

Key-note address
Urban Ecology Research Consortium Symposium (UERCS)
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Webinar

LET'S RECLAIM & DEMOCRATISE ECOLOGY

If there is one thing that I have to 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. 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. A vision that is rooted in the ideas of sustainable ecology.

At the core of this objective of interventions is the state of relationship between people and collectively their relationship with nature.

For me, Ecology includes People & Nature. The two are inextricably entwined and the recognition of this in relationship is critical for our understanding of the current state of our ecology and its future. Any attempt to separate one from the other is to undermine our struggles for the achievement of sustainable ecology.

Sadly, these relationships have been severed. Our governments and the various development agencies have continued to attack nature and systematically destroy the natural habitats, that sustain our lives. The rampant destruction of nature is leading to frequent occurrences of climate catastrophe that is threatening our health, indeed our very survival.

On the other hand, Governments response to people is no different. Polarisation of people on the basis of caste, religion, faith, gender etc. is being actively re-enforced. Today, we stand sharply divided. An intense state of violence defines our way of life.

As these conflicts begin to dominate city landscapes, 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.

For me, I would like to view cities from social and environmental perspective. A sustainable ecology of cities is possible when we can successfully combine environmental and socio-economic dimensions equally in the plans and actions that we pursue.

Let's take a look at the CASE OF MUMBAI, A CITY ON THE WATER & RICH WITH THE VAST EXTENT OF DIVERSE NATURAL AREAS



In Mumbai, we have turned our backs to water and the incredible coastline of the city. We have continued to treat the waterfronts, watercourses and water bodies as the dumping ground of the city, both physically and metaphorically.



NATURAL AREAS MAP

149.67 km²
29.93%

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Lakes, Ponds, & Tanks | 7.06 km ² |
| Creeks, | 9.25 km ² |
| Rivers, & Nullahs | 340.7 kms |
| Hills, Forests | 53.60 km ² |
| Wetlands | 8.01 km ² |
| Mangroves | 61.42 km ² |
| Beaches | 1.44 km ² |

Neither have the vast extent of the 150 sqkm of the natural areas been considered in the planning and development programs.

WAY FORWARD:

1. INTEGRATION & UNIFICATION

BANDRA BANDSTAND PROMENADE

A product of a strong citizen's movement in the area, this promenade meanders along the western edge of Bandra creating a contiguous open space where people can walk, relax and experience the vast beauty of the seascape.

Project undertaken by Bandra Bandstand Residents' Trust in association with social activist and actor Shabana Azmi, and architect P.K.Das.

Funding: Shabana Azmi (MPLAD Fund)
Water front length: 1.2 km
Cost: Rs.140 lacs.
Period of construction: 2003-02.
Structures and restoration: Anap Sarbadikary

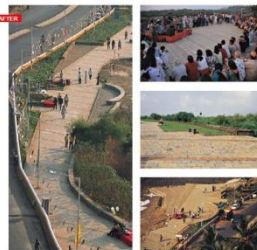


CARTER ROAD PROMENADE, BANDRA

This project too was part of the larger movement in the city to reclaim public spaces and to protect Mumbai's coastline. The development at the Carter Road waterfront represented the main- groves, which had been abused as a dumping ground, and their lush greenery has greatly added to the beauty of the waterfront. The mangroves formed the central point of interest at the Carter Road waterfront. Our development meanders around it. Patches of grass, planted adjacent to the main- groves, extend the lush green expanse.

Project undertaken by Bandra West Residents' Association with social activist and actor Shabana Azmi, and architect P.K.Das.

Funding: Shabana Azmi (MPLAD Fund)
Water front length: 1.2 km
Cost: Rs.150 lacs.
Period of construction: 2002-02.



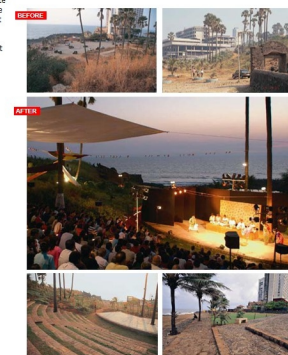
Integration of the natural areas and the unification of people and nature is of utmost priority.

LAND'S END AMPHITHEATRE, BANDRA

The project includes restoration of the hill slope and its contours, which had been dug up mindlessly by a hotel to create a garden that has no relevance to the immediate natural and historical environment. The project includes plans to conserve, restore and develop appropriately the existing ruins and to regenerate the palm forest that once stretched over its slopes.

Project undertaken by Bandra Bandstand Residents' Trust with social activist and actor Shabana Azmi, and architect P.K.Das.

Funding: Shabana Azmi (MPLAD Fund)
Area: 18,000 sq.ft.
Cost: Rs.90 lacs.
Period of construction: 2002-03



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

Juhugiri. Pyar se.

After more spaces and almost 3 Covid incidents, Citizen 10 km two-lane, flood-free walkway along Juhu rail line has been inaugurated. The project is a part of the Juhugiri Pyar se initiative. The project is a part of the Juhugiri Pyar se initiative. The project is a part of the Juhugiri Pyar se initiative.

**Wishin Juhu
Engaging public space**

Small, happy, vibrant, beautiful, and beautiful. It is a part of the Juhugiri Pyar se initiative. The project is a part of the Juhugiri Pyar se initiative. The project is a part of the Juhugiri Pyar se initiative.

The new project is a part of the Juhugiri Pyar se initiative. The project is a part of the Juhugiri Pyar se initiative. The project is a part of the Juhugiri Pyar se initiative.

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2. NEIGHBORHOOD BASED BOTTOM-UP PLANNING PROCESS :

Active participation of people in the decision-making process is fundamental. It is a bottom-up process instead of a top-down model that we are committed to.



Explain Participation – Clichéd

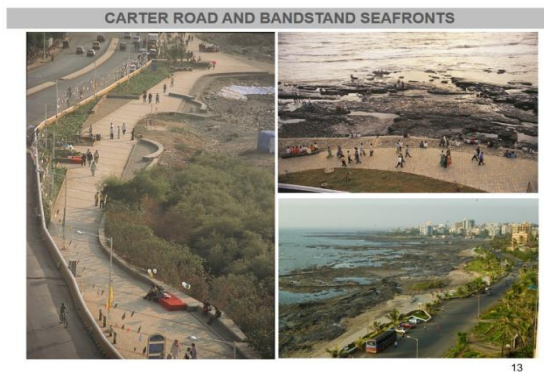
Important – participation of the excluded and marginalized. That's the challenge of ecology movements.

As a matter of fact, the undertaking of plans and projects that would bring about significant social and environmental change have to be led through people's movements. Therefore, I refer to these works as movements, not projects.



In order to effectively implement the bottom-up model and achieve maximum participation, it is prudent to undertake Neighborhood based city planning – for neighbourhood people know best about their area, otherwise alienated from the big top-down city vision plans that reflect a brutal colonial order.

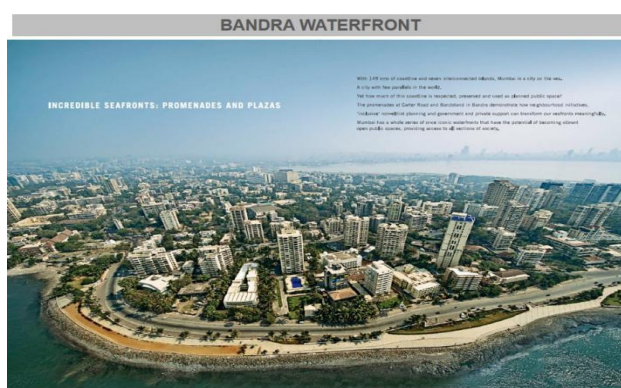




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Through a neighbourhood-based development approach it is possible to decentralize and localize projects: thus breaking away from monolithic planning and design ideas that are disconnected from most people (and often serve the interests of the few,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

For Example – Interventions such as these – in Bandra & Juhu would not have been considered nor perceived in the “Master Plan” of the city.



Popularisation of plans and works is important.

Today, hundreds flock these areas. Importantly, people relate to these spaces in their daily schedules.

3. URBAN PLANNING AND DESIGN – A RIGHT:

Planning and architecture are an effective democratic tool of social change and instrument for mobilizing collective movements. 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.

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

Unfortunately, movements concerning planning and design matters have not evolved adequately in order to influence change towards unification of the fragmented landscapes and the achievement of sustainable urban ecology.

4. A THRUST TOWARDS RE-ENVISIONING CITIES:



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 relationships 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.

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

Interestingly, 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)”

Such reconciliation is indeed, the essence of our sustainable ecology battle.

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 assets, is an effective democratic tool for the achievement of this objective.

What we require for the achievement of sustainable cities is a citizen-based and knowledge-driven movement for repairing and re-unifying the fragmented and dysfunctional urban landscapes. But under the prevailing trend of urbanization that is pursued by governments, with its thrust on privatization, the agents of change relentlessly devise ways of damaging and breaking down the landscape into disparate and often conflicting fragments to achieve business turnover and profit. My view is that our counter struggles to repair & unify the fragmented and dis-functional urban landscapes will succeed only when they are turned into significant political movements.

To Conclude:

Therefor I say, 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.

Thank You All

P.K. Das