

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

Nauzer K Bharucha | TNN

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 Mumbaikar'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-revered 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 Ganapath 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

As Mumbai struggles with

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.

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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	2.5	0.5
Playgrounds	4	0.8
Recreation grounds	7.2	1.6
Encroached open space*	5.3	1.1
Encroached space on NDZ**	4.8	1
Fish drying yards***	0.2	0.03
Lakes, ponds, tanks	7.1	1.5
Creeks, rivers, nullahs	13.1	2.7
Wetlands+	8	1.7
Mangroves	61.4	12.7
Beaches	1.4	0.3
Promenades	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

No	Sq Km	%
GREATER MUMBAI TOTAL	482.7	100

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."

CITIZENS TO THE RESCUE

Here are 5 examples of people initiatives to reclaim city spaces

Girgaum Chowpatty, bhel plaza and a sandy beach



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 Girgaum Chowpatty was passed
- Girgaum Chowpatty improvement plan includes the beach, parks, children's play area, a club and a restaurant, Birla Kredita Kendra and water sports at Choti 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 Mumbaiites.

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.

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

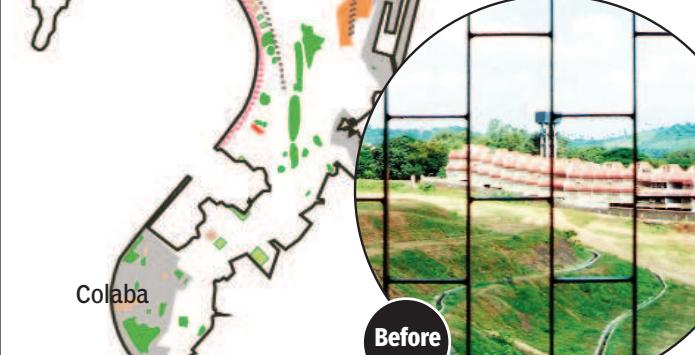
The only issue now is vagrants on the beach. There has to be constant vigil, which is not happening. There is also unauthorised occupation in the gaps between parked boats

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

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

Indrani Malkani | MEMBER, HC-APPOINTED COMMITTEE

A look at Marol garden, ground up



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. 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."

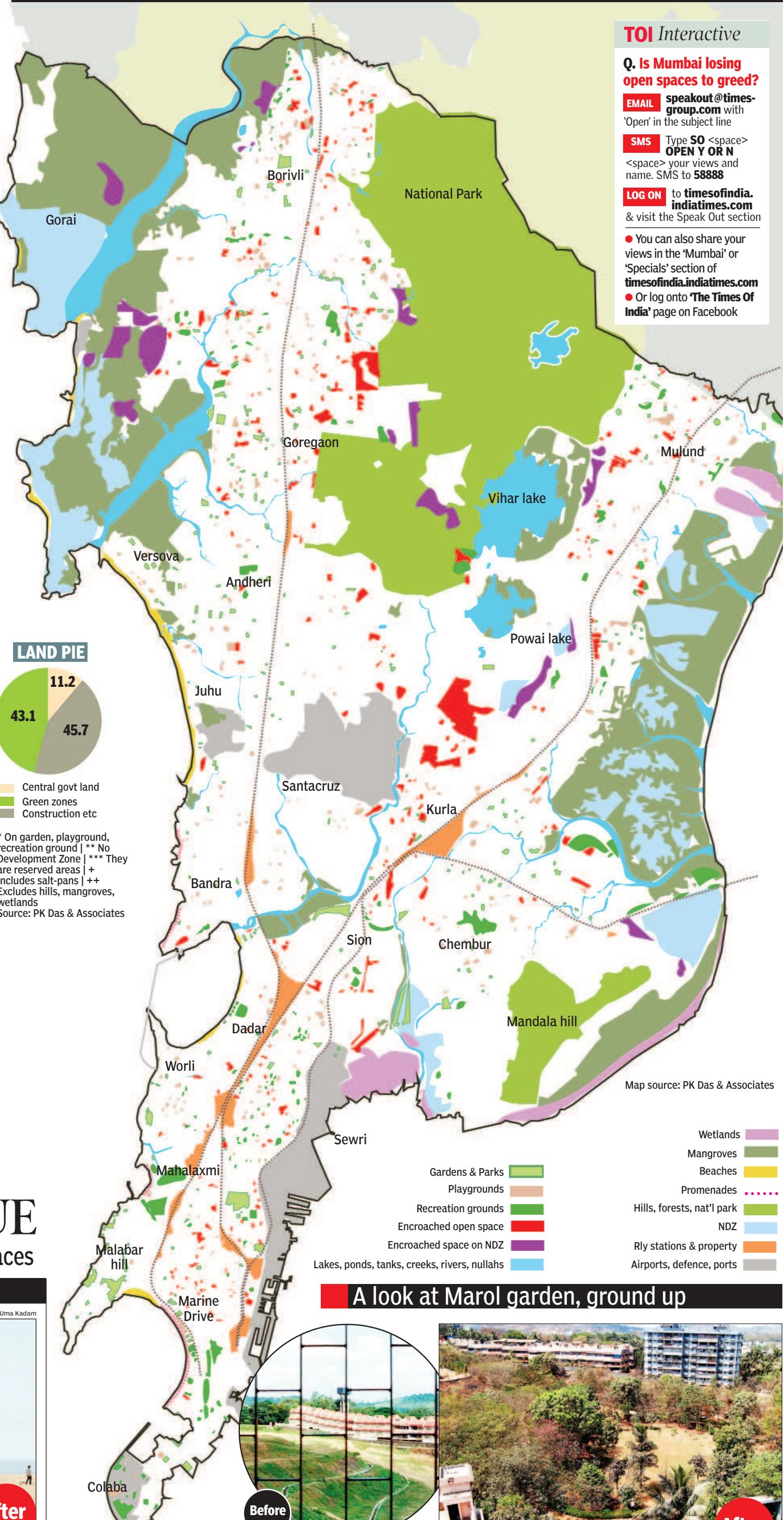
gether and decided to develop it; members of the Marol Military Road Residents' Welfare Association (MMRWA) adopted the plot in 2000-2001. What began as a humble endeavour by some to

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.

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NOT GREEN ENOUGH IN NEIGHBOURHOODS: OUR OPEN SPACE MAP



TOI Interactive

Q. Is Mumbai losing open spaces to greed?

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