

URBAN LIVEABILITY FORUM

PRESENTS

"MY RESOURCE. MY RESPONSIBILITY"

A knowledge series from the experts on effective management of resources to enhance urban Liveability during and post pandemic.

GREEN OVER GREY: IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACES IN URBAN LIFE

by Arundhati Nagargoje,
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Advocacy, Governance & Renewal | Mumbai

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Central Park, NYC Source: New York Latin Culture Magazine

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**Green over Grey:
Importance of Public Open Spaces in Urban life**
by, Arundhati Nagargoje

What is a Public Open Space?

Public open space (POS) is an open piece of land that is undeveloped and accessible to the public, such as parks/gardens, playgrounds and green spaces. They are vital environment elements for citizens and their urban life, especially in a metropolis like Mumbai which has expanded into a dense build fabric.

Advantages of POS in Urban life

POS are beneficial for Physical, Mental & Social health of the citizens

Public Open spaces are not only for recreation but also essential for the physical, mental and social health of the community.

Public Open spaces are not only for recreation but also essential for the physical, mental and social health of the community. A good quality Open space encourages citizens in physical activities like walking, playing sports and exercising. Playgrounds and parks like **Shivaji Park, Joggers Park, Oval maidan** and many more are the cradles of Mumbai's sports and exercise activities. Now citizens can exercise with gym equipment in gardens like **Colaba woods, Aji-Ajoba udyan**, etc. Such activities held in playground and parks of the city are aiding Mumbaikars against obesity and ill-health.



Garden & Parks in Mumbai

POS plays a crucial role in Community Building:

The public open spaces are shared spaces that are accessible to all with no discrimination, contributing to the community building. Open spaces in the urban fabric are much-needed for interaction and for local communities to carry cultural activities. **Horniman Circle** is one of the crowded gardens which hosts several cultural events and functions. **Azad Maidan** is an iconic public space for the community to hold protests and political campaigns. A study has discovered that the location and visibility of a public open space reduce crimes and fear of crime, resulting in high vigilance and a safer neighbourhood. Carter road promenade is the classic example of social reliance. A kilometre long walkway was developed for public use in order to reduce the crime rates at Carter road.

POS helps to increase the Economic Value of your neighbourhood :

A well-developed Public Open Space has become a significant marketing tool to attract more tourists and citizens. **Hanging Garden and Kamala Nehru Park** has higher tourist footfall and high-quality public environment that offers a local identity to their neighbourhood.

This in turn, has a positive impact on the real-estate value of adjacent properties, thus promoting the local economy.



Hanging Garden Source: Thrillophilia

POS possesses the most essential Ecological value for the city.

In the densely built area of Mumbai where the temperature is increasing day by day, vegetation in public open spaces provides environmental benefits such as reducing heat island effect, absorption of air pollutants and also acts as sponges during the monsoon.

Sanjay Gandhi National Park / Maharashtra Nature park consists of a variety of vegetation and is home to diverse ecosystem including native plants, migrating birds, insects, animals and provides citizens the pleasure of experiencing natural life in an urban environment.

Existing condition of POS in Mumbai

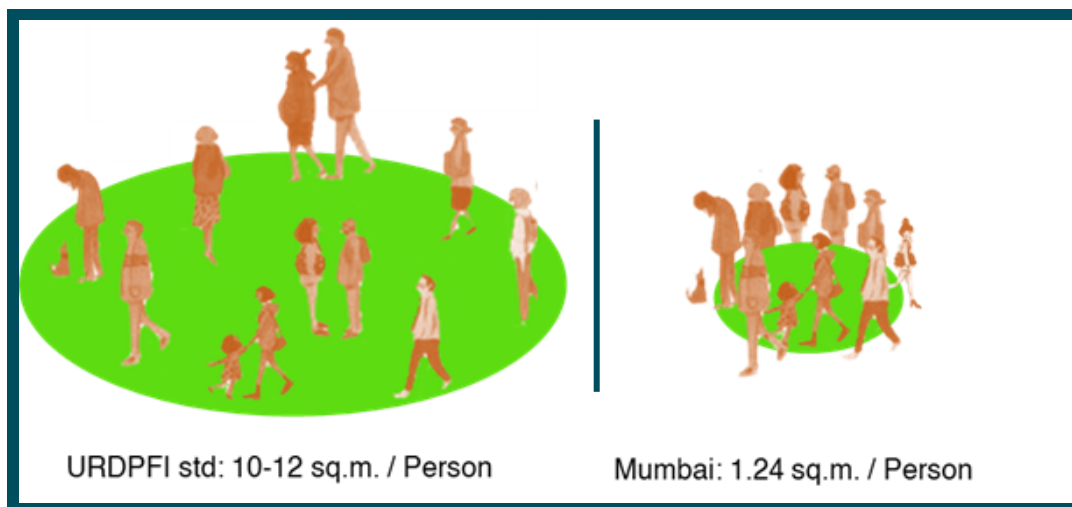


Diagram indicating the ratio of Public Open Space per person

Unfortunately, despite their importance to us, the public open spaces are often neglected. The development authorities of Greater Mumbai follow the URDPFI (Urban Development Plans Formulation and Implementation) guidelines, which recommends 10-12 sq.m. per capita open spaces are desirable. The Development Plan-2034, existing Land-use report states that the per capita open space availability in Mumbai is 1.24 sq.m. which is quite insufficient for a densely populated city of 12 million people(census, 2011). In addition to the statistics, there is an uneven distribution of public open spaces across the city which requires to be changed by an equitable expansion of the POS network.

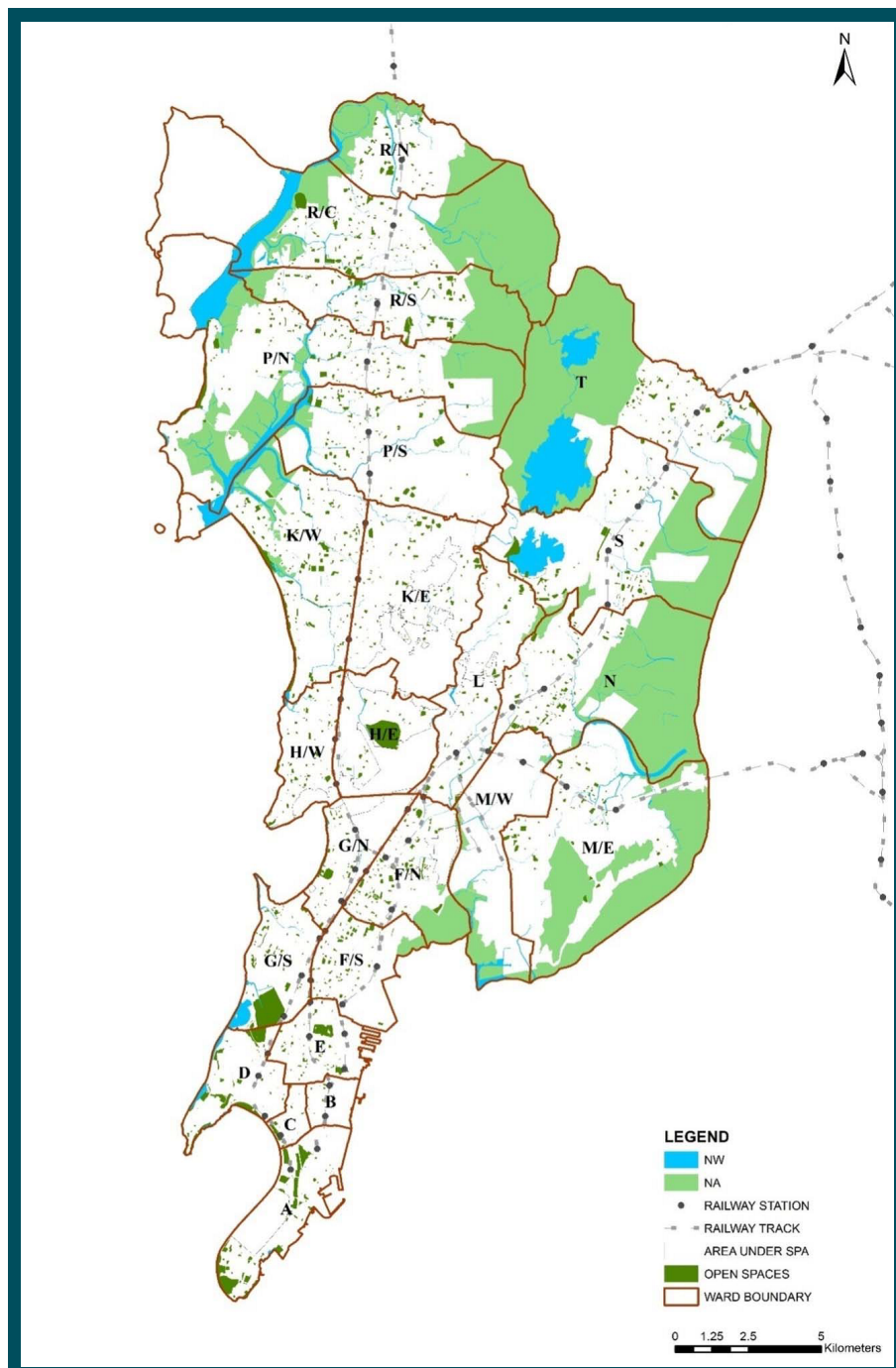
Reasons for reduction in POS in Mumbai : Generic factors

At present, the green cover of Mumbai as 1068 public open spaces (List of Garden R.G P.G & open spaces, MCGM) are reducing in numbers and sizes for various reasons including;

1. Encroachments by slum dwellers, parking or vendors.
2. Inadequate policies which allow private developers to build on reserved POS.
3. Many POS have the inadequate infrastructure, while few of them are completely undeveloped and inaccessible.
4. Few POS are reserved only on the Development Plan, however, on the ground, the area is entirely built upon.

Reasons for reduction in POS in Mumbai : Policy factors

- A scheme developed by the state, the in-situ free housing for slum dwellers (Slum Rehabilitation Authority) allows private developers to develop on Public Open Spaces and No Development Zones is eating up the gardens and playgrounds in Mumbai.
- A policy proposed by MCGM (Municipal Cooperation of Greater Mumbai) called 'Caretaker policy' under which a third party, i.e. private developer, organization, NGO's or any government agency could be allowed to adopt the garden or playground in subject to maintaining it. The policy allowed the adoptee to build upon 25% of the area.



Map showing Existing Public Open Spaces in Mumbai City

Source: Draft Development Plan of Mumbai 2034

Few adoptees occupied the POS by constructing clubs, gymkhanas and started charging citizens entry fees by privatizing the public garden or playground. After many years of public protests, MCGM has made changes in the anti-citizen policy and is now in the process of taking back the gardens and playgrounds from adoptees and eliminating the privatization.

- In 2015, the Government of Maharashtra provided permission to install 4G antennae towers on Reserved Public Open Spaces in Mumbai. Citizen's protest and PIL filed by vigilant NGOs obtained a stay on further permissions for installations.
- In 2018, MCGM proposed a facility of an underground pay & park on a few gardens. This would cause loss of permeability of the ground because of concretization for parking.

In many such ways, Mumbai has lost and still losing on the existing Public Open Spaces. The city urgently requires to safeguard and expand the network of its POS. It is crucial for the city in order to achieve the UN's 5th SDG, i.e. "sustainable cities and communities".

Being responsible citizens, we need to be vigilant of the POS in our neighbourhood to protect it. Participate in public consultation and provide suggestion and objections for any development project proposed on POS in your neighbourhood or in the city.

Recommendations to conserve & enhance the existing POS:



Reference image of community park
Source: Cambridge Crossing

1.No construction to be allowed on it except security/gardening storeroom. The POS should be accessible to all citizens throughout the day, charging no fees.

2.Facilities and services to be provided in POS including a storeroom to store gardening equipment, water connection for gardening, Vermi-composting of garden waste, Plantation of native plant species to encourage biodiversity which grows easily and require less maintenance.

3.The materials used for pavements, street furniture or on any other services should be heat absorbent, eco-friendly and locally available.



4. The future policies must be mindful of the goal to increase the areas of POS per capita in Mumbai.
5. Future development plans and redevelopment schemes can be a useful tool to increase the POS in the city.
6. The current interim policy for Gardens and parks, published by Garden dept. has incorporated the new opening timings i.e. 6 am to 10 pm for all reserved POS under MCGM, suggested by citizens and NGOs in the public consultation process. It is a step ahead in making the POS associable to all citizens for additional amount of time.

Let's be wishful of more such positive steps by the government agencies and be responsible citizens by playing our parts towards protecting the invaluable resource.

ABOUT THE WRITER



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Arundhati is an Architect-Urban planner working in the civic & governance sector, aiming at inclusive community growth & sustainable design solutions.

She has extensively participated in the public consultation process with Government bodies like Municipal cooperation of Greater Mumbai(MCGM), Mumbai Port Trust(MbPT), Coastal Regulation Zone(CRZ) committee, State(GoM) Directorate of Archaeology & Museum to form Development plans, Public policies and regulations.

She has also assisted the organization in advocacy campaigns for the protection and conservation of Public Open Spaces, Natural resources and the Built Heritage of Mumbai.

She is leading development projects with sustainable planning techniques and climate-adaptive strategies to provide resilient infrastructure to the city.

Currently volunteering for an international consultancy organization UNICITI to support its 'Third Way of Building Asian Citeie programs'. Working on local knowledge and cutting-edge technologies to unlock the potential of sustainable building materials, designs and construction techniques and transform the way Asian cities are built.

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