

Futures That Never Came: Traces of (Im)possible Bombays

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Robert Stephens, *Bombay Imagined: An Illustrated History of the Unbuilt City*, 2022, Urbs Indis. ISBN 978-84-122747-5-2.

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Do histories mean narratives about pasts that manifest, or are they also about unrealized possibilities and their variegated relationships to the present? What must the posterity remember about a city's past as it oscillates between memory and forgetting? How must we write histories of urban heterogeneity—the many cities that reside within one name? Indeed, how must we account for the fragments that create urban identity and the co-constitution of human experiences and built structures? These methodological, and often existential, questions inform architect Robert Stephens's choice to craft a monumental history of Bombay (Mumbai since 1995) by documenting the suspended urban planning proposals that remain as archival traces—possibilities alluring to futures that never came. Using myriad primary sources, including maps, drawings, blueprints, government reports, official correspondence and newspaper articles, complemented by contemporary visual reconstructions, the book offers layered journeys of many unbuilt Bombays that could have been but never became. Simultaneously, the book underscores the shifts from the initial British anxiety over controlling the region to their later self-assurance about their 'civilizing mission' and defeating the enemy attacks, both native and rival European, to the subsequent postcolonial apprehensions about urban planning and governance. *Bombay Imagined* is an ambitious book in its temporal scope and conceptual insights, making for a slow, contemplative and affective reading. This slow, careful reading of the unbuilt city is a poignant twist to how the built Bombay/Mumbai is often characterized otherwise—by its speed, instrumentality and indifference.

Steeped in the intertwined flow of a documentary commitment and a passion for speculation, *Bombay Imagined* embodies an archival feast, with a comprehensive index, including a general word index, people and institutions index and places index, and completed with superlative production quality, treating readers to (im)possible Bombay's untold histories. One of the most innovative aspects of the book is the colour-coded categorization (p. 6) of the plans under 16 heads—adaptive reuse, architecture, conservation, defence, docks, housing, memorial, pedestrian, pier, reclamation, recreation, redevelopment, sanitation, transportation, urban planning and competition—helping readers to navigate the projects while also appreciating the porosity of such categorical boundaries by allowing individual projects to have multiple colour codes.

Academic and popular common sense informs us how the story of Bombay as the quintessential English colonial port city begins in 1845, once the seven islands were merged through land reclamations. Likewise, Stephens's central narrative of unbuilt Bombays takes off from 1845 with the proposal of a city reservoir to ward off water shortage (p. 18). Nevertheless, he remains attentive to the genealogy of this plan—foregrounding the English East India Company's multiple previous plans through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first proposal was put together in 1670 to build a city with the potential to become a 'grand metropolis' (p. 10), shortly after the archipelago of seven

islands was transferred from the Portuguese to the English in 1661 as part of Catharine of Braganza's dowry to Charles II. Stephens carefully documents how this plan took a backseat when the second British Governor of Bombay Gerald Aungier feared estranging the locals by damaging the flora in the process of urbanization and focused, instead, on consolidating the English power in the region by 'strengthening the Bombay Castle'—eventually leading to the transfer of the English operations from Surat to Bombay in 1687. Indeed, the archipelago's history through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is fraught with power contestations, wars and negotiations between the English and other regional powers, as well as other European companies, including the Dutch and the Portuguese, resulting in limited plans for urban development and, hence, sparse archival remains of unimplemented plans. Stephens cites three such unsuccessful plans from 1720, 1758 and 1777 that significantly included water channels and fortification walls.

Beginning with 1845, the nineteenth-century plans take up one third of the book, while the rest of the two thirds are dedicated to the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, ending with 2020. This encyclopedic endeavour is dotted with iconic names who reinvented architecture and urban planning in India, as well as their less popular colleagues whose contributions have slipped through the fissures of history, despite their brilliance. *Bombay Imagined* brilliantly brings back those individuals—draftsmen, engineers, architects and town planners—whose role in the making of the colonial world order is seldom discussed in historical studies of the city, the British Empire or the subcontinent. The book focuses on these professionals who planned (and on other occasions built) the spaces that sustained the English administration, their lived realities and their hegemonic visual culture, simultaneously reflecting and creating the colonial ideology. Stephens tells us not only about the predictable British plans towards civic amenities and administrative and trading requirements of town halls, churches, cemeteries, art schools, a crematorium and a tower of dead for the locals, hospitals, prisons, sidewalks, an underground railway, canals and reservoirs, piers, docks, drainage, reclamations and a promenade, but also about a bizarre and culturally offensive plan for turning the Elephanta Island Caves — 5th-6th CE cave temples dedicated to the Hindu deity Shiva— into a tavern and ballroom for 'billiard playing, drinking, dancing, singing, swearing, and other grosser practices' (p. 24).

Reflection of the increased Indian participation in the affairs of the Raj since the later part of the nineteenth century is the beyond the scope this book. Consequently, we get the first Indian name, the polymath Jamsetji Tata, when he proposed the 'Oriental Venice' in 1900, only to be dismayed by the Wadia family's reluctance to sell their land even at double the market price (p. 130). Simultaneously, we also learn about Tata's proposal for an artificially air-conditioned office building—a proposal that was way ahead of its time. Stephens provides us a glimpse into four of the 16 competition submissions from 1908 for the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, telling readers about competing visions for what exists today after reconsecration as the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya. Likewise, he very provocatively compares and contrasts the 1918 proposal of a low-cost bamboo house of the Indian draftsman D. S. Neogi in response to the government's open call for accommodation for Bombay's working class with that of celebrated post-independence architect Charles Correa's 1973 bamboo residence proposal to Indira Gandhi as a critique of affluent consumption (p. 164). As the book moves through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, readers get to see the proposals for housing and slum developments, airports, a pet cemetery, public parks, more reclamations, several gateways and throughfares, expansions of Bombay, subways, skywalks and tube rails—explicitly alluding to Bombay's perennial housing, traffic and space issues that only grow with time. All these unrealized plans for Bombay/Mumbai are engaging narratives of a sprawling megapolis that never ceases to enchant.

Contemplating on General Aungier's foresight for a 'metropolis', one wonders how Mumbai would look or how it would feel if the visions documented in the book were to be realized. However, we must also ask why do these stories of unrealized plans matter beyond awe and wonder? Or, why is Stephens's archival excavation significant? They matter because each of these urban planning proposals over a span of approximately 350 years could *only* be imagined in the context of historically specific built environments over the period and how people inhabited spaces. Conversely, all proposals that materialized were founded on what was never built but remained in the form of many preceding plans. The city of Mumbai, the 'city of dreams', as it exists today, would be impossible if it were not for these unrealized futures. *Bombay Imagined* alerts us to this historical contingency and how the unbuilt city created the conditions of the possibility for what could actually exist.

Ranu Roychoudhuri
*Performing and Visual Arts, School of Arts and Sciences,
Ahmedabad University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India
ranu.roychoudhuri@ahduni.edu.in*