

RE-ENVISIONING CITIES

The Case of Mumbai

We are concerned about the shrinking public spaces in cities. In the case of Mumbai, as the city is expanding, its public spaces are sharply declining. The democratic ‘space’ that ensures accountability and enables dissent is also shrinking, very subtly but surely.

This is a phenomenon experienced in most cities around the world particularly so, in India where urbanization is a fast growing phenomenon.

This is most manifest in the deteriorating conditions of physical open spaces of our cities in India. Open spaces are “left-overs”, while construction and real estate turnover dominates land-use and development plans and policies. This is leading to the deterioration of the quality of life in our city.

Open spaces in most cities across the world are fragmented, disparate and often barricaded, even though many such spaces have beautiful gardens and landscapes. In city planning terms they are not an integral aspect of the growing urban-scapes. Seldom do such spaces relate to people’s neighborhoods and their daily life in cities. Most often these spaces are exclusive and restricted.

Open-spaces reflect quality of life. Dignity of public life is undoubtedly reflected in the planning and quality of open spaces. The idea of Open spaces integration in city planning and development plans and programs can promote social integration. This social aspect is a significant aspect of democratization of our cities.

Can we consider our cities not merely being grounds for maximum construction and business turnover but an opportunity to plan and develop systems of public spaces with equal access to all? Can open spaces be the basis for city planning? This is our subject for research and city planning ideas.

The case of Mumbai enables us to explore these ideas for “open” and democratic cities. Our research and proposals are specific to Mumbai, a city that we are most familiar with, but the lessons are relevant to most cities around the world. For us, the achievement of open spaces network means social networking. The expansion of public spaces is an important social, cultural and political act.

But what is equally or may be more important is the aspect of participatory planning. How can we motivate and engage more and more people in decisions that affect our lives. How can new languages and communication facilitate the integration of all the people, that city planning ideas can be de-mystified. How new governance models can be evolved constantly through democratic forums.

For us, planning, urban design and architecture are fantastic democratic tools for influencing social change. Projects towards this objective are effective instruments for enhancing popular participation and wider public dialogue. We as planners and architects have to therefore carry this enormous responsibility and work within social, cultural and political movements.

An ongoing exhibition 'OPEN MUMBAI: LET'S EXPAND PUBLIC SPACES' is the culmination of one year of intense study and research of public open spaces in Mumbai and city development. Our research and study also analyses the various open spaces projects planned and executed by us with active peoples participation in the past 15 years and how the learning's from them can enable a vision for future projects for expansion of open spaces and the democratization of our city.

This exhibition along with a series of seminars at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), in Mumbai, are some of the many activities that we have planned for generating a wider public dialogue and participation at a very crucial moment of the city's development. Presently the city government has initiated a planning process for the revision of the city's Development Plan (DP). A new revised Plan will hold good for the coming 20 years, i.e. unto the year 2034 thus, substantially influencing or affecting land use, development and life of over 12 million people living and working in this city.

Several mappings and data of the various aspects of the city, including that of the open spaces and land-use are an integral part of our research and study and the exhibition.

'All you need is the plan, the road map, and the courage to press on to your destination.'
-Earl Nightingale

Maps are an insight into a nation's progress.

Not maps that define national boundaries, but maps that define cities and neighbourhoods.

Maps that reveal the resources we have and how we share them. And the resources we may have lost.

Open spaces, water bodies, vegetation, wildlife. Maps that make us vigilant and protective.

Ours is a voluntary effort that has helped create a basis for the 'Open Mumbai' vision plan.

An even more concerted effort by government is needed to continually map the city in extensive detail... if we are to build a more equitable city for its citizens.

We have also carried out extensive mapping and land use of Slums in Mumbai, Social amenities provisions, Housing reservations, and Commercial and industrial reservations. These maps have been published too and available for public knowledge.

The Hon'able Chief Minister of Maharashtra State Shri Prithviraj Chavan inaugurated this exhibition on the 15th March, 2012. He spent an hour and has been quite moved by the exhibition and the various ideas that we have proposed for the expansion of open-spaces in Mumbai. Other dignitaries included a few Members of Parliament, senior bureaucrats of the state, city Municipal Commissioner and Metropolitan Commissioner, other eminent citizens and many citizens' associations and groups.

The following day Shiv Sena President, Shri Uddhav Thackeray (Shiv Sena is the party that heads the city government) also visited the exhibition and spent nearly two hours. Both the heads of state and city governments have highly appreciated the ideas and have committed to follow-up on their implementation. We also held the first 'Open Mumbai' seminar on Saturday the 17th at 2.30 p.m. along with the release of a book – "On the Waterfronts"; Reclaiming Public Spaces,

co-authored by Mr. P K Das and Dr. Indra Munshi. We will hold three more seminars on the coming three Saturdays on different subjects relating to open-spaces and cities. These seminars will be chaired by Municipal Commissioner, Principal Secretary, Urban Development and the Environment Secretary, respectively.