“A Terrible Beauty” Into the Rose Garden
Meera Devidayal, Mumbai, 2014
Photographing the Ruins of a 21st-Century Exploding Metropolis: The Terrible Beauty of Meera Devidayal’s Mumbai Mill Lands

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Inspired by archaeology and the picturesque, writers, painters, and architects were drawn to real and imagined sites of urban ruin in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 19th century photographers joined them there. There was also a craving for images of urban decay as counterweights to modernism’s obsession with the new during the 20th century. Today photographers Andrew Moore, Robert Polidori, and Camilo José Vergara autopsy the built remains of economic and natural disasters in shrinking cities like Detroit, Buffalo, and New Orleans. Celebrated in exhibitions and lavish publications, their images raise questions about so-called “ruin or disaster porn” created by outsiders. Here I focus instead on Meera Devidayal’s imagery of industrial ruins in Mumbai, an exploding metropolis of the global south. As a woman and long-time resident of the city she stands apart from the usual suspects of ruin photography in the West. Unlike these photographers, Devidayal has a deep personal connection to Indian textile mills; she explored and photographed them over a period of 2-3 years beginning in 2010. Engines of its modern industrial economy since the 1800s, the city’s mills, called “cathedrals of cotton”, have almost all been demolished for shopping malls and high-rise offices and luxury apartments, architectures of global aspiration. Today only a few mills remain; and most of these are derelict. Amidst landscapes of deindustrialization, she imagines new urban spaces and documents places marginalized men create for themselves there. Devidayal’s work underscores the potential of urban ruins in exploding as well as shrinking cities. Rooted in the city, architecture, and photography, her art is about the terrible beauty and human costs of a Mumbai simultaneously dying and exploding. It speaks to our need for understanding the hazards and opportunities of what the late architect Charles Correa called great cities but terrible places.

Keywords: Deindustrialization, Exploding, Global south, Mill lands, Photography, Post-industrialism, Ruins, Shrinking, Textile mills
**ruins**

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Here I focus instead on Meera Devidayal’s imagery of urban ruins in Mumbai, an exploding metropolis of the global south. Beginning in 2010, she photographed the remains of Mumbai’s mill lands for 2 to 3 years. One of the book’s first photographs is what she describes as the secret gardens of the mills. The crumbing shell of what was once a mill, she wrote, was “magicked, enspelled, sunk in a green ocean…”

![Image of ruins](image)

This photograph inspired her painted photograph (familiar from India’s popular culture of photography) of a rose garden like the one the 13th-century Persian poet Sa’di promised his beloved.

![Image of rose garden](image)
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Cheap posters of such rose-filled gardens sell on Mumbai’s streets, she explained, and decorate the cramped rooms and haunt the dreams of its struggling inhabitants like the displaced and dispossessed mill workers1.

Once again, she said, Mumbai “threw up a plethora of images for me to play with”. To “turn these ‘found images’ into a visual metaphor”, she continued, “and charge with new meaning and resonance” inspired her 2014 exhibit “A Terrible Beauty”, and accompanying book Into the Rose Garden.

The former’s cover is a tightly famed close-up of the now rusted and silent machines that once set the pace for 250,000 mill workers (2/3’s of the city’s adult working population) until the late 1970s. In rose pink letters the title block floats incongruously above a scene of modernity’s entropy and ruination. Usually spread across two pages, the text and images of the book juxtapose Mumbai’s nightmarish realities with its alluring dreamscapes. The city Devidayal explains, is her subject matter: “I have long been interested in the city and my work has always been about the human situation here – be that of the migrant or the dream/reality quality that pervades life here”2.

I emphasize the publication Into the Rose Garden because it is an artist’s book. The interplay between its texts and images creates a more dynamic and inclusive narrative than individual photographs. And I am interested in how discursive spaces of publication and exhibition construct meaning for architecture and photography. Furthermore, Devidayal should be considered, I believe, alongside western women like Alice Austen and Berenice Abbott if we are to create more global histories of photography, architecture, and the modern city.
As both a woman and long-time resident of Mumbai (originally known as Bombay) Devidayal stands apart from the usual suspects of western ruin imagery who are often accused of hit-and-run photography. She has lived there since the 1960s. She was raised in what she describes as an “upper-crust English upbringing” in a Calcutta family of industrialists. Convent-schooled, she then studied English literature at Calcutta University. Thus stories and their telling have always intrigued her. Wed at 19 in a traditional Indian arranged marriage, Devidayal moved to Bombay because her husband had family business and manufacturing interests there. Although she modestly describes herself as a wife, mother, and grandmother, she enrolled in evening classes at the Sir J. J. School of Art and began exhibiting her work during the 1970s. Filled with images of women, girl-children, nature, and creativity, her paintings and watercolors led many critics like the historian Vidya Dehejia to credit her with a feminist ethic. Like the majority of Indian women –both past and present– Devidayal demurs on the subject of feminism, preferring to let viewers discover their own meaning.

Her interest in Mumbai’s textile mills has a very personal resonance. The Orissa Textile Mills—a thousand miles to the northeast of Mumbai—were, she noted, “started by my father... a dream fulfilled; and my childhood was spent in and out and around it”. In 2014 she went back there. After “having stepped into the labyrinth of Mumbai’s mills, I find myself, like Alice, walking through the looking glass, going backwards... into another time, another place”, her father’s now derelict mill. Founded the year before Indian independence in 1946, his factory employed 5,000 workers who produced 26,000 miles of cloth each year. Nehru’s program for new townships inspired her father to build a school, housing, hospital, department store, and recreational club for his factory workers and their families. A system of loudspeakers even piped music into every house in the labor colony. His vision of industrial modernity was in concert with the new Indian state’s commitment to social uplift and welfare. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, mills closed across India because of imposed quotas. Workers were laid off with the advent of improved power looms. And many textile mill owners turned to more lucrative industries like petrochemicals. The state acquired her father’s mill in 1981 and then closed it in 2003. The final images in the book are 2014 photographs of the Orissa Mills. One shows the now long closed mill with its gate shut and walls faded. Only the vegetation that has taken root in the deserted mill compound is thriving.
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mill lands of bombay/mumbai

Into the Rose Garden is not just Devidayal's meditation on the history of her family. It has a charge that resonates for Mumbaikars (those born or residing in Mumbai) and Indians. The mill lands were proud symbols of Indian modernity, defiance, and independence. Engines of its modern industrial economy since the 1850s, the mills were called “cathedrals of cotton”, because their great brick and stone chimneys rose like medieval spires over the city's center. The mills were a modern industrial economy that fabled Indian entrepreneurs and industrialists like the Wadias and Tatas built and ran. They made Bombay a modern industrial center rather than simply the port for an extractive colonial economy. The owners offset the high-cost of imported British and German mechanical looms with the cheap and abundant labor of rural India. Thus male and even some female migrants from impoverished villages came in search of work and greater opportunities in the Bombay mills. By the late 19th century they labored in buildings powered by hydroelectricity and constructed of cast iron and concrete. Known for militant trade unionism, Mumbai mill workers began staging strikes as early as the 1880s. They also created a vibrant working-class culture of music, theater, folk art, and street performance.

The architecture of the mills was imposing. Built of brick, limestone, and rusticated grey stone, it was ornamented by rose windows, pediments, cornices, pilasters, and round arches. The material palette and architectural forms were appropriated from the High Victorian Gothic of the Raj's public buildings located in the Fort, the south Bombay enclave of the British. The mills were monuments to Indian modernity and enterprise, “meant to last forever”, Devidayal writes, “not become empty shells within a century”. Seeing her images of their skeletal remains overrun by urban wilderness and filled with rusted mechanized looms saddened and even shocked many Mumbaikars.

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The mills were landmarks of the Indian independence movement. The cloth they produced was made, sold, and worn by Indians. The mill lands represented swadeshi (economic self-sufficiency), a cornerstone of the independence struggle. Indian-made cloth was part of Gandhiji's strategy to undermine the British Raj by boycotting products like textiles it imported into India. Although he encouraged Indians to spin and weave khadi (handloomed cloth) Gandhiji also accepted financial support from India's mill owners. And the latter proudly advertised their products as swadeshi. The Mumbai mills represent India's modern heritage of industrialization and the struggle for independence. The decline of its mills in the 1970s and 1980s and their subsequent ruin and demolition since the 1990s cast a long shadow over the Nehruvian project for a modern, self-sufficient India.

Although little known in the West, Mumbai's deindustrialization was just as traumatic and devastating as that experienced in the American Rustbelt cities of Detroit, Buffalo, and Pittsburgh. Of the 80 mills that existed in 1930, only about 50 were still operating by the 1980s. Mill workers went on strike to protest reduced wages, representation, and loss of jobs to mechanization from 1982 until 1983. Determined to break the union movement, the owners closed the mills or outsourced work to factories in the countryside with docile laborers. After eighteen months on strike –the longest and largest industrial action in history– a hundred thousand mill workers lost their jobs.

Originally an archipelago of 7 islands, Mumbai occupies land reclaimed from the sea. In an island city of almost 22 million inhabitants today, land is scarce and coveted. By the late 1980s mill owners realized the over 600 hundred acres their factories occupied in central Mumbai were much more valuable than manufacturing textiles. Facing bankruptcy in 1991, the central government deregulated the economy to stimulate private investment and development. The state government in Mumbai then amended the zoning laws to permit
some commercial and residential development on the mill lands heretofore restricted to manufacturing. At first some mill owners converted industrial sheds into shopping malls, bowling alleys, and discotheques for the burgeoning middle classes created after the economic liberalization of 1991.

Five years later with widespread demolition of the mills for private development, Charles Correa chaired a commission recommending the so-called “1/3 formula”: aggregating the mill lands and dividing them into equal areas for low-cost housing, public spaces, and market-rate development. The government’s suppression of the Correa report led to further protests, proposals, and lawsuits to ensure at least part of the mill lands benefited displaced mill workers and the general public. However, an alliance of mill owners, developers, politicians, and mafia dons defeated all these efforts. Thus “weapons of mass construction” as anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls the shopping malls, office towers, and luxury apartments (often designed, he notes, by western starchitects and built by Bechtel and Halliburton) invaded the mill lands. As Devidayal shows, this architecture of globalization (simultaneously no place and every place) dwarfs and encircles Mumbai’s last surviving cathedrals of cotton.

great city... terrible place

What Charles Correa observed about the Bombay of 1985 in his essay, “Great City... Terrible Place”, is still true of Mumbai more than three decades later: “Everyday it gets worse and worse as physical environment... but better and better as: city. That is to say, everyday it offers more in the way of skills, physical activities, opportunity –on every level from squatter to college student to entrepreneur to artist... there are a hundred indications emphasizing impaction (implosion!) of energy and people which is really a two-edged sword... destroying Bombay as an environment, while it intensifies its quality as city”. Today 30 migrants from the villages arrive every minute in India’s hypercities like Mumbai.
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The visual trigger for her still images and film A Levelled Playing Field was Devidayal’s stumbling upon a cricket match in a derelict mill. Here she wrote: “every afternoon the vast rooftop of a one-time loom-shed, now an empty hall of pillars, turns into a surreal cricket field high up in the air”.

Young men, perhaps distress migrants from the villages, saw the potential of ruined spaces hidden away in the inner folds of the city. Clearing away debris and painting stumps on a surviving wall, they created a private cricket pitch in the clouds. Their field of dreams is remarkable in a city with few open spaces for play and leisure, especially for these young men. Devidayal inserted television footage of India’s modern gods, its national cricket team, into the crumbling openings of the mill walls. Rising in the distance a skyscraper is part of the global economy threatening the open spaces these men reclaimed from the ruined mill lands. In return it offers them, Devidayal shows, only passive consumption of cricket as recompense.
Both young and old men, Devidayal learned, made use of the mills. Threaded through the mill lands are wells, ponds, and tanks created for dyeing, bleaching, and humidifying (the latter used to prevent fires from sparking thread). As of 2015, the city was still supplying at least some of them with water. Those who live in shanties or on pavements have little access to this precious resource. Some men began to use the mills’ still functioning infrastructure to bathe, draw water, and wash clothes.

In the words of poet Li-Young Lee, whom Devidayal quotes in the book, these men found “a place/for those who own no place/to correspond to ruins in the soul./It’s mine./It’s all yours...” The Mumbalkars she discovered in the mill lands were making Correa’s terrible places of the great city into spaces that provided privacy, relaxation, community, and essentials of daily life.

The mills were hot, crowded, deafening, and dangerous spaces where machines set a killing pace. Reminding us their ruins are not just romantic and picturesque, Devidayal photographs a young man in a hoodie (universal symbol of those to fear and avoid) in the shell of a mill strewn with rubble and a staircase to nowhere. Perhaps because she is an older woman or merely lucky, Devidayal writes, “I was able to wander freely and unafraid [albeit with a former mill worker as sherpa], to accomplish my work before all hell broke loose”. In 2013 a young female photojournalist on assignment to depict the Shakti Mills was gang raped by five men who used cell phones to spot and corner her. In their text messages they referred to the woman as a “beautiful deer”. Previously, they had raped at least five other women there. The Shakti Mills were where the men said they went to “hunt their prey”. Out of shame and/or fear of the police these other victims remained silent. The photojournalist did not.

Devidayal reminds me of women photographers like Alice Austen and Berenice Abbott who also explored the modern city with their cameras. Austen was a proper middle-class woman who, nonetheless, photographed immigrants in the streets of New York’s Lower East Side during the 1890s. Like Austen before her Devidayal fearlessly plunges into very different worlds from her own. Crossing barriers of class, ethnicity, and religion, both women can put people going about their daily lives at ease in front of the camera. Devidayal captures a dramatically changing 21st-century city just as Berenice Abbott did a New York morphing from brownstones into skyscrapers during the 1930s. Devidayal’s Dickensian city of mills survived into the 20th century only to be destroyed for the glittering towers of a contemporary Oz. In the work of Devidayal we see the same passion Abbott described for documenting intersections of “what the past left you,... [and] what you are going to leave the future”.

While western photographers rarely depict people among urban ruins, Devidayal shows us men at ease in the places they have ingeniously repurposed from a devastated industrial landscape. Unlike Piranesi’s 18th-century Romans who colonized the ancient ruins, her inhabitants are not dwarfed by the mills’ architecture. Both the mills and men are the collateral damage of modernity and globalization. Her imaginaries are simultaneously a rebuke to what displaced the ruins and a lament for their lost potential. This terrible beauty that spans temporalities makes her work especially important. Rahul Mehrotra argues for his fellow architects, planners, and preservationists struggling with fragmented landscapes of post-industrialism. “I rise again, changed but the same” is the phrase Devidayal uses to introduce Into the Rose Garden. If we are to resolve Correa’s paradox of great cities and terrible places for all citizens, we must take her words and art into our hearts and minds.
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endnotes

3. Meaning good bay from bom bahia, Bombay was the name the Portuguese gave the city after taking control of it in the 16th century. In 1995 when the Shiv Sena came to power, the leaders of this fundamentalist Hindu political party objected to the Portuguese and then British colonialism associated with Bombay. They changed the city’s name to Mumbai in honor of the goddess Mumbadevi.
5. Into the Rose Garden, n. pag.; and Sharada Dwivedi, “Past Times: Layers of History and Culture”, in Mills for Sale, 82.
7. Into the Rose Garden.
8. Lisa Trivedi, Clothing Gandhi’s Nation: Homespun and Modern India (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 82-91
12. Into the Rose Garden.
13. Into the Rose Garden.
15. For Austen and Abbott, see Mary N. Woods, Beyond the Architect’s Eye: Photographs and the American Built Environment (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2009), 47 and 63-64.

bibliography

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CV

Mary Woods. Cornell University professor, was the first to hold the Michael A. McCarthy Chair in Architectural Theory there. She focuses on intersections of media with the built environment. Beyond the Architect's Eye: Photographs of the American Built Environment (Penn Press, 2013 and 2009) explores tradition and modernity through different genres of photography. This fall Routledge published her Women Architects in India: Histories of Practice in Mumbai and India, an intertwined history of women, architecture, and modernity from the independence struggle to the present day. Woods has received fellowships from the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Creative Center for Photography, Fulbright Foundation, American Council of Learned Societies, and American Institute for Indian Studies. Now she is at work on: a book about photographing urban ruins; a photobook on Mumbai’s architecture of the night with photographer Chirodeep Chaudhuri; and a documentary on Indian cinema halls with director Vani Subramanian.