

Ahead of the second edition of 'Bombay Imagined,' Robert Stephens on how researching the city’s un-built plans shaped his home design

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Weeks before the second edition of Bombay Imagined releases, Robert Stephens discusses how its research impacted him from the drawing board to the drawing room of his Bengaluru home. Excerpts from the interview



On the sidelines of a symposium at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) last month, this writer met Robert Stephens, architect, urban planner, and Bombayphile. The Bengaluru resident was excited that the second edition of his book, Bombay Imagined: An Illustrated History of the Unbuilt City was almost ready. At that session, he reminded audiences how detailed, un-built plans meant for the development of Bombay/Mumbai included in the book, could be realistically adapted to today's times, and even for residences. He cited examples that he had incorporated while building his own home in Bengaluru. Stephens offered more insight in this conversation with mid-day.

What was the driving force to release the second edition of Bombay Imagined?

When the last of the first edition copies found homes earlier this year, there was a palpable sadness in my heart. For three years I have watched as people discovered a side of Mumbai that they never knew existed. A few individuals told me the book brought them to tears (whether of joy or sorrow, I'm not sure!). As Dayanita Singh says, “A book is a conversation with a stranger in the future”, and we wanted to keep the conversation going.

During your session at CSMVS, you revealed about drawing inspiration from these plans to build your home. Tell us more.

Over the course of Mumbai's unrealised history, there have been a few who held the radical view that sewage is a resource; not to be wasted. Hector Tulloch proposed irrigating agricultural fields from Matunga to Chembur with the city's wastewater in 1872, while NV Modak proposed transforming waste into biogas in 1939. Neither vision came to fruition at its time, but the idea now lives vicariously in our home, which naturally treats all wastewater and reuses it for irrigation within the property.



The Mumbai section (in pic) of the collection is housed in a cave-like room inspired by a traditional open well on the property. The library also features collections on Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Patna, and Rajgir, as well as sections dedicated to Patrick Geddes, Sir M Visvesvaraya and Mohammad Fayazuddin. images, PICS COURTESY/ROBERT STEPHENS, TINA NANDI STEPHENS

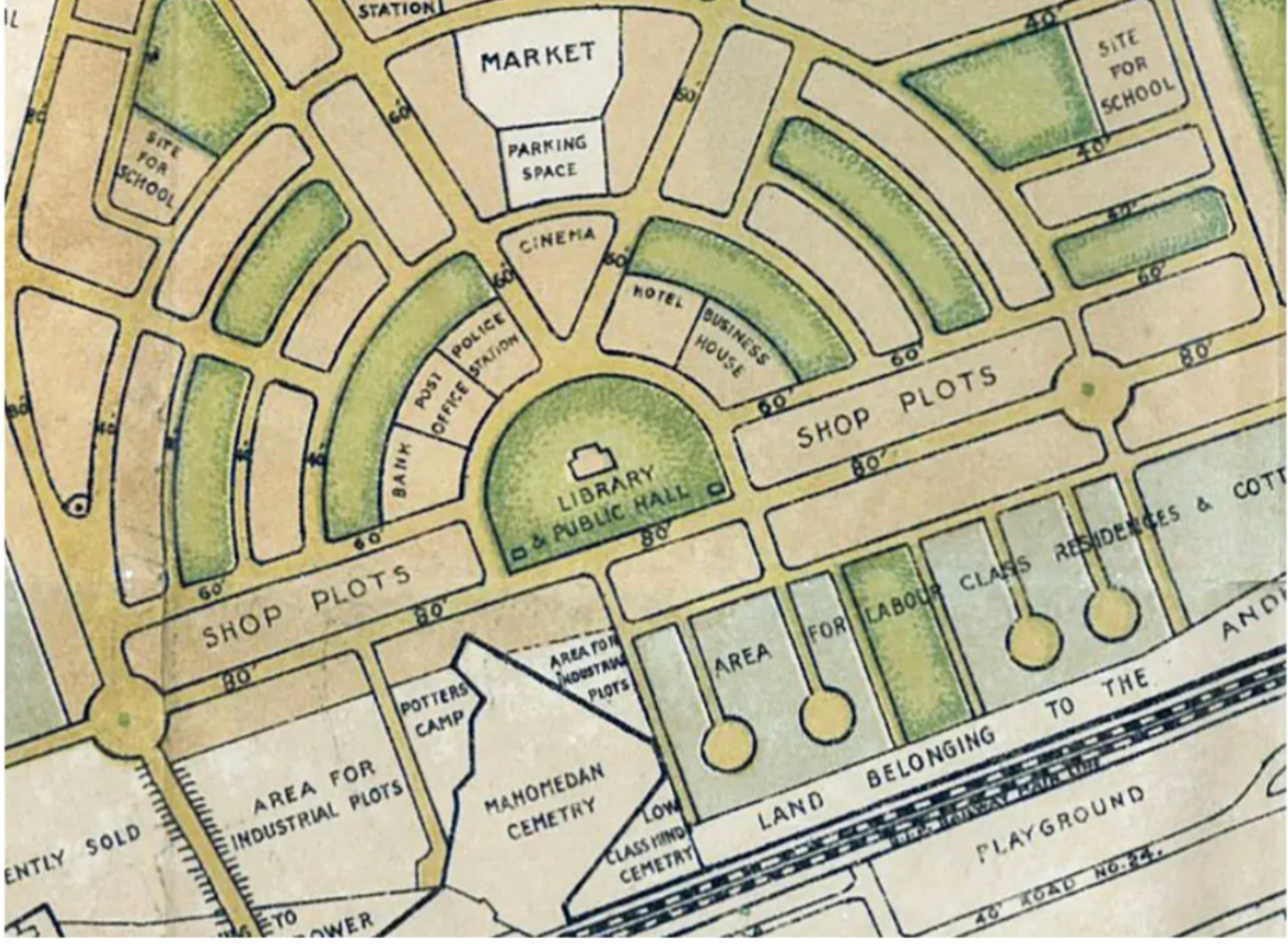
In 1945, there was a curious masterplan, which placed a Library and Garden at the centre of a new vision for Dharavi. The first time I saw this scheme I fell in love with it: Imagine a space overflowing with books set amidst the wonders of nature, open and free to all. Our home, which happens to be located in the centre of our neighbourhood, houses more than 1000 rare books on India's cities (the Mumbai section comprises 409 titles), and we decided to make it a public library that anyone can visit and explore, six days a week. The reading space for visitors is nestled under a verandah that overlooks a naturalistic garden, like a miniature version of the vision for Dharavi.



The cover for Bombay Imagined's second edition

Looking back at the Bombay Imagined journey, did you ‘imagine’ that it would resonate with all kinds of readers?

Cities are a lot like people. They have dreams and desires, hopes and aspirations, many of which remain forever unfulfilled. This shared experience connects us with cities in mysterious and unexpected ways that resonate with everyone, especially with those who least expect it.



The Dharavi Estate Neighbourhood Unit proposal of 1945

How can your book's message reach a wider audience?

There are many imaginations for its future! An exhibition is in the works, as well as an audacious creative project which we will keep a bit hush for now, but hopefully not for too long.