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[Room] for Play Study of play spaces in low-income residential typologies, Mumbai

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Abstract

[Room] for Play investigates the spatial conditions of play within dense low- to middle-income housing typologies in Mumbai that have come up over the past seventy-five years. The study examines five predominant housing forms- slums, site-and-services schemes, chawls, redeveloped SRA buildings, and private apartment redevelopments, that together constitute 75% of the city's residential fabric. The research focuses on how children experience and appropriate everyday spaces for play, while also observing how teenagers, adults, and the elderly participate in shared spatial life. Using a comparative methodology across five neighbourhoods, the research combines on-site observation, measured drawings, and semi-structured interviews. The findings identify spatial configurations that enable or inhibit playful practices and reveal a gradual erosion of such spaces in redeveloped, newer housing typologies, highlighting the urgent need to reintegrate play-conscious design in future urban housing models.

Keywords; Play, Low-Income Housing, Type, Redevelopment, Spatial Configuration, Density

INTRODUCTION

Housing in dense cities is commonly understood through technical and quantitative frameworks, where planning regulations, density calculations, and unit efficiency become the primary parameters through which residential environments are designed and evaluated. Within this logic, the house is often treated as a fixed arrangement of rooms assigned to specific domestic functions, with living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, and toilets forming the dominant spatial vocabulary of housing. In rapidly transforming urban contexts such as Mumbai, particularly in redeveloping neighbourhoods like Parel and Lower Parel, this has produced repetitive vertical housing forms that prioritise efficiency, density, and economic return, often reducing opportunities for informal social interaction within residential environments.

However, everyday life within dense housing reveals that this understanding remains incomplete, as many activities that sustain urban social life occur outside clearly defined domestic interiors. Shared corridors, courtyards, staircases, intermediate landings, and thresholds frequently accommodate domestic spillover, informal gathering, and social exchange that cannot be contained within the limited dimensions of the dwelling unit. The importance of such spaces is strongly articulated by Charles Correa in *The New Landscape*, where he proposes eight principles for responsive housing environments: incrementality, open-to-sky space, equity, disaggregation, pluralism, malleability, participation, and income generation.

As he writes,

Urban living involves much more than just the use of a small room of say, 10 sqm. The room, the cell, is only one element in a whole system of spaces that people need. (Correa, 1985)

This statement shifts attention from the dwelling as an isolated unit to the wider network of spaces that support daily life. Within dense housing conditions, these spaces become especially significant for play, movement, and informal interaction, particularly where interior domestic space is limited. This research, therefore, approaches housing through the concept of [Room] for *Play*, examining how shared architectural spaces enable everyday acts of social life beyond the formal boundaries of the dwelling.

PLAY AS A CONCEPT

Play is often associated with childhood recreation or designated playgrounds. Within planning frameworks, play is typically understood as an activity that requires specialised equipment or designated spaces such as parks and playgrounds. However, this narrow understanding overlooks the broader social and spatial dimensions of play. The word *play* carries multiple meanings and interpretations. With age, forms of play change. Beyond structured games, play may include activities such as watching others, chatting with neighbours, gossiping, resting, waiting, or casually observing the everyday life of a neighbourhood. These activities often occur during moments when individuals step outside the routines of work and domestic responsibilities.

Play, therefore, represents a form of engagement with space rather than a clearly defined activity. It describes moments when people occupy environments in ways that are flexible, informal, and interactive. A day in the life of a human constitutes a large part of 'play'. In dense urban environments, these forms of engagement frequently emerge in spaces that were not originally designed for leisure or recreation. Play in architecture has been expressed in a variety of ways. It has been specifically defined in relation to one's context. The context this study is based on helps us derive a new concept of play, which is not often considered in architectural studies. This paper looks into an aspect of 'play' from a different dimension, known as 'Room for *Play*'

Playful	Leisure	Entertainment
Pastime	Play and its forms	Recreation
Relaxation	Pleasure	Socialisation

Figure. 1: *Play* and its form Source: Author

¹ Definition of *Play* in this research: A voluntary activity that is chosen to be performed with the intention of feeling relaxed, satisfied, or entertained; it is done for its own reasons and purpose.

[ROOM] FOR PLAY

The concept of *Room for Play* emerges from observing how residents occupy spaces within residential environments. Rather than referring to a specific room or dedicated recreational facility, it describes the spatial possibilities that arise within the interstitial spaces of architecture- gaps, overlaps, edges, and residual areas that exist between clearly defined functions. It seeks to understand how such spaces emerge within dense urban patterns and how residents inhabit, adapt, and activate them through everyday life.

Play is an instinctive human activity, yet within dense housing environments, the compactness of domestic space often limits where it can occur. Since a house cannot contain all aspects of everyday life, many activities extend beyond its boundaries. While work-related functions are often absorbed within the dwelling, play frequently spills outward because it requires openness, flexibility, and freedom. In dense neighbourhoods, this spillage becomes visible in corridors, thresholds, staircases, verandahs, and streets, where everyday life extends into shared space.

A useful analogy is the clearance gap between a door and its frame. Though small, this margin is essential: it allows the door to move freely and adjust to changes in material over time. Similarly, architecture requires margins of tolerance- spaces not fully fixed by function- where human movement, interaction, and improvisation can unfold.

Within this framework, *Room for Play* can be understood through three spatial conditions: **spillage**, where activities move beyond intended boundaries; **excess**, where architecture produces more space than strictly required; and **appropriation**, where residents repeatedly adapt spaces to support everyday use.

Through these processes, architecture operates not as a fixed arrangement of rooms, but as a flexible spatial system shaped continuously by its inhabitants.

RESEARCH AGENDAS

Research Question

How does play occur in the dense spatiality of low-to middle-income residential typologies in Mumbai?

Research Aim

The research aims to understand how play emerges within residential environments and how architectural spaces support informal social interaction in dense housing conditions.

Research Objectives

- To identify spatial conditions where play occurs within residential environments.
- To examine how different housing typologies influence opportunities for informal interaction.
- To document everyday spatial practices within shared residential spaces.
- To develop a spatial framework for understanding Room for Play within housing environments.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts an observational and comparative approach focused on everyday spatial practices within residential environments. Five housing typologies within Mumbai were selected for analysis. These typologies represent different modes of housing production and collectively reflect the diversity of residential environments within the city.

The typologies include:

- Slums
- Site and Services Scheme
- Chawls
- Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) Schemes
- Private Apartment

Field observations were conducted within representative neighbourhoods from each typology. The study documented how residents occupied and interacted with shared spaces such as streets, corridors, staircases, washing areas, terraces, and thresholds.

These observations were mapped and compared to identify recurring spatial conditions where informal interaction and play occur.

FIELDWORK DATA

The field study documents how each site is experienced at ground level, focusing on density as a central concept. Figure-ground analysis is used to understand the spatial structure of the broader area and the site itself. Each site is introduced through maps showing surrounding density, followed by basic information, photographs, and drawings of house extensions and typical dwelling layouts. The study then explores how play occurs within each housing

typology. Finally, a drawing isolates the “room for play” by removing the surrounding context, highlighting the quantity and distribution of play spaces. This method reveals how residents adapt spaces through appropriation, overflow, and social interaction, enabling clear comparison across different urban typologies.

The following section begins the discussion of the fieldwork conducted across the selected sites.

Slums: Jijamata Nagar, Sewri, Mumbai

- Slums represent one of the most informal housing typologies within Mumbai. These settlements evolve through incremental construction and self-built practices, producing dense networks of narrow lanes and interconnected dwellings.
- The street becomes the primary spatial framework through which everyday life unfolds. Unlike formal housing environments, where circulation spaces are designed primarily for movement, the streets within slums function as multi-purpose environments.
- Children frequently use these lanes as playgrounds. Running, climbing, and improvised games become part of the everyday life of the street. Because houses open directly onto these lanes, residents maintain visual and social connections with the activities occurring outside their homes.
- Doorsteps and thresholds also play an important role. Adults often sit at these edges, watching the activities of the neighbourhood and interacting with neighbours. These thresholds become transitional spaces between private interiors and shared public life.
- Within this spatial structure, play is integrated into the everyday functioning of the settlement rather than confined to designated recreational areas.



Figure. 2: Geography of play in slums Source: Author

Site-and-Services Scheme: Shivaji Nagar, Govandi, Mumbai

Site-and-services housing represents a more structured approach to residential development. In these projects, infrastructure and plots are provided by planning authorities while residents gradually construct their homes over time.

Compared to slums, these settlements exhibit clearer spatial organisation. Streets are wider, and plot boundaries are more defined. However, the incremental nature of construction allows residents to adapt their homes to changing needs.

Internal streets frequently become environments for children's play and informal gathering. Washing areas, small platforms, and open corners become places where residents interact while performing daily routines.

These spaces often function simultaneously as areas for work, social interaction, and leisure. The flexibility of the spatial layout allows multiple forms of occupation to coexist.

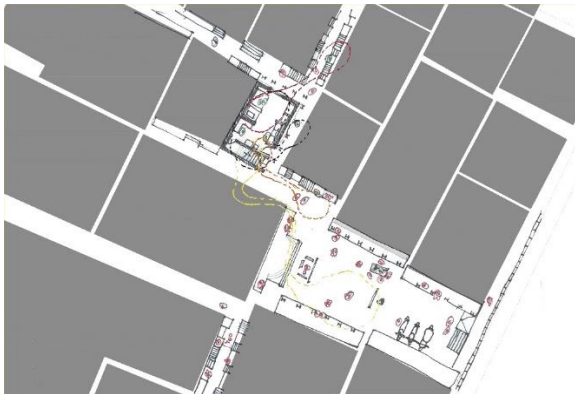


Figure 3: Geography of play in the sites and services scheme Source: Author

Chawls: Koli Chawl No.3, Lower Parel, Mumbai

Chawls represent one of the earliest forms of organised working-class housing in Mumbai. Built primarily during the industrial period, these buildings consist of small residential units arranged along shared corridors.

The corridor becomes the central social space within the building. Because every dwelling opens directly onto this corridor, residents encounter each other frequently during everyday movement.

Children often play along these corridors while adults gather in the same spaces for conversation and observation. The corridor further grows into the connecting bridge

between two building bars. The corridor, therefore, operates as an extension of domestic space.

This spatial arrangement creates a strong sense of collective life within the building. Everyday interaction becomes embedded within the architectural structure of the chawl.



Figure 4: Geography of play in chawls Source: Author

SRA Housing: Matoshree Co-operative Housing Society, Parel, Mumbai

Slum Rehabilitation Authority housing represents a formal attempt to replace informal settlements with standardised apartment buildings and improved infrastructure. However, despite larger dwelling units, the spatial conditions often perform worse than expected in supporting everyday social life.

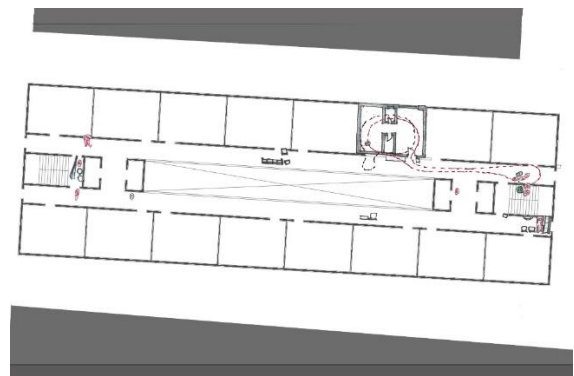


Figure 5: Geography of play in the SRA Housing scheme Source: Author

The vertical configuration reduces accessible shared open spaces, leaving corridors and staircases as the primary areas for interaction. Due to their narrow proportions, poor lighting, and limited spatial quality, these spaces are rarely inhabited for long and fail to support sustained social

activity. Residents occasionally gather on staircases or pause in bridge corridors, but such interactions remain brief and incidental.

As a result, daily life in buildings such as Matoshree CHS becomes deprived of play and spontaneous encounter. Although the built form creates pockets of privacy useful to certain age groups, it weakens neighbourhood connectivity, limits children's play, and reduces the informal social vibrancy once present in slum environments.

Private Apartment: Khapridevi Co-operative Housing Society, Parel, Mumbai

Private apartment complexes represent the most regulated housing typology within the study. However, in Khapridevi, these provisions do not translate into an active shared life. Corridors and staircases function primarily as circulation routes, offering little scope for informal occupation or spontaneous interaction.

The building lacks flexible and interpretable spaces that residents can appropriate, making the overall environment highly functional but socially inactive. Residents generally remain inside their homes and step out only when necessary, as the outdoor spaces provide little incentive for everyday occupation.

The courtyards, instead of becoming communal spaces, are largely used for parking, reducing opportunities for play

and social exchange. As a result, privacy is prioritised over collective life, producing a residential environment where form supports efficiency but offers little room for play.

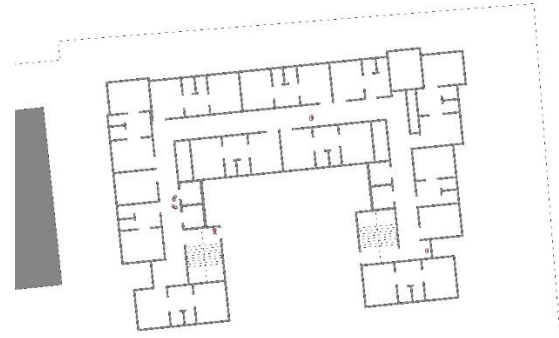


Figure. 6: Geography of play in a redeveloped private apartment Source: Author

SPATIAL FRAMEWORK OF PLAY

Across all five housing typologies examined in this study, play repeatedly appears within particular spatial conditions that emerge through the relationship between built form and everyday life. Because this research adopts a comparative approach, a common analytical framework was developed to evaluate how play becomes visible across different neighbourhoods. These processes are examined through nine comparative parameters that reflect both what play generates within an environment and what spatial conditions enable it.

Table 1: Analytical Framework for play across sites
Source: Author

	Sites/ Parameters	Slum	Site & Services	Chawl	SRA Building	Private Apartment
S P I L L A G E	Degree Of Play					No spillage
	Sense of security	Residents feel secure with people constantly present outdoors	Active lanes with elders provide natural surveillance	Corridors serve as passive watch zones	Empty corridors increase vulnerability to trespassing	Lack of outdoor presence compromises resident safety
	Sociality	Strong community bonds with active social interactions	Vibrant social life supported by frequent neighbourly engagement	Moderate social ties centred around shared spaces	Limited social interaction due to the privatisation of space	Social isolation with minimal community interaction
	Level Of Privacy	Low	Low	Very Low	Very High	High

E X C E S S	Mixed Use (Commercial and Residential Use)	Clinics, General stores, and mechanics become social spots where men spend their weekends	Balwadis are present. Fewer shops are present in the neighbourhood.	Shop fronts are occupied by men and the elderly in the afternoons.	A very stark disconnect seems to exist between the ground-floor shops and the residents	No mixed use observed
	Shared Spaces	Numerous shared spaces	Numerous shared spaces	Moderate shared spaces	Very few shared spaces	Extremely few shared spaces
A P P R O P R I A T I O N	Scope for Improvisation	High Potential	High Potential	High Potential	Very limited potential	Almost no potential
	Accessability	All age groups and genders inhabit the shared spaces	Fewer women inhabited shared spaces found	Fewer women and teenagers inhabited shared spaces found	Except for teenagers, no group is found explicitly	No groups were actively found out
	Festival Containment	The entire community participates in festivals	The majority of community participates in festivals entire community	The entire community participates in festivals	Few festivals are held within the built form	Festivals are celebrated privately within families

CONCLUSION AND SPATIAL ARGUMENT

The study demonstrates that play is an essential component of everyday life within residential environments. Across the five housing typologies examined in Mumbai, residents continuously reinterpret architectural spaces through informal activities such as conversation, observation, gathering, and everyday negotiation.

Room for Play is proposed as a framework for understanding these informal and often overlooked spaces that extend beyond the functional logic of the house to support social life and human interaction. It challenges the idea of the home as a fixed unit defined only through measurable rooms, instead presenting dwelling as a flexible condition shaped by participation, adaptability, and appropriation.

Focusing on the large majority of residents who have little access to architects or agencies over housing outcomes, the study argues that contemporary redevelopment increasingly produces repetitive and spatially disconnected environments. As housing becomes driven by efficiency, technical compliance, and standardised layouts, the spaces that sustain collective life are gradually diminished. The findings suggest that typologies offering greater spatial opportunities for play generate stronger sociality, safety, and belonging.

Room for Play, therefore, argues that future housing must move beyond purely functional planning and

deliberately retain flexible spaces that allow everyday life to unfold.

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