SELECTIVE FORMALISATION IN BHENDI BAZAAR, MUMBAI

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Industrial Development and Informal Urban Transformation: Revalorisation and Displacement in Mumbai

Selective Formalisation and Everyday Displacement in the Bhendi Bazaar Redevelopment Project

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Abstract

Large-scale redevelopment projects have become central instruments of spatial restructuring across cities of the Global South. Although these interventions are frequently framed through policy agendas of rehabilitation, modernization, safety and inclusive development, their socio-spatial consequences remain deeply uneven, particularly in urban contexts shaped by informality, dense mixed-use fabrics and precarious tenure arrangements. This paper examines the Bhendi Bazaar Redevelopment Project in Mumbai as a case through which to rethink the relationship between planning, informality and displacement.

Rather than approaching Bhendi Bazaar as a conventional case of slum clearance or market-led gentrification, the paper analyses it as an institutionally mediated process of informal urban transformation. Led by the Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust (SBUT) and enabled through Mumbai's cluster redevelopment framework, the project promises same-neighbourhood return, improved housing, commercial continuity and heritage-sensitive urban design (Master & Dravid, 2015; SBUT, n.d.). However, it also reorganizes the material, economic and symbolic conditions that historically sustained everyday life in the neighbourhood.

The paper argues that Bhendi Bazaar illustrates a form of informal gentrification: a process in which informality is not immediately eradicated, but selectively formalised, spatially reorganised and symbolically mobilised within broader trajectories of urban revalorisation. Through the vertical rehousing of residents, the reordering of bazaar economies and the curation of local authenticity, redevelopment produces displacement beyond direct eviction. The key issue is therefore not only whether residents and businesses are formally rehoused, but whether the social, commercial and everyday conditions that enabled them to remain are preserved.

By foregrounding selective formalisation and everyday displacement, the paper contributes to debates on planning, governance, redevelopment and socio-spatial inequality in Global South cities.

Keywords: informal gentrification; redevelopment; selective formalisation; displacement; Mumbai; Bhendi Bazaar.

1. Introduction: redevelopment, informality and displacement beyond eviction

Across cities of the Global South, large-scale redevelopment has increasingly become a preferred planning instrument for transforming dense inner-city areas, deteriorated housing stocks, informal settlements and mixed-use neighbourhoods. These interventions are commonly justified through the language of safety, infrastructure repair, modernization, environmental improvement, economic competitiveness and social inclusion. In policy discourse, redevelopment is frequently presented as a corrective to urban decay and as a mechanism for integrating marginalized populations into the formal city. Yet these projects also raise critical questions about land revalorisation, displacement, governance and the transformation of everyday urban life.

This paper examines these tensions through the case of Bhendi Bazaar in Mumbai. Located in the dense historic fabric of South Mumbai, Bhendi Bazaar has long combined cessed buildings, chawl housing, tenant occupancies, religious institutions, small commerce, bazaar economies and intense everyday street life. Since 2009, the area has been subject to one of India's most ambitious inner-city redevelopment schemes, led by the Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust. The project promises to replace old and unsafe buildings with modern high-rise towers, provide improved housing to existing residents, reorganize commerce and preserve elements of the neighbourhood's cultural identity (SBUT, n.d.; Chandran, 2017).

At first sight, Bhendi Bazaar might appear to be a case of rehabilitation rather than displacement. Unlike more coercive forms of redevelopment, the project is not officially based on mass eviction or the simple removal of existing residents. On the contrary, its legitimacy rests on the promise of same-neighbourhood return, improved housing conditions and continuity for residents and businesses. This makes the case particularly important. It forces us to move beyond a narrow understanding of displacement as direct expulsion and to examine how redevelopment can formally include residents while transforming the conditions that made their presence socially and economically viable (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009).

This question is especially relevant in contexts where urban informality is not a residual condition outside planning, but a mode of urbanization and governance. Roy (2005) famously argues that informality should not be understood simply as the absence of formal regulation, but as a planning epistemology through which the state differentiates, tolerates, regularises or represses urban practices. Ghertner (2015), in turn, argues that conventional gentrification theory often fails in contexts where formal property relations cannot be assumed as the analytical baseline. These insights are central for interpreting Bhendi Bazaar: the case does not show the disappearance of informality, but its reorganisation through planning, legality and redevelopment.

The central research question of this paper is therefore: How does the Bhendi Bazaar Redevelopment Project reveal the role of planning institutions in selectively formalising informal urban life while producing new forms of revalorisation and displacement?

The paper argues that Bhendi Bazaar represents an institutionally mediated form of informal gentrification. Informality is not simply erased; it is reorganised, formalised, aestheticised and mobilised as part of a broader redevelopment strategy. The project incorporates certain elements of the existing social and cultural fabric—commerce, community identity, religious heritage, bazaar atmosphere—while simultaneously transforming property relations, spatial arrangements, commercial geographies and everyday routines. This produces a form of displacement that is not primarily immediate or spectacular, but gradual, normative, commercial, symbolic and everyday.

The contribution of the paper is twofold. Empirically, it reads Bhendi Bazaar as a complex redevelopment process in which improvement and dispossession are not mutually exclusive but intertwined. Conceptually, it proposes informal gentrification as a useful lens for analysing redevelopment in contexts where informality is not outside planning, but actively governed through selective regularisation, conditional inclusion and spatial reordering.

Methodologically, this paper is based on qualitative documentary analysis combining official project material produced by SBUT, planning and policy documents, legal records and court decisions, media coverage in English and Hindi, multilateral reports and secondary academic literature. Rather than offering a definitive empirical assessment of the redevelopment process, the paper adopts an exploratory case-study approach and is conceived as research in progress for discussion at the AESOP–IIT Delhi–UCL Workshop. Its aim is to identify the main socio-spatial mechanisms through which redevelopment, informality and displacement intersect in Bhendi Bazaar.

2. Bhendi Bazaar: redevelopment, rehabilitation and land revalorisation

Bhendi Bazaar is one of the oldest and densest neighbourhoods of South Mumbai. Historically associated with the Dawoodi Bohra community, while also inhabited by other groups, it has been characterized by narrow lanes, mixed-use buildings, chawls, religious institutions, small shops, workshops, food markets and intense pedestrian life. Its urban fabric has long combined residential, commercial, religious and social functions in close proximity. This density has been central to its vitality, but it has also been associated with overcrowding, deteriorated buildings, inadequate ventilation, shared sanitation and infrastructural stress (India Today Hindi, 2014; Chandran, 2017).

The Bhendi Bazaar Redevelopment Project was initiated in 2009 by the Saifee Burhani Upliftment Trust. It covers approximately 16.5 acres and has been widely presented as a model for cluster redevelopment in Mumbai. The project aims to replace hundreds of old buildings with modern high-rise structures and to rehouse thousands of families and businesses within the same neighbourhood. Earlier project material and media reports refer to the rehousing of approximately 3,200 families and around 1,200–1,250 businesses,

though figures vary across sources and project phases (Master & Dravid, 2015; SBUT, n.d.; Sugra Begum v. State of Maharashtra, 2020). Such variation itself reflects the complexity of the scheme, the evolution of its design and the multiple institutional frameworks through which redevelopment has proceeded.

The project was enabled by Mumbai's cluster redevelopment regulations, particularly DCR 33(9), later incorporated into the DCPR 2034 framework. These planning instruments allow the redevelopment of clusters of old and cessed buildings through incentives related to Floor Space Index and built-up area. In practical terms, they make it possible to transform a low-rise, dense and deteriorated urban fabric into a verticalized environment, where existing residents are rehoused and additional built space can be used to finance the project. This is the economic and regulatory core of the redevelopment logic: the promise of rehabilitation is tied to the capacity to unlock land value (Asian Development Bank, 2018; Indorewala, 2022; Master & Dravid, 2015).

This matters because Bhendi Bazaar is not peripheral land. It is centrally located in Mumbai, a city marked by extreme land scarcity and intense pressure on real estate values. The deteriorated condition of the built environment, combined with old rental arrangements and dense occupation, generated a significant gap between existing use value and potential redevelopment value. In this sense, the project can be read through the broader logic of urban revalorisation: land and built form are reorganised so that a dense but relatively low-value fabric becomes a modern, higher-value urban district. This logic resonates with Smith's (1979) theory of the rent gap, though the Bhendi Bazaar case complicates it by showing how value capture can be mediated through community-linked institutions, planning incentives and rehabilitation discourse.

However, the Bhendi Bazaar case cannot be reduced to a conventional market-led redevelopment. SBUT's role gives the project a distinctive institutional and community-linked character. The trust presents itself not merely as a developer, but as a social and community actor seeking to improve the living conditions of residents while preserving the neighbourhood's identity. Official narratives emphasize safety, health, infrastructure, dignity, heritage and community upliftment (SBUT, n.d.). The project is therefore legitimated not primarily as clearance, but as rehabilitation.

At the same time, Bhendi Bazaar has been repeatedly framed beyond the local scale as a model for urban redevelopment. It was showcased in smart-city and infrastructure-oriented policy discussions and later incorporated into broader redevelopment frameworks by multilateral institutions (Asian Development Bank, 2018; Asian Development Bank & World Bank, 2025; Indian Express, 2016). This policy visibility matters: it turns Bhendi Bazaar into more than a neighbourhood project. It becomes a demonstration case for a wider planning logic in which rehabilitation, value capture and urban modernization are presented as mutually compatible.

This dual character is crucial. Bhendi Bazaar is simultaneously a project of housing improvement and land revalorisation; a community-linked initiative and a planning-enabled redevelopment scheme; a promise of continuity and an instrument of radical socio-spatial transformation. Its analytical importance lies precisely in this ambiguity. It shows how redevelopment in informalized or semi-formal inner-city areas can operate through inclusion

rather than removal, and how inclusion itself can become a mechanism for reorganising urban value.

3. Selective formalisation: housing, commerce and everyday life

The most important mechanism at work in Bhendi Bazaar is selective formalisation. The project does not simply eradicate informality. Instead, it reorganises informal and semi-formal practices into more legible, governable and marketable forms. This process can be observed in three interconnected domains: housing, commerce and everyday social life.

3.1. From chawls to towers: residential formalisation

In residential terms, the redevelopment is justified by the poor condition of the existing housing stock. Many families lived in extremely small rooms, often with shared toilets, limited ventilation and insecure or deteriorated structures. From this perspective, redevelopment responds to real material problems. The promise of larger, modern apartments with improved services cannot be dismissed as merely ideological. For many residents, rehousing may represent a substantial improvement in housing standards (Chandran, 2017; SBUT, n.d.).

Yet the shift from chawls and dense mixed-use buildings to high-rise towers transforms more than physical shelter. It changes the social architecture of everyday life. Chawls and bazaar neighbourhoods are not simply inadequate housing units; they are socio-spatial systems in which corridors, staircases, thresholds, courtyards, shopfronts and streets structure daily interaction. Informal childcare, neighbourly exchange, credit relations, food practices, religious routines, domestic production and small-scale commerce depend on proximity and porous boundaries between home, street and market.

Vertical rehousing modifies these conditions. Apartments may be larger and safer, but they are embedded in a different spatial regime. Lifts, enclosed corridors, regulated entrances, maintenance costs, formal building management and new rules of common space reshape how residents inhabit the neighbourhood. The home becomes more clearly separated from the street; circulation becomes internalised; community interaction becomes less spontaneous; and the everyday economies of proximity may be weakened.

The transition process is itself a major site of socio-spatial disruption. Court records and public notices show the importance of transit housing, rental compensation, certification of eligible occupants and permanent alternate accommodation agreements (Collector Mumbai City, 2019; Abdul Rehman Shaikh v. Executive Engineer ‘C-1’ Division, 2024). These mechanisms are not merely administrative details. They define who is recognised, who must move, how compensation is calculated and when permanent return becomes possible. In this sense, redevelopment formalises not only buildings, but urban subjecthood.

This is why the case demands a broader understanding of displacement. If residents are rehoused within the same area, physical expulsion may be avoided. However, the conditions of inhabiting are transformed. The question is not only whether residents return, but what kind of urban life they return to. In this sense, redevelopment produces a form of everyday displacement: a loss or reconfiguration of the social and spatial arrangements that sustained collective life, even when formal residence is maintained.

3.2. Reordering bazaar economies

Bhendi Bazaar is not only a residential neighbourhood. It is also a commercial and productive landscape composed of shops, food stalls, workshops, jewellery businesses, small traders, service providers and religiously embedded economies. These activities are central to the area's identity and to the livelihoods of its residents. They also constitute an important dimension of urban informality, not necessarily because they are illegal, but because they often depend on flexible arrangements, street visibility, personal networks, informal labour and everyday proximity.

The redevelopment project promises commercial continuity by relocating businesses within the new built environment. In principle, this distinguishes Bhendi Bazaar from redevelopment schemes that simply eliminate informal or small-scale economic activities. Yet continuity is not neutral. A shop relocated from a street-level bazaar environment to a podium, gallery or planned commercial block may remain legally present while losing its previous spatial advantages. Footfall, visibility, customer relations, storage practices, informal extensions into the street and proximity to complementary businesses are all part of the commercial ecology of the bazaar.

SBUT's own commercial-transit material is especially revealing in this respect. It frames commercial transit as a way to minimise business disruption while transforming what is described as an unorganised or chaotic marketplace into a more planned and modern commercial environment (SBUT, n.d.). This language captures the core mechanism of selective formalisation: trader continuity is promised, but on new spatial, architectural and regulatory terms.

The transformation from bazaar to planned commercial space is therefore a process of translation. Informal and small-scale enterprises are not necessarily erased, but they are translated into a more regulated, legible and curated landscape. This may involve assigned units, signage, standardized layouts, maintenance obligations, licensing requirements, circulation plans and new hierarchies of visibility. Activities that fit the new image of the district can be incorporated; others may be marginalized, displaced or rendered economically unviable.

This commercial reordering is central to understanding displacement in Bhendi Bazaar. For small traders, displacement may occur not only through eviction, but through the erosion of viability. If customers no longer pass by, if rent or maintenance costs increase, if storage becomes difficult, if relatives or informal workers cannot continue participating in the

business, then formal relocation does not necessarily secure economic continuity. The business may remain, but the livelihood system that sustained it is altered. Critical journalism on the project has repeatedly highlighted delays, uncertainty and implementation problems as central challenges for residents and businesses (Sadhwani, 2017; Singh, 2022).

This aspect connects Bhendi Bazaar to broader debates on labour geographies and informal enterprises within formal development. The project reorganises not only housing but also work. It transforms the spatial conditions under which small commerce and informal labour operate. In doing so, it reveals how redevelopment can produce displacement through the redesign of economic geographies.

3.3. Everyday life under new rules

Selective formalisation also affects everyday practices that are more difficult to measure: where people meet, how children play, how religious and community life unfolds, how food circulates, how neighbours support each other, how streets are used, and how residents negotiate density. In dense informalized neighbourhoods, everyday life often depends on flexible and shared use of space. Streets function as extensions of homes and shops; thresholds become places of exchange; informal arrangements compensate for infrastructural deficits.

Redevelopment replaces this flexible spatial order with a more planned, regulated and surveillable environment. Open-ended street practices are reorganised into designated spaces. Circulation, recreation, commerce and residence are separated more clearly. This may improve hygiene, safety and infrastructure, but it also reduces the ambiguity through which many everyday practices were sustained.

The result is not simply formalisation, but selective formalisation: a process that decides which forms of informality can be incorporated and which must disappear. Community identity, heritage and certain forms of commerce may be preserved because they add symbolic and economic value. Unregulated street use, excessive density, informal extensions, improvised labour arrangements or activities considered disorderly may be restricted. Informality becomes acceptable only when it is legible, aestheticised and compatible with redevelopment.

4. Curated authenticity and the symbolic value of informality

A second central mechanism in Bhendi Bazaar is the symbolic mobilisation of informality. The project does not present the old neighbourhood merely as a problem to be erased. It also draws value from its history, community identity and bazaar atmosphere. This is one of the reasons why Bhendi Bazaar is such a significant case: redevelopment does not reject the symbolic capital of informality; it repackages it as curated authenticity.

Promotional and architectural narratives surrounding the project often emphasize heritage, community, tradition and continuity. Elements associated with local architectural identity—such as Islamic arches, jharokha-like features, façade references, material cues and heritage-sensitive design—are incorporated into the new built environment (Chandran, 2017; SBUT, n.d.). The aim is to construct a modern district that still appears rooted in the cultural memory of Bhendi Bazaar.

This symbolic strategy is powerful. The old bazaar, with its density, food culture, religious institutions and commercial vitality, becomes a resource for branding the new district. What was previously associated with overcrowding, informality or disorder can be reframed as authenticity, vibrancy and heritage. In this process, the everyday life of the neighbourhood is transformed into an aesthetic and commercial asset.

However, curated authenticity is selective. It preserves those elements of the past that can be integrated into a modern image of urban renewal, while filtering out practices that appear excessive, disorderly, unprofitable or incompatible with the new development. The bazaar is not preserved as a lived, open-ended and self-organised urban ecology. It is redesigned as a controlled representation of bazaar life.

This dynamic resonates with broader debates on authenticity and gentrification. Zukin (2010) has shown how authenticity can become a key resource in urban revalorisation, particularly when neighbourhood identities are transformed into marketable cultural capital. Bhendi Bazaar illustrates a related process under conditions of informality: the informal and popular character of the neighbourhood is not simply stigmatized; it is selectively aestheticised. The result is a formalised authenticity, in which the cultural value of the old neighbourhood is retained while the practices that produced it are reorganised.

Dalvi's semiotic critique of the Bhendi Bazaar Redevelopment Project is particularly useful here because it reads the project's media language and imagery against the social syntax of the existing neighbourhood (Dalvi, n.d.). From this perspective, redevelopment does not simply preserve Bhendi Bazaar's identity; it re-signifies it through a new visual order based on upliftment, community pride, architectural coherence and modern urban legibility.

The symbolic dimension also affects displacement. Residents and traders may remain physically present, but the meaning of their presence changes. They become part of a curated landscape of heritage and community uplift. Their culture is celebrated, but within a redevelopment framework that sets new spatial, commercial and aesthetic rules. This produces a subtle form of symbolic displacement: the neighbourhood's identity is preserved in representation while its lived conditions are transformed.

5. Informal gentrification and the politics of permanence

The Bhendi Bazaar case challenges two dominant interpretations. First, it does not fit neatly within classical accounts of gentrification based on direct residential displacement and the replacement of working-class residents by higher-income newcomers. Second, it cannot be understood simply as benevolent rehabilitation, because the improvement of housing and

infrastructure is tied to land revalorisation, commercial reordering and the reconfiguration of everyday life.

This ambiguity is best captured through the concept of informal gentrification. Informal gentrification can be understood as a process in which informal or semi-formal urban practices are not immediately eliminated, but selectively incorporated, reorganised and instrumentalised within broader trajectories of urban revalorisation. It does not require the immediate expulsion of existing residents. Instead, it operates through conditional inclusion, partial formalisation and the transformation of the conditions of permanence.

Bhendi Bazaar illustrates this logic very clearly. Residents are promised return; businesses are promised relocation; heritage is promised preservation. Yet each of these promises is attached to a process of transformation. Return takes place through vertical rehousing. Commercial continuity takes place through planned retail environments. Heritage preservation takes place through architectural branding. Inclusion is therefore real, but it is not neutral. It is inclusion into a new spatial and economic order.

This has important implications for planning theory. In many redevelopment debates, compensation and rehousing are treated as evidence that displacement has been addressed. But Bhendi Bazaar suggests that the relevant question is not only whether residents and businesses are rehoused, but whether redevelopment preserves the material, economic and social conditions that allow them to remain. The right to return is not the same as the right to stay.

The politics of permanence therefore becomes the key evaluative criterion. Permanence is not merely physical presence in a newly built apartment. It includes the ability to maintain livelihoods, social networks, cultural practices, commercial relations, affordability and everyday autonomy. If these conditions are weakened, then redevelopment may produce displacement even in the absence of mass eviction. This argument builds on Marcuse's (1985) distinction between direct and exclusionary displacement and on later critical work emphasizing displacement as a multidimensional process rather than a single event (Slater, 2009).

This perspective also helps rethink the role of the state and planning institutions. Informality is often described as a failure of regulation or as an absence of the state. Bhendi Bazaar shows the opposite. Informality is actively governed through planning instruments, eligibility criteria, acquisition procedures, transit arrangements, building permissions, legal disputes and redevelopment incentives. The state does not simply formalise the informal city; it decides which informalities are formalised, which are tolerated, which are aestheticised and which are displaced (Roy, 2005; Ghertner, 2015).

The legal record is especially important in this regard. Courts have generally stabilized the project while addressing disputes over eligibility, evacuation, title and allocation. In several redevelopment-related disputes, legal records point to the importance of eligibility, evacuation, transit arrangements and allocation procedures in shaping the conditions under which residents are required to move and later return. A recent Bombay High Court judgment concerning premises within the Bhendi Bazaar redevelopment area illustrates how disputes over ownership, statutory notices, evacuation and redevelopment procedures

continue to shape the project's legal architecture (Abdul Rehman Shaikh v. Executive Engineer 'C-1' Division, 2024).

In this sense, informal gentrification is not a marginal or accidental process. It is a mode of urban governance. It allows redevelopment to present itself as inclusive while reorganising urban value. It converts informal density into developable land, community identity into branding, small commerce into curated retail and precarious housing into vertical real estate. Its central paradox is that inclusion can become a vehicle of transformation.

For the AESOP workshop, this argument connects Bhendi Bazaar to wider debates on planning, governance, equity and territorial restructuring. Although the case is not an industrial corridor or SEZ, it raises similar questions about how spatial planning reorganises land, labour, infrastructure and local economies in the name of development. It shows that redevelopment projects must be evaluated not only by their physical outputs, but by their effects on urban livelihoods, informal enterprises, community networks and long-term security.

6. Conclusion: redevelopment, displacement and planning in the Global South

Bhendi Bazaar demonstrates that redevelopment in Global South cities cannot be understood through a simple binary between clearance and inclusion. The project does not operate primarily through mass eviction, yet it profoundly transforms the neighbourhood. It improves housing while reorganising social life; preserves heritage while curating authenticity; relocates businesses while altering commercial geographies; and promises return while reshaping the conditions of permanence.

The case therefore offers a strong basis for conceptualising informal gentrification. Informality is not removed at the outset. It is selectively formalised, spatially reorganised and symbolically mobilised. The bazaar is not destroyed in a straightforward sense; it is converted into a more governable, verticalized and marketable version of itself. This is precisely why Bhendi Bazaar matters for urban theory: it reveals how revalorisation can advance through inclusion rather than against it.

Three conclusions follow. First, rehabilitation and revalorisation must be analysed together. Improvements in housing and infrastructure may be real, but they can also function within broader strategies of land value capture and spatial restructuring. Second, displacement must be understood beyond eviction. In Bhendi Bazaar, displacement appears as transition, waiting, commercial disruption, loss of footfall, normative regulation, symbolic rebranding and potential erosion of community networks. Third, planning in informalized contexts should be evaluated through the politics of permanence. The central question is not only whether people are compensated or rehoused, but whether they retain the capacity to live, work and belong in the transformed neighbourhood.

Bhendi Bazaar thus shows that inclusion can itself become a mechanism of transformation: residents and businesses may be formally incorporated into redevelopment while the everyday conditions that sustained their presence are progressively restructured. Recognising this paradox is essential for building more just planning frameworks in cities where informality is not an exception, but a constitutive feature of urban life.

Questions for workshop discussion

1. How can planning frameworks evaluate displacement when residents are formally rehoused within the same redevelopment area?

2. What mechanisms are needed to protect informal and small-scale enterprises during large-scale redevelopment?

3. Can selective formalisation be understood as inclusion, displacement, or both?

4. How can redevelopment policies preserve not only housing units, but also the everyday social and economic infrastructures that sustain neighbourhood life?

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