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The City Has Memory: Images of Ruin and Reclamation in Bombay / Mumbai

MARY N. WOODS

Soon after the invention of photography, Indians used this new way of seeing to depict intensive cycles of ruination and reclamation, excavation and construction, consolidating and then expanding the city of Bombay (now Mumbai). Ever since then, photographers have depicted the paradoxes of what Bombay/Mumbai once was, might have been, and may still become.

Bereits kurz nach der Erfindung der Fotografie verwendeten Personen in Indien diese neue Sichtweise, um die Zyklen von Zerstörung und Rückgewinnung, Ausgrabung und Errichtung darzustellen, die zuerst die Stadt Bombay (heute Mumbai) konsolidierten und dann erweiterten. Seitdem haben Fotografinnen und Fotografen die Paradoxien dieser Stadt dargestellt. Ihre Bilder sind Imaginationen dessen, was Bombay/Mumbai einst war, gewesen sein und noch werden könnte.

Biography

Mary N. Woods is professor emerita of urban and architectural history at Cornell University, where she was the inaugural Michael A. McCarthy Professor. Her books include *From Craft to Profession: Architectural Practice in Nineteenth-Century America* (1999), *Beyond the Architect's Eye: Photographs of the American Built Environment* (2009), and *Women Architects in India: Histories of Practice in Mumbai and Delhi* (2016). Her current projects are a documentary film about Indian migration and cinema halls, with filmmaker Vani Subramanian; an exhibition on Mumbai's architecture of the night, with photographer Chirodeep Chaudhuri; and a book exploring the imagery of ruin and renewal in New York City and Mumbai.

Cities embed their memories in places and narratives. Still and moving images document these places, but they also create urban memories and imaginaries. They archive what the city is and what it might have been and may still become. Bombay has sat for its portrait from the early years of photography. Moreover, visual languages have always been especially significant in India. They are the *lingua franca* in a country with 22 languages and 720 dialects. The visual, historian Michael Windover writes, “is especially important to Indian daily life and ways of being.” *Darshan*, literally “seeing,” is a central act of Hindu religious worship that seeps into Indian social and political practices. Here the image rather than the beholder possesses power.¹ In the following discussion about the photography of Bombay (called Mumbai since 1995, after the Hindu mother goddess), photographic imagery is multivalent. It morphs from art to document, warning to celebration, and diary to propaganda, depending on the context and viewer.

Known as the “City of Gold,” Bombay/Mumbai has long been a magnet for women and men from across the subcontinent and around the world seeking new lives and opportunities. Bombay, originally a collection of seven islands, had to reclaim land from the sea to accommodate its ever-burgeoning population: some 10,000 in the early 1660s, when the British first took possession; over 776,000 when it was called “Urbs Prima in Indis” (First City of India) and “Second City of British Empire” in the early 1900s; and nearly 20.5 million today.² After building embankments, flattening hills, and filling swamps and mangrove forests with rubble, the eighteen square miles

that constituted Bombay in 1655 grew to twenty-two square miles a hundred years later. By the mid-nineteenth-century so much land had been reclaimed from the sea that Bombay became a single mass. In the 1860s, chronicler Govind Narayan noted it would soon “never occur to anybody that Mumbai was an island once.”³

Situated on the Arabian Sea along the subcontinent’s western coast, Bombay was a center of trade and commerce long before the Portuguese named it “Bombaim” (good bay) in the 1530s. Embedded in global networks, Bombay imported new photographic technologies such as the daguerreotype and calotype soon after their invention in the 1830s and 1840s, respectively. The first photograph of Bombay (perhaps the first made in India) may be a calotype from the 1840s. It survives only as a blurred gelatin silver print reprinted from the original image at some point in the 1850s.⁴ Tellingly, it is about the city’s remaking and expansion for trade and commerce. Taken from an elevated vantage point by an unknown photographer, the image shows the newly constructed Colaba Causeway at what was then the southern edge of Bombay. Barely visible in the distance is the fortification built by the British to secure a foothold there in 1668.

Photographs of Bombay’s new streets, buildings, and neighborhoods document further developments under a master plan devised in the 1860s. Purposely taken in the early morning hours when the streets were empty, these images have none of the blurred areas that were created by moving people and traffic due to photography’s then slow film and lens speeds, and the long exposure times.

1. Windover 2009: 203.
2. Tindall 1992: 1; Hapgood 2015: 86.

3. Hapgood 2015: 86; Ghosh 2016: 38–39.
4. Hapgood 2015: 13.

Highly prized, such crystalline images were forms of civic boosterism and urban branding. In the decades to come, this genre of urban photography grew even more ambitious, with sweeping panoramas composed from tall structures, such as this image taken from the University of Bombay's Rajabai Clock Tower, which was completed in 1878 (Fig. 1).⁵ British patrons of these views saw in them proof of their enlightened rule. Such imagery was also thought to stimulate investment and development. And these photographs were also souvenirs for tourists from India and abroad. Like the photographs Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann commissioned to document his transformation of Paris from a medieval to a modern city, these views of Bombay symbolized ongoing projects of progress and modernization. They spoke about a Bombay in the process of becoming; a city, Hapgood writes, "that would soon undergo drastic change, places that would be demolished in a few years ... and neighborhoods undergoing rapid reclamation and industrialization."⁶

By 1844 Bombay's first commercial photography studios were making portraits of the city's social, political, and economic elites. The price of a single daguerreotype exceeded the cost of twelve bottles of imported champagne. A decade later, Elphinstone College, one of Bombay's first institutions for higher education, offered courses in photography open to both Indians and Europeans. Organized in 1855, the Bombay Photographic Society had 200 members a year later, when Indians were first admitted. "Lens-based imagery deeply permeated the everyday life of Bombay," Hapgood writes. "The origins of Indian

photography were tied to the local material, retail, and consumer practices of the middle and upper classes."⁷ While Bombay had sixty-five photographers (amateurs and professionals), Calcutta, the capital of British India, had only thirty-one during the second half of the nineteenth-century. And Bombay may have had more photographers, Hapgood speculates, than any other Asian city.⁸

Hurrichand Chintamon, who had studied photography at Elphinstone, was probably the first Indian to create a successful commercial practice in Bombay.⁹ While Chintamon specialized in portraits of Bombay's elites, Raja Deen Dayal made pictures of the city they built. Dayal left his position as a public works draftsman for a career in photography in 1875. Twenty-one years later he had the largest commercial studio in the city, making over 20,000 negatives of Bombay alone between 1896 and 1909.¹⁰

Although not attributed to Dayal, this view of south Bombay looking toward the sea is reminiscent of a panorama he made from atop the Rajabai Clock Tower on the University of Bombay campus (Fig. 1). In this image, said to be from the 1880s, the city's waterfront is prominently featured, just as it was in the aforementioned photograph of the Colaba Causeway. Because of further land reclamation, the causeway was now no longer adjacent to the waterfront. Both images emphasize that the city's identity was always tied to the sea. Prominent in the foreground is Watson's Hotel, a building of prefabricated cast and wrought parts manufactured in England and transported to Bombay, where it was then assembled. Erected between 1867

5. Hales 2005 [1984]: 123–35.

6. Hapgood 2015: 32.

7. Ibid.: 10, 13–15, 51.

8. Gutman 1982: xi–xii; Hapgood 2015: 11.

9. Gutman 1982: 108–09.

10. Hapgood 2015: 95–97, 107–09.



Fig. 1.

Unknown, Looking out to Sea, Watson's Hotel, Bombay, ca. 1880s.
Source: Pump Park Vintage Photography / Alamy Stock Photo.

and 1869, the hotel was a modern architectural structure derived from factory buildings—especially apt for a city already developing an industrialized economy based on textile mills. In 1896 the Lumière Brothers' new moving pictures were presented to the European-only clientele at Watson's. It was the first film screening to take place in Asia. Like the hotel's prefabricated elements, film was a migratory medium that also found its way to a modern and cosmopolitan Bombay.¹¹ In the distance is the 1876 Sailors' Home designed in the neo-Romanesque style favored for Bombay's grand public and private buildings, such as the Victoria Railway Terminus. Across from the Sailors' Home are tents pitched on the green spaces near the causeway.

According to Hapgood, the city's British residents periodically erected these temporary structures to escape the heat and outbreaks of plague.¹²

This view of south Bombay includes all the features (architectural and topographical) that made Bombay "Urbs Prima in Indis": deep-water port, expansive waterfront, broad boulevards, green spaces, and imposing historicized and industrialized architectures. Still called the "Fort" even after the British fortifications were demolished for the city's expansion in the 1860s, south Bombay was the traditional stronghold of British power and wealth. The city's western sea-facing side, just beyond the right-hand frame of this 1880s

11. Dwivedi / Mehrotra 1999: 66.

12. Iyer 2014: 10.

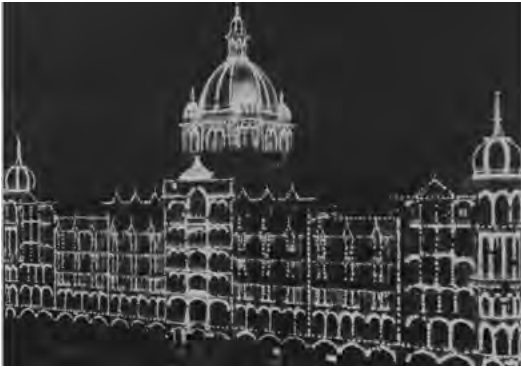


Fig. 2.

Unknown, Golden Jubilee of Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, 1953.
Source: Times of India, 25 December 1953.



Fig. 3.

Unknown, View of Marine Drive, ca. 1940s.
Source: Dinodia Photos / Alamy Stock Photo.

photograph, would soon become the site of intensive reclamation and redevelopment efforts spurred by the municipal government.

Chintamon, Dayal, and other Indian photographers were prolific image-makers and gifted storytellers. In Hapgood's words, "Indians quickly harnessed photography for their own political, social, and propagandistic purposes."¹³ They documented a modern city that Indian entrepreneurs, industrialists, and philanthropists made alongside the British. Architect Charles Correa once observed that while

Calcutta was a city built by the British, Bombay was the work of Indians—Jews, Parsis, Goans, Gujaratis, Punjabis, and Maharashtrians—who migrated to Bombay from across India and the world.¹⁴ Originally traders and merchants, great Indian families like the Tatas and Sassoons became industrialists in the 1850s, building textile mills for Indian cotton grown in the Deccan Plateau to the east and south of Bombay. The Tatas were Parsis from Gujarat, and the Sassoons were Baghdadi Jews. While they built great mansions and villas for themselves, they also endowed hospitals, libraries, schools, and religious institutions. Barely visible in the 1880s photograph is the gabled tower of the neo-Gothic Sassoon Library built by the family in 1870. Beyond the Colaba Causeway, the Tatas would open the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in 1903. Drawing on neo-Medieval and Indo-Saracenic architectures, the hotel welcomed Indian and European guests. It was a point of pride for the Tatas, pioneers of Indian hydroelectric power, that the hotel, considered the most luxurious in Asia, was the first public building to be electrified in Bombay. On special occasions, such as the hotel's golden jubilee in 1953, thousands of incandescent bulbs outlined its intricate façade (Fig. 2).¹⁵

Bombay's western shoreline, as mentioned above, became the site of intensive development in the late 1890s. Known as the Back Bay Reclamation, this project continued well into the twentieth century. Throughout this long history, it was plagued by delays, cost overruns, faulty engineering, and corruption. By the 1940s modern hotels and luxury apartments overlooked Marine Drive, the Back

13. Hapgood 2015: 10.

14. Hai [n. d.]: 5:40–6:03.

15. Woods 2015: 39.

Fig. 4.

Parthiv Haldipur,
Marine Drive and
Nariman Point, 2008.
Photo: Parthiv
Haldipur, Creative
Commons.



Bay's seafront promenade. Photographs taken from above emphasize the curve of Marine Drive, echoed by the streamlined automobiles and the Art Deco architecture (Fig. 3).¹⁶ In the 1960s and 70s, the Indian government, corporations, and entrepreneurs commissioned high-rise hotels and office buildings to create a modern skyline inspired by postwar modern architecture and development in the West. Built on land again reclaimed from the sea, these buildings rose along Nariman Point, a further extension of Marine Drive (Fig. 4).¹⁷ Then and now, the drive is truly an outdoor living room accessible to all in a city starved for open space. While the tall buildings of Nariman Point were promoted as solutions to south Bombay's overcrowding, architect Kamu Iyer argued, they actually exacerbated congestion and strained an already overtaxed public transit system. Moreover, the buildings along Nariman Point offered few shops, hotels, restaurants, and amusements that Indian tourists, office workers, and service staff could afford. Apart from the seaside promenade, it is the domain of the city's elite.¹⁸

Like Marine Drive and Nariman Point, almost all of Mumbai is, novelist Amitav

Ghosh writes, a "wedge of cobbled together land totally exposed to the ocean." Rising sea levels pose, he continues, an "extraordinary, possibly unique concentration of risk" to the city's infrastructure (including the two nuclear power plants), the densely packed residents (55 percent live on only 25 percent of the city's occupiable land), and media, corporations, and educational and cultural institutions of national and international importance.¹⁹ In 2005 the suburbs of north Mumbai experienced one of the heaviest rainfalls ever recorded, when 94.5 centimeters fell in just over 14 hours. Once confined to India's eastern coast, cyclones and tsunamis now threaten Mumbai and the western coast. Recent projections predict that by 2050 most of south and central Mumbai will be underwater, returning the city to its origins as an archipelago.²⁰

Meera Devidayal, a Mumbai artist who works in film, photography, and traditional media, has long made the city her subject. In *Water Has Memory*, a 2018 multimedia installation, her inspiration was the sea's images cast on the windows of her husband's Nariman Point office. "There were these reflections," Devidayal says, "but the sea was nowhere.... This area was reclaimed land, and the sea had been taken over by it. But it [the sea] was still

16. Sharma 2001: 39.

17. Iyer 2014: 85–91, 114–15; Soriver / Srivastava 2015: 109–10, 237–38.

18. Iyer 2014: 115; Dwivedi / Mehrotra 1995: 280, 283, 290.

19. Ghosh 2016: 39–52.

20. Lu and Flavelle, 2019.

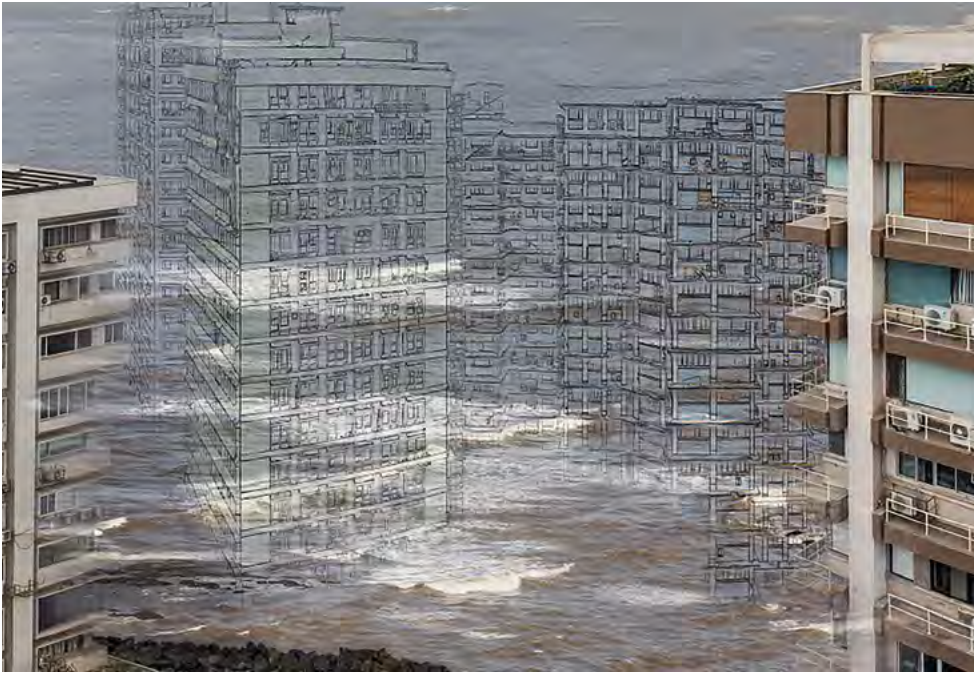


Fig. 5. Meera Devidayal, *Water Has Memory*, 2018.

visible in these reflections.... [It] has a mind of its own, its own voice, its own memory.”²¹ In an image from *Water Has Memory* (Fig. 5), photographs of Nariman Point offices bracket her spectral charcoal drawings of the same buildings submerged in a gray and turbulent sea. The image is a palimpsest overlaying Mumbai’s past in the seas with its present of high-rise buildings on reclaimed land, and beckoning to its future as a twenty-first-century Atlantis.

In 2014, Devidayal turned her gaze inland, to the mill lands of central Mumbai, in another multimedia project, *A Terrible Beauty*. Like the later *Water Has Memory*, it is a story about the city’s reclamation and redevelopment. Set in the mill district, this work is about land reclaimed not from the sea but from Bombay’s textile mills in the heart of the city. Bombay’s mills, founded by the Tatas,

Sassoons, and other great Indian families, as discussed above, began spinning and weaving Indian cotton for a global market during the second half of the nineteenth-century. Called the “Manchester of the East,” Bombay’s mills challenged the textile factories of the English Midlands. By 1900 there were 136 mills in Bombay, constituting perhaps the largest concentration of textile production in the world. The workforce of these mills grew to some 250,000 men and women by the 1970s. It was the largest labor force employed by any single industry in the world. Bombay mill workers were militant trade unionists and a powerful social, political, and cultural force in the city. Laboring in the heat, dust, and noise of the mills, they lived in the *chawls*, nearby tenement housing built by the mill owners. In the tiny rooms, galleries, and courtyards of the *chawls*, these migrants from across rural India sought to realize their dreams in the City of Gold.

21. Bhattacharya 2018.



Fig. 6. Nipun Prabhakar, *Re-Territorialisation*, 2019.

Aptly called “cathedrals of cotton,” Bombay’s textile mills were designed in the imposing styles of neoclassical and neo-Medieval architecture. While only the outer walls of the derelict Shakti Mills remain today, architect and photographer Nipun Prabhakar still found traces of their once imposing Romanesque Revival architecture in 2019. The mills’ round arches, voussoirs, and banded moldings, all executed in rusticated gray stone, echo the forms, embellishments, and materiality of the Raj’s public buildings in south Bombay (Fig. 6). Shekhar Krishnan, a historian, archivist, and activist, has long worked to transform the India United Mills No. 2–3 into a museum dedicated to the city’s textile industry. One of the last intact mill complexes, it boasts such elaborate features in the weaving shed as rows of oculi above the arched aediculae to either side of a great round-arched window with tracery (Fig. 7). In 2019 the municipal corporation announced that the National Institute of Fashion

Technology would establish a sub-center at the museum. Also planned are spaces for state emporia and fashion shows. Melding historicized forms and details with first iron and then steel and concrete, these mill buildings were explicitly designed as grand and imposing temples celebrating Bombay’s modern industrial economy—an Indian challenge to British rule.

During the independence struggle, the textile mills became potent symbols for Indian self-sufficiency (*swadeshi*). Boycotting British imported textiles, Indians bought cloth produced in Bombay and other Indian mills. The city’s mill lands were also architectures of the Indian struggle for independence.²² They lasted, however, only a few decades after India won its independence in 1947.

22. Iyer 2014: 180; Dwivedi / Mehrotra 1995: 153; D’Monte 2006: 12, 88–89.



Fig. 7. Shekhar Krishnan, Weaving Shed, India United Mills No. 2-3, 2018.

Antiquated equipment, overseas competition, and import quotas undermined the Indian textile industry, and Bombay's mill owners reduced their costs by replacing workers with modern power looms. In protest, 100,000 textile workers organized the longest labor action in history, lasting from 1982 until 1983. In the end the strikers were all dismissed, and the owners closed their Bombay mills and relocated them to the countryside, with its docile labor

force.²³ Opening the centralized Indian economy to private and overseas investment in 1991 made the moribund mill lands more valuable for real estate development than for manufacturing.

But a struggle over the mill lands soon took place. Trade unionists, mill workers, artists, journalists, architects, planners,

23. D'Monte 2006: 13–15.

and preservationists proposed other futures for the sites. The unions argued to divide the land occupied by the mills between workers and owners. While the former would develop new housing and vocational training centers, the latter would sell or develop their shares in the land. A public commission led by Charles Correa proposed apportioning the mill lands into three parts: affordable housing, public green space, and private real estate. After the government suppressed the Correa commission's report, the struggle for the mill lands shifted to legal battles fought in the courts. While a few government-owned mills continued to operate, many private mills were simply abandoned and fell into ruin as lawsuits dragged through the judicial system.²⁴

Other mills took on new lives in the 1990s, when the government incentivized and stimulated the private sector to avoid bankrupting the state-run and centralized economy. The state government in Bombay amended zoning laws to permit some commercial and residential development on the mill lands, heretofore restricted to manufacturing. Some mill owners converted factories and warehouses into bars, bowling alleys, restaurants, and discotheques for India's growing middle and upper classes. They also repurposed the mills as galleries, advertising offices, and design studios for the city's creative classes. It was a process familiar from the gentrification that transformed dying manufacturing areas in the West, such as when New York City's Cast Iron District incorporated the galleries, boutiques, and restaurants of SoHo, so named because it was south of Houston Street. In 2006 the Indian Supreme Court ruled in favor of the owners, allowing them to demolish their mills for private redevelopment.

Developers working in tandem with corrupt politicians and the Mumbai mafia built shopping malls, high-rise offices, and gated residential communities—the aspirational architectures of a global and neoliberal India built on the ruins of Bombay's modern industrial heritage.²⁵

In her book *Into the Rose Garden*, artist Meera Devidayal saw other afterlives for the mill lands that thrived for a short while amid the ruins. Hidden within mills now overtaken by nature, men from the surrounding neighborhoods fashioned spaces for their everyday needs and small pleasures. These improvised spaces arose as the fate of the mills was being contested. In an abandoned mill, Devidayal stumbled upon a cricket match where, she wrote, “every afternoon the vast rooftop of a one-time loom shed, now an empty hall of pillars, turns into a surreal cricket field high up in the air” (Fig. 8).²⁶ In her film *A Levelled Playing Field*, Devidayal inserted television footage of India's modern-day gods (the national cricket team), and advertisements for luxury goods into the crumbling mill windows as young men played there. Rising in the distance, a skyscraper looms over this improvised pitch. Along with the mills, the young men are the collateral damage exacted by neoliberalism and globalization.

The mills had an ecosystem, Devidayal discovered, that these men also put to good use. Threaded throughout the mill lands were wells, ponds, and tanks used for dyeing, bleaching, and humidifying (the latter needed to prevent fires from sparking) the thread and cloth spun and woven there. As of 2015, the city was still supplying some of the remaining mills with water. Those living in the nearby slums or pavements have little access to this precious resource.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.: 12–15.

26. Devidayal 2014: n.p.

The mills' aqua system became a place where these men came to bathe, draw water, and wash clothes. In the ruins of the mills they also gathered to chat, smoke, play cards, and socialize (Fig. 9).²⁷

Devidayal, who discovered the secret lives of the mills, is part of a long tradition of women photographers in India, a history both inspiring and problematic. A large cyanotype of a palace near Panna taken in 1890 is the work of both the Maharani of Tripura, a royal princess, and her maharaja husband. Raja Deen Dayal employed a woman to photograph female sitters in *purdah*, their seclusion from males who are not relatives. He also hired women to retouch negatives and hand-color photographs. The latter proved especially popular in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India.²⁸ Then and now, women photographers who work

outside the home are suspect in India because respectable women should not be in the streets or public places alone. Even Western women photographers have endured harassment and taunting, such as Berenice Abbott when she took photos in the streets of New York City during the 1930s and 1940s.²⁹

Perhaps because she is older or merely lucky, Devidayal writes, "I was able to wander freely and unafraid [albeit with a former textile worker as her guide], to accomplish my work before all hell broke loose" in Mumbai's mill lands. In 2013 five men assaulted and gang-raped a young woman photojournalist (who also had a male guide) in the ruins of the Shakti Mills, shown in Prabhakar's photograph, where Devidayal also took pictures. The attackers used mobile phones to hunt women down, alerting each other through text messages using the code word "beautiful

27. Ibid.

28. Gutman 1982: 54, 105, 122–23.

29. Woods 2009: 35–36.



Fig. 8.

Meera Devidayal, *A Levelled Playing Field, A Terrible Beauty*, 2014.



Fig. 9.

Meera Devidayal, *Untitled, A Terrible Beauty*, 2014.

deer.”³⁰ Today there are efforts afoot to make the lane alongside Shakti Mills safer, especially for women, who are terrified to walk here, by commissioning improved lighting, street furniture, and community art projects. The ruined mill lands, for all the beauty, sublimity, and creative reuse that Devidayal, Krishnan, Prabhakar, and others have found there, are also places of danger and violence.

The terrible beauty of Devidayal’s Mumbai is echoed in what Correa wrote about his Bombay in a 1985 essay: “Every day it gets worse and worse as [a] physical environment,” he observed. “But better and better. That is to say, every day it offers more in the way of skills, physical activities, opportunity—on every level, from squatter to college student to entrepreneur to artist ... [T]here are a hundred indications emphasizing impaction (implosion!) of energy and people which is really a two-edged sword ... destroying Bombay as an environment, while it intensifies its quality as [a] city ... It is a great city and a terrible place.”³¹

Photography has always captured the paradoxes of Bombay/Mumbai’s “terrible beauty”—“a great city and a terrible place.” In these images, the city’s dualities and contradictions persist across time and space. They preserve a city with as many avatars as the Hindu deities that devotees worship here. It is a city created, destroyed, reclaimed, and reconstructed again and again. Multivalent, these images speak to what Bombay once was and what it might have been, and to what Mumbai is now and may still become.

Acknowledgments

As always when writing about Bombay/Mumbai, I am indebted to the sadly now late Kamu Iyer, historian of the city and dean of Bombay architects. Kamu passed away at the age of 88 in the fall of 2020 just after publishing his fifth book, *From Diagram to Design*. We will not see his like again, and Bombay will never be the same for me without him. I dedicate this essay to Kamu Iyer, my dear friend and mentor. I am also very grateful to Ela Kaçel for her probing questions and Frederike Lausch for her precise editing. Finally, I thank Axel Sowa for the opportunity to contribute to *Candide*.

30. Devidayal 2014, n.p.; Barry / Choksi 2013.
31. Correa 1985: 91–92.

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