

Reviving Open Spaces for the Worn Out City Cores_ Case of Gopi Talao, Surat.

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Ar. Vishal Shah, Founder partner- Aangan Architects and Partner- Urban Initiatives, is a multidisciplinary personality related to the field of design and academics; creating a fine balance between Practice and Preaching. A strong advocate of design for masses and an ardent activist in his own right,, he strongly believes in 'What is the City But the People'. He has represented Surat at international level in academics as well as architecture practice and is currently coordinating the Masters in Architecture Programme with specialization in Urban Design at the Faculty of Architecture, SCET in the capacity of Professor.



THEME: URBAN ECOLOGY (WATER SYSTEMS, CITY GREENS, ETC.)

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The transition of Indian Cities from medieval to industrial city resulted in degradation of important environmental resources and urban open spaces in the core areas. The degeneration continues till the contemporary notion of environment is propagated and it becomes a part of the collective consciousness. A very important aspect for Indian cities in transition is to look back at the history and culture of public spaces and revive dilapidated and neglected spaces to give them back to the people, this salvaging of spaces as per this research and project is the most 'sustainable' measure that needs to be taken into consideration in view of the economy and ecosystem that the Indian cities behold.

Sustainability is not limited to the design of building but it is about 'creating a balance between the economy and the ecosystems, especially for public projects with large areas'. The case of Gopi Talao Rejuvenation in the old city core of Surat, India intends to examine the crucial role of design of Urban Open spaces in creating equity in a socio-political environment of disparity that our recreational and leisure spaces are going through. It is about sharing the space with the native flora and fauna and giving them an equal chance to survive and it is about contributing to the microclimate of the place. The project also evaluates on ways to providing environmental benefits by means of Ground water recharging, Storm water sink, recharging of the aquifers and as an environmental asset in the form of natural area, harbouring important aquatic ecosystem and as a heaven for migratory birds. It is an attempt to assemble and celebrate as a city as well as to connect to the past by being in a significant place without losing the relevance. Thanks to the project that due to the Oasis created in the centre of a dense core city, 'Sparrows are Back Again' and this can be termed as one of the most important achievement of any place making exercise, Smart enough to continue with the legacy of creating meaningful urban open spaces.



Gopi Talao (Talab) is strategically located in the walled city area of Surat. It is situated between the inner ring (the older fort wall) and the outer ring (the extended fort wall). The travel accounts of the 17th century describe Gopi Talao as 'an important urban recreational space with religious significance'. Initially the Talao was a part of the traditional water management system and was linked to the moats of the city wall. However, the Talao started decaying due to rapid developments in the surrounding which hampered the natural catchments of the Talao.

Over the years, from an important socio-religious symbol of the city, the Talao became a neglected large open space in the middle of the dense walled city area. There was formation of many slum clusters around the Talao on the land belonging to the city administration and few private trusts. With a possible threat to 'public health', the city administration decided to fill up the Talao with solid waste going against the natural topography with a plan of developing it as a maidan or a stadium. The corporation spent substantial amount in bringing solid waste from various areas of the city and filling the Talao. However, there has been a turnaround recently The Talao has to be restored according to the revised development plan of 1996.

ISSUES

- The transition from a medieval city to an industrialized city also resulted in the degeneration of important environmental resources. The degeneration continues till the contemporary notion of environment was propagated and it became part of the collective consciousness. Series of Gujarat High Court rulings on the status of water bodies in the urban agglomerations resulted in generating a discourse on the conservation of the traditional water systems. The status of Gopi Talao also indicates the peculiarity of the nature of urban development.
- The story of Gopi Talao questions the status of 'environment' as an agenda of governance. If 'environment' is the purview of the city administration then what is the nature of the governing structure that 'conserves' the environment.
- Currently, there are 6,000 families residing around Gopi Talao. In order to restore the Talao and make it accessible, about 2000 families have to be rehabilitated. The urban rejuvenation demands a displacement of few of its citizens. In the arising circumstances, what should be the strategies of the urban renewal plan?

AIM

The research paper aims at understanding the episode of Gopi Talao in the larger context of urban environmental management and the process of urban development.

