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ENGL 100

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“This is Not a Slum: What the World Can Learn from Dharavi”

 Dharavi is defined as the textbook definition of a slum. Its features do not reflect what modern society would call a “successful” city due to its lack of infrastructure. However, in Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava’s article “This is Not a Slum…”, the author highlights the positive aspects of Dharavi’s commerce and community, focusing on the homegrown community and economic expansion in Dharavi while antagonizing the government’s wishes to rebuild Dharavi into a modern metropolis that consists of stacked apartment buildings and malls. Echanove defends the slums by explicitly stating that Dharavi creates job opportunities for the poor and allows creative expansion of their homes while promoting a homegrown and interactive community.

However, the media portrays Dharavi in a negative light, stating that the slums are expanding with negative consequences as eventually Dharavi will become too big of a problem to fix. The problem then arises: “Taking into consideration the positive and negative aspects of Dharavi, should the entire world adopt Dharavi as an idealized model for cities”? Although Dharavi successfully promotes a tight-knit community that bonds together, we cannot overlook the unruly expansion of a market filled with sweatshops and the lack of solid infrastructure that is presented.

While Echanove states “Unfortunately, this complicated and vibrant street life is often entrenched in a negative narrative—one in which these characteristics are presented as something shameful” (qtd. Echanove. 22), We must understand why the media chooses to do so. Under the vibrant street life and bustling economy, Dharavi is fuelled by a sweatshop style industry meaning the people live and work in their homes, work in unsanitary and unhealthy conditions, and are working for a miniscule amount. Although Dharavi has a vastly expanding

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job market, the market is mostly composed of these sweatshops, multiple work hazards, and underground markets. People can be overworked to the point of slavery as consumers are often ignorant in seeing the effort put into an item, and unethical work establishments are often hidden due to the constantly expanding homegrown communities. Echanove overlooks this aspect of Dharavi and chooses to focus on the positives of homegrown markets. To further implicate such a possibility, the article also states, “In Mumbai, as in most cities, zoning laws make working and living in the same place illegal.” (22). This law is placed in all industries to prevent a sweatshop and slavery-based economy; However, Dharavi breaks this law by combining working and living spaces. Although Dharavi contributes roughly five-hundred million US Dollars annually, the way Dharavi makes that profit is unethical and impractical for a model city.

The implementation of a home/work environment in Dharavi is unruly and unorganized, as the citizens often freely expand their housing without proper knowledge of housing reinforcement. Echanove defends the unruly expansion by stating “Dharavi residents’ ability to defy building codes and use space as intensively as possible has helped each family make the most of the available resources” (21). I digress however, as building with available resources to create a home in the present time compared to investing in resources to build a long-lasting environment is resource inefficient and will cause more complications in the future. Modern day societies hire architects to design homes that are stable, can withstand harsh weather conditions, and will last a long time. In Dharavi, homes are often made on the spot with no planning of long-lasting stability in the events of a natural disaster. The argument can be made that homes can be reinforced once a temporary house is built, however due to the unstable infrastructure in Dharavi’s complexes which is usually stacked three to four levels high, this is virtually impossible. The result of this poor planning of infrastructure is unnecessary resource consumption in the future.

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Although the problems of sweatshop styled work and inefficient urban infrastructure is present, Dharavi’s community is something that cities worldwide should adopt. The tight-knit community that helps neighbors out is something seen as rare in modern society. “Groups from similar ethnic or economic backgrounds tend to live together and provide support systems; neighbors look after each other’s kids and provide cheap subrentals when other families need space. The efficient, hyper-dense, and complex neighborhood we know today grew through this process of interlocking lives and needs.”. This type of community that supports each other is something that all of us should strive to do and can result in a positive environment for everyone. Being able to support one another will result in overall success throughout the community and lower the possibility of violence and crime.

The question remains though, should the world adopt Dharavi’s infrastructure as a model that cities should follow? I believe that the strong community values of sharing and providing support for one another present in Dharavi is something that all cities and communities should follow. However, the economic the sweatshop styled work/living environment and unruly expansion of housing and use of resources is something that should be avoided.