

Talk at the India At 100 – Festival of Urbanity
Indian Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi
April 11th – 12th, 2011

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RE-VISIONING CITIES:

RECLAIMING MUMBAI'S PUBLIC SPACES & THE WATERFRONTS

A15 mins. Presentation

Introduction:

The Central idea of my presentation is to discuss the democratization of city planning. This can be achieved through several simultaneous means. Planning for expansion of public open spaces is one of the means that I intend to pursue. This is particularly significant as public spaces are shrinking with the expansion of our cities. Thus, movement for reclaiming open spaces in our cities can be an effective instrument for democratization of city planning. Many organizations and individuals in Mumbai have come together under the banner of Mumbai Nagrik Vikas Manch to prepare a 'People's Plan' in-order to influence the city's development plan that will shortly undergo revision. Mumbai's waterfronts development and the movement for reclaiming open spaces has been a significant step towards this objective.

Public open spaces should form the basis of city planning. Public spaces reflect the quality of life and public dignity or, the dignity of public life in any city is reflected in the quality of open spaces. I therefore propose that ideas of open spaces and their integration should form the heart of the planning concept of cities. This can be achieved through specific area projects, such as the waterfronts development in several areas in Mumbai, comprehensive neighborhood planning as a way forward for city planning as in the case of 'Vision Juhu Plan' and re-visioning cities on the basis of the expansion of public open spaces, as in the case of the 'People's Plan' for Mumbai.

I have actively participated in the movements at all the three levels. In some instances I have proposed the initial plans and development ideas but have always helped the movements in translating their demands to specific plans. I believe that Planning must be included in the agenda of social and political movements. Also, we must accept planning as an effective democratic tool of social change and an instrument for mobilizing social movements for equality and development justice.

Now let me start from the bottom, the example of Mumbai's waterfronts development along the western coastline in Bandra. Bandstand, Carter Road, Land's end, Chimbai fishing village, Juhu Beach and Dadar Prabhadevi beaches are some of the seafronts that have experienced manifold change thus, influencing the life of people in the area and the city at large.

A. RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACES - MUMBAI'S SEAFRONTS DEVELOPMENT

1. In 2000-2003 a popular citizen's movement led to a major transformation of nearly 3 kms of Mumbai's western waterfronts.
2. Both the movement and the project are a protest against the abuse, neglect and misuse of public spaces and the waterfronts in particular.
3. Demonstrating ways by which we can expand public spaces through democratic planning and collective governance.
4. An example how democratic planning and architecture have contributed substantially to social change.
5. The waterfronts project is an important example in the understanding of our cities' development models.

The Beginning:

1. The waterfronts project has been a bottom-up process.
2. Plans for the 40 kms of the Western Waterfronts prepared voluntarily by me
3. Was widely discussed, popularized and accepted by different neighborhood residents.
4. The residents filed several Public Interest Litigations in favor of the plan.
5. Subsequently the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai & the Govt. accorded recognition.
6. Bandra Waterfront's successful implementation popularized the need for protecting the waterfronts of the city and generated a movement for reclaiming public spaces.

Key Aspects of the movement:

1. As the city is expanding its public spaces are continuously shrinking.
2. A city on the water, but the waterfronts have never been considered an integral part of the city's land mass.
3. Our objective is to prepare a comprehensive plan for the city's waterfronts.
4. Protection of the environment and conservation of the eco-sensitive borders of the city.
5. The waterfronts project is a precedent for democratic planning and collective action.
6. Through succinct struggle and collective action, the waterfronts treated as a backyard and a dumping ground of the city, both physically and metamorphically, are turned into social and cultural forecourts.

Environmental & Social Outcomes:

1. The movement continues.
2. The project has no grandiose ideas in terms of major constructions.
3. They remain unbarricaded, open & clear forever.
4. We believe that Democracy thrives in the open public spaces where body and mind can be exercised.
5. Open-spaces is a metaphor for democracy

B. 'THE NEIGHBOURHOOD WAY' FORWARD - The 'Juhu Vision' Plan.

Let me present yet another significant movement in Mumbai by which an entire neighborhood planning through collective initiative and citizen's participation has been possible. The "Vision Juhu" plan reinforces the idea of expanding public spaces through comprehensive democratic planning; thus providing directions for evolving a vision plan for the entire city.

Highlights of this movement and the plan are summarized as follows:

1. The understanding of “Planning together” as a popular democratic function.
2. Integration of planning with other democratic rights movements.
3. Evolving models for effective public participation & dialogue amongst all the people.
4. Relate planning with daily life experiences and problems in order to influence social changes and promote human development.
5. Campaign to popularize planning – leaflets, exhibitions, talks, conferences, meetings.
6. Using Plans as instruments for the mobilization of collective movements.
7. Include planning in the agenda of social, political and environmental movements including in election manifestoes & campaigns.
8. Evolving new urban planning practices

Hence the 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. From the waterfronts we move forward to neighborhoods and now to the entire city with an objective of preparing a “People’s Plan’ for Mumbai.

C. RE-VISIONING OPEN CITIES – A ‘People’s Plan’ for Mumbai:

Finally, a comprehensive public open spaces plan is being prepared with specific ideas for the protection and expansion of open spaces. The integration of this plan with the larger development plan of the city is necessary too. Rather the preparation of the city’s development plan on the basis of the open spaces plan may be a way forward towards the achievement of a ‘People’s Plan’ for the city. Open spaces plan ought to be the basis for the preparation of the city’s development plan.

Firstly, we have carried out a detailed survey and mapping of open spaces of Mumbai. Open spaces include not only the reserved open spaces in the form of PG, RG, P & G. but, also the vast range of natural assets such as the wetlands, creeks, rivers, lakes etc. This is the first time that such a comprehensive mapping of the city’s open spaces has been carried out and is being published.

One simple way of achieving the expansion of open spaces is to develop a web of green connectors, in the form of avenues, pathways, gardens and cultural spaces, along major roads, creeks, water bodies, rivers, open spaces, mud-flats and mangroves thus, networking the various open spaces. These networks will also enable walking and cycling thus, challenging our increased dependency on motorized transportation, road congestion and pollution. An independent movement- ‘Mumbai on Two Feet’ is simultaneously launched to structurally integrate walking and cycling into the development plan of Mumbai.

Lastly but not the least, these connectors will provide an opportunity for developing rich environmental condition all over the city. This will include trees plantation, landscaping, conservation of water bodies-rivers, nalas and ponds. These new spaces will in turn influence developments around them offering ways for further networking of buildings and layouts. Gradually the city will experience a radical departure in urban planning and design towards the achievement of an integrated and cohesive city (not fragmented and disparate as in most instances) thus, providing better quality of life and environmental condition.

Integrated and comprehensive planning of public open spaces is therefore an effective means for Re-Visioning our cities as open and democratic. Such means provide opportunity for participation by all. Thus planning of our cities could become a popular movement in their respective cities, through various levels of engagement for the expansion of open spaces as presented here; specific area development plans, neighborhood plans and finally a Vision Plan for the entire city. Public action at all the three levels, separately and together, is necessary step towards the objective of Re-Visioning our cities.

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