, with inflation).

On arrival in Mumbai, the father began working for Western Indian Tanneries, a large factory in Dharavi. There was no 'slum' here back then, Mr. M mentioned; it was a forest area with a river. The company hired his father for a temporary position for six months. Mr. M stated that the company preferred short contracts because if employees worked for longer than six months, their positions were considered permanent by law, which entitled them to benefits. According to Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013), most tanneries in the area avoided declaring official numbers of workers, but Western Indian Tanneries was the only company to officially announce these. The company therefore had to abide by the rules of the Factory Act implemented in 1948, which regulated the working conditions of employees of large industries and was linked to the Minimum Wages Act implemented in the same year. So Mr. M's father earned relatively well for the six months he was employed, but was forced to leave the company when the contract ended.

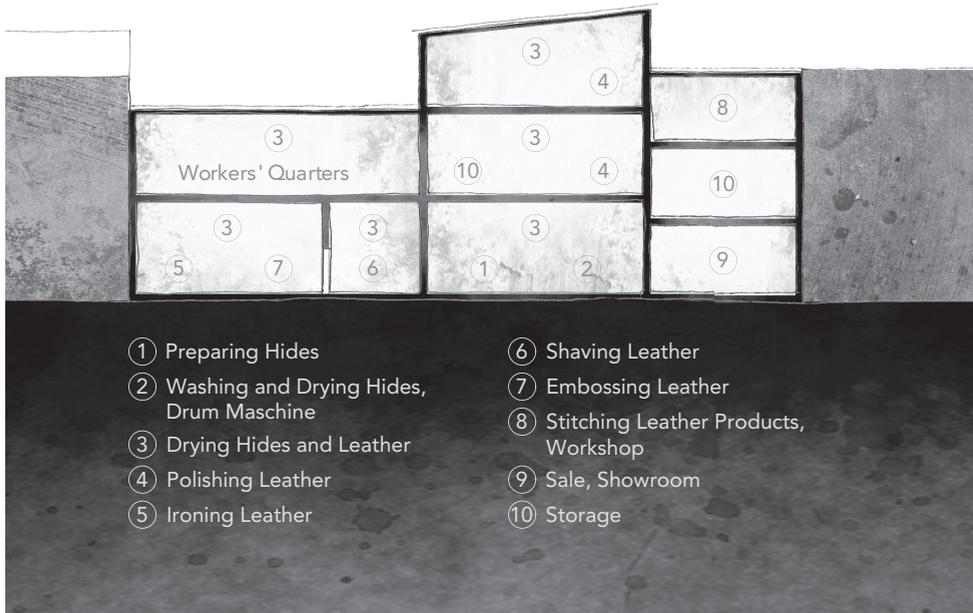
1 Thakurta and Dasgupta's 2024 documentary is titled 'Dharavi ka dada kaun?', which translates to 'Who is Dharavi's uncle?' In Hindi, the term 'dada' also refers to a thug and 'dadagiri' is the act of forcing someone to do what you want.

Mr. M's father approached many people during his renewed search for employment, and according to Mr. M, his first breakthrough was when a Hindu man agreed to invest in him. The man purchased a shaving machine for leather production and his father carried out the work. The two thus became partners, splitting the profits of shaving hides. As Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013: 58–60) explains, small-scale leather units proliferated in Dharavi with the expansion of the informal sector in the 1960s because of the flexible workforce it enabled. However, the large number of small-scale industries that were set up also led to less modernization within and severe competition between them. Mr. M explained that the chances of success were slim, but his father worked hard, often 18 to 20 hours a day, and was able to launch the company. The next breakthrough came when the partner exited the business a few years later. Mr. M stated that the partner was Gujarati and came from a vegetarian family. Hindus from this community are not allowed to work with dead animals or their products, as they are considered impure. According to Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013: 129), 'Dharavi's leather workers, whether Hindu or Muslim, share the opprobrium of their profession equally and have very low status'. The partner had conflicts with his family, so he ended the association. This forced the father to pay him out—a blessing in disguise, Mr. M continued, because it gave him financial independence. He was about 22 or 23 years old at the time, and was finally able to marry Mr. M's mother. By the 1970s, the father had built up a business with four machines and employees of his own.

Today, Mr. M's father continues to expand the business and plans to increase the number of go-downs (warehouses) the family owns in the city to 40. 'He is a big boss now', Mr. M stated, laughing, and said it all started with 100 rupees over 50 years ago. The family is continuing the leather business his father begun without any negative connotations. While his older brother assists the father in leather production, Mr. M has had a different plan. He recently launched his brand of finished leather products with a logo of the settlement to demonstrate his pride in belonging to it and, in his own words, to showcase the high-quality products its inhabitants create. Although the brand is informal, as is the manufacturing unit and the settlement itself, he owns the shop-cum-showroom within the complex, which showcases a variety of bags, wallets, jackets and belts for sale. He stated that he can create anything out of leather that a customer wants. Almost the whole process, from the preparation of the raw animal skins to the sale of finished leather products, is now organized on-site, branded with the logo of the settlement and ready for export to the world.

### **The spatial configuration of the unit**

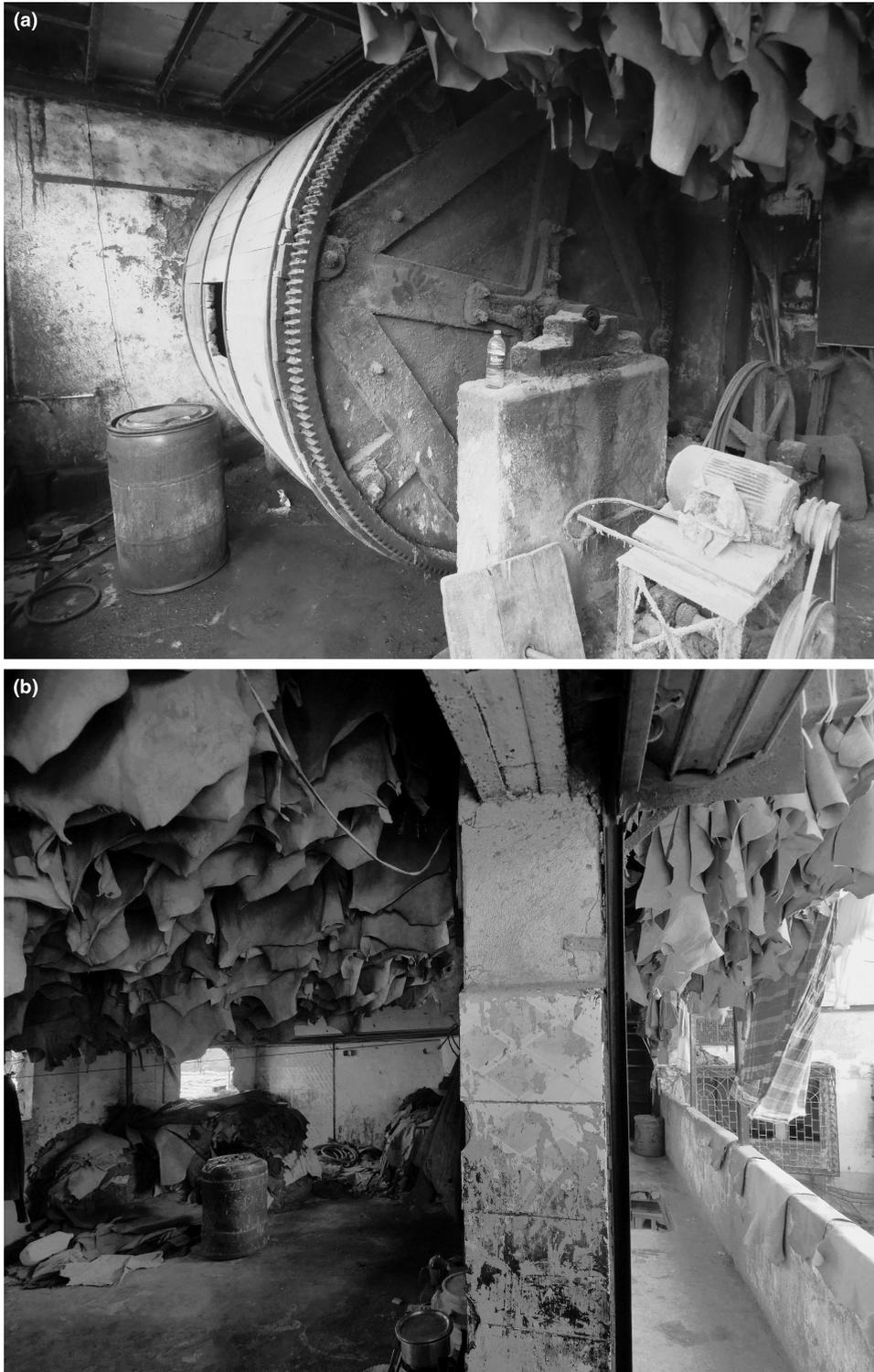
The family has settled and built up a business in Dharavi that is similar to others in the area, internationally renowned today for the high quality of its leather and associated products. The factory comprises two buildings. The first is owned by Mr. M's father and brother and consists of a two-storey and a three-storey section with a total ground coverage of about 150 square metres. The second building belongs to Mr. M and has three floors and a footprint of approximately 30 square metres. Although the three-storey sections of the buildings are adjacent to each other, the first building is much taller because of its higher rooms (see Figure 1). While the ceiling height of the latter is about 2.5 metres per floor, a common standard observed within Dharavi, the former has a ground floor with a ceiling height of about 3.5 metres, a middle floor of about 2.5 metres, and top floors with skillion roofs ranging in height from 4.5 metres at its highest and 3 metres at its lowest point. The roofs are sloped towards the back of the buildings and covered with corrugated metal sheets. The first building, belonging to the father and the older brother, also has corridors on one side with openings and metal ladders to connect the floors on the outside, while the second has ladders connecting the floors within the building. I now examine the production process to enhance our understanding of the spatial requirements of the current system.



**FIGURE 1** Constellation of uses in the leather production unit (source: author’s own diagram)

According to Mr. M, hides are supplied to the unit by butchers and slaughterhouses in the area. Sharma (2000: 84) states that about 4,000 goats were ‘officially’ killed in Deonar on Tuesdays and Saturdays, with another 5,000 unofficially slaughtered on the same days. All these skins were brought to Dharavi for processing. The abattoir is still in Deonar today, approximately 9 kilometres from Dharavi’s leather district. It supplies the settlement with large quantities of skins, which are supplemented by local butchers. The first step of production on site is the preparation of these hides, which begins with removing unwanted components such as hair. The skins are then cleaned in a drum machine, a vast rotating barrel (see Figure 2a), on the ground floor of the building. About 1,000 goat skins can be washed in this machine at a time, Mr. M explained, after which they are hung to dry.

The next step is degreasing the hides, followed by tanning—processes no longer carried out in Dharavi. The interviewee did not mention that tanning is now outsourced, along with the degreasing and desalting processes; this information was gathered through observations on-site and literature in the field. Tanning, and the removal of blood and fat from the skin during degreasing and desalting processes, can create toxins that pollute the environment. These processes, which used to be conducted by industries in Dharavi, have been banned since the 1990s because of health concerns. Only non-polluting, light industrial units are currently permitted in the settlement (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013). This is why, in the current system, skins are treated with preservatives such as salt, sent to Chennai or Kanpur, and then returned after these processes have been completed. Kapoor (2021) elaborates on these processes and states that although traditional vegetable tanning continues in small household units in rural areas, chemicals such as Chromium-6 are used in large tanneries today. Besides producing better quality leather, chrome tanning does not stain the hands of leather workers red as traditional methods do, which has led to an improvement in their status.



**FIGURE 2** (a) Drum machine for washing skins (photo by the author, February 2022); (b) Drying skins in areas with better ventilation (photo by the author, February 2022)

Chaman Lal, a leather worker interviewed by Kapoor (2021: 986) explains, 'Those red hands would smell of leather (*chamde ki badboo*) and other people would stay away from us. Now we are factory workers who do modern work in the city. No one knows who we are because we are not marked by the colour or the smell of leather'.

After tanning, the crust leather is then dyed and polished on-site. This happens post-tanning (*ibid.*). The barrel shown in Figure 2a is used to re-wash the skins and treat them with dye, oil and other chemicals to make the leather thicker and softer to the touch. The dye, usually brown or tan, is thus absorbed by the leather. Mr. M explained that if the dye does not completely penetrate the hide and the formerly whitish colour becomes visible when cutting it, the leather is of poor quality. An essential requisite for achieving good quality leather is the pH level of the water used in washing processes: it must have a pH level between 5 and 6, Mr. M stated, because it is otherwise detrimental to the skins, as they do not absorb the oils and chemicals. The coloured skins are dried again before being polished by hand, either with a brush or a spray machine. The skins are then dried once more before the leather is finished.

Finishing is the final process (Kapoor, 2021), and on-site steps are ironing, shaving and embossing. Leather is first ironed with a machine to smoothen and flatten it before inserting it into the shaving machine to achieve uniform thickness. Leather is thicker in some areas and thinner in others, Mr. M explained. Lamb skin, for example, is thicker at the neck and thinner near the stomach. These machines therefore ensure equalization. The last step of leather production is then embossing and printing. Hides of goats, sheep and buffaloes are predominantly used for leather production in India. Since cows are sacred to Hindus, their hides are not used. Skins of wild animals are also not used, because killing these animals is a criminal offence in the country. Therefore, a hydraulic design machine is used to emboss or print the textures of other animal skins—like crocodiles or snakes—onto the leather. After this, the leather is ready for sale.

In the past, the leather was sold abroad, but in 1973 the Indian government banned the export of semi-finished leather to promote the export of finished leather articles, which had a positive effect on the leather market in Dharavi (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013). Today, although some leather is transported to other parts of the country, a large part is processed into finished goods within the settlement. According to Saglio-Yatzimirsky (*ibid.*), over 30% of leather products made in Dharavi are sold in showrooms within the settlement, albeit through distributors, often from outside the settlement, as artisans rarely have direct access to markets. I observed a large number of small workshops creating and selling handmade leather products on roads in the vicinity of the factory, confirming this claim. The workshop belonging to Mr. M is closest to the manufacturing unit and part of the building ensemble.

All processes involving heavy machinery that cause vibrations, such as drum cleaning, shaving, ironing and embossing, are carried out on the factory's ground floor. Mr. M's shop-cum-showroom is also on the ground floor for better access to the increasing number of clients entering Dharavi. The upper floors, which are used for colouring and polishing, are in proximity to the large areas for drying the hides. Cross-ventilation accelerates the drying process, which is why these processes are best carried out on the upper floors of the building and on the veranda, as seen in Figure 2b. Mr. M explains that direct exposure to sunlight should be avoided, however, as this could deform the leather. Since the drying of hides is a crucial step carried out at multiple production phases, it requires an area of significant size, and skins are therefore also dried under the ceilings of production zones on other floors, which accounts for the increased ceiling heights in corresponding parts of the factory. Mr. M remarked that production processes are much more efficient in the summer than during the monsoon season, because the skins dry in one or two days when it is hot but require six to seven days to dry in the humid, rainy season. Another activity carried out on the upper floors is the cutting and stitching of leather products in Mr. M's workshop, which is located

above his showroom. The products made here are displayed for sale in the showroom below and stored on the floor between. All surplus articles—extra leather that is ready for transport and finished products to be exported—are then taken to various go-downs in the city, as described by Mr. M.

During my on-site observations, I noted that approximately 20 workers are employed at a time: about 15 in the factory and five in the workshop showroom. All on-site employees were Muslim men, and most of them were migrants from northern India who had a similar ethnicity to the owners. According to Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013), employers prefer their workers to be from the same caste or community, which has advantages such as a common language and customs, and holidays according to the shared religious calendar. These workers live on-site, pulling out their mats to sleep on the upper floors of the building when their work shift is over. Some even cook food there on portable kerosene stoves (as shown in Figure 2b), while others partake in India's famous dabba system of affordable food distribution. Workers also conduct daily prayers on the upper floor of the building, where they sleep, and attend the neighbourhood mosque on specific days. They use the public toilets available in Dharavi and bathe outside the building using buckets of water. The factory complex thus accommodates a multitude of uses, including some of the workers' domestic and religious activities.

### **Discussions on identity, space and redevelopment**

'Maintaining this way of life ... requires pragmatism and the ability to situate [oneself] in the overlapping and intersecting networks of power and sovereignty that traverse the boundaries of the slum' Weinstein (2014: 20)

In our conversations, Mr. M mentioned that his family had not received any support for starting the business besides the 100 rupees the future mother-in-law had given his father. They did not have relatives who could lend them money, and there was no assistance from the government either. Mr. M criticized the lack of support from all political parties who had come to power in Mumbai over the years but refrained from mentioning specifics about his dealings with the current Hindutva authorities even when asked, possibly out of fear for repercussions. He diverted by stating that banks also did not offer loans to people with nothing. His father worked his way up from among the poorest strata under significant risk and personal sacrifice, without any external assistance. Dharavi is filled with similar stories (Sharma, 2000; Patel and Paul, 2010; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Weinstein, 2014; Nijman, 2015; Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023). However, not all ventures were successful, and the businesses that do persist are uncertain of the impact redevelopment plans will have.

When asked about the DRP, Mr. M stated that politicians have been promising to help Dharavi's residents for over 50 years. He explained that pledges are made before every election, but nothing ever happens, and it remains unclear whether the current proposal with the Adani Group will come to fruition, and if so, how. Outsiders who interfere want to earn money, he added. They want to create additional apartments they can sell, which would lead to overcrowding. He added that when development is undertaken, it should be for the people. Over one million people already live and work in Dharavi, in an area of just over 2 square kilometres. According to him, inhabitants should either be given extra space to improve their conditions or receive appropriate monetary compensation to enable them to relocate. However, an offering of only 300 to 400 square feet to each family (about 28 to 37 square metres) is less than they already have and depend on for their livelihoods. If they were to be given an apartment but lose their source of income, this is not development, he stated. Research by Weinstein (2014) shows that some residents possess as much as 2,000 to 3,000 square feet (approximately 185 to 280 square metres). Mr. M confirmed that many people are happy in Dharavi now;

none want change that leaves them in a worse situation than before. He added that the authorities are aiming to show the world they are doing a good job by providing people with improved sanitation and new buildings, but do not present the socioeconomic facilities that already existed.

Dharavi is a dynamic space, with different areas catering to the needs of specific constituent communities (Sharma, 2000; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013; Weinstein, 2014). As mentioned earlier, the riots of 1992 changed the spatial constellation of Dharavi and resulted in people with the same religion or ancestry relocating to live together (Sharma, 2000; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013). This reinforced a sense of identity at the micro-level and actually has some advantages. It enables rituals and festivals to be celebrated by the whole community, like the processions of Ganesh Chaturthi in Kumbharwada (Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023) or the practices of Eid al-Adha, also known as Bakri Eid or Lamb Eid in India. Thus, there is no need for special considerations to accommodate differences such as vegetarian or non-vegetarian food preferences, including the acceptance of animal slaughter in the neighbourhood. Conflicts because of different fasting orders are also reduced, not just between Hindus and Muslims but also between various Hindu castes and sub-castes. Since many communities within Dharavi additionally share economic activities, their joint location allows for collaboration and synergy effects for their businesses, while simultaneously increasing the social appeal of and feeling of physical safety within the community (Nijman, 2015; Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023). The importance of these social components for individuals' subjective wellbeing must be highlighted, especially in a collectivist country such as India (Biswas-Diener *et al.*, 2004).

As a construct, 'Dharavi' is also a source of common identity for all the communities that comprise it, albeit to varying degrees (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013): 'it is remarkable to hear Dharavi's inhabitants talk about their lives in the slum using the pronoun "we" rather than "I" when telling personal stories. They often define themselves by the group they form, as opposed to the external world—they are the "slum dwellers"' (*ibid.*: 242–43). Interviews with several inhabitants in the Behram (2023) documentary confirm this. As mentioned earlier, the local Hindu leader Chandrappa believes that people in Dharavi are part of a community, irrespective of income, caste or religion. A local Muslim leader, Mohammad Farooq Alam Sheik, also states in the documentary that every individual should practice the faith that is right for them, demonstrating openness and acceptance towards other religions in the neighbourhood. Pawan Sauda, a young rap artist in Dharavi, mentions Dharavi as one of the best places to find inspiration. The unique stories of individuals here influence his work, and he emphasizes the words 'Dharavi meri Jaan' in his music, which translates to 'Dharavi is my life' (*ibid.*: 00:20:40). In Hindi, the word 'Jaan' is also a term of endearment for loved ones. This feeling is shared by Mr. M through the launch of his brand, using a heart symbol to represent the settlement on his products, which are distributed within India and exported abroad. Dharavi is therefore a fundamental part of his identity and a source of pride to him, which demonstrates the stark contrast between how inhabitants view their settlement compared with the authorities and investors who are interested in redevelopment profits. Inhabitants' protests against past and new redevelopment initiatives, documented by Thakurta and Dasgupta (2024), have only strengthened this sense of unity (Patel and Arputham, 2008; Patel and Paul, 2010). Inhabitants warn that if the movement starts, its 'flames' will spread throughout Maharashtra (Thakurta and Dasgupta, 2024: 00:36:58). It is precisely this project—the DRP—if executed within an inclusive framework, that has the potential to further unite the various communities within its borders and bridge the gap between the settlement and the city.

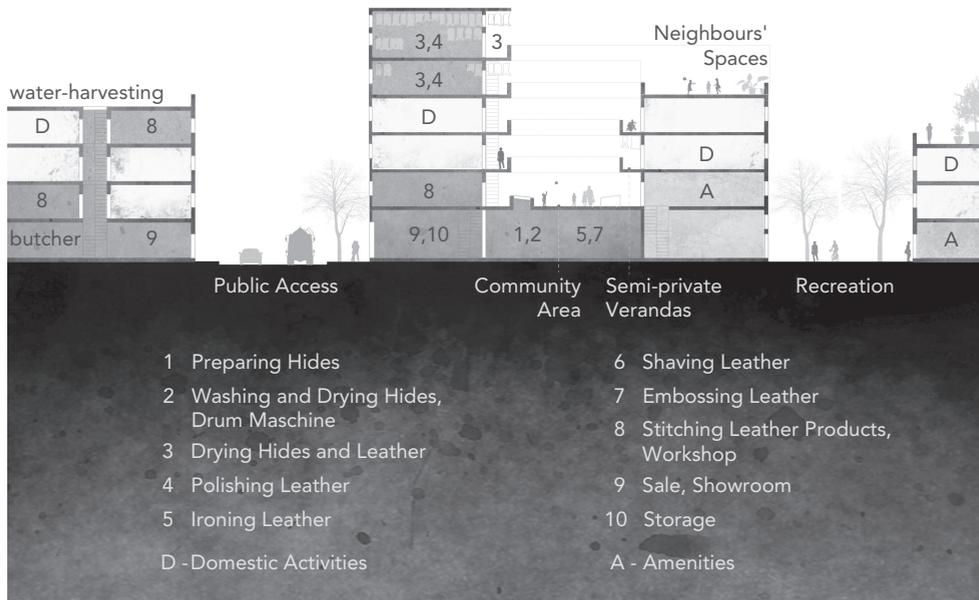
### Inferences for redevelopment

So how can inclusive transformation be facilitated? Development means investing in the people, as Mr. M eloquently put it. Although the authorities have promised that the settlement will be redeveloped with commercial activities in some areas, this is not enough to maintain the urban resilience Dharavi has achieved (Weinstein, 2014; Nijman, 2015; Meerow *et al.*, 2016). The settlement encompasses the ancestries and cultures of all its inhabitants, their struggles in creating a livelihood and the spatial transformations they have undergone in the process (Sharma, 2000; Nijman, 2015). Which does not mean there is no scope for spatial or structural improvement. According to Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013) and Sharma (2000), there is room for improvement in Dharavi's leather industry, for example, as lack of opportunity for expansion and modernization limits its success in international markets, especially compared to production units in China. Residents also state that they are not against redevelopment; what they fear is deceit (Thakurta and Dasgupta, 2024). Redevelopment, when undertaken, must be sensitive to the existing fabric, including the settlement's various communities and socioeconomic systems (Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023). If implemented conscientiously, it could promote the collective identity of the settlement and the city it is part of. I now explain the data from the previous sections by presenting ideas for hybrid design at four scales.

The first scale is that of the individual family or production unit. For families to retain their livelihoods, which are directly linked to their identity—religion, caste, occupation, language and ethnicity—hybrid buildings must be designed to accommodate production processes. The example of the leather manufacturing ensemble includes several such spaces. Areas for processes that involve heavy machinery, like the ones currently in operation, should be provided on the ground floor or on a slab designed to accommodate their weight and vibrations. These areas also require a ceiling height of more than three metres to account for their size. Areas with ventilation that prevent exposure to direct sunlight are needed for drying the hides at different stages of production, preferably on higher floors or above machines, if additional height is provided. The drying of hides can also be facilitated on sheltered verandas and in upper areas of production zones to simulate present circumstances. Dehumidifiers are an option for modernization to be considered for drying hides and facilitating production cycles during the monsoon season—an aspect discussed by Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein (2023) in the context of pottery units. Installation of filtration systems could additionally reduce pollution by cleansing water from the drum machine before it is released, thus improving the immediate environment. Dharavi's competitiveness in international leather markets could also be enhanced through improved mechanization and expansion of existing units if owners are willing to invest in these, and the DRP could facilitate such changes. Mueller-Wolfertshofer (forthcoming) questions whether subsidies could assist owners with investments in technological and environmental improvement. Sharma (2000) and Weinstein (2014) speculate that the additional maintenance and taxation costs in formalized production units would not be too much for owners to bear. In informal conditions, units are forced to pay extortion fees and bribes, which Sharma (2000) and Weinstein (2014) argue are far higher by comparison. Although the case differs for workers and purely residential units, informality also has its price in these areas, and formalization could improve the situation for many.

The second scale is that of the micro-ecology, a term coined by Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein (2023) to describe the interrelation and dependence of connected activities in the immediate hybrid neighbourhood. As Mr. M mentioned, a considerable portion of the leather manufactured by his family and other units in the area is transformed into finished products within Dharavi. Small workshops, where the leather is stitched or final products are showcased and sold are an important part of the system, which could be incorporated into building ensembles, as in the case

studied. Neighbouring butchers that supply hides to the area, as well as the abattoir in Deonar, should also remain in the vicinity to maintain production cycles. Increasing the ground coverage of the building and merging such small-scale units into it is one method by which these goals can be achieved. Production could be carried out in the interior of the building by using light-wells to facilitate natural light and ventilation, while uses requiring access from outside could be planned for at street level. Figure 3 shows a schematic representation of such an ensemble. Options for modernization and expansion could thus also be possible, enabling units such as that of Mr. M, which have established themselves over generations, to adapt to new challenges or requirements. The implementation of filtration systems and safety standards would also allow for production processes to be combined with residential uses. Safe living areas, separate from work spaces, need to be provided to employees and their families who are part of the socio-economic system. Bhide (2024) states that shared living areas reduce costs and are, therefore, the most common living arrangement for migrant workers. This could be an option for employees currently living on factory premises, for example. Apartments integrated into the upper floors of hybrid buildings could also improve the living conditions of the families of butchers or employees in workshops who create finished leather products. Since inhabitants do not wish to leave the neighbourhood, as described in earlier sections, this would allow them to remain part of their micro-ecology but under improved conditions of privacy and sanitation. Living separately from production areas and on higher levels of buildings also reduces exposure to noise, pollution and insects (Sanyal and Mukhija, 2001), while simultaneously protecting against spells of severe flooding during the monsoon season (Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023). Building stairways would additionally enable residents with reduced mobility to access the upper floors more easily (Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023) than via the ladders currently in use. Specially designed roofs could enable water collection during the monsoons for production processes, for example, for washing hides, or for domestic activities. Roofs can also be used as shared recreational areas, facilitating interaction



**FIGURE 3** A schematic representation of hybrid redevelopment incorporating existing socioeconomic requirements of the leather manufacturing unit (source: author's own diagram)

between inhabitants of the building. Figure 3 also shows the varying degrees of privacy that hybrid buildings could facilitate. Similar to current processes in the existing factory, hides could be dried on outside verandas that are situated adjacent to production zones. Verandas outside private apartments, by contrast, could provide space for interaction with immediate neighbours and allow for children to play together in a safe environment, for example, while caregivers carry out work, domestic or otherwise. Jokin Arputham, an activist who founded the National Slum Dwellers' Federation, states that such corridors or passages are the lifeblood of any redevelopment building (Bansal and Gandhi, 2012). These spaces could be used not only for social interaction, especially by women, but also for drying the families' clothes.

This brings us to the third scale: the community. The importance of community groups' support and acceptance of redevelopment initiatives cannot be underestimated (Weinstein, 2014). The current layout divides communities based on factors such as religion, ancestry and livelihoods, as well as their monuments, which have been built over decades. The oldest mosque, Badi Masjid, was constructed in 1887 and the cross of Koliwada was erected in 1850, while local legends date the Hindu Koli temple of Khamba Deo back more than 200 years (Sharma, 2000). Safeguarding such spaces is, therefore, an important aspect for consideration, mentioned by Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013: 315), as communities would not accept any proposals to move these spaces. Hybrid planning could facilitate retaining the current locations of these spaces by merging them with buildings that encompass economic and domestic activities. Spaces for upholding rituals and religious practices are also required and could be facilitated through hybrid redevelopment. One proposal for achieving this is to plan buildings with courtyards for community activities, such as the daily prayers of factory workers or more complex customs during festivals such as Bakri Eid, which would provide a more private setting for rituals that might be in conflict with other cultural values. Courtyards can be of varying styles and cater to different requirements, including combating climate change, depending on the location and dimensions of the building (*cf.* Baker, 2014; Markus, 2016; Fernández Per and Mozas, 2020; Astbury, 2024). Retaining the streets and alleys that are currently named after deities or influential community leaders in Dharavi (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013) is another method of preserving the spatial identity of communities. When describing methods of policing or surveying areas such as Dharavi, Sharma (2000) demonstrates that this is only possible through community-based approaches. Likewise, Bhide (2021) illustrates how efficient methods of dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic were conceived and implemented by members of the community. The same reasoning would hold true for planning initiatives, and an approach should therefore be considered where redevelopment, although planned with networks at the level of the city, is implemented by the community. Sanyal and Mukhija (2001), Nijman (2008), Rosa *et al.* (2014) and Kamath and Joseph (2015), among others, have begun this conversation.

The fourth scale is that of the settlement, intrinsically connected to the city. Public services and amenities have to be integrated into redevelopment initiatives to meet the needs of the inhabitants and the city as a whole (*cf.* Patel *et al.*, 2007; Mueller-Wolfertshofer and Boucsein, 2023) to positively affect the identities of both if appropriately implemented. Transportation networks are one example. Improving public accessibility within the site could encourage citizens from outside to enter Dharavi, thereby dispelling misconceptions about the area and boosting returns. Turnover in the settlement would improve because direct sales would increase the profit margin three to five times, according to Saglio-Yatzimirsky (2013), while simplifying the transportation of finished goods via proper roads and public transport infrastructure. Other amenities include, but are not limited to, educational institutions, medical facilities and waste disposal infrastructure (Mueller-Wolfertshofer, 2024), which can be merged with spaces for socioeconomic activities in hybrid buildings. Through the

terms ‘repair’ and ‘consolidate’, Bhan (2019: 649) explores alternative methods of enabling amenity provisions in cities of the so-called global South through practices and ‘modes outside the network ideal’. Another aspect to be considered is the enhancement of shared identity in the settlement. ‘Dharavi’, as a term or abstract, could further unite the communities that comprise it to demonstrate its value as the *heart* of Mumbai and its capacity to alter public perception. By documenting the settlements’ communities and their respective socioeconomic spatial requirements, the unique and the shared attributes of the different areas can be retained in hybrid redevelopment, such as that of the leather districts or the special character of the industrialists Weinstein (2014) refers to. By doing so, the multi-faceted urban layout within Dharavi can be displayed to citizens living within and outside the settlement, exemplifying the synergy between its cultural groups and demonstrating their importance within the city.

Rap artist Pawan Sauda (see Behram, 2023: 00:21:14) believes in Dharavi’s bright future, stating that this ‘heart of the city’ will become even more beautiful after the government’s redevelopment project has been successfully carried out. Adopting spatial planning concepts such as hybridity, as described in this article, could make this possible for all inhabitants and communities, including those with distinct spatial requirements.

### Conclusion

Mumbai is India’s financial capital, and Dharavi, with its internationally reputed commercial enterprises, is its most well-known informal settlement. The communities that have settled here have preserved their trades and customs, often continuing traditional practices with precise distinctions based on religion or caste. The leather sector—whose workers have a very low status in Indian culture and are often called ‘untouchable’ because they work with carcasses—is a prominent example. Within the settlement, however, these workers have experienced unprecedented upward mobility, as attested to by the leather manufacturing complex examined in this research. The family’s identity is based on religion, ethnicity, language, the type of work executed and the location of its livelihood—Dharavi. The spatial fabric of the settlement constitutes a multitude of communities created through various combinations of such factors, resulting in distinct identities and corresponding spatial configurations that require preservation.

If a complex space such as Dharavi is to be redeveloped to truly improve conditions for inhabitants, their requirements have to be met at various levels, as my findings show. Individuals’ livelihoods must be retained within safe environments for domestic, economic and religious activities. Synergies in production processes should also be retained, even enhanced, in existing micro-ecologies by providing opportunities for expansion and modernization. Safeguarding communities, their monuments and activities is yet another aspect to be achieved if plans are to be acceptable to them. The scale of the city must further be considered through the integration of public services and amenities that help residents advance, while simultaneously dispelling negative stereotypes about the area. The importance of hybridity towards achieving these goals within the settlement’s various communities has been discussed.

In my research I began with ethnographic data to start a discourse on urban planning for an alternative, more sustainable, approach to (re)developing cities. By focusing on the case study of a manufacturing complex in Dharavi, I demonstrated how hybrid design could enable a better outcome if the required data are available. Monographs of a single ‘idiosyncratic’ city, unit or individual can be a powerful tool for realigning theory to include the requirements of a large section of the urban population that have remained unaddressed in formal policy and planning. Although crucial for the redevelopment of informal settlements, if implemented conscientiously, such processes of hybrid design can foster inclusive urban development in cities across the globe.

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