

## **Your Place, My Place, or Our Public Space?: Privacy and Space in Mumbai**

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With approximately 20 million urban dwellers living on a narrow peninsula, Mumbai rivals other cities with the highest density. On average, its citizens have living areas of 48 square feet per person (as compared to 111.5 square feet in Shanghai). Furthermore, each person has access to an average of a mere 11.84 square feet of open space (e.g., gardens, parks, recreation ground and playgrounds). One Mumbai resident illustrates this situation: “My house must be about 10 by 10 [feet]; no, it may be about 10-by-8 [feet] . . . About 10 people live there. Actually, we are all 10 people right now [sic], but sometimes 2 more come. So, many times it is about 10 to 12 people in the same house. We adjust in the manner that at one time, no more than 6 of us enter the room [house], as we have our things around, too, and everyone sleeps on the floor.”<sup>1</sup>

Calling this an extremely condensed living situation seems an understatement, especially when it is contrasted with living space in a Western context. Compared to many Mumbaikars, the average New Yorker (in any of the five boroughs) is “living large,” with a home of 1,124 square feet; homeowners in Washington D.C. and Atlanta enjoy almost twice as much space as New Yorkers.<sup>2</sup> In January 2013, when New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg endorsed the “micro apartment” scheme (a project that granted special exemptions allowing developers to construct 300-square-foot studio apartments when city rules require most newly built apartments to be at least 400 square feet) many residents questioned whether that would be adequate living space. Considered next to the reality of living in a home of eighty to 100 square feet, with as many as ten to twelve people, as described above, a 300-square-foot “micro apartment” seems palatial.

Given these extraordinarily dense living conditions in their city, where do Mumbaikars find the space they need for private moments? Moreover, what does privacy mean in this particular context and what can it tell us about cities around the globe and how we can best live in them?

Privacy is an elusive and emotionally charged concept that professionals and academics alike still have trouble defining and interpreting. It was clear that an exploration of privacy in Mumbai would entail challenging complexities. Documenting how privacy is experienced in Mumbai’s spaces, however, not only provides a starting point to consider new designs for public space in the city, but has the potential to open up opportunities to rethink how privacy can be (re)distributed between personal and public space in other cities around the world. What began as a conceptual challenge to find a clear way to answer these questions, quantify privacy (an inherently subjective term), and better understand it with regard to the use and functions of space, was actualized as a seven-month participatory BMW Guggenheim Lab city research project that engaged

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<sup>1</sup> Respondent profile: gender: male; age: 28; location: Malabar Hill; class: poor.

<sup>2</sup> “Average Home Sizes in Washington D.C., Atlanta Twice As Much as in New York,” Propertyshark.com, January 4, 2012, <http://www.propertyshark.com/Real-Estate-Reports/2012/01/04/average-home-sizes-in-washington-d-c-atlanta-twice-as-much-as-in-new-york>.

Mumbaikars in conversations and surveys and initiated thoughtful reflection about how citizens move through and meet their needs in Mumbai.

## **Research Process**

The BMW Guggenheim Lab—a mobile laboratory that travels to cities worldwide—in cooperation with Mumbai-based independent research collective Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action and Research (PUKAR) and Mumbai Lab Team member and demographer Aisha Dasgupta, conceived of this project during the Lab’s initial on-the-ground research-and-development phases in mid-February, 2012. For Lab staff fresh to the city, the subtle and overwhelming complexities and systems that drive the city (physical and otherwise) seemed, at times, impenetrable.

Our first meeting with the PUKAR team at their offices was itself an example of how we began to understand the city. As we made our way to the offices via auto rickshaw through winding northern roads, the journey became an exercise in wayfinding—and an opportunity to see how public space is utilized. On our way, we found ourselves lost, circling four blocks in a dusty neighborhood without road signs for nearly forty-five minutes. As our driver spoke little English, we decided to ask for directions at a “barbershop” under a tree. This informal, open-air shop was comprised of two folding chairs, a small table, and no walls—just a ceiling of leaves from the canopy above. With the kind help of a patron in mid-shave, we found the PUKAR offices. For us, this experience emphasized the unique way public space is used and perceived in the city.

As an international team—including the Guggenheim staff in New York, one Lab Team member (Dasgupta) traveling between London and cities in Malawi, and the PUKAR team in Mumbai—it took months of Skype and phone calls at odd hours to get the project’s framework in place; track the progress of research; and provide feedback and analysis of data and of the data-collecting process throughout the study. However, the diverse backgrounds, expertise, and perspectives that each party brought strengthened the collaboration. After weeks of planning, the exploration into privacy and public space launched with thirty-nine in-depth interviews conducted between July and September 2012. These intimate, one-on-one, hours-long discovery interviews were conducted in English, Marathi, and Hindi with residents from different areas of the city. The interviews took place in a variety of settings, from homes to cafes—all places where respondents felt they had freedom to speak without worrying about the presence or judgment of others. This was a factor to be conscious of in a culture where family and community relationships are extremely important to an individual’s daily life.

Questions in the qualitative interviews included “When do you need privacy the most?” and “When do you need it the least?” and explored privacy not only for situations where an individual would be alone, but also a range of situations that involved the presence of others. Responses from these interviews generated a deeper understanding of where, why, and how privacy is interpreted and found in Mumbai. The results, in turn, informed the development of a survey carried out in October and November, 2012 by a network of PUKAR’s “barefoot researchers”—on-the-ground youth located in multiple communities who had been trained to carry out social-science research. These young researchers were in the ideal position to interview and solicit the opinions of more than 800 Mumbaikars from across ten areas around the city who represented a cross section of

Mumbai's socio-economic spectrum.<sup>3</sup> An additional 507 shortened surveys were administered at the Mumbai Lab's six locations during the majority of its open showcase (December 9, 2012 to January 7, 2013).<sup>4</sup>

### **How Do Mumbaikars Describe Privacy?**

As a result of globalization, terms and concepts that once were culturally specific have begun to circulate internationally, often impacting (to different degrees) the individuals and societies who receive and/or absorb these ideas. One upper-middle class Mumbaikar believes that "Here [India] . . . the concept of privacy doesn't exist. . . . We use different words for it. It is not that you didn't feel the need, but you call it maybe not by the simple term 'privacy.' You said, maybe I don't have enough room, maybe I want a different room, you articulate it differently. Because the word had come new [from the West], it doesn't mean that the problems are new, but as sharp as we define privacy is relatively new [sic]."<sup>5</sup>

For this reason, although there is no direct equivalent for the word "privacy" in Hindi or Marathi, it is not surprising that participants described privacy using a range of rather conventionally Western definitions, such as "anonymity," "silence," "seclusion," "solitude," and "autonomy." Even more interesting than these definitions were the ways in which respondents perceived and found or created privacy in their daily lives. One participant commented, "Many people live on [the] streets. There was a time when we were in college, we used to see people living on the street and we used to think as to how they live like this, do they have any privacy at all? But each person has their own view towards privacy. For some people, a closed room is a place as a means for privacy, but for another person, it is not."<sup>6</sup>

One insightful participant noted, "Privacy is shifting . . . it is a shifting expectation based on where you are."<sup>7</sup> Placing privacy on an elastic, constantly shifting continuum reflects Mumbaikars' ability to adapt to their city's rapidly changing and developing environment. In a city where, within the span of a day, a public street can transform from a crowded place of transport, to a vibrant market, to a gathering space for group prayer, and back again to its original state, flexibility is essential for city dwellers. It seems natural that Mumbaikars' attitudes towards privacy and the spaces in which it is achieved would also be in a constant state of change.

### **Where Do Mumbaikars Find Privacy?**

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<sup>3</sup> See page six of PUKAR's presentation, available along with this article as a downloadable PDF at [bmwguggenheimlab.org/where-is-the-lab/mumbai-lab/mumbai-lab-city-projects/privacy-and-spaces-in-mumbai](http://bmwguggenheimlab.org/where-is-the-lab/mumbai-lab/mumbai-lab-city-projects/privacy-and-spaces-in-mumbai).

<sup>4</sup> The Lab visited Byculla (the physical center of the city), Horniman Circle (the main business district in the southern part of the city), Priyadarshini Park (an affluent residential area overlooking the sea), Sambhaji Park in Mulund East (a development on the periphery of the eastern suburbs), Batliboy Compound (part of Central Mumbai's disappearing industrial heritage), and Mahim Beach (an area that connects South Mumbai with its upmarket northern suburbs, just a stone's throw away from the slums of Dharavi).

<sup>5</sup> Respondent profile: gender: male; religion: Hindu; location: Bandra West; class: upper-middle.

<sup>6</sup> Respondent profile: gender: male; religion: Hindu; class: middle.

<sup>7</sup> Respondent profile: gender: male; religion: Hindu; location: Bandra West; class: upper-middle.

“Most of the times [sic] we go to the bus stop. No one can ask or say anything to us. That is why we talk at the bus stop . . .”<sup>8</sup>

“ . . . mental privacy is something that is extremely sacred to me . . . I think by zoning out you can be sitting in a train compartment and completely zone out—you know, where you have a lot of public around you because strangers so you can be intimate with book or just like start dreaming. . . . So I don’t think that much to do with having people around you, but desire to create that private zone within yourself.”<sup>9</sup>

“We (Muslims) are not allowed to recite the ‘Namaaz’ (Muslim prayer) during menstruation. At such times, my father asks me why I’m not praying and I cannot tell him the reason. There are a lot of other problems as well which can be told to only my mother and which cannot be told to anyone else. So in case we (sisters) want to discuss something privately with my mother, we do so under the excuse of going shopping in the market with her and talk on the way there.”<sup>10</sup>

Fifty-four percent of the 800 respondents considered “home” to be their most private space and a place where they find time for themselves—an unexceptional result from a Western perspective. However, many participants also expressed that they consider their home a place where they did not feel comfortable speaking about private matters or did not feel they were granted adequate privacy for their specific needs. Within the home and outside it, neighbors were seen as an added hurdle, as one respondent revealed: “When neighbors are living so close, it is a five-inch wall. If we talk even a little loudly, they can hear what we are saying. That is why we never get that kind of privacy. One should forget privacy when they are living in a *chawl* [a building typology often four to five stories with ten to twenty tenements (rooms) on each floor, typically with shared bathrooms].”<sup>11</sup> This respondent’s story is part of a larger collection of data from this study that suggests that the instinct to find privacy outside the home stems from severe urban overcrowding, which in turn impacts housing.

According to an April 2010 *Bloomberg* article, “. . . a 100-square-meter luxury residence in Mumbai costs about \$1.14 million, or 308 times the average annual income in India, based on calculations from a housing index compiled using sixty-three markets by Knight Frank LLP and income estimates of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency for purchasing-power parity in 2011 . . . Singapore and New York homebuyers would need forty-three years and forty-eight years, respectively, for equivalent residences using national income averages, the data show.”<sup>12</sup> One of the many reasons for Mumbai’s incredible density in terms of residential living is that soaring real estate prices make it impossible for many individuals to live independently. It is not abnormal to find entire families sharing a single room as their sleeping quarters. With such limited space, and the resulting proximity to others, it is not surprising that many find it difficult to have privacy within their own homes. It could be argued that, due to the lack of space in a home, many Mumbai residents seek privacy and private space in the public realm.

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<sup>8</sup> Respondent profile: gender: female, 27; location: Jogeshwari; class: poor.

<sup>9</sup> Respondent profile: gender: female; age: 43; class: upper-middle.

<sup>10</sup> Respondent profile: gender: female; religion: Muslim; class: lower-middle.

<sup>11</sup> Respondent profile: gender: male; location: Jogeshwari; class: lower-middle.

<sup>12</sup> Ailing Tan and Pooja Thakur, “Mumbai is the World’s Least Affordable Home Market,” *Bloomberg*, April 10, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-04-10/mumbai-is-world-s-least-affordable-home-market-chart-of-the-day.html>.

Public spaces frequently mentioned by interviewees as places where they sought privacy included more conventional places such as beachfront spaces and parks, which in Mumbai are often the only open spaces away from traffic and urban noise. Interestingly, respondents also found respite in more unorthodox locations such as bus stops, crowded train compartments, and on the streets themselves, as noted in the statements above.

What does this tell us, then, about what types of environmental and spatial requirements Mumbaikars seek in their city and how they perceive and use public space in general?

## Public Space

It seems that Mumbaikars have a broad notion of public space. One participant responded, “How is public space generated? I mean, I don’t think it’s generated, I think it’s the way you perceive it. Like, if you are in a place where there are many people, then it’s a public place. And if you want yourself to be there, then again it becomes a private space, like, it just depends on how you perceive it. There’s nothing like public space in general. Like, any time I go outside my building, it’s a public space.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to the seashores and parks mentioned by respondents, cinema halls, restaurants, membership clubs, and public toilets were also considered to be public spaces. This brings two points into question: 1) What does this mean in the Western context when we do not typically refer to many of these spaces, such as malls and membership clubs, as public? Does this then provide us with grounds for a broader redefinition of public space? 2) While the concept of public space is quite inclusive in Mumbai, what makes these spaces exceptional is that these spaces typically require a fee for entry or use. This raises issues of accessibility in terms of financial standing, physical proximity, and social acceptance/permission.

One forthright interviewee commented, “I think the real thing is the economic cost of privacy in Mumbai is very high. . . . What it means is that to have a house, it is expensive. To always go to a coffee shop and have a 100-rupee coffee to get ten minutes of conversation. . . . All of those things are the problem.”<sup>14</sup> It is clear that for those with financial constraints, spaces that require payment are not a viable option. According to a 2010 *Hindustan Times* article, approximately 60 percent of Mumbaikars live in a slum shanty or unplanned brick/cement house. Based on that data, it seems safe to assume that the number of those with financial constraints, and thus unable to afford access to many ostensibly “public” spaces, is substantial.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, many urban dwellers (55 percent of the 800 respondents) turn instead to free and local community centers. However, an alarming one-fifth of the respondents simply did not have access to any community space. A male participant from Dharavi, one of the largest slums in the world, shared his anguish over the city’s redevelopment

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<sup>13</sup> Respondent profile: gender: female; age: 20; location: Vile Parle East; class: middle.

<sup>14</sup> Respondent profile: gender: male; religion: Hindu; location: near Mount Mary Church, Bandra West; class: upper-middle.

<sup>15</sup> Bhavika Jain, “62% of Mumbai Lives in Slums: Census,” *Hindustan Times*, October 17, 2012, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/Mumbai/62-of-Mumbai-lives-in-slums-Census/Article1-614027.aspx>.

plans: “We do not have that community space . . . not at all. The kind of buildings that are coming up in Dharavi have their own society and children play in that compound. There are very few libraries, but one cannot talk there. So for me, the mosque gives me that kind of privacy and space to be myself.”

What is interesting to note is that 21 percent of respondents viewed redevelopment as a threat to community spaces, while 20 percent broached the issue of local mafia unofficially co-opting land, leaving few community spaces remaining. Viable community spaces must be safeguarded and maintained so that those living in small, densely packed homes with little privacy have somewhere to meet, and communities have gathering-places for family celebrations, festivals, and rituals. Where such spaces do not exist, new spaces must be created.

One critical point related to social accessibility is that an equal number of men and women were concerned with safety, a topic that came up frequently. For 87 percent of female participants, women’s safety, “eve teasing” (sexual harassment), and the presence of men were the top three criteria that precluded women from accessing many public spaces. These concerns were also recurring themes for men who were concerned about the safety of women. In a city considered one of India’s safest, this was an unexpected response.

So, what is the ideal space to meet these needs and what can we learn from this study that can help inform policy makers and designers for future city designs?

### **Inclusive Planning**

The Lab began this project as an exploration in privacy; it became an exercise in rethinking, reimagining, and exploring how Mumbai’s diverse lifestyles and urban realities use public space. The most significant take-away from the project was the value that lay in collecting an inventory of thoughts, suggestions, and illuminations from Mumbaikars on how they creatively negotiate, adapt, shape, and use spaces in their city to achieve their social demands and daily needs. Our findings revealed telling information about how Mumbaikars see and experience privacy in their city. That rich data helps us unravel questions of why, from whom, when, and where privacy is sought; how it is achieved; and definitions for what privacy is, which were manifold. Above all, the project reaffirmed that access to public spaces that fit city dwellers’ requirements is a challenge that Mumbai faces. Barriers to such spaces include infrastructure, density, financial issues, safety, development, local mafia, and, of course, the sheer lack of these spaces.

We all define the term privacy in a plurality of ways and acknowledge that different people, cultures, and societies actively seek more or less—whatever place one occupies on the spectrum is not better or worse. Rather, the spectrum of needs speaks to the complexity of cities and societies. Similarly, notions of public space come from lived experiences and are consistently being restructured and redefined. More than a study on privacy and public space, the project has captured a candid, personal glimpse of the multifarious ways city dwellers in Mumbai perceive and move through the place they call home.

Many have noted how the more formal built environment of many cities has become vulnerable to the forces of homogenization and the loss of a distinctive identity of place. These factors lead to urban environments that do not necessarily fit the needs of their users. By enabling a more immediate two-way dialog between citizens and government, today's technologies and social media could give Mumbai and other cities around the world a more realistic possibility of fulfilling the needs of individuals and communities in the arenas of housing, public space, livability, and other issues by incorporating more thoughts, ideas, and suggestions from city dwellers on how future urban design is considered.

Rather than using a conventional Western design standard or an existing framework for what "public space" is, being open to alternative and novel ways of perceiving and utilizing available spaces would begin to help fill multiple needs for greater public usage. Inclusive, informal, flexible spaces of this kind could include open-air barbershops and the temporary cricket pitches that pop up across the city in both formally designated sports fields and ad hoc locations. Other types of public space that could be developed might be safe, female-only public spaces, and flexible and free multi-use spaces.

There is no universal answer or catchall solution to the issues outlined here, though there is certainly a need for stronger community action groups that are able to effectively gather suggestions for new public spaces and actively push the city to make changes. It is clear that there is great potential for citizens to contribute more directly to policy- or systems-level change on both a smaller and larger scale. Continuing a similar method of community-based participatory research and engagement will also increase the possibility of identifying needs and mobilizing those with the most at stake. As one Mumbaikar put it, "I think the ideal public space should be close to home, so it's accessible, clean and neat, noise-free, environmentally rich and aesthetically done"—a great point of departure, ready for tailoring to its specific community.

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