

Viewing the social (re)construction of (sub)urban space in Mumbai's Mulund through the lenses of Lefebvre's spatial triad

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Abstract

This study explores the social construction and transformation of Mulund through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad: spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces. It reveals how urban and social dynamics redefine suburban spaces and their meaning. It is based on research methods such as lived-in histories, personal reconnaissance, non-participant observation, residents' interviews, and Google Earth imagery, and explores how gentrification, infrastructural development, and market-driven planning have transformed the urban landscape of Mulund. The study finds that while middle-class redevelopment and commercial expansion dominate conceived space, enduring informal settlements and pre-existing community practices persist, generating ongoing tensions over access, use, and meaning. The struggle between perceived and lived spaces is a battleground where spatial practices can resist, accommodate, or be subordinated to hegemonic planning, thus producing a mosaic of inclusion and exclusion. By using Lefebvre's triad, the paper regards Mulund as a location where socio-economic hierarchies, everyday practices, and urban policy not only coexist but also profoundly influence each other, thus providing critical insight into suburban transformation, which is primarily contested rather than merely changed.

Keywords: *Space, perceived space, conceived space, lived space, urban*

Introduction

The notion that space is not merely a neutral backdrop for human activity but space itself is rather actively shaped by social processes, interactions, and power relations has become pivotal in contemporary geography, urban studies, and social theory. Space is produced through an ongoing process of creation and transformation, where each act of production inherently involves a cycle of destruction and renewal (Softaoğlu, 2019). The traditional understanding of space is challenged by associating it with the social spectrum, which gives it a larger meaning. As a result, space has come to be recognised as socially constructed

or socially produced. Every social, economic, ideological, and technological component contributes to the creation of the physical environment in the social production of space (Low, 1996). The concept of social construction of space is rooted in the works of philosophers and social theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and David Harvey. In this regard, the seminal work of Henri Lefebvre, "The Production of Space," is particularly influential.

According to Lefebvre, comprehending the historical and social production of space requires consideration of the three types of spatial productions, i.e., 'spatial practices'

(perceived space), ‘representations of space’ (conceived space), and ‘representational spaces’ (lived space) (Lefebvre, 1991; Oliver, 2012). He termed these three types of social production as the ‘spatial triad’ or ‘triad of spaces’ (Fig. 1). Lefebvre introduced the notion of the spatial triad while delving into the dialectically interconnected aspects of social space (Knott, 2015). The way that spatial arrangements can impose social norms and control is further highlighted by Michel Foucault’s concept of power and space (Foucault, 1995). His research on prisons, hospitals, and other institutions shows how spatial architecture can control and discipline the body and the mind. Additionally, Harvey examined how capitalist processes produce space, emphasising how economic considerations influence urban planning and spatial structure. Nonetheless, he suggests that Lefebvre’s unwavering voice is responsible for instilling the belief that control over space is a basic and ubiquitous source of social power in and over daily life (Harvey, 1990). The foundation of Lefebvre’s triad is an understanding of observable reality and the social interpretations that accompany it (Lefebvre, 1991).

The spatial triad resides on the mutually associated aspects of space construction, where the elements of the triad are interwoven and continuously influence each other, sometimes even in conflicting ways. The first component of the spatial triad is ‘spatial practices’. It refers to how space is produced, used, and perceived. It represents a close relationship within the framework of perceived space, between urban reality—the networks and pathways connecting the designated areas for work, private life, and leisure—and everyday reality, or routine (Lefebvre, 1991). It represents the abstract geographical equivalent of the real social production (and reproduction) process, which can be characterised by cohesiveness and structure or dissolution (Oliver, 2012). The second component of the spatial triad is ‘representations of space’. It refers to space as it is conceived by scientists, technocrats, planners, and other professionals (Lefebvre, 1991). These spaces are represented in maps, diagrams, plans, and models (Lefebvre, 1991; Zieleniec, 2018); and are “... tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to

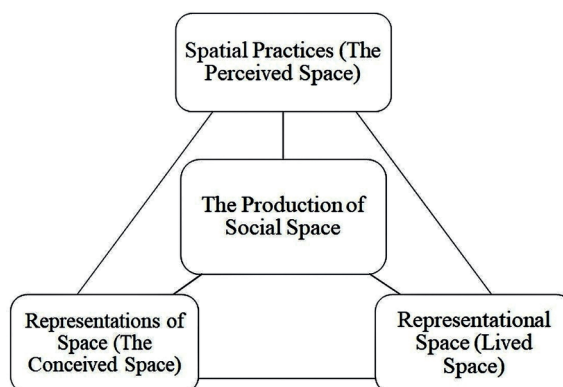


Fig. 1: Diagrammatic representation of the spatial triad

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Lefebvre’s concept of the spatial triad

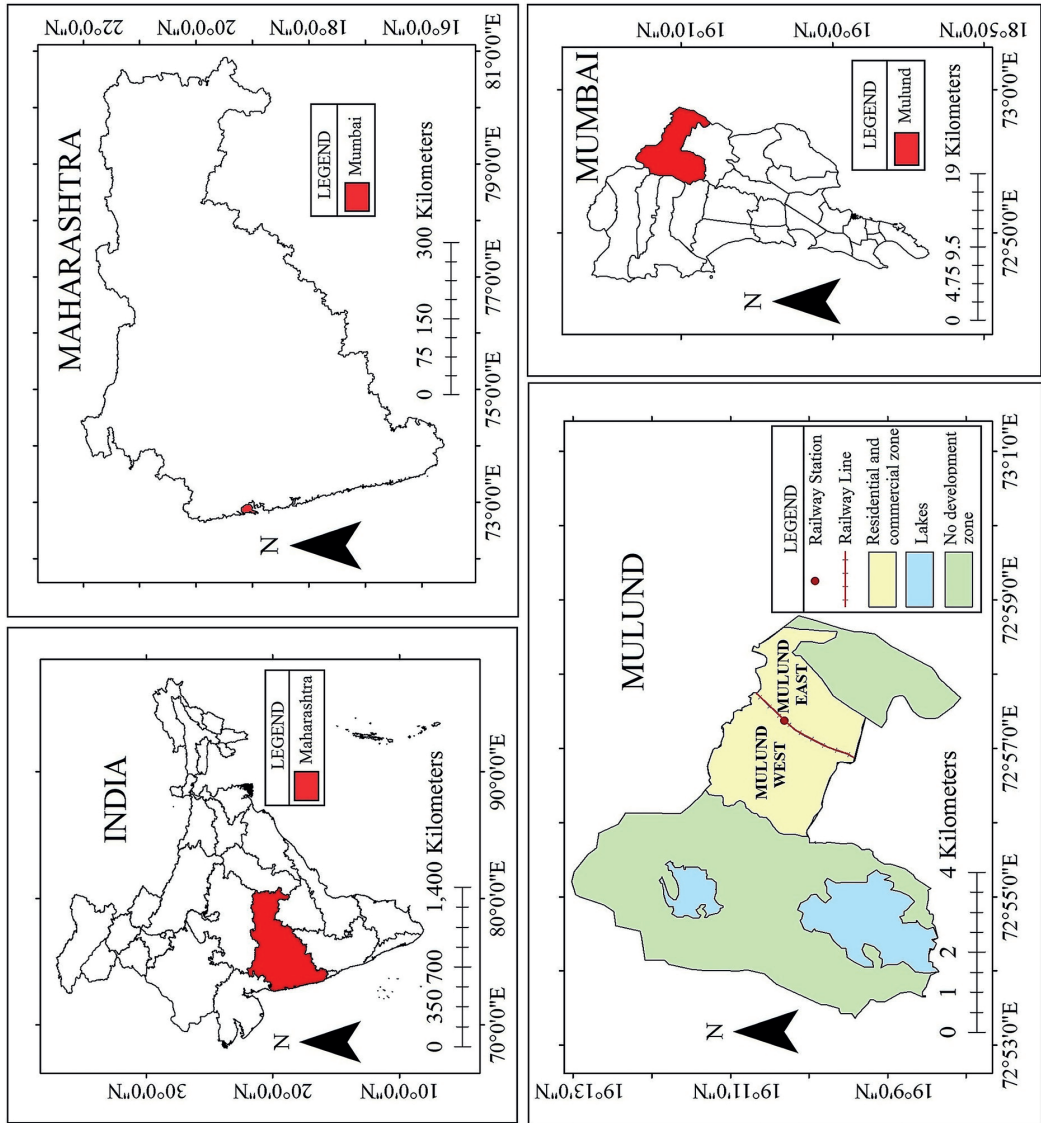


Fig. 2: Location of Mulund in the MCGM
 Source: Prepared by the authors

‘frontal’ relations” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). The third component of the spatial triad is ‘representational spaces’. It refers to “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols...” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). Thus, it is the space of the users and inhabitants. It is also artistically interpreted and depicted in the works of writers, poets, philosophers, painters, etc. (Leary, 2009; Lefebvre, 1991). It is constructed through symbolic manifestations and is superimposed on the physical space.

The concept of ‘spatial triad’ or ‘triad of spaces’ forwarded by Henri Lefebvre offers a profound framework for understanding the complexities of urban and suburban spaces. While the social construction of space has been explored in various parts of the world, in the present times, exploring it in the context of the fast-urbanising areas of the global south has become highly important. Research into the city planning of Bokaro has made explicit use of Henri Lefebvre’s triad to analyse how the types of spaces that are conceived by planners reflect both their ideological and functional visions (Redkina, 2025). Also, research into Mumbai’s slum rehabilitation housing uses Lefebvre’s theories to illustrate how space is produced because of the interactions between: i) built form; ii) the lived experiences of individuals; and iii) social inequality (Sarkar & Bardhan, 2020). Fractal urbanism and segregation within India provide evidence of the continuing existence of caste-based spatial segregation in the country, thereby confirming Lefebvre’s notion of the socio-spatial production of inequality (Bharathi *et al.*, 2021). The unprecedented nature of urbanisation in the global south has intensified the process of the construction and reconstruction of urban and suburban spaces (Bhattacharjee, 2021). Further, the

present pace of urban growth has rendered these spaces an immensely complicated character that has elevated their dynamism to a different level altogether. In the city regions of the global south, the forces of urbanisation are transforming geographies beyond the city core by shaping the geographical space in newer ways and consequently establishing a renewed experience of place. As evident in the case of Mumbai, at present, most of its urban growth is taking place in areas beyond the city’s core. In other words, South Mumbai is facing saturation, and urban growth has percolated to areas beyond it. Therefore, in this study, we explore the social construction and reconstruction of urban space in the suburban realms of Mulund, located in the Mumbai suburban district.

The research questions of the study are as follows:

- (i) How does Lefebvre’s spatial triad framework explain the social (re) construction of (sub)urban space in Mulund, Mumbai?
- (ii) How do conflicts and negotiations across the (sub)urban space of Mulund manifest in the spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces observed in the area?

Methodology

Study Area

The study is focused on Mulund, a suburban locality of Mumbai. Although Mulund is part of the Mumbai Suburban District, it comprises the northeastern-most ward of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), i.e., the T-Ward (Fig. 2). It borders Thane city in the north, Thane creek in the east, the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) in the west, and the suburbs of Bhandup

and Kanjurmarg in the southwest and south, respectively. The suburban railway line that runs through the suburb divides it into two halves, namely Mulund East and Mulund West. In recent times, Mulund has undergone a lot of transformation, shed its suburban character, and embraced a new urban identity.

Data and methods

The study uses the theoretical framework of Lefebvre's spatial triad. It is a well-known framework that has influenced an expansive variety of research subjects. It has been highly influential in the social sciences for a variety of reasons, particularly contributing to an expanded sense of what can be considered "spatial" or "geographical." Essentially, Lefebvre believes that all spaces are social and all combinations of social relations are spatial. Therefore, space is not merely a backdrop to social activity; rather, it is produced, and in the process, social relations are renewed, further underscoring the social nature of space itself. Through the critical application of the spatial triad in case studies, it can be used as a tool to comprehend the social construction of space. Hence, we have chosen to apply it as a framework for this study.

The study uses a qualitative interpretive case study design to deeply understand the complex social dynamics and experiences of residents in Mulund. This approach is adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of how space is perceived, conceived, and lived. Based on the research design, data for the study were collected through lived-in histories, personal reconnaissance, non-participant observations, residents' interviews (N=14), and Google Earth imagery to gain a deeper understanding of the existing situation. The sample size of the

study was determined by thematic saturation, which is reached when new themes are not emerging across repeated interviews. In qualitative research, the saturation criterion is used to discontinue data collection and/or analysis (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). This was supported by recursive coding and comparison. The researchers acknowledge their positionality as external observers, which may influence interpretation; this was addressed through reflexive memo-writing and sustained engagement in the field. Additionally, all ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity of participants, and sensitivity to participants, were adhered to in the processing of data. Although spatial analysis can be enhanced by using Google Earth imagery, certain limitations exist: specifically, resolution, time gaps between photographs, and bias of the observer providing the information captured in a photograph. These limitations were accounted for and minimised using triangulation to confirm findings through the collection and comparison of data from multiple sources, including field observations and interviews. Data analyses included an iterative coding process (for interviews and field observations); constant comparisons among codes, and development of themes through data analysis; and finally, interpretation of data themes using a spatial triad based on Henri Lefebvre's theory of space. A word cloud was used to visually illustrate the dominant theme in the data analysis process.

Results

In Mulund, the way space is socially produced and continually changed is best understood as a dialectical relationship between the spatial practices, representations

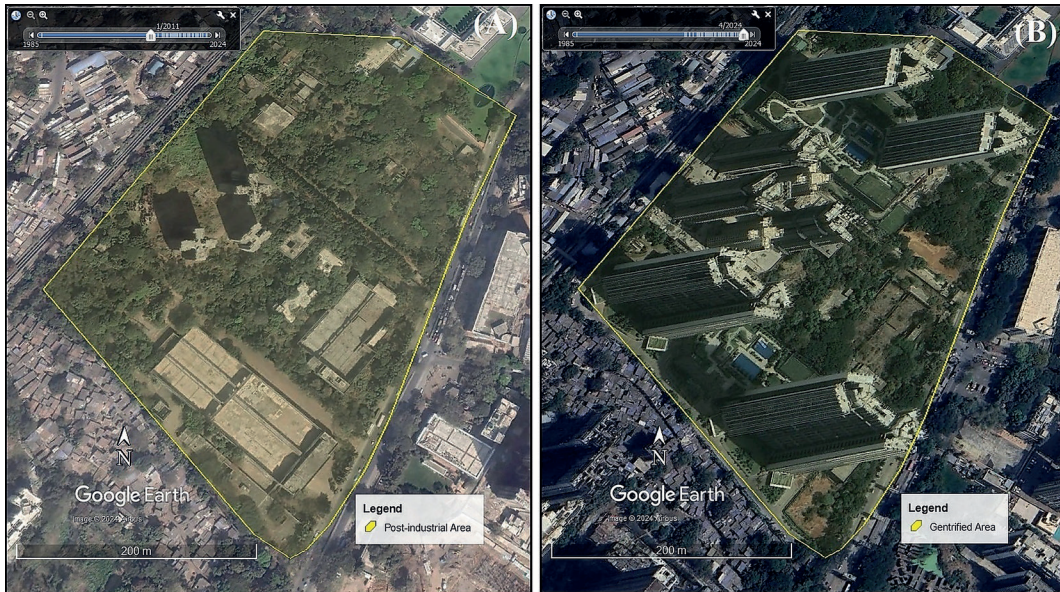


Fig. 3: (A) A Post-Industrial Area in Mulund West (January 2011), and
(B) Gentrification of the Post-Industrial Area in Mulund West (April 2024)

Source: Plotted on Google Earth Pro

of space, and representations of the spaces. The results demonstrate that urban change in Mulund occurs through these dynamic interactions rather than through individual spatial processes.

The redevelopment of previously developed industrial areas for use as new luxury homes; more malls and stores are added; there are continuing areas of informal housing with basic shelter and access; and improvements in transportation systems connect throughout the city have led to changes in how people live day-to-day. Although all these factors have changed over the last few years, they do not occur in isolation; rather, the changes reflected by all these physical elements are each informed and influenced by how planning controls and shapes the use of each of these physical elements. All these physical changes are planned, controlled,

and defined by how the government, developers, and planners envision how to use these previously developed properties for gentrification or for rental purposes. Therefore, moving from industrial areas to high-rise residential developments or commercial properties reflects how the city has been re-conceptualised as a middle-class hub of residential and investment opportunities (Fig. 3A & 3B).

While planned representations are reshaped by the actual lived realities they encounter, they are also influenced by the constraints on the space-based practices that impact them. For example, the persistence of slums and informal settlements highlights limitations of formal planning, giving rise to alternative spatial logics that are primarily based on affordability and survival. The existence of unplanned spaces is not at all isolated from the formal city, but rather, they

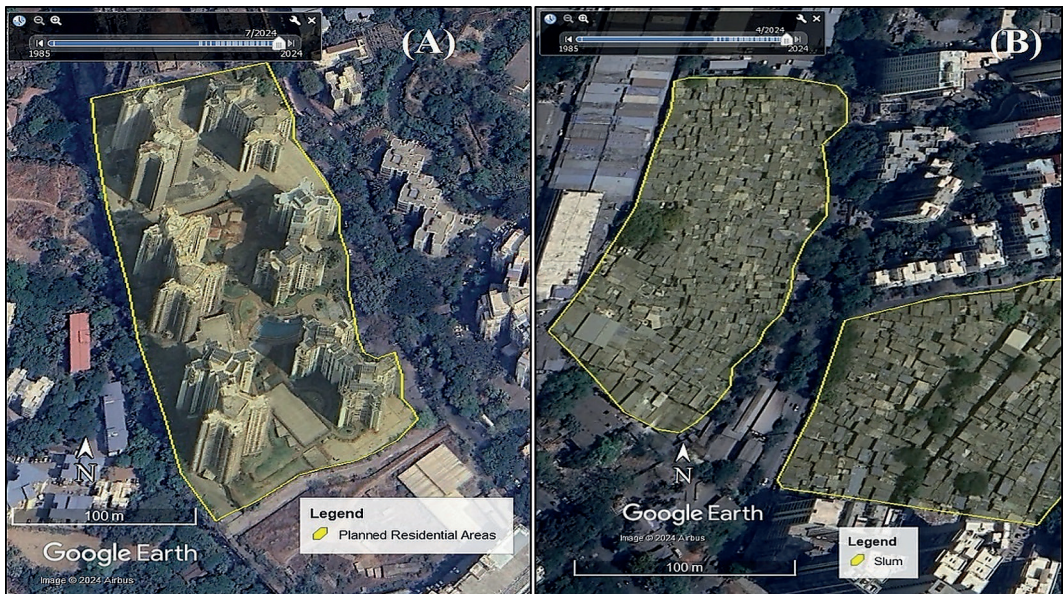


Fig. 4: (A) Depiction of Planned Residential Growth in Mulund (June 2024), and (B) Depiction of the presence of Slum Settlements in Mulund (June 2024)

Source: Plotted on Google Earth Pro



Fig. 5: Characteristics that are associated, by the residents, with Mulund based on their lived experiences

Source: Prepared based on the residents' interviews

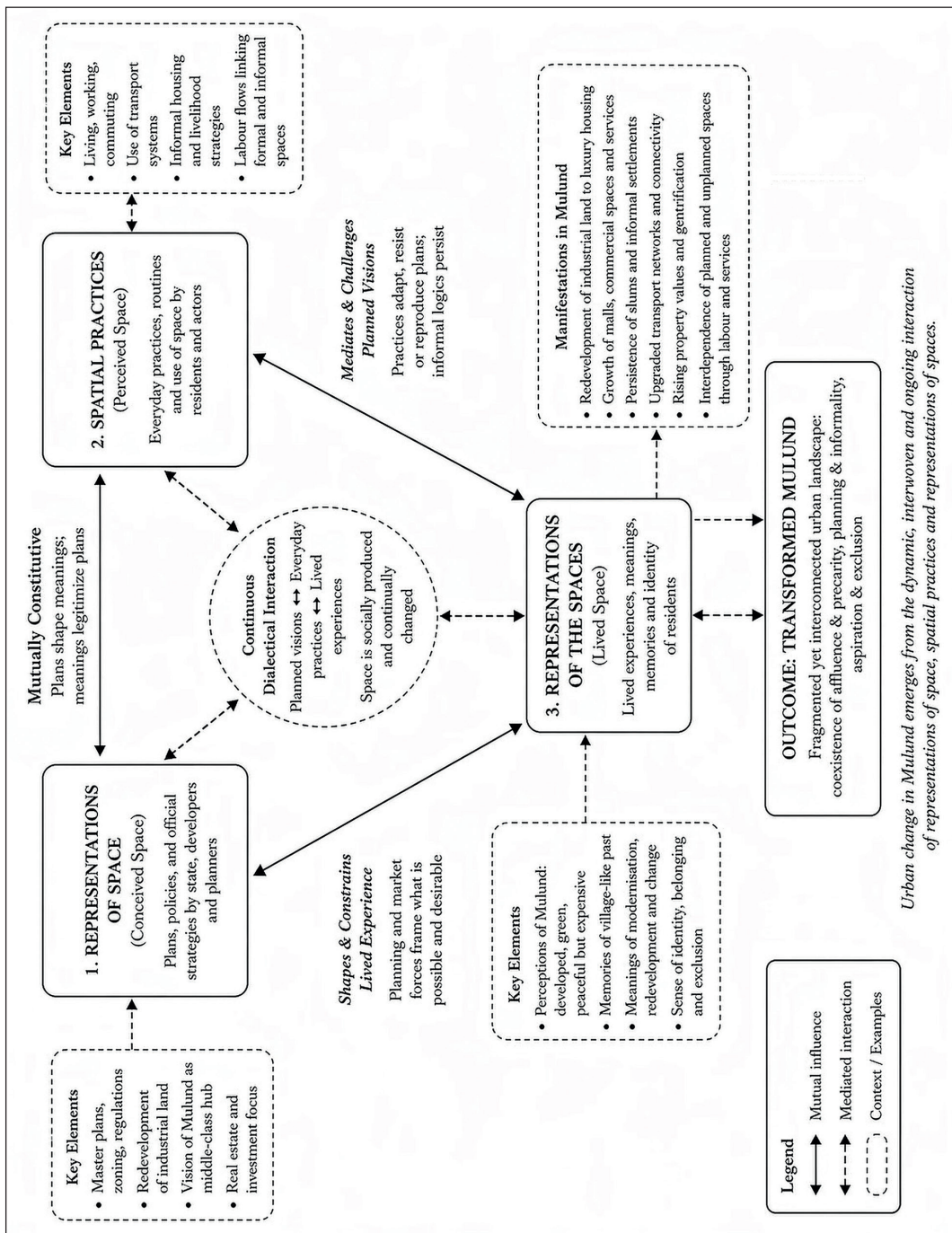


Fig. 6: Interconnected aspects of the spatial triad in Mulund

Source: Prepared by the authors

are functionally connected to it through labour flows (e.g., domestic work performed in high-rise apartments). This interdependence between planned/unplanned spaces (Fig. 4A & 4B) illustrates the way in which spatial practices play an important role in mediating (and often challenging) the predominance of representations of space.

Both spatial patterns and the interpretation of how space is experienced socially (representationally) are created through these representational spaces. The way Mulund's residents interpret rather than simply reproduce their experience of Mulund (i.e., developed, green, peaceful, but progressively too expensive) shows the relationship between experience and the creation of meanings about material changes and planned changes in the meaning of place through time (Fig. 5). Long-time residents' memories of their village-like past exist alongside current representations of the impact of modernisation or redevelopment, functionally producing a multidimensional spatial identity. The way these meanings are expressed or represented also contributes to the cycle of spatial production by influencing housing markets, investment patterns, and planning priorities, and further establishing Mulund as an attractive but contested urban area.

Thus, the transformation of Mulund is not merely the outcome of infrastructural development or real estate expansion. It is the result of a continuous dialectical negotiation where planned visions shape material practices; everyday practices adapt, resist, or reproduce these visions; and lived experiences reinterpret and legitimise (or contest) both (Fig. 6). This triadic interaction produces a fragmented yet interconnected urban

landscape characterised by the coexistence of affluence and precarity, planning and informality, aspiration, and exclusion.

Discussion

The study explores the social (re)construction of Mulund's space, which has transformed from suburban to purely urban characteristics, analysed using Henri Lefebvre's Spatial Triad framework. While the results reveal the perceived, conceived, and lived spaces of Mulund, it is important to note that "relations between conceived-perceived-lived spaces are not ever stable, nor should they be grasped artificially or linearly" (Merrifield, 2006, p. 111). Rather than existing as parallel domains, these dimensions are mutually constitutive, and many of their characteristics are shaped by relations of power embedded in the broader pattern of capitalistic urbanisation in Mumbai.

Conceived space as a project of power and capital

The planned areas of Mulund (based on the input of planners, builders, architects, and municipal actors) reflect views primarily derived from master plans, private real estate strategies, and infrastructure-led development. These spatial representations concentrate on residential high-rises, commercial complexes, and transit-oriented corridors, reflecting technocratic and hierarchical spatial logics, as highlighted in the existing theoretical context (Lefebvre, 1991; Merrifield, 1993; Shields, 1998). Redevelopment of previously low-rise structures into high-rise buildings, gated communities, and retail developments all represent a class-based interpretation of how urban areas should be developed. As one long-time resident expressed, "*Buildings have gone higher, but people like us feel pushed to the side.*"

However, this vision does not simply overwrite existing realities. Instead, it encounters resistance and adaptation within perceived space. Therefore, informal settlements are not anomalies but spatial responses to the exclusionary housing market. Street vendors and other informal workers also occupy the planned area and are redefining those areas, often against the regulations governing their operation. Attempts at controlling the space have led to the decline of many traditional bazaars and the imposition of new regulations on vending. Nevertheless, the continued existence of both demonstrates the inability of a top-down governing approach to control every aspect of a city. This relates to the argument of Lefebvre that conceived space is a representation of power relations and an imposed order, even though it is still affected by everyday practices, which planners cannot completely control (Elden, 2004; Merrifield, 2006).

Perceived space as mediation and contradiction

Perceived space in Mulund reveals how quotidian practices mediate between imposed order and lived realities. The movement of domestic workers between slum dwellings and high-rise apartments or the inclusion of informal services within the formal residential zone shows how physically divided spaces still are functionally interdependent. Perceived space emerges from people's understanding and moving through these physical surroundings in a humanised, sensory way (Michalovich, 2019). However, as the current literature points out, spatial arrangements can also create unity among the people and, at the same time, intensify the division of the marginalised (Delaisse *et al.*, 2021). In Mulund, the difference between the rich residents of high-rise towers and the

poor people living in the unplanned slums that are deprived of basic urban services is so prominent that it results in obvious spatial and social segregation. A domestic worker described this duality as, "*We work in those towers, but we cannot afford to live anywhere close.*"

These engagement-based contradictions lie at the heart of capitalist urbanisation, where proximity coexists with inequality. Infrastructure improvements, such as enhanced connectivity, facilitate flows of labour and consumption, *yet also* accelerate land value escalation and displacement pressures. Consequently, how people perceive space recreates spatial order on the one hand and, on the other, subtly destabilises conceived spatial order.

Lived space as counter-space and meaning-making

Space functions as both an object and a thing; at the same time, it is also a process, a means, and a tool in which social relations, and hence change, occur (Zieleniec, 2018). Lived space in Mulund is a lively counter-space that keeps changing the spatial experience through the continuous reshaping of symbolic meanings, memories, and identities. People living in the area recall the transformation of the place from a village-type settlement to a city centre characterised by malls, parks, good roads, and cultural variety. The fabric of the community, festivals, and local histories have been there all along, though the density has increased, the waste management problems have become worse, and the redevelopment has been going on unevenly. Memories of a quieter, village-like past coexist with present narratives of development and opportunity, producing a layered spatial identity. One resident reflected, "*It is more developed*

now, but it doesn't feel like the same Mulund anymore." As argued in the existing literature, lived space is the place that stores the most obscure, informal knowledge, which is usually very difficult for a technocratic regime to regulate or redefine (Elden, 2004; Merrifield, 2006).

Representational spaces in this sense can be considered as a form of quiet protest. These lived experiences generate what Lefebvre terms 'counter-spaces', not overtly oppositional, but quietly subversive. The opposition of the residents to the redevelopment projects, their care for the public spaces, and their fight for community practices are examples of how lived meanings can challenge the displacement of people from the city and have the power to change those places that are going to be transformed.

Mulund's distinct contribution

Even though Mulund is similar in character to other Indian suburbs, it imparts three different insights to Lefebvre's triad:

(a) Sharper Triadic Tensions:

The proximity of industrial remnants, middle-class redevelopment, and old informal settlements side by side have the effect of increasing the contradictions between perceived, conceived, and lived spaces.

(b) Lived Space as a Stabilising Force:

Excellent community relations and cultural continuity are instrumental in the redevelopment processes, thereby achieving the preservation of older spatial identities to a greater extent than in most other suburbs.

(c) "Negotiated Gentrification":

The redevelopment is the result of continuous negotiations among developers, residents, informal workers, and municipal actors; thus, it creates the coexistence of different spatial

forms that are not integrated into a single elite enclave.

Conclusion

The spatial triad refers to the three aspects of space that are combined to form a single analytical tool to understand how space emerges in socio-historical-geographical contexts, and is not a strict formula (Wolf & Mahaffey, 2016). When applied to Mulund, it uncovers a changing urban landscape that is not just the result of physical changes but also the effect of social hierarchies, everyday practices, lived histories, and different development visions that have interacted with each other. The example of Mulund demonstrates the idea that conceived spaces do not completely dominate spaces that are perceived and lived, but rather the urban changes become visible through the ongoing negotiations, disputes, and reconstruction of the spatial meanings.

The formation of the conceived spaces could have been better understood by exploring the existing Mumbai Development Plan, but due to certain constraints, we could not carry out this exploration for the present study.

Competing interest

The corresponding author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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