

**Guardian Cities Mumbai**

Cities

# The best idea to redevelop Dharavi slum? Scrap the plans and start again

**Dharavi stands on a goldmine: a slice of prime land in the heart of India's richest city. Sharkish developers are circling, but a new competition to invite better ways forward has thrown up fascinating proposals**



*Transforming squares into neighbourhood centres in Dharavi. Illustration: Felixx Landscape Architect & Planners + Studio OxL Architects*

By 8am, Dharavi is already noisy. Tea stalls already clinking, leather-making and embroidery and plastic-crushing machines already cranking through their long daily grind. Dharavi, the most well-known informal settlement in Mumbai, stands in a category of its own, and challenges the very notion of a slum. Its maze of matchbox buildings contains thousands of micro-industries, which collectively turn over **\$650m annually** and provide affordable housing to the city's working class. Over decades, Dharavi's residents – its potters, garment-makers, welders and recyclers from all over India – have transformed what was a marshy outpost into a thriving entrepreneurial community.

But Dharavi is no longer in the boondocks. Massive northwards growth in the peninsula city of Mumbai over the last two decades has engulfed Dharavi's humble plot of 525 acres. Today, Dharavi stands on a goldmine: a slice of land in the heart of the megapolis with the highest land prices in [India](#). Its coveted position sits at the intersection of two main train lines, and is just a stone's throw from a new business district, the Bandra-Kurla Complex. Not surprisingly, Dharavi has caught the attention of sharkish developers.

Under the government-led Dharavi Redevelopment Project, developers will provide the people living there – who can prove residency since 2000 – a new, 300 sq ft house for free. In return, authorities have allowed the builders to go higher ( increasing the floor space index in Dharavi from 1.33 to 4), thereby concentrating residents into tower blocks and freeing up space for luxury high rises that will reap huge returns. The plan has created a storm of controversy.



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*Turning external forces into qualities. Competition entry, The Game Is On! Illustration: Felixx Landscape Architect & Planners + Studio OxL Architects*

Everyone agrees that Dharavi needs better working and living conditions. The settlement may have organically achieved the low-rise, mixed-use community of many urban planners' dreams, but it is not without its problems. Years of government neglect have left Dharavi's hygiene and safety levels grossly inadequate. There are queues for everything, including toilet blocks, municipal water taps and healthcare clinics. The [300,000 or so residents](#) – there has been no official count and studies suggest it could be double that – squeeze into an area just one-third bigger than Hyde Park.

**Dharavi's design is not an accident; it responds to the social ties and economic needs of the community**

The new plan to redevelop Dharavi increases that density to inhumane proportions. Although the tower-block buildings offer amenities such as toilets, they also threaten to destroy the fabric of a community in which homes, roofs and outdoor spaces transform into places of work and social interaction – the only way many of the micro-enterprises can operate. Dharavi's design is not an accident; it responds to the social ties and economic needs of the community.



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The clash of opinions on Dharavi's future triggered a decade-long stalemate. So, last year, Mumbai's [Urban Design Research Institute](#) (UDRI), an independent organisation advocating for more equitable development in its home city, put the problem to the global community.

UDRI launched an international competition, called [Reinventing Dharavi](#), to solicit the best ideas for this endlessly limboed issue. Twenty teams, with more than 150 members from 21 different countries, submitted proposals. The competition's only requirement was that the teams were interdisciplinary, in order to address the complex housing, work, financing, health, sanitation, recreation and legal issues.

Their proposals ranged from bathroom towers that moonlight as public spaces, to an annual festival, to a collective brand that would increase marketing power and recognition of the area's diverse products.

"We wanted to stimulate fresh thinking," said Cyrus Guzder, a member of the jury, at the competition's awards ceremony in December. "Even though we've spent some time walking around Dharavi, we must say the ideas were quite original, even from international participants."





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*Redevelopment of the negar (neighbourhood) in competition entry, The Game Is On!  
Illustration: Felixx Landscape Architect & Planners + Studio OxL Architects*

UDRI held a workshop to give people a first-hand look at some of the urban structures the residents themselves have already created. Many of the competition proposals built on and celebrated the community's strengths: its sense of entrepreneurship; the mixed-use developments; the low rates of crime; and strong social ties.

One proposal from a Dutch team, entitled *The Game is On!*, honed in on the vibrancy of Dharavi's street life – the children's cricket matches, tea sellers, and fruit vendors – as the starting point for gradually improving living conditions. Their concept, which won an honourable mention, proposed to bring local stakeholders together to “co-create” a plan for the streets and squares that zigzag between the tightly knit neighbourhoods. “The process of street-led upgrading forms a frame for people to start upgrading their houses and workspaces, or to define places for communal buildings,” says team member Joop Steenkamp, an architect. “It's a way to gradually improve living conditions without disturbing social coherence or destroying a historically grown situation.”

**It is hard to overstate the sea change this represents in the history of development planning for Dharavi**

Many teams mapped out new physical infrastructure, such as container housing or sophisticated water systems. Another common concern was the idea of connectivity, on both a physical and economic level. The India-based members of team seven proposed that Dharavi remain a place to both live and work, a “factory for the 21st century”, and asked the judges to rethink the notion of a world-class city. “We don't want to be Shanghai. We want our own characteristics, with the slum dwellers as part of that,” they said. The group proposed that Dharavi no longer be an island of deprivation in the city, but rather a magnet for commerce, by converting slum buildings into industrial hubs.

But it was a team from Mumbai that took first prize, for a most novel idea: scrap all plans and begin again. The group, called Plural, asked a question that has been missing in all these decades of discussion: “How would residents envision their future if they had their rights?” The rights being denied to them, argued Plural, are the right to entitlement, the

right to participate and the right to livelihood. And their first suggestion? To eliminate the one profiteering commodity that has skewed all visions of Dharavi's future: the land itself.



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*One million people live and work in Dharavi, which occupies just under one square mile. Photograph: Bethany Clarke/Getty Images*

Inspired by Gandhi's notion of land as a community inheritance, the group proposed that current landowners in Dharavi – the biggest of which is the government – release all ownership rights to a Dharavi Community Land Trust.

**The idea shows promise: one of the major hindrances to redevelopment has been the complexities of land ownership**

This trust would be a non-profit corporation, governed by former landowners, community members and neighbourhood associations. Its first task would be to understand the needs of each of the existing 156 nagars (neighbourhoods), before developing accordingly. The idea shows promise: one of the major hindrances to redevelopment has been the complexities of land ownership, from various government agencies to private owners. The trust would solve that problem in a stroke.

“We have a vision to bring back the focus on the people's needs in Dharavi in a sustainable and human-centred manner,” said Jasmine Saluja, a Plural team member. “We've had

proposals on Dharavi since the 1970s, but the problem is that they've never included the people themselves."

It is hard to overstate the sea change this represents in the history of development planning for Dharavi: rewind on the process altogether. Rather than showcasing glossy images and plans, the project involves the residents in development from the get-go.

But influencing the current trajectory will be no insignificant task. There's a sobering precedent: Mumbai's abandoned mill area, which was primed for affordable housing is instead now lined with luxury malls and hotels. A similar debate is raging over how to redevelop the eastern waterfront.

At some point, UDRI will need to convince not just activists but power-brokers. Its next step shows it is aware of the task ahead: UDRI is developing a publication to bring the most promising ways forward to government officials.

## 'Mumbai is on the verge of imploding'

*Bachi Karkaria in Mumbai*

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"What we're doing for Dharavi," says Guzder, "is getting India to think about slum redevelopment or urban renewal."

"We can't go on in the same way we have been," agrees Akhtar Chauhan, a professor and member of the competition's steering committee. "This competition has given us a good collection of ideas for a new, more humane direction. And now we have to act."

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