

Turning Backyards Into Proud Forecourts

PK Das tell us why it's important for citizens to speak out and save the open spaces and water bodies in their city

IRLA NULLAH INTEGRATION MOVEMENT

In the year 2012, the citizens of Juhu along with this author launched a significant movement for the conservation and integration of over four kilometers of 'Irla Nullah' in their neighbourhood of Juhu, Mumbai. Municipal authorities wondered why this was of any importance. But the movement continued with determination, backed by substantive survey data and design details. Comprehensive plans and implementation programmes were drawn up through active citizen participation. Meetings were held in several public places and posters and a book, 'Vision Juhu', explaining this movement and the project were published. Our central objective by this movement was to bring Juhu together. Connecting and networking the various isolated, disparate and fragmented spaces and activities was a means to achieving this objective. These include the various open spaces, the Irla nullah itself, gardens, parks,

playgrounds, public institutions like colleges, schools, training centers, music, dance and art centers, markets, health-care centers, etc. These connected spaces would also be networked with neighbourhood streets for further integration and accessibility. This effort would nourish community life, neighbourhood engagements and participation, truly symbolising our democratic aspirations.

As far as the funding of this project goes, the area citizens got incredible and unstinting support from Shri. Javed Akhtar, Member of Parliament. He is an eminent lyricist, social activist and a resident of Juhu. He has committed the entire money that he got under the MP Lad scheme (a scheme under which all parliamentarians get similar funds during their tenure to spend in their constituency), amounting to nearly three hundred million rupees. As per the MP Lad scheme conditions, the implementation of these works is carried out by

Through this project we will demonstrate the need and importance of planning and developing neighbourhoods and their identity in this fast growing metropolis

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 beach, improve access, enhance facilities
- Provide civic amenities for gaslans, re-develop slums
- Form a model for neighbourhood planning, participation & governance

Vision Juhu
Expanding public space

Kamala Rajesh Vidyanath Institute for Architecture • PK Das & Associates, Architects • Mumbai Waterfronts Centre

Supported by: Juhu Citizens Welfare Forum (JCWF) • Collaborator: Juhu Residents Welfare Group
Juhu Inhabitants Residents Association • Juhu Housing Association Limited • Gaslans Area Residents Association (GARA)
Juhu Residents Association • Juhu Residents Association • Juhu Club of Juhu • Juhu Residents Welfare Group
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A public campaign poster



Top: Irla nullah overview in Juhu. Middle: Neglected and abused Condition before. Below: Visualisation post implementation of the project



designated governmental agencies. Thereby the entire process that includes planning, designing, fixing expenditures and implementation are transparent and in the public domain.

Through this plan, we will generate an active and pulsating system of public spaces that would form the heart of Juhu. This will also provide a distinct identity to our neighbourhood and all our people. Women, children, the old, the young, will all find an opportunity to walk, cycle, play interact and intermingle in these areas. Groups

will have the opportunity to organise spontaneous and planned activities like meetings, music and dance programmes, art festivals, get-togethers, games for children, sports, literary activities, theatre and many such events. Colleges and schools in our area may organise events both for their students and for the neighbourhood.

On both sides of Irla nullah that runs for nearly four kilometers along the length of Juhu we will be able to walk and cycle. Keeping with the original idea of the Municipal Corporation

for building a 'City Forest' on land along the Irla nullah, we will grow forests in all these areas. 'Walking, Cycling and a Forest' is thus our metaphor for the integration and expansion of our social, cultural and political life in Juhu. This we believe will enormously enrich our lives and we will be proud of this space.

Through this project we will demonstrate the need and importance of planning and developing neighbourhoods and their identity in this fast growing metropolis. We will also demonstrate the significance of preparing comprehensive area redevelopment plans as a way forward in the preparation of a dynamic city redevelopment plan. Planning for Mumbai would then be a bottom-up process with participation of all the people. Neighbourhood and area plans enable easy and effective participation. Ideas about democratisation of public spaces and planning are well reflected in this endeavour. Above all, this project is also about claiming a better quality of life, which all citizens deserve and aspire for themselves, their families and communities.

Subsequently, the 'Open Mumbai' exhibition: 'Expanding Public Spaces', illustrated how significant the integration of these nullahs is to the development interests of the city at large. It also argued how necessary it is in the planning of the city to consider these backyards as significant public spaces, turning them into proud forecourts.

DIVIDED CITIES: POLARISATION, INTOLERANCE AND THE BACKYARDS

Increased social discrimination and exclusion has led to deepening social fissures across city landscapes. Intolerance is today the hallmark of social and political condition. Increasing levels of tolerance and apathy to constant abuse, disrespect and the rapidly growing urban decay is fast eroding or dismantling the idea of cities. Such discord and disharmony is also evident in land-use and planning of cities. Spaces are increasingly being divided, colonised and barricaded in order to achieve exclusivity. Cities are being constantly divided.

'Nullahs' (a watercourse, riverbed, or ravine) as they are popularly known in India, are one example of such spaces of discontent. Nullahs connote filth, stink and a place for disposal of waste. In city planning too they are treated as being the backyards, sites to be kept away from. Similarly, many other areas like the natural areas or the places where working class people reside are neglected and treated as backyards of the city. Or we may say that there are few select areas that are accorded greater significance and given priority in development programmes. As a result, vast stretches of land and surrounding environment are ignored and left to deteriorate

further. Moreover, as these spaces do not attract the attention of realty developers, in many instances the poor – in search of a roof over their heads – occupy them to build their makeshift homes. This phenomenon is most evident in Mumbai, though it is experienced in all cities across India, including metropolitan cities such as New Delhi, Chennai and Kolkata.

In Mumbai, most of the over 300 kms-long nullahs were originally natural watercourses. These vital streams of watercourses have been turned into nullahs for disposal of waste, both officially and illegally. Solid as well as chemical and toxic waste is let out to these watercourses. Over the years, there is no knowledge in the public domain of them being rivers and natural watercourses that defined the landscape of this estuary.

During the floods of 2005 that left the city paralysed for several days with huge losses of property and life, the city authorities woke up to realise how important it is to conserve these rivers and watercourses. Most people learnt for the first time that Mumbai has five rivers and several significant natural watercourses. But soon irresponsible city authorities and governments have forgotten these warnings. Dumping into these nullahs continues, while under the guise of development, the municipal corporation has gone ahead to build impervious concrete walls along their edges with massive expenditure, thus further severing the ecological and environmental values and relationships. Hordes of private builders and developers continue to landfill parts of these watercourses and wetlands, cut mangroves along their edges and even cover them with slabs to utilise the space above for real estate interest and short term profit, with the government's sanction.

CITY PLANNING AND DESIGN AS EFFECTIVE DEMOCRATIC TOOLS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Mainstream planning and design ideas that predominantly reflect the political ideology and interest of the ruling class and their agents are often in conflict with larger development interests. This has been realised through many examples the world over, including in the historical cases of Haussmann's plans for Paris and Moses' plans for New York and the protests that followed in both cities. Plans for cities could be utilised for exactly the opposite objective: to achieve social integration by engaging communities as agents of change, as has been championed by Jane Jacob and others. In the context of rapid urbanisation, people's movements in and across cities claiming 'Urban Planning and Design Rights' have therefore come to be essential.

I believe that Urban Planning and Design

should be considered a 'right' and brought to public dialogue. The democratisation of urban planning and design would be a significant step towards the achievement of just and equal cities. Exercising this right would be an effective means for bringing about much-needed socio-environmental change.

It is heartening that people in different parts of the world are intervening in decisions that affect their lives and questioning the plans and projects that are being forced on them. Communities in different neighbourhoods and cities are demanding public discussion on matters relating to planning and design issues.

From rights to concessions is yet another oppressive social and political trend that has come to prevail, particularly evident in the neo-liberalized world. Public freedom and rights over a wide array of issues that affect life in cities have been turned into matters of negotiation and concessions, leading to reduction in open spaces and opportunity for public participation. Land and development deals are led by private agencies bargaining for concessions in monies and goods rather than engaging in issues of basic rights. Only when there are uprisings will the governments begin to grant fringe or peripheral benefits to the public under the guise of public largesse, without altering the very foundations upon which colonisation, exclusivity and private empires are built across cities.

Increasing commodification of cities covering all aspects of life, under expanding markets, has engulfed basic social and human development needs and has substantially eroded fundamental rights of most people. Public spaces, particularly the open spaces are consumed as a commodity, as in many instances put to trading for furthering real estate interest or for facilitating vested interests desire for gaining land and property.

But people's collective's are intervening and

participating in the development and governance of public spaces, as demonstrated in reclaiming Mumbai's waterfronts movements led by various citizens groups. For management and governance of these waterfronts, a tri-partite between citizens, the government and private agencies has been established with residents' associations being at the top of the pyramid.

LET STREAMS OF OPEN SPACES DEFINE 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 a 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 neighbourhoods and the city. Through such an endeavor it would be possible to not only recognise the backyards but also integrate them with the city and turn them into important social and environmental forecourts.

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 the neighbourhood character in which they are placed. Are decisions that impose such blocky parcels of land guided by the 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 polarisation, due to the very nature of its design and

Could we break away from large monolithic spaces and geometric structures into a fluid stream of linear open spaces?



Irla nullah integration plan rendering

governance structure. Most public spaces today have significant socio-political colour that cannot be ignored or masked under the guise of city beautification programmes 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 characterised by forced ghettoisation and gated communities? Can sensitive ecological assets that have been classified and colonised and or treated as backyards of development programmes be put to public domain and turned around as social and cultural forecourts? How can we alter the established blocks of barricaded spaces and structures into open and clear forever 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 a 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 strive 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

By achieving intensive levels of citizens' participation we wish to influence governments to devise comprehensive plans and integrate disparate developments

Let streams of linear spaces define our city's landscape - Irla nullah in Juhu neighbourhood

projects, as seen and experienced in Mumbai and many other cities across India.

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 democratic 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 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 and blue corridors throughout the city and its various localities, nourishing community life, neighbourhood engagements and participation. In the particular case of Irla nullah integration, the project includes the cleaning and treatment of the highly polluted waters by simple natural and biological processes.

Mumbai has evolved by itself and every area has typical challenges. Each neighbourhood has its own unique set of strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, best understood by the people who live and have an interest in it. Allowing citizens to utilise this awareness of their neighbourhood will result in a vision best suited to them and to this city. Neighbourhood planning keeping larger, city issues in mind is the way ahead. It will empower local residents and make them responsible for their area development. This will truly be our vision, our desired future for our surroundings and our city.

NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED CITY DEVELOPMENT

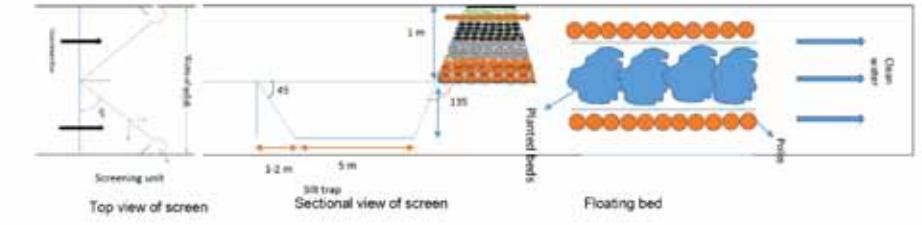
Considering neighbourhoods as the basis for organising movements for effective democratisation of urban planning and design is key. Such an approach facilitates local people's active participation in matters concerning their area, which they know best, while influencing the city's planning and development decisions.

Through a neighbourhood-based development approach it would be possible to decentralise and localise projects and their designs, breaking away from mega monolithic planning and design ideas with enormous investments that impose unbearable burdens on the lives of most people. Neighbourhood based urban planning and design approaches would also facilitate closer interaction between people and their elected representatives.

PHYTORID PLANTS - THE CORE ENGINE FOR REMEDIATION



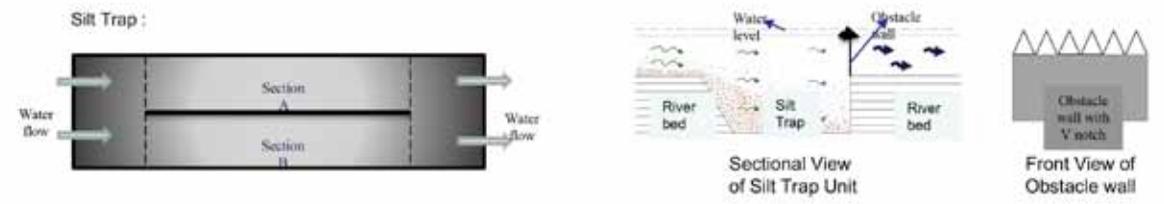
Floating bed treatment unit



Schematic view of different technologies in sequence from left

Cleaning mechanism:
 • From outside bucket system • Outsides on sides there will be a container • Where this silt will be deposited • Water will drain out through the nallah again

TECHNOLOGY FOR SEDIMENT REMOVAL



Proposal by NEERI

Importantly, it creates a more collaborative approach to city and place making. The various 'reclaiming public spaces movements' in Mumbai — the seafront development in Bandra, the Juhu beach redevelopment work and the 'Juhu Vision' plan with work along a watercourse, Irla Nullah as it is commonly called — have amply demonstrated the gains of the neighbourhood-based approach to city development. For citizens, these projects have allowed the immediate reclamation, redesign and re-programming of public space.

With public space being the main planning criteria, we hope to bring about a social change: promoting collective culture and rooting out alienation and a false sense of individual gratification promoted by the market. Our experience of neighbourhood actions in Mumbai has come to confirm that such initiatives can influence long-term change in ways cities development is understood. Interventions by citizens, as in Bandra, Juhu and other areas of Mumbai, would have never been anticipated by a 'master plan' for the city. 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 symbolise our democratic aspirations. This is a significant way to rebuild humane and environmentally sustainable cities.

TURNING BACKYARDS INTO PROUD SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FORECOURT

In Mumbai, the 'Mumbai Waterfronts Centre' has 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. 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 people's participation in the development and expansion of open spaces.

Integration and inclusiveness as two key components of the idea of 'Just and Equal City' have to be discussed and debated in the planning and implementation of these various projects. Those promoting the creation of 'backyards' of exclusion and discrimination, have to be challenged in order to develop livable cities of social and environmental justice, for all.

