RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACE
A Movement for the Development of Mumbai's Waterfronts

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Recent development of nearly 3 kms of the Seafront at Bandra Band-stand and Carter Road and the project for the redevelopment of 3 kms. of Juhu beach as a part of a larger plan for the restoration of the city's sea-front, has greatly affected the place and the people. Moreover it has led to a new relationship between the place and the people and between people themselves.

One of Bombay's greatest assets is its extraordinary coastline and its series of unique and picturesque waterfronts. Tragically, these waterfronts are also the city's biggest dumping ground – both literally and metaphorically.

The fact is that these thirty-four kilometres of the western coast have never been considered in the planning and development process as an integral part of the city's landmass. On the contrary, reclamation, sewage disposal and encroachment have constantly abused the waterfronts. The eastern coast has been put to restricted use for defense and docks and has been barred to public access.

Yet, for the millions who live in our crowded city, the waterfronts are the only major open spaces – whether it is Marine Drive or Chowpatty, Haji Ali or Worli Seaface, Dadar Beach or Bandra Bandstand, Carter Road, Juhu Beach, or Versova. The Waterfronts are Bombay's most significant and popular public spaces to which people from all sections of society flock, not only from the city and its suburbs but from elsewhere in India as well. They are places for leisure, realization and entertainment. Unfortunately, unplanned commercialization has largely destroyed the natural environment. The absence of a master plan for development of the waterfronts has encouraged the rich and the powerful to manipulate and grab land, thus gradually starving the city of its most vital public space.

Our objective is to restore and preserve the natural beauty of these waterfronts in a pragmatic and realistic manner, working within existing realities and solving key problems through simple, modest design solutions; thereby also creating momentum for positive change. There can be no grandiose ideas here. In fact, no major construction on these waterfronts should be allowed. Instead there must be firstly, a halt to the abuse of our waterfronts; secondly, a selective reallocation of spaces and activities; and thirdly, very minimal restructuring where necessary.   Most important, these waterfronts must remain the collective asset of the city and   all its citizens, and a vital, vibrant element in its environmental and social fabric.

It is interesting to find how people of all ages from different classes frequent   this place now and how their relationship and public sense have been greatly affected. The young who otherwise were spending time into late nights, drinking, smoking and loitering, often being violent between themselves and with others   have either left the place or have found a new ground to spend time and develop their relationship for better. There is virtually no rash driving and broken bottles of alcohol littering the sea front. Similarly women have found an opportunity to walk   in leisure to be to themselves, meet friends and be an active part of a public sphere. Children including toddlers crawl, run and play with their parents, which they don't get to do otherwise in an open public space in Mumbai. There are ofcourse the die-hard health conscious freaks that now find ample space and opportunity for jogging and workouts. This project and the ensuing movement has restored safety and respectability and dignity to all those who come here.

The redeveloped space has thus established a new meaning in the relationship of people and their attitude to public-space. What was for several years together   was the backyard with filth and violence is now transformed as a forecourt of   social and cultural activity. It is interesting to observe the radical change in the behavioral patterns as well as in the relationships due to this development. A new sense of pride and dignity is seen beaming on the faces of people, particularly the neighbourhood citizens. Personalization of this space and a sense of belonging by those who come here are the hallmark of this development.

What bothers us often in the city is the growth of apathy and detachment. People   in general seem to be growing apart from one-another, concerned less for the   other and apathetic to incidences that are anti-social and detrimental to common good. A deep sense of detachment from one-another and with the cities public-space is   worrying. Further, under the present trend of privatization of   development, spaces for public life are down sized and emptied of their interactive and deliberative purposes, people live in more isolating and privatized spaces.   This development programme is a challenge to this demeaning trend. The movement is an attempt to overcome the undesirable social trend and help in providing a place for the growth of better relationship and concern for the public-sphere.

These developments are not barricaded and are freely accessible to one and all. While this description may seem to be like of any other large unguarded public space, along these sea fronts there is constant vigilance by the respective neighbourhood communities. People in the immediate neighbourhoods have come together to form neighborhood Citizens Associations to maintain and manage   these places and guard it too.

They raise money through contributions for the repairs and for security.   Association members comb these areas to ensure high standards of maintenance. They meet regularly to discuss on all matters that affects this space and their neighbourhood. This is an important beginning in the movement of citizen's participation in decision-making and control over the development programmes   that affects their neighbourhoods. Learning to work together for public good and taking collective decisions is an important democratic process. It is for promoting   a motion of public without which it is hard to

imagine a "Democratic Democracy". This is an important lesson for the majority of the middle and upper classes who otherwise are used to taking decisions independently at their individual and personal level. Their sense of independence stems from their better economic position. This process is a small but important way that is affecting social behavior in public-space, challenging the hyper-individualization and isolation that is fast eroding social development. This movement along with other important citizen's activity in different parts of the city for similar issues has set a new direction in the city's governance.

These Citizen's Associations organize various cultural programmes too. Music, dance, art shows etc., are regularly held. An exclusive place in the form of galleries at the waters edge provides a dynamic ambience for such programmes at Bandstand and Carter Road too. People participate in large numbers and passers by join in too. There is no ticketing, nor any other restrictions for their participation.

The idea is to renew activities at the waters edge that bring people together. As a matter of fact the seafront at Bandra is popularly named as Bandstand. Once upon a time a band used to play music and people used to gather. It is this gathering or coming together that we want to renew. Many new relationships and many new ways of addressing and understanding public issues will emerge from such gatherings. We would like to watch the social and environmental dynamics that will unfold in this process. Thus the movement will be continuously enriched and strengthened.

This project and its implementation has led to new and meaningful relationship between the neighbourhood community and the local government. Otherwise an apathetic Municipal administration, uncaring about the city's public-space and the coastline in particular is now more responsive and supporting the citizen's movement. That these developments and the facilities are the basic rights of people is being increasingly realised. The Police too behave differently now. They too respond and co-operate with the local citizens. This collaborative effort has enabled the formation of a more meaningful and effective monitoring group to not only execute this project but to maintain discipline, confront dubious interests and challenge encroachments. With this development various anti-social elements and boot-leggers have left the place. Land grab illegal land-fill, illegal constructions, attempts to colonizing space against larger public interest has been checked. This movement is not merely a beautification programme but is a part of a larger democratic struggle for reclaiming public-space and the establishment of public-space rights, create space where people meet, share with others, and come to care about each other.

Development of the seafront at Bandra Bandstand, Carter Road and Juhu has provided an alternative to the majority of the middle and lower income groups who have very little opportunity otherwise for leisure and relaxation in this expensive city more and more facilities and space are being privatized, restricting their use to a few and the rich. Increasing colonization of space and development by the rich and the powerful under the guise of privatization is fast eroding the public sphere of its democratic values.

Sustainability of any public-space development project is yet another issue that is addressed in this project. It is demonstrated that the sustainability of any public-project is largely possible by larger public participation and effectively developing a larger social and political force for it. Equality, equal opportunity and accessibility for one and all ensure a stronger relationship and social commitment. This project is also encouraging more and more people to not only support the movement but also actively participate in it. Emerging social strengths from such movements pose difficulty for those who are constantly making efforts to destabilize popular relationships and undermine an important democratic function of bringing public-space to public control. Their intention is to grab public property and space for personal gain directly by promoting beautification schemes and financing them under the guise of social service. However, a few sponsors with honest intentions approach it differently. They develop the project in close partnership with the local neighbourhood associations. Those promoting directly are almost invariably in nexus with corrupt officials, thus covering-up and getting away by doing things contrary to the disclosed objective and to larger social interest.

Even though some of the privately sponsored schemes are beautiful and well executed, they lack larger public participation. While these spaces are developed for the public, they are never an integral part of the public sphere. Therefore such projects turn out to be managed exclusively on upper and middle class perception and desires, thus alienating the masses.

While people's participation is crucial to the sustainability of such projects, finance is important too. In this project we have successfully forged partnerships with private sector for their financial contribution for construction and subsequent maintenance, but with a difference. Appointment of the private sponsor is made directly by the Citizen's Association and not by the city administration. The Association approves the plans and activities of the sponsor and also regulates it too. Regular review meetings are held between the Association and the sponsor (s) to review the situation and to plan for its further development. Agreements are drawn between the private sponsor and the citizens trust. This is different from the normal procedure in which the private sponsor enters into a direct agreement with the local government. Invariably the sponsor then manipulates and undermines the sanction to their benefit while neglecting, even abusing public interest. They invariably get away in their dubious operations due to the lack of public participation and vigilance. The citizen's trusts have in turn entered into a legal agreement with the local administration for their rights and control of the development. This project is also a unique demonstration in the city of how the dignity and respectability of a public space reclaimed by a public movement and sustained by a collective effort of the citizens.

This project stands to protest against various forms of urban crime. It challenges the attempts for land grab by developers and other commercial interest; it opposes the growing nexus between anti-socials, politicians, police and officials that is increasingly eroding public interest. It stands against environmental pollution and ecological damage, while demonstrating simple ways by which natural conditions can be protected and

developed. This project is not meant to promote any grandeur plans for construction of buildings and entertainment malls. It is a humble attempt to protect the coastline, safeguarding the ecologically sensitive areas, protect mangroves, beds of rocks, sandy stretches etc., simultaneously developing space along it as an effective public forum for social and environmental justice.

Conservation and Urban renewal are other issues that are discussed too in this project. Conservation of not just public space but that of just social values is an important concern in urban planning. The development of the seafront at Bandra, Carter Road and Juhu are not isolated projects but is an effort towards developing a larger perspective for a coherent conservation and renewal policy for the development of existing and potential public space in Mumbai.

Designs for these projects play an important role in the development process. Design becomes an instrument for mobilizing and sphereheading the movement. Initially designs are used to attract attention and to bring together interested people, particularly the neighbourhood citizens. A discussion of the design instigates participation. People begin to then realize the different dimensions of the project and chip-in their views. They also are able to then comprehend the physicality of the project and the important change that it would bring to their environment and life in the neighbourhood. Regular discussion of the design and other aspects of the implementation then becomes engaging whereby more and more people get attracted to the project.

It is extremely important therefore to consciously plan to popularise the design and the various aspects of the project. Besides designing the architect need to therefore undertake a larger responsibility and promote not just the idea but the project itself. Architects do need to play the role of an activist and carry out campaigns for popularising the design as well as the project.

This engagement of an architect as an activist enriches the architects role and position in society to a much greater pedestal wherein he / she begins to co-relate design with larger and more important determining factors of social and political importance. The process of designing as well as the design itself gets moulded by the larger concerns thus, making the design relevant and acceptable. Initial design ideas, sometimes driven by individual fancies and limited design objectives gets firmly rooted in the social and cultural framework of popular demands.

The architect thus matures in understanding the larger forces that influence   design. Designs and its development achieves a different pitch wherein they are presented and communicated in new ways and forms to a wide range of people including the common man. Communicative skills of the Architect are thereby sharpened and made relevant and appropriate for public debate and discussion.   As architects it is therefore important for us to realize the need and importance of popularisation of design and to reinforce citizens movements with design ideas.

All is not well as it seems. There are many critical questions that have arisen   during the implementation of this project and in the movement for restoration and development of public-space in Mumbai. A number of matters that have emerged needs to be challenged. Citizens Associations for this project and for other similar important projects in the city have been led primarily and predominantly by the   elite, drawn largely from the middle and upper classes, alongwith a number of professionals representing similar class interest. This leadership believe that they represent what is best for the people. Such citizens associations always take anti-labour and anti-poor position. They are clearly elitist, anti-democratic and anti-movement. These small, unrepresentative groups capture media attention, influence those in power in the government, thus continuing at the helm of public-sphere by a combination of such forces. Such groups gradually colonise space too and divide spaces on class-basis under the guise of beautification   programmes. Most often beautification projects consider spaces as mere commodities. What is needed instead is putting people before commodities. This immediately gives the development a human dimensions.

Public space in Mumbai is not merely beautified but structurally integrated to the larger programme for these cities development, its social and environmental fabric in particular.

It is necessary to prepare a comprehensive plan for the city's public-space. This movement for the Restoration for Mumbai's Seafront is a small beginning in that direction.