

TALK TO COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY AND BEZALEL ACADEMY
URBAN DESIGN STUDENTS
30TH JUNE, 2021



PKDAS-

Key points –

1. Sustainable ecology achievement including on understanding of Ecology
2. Demonstrating change through participatory planning & Design Interventions
3. Re-envisioning Cities & their Democratization



Samarth & I are deeply concerned about the state of relationship between people and collectivity with nature. For us, Ecology includes People & Nature. The two are inextricably entwined and neither are exclusive. Recognition of this relationship is critical for our understanding of the current state of ecology and its future. Any attempt to separate one from the other is to undermine our struggle for the achievement of sustainable ecology.



Sadly, this relationship has been severed. Governments and the various development agencies have continued to attack nature and systematically destroy the natural habitats and the natural conditions that sustain our lives. The rampant destruction of natural conditions has led to frequent experiences of climate catastrophe that is threatening our health, indeed our very survival.

Also, Government's response to people is no different. Polarisation of people on-the-basis of class, caste, religion, faith, gender etc. continues to be re-enforced. Today, as people we stand sharply divided. A state of alienation and violence defines our way of life. Also, more and more people are being denied access to resources and their rights.

What we are deeply concerned about, is the constant division of our cities into disparate fragments; both in social and spatial terms, therefore, struggles for their unification is an important objective.

It is with this objective that we consider building relationships between people and collectively with nature, as an important mission. This is the essence of our talk: focused on an understanding of these relationships and networks of interactions, particularly those that develop in the process of

collective interventions by citizens on demands pertaining to social and environmental justice and how they contribute to the larger interest of sustainability of cities.

Sustainable ecology is possible when we can successfully combine environmental and socio-economic dimensions equally in the plans and actions that we pursue. As a matter of fact, it is the extent of their integration and inclusion that form a criterion by which we evaluate the value of our work and engagements.



If there is one thing I must state as being the most important learning from my living and working in Mumbai, it is the need for collective intervention in the current trend of exclusionary urban development with an objective of achieving social and environmental equity and justice for all.

As the various conflicts begin to dominate the city landscape, we are compelled to intervene, particularly in the excluded, discriminated and much abused backyards of people & places that are, in most instances, situated in the borders, edges, peripheries and margins.

Also, as a necessary condition, each individual intervention would have to be linked to other democratic rights struggles, thereby building networks of interventions towards evolving an alternate vision of the city.



An example, it is the over 300km nullahs and their immediate precincts in Mumbai to which we have turned our back. Neither have the vast extent of the 150sqkm of the natural areas been given due recognition or considered in the planning and development programs of the city.

In Mumbai, as in many other parts of the world, we have continued to treat the incredible coastline, waterfronts, watercourses, and water bodies as the dumping grounds, both physically and metaphorically. Indiscriminate land filling and destruction of the natural areas that include the creeks, rivers, wetlands, mangroves, forests, hills, etc. continue to be abused and landfilled for individual and short-term gains, including by the various governments.

For an understanding of collective interventions and ecological scrutiny, we will get on to discussing one significant citizens' struggle-- **the Irla Nullah Movement, as an example**. While this example is specific to a Mumbai neighborhood, the issues it raises will, hopefully, resonate in the experiences that you have in your respective places of familiarity. The overarching ideas and principles would hopefully be the same, thus invoking a dialogue and solidarity amongst us.

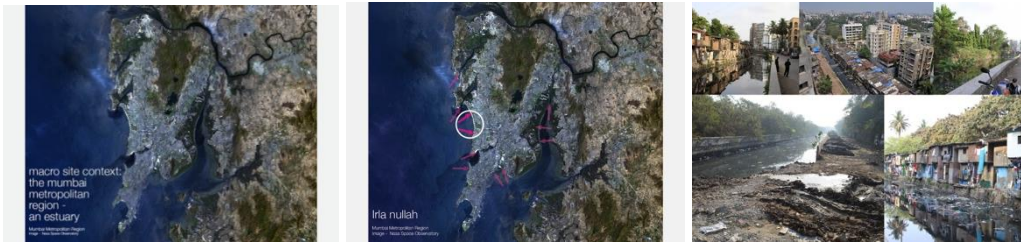
But, before we get on to the Irla example, we would like to present 'A Network of Movements-- 22 years and continuing', that provide a historical perspective to the Irla movement and its position in the larger context of the city. This example also illustrates its replicability and scalability potential.

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SAMARTH DAS-

In the year 2013 the citizens of Juhu, a neighborhood in the western suburbs of Mumbai, launched the Irla Nullah movement for the conservation, re-invigoration, and re-integration of a 7.5km “nullah”. Most of the over 300km of nullahs in Mumbai, that includes the Irla nullah, were originally natural watercourses, or rivers connected to the sea and thereby the tides. These watercourses regulated ground water level and assisted in dispersing flood water from the land in case of intense rain.

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Unfortunately, over the years they have been abused -- becoming waste and sewage drains, which take the effluents out into the sea. Sadly, the city government has channelized them by building impervious concrete walls along their edges, thus further severing their ecological and environmental attributes, and separating them from the people.



At the time when the Irla nullah re-invigoration movement was launched, the Municipal authorities wondered why this was important. Also, the people living in Mumbai, generally associate nullahs with dirt, filth, and odour. Over the years there is little public knowledge of them being rivers and natural watercourses that defined the landscape. Battling such impediments, the movement continued: comprehensive plans and implementation programmes were created through active citizen participation.



Our belief is that planning should most definitely be from the bottom up. The vision juhu plan was conceived with the hope of connecting natural

assets with institutions as well as residential areas in order to rich network of open spaces that facilitated pedestrian movement through neighbourhoods.

Meetings were held in public places with posters – Juhugiri Pyar Se (taken from a colloquial slang ‘dada –giri’ which means ‘by coercive force’. Here it is re-interpreted as the collective power of the people of Juhu. *Pyar Se – means “with Love”) and a ‘*Vision Juhu*’ book publication, communicating the project.



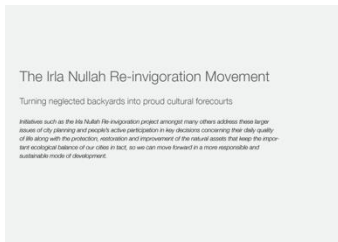
The city officials could no longer ignore the gathered momentum: the city Municipal Commissioner finally approved the project 11 months later. Today, people, in large numbers, flock the redeveloped areas along the nullah.

The Irla Nullah Re-invigoration Plan -- advocating the Juhu Vision Plan that covers an area of 4 sq. km, focuses on cleaning and turning the waters of a polluted and much-abused natural watercourse and its immediate precinct into a vibrant public space and a neighbourhood fore-court generating rich social, political, and environmental dividends.



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Importantly, through the Irla Nullah movement, we could generate an active and pulsating system of public spaces, including the nullah that would form the spine of Juhu.



Such movements are not to be seen merely as a beautification programme; but as part of a larger democratic struggle for reclaiming public space, and to create spaces where people meet, share experiences, and begin to care about each other and garner social relationships collectively between them and nature. It is such relationships that cannot be separated from one another and considered exclusive. “Rather, together they, form the urban ecosystem. The two together are inextricably both human and biophysical” Pickett, Cadenasso and McGrath.

It is in this context we consider our struggles to pursue the idea of unification of cities through architectural and design endeavors as being important, while engaging closely with social and environmental movements. Our priority must be to establish close relationship between architecture and people, placing strong emphasis on participatory planning from the very beginning and at every stage.

With the nullah and the public spaces being the main planning criteria, we hope to bring about, over period-of-time, social change: promoting collective culture and rooting out alienation and false sense of individual gratification, promoted by the “market”. Unjust social systems are inherently unsustainable. The linear parks created along the nullahs will create more liveable neighbourhoods for more people, in an equitable way. This equitable expression of nature-based solutions is sustainable.

The Irla project is a demonstration of the importance of neighbourhood-based planning and designs for the preparation of the city’s development plans and projects. Such an approach facilitates local people’s active participation in matters concerning their area, which they know the best, while influencing the city’s planning and development decisions.

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Evolving a Plan for Transformative, City-Wide Change: The Open Mumbai Plan



In 2012 we held an exhibition titled ‘Open Mumbai – Re-envisioning the city’s open spaces’. The thought for the plan started when we did the first ever mapping of open spaces and natural assets of Mumbai. The Open Mumbai plan looks at networking open spaces and natural assets to argue that these should be the basis for city planning as opposed to simply looking at real estate profits and land exploitation.

This exhibition was extremely successful in the sense that the mapping of natural assets that was done led to the inclusion of these neglected spaces into the current DP – with their respective buffer zones also being marked in the plan.

The plan proposes a city-wide network of connected public spaces that include the natural areas and the different bio-systems. This is the overarching vision—to re-envision the city that has manifested itself in a tangible pilot effort – the Irla Nullah Re-invigoration Project.

Another objective of such movements ought to be the conservation of the vital natural assets and their integration with neighbourhoods and the city, expanding public spaces-- both in physical and democratic terms, expanding tree cover, popularising and de-mystifying the planning process for effective participation, and promoting the idea of neighbourhood-based city planning.



The Irla Nullah Re-invigoration project and the other waterfronts and public spaces projects models a paradigm shift in understanding Mumbai's ecology and build in a sustainable manner with nature and its benefits, to improve with equity the quality of life of all Mumbaikars.

SAMARTH DAS-



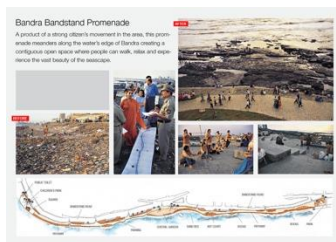
Integration of the natural areas and the unification of people and nature is of utmost priority.

We have to work towards turning the abused backyards of people and the natural habitats into our proud forecourts.

Neighborhood Based City Planning:

Through a neighbourhood-based development approach it is possible to decentralize and localize projects: thus, breaking away from monolithic planning and design ideas that are disconnected from most people (and often serve the interests of the few, not the many). 'Master Plans' for cities are generally top-down models, drafted by elite groups of designers, and fail to engage with citizens on their ideas.

With localised projects, the planning of cities will hopefully become a bottom-up process with participation of all people. Importantly, neighbourhood-scale work is a more collaborative approach to the city and place-making. For citizens, such projects allow the immediate reclamation, redesign, and re-programming of public spaces within their localities.



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(Slides 41-49)

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1.

Urban Planning & Design: A Right
Planning and Architecture are effective democratic tools of Social Change

For us, it is urban planning and design that provides incredible power for the achievement of the objective of unification of people and nature. It is for this reason we have been arguing that participation in urban planning and design need to be considered a right, and that, popularisation and democratisation of the same is, indeed, important.

Planning and architecture are an effective democratic tool of social change and instrument for mobilizing collective movements. Cities are not spaces for competition: nor for individual and disparate efforts. To us they are a fantastic opportunity for forging collective and co-operative effort. Larger public participation and engagement of people's organizations in the development process truly helps develop a city: and planning and architecture should integrate with it for enabling social changes and achieving development justice.

2.

Demonstrating Change
Through participatory endeavours and exchanges across all groups

3.

Scale Up !
To influence City-wide transformative change

PKDAS- Conclusion

It is necessary to Re-envision cities in-order to elevate the quality of life and environment that we are subject to. Networking of people and places that includes the natural areas, is an effective democratic means for the achievement of this objective.

For long, our discourses on cities have relied on the understanding of social relationships and how the modes of production have influenced their formation. To support this statement, I would like to refer to David Harvey when he quotes from Karl Marx in his book - Social Justice and the City. "The totality of these relationship of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life, conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life.

"In terms of Marxist terminology, the urban and the process of urbanization are simple superstructures of the mode of production (capitalist or socialist)".

Further, in the same book, Harvey has analysed social relations, built form and environment; and how each influences the other, but his reference to environment is restricted to built- environment and does not include the natural ecosystems. I quote— "Urbanism may be regarded as a particular form or patterning of the social process. This process unfolds in a spatially structured environment created by man. The city can, therefore, be regarded as a tangible, built-environment- an environment which is a social product."

Interestingly on the other hand, Pickett, Cadenasso and McGrath in their book – 'Resilience in Ecology and Urban Design', quoting McGranahan and Satterthwaite present a wider understanding of the environment. I quote — "a great deal of the urban sustainability literature tends to promote the so-called "brown agenda" of environmentalism, which emphasizes the need to solve immediate needs of the billions of people who live in degraded, unsanitary conditions and grueling poverty, while the "green agenda" emphasizes protection and enhancement of ecosystems to support future generations and other species. Reconciling green with brown agenda issues, however, is at the heart of more encompassing

viewpoints on sustainability, recognizing that poverty and environment conservation are inextricably entwined (McGranahan and Satterthwaite 2002)”

Newspaper slides

Through initiatives like the Irla Nullah Project and reclaiming the waterfronts and public spaces projects, we aim to bring these natural assets to the forefront to protect them. Facilitating the right of way for these streams to function efficiently, including ensuring space for their swell, will allow citizens to understand the role they play in the larger ecological scheme of the city. These nature-based solutions in the form of a restored ecosystems are inherently sustainable, much than the grey solutions currently in place.

The struggle for unification of the broken pieces of urban ecology is a political battle that must be pursued through democratic rights struggles.

Newspaper slides

“Public action can play a central role in economic development and in bringing social opportunities within the reach of the people. What the government ends up doing can be deeply influenced by the pressures that are put on the government by the public” (Sen and Drez, 1989:38)

To quote Henry Lefebvre, his book *The Urban Revolution* “separation and segregation break the relationship between people and nature. They constitute a totalitarian order, whose strategic goal is to break down concrete totality, to break the urban. Segregation complicates and destroys complexity—a necessary sustainability criteria.”

At a political level, our struggles are against the rapidly expanding phenomenon of segregation exclusivity and discrimination, against the abuse, misuse & colonization of public resources and exclusionary city planning. Our fight is for networking and integration, for equality, environmental justice, and democratization of the ecology, instead of cities.

Thank you all.

P.K. Das & Samarth

