

**DEMOCRACY, ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE**  
**Talk at the Mumbai Festival, University Convocation Hall.**

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February 2009

2,3,4,5	<p>The <b>central objective</b> of my talk is to suggest and submit that planning and architecture are an effective democratic tool of social change and an instrument for mobilizing social movements for equality and justice. I believe that a city can truly be developed through larger public participation and the engagement of people's organization in the development process. Democracy and democratic movements are the means to achieve this objective. Thus Planning and Architecture must integrate with it for enabling social changes and for achieving development justice.</p> <p>I will use the case of the waterfronts movement in Mumbai, where I live and work to explain how democratic planning and architecture from amongst many other significant movements, have contributed substantially to social changes. The waterfronts project is an important example in the understanding of our cities' development models, particularly in the context of neo-liberal globalization. The waterfronts movement and the project is a protest against the abuse, neglect and misuse of public spaces and the waterfronts in particular. But before we get on with the project a brief history of Mumbai and its demographic profile will help us understand the above issues comprehensively.</p> <p><b><u>Mumbai:</u></b></p> <p>For me, Mumbai's distinction and strength lies in the organizations and movements of its people and their participation at many levels for their rights. Historically, the city has witnessed significant struggles and in fact was perceived as a zone of liberation, particularly by the working class. The working class constituted a significant section of the city's population due to the construction of the port and the cotton textile mills that formed the backbone of Mumbai's economy and growth.</p> <p><b>A few significant Movements being:</b></p>
6	➤ <b>Ambedkar's Dalit Movement</b> started in the early 19 <sup>th</sup> century at a national level where the basic structures of the Indian caste and social system were challenged.
7	➤ <b>Mahatma Gandhi</b> launched the <b>Quit India Movement</b> against the British rule in the city in 1942.
8	➤ <b>Workers Union and Rights Movement</b> gained great significance post independence; communist party, led by Dange started the first unions in

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Mumbai.

- **Slum Dwellers' Housing Rights Movements** started in early 1990s, which aimed to rehabilitate slum population and promote housing for the city's working class. Nivara Hakk Sangharsh Samiti, a broad coalition of several city-based organizations was formed in the 1990s to challenge the mid-night eviction of slum dwellers to remove and throw them out of the city.
- **Citizen's Movements** is ongoing today and gaining popularity by the day. Distinctly diverse movements like the one for democratic rights for equality and justice and the other for exclusive democracy and control exist simultaneously.

I would like to explain the growing crises in our cities through the following two phenomenons.

### (1) EXPANDING CITY – SHRINKING PUBLIC SPACES

The tragedy is that while the city is expanding its public space is rapidly shrinking.

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There are several reasons for this shrinking democratic space. In the words of **Sunil Khilnani**, again from his book '**The Idea of India**,' 'what we have in this country is a façade of democracy that has disguised (masked) authoritarian governments since independence. How can democracy flourish in a society that is so deeply marked by profound inequalities in the distribution of incomes and wealth?'

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**Professor Saskia Sassen** also explains this crisis in another way and I quote, "The dynamics of city development today produces a political deficit. A politics of 'Rights to the City' is often the cry of the struggles challenging the main stream. But sadly these movements are often restricted to local issues; a particular building and its use, sanitation, water supply etc. There is a need to connect this to a larger democratic struggle for equality and social justice."

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Economic growth does not give the full picture, not even in the development context, because we need social equity and human development. It's quite clear that democracy is the best guarantor for the necessary checks and balances and conflict management that come with social disparities.

Also there is restricted space and opportunity for **public participation**. In spite of formal announcements for participation, public involvement only has a reactionary approach. The nature of projects and development plans are relevant to the needs and aspirations of the selected few and public good is secondary.

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**Access to information** is also limited in spite of the ‘Right to Information Act.’ On most occasions it has been seen that the selected information given to the masses is of little or no use. But RTI is celebrated as a victory by rights organizations.

Due to limited access to information and restricted participation in decisions there is **lack of public dialogue**. The public sphere itself is being downsized.

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Government’s method of **privatization of developments** and corporatization is leading to the depletion of public assets and the pauperization of the state. The government is backing out of its responsibility to directly develop social welfare projects and intends to facilitate private agencies to boost development. Their central idea of globalization is privatization.

In the words of **S.I. Kahn**, “privatization is both its method and its purpose. **People who profit from a policy set the policy. It’s like the fox is guarding the hen’s house,**” There is legitimization of depletion, colonization and violence by the government itself through new laws and development policies.

Democracy in India has several flaws and is perhaps restricted to select elite. This **exclusive democracy** caters to the upper class interests, asserting parallel power and control. Its growing nexus with the corporations wield arbitrary power. Also many citizen movements that exist today are under the guise of public interest are highly exclusive.

The idea of ‘citizens’ and ‘citizenship’ is also not clear. The ruling elite file Public Interest Litigations to restrict citizenship rights to the poor and the working class. This **exclusive citizenship** curbs the fundamental rights of the poor and the working class. There are many moves to denounce slum-dwellers as rightful citizens.

**Inequality** too is growing on many fronts; gender, age, child abuse, caste, religion and so on leading to sharp social divisions and polarization of exclusive interests. Communal wars like the 1993 Mumbai riots and fundamentalism has torn the social fabric of the city and polarized communities.

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**Violence** is perpetuated both by the government through new laws and by the might of the private developers, undertaking new responsibility for developing the city. Tagore notably quoted, “Unity cannot be brought about by enacting a law that all shall be one.”

The government in India is thus actively **undermining democracy**. The

relationship between people and government is severed due to the above reasons. Rights are negotiated and concessions sought, like a financial transaction deal.

**(2) EXCLUSIVITY AND THE STATE OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT.  
(DEPLETION OF PUBLIC ASSETS)**

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**Euphoria about free market led development and high business turnovers**

Mumbai has been undoubtedly expanding in size, population, business turnovers and so on. There is a euphoria and excitement amongst the upper and middle classes about the new market. They have glossy super-markets and malls to buy goods from world over, multiplexes, international schools, mega hospitals and exclusive high-rise housing and gated colonies. The state government too is putting in all effort; by way of policies and other facilitation measures, to wipe the city clean of the past baggage of liability the elite considers: industries, manufacturing centers, workers settlements, heritage buildings etc. Change in land-use policy is a major engagement to promote the development of malls, multiplexes and exclusive commercial spaces including gated townships, leading to a complete anarchy of the city's planning and development.

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**Indomitable Real Estate**

**The real-estate business in most Indian cities and particularly in Mumbai is booming. Although, the present global meltdown has halted it, Mumbai still has a turnover, profit and property values amongst the highest in the world. Boom in the construction industry, real estate sector was pegged at \$16 billion in 2006-07 and is likely to reach \$60 billion by 2010, as published in a recent TOI article by Neelam Raj. This industry is growing at the rate of 30% according to Earnest & Young. Mumbai is undergoing massive expansion and significant transformation; as a result India's growth averaged 9% continuously for the past 4 to 5 years, with contributions from trade, transport, finance and communications as well.**

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Tragically, we equate **development in terms of Real Estate turnover and the volumes of cement and concrete use.** Therefore as the city is proudly being 'built,' its public space is swiftly being infringed.

**Exclusive developments** - promote the concept of gated communities and leave the city underdeveloped.

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The **retail sector** too is corporatised with the endorsement of **mega malls** and recreational clubs for the elite. The **health department** is encouraging

30	<p>huge hospitals with luxurious facilities at high prices and even the <b>education sector</b> is bringing in new international academic institutes, meant primarily for the rich.</p> <p>The approval of <b>new townships</b> and precincts developments too is leading to displacements due to mega projects concepts. <b>Redevelopment is given a go</b> and core areas of the city are therefore neglected, aggravating the dilapidation of buildings and leading to faster deterioration of quality of life in vast areas of the city.</p>
31	<p>There is <b>depletion of public assets for private and exclusive interests</b> and appropriation is at the cost of public good.</p> <p><b>Self-reliance a free market bluff-</b> Private developers use the term dependence to characterize people's relation to government. In particular, they call people "<b>dependent on the state</b>". 'But by 'independence' they mean having no rights to public goods and services and no governmental programs. Private developers praise self-reliance and consider it opposite to dependency. "In the language of privatization, we do not need and should not want government, laws or rights to establish and protect our freedom. And by free market they mean capitalism with no constraints. The 'welfare state' is scorned as too powerful as centralized government turns citizens into its dependents. <b>Thus private developers equate democracy with unregulated capitalism and equate freedom with corporate license,</b>" S.I.Kahn.</p>
32 33 34	<p><b>Open Space Abuse</b> - The dignity of public life is reflected in the condition of a city's open-spaces. Sadly in Mumbai public spaces have been long neglected and abused. Lack of vision and planning coupled with regular depletion of open-spaces, including those reserved in the D.P. for playgrounds, parks, gardens etc., is leading to a miserable socio-environmental condition. Developments in Mumbai are realized merely in terms of volume of construction and consumption of concrete to the extent of destruction of natural environments. Land filling in the sea, construction on mud flats and the destruction of mangroves have been a historical phenomenon in the expansion of this city.</p> <p>In fact the very geneses of Mumbai's land mass and geography is significantly marked by land filling, commonly bluffed as 'reclamation'. The history of seven islands to a metro is largely about land filling, destruction of natural environment and real estate turnover.</p>
35	<p>Open-spaces obviously do not provide the turnover that our developers get from the construction and sale of buildings. Therefore open-spaces have been historically encroached, taken-over and abused both physically &amp; metamorphically.</p>

For an illustration of both the phenomenons, I put forward the project and the movement for reclaiming public spaces.

**The Bandra Waterfronts (Environmental & Social Outcomes):**

- The project had no grandiose ideas in terms of major constructions allowed on these waterfronts.
- They remain unbarricaded, open & clear forever.
- “We believe that Democracy thrives in the open public spaces where body and mind can be exercised,” as observed by professor Zilla Einstein, Ithaca college.

What excites me most is that the project stood to challenge:

- The destruction of mangroves
- Land filling and dumping
- Pollution of the coast and the waters
- Encroachments and colonization of space
- buse, misuse & degradation
- Apathy & indifference – both of govt. & people
- Violent youth & public behaviour
- Discrimination in use and access to the waterfronts

With effective public action and neighbourhood residents determination, the Bandra Waterfronts remains under collective control and are safe and well maintained. A new tripartite governance model has also been established.

Now the locals of the area commemorate this victory with festivals like the Bandra Festival.

**Key Lessons:**

- The waterfronts have to be understood as a part of the open space network and the open spaces must be integrated to the larger development plan of cities.
- Our idea is to redraw the maps of our city’s redevelopment with public spaces being the basis and the heart of planning.
- We need to expand and re-imagine the public realm by improving quality of life and by not how much more we can build.
- I believe in Planning and Design being an effective democratic tool for mobilizing public action and for bringing about needed social change for equality and participation.
- Public space should be considered as a metaphor for Democracy.
- The Movement continues in other parts of the city. **ex. Dadar-Prabhadevi beach nourishment plan, the development of**

## Chimbai waterfronts and now Vision Juhu.

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### Waterfronts to Neighbourhood- A Way Ahead

We now want to **see the city upside down**. Presently, cities are often conceived as an opportunity to build more-increase real estate turnover promoting only **property led development**. The marginal spaces left over; due to bad planning are designated as public spaces, which are further, manipulated for more construction. Instead, we want to **Re-Vision our city with open, public spaces as the prime focus and reposition the concept of creating more open spaces into the heart of planning in Mumbai.**

Hence the following Juhu example is a significant step. From the waterfronts' project, we have learnt that **networking public spaces means networking of the social and cultural life of the city in which all the people have equal access. Thus again democratizing public spaces is our political objective.**

To set a precedent for Mumbai, we have now initiated 'Vision Juhu' as a pilot project. By involving members of every stratum of society, government organizations and experts, we aim to resolve issues pertaining to the neighbourhood of Juhu.

There is a need for comprehensive planning with the thrust being public spaces. We need to integrate open spaces for leisure, relaxation and recreation.

We need to include and improve several amenities like education, health, markets, roadside stalls and hawkers, thus expanding our notion of public realm. This expansion of public realm will help enrich quality of life and environmental conditions- both natural and built.

In physical planning terms, 'Vision Juhu' aims to develop a contiguous open spaces plan through networking various aspects of the public realm. This would develop a green spine throughout our city and its various localities, nourishing community life, neighbourhood engagements and participation.

'Vision Juhu' has been prepared keeping the larger issues of Mumbai in mind. **'Juhugiri, pyar se' implying 'Juhu's coerce, with love,' has the following agenda:**

- Double open space: almost equal to three Oval maidans
- Create 10 km tree-lined, flood-free walkway along Irla Nala
- Inter-connect open spaces with institutions and amenities
- Realign and integrate Metro rail network with public spaces
- Protect beach, improve access and enhance facilities



- Provide civic amenities for goathans, redevelop slums
- Form a model for neighbourhood planning, participation and governance.

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, detachment and self-sufficiency promoted by market.

By achieving high levels of participation, we wish to devise comprehensive plans and vote out disparate developments.

This is a significant way to rebuild Mumbai as a humane and environmentally sustainable city, thus clearly enhancing the quality and dignity of public life.

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### **In Conclusion**

There is a **need to integrate planning and architecture**, with larger democratic movements and to use it as an instrument to mobilize communities for political action to bring about development justice.

As Amartya Sen and Dreze believe 'Public action can play a central role in economic development and in bringing social opportunities within the reach of the people as a whole. What the government ends up doing can be deeply influenced by the pressures that are put on the government by the public.' (Sen and Dreze, 1998: 38 and 39) Planners and architects can help mobilize public action.

Co-relating design with larger and more important determining factors of social and political importance enriches the architect's role and position in society to a much greater pedestal and engages the architect as an activist.

Thus I believe that by the method of inclusiveness and totality, Mumbai can be Re-Visioned for its people and become a prominent symbol of the contemporary, democratic India. Close relationship with the needs and aspirations of the masses need to be developed and effectively be reflected through social democratic movements.

**Integration of democracy, architecture and social change is our new challenge** and the movement for reclaiming public spaces including the waterfronts developments is one of the means for achieving this objective.