

Let streams of linear open spaces flow across urban landscapes

Can we re-envision our cities with a stream of linear open spaces, defining a new geography of cities? Could we break away from large monolithic spaces and geometric structures into fluid stream of linear open spaces, meandering, modulating and negotiating varying city terrains, akin to rivers and watercourses? This way the new structure of open spaces would relate to and integrate with many more areas and people across neighborhoods and the city.

Over the years, across cities, we have been planning and building parks and gardens and other public spaces as geometric blocks, that in most instances stand out in sharp contrast to its neighborhood character in which it is placed. Are decisions that impose such blocky parcels of land guided by intention of promoting exclusive spaces, spaces that could be contained and controlled and access to it regulated? In most instances these blocks are barricaded having little integration with the character of spaces and activities around them. In many urban situations such examples have also led to class and community polarization, due to the very nature of its design and governance structure. A public space has significant socio-political colour that cannot be ignored or masked under the guise of city beautification program and limited environmental objectives.

Today, we are confronted by many critical questions that need to be answered. Can public spaces in various forms be conceived to harness social and community relationships? Can they bring together the disparate fragments of spaces within cities, otherwise characterized by forced ghettoisation and gated communities? Can sensitive ecological assets that have been classified and colonised and or treated as backyards of development programs be put to public domain and turned around as social and cultural fore-courts? How can we alter the established blocks of barricaded spaces and structures into open and clear fore-ever spaces for all? Can more people freely access and exercise control over common property, in order to democratise the ecology of cities? Alternately, can we work towards developing linear structure of open spaces as an answer to many of the above issues while significantly altering the well established dogmatic order of public spaces in the planning and development of cities?

This may be a tall order, but worth pursuing as it is rooted in the idea of a new urban rights agenda- governance models that strives to achieve integration, equality and socio-environmental justice. In most instances, public spaces have been shrinking with city's expansion. Open land including those reserved for gardens and playgrounds have been either converted by governments for building construction purposes or are being grabbed and developed for real estate projects, as has been experienced in the case of Mumbai. In such an event, a collective or community ownership of common spaces becomes crucial, also for maintaining a desirable balance between open spaces and built-up areas. It is in this regard that linear stream of open spaces achieves significance. This is not to say that larger parcels of land for open spaces are not

necessary at all. The interesting possibilities of linear systems is that small residual or marginal spaces that are often ignored or neglected can be stitched together with other open spaces and natural areas into a larger structure of open spaces. Such an approach would greatly strengthen our struggle for expanding open spaces in dense cities where open lands are in shortage, in order to achieve minimum open spaces standards.

In terms of physical planning, our aim is to develop contiguous open spaces by interconnecting various facets of areas open to the public. This would produce a network of green corridors throughout the city and its various localities, nourishing community life, neighbourhood engagements and participation. With public space being the main planning criteria, we aim to bring about a social change i.e. promote collective culture and root out alienation and a false sense of individual gratification promoted by the market. By achieving intensive levels of citizens' participation we wish to influence governments to devise comprehensive plans and integrate disparate developments. The 'open and clear forever' public space policy will truly symbolize our democratic aspirations. This is significant way to rebuild humane and environmentally sustainable cities.



A network of green corridors and a central park in a plan by this author for Pimpri Chinchwad town in the state of Maharashtra, India.

Pimpri Chinchwad Networking Plan: Central Park

In Mumbai, the ‘Mumbai Waterfronts Centre’ and architects PKDas & Associates have made an attempt to re-envision the city by proposing such a linear public spaces structure, bringing together the vast extent of the natural assets and the available open spaces with the city. An illustration of such an idea shows how a system of linear parks and other public spaces can radically alter the socio- environmental character of the city. More importantly, by this plan it is possible to mobilise neighborhood people’s participation in the development and expansion of open spaces, as much as the city as seen in the plans for Juhu, a neighborhood in the western suburb of Mumbai.

In order to Re-Vision Mumbai and democratize its public space, we have launched the ‘Vision Juhu’ plan as a pilot project.

Juhugiri. Pyar se.

Double open space: add almost 3 Oval maidans
 Create 10 km tree-lined, flood-free walkway along Irla nala
 Inter-connect open spaces with institutions & amenities
 Re-align & integrate Metro rail network with public spaces
 Protect beaches, improve access, enhance facilities
 Provide civic amenities for gaughans, re-develop shams
 Form a model for neighbourhood planning,
 participation & governance

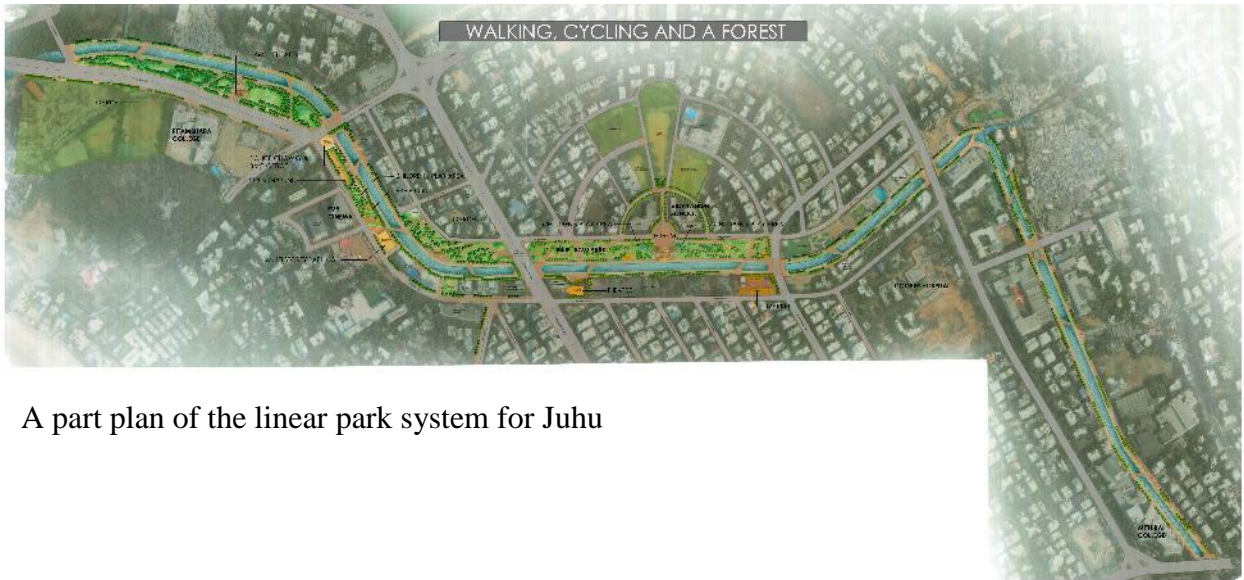
Vision Juhu
Expanding public space

Kamala Rajeev Vishwanath Institute for Architecture • PK Das & Associates, Architects • Mumbai Waterfronts Ctr

Supported by: John Coates, Wilson Group (JWG) • Gulmohar, Sanshodhan, Wilbur Smith
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 Juhu Residents Association • JHU Residents Association • Dnyanesh Chhabra • Resident Welfare Society (RWS) Park Road
 Contact: www.visionofjuhu.com • plan.visionofjuhu.com • info@visionofjuhu.com

PROPOSED NETWORK PLAN FOR JUHU

A public campaign poster, published by area residents and this author to popularize the idea of linear open spaces structure in the Juhu neighbourhood of Mumbai, currently under implementation



A part plan of the linear park system for Juhu



An rendering of the green corridor onto a google image of Juhu area.

As Mumbai expands, its open spaces are shrinking. The democratic ‘space’ that ensures accountability and enables dissent is also shrinking, very subtly but surely. The city’s shrinking physical open spaces are of course the most visible manifestation as they directly and adversely affect our very quality of life. Such new order of linear open spaces must clearly be the foundation of city planning. Through this plan, we hope to generate dialogue between people, government, professionals and within movements working for social, cultural and environmental change. It is a Plan that redefines land use and development, placing people and community life at the centre of planning – not real estate and construction potential. A Plan that redefines the ‘notion’ of open space to go beyond gardens and recreational grounds – to include the vast, diverse natural assets of the city, including rivers, creeks, lakes, ponds, mangroves, wetlands, beaches and the incredible seafronts. A plan that aims to create non-barricaded, non exclusive, non-elitist spaces that provide access to all our citizens for leisure, relaxation, art and cultural life. A plan that ensures open spaces are not only available but are geographically and culturally integral to neighbourhoods and a participatory community life.

Such plans for cities will be the beginning of a new dialogue to create truly representative ‘Peoples’ Plan’. Let streams of linear open spaces flow across urban landscapes defining a new ecology – socio- environmental order, of cities world over

Open Mumbai Exhibition and inauguration photos





‘Open Mumbai’ Exhibition inauguration by the Chief Minister of the State of Maharashtra and other eminent citizens along with the author. Exhibition objective: to enable public participation and popularize the idea of networking Mumbai’s natural areas and open spaces across the city.