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The Birth and Evolution of the Esplanade Estate, Bombay

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Abstract

The year was 1862. The Governor, Sir Henry Bartle Frere. The time was right to explore a new vision of Bombay. The large rambling Bombay Fort stood in the way of progress and change. There was no longer a need for a defensive structure – the British were the paramount power in India – and orders to demolish it were given. Governor Frere envisaged the creation of a new town rising on the rubble of the old walls. A 'Rampart Removal Committee' was set up to create a new district, an area of elegant residences, business, education and government buildings, utilising the land on which the fort had stood as well as the large Esplanade. Along the periphery of the old Fort and Esplanade came up one of the city's most impressive urban development projects. The 'New Town' or 'Frere Town' as it came to be known, was to be representative of the British colonial Empire in India.

This talk focuses on the planning and growth of one area of Frere Town, which the Bombay Improvement Trust later called the Esplanade Estate. It is a roughly trapezium-shaped area carved out of the Esplanade on the edges of the Fort walls. This portion of Frere Town was leased to private individuals. It didn't quite work out the way it was supposed to, but over the next half century it would be filled with beautiful late 19th and early 20th century buildings. Now simply called Fort, the area is synonymous with the spirit of commerce and enterprise that this city is famous for.

Keywords: Esplanade, Bartle Frere, Hornby Road, Fort

Urban planning can be described as a technical and political process concerned with the welfare of people, control of the use of land, design of the urban environment including transportation and communication networks, and protection and enhancement of the natural environment.[i]

In 1862 the British Government of Bombay embarked upon an ambitious project that was the first exercise in urban planning and development of the town of Bombay. The 'New Town', or 'Frere Town' as it came to be called was envisaged along the

western foreshore of Bombay island. The Hornby Road Estate or Esplanade Estate, as it was named by the Bombay Improvement Trust, is part of Frere Town. It contains 65 beautiful late 19th and early 20th century buildings, mostly in the neo-Gothic and neo-Classical styles. Now comprising mainly of commercial and business buildings, originally many of them were residences of the town's elite. There were also schools, theatres, a cricket club, a racquet court and a hospital, most of which are still there.

This paper deals with the genesis of the Esplanade Estate – the planning that went into the creation of an urban precinct more than a century ago. It is also the story of development in the city – the creation of a new town rising on the rubble of the Fort walls.

In modern geographical terms, Frere Town stretches from the Crawford Market in the north up to the Maharashtra State Police Headquarters in the south. Its eastern boundary lies along today's Mahatma Gandhi Road (originally Rampart Row) up to the Flora Fountain and then continues along Dadabhai Naoroji Road (originally Hornby Row and then Hornby Road and closer to the Market, Esplanade Market Road) up to the Crawford Market. The Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (formerly Victoria Terminus), though it lies to the east of Dadabhai Naoroji Road, is also part of Frere Town. The northern boundary lies along Lokmanya Tilak Marg (originally Esplanade Cross Road and then Carnac Road) and the western boundary lies along Mahapallika Marg (originally Cruickshank Road), meeting up with Hazarimal Somani Marg (originally Waudby Road) and from there on to Karamveer Bhaurao Patil Marg (originally Mayo Road). Its southern boundary is at Cooperage.

The Esplanade Estate or Hornby Road Estate, as it was originally called, lies in the middle of Frere Town. It is roughly a trapezium shaped area is enclosed by Hornby Road, originally Hornby Row, now Dadabhai Naoroji Road, on the east and Esplanade Road, now Mahatma Gandhi Road, and Waudby Road, today's Hazarimal Somani Marg, on the west.

The town of Bombay had seen continuous growth from the time of its settlement in 1668. The East India Company had determinedly set about developing it into a centre of trade and commerce. To that effect, quays, warehouses and a customs house were built[ii] and fortifications in the form of Bombay Castle grew around the old Manor House. Population growth was encouraged through various incentives[iii] and the harbour expanded.[iv] In 1715, the town was enclosed within a walled fort stretching from Dongri up to today's Maharashtra State Police Headquarters near Regal cinema.[v] But with the large numbers of people moving to Bombay, space to house them became a problem. The immigrants settled in a 'native' town outside the Fort walls. By the middle of the 18th century the number of immigrants had swelled sharply and the township outside the Fort walls kept growing. Overcrowding, both inside and outside the Fort, led to many people settling in areas like the distant Malabar Hill.[vi]

The Esplanade was a large, semi-circular tract of land that sat outside the Bombay Fort on the western part of the island. It was maintained as an open space with rules forbidding any building on this land. This was done in order to give the ordnance on the fort ramparts a clear field of fire.

With walls forty feet high and varying in width from twenty-five to fifty feet at the top,[vii] the fort of Bombay had stood as a silent spectator as the small trading port grew

into a large and prosperous city. By 1850 the fort was described as "a large basket stuffed so full of goods that they threatened to tumble out of it."[viii] The large ramparts, that had been a security necessity for many years, were now felt to be obsolete and a troublesome burden. There were no longer any threats to the British as all major enemies had either been vanquished or had ended hostilities.

From 1845 many Chief Engineers and Commanders-in-Chief had put forward the idea of removing the western ramparts. They had argued that the walls of the fort were, in actual fact, quite useless for any practical purpose of defence and also was a cause of inconvenience to the local populace. The better option was to improve harbour defences. These would then render the current ramparts redundant.

There had always been opposition to the removal of the ramparts as they provided a semblance of security to those who resided within them; but by the early 1860s the reasons for holding on to the fort had become superfluous. The population had increased to the point where more people lived outside the Fort than within – about 800,000 in the entire city and only 40,000 to 50,000 residing within the Fort,[ix] and the city was still growing at a rapid pace. Trade was keeping pace with this growth and there were greater demands on the city from foreign commerce. The aggregate annual commercial activities in the City were estimated at around $40 Million Pounds Sterling and 770,000 tons of shipping.[x] The Chamber of Commerce had, in fact, made several memorials to the Government regarding security and space.

But it was only under the next Governor, Sir Henry Bartle Frere (1862-1867) that change began to take place. Money was streaming into the town with the increase in trade and commerce. The public began to think about improvements to the town in terms of space. Land was urgently required for airy streets and houses; the high walls interfered with the circulation of air and occupied a large space of the busiest part of town; and the ditch, with its foul and stagnant water, was responsible for the spread of disease. In the monsoon the ditch would flood and the filthy water, with all its sewage, would overflow. This would then seep into potable water sources, like wells and tanks, and every monsoon virulent cholera outbreaks killed 1000s in the town.

In June 1862, sanction was received from the India Office, London, for the removal of a larger part of the land defences of Bombay.[xi] Two things were deemed very important – first, that open spaces be maintained – not just for the purposes of sanitation but also as a welcome change of environment from the crowded streets;[xii] and second, that a comprehensive plan of action be readied before any of the land was sold. There were to be rules and regulations governing the sale of these plots, not just in the matter of convenience or buildings but also of architectural styles. This was, it was felt, an opportunity to create a new city on the island and it must be made the most of.

"But, further, whatever plan be adopted ought to be one comprehending all the several plots of new ground about to be acquired in different situations, whether by reclamation or by demolition of the ramparts, so far, at least, as it is intended that building shall extend. No building lots ought to be sold, or otherwise disposed of, until not only the general arrangement, but also the style and character of the buildings to be erected shall have been carefully considered, and a comprehensive plan shall have been matured in conformity with the conclusions arrived at. In framing such a plan, regard should be paid, not merely to the accommodation and convenience of the public, and

of individuals, but also, in some degree to architectural effect. An opportunity, not likely to recur, will now be afforded of building almost a new city in the Island of Bombay, and it may become a permanent subject of national reproach if due advantage be not taken of the occasion."[xiii]

So, in 1862, the Governor, Sir Henry Bartle Frere gave the final orders for the removal of the obsolete fortifications.[xiv] The responsibility of pulling down the fort and its ramparts, and filling up the trenches and smelly ditch, was entrusted to a Rampart Removal Committee.[xv]

The actual work of demolishing the battlements and laying out the roads was done by the Public Works Department and the army Engineers. The Rampart Removal Committee was responsible for overseeing the work and for planning the use of the space that was freed up with the removal of the walls.

With the demolition of the ramparts having begun, the Executive Committee of the Rampart Removal Committee turned their attention to the sale of the ground that was being cleared and levelled. The revenue required, both for the demolition of the ramparts as well as the expenditure on these new buildings and roads, was to be raised by the sale of some part of the ground that had been cleared. An area of around 25,000 sq. yards, between the Bazaar and Church Gates, i.e., along the Hornby Row, was proposed to be put up for sale.[xvi] It was estimated that a sum of Rs. 10 Lakhs could be raised from these sales.[xvii] The Rampart Removal Committee envisioned a total of 50,000 sq. yards of land on the Esplanade would be sold and, if averaged at the rate of Rs. 50 per sq. yard, this would raise Rs. 25 Lakhs.[xviii] This would then pay for the construction of the new buildings and roads, as well as the salaries of the Rampart Removal Committee establishment.

Under the guidance of James Trubshawe, Architect to the Rampart Removal Committee, broad avenues were visualised, and areas earmarked for public, military and residential spaces. Not all the land was to be sold. Land was to be set aside for public buildings like government offices, a new hospital and even a first-class hotel. New officers' quarters, as well as new roads and streets, were all in the planning. The Esplanade might have been entirely swallowed up in this urban expansion, but for an order of the Governor, who deemed that at least a part of it should be left as open public space.

"His Excellency the Governor in Council is of opinion that the plan of the Committee provides for covering a much larger space with building than is either necessary of desirable.

Her Majesty's Secretary of State for India has specially enjoined the Government not to encroach on the Esplanade so as to diminish the total space available for air and exercise… it seems to His Excellency in Council that in their anxiety to make the removal of the ramparts financially profitable, the Committee have gone further than the necessity of the case demanded.

It was never intended to sell, for private building purposes, so much of the esplanade as shall enable Government to erect all the public buildings required free of cost."[xix]

So, the western portion of the Esplanade was left open, divided up by broad roads into the four maidans that we see today – the Cooperage, the Oval, the Cross Maidan and

the Azad Maidan – though there were many who believed, even at that time, that the land should be utilized for development.

The 'Sale of Land' on the Esplanade began in 1864. The plots were not 'sold' in the actual sense of the term but rather what was sold was the lease to build on the land. Government held all the land and individuals purchased the lease. The term 'sale' is therefore not strictly the correct term, but it is the term used by the Government at the time, not just in India, also in their territories in Hong Kong and Singapore. Hence, I have continued with the usage.

Contiguous to the decision to bring down the fort walls was the determination, on the part of Government, to create "almost a new city"[xx] on the island of Bombay. The land thus freed up was to be sectioned into plots and offered on lease. Most of these were auctioned off to private buyers and some were granted on very nominal rents for educational institutions. Initially called 'New Town', this area came to be known as Frere Town, after Sir Bartle Frere. The money raised from the sale of the plots, along with private donations, was used to build the grand public buildings that edge the maidans. The rubble from the walls was used to fill up the ditch and to reclaim land at Mody Bay. A new Bombay arose, as Sharada Dwivedi put it, "phoenix-like"[xxi] from the debris of the old fort.

The Rampart Removal Committee suggested that the owners of buildings be allowed to use their lower floors for shops and the upper floors for residences. Wide footpaths would be created along the new roads and these would be compulsorily arcaded.[xxii] The arcades were designed to protect pedestrians from the hot sun in the summer months and the wet in the monsoon.

Regulations were drawn up regarding the quality of materials, the type of construction and time limits as well as the repercussions of non-compliance. A "Conditions of Sale"[xxiii] was included in all lease documents, making it non-negotiable. The initial leases were granted for a period of 999 years; however, over the subsequent years they were reduced to 99 years and later ones under the Bombay Improvement Trust were for even shorter periods.

Though initially Government had been open to the land being used to build warehouses as well as residential buildings, it soon became apparent that they would not allow just anything to be built. Public houses (modern day bars) or liquor shops were not allowed. Anything that might be construed as an annoyance or inconvenience to others were not given permission either. For example, the newspaper, the Bombay Gazette, was declined several plots as it was felt that their presses would be too noisy. Though when the General Mews were to be built, and many of the residents opposed it on the grounds of hygiene, noise and smell, Government, promising to ensure good hygiene and minimal noise, pushed the proposal through.[xxiv]

The specifications also laid down a uniform height for the buildings, the fact that all exterior casings had to be in good stone or brick and that only good quality brick and timber were used for the construction.[xxv]

Not only did all the proposed buildings have to adhere to the specifications in the Conditions of Sale but their designs also had to be passed by the Public Works Department and Government. While there was not any single design agreed upon or

forced on the lessees, there were certain expectations for the look and feel of the area, which, while not all similar, was expected not to strike a discordant note.[xxvi]
There was no restriction on the architectural style – most of the buildings were designed in the Neo-Gothic and Neo-Classical styles, with some exceptions like the Standard Chartered Bank building which is in the Classic Renaissance style.

Not everyone agreed with this idea of different designs. Walter Paris, 'Architect to Government' in 1867, was insistent that different designs would result in a "confusion of the most painful incongruities".[xxvii] Though this might also have been to do with the fact that he wanted Government to allow him, as Architect to Government, to design all the buildings.[xxviii] When this didn't happen, he went on leave for two months and chose not to return.

The planning of large thoroughfares through the Esplanade had begun even before the demolition of the fort started. The Rampart Removal Committee was given a clear mandate to provide for better lines of communication from the areas north of the fort (Girgaum and the Bazaars outside the fort) to Apollo Bunder and Colaba.[xxix] Every bit of it was specified – sizes of main roads, side streets, lanes, alleys and pavements. Even the trees that were to be planted on them and who was responsible for their maintenance was decided.

The sale of plots took place at a very slow pace throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some areas of the current Dadabhai Naoroji or D. N. Road (originally Hornby Row and then Hornby Road) were not sold for the longest time as two ravelins of the Bombay Fort – the Cumberland Ravelin and the Hodge's Ravelin still stood there. They had not been demolished as they housed government offices. It was only in 1884[xxx] and 1888[xxxi] that they were finally removed and the land along D. N. Road was properly sectioned into plots.

In order to ensure that the new constructions on the Esplanade not shut out the air moving from west to east on the island, Government also gave extra land on two sides of the plots, free, to each purchaser. Open spaces were seen as requites for the hygiene of the city and the health of its inhabitants. These pieces of land were to be used as gardens or just as open passages to allow for the free movement of air and could not be built upon.[xxxii] Any sort of congestion in this area was frowned upon as it prevented the free movement of the sea breezes from reaching the inner parts of the crowded former walled town. Though there were many who felt that land in Bombay was too valuable to be given away free just so that houses might be detached (i.e. not touching each other) and have gardens.[xxxiii]

The sale of land on the Esplanade Estate, however, did not take off as Government had envisaged. The growth or genesis of the Esplanade Estate took over 5 decades. Unlike what Government had originally thought, buyers did not snap up the plots very quickly. Government, on their part too, were not willing to simply give out the plots, and took great interest in ensuring that the vision with which this exercise had been embarked upon remained more or less true.
Though the first auction in August 1864 garnered good sums of money for the plots, not too many were sold.[xxxiv] Only 5 plots along north D. N. Road were successfully auctioned but they did fetch between Rs. 113 and Rs. 93 per square yard.[xxxv] The second

auction was even more dismal, where only 3 plots out of the 25 put up for auction were sold.[xxxvi]

Land sales were very slow for the next few years as the share market had crashed and decimated many a fortune. It was only in the 1880s that sales picked up. In land auctions held in 1881 and 1882 more plots along the Esplanade were sold but the highest price achieved was Rs. 25 per square yard.[xxxvii] Land prices, even in this prime area, would not again reach the highs of 1864.

Slowly, over the next decade, plots were taken up by the public. Many were given by Government at low rents for setting up educational institutions – the Frere-Fletcher School (today's J. B. Petit Girls School), the Cathedral Boys' and Girls' Schools, the John Connon School, the Alexandra Native Girls English Institution. Theatres came up on two plots – Gaiety and Novelty – today's Capitol Cinema and New Excelsior Cinema. The Fort Gratuitous Dispensary and the Parsi Lying-in Hospital were given land at very low rates.

In 1870 a large part of the land still stood unoccupied and so Government decided to construct a mews to stable the horses and carriages of the people who worked in the public buildings set up on other parts of the Esplanade.[xxxviii] Many of the residents of the area protested vehemently against the decision[xxxix] but the Government gave assurances and proceeded to complete the mews by 1876.[xl] The mews also contained the storerooms of the Executive Engineer, PWD.

In 1898, all the land left vacant as well as the mews were handed over to the newly formed Bombay Improvement Trust.[xli] The mews were to be demolished and the land freed up was to be used to raise funds for the Trust. However, finding place for another mews and the Engineer's Stores proved rather difficult. Ultimately, it was decided that arrangements for stabling the horses and carriages would be made with the Tatas, who had just set up the Wellington Mews at Wodehouse Road. The Engineer's Stores would remain on a small part of the plot.[xlii]

The rest of the plots on the Esplanade Estate were leased out by the Bombay Improvement Trust and by 1908 the Esplanade Estate was an urban sprawl with its 65 buildings.

While the Esplanade Estate was amongst the earliest of urban development projects built by the British in India, was this the first time that such a model had been used? I believe not. The architects and planners for the city of Bombay were most likely influenced by ideas of urbanisation in the larger cities of Europe.

In Barcelona, in the mid-nineteenth century, the engineer Ildefons Cerdà was studying modern cities and what they could aspire to be. It is he who is credited with the invention of the word urbanisation which he then codified in 1867 in his General Theory of Urbanisation. His studies led to the redesigning of Barcelona – large thoroughfares for the smooth flow of traffic, octagonal blocks of buildings with gardens in the centre providing for the movement of air, uniform buildings in a mix of architectural styles including those of the famous Antonio Gaudi.[xliii]

Around the same time in Paris Baron Hausmann was selected by Emperor Napoleon III to bring order to the chaotic and cramped city of Paris. He was charged with creating new roads, pubic parks, public monuments, new sewers and changing the architectural façade of the city. Here too large thoroughfares lined with trees, a central sewer system

and architectural facades of the neoclassical style of a uniform height were created.[xliv] Baron Hausmann, however, is also often termed as an imperialist megalomaniac because he tore down more than 12,000 buildings to create the new Paris. Many still feel that this destruction of the city's slums was to help the French army put down popular uprisings[xlv] (this has often been an accusation levelled at the BIT as well).

And this concludes our story. Bombay's Frere Town was the brain child of the British and developed under both, the Colonial Government as well as the native populace. It was a combination of public as well as private money, of British architects and engineers as well as Indian engineers and overseers, together with sculptors from the School of Art. The Esplanade Estate became the most densely packed area in Frere Town, with its mixture of residential buildings as well as commercial buildings, schools and theatres, a hospital and a dispensary, a Church and a Masonic Lodge. Much of this area remains as it was – the schools continue, as does the Church, the theatres and the Masonic Lodge. However, the residential buildings gave way to commercial buildings and this area is now known mainly as an area of commerce – a part of Bombay Fort area.

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