

TOO CLOSED FOR COMFORT

City neighbourhoods barely have open spaces for relaxation and enjoyment of the outdoors. The result has taken a toll on our quality of life

Demolish this structure and set an example for all times that 'enough is enough'. We are getting sick of this perpetual crookedness of the authorities and the supporters of these wretched officials. Confiscate their properties and build this children's park. It is absolutely sickening the way this city is being destroyed by greedy and corrupt officials."

This reader's outburst, following a TOI report on how a playground was usurped by a builder, underlines the Mumbai's anguish at the city's lack of open spaces. While Mumbai has a high wealth index, its citizenry suffers a diminishing quality of life.

Poor planning, haphazard construction and unabated encroachment of public spaces have resulted in living conditions deteriorating for the city's 12.4 million residents in terms of light, air and a healthy environment. BMC statistics show that in the island city, on an average, over 45,000 people are cramped into every sq km. Singapore (population 5 million) has a ratio of 7,300 people per sq km.

More frightful is data like: there are just seven public swimming pools to cater to Mumbai's huge population. It gets even more depressing. The widely quoted figure of 0.03 acre of open space for every 1,000 people is at least 40 years old. When it was computed, the city's population was just under nine million. Since then, even as the population has increased, large swathes of land reserved for public amenities have been either encroached on by slums or de-reserved for construction purposes. Mumbai's mangroves, playgrounds, parks, waterfronts and even protected forest lands are being steadily chewed up by slums, swanky housing societies and commercial complexes.

City-based gynaecologist Nozer Sheriar frequently advises expectant mothers to walk. "But where will they walk? On roads and broken pavements? It's ridiculous to even suggest this anymore," he said.

Reproductive health problems, especially increasing male infertility, he added, are linked to environmental pollution and the loss of green spaces. "It's anecdotal, but these factors play a part in such disorders," he said. Expressing concern that many sporting activities are possible only if one is a member of an elite club, Sheriar asked, "Which city in the world charges money to walk into a park?"

Architect Gananath Shetty had warned about Mumbai's peril four decades ago. Among the host of problems he spelled out in 1970 was the lack of chil-

dren's playing areas. "It is a universally acknowledged scientific fact that play in the early years of life is one of the most important phases of development, leading to the blossoming of a child's faculties. In spite of the better standard of living today, there is a gulf of emotional poverty, loneliness, mental illness, delinquency and drug usage amongst the younger generation," he said. The architect further added that these conditions and habits spring mainly from living in congested environments where "immense building activity is carried on without love or understanding in the most squalid of surroundings". "These denigrating conditions have destroyed the basic elements of a child's play," said Shetty.

Housing activist P K Das, who was the architect for the redevelopment of seafronts at Bandra and Juhu, said, "We consider our city to be a ground for

fought by a slew of spirited citizens' groups, activists and NGOs. In the last decade, an audacious move to exploit the 226-acre Mahalaxmi Race Course was halted after citizens approached the Bombay high court and got a stay. The plan to build a seven-star hotel, convention centre and golf course was backed by the son-in-law of a senior state politician.

Last year, the NGO Save Open Spaces stalled a builder's attempt to use a six-acre plot in Juhu for a slum redevelopment project by realigning the Irla nullah and shifting road and garden reservations. Vidya Vaidya, secretary of the General Arunkumar Vaidya Nagar Rahiwasi Sangh, which represents about 5,000 Bandra Reclamation residents, said, "We are forced to rush to the courts every time." The sangh is fighting to save an eight-acre plot, which is being eyed by a local politician.

As Mumbai struggles with

HOW MUMBAI'S LAND IS CARVED UP

CENTRAL GOVT LAND

	No	Sq Km	%
Rly stations & property	—	9.4	1.9
Airports, defence, ports	—	14.6	3
Major roads & h'ways	—	30	6.2
SUBTOTAL	—	54	11.2

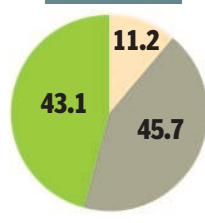
GREEN ZONES/OPEN SPACES

	No	Sq Km	%
Gardens & Parks	318	2.5	0.5
Playgrounds	631	4	0.8
Recreation grounds	603	7.2	1.6
Encroached open space*	501	5.3	1.1
Encroached space on NDZ**	—	4.8	1
Fish drying yards***	5	0.2	0.03
Lakes, ponds, tanks	23	7.1	1.5
Creeks, rivers, nullahs	—	13.1	2.7
Wetlands+	—	8	1.7
Mangroves	—	61.4	12.7
Beaches	10	1.4	0.3
Promenades	6	0.12	0.02
Hills, forests, nat'l park	—	53.6	11.1
NDZ++	—	39.5	8.2
SUBTOTAL	—	208.2	43.1

LAND FOR CONSTRUCTION, ETC

	No	Sq Km	%
Hsg, ind, commercial, amenities, services	—	—	—
SUBTOTAL	—	220.5	45.7
GREATER MUMBAI TOTAL	—	482.7	100

LAND PIE



Central govt land
Green zones
Construction etc

* On garden, playground, recreation ground | ** No Development Zone | *** They are reserved areas | ++ Includes salt-pans | ++ Excludes hills, mangroves, wetlands
Source: PK Das & Associates

maximizing construction potential and deriving profits. Open spaces are neglected because they do not provide a financial turnover. Not surprisingly, the quality of life has miserably deteriorated for both the rich and poor." He added that Mumbai needs a comprehensive plan for open spaces.

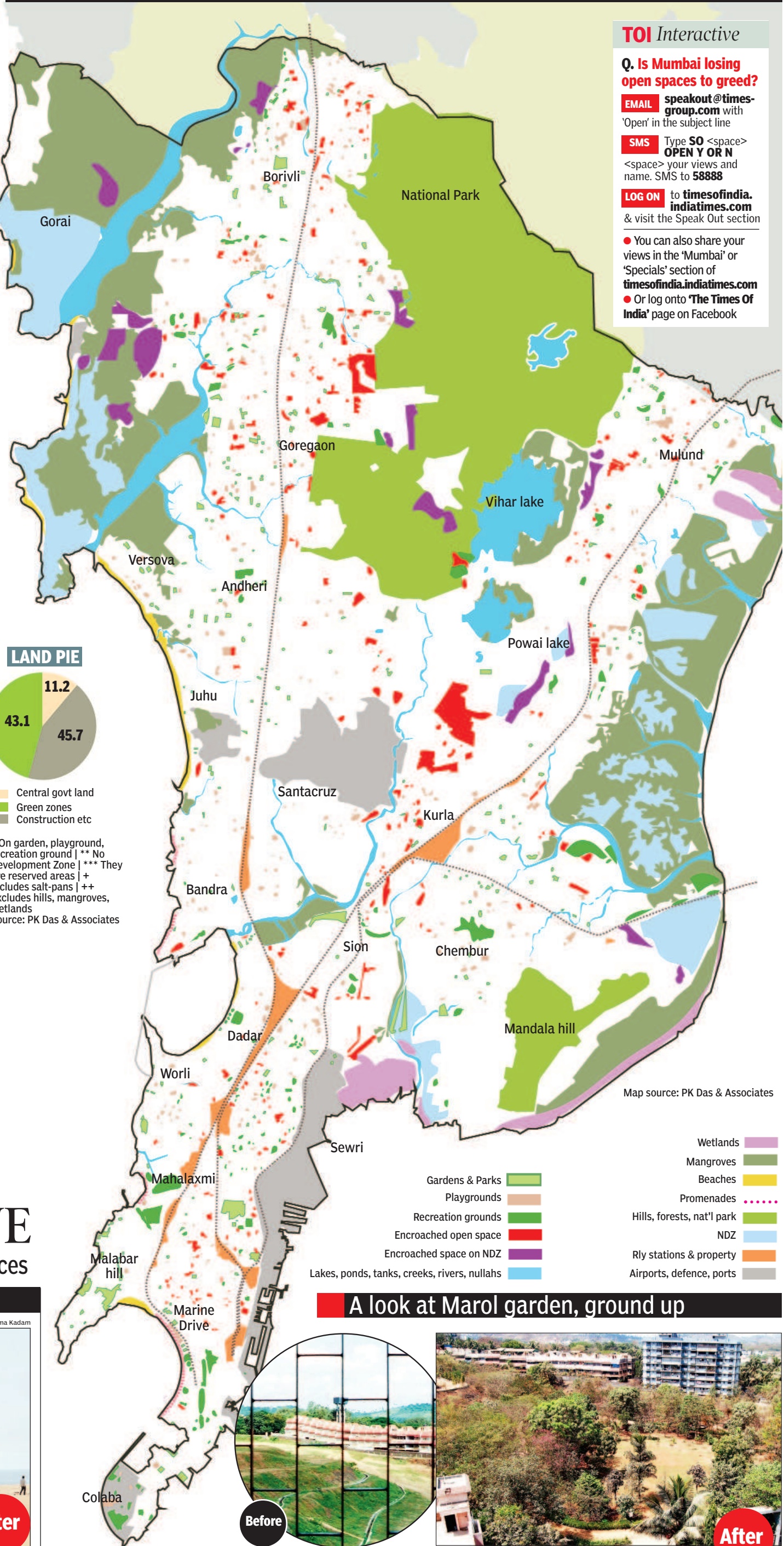
Five years ago, a survey conducted by the Urban Design Research Institute showed 45% of the city's open spaces were lost. Of the 3,103 reserved plots that were surveyed, 1,397 were completely or partially covered or encroached upon.

The fight to reclaim the city's parks and playgrounds is being

its shrinking spaces, other cities march ahead. Singapore, a little over one-and-a-half times Mumbai's size, will throw open a 250-acre botanical garden in June. New York has a great variety of open spaces, from the sprawling Central and Prospect parks, to small neighbourhood lots that are local gathering places.

Said New York-based urban critic and international lecturer Roberta Brandes Gratz, "I think these small ones are the most valuable because they really connect residents to each other.... The best-looking and most functional public spaces are the ones local people create and design themselves."

NOT GREEN ENOUGH IN NEIGHBOURHOODS: OUR OPEN SPACE MAP



TOI Interactive

Q. Is Mumbai losing open spaces to greed?

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CITIZENS TO THE RESCUE

Here are 5 examples of people initiatives to reclaim city spaces

Virgaum Chowpatty, bhel plaza and a sandy beach



Each beautification wasn't on their mind, but their fight to save their daily bread led to one of the successful campaigns—with orders from the Bombay High Court. A group of bhelwallah stall owners at Virgaum Chowpatty moved the high court against the BMC's plan to demolish stalls in 1998.

The area around a water fountain nearby was being misused as were some spots on the beach. In 2001, the HC set up a committee to chalk out an improvement plan for the beach. The team had retired judge Justice S C Pratap, senior

Sea Change

- In 1998, bhelwallahs moved the HC against demolition of their stalls
- In March 2001, plan for a Bhel Plaza and a panel for improvement of Virgaum Chowpatty was passed
- Virgaum Chowpatty improvement plan includes the beach, parks, children's play area, a club and a restaurant, Birla Kreed Kendra and water sports at Conti Chowpatty
- The committee continues to have a say in regulating beach activities

lawyers Rafique Dada, Navroz Seervai, Rajan Jayakar, public-spirited resident Indrani Malkani, politician Pramod Navalkar, civic official Subrat Ratho and eminent heritage architect Rahul Mehrotra. Their efforts led to a structured bhel plaza and, consequently, brought about a sea change in the experience of a day out at the beach for all Mumbaiers.

Over a decade later, the committee is still going strong. "But some issues are still pending and are in the process of being worked out," said Malkani.

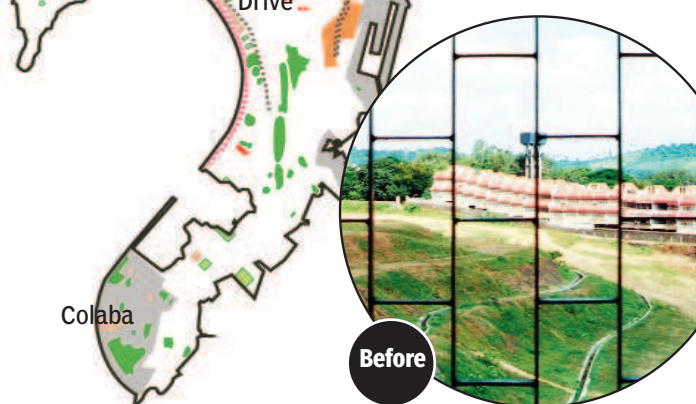
The only issue now is vagrants on the beach. There has to be constant vigil, which is not happening. There is also unauthorised occupation in the gaps between parked boats

Citizen participation is a powerful tool. The transformation of Virgaum Chowpatty is an example of how success can be achieved in partnership with the administration, thereby making the system work successfully

Rajan Jayakar | MEMBER, HC-APPOINTED COMMITTEE FOR IMPROVEMENT OF VIRGAUM CHOWPATTY BEACH

Indrani Malkani | MEMBER, HC-APPOINTED COMMITTEE

A look at Marol garden, ground up



A handful of us started doing up the garden. We dug pits, planted trees and watered them. Slowly, the patch started to turn a lush green

Suresh Nair | MAROL MILITARY ROAD RESIDENTS WELFARE ASSOCIATION

The garden has proved to be a blessing. The ladies wing that we set up has taken the initiative of educating slum children who come every evening

Ramesh Pandit | MEMBER, MMRWA

To most people, turning a quarry into a garden replete with trees, lawn and different species of birds would seem not just daunting but almost impossible. But a look at the 6.5-acre garden ensconced in a remote corner of Marol shows that a group of people with an aim to transform their backyard can make it happen.

Since 2008, the rocky terrain with about five levels has been a favourite haunt of Marol residents. The Bharatvan garden has seen a growing stream of visitors for walks, meetings, jogs and sporting activities.

The metamorphosis of the quarry has been more than an uphill task. After realizing that the quarry—an erstwhile haven of drug peddlers and squatters—was earmarked for a garden, a group of residents got to-

Greening A Quarry

- In 2000-2001, members of Marol Military Road Residents' Welfare Association adopted a quarry and endeavoured to convert it into a garden
- Soon, politicians, including state minister Suresh Shetty, late MP Sunil Dutt, Avinash Kubal of Mahim Nature Park and various corporators began to contribute to the effort
- In 2008, the 6.5-acre garden spread across five levels was thrown open to the public
- Today, the green relief attracts visitors for walks, meets and sporting activities

revive a barren plot of land during their free time, turned into a larger effort with contributions from local politicians, including state minister Suresh Shetty, late MP Sunil Dutt, Avinash Kubal of Mahim Nature Park and various corporators. So far, the residents' association has spent Rs 25 lakh on the project.

Trupti Shetty, a resident involved with the garden, said, "It is like a mini-forest. The garden is beautiful and there are many varieties of trees. There is also a small play area and children love going there. It has brought peace and freshness to our lives. We do have problems of maintenance and security but then we did convert a barren land into a green space."

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