

What are the social justice implications of urban ecology, and how can we make sure that "green cities" are not synonymous with "gentrified" or "exclusive" cities?

PK Das, Mumbai
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P.K. Das is popularly known as an Architect-Activist. With an extremely strong emphasis on participatory planning, he hopes to integrate architecture and democracy to bring about desired social changes in the country.

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I am deeply concerned about the systematic fragmentation of our towns and cities and with it the breaking down urban ecology - an integrated structure of built and natural environments. This fragmentation process produces individual, disparate, competing and often-contradictory situations that are detrimental to the very idea of an integrated and sustainable urban ecology.

To check this ongoing fragmentation and simultaneously work towards their successful unification is our key objective. Development plans and programs must therefore be rooted in this objective and the ideas therein. This is not an easy task under the dominant market led development regimes, in which packaging and marketability are considered to be necessary and sufficient criteria for success. This is where lies the problem. Natural environmental conditions and assets are considered to lack exchange value in the capital markets, and are therefore excluded from the development plans and programs. Not just ignored but also abused, misused and destroyed to gain grounds for furthering construction and real estate opportunity.

Cities are seen to be grounds for quick capital turnover through real estate business, construction of buildings and infrastructure that are aggressively pursued in the name of development. They are increasingly expensive and exclusive, and being carried out at a cost to social development and larger public good, including large-scale human displacements. Gentrification, the emergence of gated communities and their barricaded colonies are in vogue. This trend is furthering the fragmentation of cities into exclusive privatized blocks, while reducing the left over spaces as mere transportation corridors: roads, highways and flyovers that support our increased dependency on motorized transport. Where are the streets where people meet, exchange politics and build social and community networks? As cities expand, public spaces are rapidly shrinking.

Erosion of public space in both its physical and democratic dimensions is leading to more people being excluded and marginalized from mainstream developments. It imposes enormous burden on people, particularly the poor and the marginalized, while leading to inequality and environmental injustice. These 'development' processes also further alienation and social tensions. Sustainable urban ecology is thus fractured and severed into disparate pieces.

Our challenge is not only to check the fragmentation of our cities in all its violent dimensions but also build a robust urban ecology rooted in the democratic principles of social and environmental justice. Urban design is an incredible tool for the achievement of this objective. The 'Open Mumbai' plan addresses these issues for Mumbai, aiming to achieve the integration of the vast extent of natural assets with the daily social and cultural life of people.