

## Towards Hope as Practice. Young Residents Reclaiming a Neighbourhood's Identity through Arts and Placemaking

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### Abstract

Low-income neighbourhoods in our cities are often poorly-planned spaces that exacerbate socioeconomic disparities their residents face. These inequities also impact their health, especially communities in the Global South who are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. One such example of an inadequately planned rehabilitation neighbourhood is Natwar Parekh in Mumbai's Govandi. Over 25,000 former slum dwellers - the population of a tier 3<sup>1</sup> city - have been crammed into 61 seven-storey buildings, with 80% homes having little to no access to sunlight or ventilation. The area is flanked by Asia's largest landfill and polluting industries, creating an unhealthy environment with poor air quality and contamination. Tuberculosis and other diseases are on the rise here, and the average life expectancy<sup>2</sup> is just 39 years, almost half the national average. Govandi is ghettoised and neglected by the rest of Mumbai. Children who grew up here hesitate to mention their address because of the stigma attached to living here. Burdened by this shame and loss, Govandi's youth came together seven years ago to work with a group of artists and urban practitioners from Community Design Agency (CDA), a social design organisation, to reimagine their neighbourhood. Together, they have redesigned garbage-filled alleyways into accessible streets, painted vibrant murals, and held the first-ever Govandi Arts Festival that allowed them to redefine their narratives of the place they call home. These initiatives have brought the community closer, made them more resilient, and even prompted spatial improvements by city authorities who were forced to turn their gaze here. This essay explores the interlinkages between spatial improvements via arts and placemaking initiatives and their effects on the physical and emotional well-being of Govandi's youth. Urban practitioners Natasha Sharma and Sandra Alexander from CDA explore methodologies for regenerative place-making in this vulnerable neighbourhood.

**Keywords:** art and activism, youth engagement, civic participation, regenerative placemaking, community-driven art practise

<sup>1</sup> Tier 2 and tier 3 cities are the growing urban cities in India and are classified based on the population limit. The population of a tier 2 city ranges between 20,000 to 49,999 while that of a tier 3 city ranges between 50,000 to 99,999.

<sup>2</sup> Life Expectancy refers to the number of years a person can expect to live. It is an estimate of the average age that people belonging to a particular population demographic will be at the time of death.

### To cite this article:

Sharma, N. and Alexander, S. (2024) "Towards Hope As Practice: Young Residents reclaiming a Neighbourhood's identity through Arts and Placemaking", *The Journal of Public Space*, 9(2), pp. 233–244. doi: 10.32891/jps.v9i2.1788.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



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Figure 1. Projection on building facades of a film made by Jerry Anthony (Artist Resident for Govandi Arts Festival) in collaboration with the residents of Natwar Parekh in Govandi, Mumbai.  
Credit: Tejinder Singh Khamkha. 2023.

*“Even though I have a house now, I sometimes still miss the slums. Back in the slum, we would do things together face similar experiences and problems together. But ever since we came here into our new houses, no one looks after each other or takes care of the space they have been allotted”, says Parveen ji, one of the dwellers and a social worker living in the Natwar Parekh neighbourhood in Mumbai’s Govandi.<sup>3</sup>*

Residents of this neighbourhood have been grappling with questions of what ‘home’ means to them ever since they were shifted to a Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) neighbourhood in 2008, built as part of the Mumbai city authorities’ efforts to house the urban poor and homeless populations for infrastructural developments. More than 25,000 people live in this neighbourhood in Govandi now but still reminisce how closely-knit they were when they lived in the slums. The City of Mumbai provided housing, but this housing came at the cost of community members’ emotional and physical well-being. Located in the eastern suburbs of Mumbai, Govandi is a stone’s throw away from Asia’s largest dumping ground. Here, what could possibly be the population of an entire tier 2 city in India, has been crammed into merely 61 buildings. Large families with up to 8 or 10 members live in small, 226 square foot apartments (Sharma, 2023). The closely-packed houses barely have any access to sunlight and air, and thus Natwar Parekh has become a breeding ground for chronic diseases. Every one in ten people suffers from Tuberculosis, and the average life expectancy here is just 39 years old, almost half the national average (Bharucha and Iyer, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>All residents of Natwar Parekh mentioned in this essay have consented to the usage of their names and statements made by them. Quotes have been cross-checked with them and we have tried to maintain utmost accuracy while translating it from Hindi to English.



Figure 2. Satellite image of the tightly laid out grid of 61 buildings of Natwar Parekh and the area surrounding it. Credit: author

Mumbai, also known as the “city of dreams,” has numerous resettlement neighbourhoods. However, the lack of educational and professional opportunities in these communities significantly impacts the dreams and aspirations of thousands of children and young people. This is partly due to the stigma associated with their living environment. Additionally, the design of their homes severely impacts on their health, and there are limited opportunities for them to gather and socialise due to the absence of usable public spaces nearby.

Fran Tonkiss writes in *Space, City and Social Theory* (Tonkiss, 2005) that urban forms are not only made out of things and materials, but also out of “meanings, language and symbols”. Tonkiss elaborates that a building can be easily knocked down, but not the memories, imaginations and experiences composed in the space. In the process of formalising housing and laying emphasis on how it should be planned, the memories that people have of a place often get demolished and newer meanings get reinstated. In doing so, less attention is paid to making residents feel a sense of belonging in their new neighbourhood because the focus is on providing basic resources to survive, not thrive.

## I. Regenerating belongingness

As artists and urban practitioners, we, the authors of this essay, have been dwelling on these questions along with the residents of Govandi over the past seven years. As part of the team at Community Design Agency (CDA), a design and architecture studio based in Mumbai, we have been working on regenerating the Natwar Parekh neighbourhood. Five years ago, the questions we started off with when we entered the neighbourhood included:

- How do we learn to see the built environment through the eyes of children and youth growing up in this vulnerable neighbourhood?

- How can arts be used to develop sustainable, non-intrusive, expressive and creative methods of working that can build a sense of safety, agency and community for them?
- What does it take to include children and the youth in this approach to shaping their built environment, when they have previously had no say in it?



Figure 3. (left) The dilapidated condition of a street in the neighbourhood with drains overflowing and garbage piled up. 2023. Credit: Community Design Agency.

Figure 4. (right) A family occupying the common space outside their apartment as space for rest, play and utility. 2023. Credit: Community Design Agency.

In a neighbourhood riddled with issues that economically-burdened adults find difficult to solve, we started out by going to the youth and children. While our work began with the intent to improve the hard infrastructure such as sewage, drainage and waste issues, it was supported by softer art-led interventions that brought the community together to bring about change in their physical surroundings. What emerged beautifully was how this approach garnered a lot more interest with the youth of the neighbourhood as they felt a sense of agency within their own spaces, one that otherwise always got blanketed by large infrastructural issues that weren't in their control. We believe that these art-based engagements should not be pursued as add ons but as non-negotiables to community building and strengthening.

We began with the formation of the youth group when boys and girls in the neighbourhood sat together to share their ideas and reimagine their spaces, to working together to make it happen, to cleaning the streets and redesigning them, painting murals, to co-building a library, and initiating an arts festival. These initiatives evolved into so many more possibilities. These interventions have been supported by philanthropic funding and collaborations with the city authorities like the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation. In our practice, we see art as the input through which multiple tangible and intangible, big



Figure 5 and 6. (both) Tactical interventions are done through community skills and resources to clean up the street and turn it into a mini park for play and leisure. Image Courtesy: Community Design Agency, 2020



Figure 7. (left) Kids playing with cement and bricks in a common space with rudimentary construction. Figure 8. (right) A mural with text that translates to “This is our home” highlights the vibrancy in their neighbourhood and its people. Image Courtesy- Community Design Agency, 2021

or small transformations begin to emerge. It takes us back to Nick Obolensky’s words in *Emergent Strategy* (Brown, 2019), where he explains emergence as ‘the way in which complex systems and patterns arise out of relatively simple interaction.’ Our everyday observations from the community at Natwar Parekh expose us to the symptoms of much larger systemic issues that they are facing.

We are building a neighbourhood pedagogy for youth-led transformation through creative and democratic engagement. Our process is iterative, has evolved through the years, and has surpassed our early imaginations. Art-based interventions have led the youth to express and explore their creative sides, while they worked on improving their neighbourhood. When a group of young people from the community were asked about their rights in the process of city-making, Nijab, a sixteen year old, mentioned that she had gained the right to her identity through being part of these interventions.

## 2. Reclaiming identities, reforming gaze

Govandi has a rich mix of culture and incredible talent - which we began to see while engaging with the youth and implementing various spatial interventions. Through drawings



Figure 9. Youth from Govandi put up a local exhibition of photographs they took of their neighbourhood. Credit:Tejinder Singh Khamkha. 2023

and rap songs, they captured the essence of their lived experiences in a way that dominant narratives of the city did not allow.

Govandi, a ghettoised neighbourhood, is far removed from the larger narrative of Mumbai, but it has its own stories to tell. Moin Khan, a young rapper and filmmaker who grew up in Govandi, challenges the multiple reductionary ideas of Govandi that the outside world has through 'Haq se Govandi', translated loosely to 'Govandi my Pride'. The rap number has garnered more than sixty thousand views on YouTube and is a favourite amongst the neighbourhood children. Moin worked as a delivery boy for Swiggy<sup>4</sup> for a few months to save for the production cost of the video. When asked what prompted him to write and produce 'Haq se Govandi', he says, 'I wanted to give Govandi another identity, which is not linked to crime or garbage.'

Together with the children and youth of Govandi, we set up the Govandi Arts Festival, supported by the British Council's India-UK Together Season of Culture, in 2023. At the heart of the festival was the mentorship program where we invited creative professionals from five disciplines - Theatre, Film, Photography, Public Art and Rap - to engage, nurture and mentor children and young adults from different neighbourhoods of Govandi for six months. This was followed by a four month long artist residency program to create a safe space for emerging and established artists to collaborate with the residents to create site and community specific exhibits. The final five-day festival welcomed crowds from across the city who gathered to listen and watch the artworks that were created by the youth as

<sup>4</sup> A food delivery platform founded in India



Figure 10. A young boy from Govandi putting out his wishlist of how he reimagines the streets of this neighbourhood during a public space design workshop. Credit: Community Design Agency. 2022

forms of self-expression.

The festival reinstated people’s identities in myriad ways. Sumaiya, a young woman who participated in the theatre mentorship workshops, said, “Even today (2 months post the festival), people recognise me and call me an ‘artist’ when I walk down the lanes of the neighbourhood. Performing in front of so many people felt empowering and gave me a sense of achievement. I was deeply moved by looking at the pride in my father’s eyes. He never posts anything on social media, but that day, I was all over his accounts, he was so proud of me and he even recorded my entire performance!”

Ifra, a film making mentee, said, “At the beginning of my filmmaking journey, I used to avoid shooting in public places because people would approach me and question my intentions. Sometimes, people made fun of me for using a tripod to shoot. Seeing my fellow mentees create videos in public places without any fear motivated me to do the same. Our assignments gradually involved shooting in busier places like markets, and I didn’t want to miss out on the opportunity to learn. As I started filming outdoors more frequently, my confidence grew, and I could proudly tell others about my passion for filmmaking without feeling hassled by their questions.”

For the first time in the 15 years of relocating to Natwar Parekh, the residents, including girls, boys, senior citizens, and women across all religions and caste, came together to carve out a space to express their voices, aspirations and talents which often get buried due to various forms of social and spatial marginalisation. In an increasingly polarised world, sharing moments of joy became a form of resilience – and art had the strength to facilitate this. It was interesting to note that some women who came for the festival from within the

community were hesitant to get the festival stamp on their wrists, because it would expose to their families that they had attended it. Silently being part of the festival was their way of rebelling against norms in their daily life. Sana, a young girl from Govandi, now chooses whether she wants to cover her head with an abaya while in public. She says that the six-month long process of making a film about herself and her years of growing up gave her a newfound agency to make individual decisions in other aspects of her life. Sana's film itself has been screened at multiple national and international film festivals. Ajaz, an aspiring dancer, was once refused health insurance when he revealed his address



Figure 11. An exhibition with portraits of people of Govandi taken by the youth on display at the Govandi Arts Festival. Credit: Tejinder Singh Khamkha. 2023



Figure 12. (left) An image of the ground before the festival took place. Credit: Moin Khan 2022.  
Figure 13. (right) An image of the ground after the festival took place. Credit: Moin Khan 2023.





Figure 14. An aerial view of Govandi Arts Festival on a ground in Natwar Parekh.  
Credit:Tejinder Singh Khamkha. 2023.

to his employer. Bushra, a henna artist, refused to walk her neighbourhood because she felt it was unsafe. The festival changed how people saw Govandi – and it reinstated a sense of pride in the residents themselves. They now want to work on making this place better because they have realised that their collective potential create a transformational impact.

### 3. Relearning Govandi through local perspectives

Every step of the process, the community's needs are kept front and centre. The climate crisis has been deeply affecting the people of Govandi and has exacerbated in the past few years. As heat waves tend to lash across India and irregular rainfall sweeps the city, residents have been paying high electricity bills and buying second-hand and third-hand air conditioners. Their improperly-designed homes lead to high indoor temperatures. Residents find it difficult to go downstairs to take a walk because of the garbage-filled streets. In 2023, we received the Art4Resilience Award<sup>5</sup> by Global Resilience Partnership<sup>6</sup>, which focussed on developing creative pathways to work with children on climate resilience. Through the award, we have been capturing stories of crises and resilience to create a grassroots vocabulary of climate with the children - one that is otherwise lost in the complex scientific terminologies that are prevalent today. In these workshops, children have laid out the impact of the climate crisis – drawing grey skies and polluted drains and telling stories of picking out fish growing in sewers that they want to take home to make a local aquarium and a lot more.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.globalresiliencepartnership.org/in-which-language-does-the-rain-fall/>

<sup>6</sup> Global Resilience Partnership is an organisation based in South Africa and Sweden which identifies and helps scale on-ground innovation around social causes, and advances advocacy around them.



Figure 15. Collage made by a 12 year-old girl during the Climate Vocabulary Workshop, indicating challenges of waste in and around the neighbourhood. Credit: Mansi Bhalerao. 2023

This process of art-based research and enquiry into the nuances of their everyday life brought out stories that shifted our perspective on the climate discourse.

#### 4. Conclusion

Women in the neighbourhood want more public spaces to be activated around their buildings so that their daughters can come out more often. Mothers felt at peace knowing that they could sit and watch over their children as they played outside. Over the past seven years, we've been part of a movement in Natwar Parekh, Govandi, spearheaded by the residents, which explores how hope can become a tool to change one's surroundings – and life itself. Through small daily acts of resistance, this community has achieved incredible transformations, has become more tightly knit, and continues to grow to be more resilient.

City authorities have taken note of this, too. The Govandi Arts Festival was also a way for the residents to urge the city to shift its gaze on them - to look again and note the conditions that this hope can be born out of and take accountability for the city's inaction towards providing a better quality of life for all. The residents cleared the largest open ground in Natwar Parekh to host the festival, which was earlier used as a spot for parking old abandoned cars for the past 15 years. Post-festival, the residents have not allowed it to go into its previous state of decline; children now play here, and the elderly host celebrations and religious gatherings here. Seeing the motivation of the residents, city authorities have sanctioned a multi-million dollar deal to upgrade the infrastructure in this neighbourhood, a project that is currently underway.

Continuously reimagining their present and futures, the residents have created a sense of belonging in these unique ways. They came together and asked - What if we could resist creatively? What if this breathed the vision of transformation that we collectively come up with? The systemic issues we address today might not be solved in our lifetimes, but we become part of smaller movements that lead to the common cause of freedom, joy and equity. The human race often forgets that we are all mutually reliant, and that there is power in the collective. Our practice supports this thriving ecosystem in Govandi, where we hope together, create brave spaces and move towards liberated futures, one voice at a time.

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