



PK Das, chairperson, Mumbai Waterfronts Centre, at his Prabhadevi office with a vision plan for Juhu that will be part of the exhibition. PIC/ SANTOSH NAGWEKAR

'A CITY IS A COLLABORATIVE ENDEAVOUR'

Open Mumbai: Let's Expand Public Spaces, is a series of vision plans for a cleaner, greener, better planned Mumbai, mounted by architecture firm P. K. Das & Associates and the Mumbai Waterfronts Centre, currently on display at a city gallery. Das, Chairperson of the MWC, tells us what it will mean to you if the plans are ever sanctioned to be translated into reality.

SANJIV NAIR
smdmail@mid-day.com

What inspired the vision plan for Open Mumbai: Let's expand public spaces? How long have you been toying with the idea?

The inspiration comes from the condition of Mumbai. The quality of life is deteriorating, and as the city expands, public space is shrinking. Therefore it is important to have a positive change. We have been working on it for 15 years. Whether it is Bandra Bandstand, Carter Road or any of the numerous other projects which we have been working on, it has been a transformation in the making. During the last one year, these individual efforts have come together. Lessons learnt from various citizen's movements we have been a part of have culminated into this exhibition.

How can the project be executed?

The project has 2 principle parts — Part 1 is about the areas in which the changes have already been

implemented — Juhu Beach, Carter Road, Bandra Bandstand and Gateway of India — and our learnings from these projects. Nearly 50 per cent of the envisioned plan therefore has already been completed. Part 2 of the projects is built on the strength of these learnings. The second phase proposes similar simple ideas that can be executed in other areas. These incorporate projects which are grounded in reality.

What is the fundamental guiding principle for the project?

The basis of the project is conservation, renovation, recycling and replanning. It is important to understand that we are speaking of integrating the project within the existing realities of the city. It is not a mega project, but a combination of small and doable projects. The attempt is to double our open public spaces. We are attempting to create nearly 500 kilometres of green open spaces, which will be utilised as walking and cycling tracks. These spaces will be dotted with gardens and water parks. These spaces will not operate in a silo; they will all be connected to each other, creating a vast network of green open space that extends from Andheri to Chembur; from Mahim to Colaba. It will connect all parts of the city and will facilitate social networking in the real world. The rationale is to have people enjoy and truly identify with the city. It is important to democratise Mumbai's open spaces.

Will large-scale changes need to be made to the layout of the city itself? Will it extend to changes in residential areas as well?

The plan we have put together does not displace. It does not call for major replacement of populations. It just requires small reconfigurations in the plans of certain city pockets. At the exhibition you can see a model of a similar reconfiguration in the Juhu area plan we have proposed. We do not look at projects from a top-down perspective. We look at cities from the bottom-up, where each area plan reflects the identity and need of its residents. Over the years each neighbourhood in Mumbai has developed its own identity. Our aim is to preserve this individuality. Therefore the plan necessitates the need for personalisation of neighborhoods.

How has the Government responded to your vision?

They have been extremely supportive. Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan was extremely moved, especially since this was the first time he saw Mumbai the way we see it. Some important bureaucrats were present during the inauguration and he had an immediate discussion with them on how they can take it forward. Uddhav Thackeray has already brought together corporators to take this up with proper plans chalked out, replete with deadlines. So the ball has already started rolling. I am hoping that the support continues.

How long would a project of this magnitude take to get executed? How much will it cost?

The complete budget is Rs 2,500 crore, which for a project of this magnitude is actually quite less. The maximum period for its execution is

about 10 years.

A lot of work which you have done exemplifies a successful marriage of social development and architecture. If this project were sanctioned would it be your greatest challenge and achievement?

(Laughs) I am sure that if we achieve this it would be a great achievement for everybody in Mumbai. But it is important to understand that a city is a collaborative endeavour. No one person can consider anything in it his own personal accomplishment. Amartya Sen once said that 'it is public action that influences governments'. And this is an ideology we have worked with for all these years. Bandra Bandstand's redevelopment was a public initiative. It was started without the government's support. Over the last couple of counts, the city's population has dropped from 12.5 crore to 11.8. I hope it is a flash in the pan as I don't want population to drop in Mumbai. I wish for it to stabilise. I would never want to have people leave the city thinking they would be better off elsewhere.

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