

{ **REIMAGINING MUMBAI'S FUTURE** } EXPERTS CALL FOR BETTER PUBLIC TRANSPORT, AFFORDABLE HOUSING, NATURAL OPEN SPACES

'Development is largely car-centric and for upper middle class'

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MUMBAI: Mumbai cannot handle the burden of the exponential redevelopment boom it is undergoing, and an alternative is direly needed: this was the consensus that emerged at a panel discussion titled Reimagining Mumbai's Future, held at the Asiatic Society on Friday evening.

"If you replace a neighbourhood of densely packed four-storey buildings with 20 40-storey buildings, like in Bhendi Bazaar, you will face the consequences," said Mustansir Dalvi, an architect and professor.

Organised by Art Deco Mumbai, the panel featured the platform's founder trustee, Atul Kumar, speaking with Dalvi, conservation architect Vikas Dilawari, and Dr Jehangir Sorabjee, head of the department of medicine at Bombay Hospital.

Mumbai, in the past, has been a city that has used crises, like

the plague, to propel itself towards improvement, said Kumar. "Planned neighbourhoods, like Matunga, Shivaji Park, and Colaba backbay, emerged through the Bombay Improvement Trust (BIT), which was formed after the plague in 1896. These had grids, wide roads, parks, and schools, which all formed a complete neighbourhood."

Things changed, in part, due to Mumbai's ever-increasing population, which Sorabjee's profession took the fall for. "In the 1920s, the average lifespan in Mumbai was 26 years," he said. "In the 1950s, it was 34 years. In the 1990s, it was 56 years, and now it is 70 years. Every two years, the number of people in the city increases by a million."

But one crucial change has led Mumbai to the point it is at today.

"Mumbai had building codes that restricted the height of buildings depending on the width of the road, based on an



From left: Art Deco Mumbai founder Atul Kumar, architect Mustansir Dalvi, conservation architect Vikas Dilawari and HOD of medicine at Bombay Hospital, Dr Jehangir Sorabjee, during a panel discussion on reimagining Mumbai's future. BHUSHAN KOYANDE

angle, to ensure homes on the ground floor received adequate sunlight and air," said Dalvi. "This changed when, in the '60s, the first Development Plan (DP) brought in the concept of Floor Space Index (FSI), replacing housing's primary aim of habitability with monetisation. This is what has led to terms such as

carpet area, built-up area, super built-up area, etc. Housing is now about exchange value."

Dilawari also pointed fingers at the Rent Control Act, which was introduced in 1999. While most countries have abolished it, it continues to incentivise landlords in Mumbai to keep old buildings unmaintained and

instead opt for redevelopment.

With real estate's force as a market, fueled by speculation, Dalvi remarked that Mumbai has changed from being a rental city to one obsessed with ownership. This has come with a decrease in open spaces, unplanned development, and a lack of affordable housing. All of these factors meant the panel at large was not optimistic about Mumbai's future.

"In the next three to five years, the consequences of the way Mumbai is changing will fructify," said Kumar. Sorabjee spoke of his ground-floor home being surrounded now by five immense towers. "This has become a very stressful city, and there is little harmony left in it," he said.

"We have been witness to development that is largely car-centric and for the upper middle class and wealthy. Those who need and use public transport, unfortunately, do not have a strong lobby or political will

attached to it. A lot of the decisions are being made ad hoc, like the six-lane road at Marine Drive, without proper traffic studies and assessment of the impact on the area," Sorabjee added.

When Kumar asked the experts what was on their wish list for the city, a few unanimous choices emerged: better public transport, affordable housing and natural open spaces.

"If we can concentrate on these few things, the future of the city can still be turned around, and it can be given a chance to shine," said Dilawari. Climate change weighed heavily on Dalvi's mind, who reckoned that without attention being given to it, Mumbai by 2050 will revert to its original state of seven disparate islands.

When an audience member asked if there remained any hope for the neglected suburbs of the city, Malad in particular, Sorabjee mused, "That would take a crisis."