

DP will be a disaster for Mumbai, increase social disparities

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By PK Das

The new Development Plan for Mumbai ridicules sustainable growth principles and actively undermines the city's most important needs — affordable housing and public open spaces. With its proposal to increase floor space index (FSI), the plan focuses on quantity over quality and perpetuates the bluff that increasing volumes of construction will automatically solve the problems of the city — when in fact it will only further increase social disparities.

First let's look at affordable housing. The new draft DP is not only silent on this issue but actively undermines the sector. Many organizations have demanded that slum-occupied lands be reserved for affordable housing, which would enable the rehabilitation of existing slum-dwellers as well as create an equal number of affordable housing units. They have also demanded reservations for social amenities on this slum land. The new DP, on the other hand, perpetuates the current failed SRA policy of allowing slum lands to be taken over for commercial development. In fact, to please developers, the plan promises to do away with the reservations that allegedly are holding up slum redevelopment. We have all seen how this SRA policy of incentivizing the market to build affordable housing has only led to more “slumification” of the city, producing vertical slums without amenities side by side with luxury high-rises. The past decade has shown us that affordable housing cannot be left to the market forces.

The DP authorities have skipped assessing the construction potential already available through redevelopment policies. Programmes for slum redevelopment, redevelopment of cessed buildings, and cluster development, as well as the sale of mill lands have led to high volumes of construction potential which, given the capacity of the government and the private sector,

won't be used up for decades. So why are we adding further to this volume through increased FSI? Who is all this extra construction for? Builders are not catering to the poor and the middle class, so we can safely assume that the extra construction will only result in adding to the large volumes of unsold luxury flats. And developers will not build if flats don't sell, thereby rendering additional FSI useless.

Secondly, how does increased FSI and density help improve the open spaces ratio in the city — already among the lowest in the world? How will accessible open spaces be generated in high-rise, high-density transit corridor areas? Reserving land in the DP for more open spaces — and for affordable housing — ought to be top of the agenda. Instead, the new plan reduces open space standards of 6 square metres per person in the suburbs to 2 square metres, and proposes to put a business hub in one of the city's few large lungs — Aarey.

There needs to be an evaluation of the emerging built-form in the interests of cohesive urban design and planning for the future. Other cities around the world with high FSI are used to justify high FSI for Mumbai. But we are not told how these cities have evolved with urban design guidelines and strict construction regulations. Moreover, they have built their infrastructure first and then fixed the FSI. Cities like New York and Singapore have also been successful in providing social housing, along with high-quality infrastructure and environment. In New York, Hurricane Sandy has even led to integrated planning that considers the impact of future natural disasters. By contrast, Mumbai's growth is a story of anarchy, driven by turnover and construction volumes without plans for supporting services and infrastructure — let alone planning for future environmental disasters. We need to learn from other cities in those areas too, not just imitate their skyline.

Many of us had made suggestions to the DP authorities. Have those suggestions been dumped in the municipal archives? I hope the government stops this plan and the public raises its voice to check the “build more” syndrome that is perpetuating an anarchic, unequal and unsustainable growth.

PK Das is an architect and housing activist
