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# Reimagining the Architectural Genius Loci of Mumbai

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the contemporary transformation of Mumbai through the lens of genius loci, or the spirit of place, employing phenomenological methods that foreground lived experience. Situating recent architectural and infrastructural developments within the framework of neo-liberal urban policies, the study argues that Mumbai's current architectural language produces a contradictory genius loci—one marked by community resilience alongside increasing alienation, exclusion, and environmental degradation. Expanding the definition of architecture beyond buildings to include sensory, social, and ethical dimensions, the paper interprets Mumbai as a climate-zone shaped by material, cultural, and intangible forces. Through a comparative analysis with Lazdynai, a Soviet-era housing district in Vilnius that successfully integrated landscape, community, and policy, the paper explores possibilities for articulating an inclusive, context-sensitive architectural language for Mumbai's future development.*

**Keywords:** Genius Loci, Mumbai, Architectural language, Phenomenology, Urban Policy

*“Cities’ beauty taken over by high-rises,  
No more clear skies or bright sunrises.  
All I see is grey air and fog,  
Is this the price we all need to pay?  
Because Mumbai lost its Bombay?”*

Branca Teixeira in *Mapping of Mumbai* (2024)

In the last two decades, many lines of lament have been written about the city of Mumbai. Proclaimed to be the financial capital of India, it also led the country in scholarly and cultural activities since its urbanisation by the British and the formative years after the country's Independence (Devy 2025). Works such as these attempt to diagnose the city's various problems, alternately also offering solutions for the same. Aroon Tikekar's *Mumbai de-intellectualised: Rise*

*and Decline of a Culture of Thinking* (2009) talks of the increasing trends of de-intellectualisation, particularly in the context of the city of Mumbai. G. N. Devy (2025) looks at the cultural decline and the decline of Mumbai's many institutions that have resulted in multifaceted problems that plague the city.

There have also been theoretical and empirical works from various disciplines that attempt to analyse the problems of the city, attributing it to the various policies ushered in as part of rapidly urbanising the city post-1991.<sup>1</sup> Works focusing on the recent urbanisation highlight the underlying neo-liberal principles that underlay the newer urbanisation policies such as the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) (Banerjee-Guha 2002, 2009, 2010, 2016; Sharma 2010). Critical works such as these, provide a holistic picture of how the city of Mumbai and its subsequent transition inspires aforementioned works that mourn the city's declining landscape.

As bell hooks<sup>2</sup> (1991) turned to theory because she was "hurting" (1), so has the author of this paper. According to hooks, theory is meant not only for the academic elite to posit their ideas but can also perform a liberatory or revolutionary function, however only when it is directed to do so. In a similar vein to hooks, I undertook this research due to the changes I have seen around me in the past few years—which have transformed and changed the way in which the city of Mumbai takes shape—utilising phenomenological tools of research.

Apart from this personal motivation, this paper also aims to contribute to the existing literature on Mumbai; by giving a significant qualitative account of the problems the city faces, using the existing research attempting to diagnose the city's problems and linking it to lived experiences. Alternately, this paper offers a potential solution that is implementable without a systemic overhaul; that is how the planners can use the tools at their disposal as a possible solution.

This paper aims to highlight the epistemological problems, i.e., the problems in the outlook towards the planning of development in the city. This examination will be carried out by looking at the 'spirit' of Mumbai that has been shaped not only by the people but also the material objects and the intangible elements of the place, such as the buildings, public spaces, climate, and so on. I reveal how the perspective towards planning, highlighted by policies are influenced by a neoliberal framework. This has a direct influence on the genius loci of a place. Genius loci of the city here refers to the city of Mumbai<sup>3</sup> and not the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR)<sup>4</sup>.

This paper will only focus on the contemporary genius loci of the city, as there is no qualitative theoretical work undertaking the task of interpreting and articulating the genius loci of Mumbai. Any inclusion of the historical genius loci would warrant its own examination based on historical sources, which will deviate from the core arguments of the paper. Data cited in this paper pertains to the city of Mumbai generally, as there are disparities with specific measurements. For example, the temperature and pollution measurements will differ according to the city localities. Hence, empirical data has been cited where it relevantly addresses the city as a whole.

Further, I aim to lay out a potential solution, looking specifically at the district of Lazdynai in Vilnius—the capital of Lithuania—as a case study; how the architects created a district which perpetuated the community spirit while imbibing the spirit of local landscape and existing culture, all while navigating the restrictions of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This paper looks at the possibility of creating a unique architectural language of the city that can shape forthcoming construction projects to create spaces conducive to community building that tackle the existing perspective towards development.

### **Methodology**

Recent theoretical works about the genius loci of a place are carried out on the theoretical backdrop of phenomenology. This paper will utilise a methodological approach rooted in phenomenology. In the interpretation of the genius loci of Mumbai, the consideration of the lifeworld experiences is crucial to articulate the genius loci. Lifeworld (*lebenswelt*) is a technical term used in phenomenological theory which refers to the world of our everyday experience. It is an all-encompassing term that includes the surrounding world of nature and culture, i.e., our overall environment. It has both subjective and objective aspects.

In formalising phenomenology Edmund Husserl, “subjected the ordinary cognition... to a critical scrutiny to spill out its essence.” (Mahadevan 2017, 153). Following from this context and the developments in the field, it becomes an important methodological tool for the project. The consideration of lifeworld experiences without the influence of abstractions and theoretical biases (pre-theoretical) is important for the elucidation of the genius loci of a place, which is enabled by a phenomenological framework. As a method, it opens up the space for the inclusion of lived experiences, not limited to metaphysics or epistemology but also ethics (Heinämaa et al. 2022, 3).

Since this paper is specifically looking at the genius loci of Mumbai, it also utilises ethnographic tools of thick participation and thick description. These qualitative tools allow for a deep understanding of the participants experiences—coupled with the phenomenological backdrop—which allow for a complex qualitative analysis of the lifeworld experiences. Such an analysis enables a thorough and holistic elucidation of the genius loci of the city, as this character of the city is not just shaped by its material surroundings but one’s interaction with them.

Following this context, the definition of architecture also needs to be expanded to broaden its horizons, not limiting it to buildings and its design process. This paper follows from interpretations such as that of Pallasmaa (2005) and Schwenkel (2021), which articulates—with the support of phenomenological experiences—how architecture (infrastructure) affects us at the level of all the senses, not just sight. Architects ought to consider the context and impact of their work in this sense. This means architecture is not merely to design a structure that looks good but one that can be inhabited. The inclusion of phenomenological tools opens up the scope for inclusion of lived experiences in the interpretation of architecture and how it affects the viewer.

Another aspect in the articulation of the city’s genius loci are the residents and their attitude towards the city. The residents of the city play a big role in its defining characteristic, especially

in a densely populated city such as Mumbai. In this regard, this paper utilises interpretation of the many voices of its residents through art and discourse. This paper primarily will look at the anthology titled *Mapping of Mumbai* (2024), as it is a specialised collection of writings about the city, written by its residents and has a diverse group of authors that allows for wide representation of the city's demographic. The timing of this work is also not divorced from the city's contemporary reality, placing it in the current socio-political context.

As the paper primarily deals with the problems of the perspective towards development in Mumbai, this methodological backdrop enables one to integrate theoretical support across various disciplines to support one's argument or find a cause for it. These references are borrowed from various disciplines as the experiences are not limited or bound by disciplinary boundaries. This dynamic approach will allow us to articulate the genius loci of Mumbai, enabling us to capture its polyvalent and diverse character.

### **Genius Loci, the Spirit**

Genius Loci, originally a Latin term; its use can be traced to the ancient world, particularly the Romans. They thought of each place as having a guardian spirit and regarded them as tutelary for the particular premise. Literally translated genius loci is the 'spirit of the place,' or its 'characteristic spirit' (Kozljanič 2023, 17). More recently however, in the twentieth century, the term is found in theory, articulated primarily by phenomenologists and aestheticians.

The contemporary conception of the term is grounded largely in phenomenology. The first attempt was made by Christian Norberg-Schulz to articulate a phenomenology of space (Kozljanič 2023, 20). Subsequently there have been many scholars working on this idea, and the field of phenomenology as a whole to take the concept forward. Due to the broad nature of this concept, it becomes important to clarify the interpretation utilised and to enumerate some of its qualities.<sup>5</sup>

Thinkers from the field of phenomenology, after Norberg-Schulz consider pre-theoretical lifeworld experiences seriously (Kozljanič 2023, 19). This means that they do not rely on abstraction of the experiences of the subject. The consideration of such experiences does not assume that each experience has a pre-given abstract concept or fact. Genuine experiences result from "holistic" and "meaningful" situations (Kozljanič 2023, 19). Considering this backdrop, these thinkers widen the scope of the lived experiences utilised in their theories to look at a phenomenology of 'place.' These theories consider the place to have a special characteristic not only because of the meaning ascribed to it by humans but also the impact it has on us (hence the consideration of pre-theoretical lifeworld experiences). The holistic approach they take, as Marilena Vecco (2019) elaborates, implies that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and these parts have a relation amongst them. This relationship consequently acknowledges all the parts and their significance in making up this whole.

The notion of place here is this whole that encompasses the material landscape one resides and interacts with, along with its culture that arises and evolves with its inhabitants. These parts constitute the genius loci of a particular place. The genius loci of a place in that sense can be

thought of as its atmosphere or ambience in the conventional sense of the terms. There is a unique spirit of a place, characteristic to it which is constituted by its components. These components include but are not limited to its buildings and trees but also the various resources required for its sustenance. It encompasses the tangible and the intangible, the environment created has different factors affecting it, not just limited to the physical objects that constitute it. They are intersubjective, and a result of the “relationship between life, physical space, people and creative expression.” (Vecco 2019, 4). They are neither “psychically projected” nor “socio-culturally constructed” (Kozljanič 2023, 20).

In this regard the genius loci is an ambiguous notion. It is a system that defines and redefines itself, where each component is participating in this process, which sustains the genius loci (Vecco 2019, 4). According to Kozljanič (2023), they can be “experienced empathetically, perceived physiognomically, and communicated intersubjectively” (20). He distinguishes between the geographical units in the analysis of genius loci (Kozljanič 2023, 19). In this paper, we are looking at the genius loci of “climate zones,” which are large geographical units that extend “farther than the eye can see (unless one looks from outer space)” (Kozljanič 2023, 20). The analysis of the genius loci requires interpretation (Vecco 2019, 5–6); it is through this interpretation that it is transmitted (Vecco 2019, 6). A foray into the examination and articulation of the genius loci of a place cannot be limited to a single layered perspective, but has to employ a multi-layered perspective. They are to be dug up like archaeology and its many sedimented aspects exposed (Kozljanič 2023, 22) and “gently” articulate the situations result in the experiences (Kozljanič 2023, 19).

### **Genius loci of Mumbai**

The spirit or atmosphere of Mumbai is to be interpreted as there is no specific work articulating it; this will take place through “thick participation” and “thick description” (Kozljanič 2023, 20) as a phenomenological research tool. The interpretation carried out is of a climate-zone. It is entirely possible that the nuances of smaller geographical units differ from the interpretation presented, as they have their own atmosphere<sup>6</sup>, following from the interpretation established earlier.

There are collective understandings of a place and individual interpretation which might differ. Individuals “have alternating ways of grasping and explaining genius loci” (Hunt 2022, 9) as it is not a simple enumeration of facts and figures.<sup>7</sup> Starting off at the sites primarily associated with the day-to-day functioning of the city, I aim to further look at the landscape of the city, environmentally and architecturally.

The following sections will be a combination of narrative accounts of my lived experiences in the city of Mumbai, along with the interpretive task of articulating the genius loci. The narrative accounts will be supported by theoretical evidences. This examination will mainly be divided into two subsections, the first one looking at the architecture<sup>8</sup> of the city and the other examining the residents and their interaction with the city. The last subsection will be a short elucidation of the genius loci of the city, as interpreted based on the arguments/accounts of the previous subsections.

## **I. Architectural Genius Loci**

This subsection is sub-divided into narrative accounts and theoretical support. This is done to systematically present the arguments for my claim, and avoid ambiguity.

### **Thick description**

The way in which redevelopment of old buildings is taking place; there is a mixture of old and new structures. The newer structures are designed either to be densely populated or to be gated communities with amenities for its residents. These structures are tall, imposing and monotonous; lacking subjective character and induce a feeling of alienation for many people. Only few have access to these places, built in narrow lanes or gated land parcels housing defunct textile mills or by razing the chawls (communal working-class housing), these do not fit in with the history and culture of the formerly working-class areas. These places encourage and enable discrimination by their very design. For example, gig workers in these redeveloped buildings are often accorded separate entrances away from the view of the main one. Moreover, structures like these do not blend into the existing landscape.

Inter-spaces between the road and the building such as footpaths, bus stops, and so on are neglected. Rampant construction leaves such spaces in half-broken/dilapidated conditions, which impact walkability and overall mobility. The older parts of the city, due to its constraints on space, has always dealt with this issue as a result of which most residents walk on the roads rather than footpaths. Factors such as overcrowded public transportation and public areas, traffic and pollution also discourage movement of people.

The redevelopment related construction activity has led to a drastic reduction in the green coverage of the city, which in turn has contributed to the increase in urban temperatures. The situation has particularly worsened due to the widespread utilisation of concrete in not just these projects and but also in the form of concrete roads laid down replacing the tar roads. Pollution in the city has increased as well, affecting visibility and breathing.

The public spaces are frequently policed, either with increased surveillance cameras or personnel. Larger public spaces are usurped for infrastructural improvement, while the remaining ones become overcrowded. The concretisation of the city roads inhibits walkability during its construction which further discourages mobility. These roads have also started to deteriorate, creating potholes while directly contributing to the particulate pollution in the city.

### **Theoretical support**

The popular discourse blames infrastructural problems of the city on overcrowding; however, data reveals a decrease in the growth rate of the city's population (Devy 2025, 82). This needs a closer examination of the history of rapid development in the city and the policies that have driven it.

Swapna Banerjee-Guha (2016) points out that the plans to develop Mumbai into an international finance centre by McKinsey & Company (McKinsey)—a consulting company—in

1993 and the 2003 *Vision Plan* for Mumbai by the NGO Bombay First and McKinsey, are driven by neoliberal logic. These plans do not take into consideration the history of the city, advocating for newer industries to take up the mantle of development and ignoring the strong labour base of the city that had lost jobs due to the mills closing down (Banerjee-Guha 2016, 74–76).

This development was based on the logic of ‘eradication of homeless and jobless people,’ not eradication of homelessness and joblessness per se (Banerjee-Guha 2002, 122). State policies such as the JNNURM are committed to the “first-worlding” of cities in the Global South (Banerjee-Guha, 2010, 2). Gated communities, shopping malls, corporate plazas and such become manifestations of these policies that do not take into consideration the disenfranchised and aggregate the already existing inequalities of a place. This approach aggravates the already existing inequalities, which in the case of Mumbai takes place along the lines of class, gender, and caste. Exclusion or neglect of the interests of the poor and vulnerable has dire consequences for cities in India, where the development driven by profit usually exploits these inequalities rather than bridging gaps (Banerjee-Guha 2010, 200, 203).<sup>9</sup>

City planning in the city is carried out by local municipal bodies such as the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in the plans it lays out spanning a twenty-year period as directed by the Maharashtra Regional and Town Planning (MRTP) Act, 1966. This act dictates city and town planning authorities to come up with a development plan (DP) every twenty years. The most recent, Mumbai Development Plan 2034<sup>10</sup> has made meaningful strides in its initial drafts towards inclusive housing and creation of land for public use by advocating for a “proactive process of public consultation” (Patel 2015, 70). However, these efforts are at the mercy of the state government officials as pointed out by Shirish Patel (2015), “can always interfere later by making changes that... do not change the character” (70) of the DP, this is permitted by Section 37(1) of the MRTP. Most recently, the DP department of the BMC issued a notification in June 2025 to modify the DP 2034 that changed the land reservation in the Western suburbs of the city to help facilitate the construction of the coastal road. The directive for the modification came from the CM while the notification was issued by the BMC (Naik 2025).

Apart from the interference of the state officials, the Mumbai DP 2034 is in favour of the real estate industry and private builders, the purpose of which seems to be to maximise the builders’ profits and not improvement of the living condition of the city (Patel 2015, 73). The DP for the MMR is put forth by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA). This plan that fully came into effect from 20<sup>th</sup> June 2021 (MMRDA n.d) is ill-planned with no proper layouts which can lead to random development (Patel 2017, 20,21). All of this points out the poor long-term planning of the civic bodies. This follows in the trend of policy favouring builders and the real estate, as pointed out by R.N. Sharma (2010) lobby to enable construction and maximise their profits (80, 83 – 84) that leads to widening inequalities (88 – 90).

Widespread construction has a direct impact on the city’s environmental quality as well. As indicated by Somvanshi and Kaur (2024) the ambient air temperature of the city is getting

hotter as the average relative humidity (RH) has increased. Persistently high RH levels affect the body's cooling mechanisms, the effects of which can be fatal. As a result of this increase in the RH, the heat index of the city has also increased making it feel hotter than the ambient air temperature, finding that Mumbai was on average 7 percent hotter in 2014–2023 compared to 2001–2010. The impact of the increase in RH is felt most during the pre-monsoon and monsoon seasons. They also highlight how the built-up areas of the city have increased which also has led to night time cooling not happening as effectively, which also has an impact on a person's health as they are not getting a chance to recover from the heat.

Chakraborty et al., (2024) have developed a comprehensive urban environmental quality index (UEQ index). In their study, they highlight the disparity in the UEQ index in different localities, with densely populated and industrially active ones having a poorer UEQ compared to areas with higher tree density and lower population density. Between 2017–2023 through trend analysis, they showcase an increase in the areas with a UEQ of “Low” and “Very Low” and a decrease of “Very High” quality areas. This study takes into consideration various parameters such as built-up area, infrastructural problems, traffic density and so on that has led to the current trends.

Ehrenfeucht and Loukaiyou-Siders (2010) acknowledge how interspaces such as footpaths have an important role to play towards community building, as spaces of interaction where the residents of a locality can interact with each other and form bonds (460). They propose city developers to take active outlook towards the planning of interspaces. Concurrently, Rao (2024) highlights how the degradation of social infrastructure has a direct correlation to the problem of loneliness and consequently the feeling of alienation. Surveillance also contributes to this feeling as noted by Ronsen (2024), who mentions how constant surveillance affects trust and changes how we view ourselves and others, fundamentally affecting how one builds and perceives their relationships.

## II. Community Spirit

The anthology titled *Mapping of Mumbai* (2024)—along with the ethnographic tools—is primarily used to highlight and support the points made in this section.<sup>11</sup> Mumbai as a city has a diverse mixture of migrants and locals that constitute a heterogenous mass; whose life in Mumbai is represented through various works of art. This anthology provides the necessary scope to interpret what a resident of Mumbai goes through, through first-hand accounts. Art also allows one to unravel the various undertones that are not explicitly said, but dug up through interpretation.

### Description and Interpretation

The residents of the city are largely inclusive and imbibe a certain kindness. Where strangers do not hesitate to help. Commuters of public transport engage in community building activities such as regular travellers of the local trains who form groups to sing *bhajans* (devotional songs) or play cards for the duration of their travel. The residents of the city have always endured through hardships to come together, that is what the 2008 peace marches organised post 26/11 terrorist

attacks also symbolise. Poetic expressions about the city reveal the inclusive nature of the city, accepting those who come to it. The romanticised depictions of Mumbai, contribute to its charm.

The local trains and buses become sites for such intermingling, as they are efficient means of transport in the city, where one can find people from various backgrounds in one space.<sup>12</sup> Largely themes of resilience come through in the poetry where one has to traverse the overcrowded mass transit and traffic every day, while managing the rapid pace of life in the city.

Along with the opening lines of the paper, other poems in the anthology reflect the aforementioned themes. Work such as that of Arpita Ghosh (2024) “As one wonders, did fiction borrow from real life or was it vice-versa... but one major lesson it gave – life is all about paisa.”<sup>13</sup> (12). The poetry of Ashish Bist (2024) captures the feeling of nostalgia and a change in the mood of the city with the lines, “First, with the liberalisation, the corporates had no choice,/ But to focus on growing their profit, for them to rejoice” and “For transportation ease, metro construction is a big leap,/ Sadly for this, many cricket grounds had to be dug deep.” (14). Gopika Menon (2024) warns against glamorisation of the city and advocates one to go beyond the superficial and materialistic aspects of the city, personifying the city as someone who is not fair highlighting how most romanticisation of the city only refers to its affluent neighbourhoods; Menon’s sentiment is best captured in the line, “*She’s the Mumbai, their Mumbai,*/ one which your eyes forget with every blink.” (17).

Anger and frustration come through in the poem of Vallari Tulzapurkar (2024), whose long poem quite eloquently expresses their frustration with a hint of anger, which turns to sadness and helplessness towards the end, from “Stop agonising, Bombay,/ I’m dying with you./ For I’ve seen how/ they treat you/ like a slut;” to “Stop agonising, dear/ for I die with you/ each day/ as I feel you/ wither away/ under their wanton pilferage.” (67-68).<sup>14</sup> These are some of the examples I chose to highlight from the anthology, that also comprises of prose reflecting similar themes.

Many of the poems in the anthology and conversations overheard at these sites have a tone of helplessness and nostalgia. The residents of the city witness the transformation around them, and the various changes that materially influence the characteristic of the city. Helplessness is set in because the residents find no accurate representation of their voice to the decision makers, which they are forced to carry on their day-to-day travails due to the precarity of the neoliberal structure.

### **Articulation of the Genius Loci**

Considering the many points of the preceding sections, I label the genius loci of the city as contradictory. This is because one is confused in the midst of these changes which occur without any regard for the local history and ethos of the place. Architecture (or infrastructure) here is not merely the process of designing and building a structure. A lack of consideration towards the material landscape of the city has led to this contradictory genius loci.

Contradiction highlights the logical incongruity of something, or the incompatibility of certain factors. The city of Mumbai in the two aspects of its genius loci are incongruous. This is

the contradiction between the existing characteristic of the city, highlighted and perpetuated by its residents, and the shape it is taking with the changes in the material landscape of the city. This is why I label the genius loci of the city as contradictory, as its residents find themselves in midst of a transforming landscape.

This transformation occurs on the backdrop of the neo-liberal policies, as demonstrated previously, the material landscape of the city manifests the intention behind these policies which is one of growing inequality/distance, where development is not thought of keeping everyone in mind, but only a selective segment of the population. The residents imbibe an outlook that runs opposite from what the material reality induces. There is a discord between the material reality and the existing spirit of the city.

The very outlook towards the development of the city is heavily influenced by policies and ideas that are driven by profitability for a small percentage of the population (Banerjee-Guha 2002, 126–127). This examination of the genius loci highlights the several issues that arise due to such an outlook. In response I present the case study of the planning and execution of the district of Lazdynai in Vilnius, Lithuania as an alternative perspective towards city-planning that respects the local geography and culture.

The reason to look at Lazdynai and not Indian planned cities such as Bhubaneshwar is because they are going through a similar process of transition as a result of policy from the centre and state, such as the JNNURM which initiated this trend. More recently, policies from the centre i.e., the union government, such as the Viksit Bharat 2047 carry this trend forward. This vision focuses creation of jobs by reducing regulations that can enable employers to increase hiring and integration of technology such as AI in governance to increase its reach (Virmani 2024). It follows the neoliberal logic of previous policies (Sharma 2024, 75). Even, state policies such as the Viksit Maharashtra 2047 are in line with the centre and hence fundamentally follow from neoliberal logic (Department of Tourism, Government of Maharashtra (GoM) 2025).

### **A Look at Lazdynai**

Lazdynai is a district in the city of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. The country was under Soviet rule until 1990, after which it gained independence. Under Soviet rule, Vilnius was rapidly urbanised as a part of a push to increase residential areas in the Eastern Bloc to accommodate its fast-growing population. This was especially seen in the urban centres of the USSR. Vilnius, being the largest city of Lithuania underwent a transition, albeit its transition was a quite different one. Its newly urbanised districts—Lazdynai and Žirmūnai—started to gain attention across the USSR for its innovative implementation, even advertised in official state propaganda to highlight the success of the Soviet housing program (Janušauskaitė 2018). The aforementioned districts have both, received state awards, with Lazdynai being the first urban neighbourhood to be conferred with the Lenin prize, the highest state honour for architecture in the former USSR.

In the light of a housing shortage—the Soviet administration following Stalin’s death—eased up on their restrictions for construction of buildings (Berger et al. 2019, 98). This was

undertaken under Nikita Khrushchev's reign. Houses were standardised; mass produced in factories and made of iron and concrete, with little consideration to the individual and geographical needs (Pilkauskas & Žickis 1994, 38). Mass housing units were built in cities that looked the same, lacking diversity and creativity.

During this time, a new model of residential district, called the microrayon (micro-district) was undertaken. These included public services which were divided into several levels depending upon their use in everyday life. As explicated by M. Šiupšinskas and E. Lankots (2019), services such as kindergartens, schools, bakeries, etc, were considered to be of everyday use and would be located across the microrayon. The second category included services used sporadically across the week such as the bank, post office, laundry, etc., and these were located at the centre of the microrayon. The third category which included buildings such as cultural centres would be in the city centre, accessible via public transport from the districts. This model was inspired by Swedish towns which were based on the idea of equality.

The houses and these districts were all regulated by the Soviet authorities (Drémaitė 2019, 73–75) and these became the base for city planning in the Soviet Union (Janušauskaitė 2018). During this period, also referred to as the Khrushchev Thaw, the USSR restored its relationship with Scandinavian nations. This later enabled the movement of planners and architects to Scandinavian countries, which has heavily influenced the planning and implementation of Lazdynai.

Over the years, the decrees such as, “On Improvement of Design Practice in the Field of Civil Construction, Planning and Construction of Cities” in 1963 and “On Measures to Improve the Quality of Residential and Civil Construction” in 1969 were adopted by the Soviet Communist Party Leadership (Drémaitė 2019, 77, 82). These allowed for an increase in experimentation in the construction of housing districts and to decentralise the design to ensure better quality houses for its residents and fight against urban monotony.

Lazdynai, which was still under construction at the time benefitted greatly from the passing of such decrees. This backdrop, aided by the production of series 1-464-LI houses by the factories and the execution by the builders made the successful implementation of the project possible (Drémaitė 2019, 75; Janušauskaitė 2018). The planning of the district was done keeping in mind the local landscape of the area and the old city of Vilnius (Janušauskaitė 2018). The architects were inspired by Scandinavian localities—Tapiola, Finland, and Vällingby, Sweden—and particularly by Scandinavian architects like Alvar Aalto. They were able to develop their unique architectural language which manifested in Lazdynai (Drémaitė 2019, 83). This language took into consideration the local environmental factors, as long as the local culture and history (Drémaitė 2019, 86–90). While deriving inspiration from elsewhere, they also recognised that it is the residents who would be assessors of the spirit of the place.

Responses from the new residents were largely positive, and it was seen to be a pioneering example of Soviet urban planning. While the very first residents took some time to adjust, once

the district started filling up, and the Lenin Prize was announced, almost all the residents had a good word about the district (Janušauskaitė 2018). It was lush and green; unique yet mass-produced buildings and microrayons with amenities within walking distances as mandated and recognised by the Soviet planning authorities.

These microrayons which comprised of a rayon (district), by the nature of its construction provided services for all the residents of the district and its planning ensured community building, via walking paths, illumination of public areas and positioning of these services. Even after the independence of Lithuania and the opening up of the country to globalisation, Soviet housing districts remain less segregated than other parts of Vilnius (D. Burneika et al 2019, 268). Lazdynai seemed to have captured and transmitted to the spirit of Vilnius.

### **Divergences and Convergences**

This case study and the works cited highlight the interplay of the residents with the architecture of a place. Lazdynai highlights how responsible planning and execution that shape the material reality has an effect on the spirit of the place. However, the context of Lazdynai and Mumbai are different from one another. Due to this, those differences will be addressed while imagining a solution for the problem that Mumbai faces using the case study of Lazdynai.

Mumbai faces different sets of challenges compared to Lazdynai, Vilnius. Firstly, the geographic challenge of having water on three sides of the city severely limits its scope for expansion. To tackle this, previous planners and architects have reclaimed land from the sea where possible and also the waterways which divided the city into seven islands. This leaves very little choice but to go upwards in its expansion. Secondly, Lazdynai had state funding and state land to plan the district and build it out; Mumbai, on the other hand, has relied heavily on private real estate developers and public-private partnerships in the revamp of the city.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, in the erstwhile USSR, the decisions for design and construction stemmed from a centralised committee. The decisions for Mumbai's planning are taken by multiple urban development and governance agencies, apart from the influences or guidance from the state or national policy.

The underlying ideas that inspire the development in both the areas are derived from fundamentally different ideas. The recent development in Mumbai is motivated by a neoliberal idea that encourages free markets and reduces regulations, especially for builders, to promote speedy development. Consequently, this leads to the state of the city as we see it today (and elaborated above). Lazdynai, or urban planning in the USSR as a whole was driven by socialist ideas that lead to a more egalitarian outlook towards such planning. As mentioned previously, the inspiration derived by the planners of Lazdynai from the Scandinavian cities also resonates with this egalitarian approach (M. Šiupšinskas and E. Lankots 2019, 304), in its consideration of the local landscape and existing culture.

However, there are similarities as well: Mumbai, like Lazdynai has also benefitted from its portrayal in media. Vilnius and Mumbai have had the benefit of being the capital (in case of the latter, capital of the western Indian state of Maharashtra) or important centres of commerce, which

incentivises the authorities to plan for expansion and development. Mumbai like Vilnius is historically and culturally rich, with efforts from many citizen groups and bodies being made to preserve them in a responsible way. Both the cities house some of the premier academic institutions of their respective country, which provide access to academics to carry out research that can meaningfully shape policy.

### **Reconciliation**

The district of Lazdynai can provide a template based on which the planners of Mumbai can develop their own language of development that is truly inclusive. As Lazdynai's process showcased, care and efforts were taken by the planners to work with the tools they had. This was done in the form of research and on-ground visitation to ensure that the new neighbourhood is not disrupting the existing geographical landscape and cultural spirit of the place.

In attempting to emulate a model, trying to be the next "Shanghai" (Bombay First 2003, in Sharma 2010, 80), Mumbai loses its own originality. A shift in the perspective to approach development makes it possible to carry out this work in such a way that it fits into the unique geographic and cultural landscape of the city. Looking at how Lazdynai was planned, the planning process of Mumbai can adopt a similar perspective.

Apart from the architectural design itself, the planning principles of Lazdynai also help tackle the problem of elite activism. Solomon Benjamin (2010)<sup>16</sup> raises this issue vis-à-vis Bangalore, which holds true in the context of Mumbai as well. He uses the term "Trojan Horses" to speak of people involved in the functioning of the system such as low-level bureaucrats and councillors who take an active part in the manufacturing of neoliberalism through kickbacks and other unofficial incentives (103–104). Citizen groups working with the government comprise of people from a middle/ upper class background. Their work usually alienates the poor, advocating for their eviction in order to promote "clean and green cities", that has even led to eviction of tribal people from the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Borivali (Benjamin 2010, 111). In the context of Mumbai, J. S. Anjara (2009) further notes how there is a disconnect between citizen groups and the poor. The work to remove hawkers is carried out to make the streets more orderly and cleaner; in doing so there is a deliberate distancing from the politics of the poor done by these groups.

The situation however, is not so simplistic as noted in both Benjamin (2010) and Anjara's (2009) work, this goes beyond neo-liberalism in a way highlighting an uneven and contradictory relationship between civic activism and state power where the activists often claim to represent the abstract citizen, which alienates the poor and disenfranchised in the process. Equitable development, approached through the framework of development as adopted by the planners of Lazdynai can help solve this issue. The municipal bodies need to go beyond interaction and dialogues with civic bodies, but undertake surveys that include all segments of the city's population.

Mumbai has an advantage to be governed by localised municipal bodies such as the BMC and the MMRDA, that have the mechanisms and resources to set up a system to ensure the voices

of the residents reach the planners and officials. Apart from the elected officials, they can also establish outreach programs and surveys to ensure equitable and need based development. Such initiatives can help the planners of the city to understand its cultural and historical identity, providing them with the necessary tools to develop a unique architectural language of Mumbai that can take into account its various nuances and transmit them.

Another aspect to consider is the impact on the environment. Ecologically, care and empathy along with a nuanced understanding of the culture of the place is important. The planners of Lazdynai showcased this in the design of various buildings that follow the terrain, rather than terraforming the landscape to conform to the buildings. Not only does this lead to architectural variety but also can reduce negative ecological ramifications. In addition to the problem of pollution, there is another ecological challenge the city faces along the seashore and its water ways. This ecological impact is not just limited to the flora and fauna but also have an impact on the residents of the city, particularly those living near the coasts. The Koli community that heavily rely on fishing have suffered due to the infrastructural projects as it has had a direct impact on the fishing activities (Barnagrwalla 2024). Such problems can be avoided with a more immersed and involved planning process that does not dismiss local culture.

This paper does not advocate for a replication of the planning model used in the Lithuanian district, but rather aims to showcase the need and benefits in developing an architectural language unique to the city's needs. Nor does it advocate against a particular architectural style such as high rises. Such buildings are important as they increase density.

However, this paper wishes to point out the various problems that arise due to the approach towards development currently being implemented in the city of Mumbai. The city has a diverse topography and cultural landscape that has the potential for a diverse architecture landscape as opposed to the monotonous replication of high rises and plazas. Similar to how the architects of Lazdynai designed stepped buildings that did not disrupt the topography of the area while also accommodating dense residential complexes.

The local municipal bodies can regulate the type of construction that can happen in each area. As the city is divided into administrative wards and planning zones as per the DP 2036, a decentralised approach can ensure efficient and adequate execution of the plans drawn up. This system can much easily utilise the planning approach the paper suggests.

The case study of Lazdynai showcases how a shift in perspective towards planning can lead to development that is truly inclusive and not just beneficial for a particular segment of the population. Through this comparison attempt has been made to emphasise the need for Mumbai to develop an architectural language unique to itself that can tackle the problems of alienation and exclusion, while ensuring the perpetuation of its *genius loci*. This can be carried out by the existing institutional infrastructure of the local municipal bodies. In a way, this solution can be implemented without a fundamental systematic overhaul.

## Conclusion

As Späth (2025) highlights the shift away from neo-liberalism and globalisation in the world, entering this period of interregnum, the need for Mumbai to move away from alienating and imitative policies stands out as a pertinent issue. There are plenty of cities and architects that the planners of Mumbai can turn to—apart from the model of Lazdynai presented—in order to derive inspiration for developing the city’s unique architectural language.

The planners can turn to works of architects such as Riken Yamamoto—who creates “conditions through architecture that multiply the opportunities for people to come together and interact by carefully blurring the boundary between public and private”<sup>17</sup> (Aravena 2024, in Riken Yamamoto 2024)—and derive inspiration for creating a landscape that is inclusive and unique.

However, we see that the push towards Viksit Maharashtra 2047 accelerates the existing perspective towards policy and planning. The methodology in the official government document mentions a “survey of citizens” and inputs from “industry leaders” as the only direct input from someone outside the administrative structure (GoM 2025). This is akin to the plan presented by Bombay First, an NGO in collaboration with McKinsey Consulting, which ushered in the changes in policy and construction projects we see today.<sup>18</sup>

Projects for tourisms that indicate the use of sea planes and cruises while also wanting to develop eco-tourism (Department of Tourism, GoM 2025), does not take into account the existing damage caused to ecological spheres with rampant construction. These projects run the risk of becoming “too programmed and become inauthentic and ultimately dissatisfying” also of “exacerbate already existing inequities by making daily life harder for some people in an attempt to satisfy business and middle-class interests” (Ehrenfeucht & Loukaiyou-Siders, 2010, 465).

There is a need and possibility of urban development that is considerate, empathetic, and informed of the local history, environment, and culture.<sup>19</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The opening up of the economy and a push towards urbanization was made as far back as the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), however, for the purposes of this paper, I look at the push in rapid urbanization policies ushered in after the economic reforms of 1991. See Mehra (2016) for an overview on urbanization in India.

<sup>2</sup> Gloria Watkins (1952-2021) was an American author and theorist, who wrote under the pen name bell hooks, which she preferred to use in all lowercase characters to decenter herself and to maintain focus on the substance of her writing.

<sup>3</sup> The city here is confined to the city limits under the jurisdiction of the BMC, Mulund in the Eastern suburbs and Dahisar in the Western suburbs. This is because consideration of the MMR region will complicate matters in terms of policy and jurisdiction as this paper can primarily focus on the municipal bodies of the BMC and MMRDA. Due to their planned and deliberate nature, the consideration of MMR regions will add layers to this articulation which go beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> However, references to policy of the MMR will be made where necessary.

<sup>5</sup> See Hunt 2022 on how the term has evolved.

<sup>6</sup> To point out in this case, following from the established interpretation of the genius loci the atmosphere of a place is not fragrant-like and dispersing. This means the various sub-areas of Mumbai divided officially by wards or locally overtime by its residents can have a different genius loci. For example, the genius loci of a locality like Lokhandwala or Oshiwara in Andheri West, will differ from that of Nehru Nagar in Kurla East or even Seepz in Andheri East.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to clarify here we will only be articulating contemporary genius loci, not a historical outlook of its changes.

<sup>8</sup> The interpretation of architecture is broadened as mentioned previously in the methodology section. This is the interpretation used in the paper henceforth.

<sup>9</sup> An example of the manifestation of these policies in Mumbai are the two main roads of the suburbs the New Link Road and the LBS Marg, both having metros built on them being flanked by high rise buildings that are a mixture of commercial and residential uses, while the stops are usually right outside a shopping mall or commercial plaza.

<sup>10</sup> The twenty year stretch for the BMC is 2014-2304, while the MMRDA has put forth the DP for the Greater Mumbai region from 2016-2034.

<sup>11</sup> Here I look primarily at the poems of the book as poetry is “gentle explication of the situation” (Schmitz in Kozljanič 2023, 19).

<sup>12</sup> This is especially important in a country like India, where even touch is considered to be polluting. In a packed train, no one has a choice.

<sup>13</sup> Paisa translates to money in this context.

<sup>14</sup> The lines cited here are from poems, however due to the purposes of this paper they are not formatted as per the original. “/” is used to separate lines as is printed in the text.

<sup>15</sup> With policy that is drafted to create favourable conditions for the authorities and builders to take property for projects (Sharma, 2010), this point of land availability and resources can be contested.

<sup>16</sup> A chapter from the anthology *Accumulation by Dispossession*.

<sup>17</sup> Looking at Yamamoto’s work, one can say such architecture is being implemented in the suburbs of Mumbai in largely “upper class” gated community projects.

<sup>18</sup> The idea of having people from corporates and industries shaping public policy creates a divide in the development. The disenfranchised classes without adequate representation do not get the resources they need, this is highlighted in Benjamin (2010) and Banerjee-Guha (2009,2010,2016).

<sup>19</sup> A version of this paper was presented at the Viksit Maharashtra 2047: Pathways to Inclusive and Sustainable Development conference on Nov 29, 2025. I am grateful to the comments of the participants of the conference and the comments from the reviewers of *Transarea Journal* to help improve this paper, however, all its limitations are my own.

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