

## OVERTURNING PARADIGMS

The article discusses socio-cultural dimensions of Urban Design based on premises of dealing with lost places and lost relationships between people and traditional public open spaces . With changing paradigms, these public places have become volatile, limited, and redundantly 'lost' in the concept of strategic planning, zoning and landscaping. The article discusses the role of urban designers while demonstrating Urban Indian cases of Surat City by bringing back to life these lost spaces and lost relationships and being inclusive and equitable.

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### PEOPLE, PLACE AND TIME: CITIES AND CHANGING LANDSCAPES

Traditionally, 'public places' were defined by 'people, purpose and their activities'. With changing paradigms, these very traditional public places became volatile, limited, and redundantly 'lost' in strategic planning, zoning and landscaping. Spaces are incomplete without social content and society is incomplete without spatial component. Globalization of technologies, societies, and economies is transforming the world along diverse and unforeseen pathways. Globalisation, a multi-faceted process of improved communication, is homogenising, standardising and inter-connecting (physical and electronic) the world; thus, problematising relationship between the local and the people. The very 'placeful' downtown is now confronting 'Placelessness' (Carmona, et al. 2010).With changing times, the dialogue between society and spaces has drastically changed.

In most Indian Cities, the City Cores, which were once thriving epicentres of social, commercial and cultural congregations are now a victim of urban sprawl. While these city cores are getting obsolete with deteriorating physical conditions and neglected public attentions, the vibrancies of street markets are getting boxed-up in hi-fi malls of later developments and the social-cohesiveness boxed-up to social-apps. It is then, that the concept of 'Placemaking' materialises as a people centric approach aiming to 'bring back' meanings and benefits to the lost places. Contemplating traditional inclusive public spaces such as streets, Markets and plazas, which were conductors of Social, cultural and economic exhilarations; are now limited to the downtowns/ city cores and restricted to social, religious and economic boundaries. These public places have been victims of the paradigm shifts and architecture of changing landscapes.



## DESIGNING FOR CHANGING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

Local cultures provide 'one-of-a-kind' places, whose unique qualities are an important place asset. Rapid urban growth directly influences the outlook as Indian cities continue to evolve. In this influential evolution, traditional urban open spaces such as street markets,

1. Traditional public open spaces refer to Streets, markets, Nodes, plazas, park of old city areas/ city cores.
2. Placelessness- Placelessness tends to signify absence or loss of meaning
3. City Cores- commercial, cultural and often the historical, political and geographic heart of a city

plazas, have lost on their 'local charm' and inclusiveness, altering dynamics of the interface between people and places. A typical Indian city today, in a complex interplay of complementary and contradictory, has morphed from the 'open and inclusiveness' to 'boxes and exclusiveness'. It is therefore, a designing challenge when urban design is torn between the celebrations of global and rescue of the local.

### **Shouldn't we revive our lost open spaces rather than seeking new one in boxes?**

Streets, markets, squares and plazas of Indian Cities were antecedently observed as Social, cultural and economic catalysts offering sites of strong socio-communal exchange. In the process of ongoing evolution of cities at large, more than just promoting better urban design, the role of urban designers is to facilitate creative patterns of use. This can be achieved by paying unparalleled attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that once used to define a place and encourage its ongoing evolution to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community. Thus, strengthening the connection between people and the places they share, which is devoid of exclusiveness and is inclusive for all.

## RESPONSE TO RECKONING OF IDENTITY: PLACES FOR ALL

Urban inequality is one of the great challenges of the century. Without the necessary upgradation of landscape and infrastructure we are looking at the proliferation of ghettos on a vast scale resulting into placelessness. Addressing placelessness is need of the hour. Consideration of inherent potentials of traditional open spaces by deliberate enhancement of local distinctiveness is the key to overturn paradigms and exploring effective possibilities for the union of barrier free intervention. Following illustrations explore the possibilities of addressing the architecture of the times, women and child friendly places, communal unions, transformable open spaces, resulting to socio-economic growth of both, people and place.

### **1. A place for all\_ The Banyan Parklet**



Figure 1 A neglected stretch of the Old city, Surat (India) with 05 ancestral Banyan Trees



Located in the core city area of Surat (India), an engaging wide stretch of open space by the street with 05 ancestral Banyan trees rusts in decay- placeless and purposeless. Could this parcel be re-imagined as an open-ended indigenous intervention enterprised for anyone and everyone? Be it, the passersby or the workers nearby; the kids, women, adults of the locality or the neighbours from the city? The obsolete Stretch, which was once a thriving street, was conceived to be reshaped as a 'Parklet' intending to invigorate the socio-cultural cohesion bringing back to life the spirit of streets.



Figure 2 Visualisation of The Banyan Parklet as conceived to be a 'Place for All'



Figure 3 Visualisation of The Banyan Parklet as conceived to be a 'Place for All'



## 2. The Lost Landmark

“What Time is this Place?” asked Kevin Lynch, exploring how communities manage with change. Jhanda Chowk, a significant landmark dotted on the maps of historic urban village of Rander, Surat (India), was a place 'celebrated'. The place is a union of three contrasting communities harmoniously co-existing in the set-up since centuries. With time, the space lost its purpose of celebration by the vertical mast, resulting in the place losing its meaning. Inclusive Urban Design plays its role in full capacity by transforming this lost place into a setting of Formal and informal public life. This outcrops by adding a communal purpose addressing the socio-cultural union as a precursor to design.

Figure 4 Jhanda Chowk : In silence, lost on purpose



Figure 5 Transformation of the Chowk as a public realm

4. Jhanda means a Flag Post in Hindi language
5. Chowk means a plaza/square/open market area in a city at the junction of two roads



Figure 6 Plan of Jhanda Chowk: Transforming dead streets into a public realm



### 3. Upgraded Traditions, Transforming Enclosures

Figure 7 Informal vegetable market, Surat (India)



Figure 8 Vacant and Void: Vegetable Markets missing out on gravity

Street markets have been a dynamic and unavoidable image of life of Indian cities. These markets embrace daily gatherings, knick-knack lined up carts, informal chats, negotiations and cohesions. These markets best demonstrate a typical Indian public realm. With changing shopping trends, seclusions and exclusivities based on economic classes and biased orientations, these markets are nearing dearth. Once flooded with people, these markets lie vacant. Shall these spaces of purpose be thought as inclusive designs that erase biased boundaries? Shall these spaces of purpose be equipped with infrastructure of the time that encourages visitors from every background, be it, social or economic? Contemplating this scenario, urban designers as socio-cultural activists, must adjure the loss of traditions and upgrade tangible aspects in order to cope up with the contemporary needs of the time which shall preserve the intangible culture. Much contemporary design needs to be reconfigured as a process that progressively transforms urban landscapes of such market spaces into updated public realms.



Figure 9 A visualisation of upgrading Vegetable markets as an inclusive enclosure

## OVERTURNING PARADIGMS

Overtuning paradigms demonstrated the role of urban designers as socio-cultural activists to bring back to life lost spaces, to re-establish lost relationships of people and place and to not only let design solutions promote social integration, but also uphold dignity of the people once they enter the space. It encourages concerns for transforming aged spaces into 'places for all', dissolving exclusions and promoting inclusions.



Figure 10 Image of the city : an illustration of Historic Urban village 'Rander', as a congregation of people and celebration of place