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Exaptive Urbanism: Evolutionary Biology and the Regeneration of Mumbai's Dhobighat

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Abstract : Mumbai's Dhobighat, 150 year old largest open laundry in the world, is the true live-work place and only source of income for some of Mumbai's highest density 'urban poor' residents. The regeneration of Dhobighat, due to its ultra prime location and complex socio-political culture has been a complex issue. This once flourishing urban industrial core has been degrading for the past several decades mainly due to the decline of the open laundry business, the site's over burdened infrastructure and conflicting socio-political and economic forces. The phenomena of 'exaptation' or 'co-option' has been observed by evolutionary biologists as a process responsible for producing highly tenacious and resilient offsprings within a species. The reddish egret uses its wings to cast shadow in shallow waters to attract small fish and hunt them. An unrelated feature used opportunistically to produce a very favorable result. How can this idea of co-option be applied to resolve the complex issue of Dhobighat's regeneration? Our paper proposes a new methodology/approach for the regeneration of Dhobighat through the lens of evolutionary biology. Forces and systems (social, political, economic, cultural and ecological) that seem conflicting or unrelated by nature are opportunistically transformed into symbiotic and complimentary relationships that produce an inclusive, resilient and holistic solution for the regeneration of Dhobighat.

Keywords : urban regeneration, exaptation, resilience, Dhobighat, Mumbai
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