

PK Das on collaboratively remaking Mumbai



Carlin Carr, Mumbai Community Manager

One of Mumbai's best-known architects, [PK Das \(http://www.pkdas.com/\)](http://www.pkdas.com/), has used his profession as an instrument for social change. Arriving in the city in 1972 to study architecture, he soon thereafter got involved in movements for slum dwellers and against corruption. Forty years later, Das continues to experiment with the intersection of his craft and his conscience. Mumbai, he says, is his workshop for it all. "It's where I shape and reshape ideas. This city allows that kind of exchange," says Das. "What I argue is that planning and architecture are fabulous democratic instruments for social change."



Although he has tackled a range of issues, Das has focused on the need to improve open spaces and affordable housing in the city. These areas, he says, have the potential, if worked through collaboratively, to positively influence the social, environmental and physical aspects of the city. While the issues he has taken up are some of the most complex and controversial, Das speaks with a great sense of optimism and hope, which he credits to collective achievements, even if on a small scale. "We are grabbing space and trying things, bringing about alternative models, working with slum movements. This is the democratic process that has opened up. If you are engaged in the democratic process, then hope is inevitable," says Das, speaking of the experiences with implementing two widely praised promenades along the seaface of Mumbai's suburb, Bandra.

The process of bringing these public spaces to life was one that turned normal development procedures upside down. "We said that the citizen's association had to be at the helm with the support of the BMC and financiers," explains Das, noting that as government has become enwrapped in privatizing interests in the city, public interests have been pushed aside. The citizen-led processes that brought the promenades to life are "all very positive urban governance developments in the city."

The success of this collaborate framework helped Das prove not only that these small neighborhood projects are possible, but that more wide-scale recapturing of open spaces in Mumbai is as well. Last year, Das launched the [Open Mumbai \(http://www.pkdas.com/open-mumbai.php\)](http://www.pkdas.com/open-mumbai.php) exhibit, attended by politicians at all levels — right up to the Chief Minister. The exhibit showed — to the surprise of congested Mumbaikers — that 55 percent of the city's landmass is covered in natural assets and open spaces. "What you have," says Das, "is a very interesting geographic situation in which there is no shortage of open space — creeks, mangroves, wetlands, rivers, ponds, lakes, hills, and an enormous forest unrivaled in most cities. It is about recognition and inclusion of the natural assets and open spaces reserved in the Development Plan as playgrounds and recreation grounds. We argue in Open Mumbai that a comprehensive open spaces plan ought to be the basis of city planning."

Open Mumbai's proposals have been taken up by the Chief Minister and are en route to becoming officially part of the Development Plan (DP), which lays out the city's land use development for the next 20 years. Adopting his ideas into the DP, notes Das, is the "ultimate victory." For more on PK Das' Open Mumbai plans as well as his ideas on affordable housing in Mumbai, visit his [website \(http://www.pkdas.com/\)](http://www.pkdas.com/).

Submitted by Carlin Carr — Mon, 07/22/2013 - 00:00

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