

Seeing the City

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July 2009

Landscape Environment Advancement Foundation
(LEAF), 2009, Doc. I

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Introduction

We posed a question. Shorn of the influence of academic classifications and its almost implied mandatory search for conforming types; we asked a question - "Where do Amdavadis go out?" We stayed away from certain known types - public parks, religious places. Some because they were known typologies, others because we thought that searching for secular compositions was of greater relevance

Parin Shah a student of Landscape Architecture, attempted to answer this question.

While doing this, she used the medium of water colours as her technique of representation. She spent days observing locations, and went through the streets of the city studying the way people behaved and then selected eight places. She then painted them in a manner where she laid more emphasis on some arrangements or aspects that she thought influenced the perception of the place, more than perhaps some other elements. This small compilation consists of these paintings and her comments on them.

Why did we choose this medium of representation? We had some objectives that we wanted to explore and observe.

A. The decreasing dependence on the human faculties, and the inversely increased dependence on technology has, as is well agreed upon reduced our means of seeing things. The camera points and captures; the mind rarely registers or deciphers. How do we as professionals and students counter this?

B. Abstract means of drawing representation such as making plans or sections and elevations, allows compilation and classification of relations within a space and further allows the making of a relevant empirical data base; but does not seem to encapsulate the essence and spirit of a space well. A simple sketch or a hand painting seems to do it better. One, then done with a specific intention of honestly deciphering the dynamics of a space and representing it, may do it even better.

The results of these posers are for the reader to decide.

During the period of ten weeks that took her to undertake this work, several discussions threw up relevant points that need to be addressed and deliberated.

A. There is a clear need to reclassify, redefine and investigate into, what constitutes open spaces in the city. Parks for example are poorly conceptualized and hence poorly used. However, even if their design strategy was reconsidered in terms of shape, location, access, and detailed design, it is clear that the city with its several layers of residents, distributed in a range of age, social and economical groups need open spaces for a host of activities that the city just does not seem to take cognizance of.

B. From the stand point of academics, it also seems clear that unless a serious debate on redefinition of space nomenclature, the evaluation of its characteristics and the role these spaces perform is not taken up and articulated, the debate on open space and the city will remain mired in indecisiveness and disagreements. The need for such a debate and its answers are of importance to students, professionals and decision makers in public bodies.

To recapitulate then, we believe that this compilation states the following:

- a. The city needs to provide democratic, secular and accessible open spaces for its residents.
- b. The city further needs to imagine the spaces its citizens need, and hence at least demonstrate typological examples however small, of what such spaces can be.
- c. The city meets, in places that are often not meant for it to meet in and claims these spaces as their own, if only to stake their claim about what are their legitimate yearnings from the city.
- d. Conventional nomenclature of public open spaces may require re-examining and re interpreting so as to suit our climatic, social and cultural settings.

Aniket Bhagwat
July 2009

City and People

A city is a complex organism comprising of different people from diverse backgrounds with varied aspirations. A city with well-developed physical and social infrastructure fuels these aspirations. It further allows freedom of choice through the options it offers, bringing people and businesses together. It thus works as a machine of growth that generates interactions at various levels.

Spaces that allow solace, or contemplation and relief are critical in the city. "Work has become the dominant fact of human life, leisure and recreation a more or less luxurious afterthought which is fitted in around it. The dreary preponderance of building, the almost total absence of gardening, in our metropolis, is a direct reflection of this. Yet leisure and recreation, in their broadest sense, are fundamentally necessary factors of human life, especially in an industrial age."¹

The city today stands between man and the source of recreation; it needs spaces which can provide a means of restoring vitality dissipated in work. "The provocative city results from many different kinds of interrelated activities where people have an opportunity to participate in elegant, carefully designed art and spontaneous non-designed, elements juxtaposed into what might be called folk idiom, a series of unplanned relationships..."²

"It is an environment which should provide for those random and unforeseen opportunities, those chance occurrences and happening which are so vital to be aware of the strange and beautiful which no fixed, preconceived order can produce."²

Collectively urban population shows distinct characteristics, not only their recreational needs vary widely with age, gender, customs and habits; but they are constantly changing influenced by work and living conditions. The urban inhabitant requires complete, evenly distributed and flexible systems fulfilling all types of needs for persons of every age, interest and gender. These spaces are also ecologically and biologically essential to life for the development of the individual.

Many times public parks and common open areas which are parts of planning systems of the city, remain unoccupied and underutilized due to many reasons. Public parks, which get locational and visual advantage, seemed to work better than other public parks of the city. Inappropriate scale, incorrect implementation, wrong location, accessibility could be some of the reasons for the failure of their usage. Contrary to this, unlabelled and unplanned typological open spaces like foot paths, road edges, private campuses, market squares, cross roads, wastelands, traffic islands, railway stations, bus stands, auto-stands, parking spaces attract people and activity. Association, environment, ambience, distance, location, time of the day, company, comfort, surrounding community and activity along with individual's emotional needs of the hour could be some of the many factors influencing people to come to these spaces.

Open spaces which are not designed as public spaces cannot be overlooked. For example, bridges in the city need attention because of the interest and activity surrounding it. They become the centre of evening meetings for the urban population allowing them to connect to the river and sky. This is also true for spaces like abandoned mill lands, dry river beds, cross roads, foot paths and road dividers which draw people to come to these places.



Public open spaces are not just about the physical realm; but they induce behaviour and also nourish socio-psychological aspirations of community. The success of these spaces is dependent upon the accurate analysis of individual and collective needs of the people to be envired.

The objective of the study was to understand the behaviour of people in relation to the open space in the context of Ahmedabad city, to re-evaluate the need of public open spaces. Few of these spaces are selected, observed and represented. Many of them are not designed as public space but each of this reflects the spirit of the city in a unique way. Teen Darwaja represents a market place in the historic context of the city; University Road, Ashram road and Ellis Bridge represent the typology which works as non designed public spaces; Shopping Mall and Railway Station are designed public places for different purposes; Ambawadi cross roads represents a typology of the 'Naka' which brings people from particular occupation for a particular purpose; ATIRA represents a institutional campus working as a public space.

People come to these spaces at the end of a busy day or to meet friends or with their children, or after shopping or to begin a new day or just to sit and watch other people. These spaces represent a diverse range of typologies in terms of their location and usage pattern.

Method of the study

There are many proven methods to study human behaviour such as literature study, collecting on-site data by observation, behavioural mapping through site visits, verbal and written questionnaires, by showing edited photographs of the place, recording behaviour pattern in text, visual and through photographic documentation and using analytical drawings. This allows for classification of relations within a space by giving quantitative and qualitative data, but it fails to capture the essence of the place.

The idea of the study was to represent these spaces in an experiential manner, as perceived; rather than by statistics, questionnaires or analytical drawings, to make a comment on their inherent character. Hence, the medium of paintings is selected over the other methods. These paintings are a collage of experiences which draw out the associations and emotions attached to the place. To come up with an honest portrayal I have spent few days at each place, observing the behaviour of people through different times of the day. I then made a series of small sketches while observing these places; and then composed them to convey an overall experience of the space. Painting these places helped in conveying them in a gentler and more contemplated manner, as one tends to observe many minute things while sketching or painting which are not often registered while photographing or making drawings.

In the next step all the eight paintings are put together with physical parameters. Compilation of these paintings will allow readers to make interrelations at various levels from the characteristics of each space.



About the City - Ahmedabad

Ahmedabad city was founded on the eastern bank of the river as a walled city. It is divided into two physically distinct eastern and western regions by the Sabarmati River connected by bridges. The eastern part of the city is established along the axis of Bhadra fort and Teen Darwaja. It is characterized by closed clusters of pol houses within the walled city. The western part of the city is characterized by educational institutes, residential areas, malls, multiplexes, business districts such as Ashram road, CG road and Sarkhej-Gandhinagar highway. City has grown by way of layers added on existing city in concentric circles.

Ahmedabad is the largest city in the state of Gujarat. It is ranked 55th in terms of population and 17th in terms of density in the world. It is the 3rd densest city in the country.⁸ With its population of 4.5 million spread across an area of 464.16 sq.km, its density stands at 9,707 persons per sq.km as per census of 2009.

A total of 129 hectare area is under open spaces in the entire city. This translates to 0.37sq.m area per person as against a specified standard of 8-10 sq.m per person.⁶ These Open Spaces are classified in five types by Municipal Corporation and AUDA: Open, Garden, Playground, Green belts and Recreational Area. Over 40 percent of the open spaces lie in the Western Zone of the city. There are no recreational areas and green belts in southern and Central Zones. In all the five zones the per capita open space is less than 0.7 sq.mt. There has been a continuous decrease in the amount of open spaces present in the city over the past decade. The green belts have been put to different urban uses and the gardens and parks in the city at present are not enough for the recreational needs of the population of the city.⁷

At present 23 percent of the area exists as classified open in the city. Development of additional 8.6 percent of area as gardens is envisaged in the proposed development by AUDA.⁷



Teen Darwaja Market Square

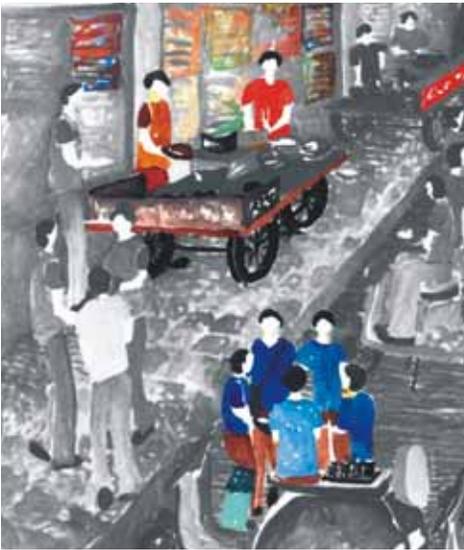


The existence of a class of people failing to make two square meals a day and waiting for free meals strikes a stark contrast to the hawkers who earn their living by selling goods on the road edges on a hot sunny summer day. Shoppers add motion to the life, quench their thirst at a road side facility and take a much needed break, seated on the divider.





University Road Street



To some this announces the beginning of a day with a cup of tea, to others it's a place for refuge when bunking a lecture, to some it's an occasion to celebrate after a cricket match, to some it marks the end of a tiring day, whereas to some others, it is just an excuse to meet friends and gossip, all this while looking at other people do the same.





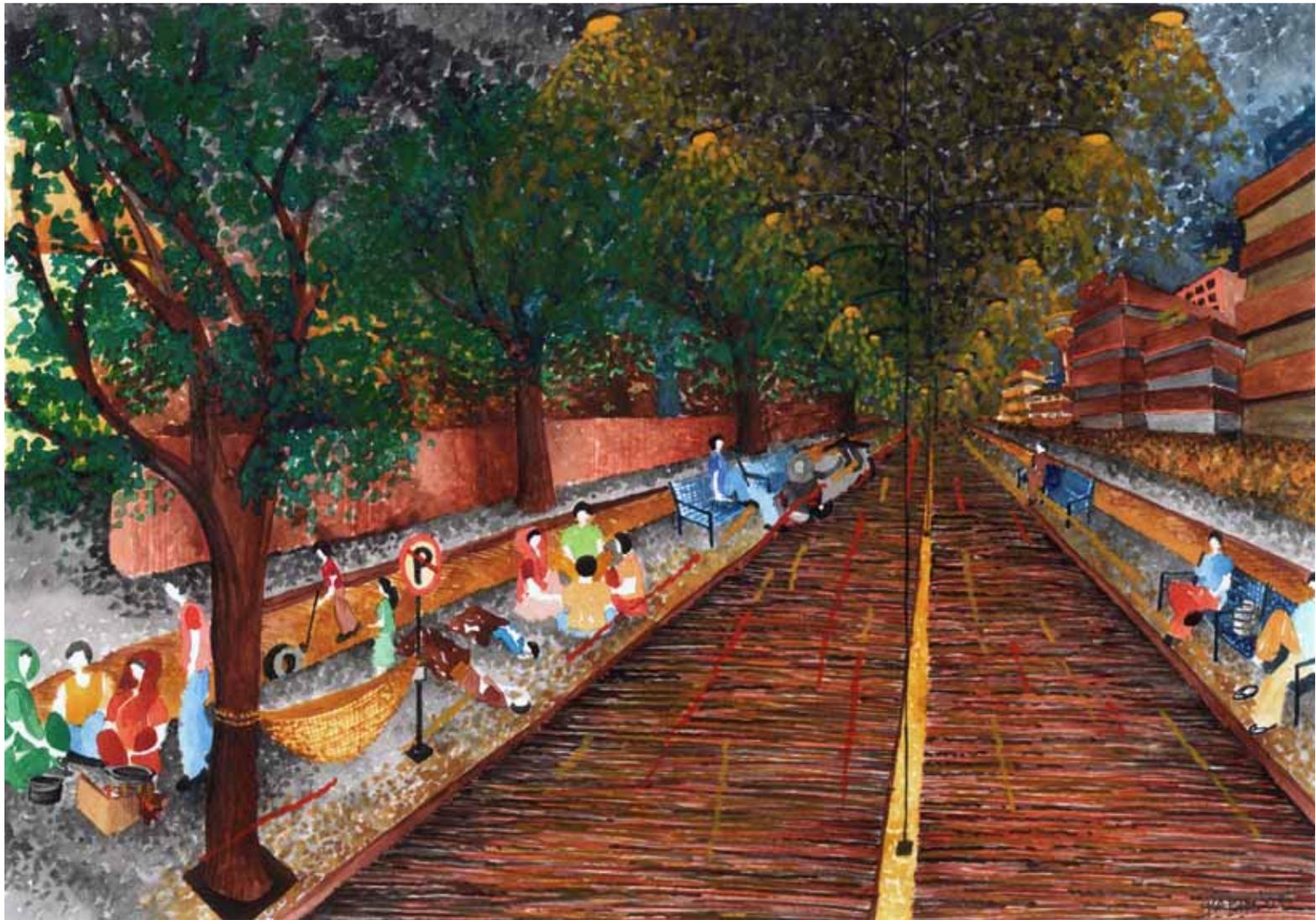
SPAIN '09

Ashram Road Street

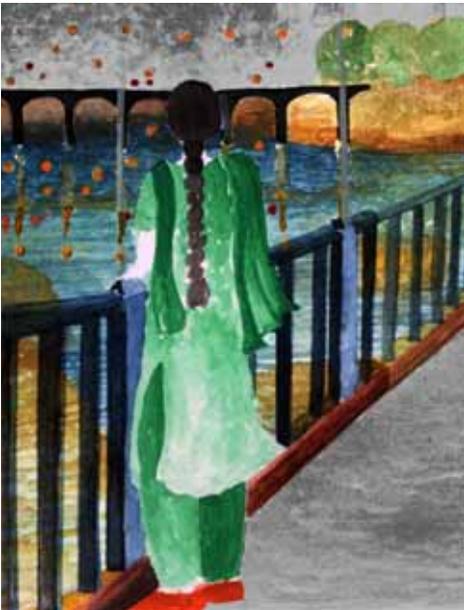


A person seated on the bench looking at the city settling down after a long tiring day at work while going back to his house. The activity of the workers, living in temporary shelters along the road sides, picks up as they get together with their family after a long day.





EllisBridge Street



A rickshaw driver tired after a long busy hot day comes to the bridge and feels connected to the sky and the river below. He recounts the past few hours and contemplates for the next few before retiring for the day.





Shopping Mall

Commercial Place



An elderly couple looks at the change in the way people spend time outside their homes while waiting for their son and daughter-in-law who have gone for shopping inside the building. A group of friends from nearby area get together every evening for a quick chat before they head back to their own different tasks.





Railway Station

Public Building



Sounds of people arguing and fighting near the reservation counters fill up the space. Even amidst complete chaos, people make themselves as comfortable as if at home. In the absence of effective policing it allows all kinds of people to occupy the floor, making it difficult to navigate even on foot.





Ambawadi

Cross-roads



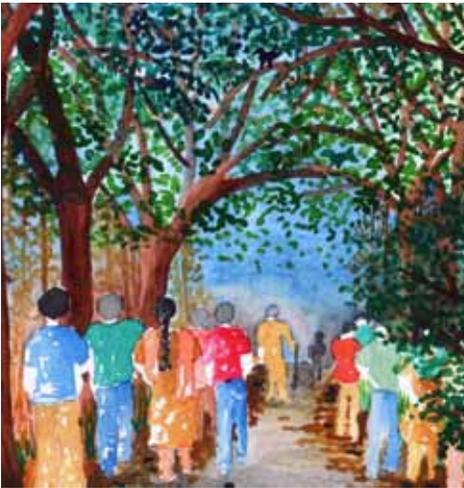
People come here all prepared with their lunch boxes and water bottles for the day ahead, adding another layer of commercial activity before the existing one starts. It is a place to mark the beginning of the day for friends.





ATIRA

Institutional Campus



Old folks come in the evenings to chat for hours forgetting all the worries in the pleasant environment created by trees and chirping of birds. It attracts youngsters, children with parents and grandparents for morning and evening walks.





Compilation



formal
streets
bridges
labourers
children
river
nature
wait
breeze
aloof
shade
institutional campus
morning walk
peace
market square
father and son



break-fast
 birds
 ground
 hawkers
 sleep
 relax
 sky
 informal
 grand father and child
 access
 friends
 play
 evening meetings
 cross-roads
 old age group
 unwind
 public buildings



Teen Darwaja

Street, approx. 3150 square metre

Oldest commercial centre contributing to the economy of the city, major transportation link with heavy traffic, continuous retail-edge, road-edges occupied by vehicles and hawkers, divider - a place to sit, **easily accessible**, both formal and informal, public place, **commercial** landuse, association - historical and daily ritual, usage - **throughout the day**



University Road

Streets, approx. 1 kilometre long; 20 metre wide

Typological examples of road edges and building edges which invites people, foot path and road edge become a place for parking vehicles and socialising, **easily accessible**, informal, public place, **institutional** landuse, association - daily ritual and **recreational**, usage - **very frequent in the morning**, less frequent throughout the day



Ashram Road

Streets, approx. 3.7 kilometre long; 22 metre wide

Financial hub of the city, heavy traffic throughout the day; less traffic during nights, **road edges and foot path** form a place to sit, socialise and sleep, **easily accessible**, informal, public place, **highly commercial** landuse, association - **recreational and daily ritual**, usage - **late evenings and nights**



Ellis Bridge

Streets, approx. 270 metre long; 32 metre wide

Oldest bridge connecting old and new city with heavy traffic throughout the day, **easily accessible**, informal, foot path of both sides and **connection to the river** draw people, public place, association - **recreational**, usage - **late evenings and nights**

Shopping Mall

Commercial place, approx. 750 square metre

Typological example of the space in front of commercial building such as malls and shopping centres, **easily accessible**, informal, **public place**, commercial and recreational landuse, association - recreational, usage - very frequent in the **evenings**



Railway Station

Public building, approx. 1500 square metre

Typological example of bus stand, railway station, auto stand which invites people for specific purpose, moderately accessible; **gated entry**, formal, **public place**, transport hub, association - **daily ritual**, usage - throughout the day



Ambawadi Cross roads

Streets, approx. 2500 square metre

Typological example of 'naka' for labourers at the major node of the city, moderate traffic during mornings, **easily accessible**, informal, **public place**, mix of commercial and residential landuse, association - **daily ritual**, usage - very frequent use in **early mornings** before shops open till noon



ATIRA

Institutional campus, approx. 2,72,000 square metre

A gated campus between the educational zone of the city with a large green cover, informal activities at the edge of the campus invite many people, **moderately accessible**, informal, private place, **institutional landuse**, association - **daily ritual and recreational**, usage - **early mornings and evenings**



Observations from the study

Public spaces represent the life of the city. Some of the observations, made while looking at the spaces studied, are as follows:

- Public spaces are continuously changing and are being defined anew. For example, the traditional Indian markets are replaced by shopping malls and plazas of the modern city; the small squares in the “pols” have no replacement at all in the new planning; when this happens, not all activities that the earlier spaces catered to, are adequately provided for; nor do these transformed entities adequately address the demands made by a fast growing city.
- Sometimes, spaces not designed for people to gather in, such as dry riverbeds, wastelands, abandoned grounds, traffic islands, cross-roads, footpaths, road edges, bus-stands, railway stations, private campuses, parking spaces are used as important places for congregation. For example, in the context of Ahmedabad, during evenings bridges are flocked with people. At the same time, public parks of the nearby area fail to draw people.
- It is observed that public spaces like Teen Darwaja, University road, Ashram road, bridges, railway station, Ambawadi cross-roads, ATIRA are successful because they are policed to some extent. Similar spaces become the place for crime and other illegal activities when not policed. For example, the railway station foyer works as a public space, in the manner in which it does, because the administration shows empathy for the certain class of people and allows them to use the station as a temporary shelter, and polices it adequately so that it is not usurped or vandalised. It is also true that spaces that are used well and occupied continuously are less likely to be vandalised, since the continuous presence of people acts as a form of social monitoring.
- It is important to look at non labelled and un-programmed public spaces and formalise their occurrence in the planning of cities, since they are critical for the life and vitality in the city.
- Public spaces, which do not depend on some form of economic activity as its generator, survive well too and are important to the city. A person staying in a joint family or a labourer after working for the whole day loves to come to the bridge in the evening just to find time for his own self. Simple benches on the footpath allow people to sit while going back to the home in the evening. A person, who does not have money, finds a shelter on the footpath or in the railway station lounge. Secluded from the city traffic, a private campus of an institute attracts many people of various age-groups for morning and evening walks. Abandoned grounds invite thousands of children in the weekend to play cricket. Many places in the city attract people without any activity generator such as eateries or shopping.
- The city needs accessible open spaces which can cater to all types of need for its residents, regardless of gender, age, socio-economic background. For example a certain class of people will not use the ATIRA grounds in the morning, or may find it a bit difficult to use the forecourt of a mall to relax. Despite its apparent public and democratic nature, spaces have embedded in them the rights given to the class of people who are expected to use it.

- There are very few places in the city where one can connect back to the nature. Green belts of the city have been destroyed by the construction activities. It is essential to have such places in the city for the growth of individual.
- City needs common open public areas like maidans and squares where people of the city can come out at the time of the festivals, religious events, celebrations and share their happiness and sorrows.
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Parin Shah is a student of the post graduate program in Landscape Architecture at CEPT University, Ahmedabad. This study is part of her summer training of 10 weeks. She graduated in architecture from the same university. Her passion for painting and sketching helped her to put these paintings together.

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