

Urban water fronts have typically been sites of heavy development and often are sites of pollution or exclusive access. But they have enormous potential benefits. How can we unlock these benefits for everyone? Are there ecological vs. social vs. economic tradeoffs?

Pk Das , Mumbai
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P.K. Das
Integrating the waterfronts

Developing open, sustainable and resilient urban waterfronts is paramount. Also, integration of waterfronts with cities' hinterlands and their social and cultural fabric in order to overcome their segregation and exclusivity is important. Therefore, evolving an integrated ecological structure that would re-define urban landscapes is our key mission.

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PK. Das is popularly known as an Architect – Activist. With an extremely strong emphasis on participatory planning, he hopes to integrate architecture and democracy to bring about desired social changes in the country.

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Integrating wetlands in Mumbai.

Being on the waterfronts and bathing in the sheer beauty and vast expanse of openness extending up to the horizon, in dense city landscapes, is truly liberating. But, increasing attempts to colonize these common assets for private and exclusive consumption is steadfastly eroding larger public interest and undermining ecological and environmental interests too—all this besides capturing the very experiences of this openness and natural beauty for few.

Under such city conditions, the need for developing an intimate and intrinsic relationship between people, ecology and city building—broadly termed as ecology of cities—becomes enormously complicated. Also, it is hard to achieve this important relationship due to ruling socio-political interests that are governed by short-term financial interests of dominant groups.



Tragically, in most instances the assessment and measure of a city's development and prosperity are based on the extent to which reproduction and turnover of capitals are achieved.

Build more syndrome in Mumbai. Photo: David Maddox

While this may be necessary, it is deplorable to pursue the same in spite of larger sections of people being marginalized from the benefits of development as well as the continuing destruction of finely balanced, interconnected ecological cycles. A balance between these two aspects—financial prosperity and economic growth; along with programs that rebuild, harness and promote interconnectivity of the vast environmental and ecological assets—is daunting, particularly for many of us who are demanding a paradigm shift in the imaginations of an integrated and inclusive ecology of cities.

A fine example of such an effort in the achievement of a new ecology of cities imagination is the [‘Rebuild by Design’](#) competition and its resulting projects that have been launched for implementation of waterfronts barriers in certain cities in the US by the Obama government. Even though the process does not sufficiently suggest ways of integrating the waterfronts with the city’s inner areas and neighborhoods, plans for building with nature are indeed commendable. The fact that these ideas can be furthered as models for planning cities and defining urban development is particularly noteworthy. It opens new avenues of thinking about physical planning of cities and conceptions about our built and natural environments.

These US examples are distinctly different from the hugely popular Barcelona-like waterfronts that are being pursued in many cities. The Barcelona waterfronts are places of high consumption and business turnover. This is a successful model of capturing natural areas for furthering market interest. Shopping malls, restaurants, cinema halls, aquariums etc. dominate the waterfronts, including building into the waters by landfilling. A few promenades are provided for leisure and walks in the backyards of these enormous building structures. The waterfronts are not realized from within the buildings that are contained spaces for transactions.

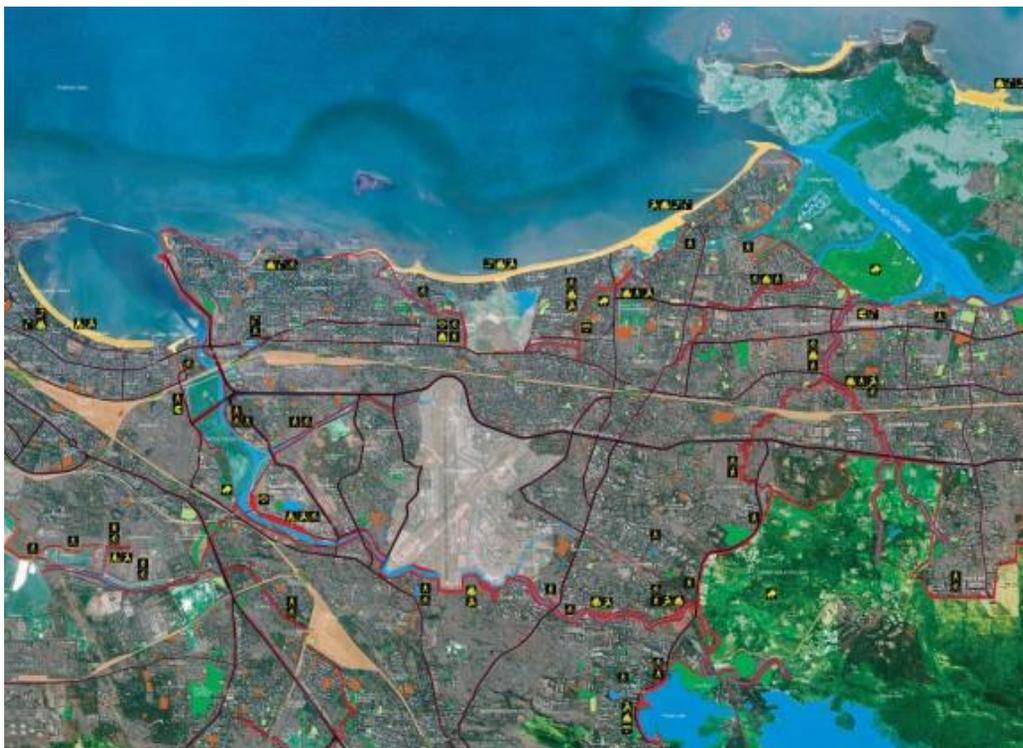
Real estate development as engines of capital reproduction and financial turnover has dominated city waterfronts across the world. As a result, vast stretches of vantage waterfronts have been developed as high cost private enclaves leaving out smaller less attractive parts for public access, as concessional spaces. Along with such developments, natural coastal conditions have been substantially destroyed, thus severing the ecological life cycles, including production and reproduction of flora, fauna and other aquatic life that thrive along these edges. That these natural conditions too stand as effective barriers against the vagaries of winds and floods were ignored in such instances. To conserve natural assets and protect the coastal edges is challenging as we squabble to capture them in the present urban development endeavors that are ridden with a build-more syndrome.

It is therefore important to not only rebuild *with* nature along coastal edges, but also develop streams of natural corridors across neighborhoods and cities in order to re-establish the symbiotic relationship between nature, people and habitation. These streams of corridors consisting of watercourses, forests of trees, wetlands, mudflats and others would inevitably be rich sites of intense participation and social engagement, thus nurturing and enriching community life and networks. Waterfronts cannot be sustained as isolated or segregated edges from rest of the city. They have to be considered as a thread of a larger ecological structure interwoven with other natural conditions, along with addressing various human needs in the city.

Waterfronts must also be realized and developed as a part of public open spaces plans and firmly placed in public realm. Active engagement of public on the waterfronts will ensure public vigilance and its protection from abuse and misuse. This will not only ensure the democratization of the waterfronts and public spaces, but also lead to the achievement of a sustainable and resilient ecology of cities. Waterfronts development is an opportunity and means for achieving these objectives.



Streams of corridors consisting of watercourses, forests of trees, wetlands, mudflats and others would inevitably be rich sites of intense participation and social engagement, thus nurturing and enriching community life and networks. Waterfronts cannot be sustained as isolated or segregated edges from rest of the city. Credit: Master Plan prepared by P K Das & Associates for the town of Pimpri Chinchwad in Maharashtra, India



Waterfront networking in Mumbai. Waterfronts cannot be sustained as isolated or segregated edges from rest of the city. Credit: extract from Open Mumbai Plan prepared by P K Das & Associates for the city of Mumbai.