

## **Dichotomy of Urban Public Spaces**

“Timeless or Ephemeral” – The Indian Experience

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Urban public spaces in India present a distinct dichotomy of constancy and change. The constancy stems from the concept of public spaces being the underlying current of Indian way of life. Tradition wraps public spaces with people and their defined activities that stamp the permanency factor on them. These public spaces transform as part of the sociocultural panorama and retain their ethnicity unnerved by the ravages of time and urban development. Integral spaces is the key to the permanency factor as the space, the architecture, the urban art, people and function merge and have no distinct separation line. The existential competence of these spaces over time has created an indelible mark in the urban scenario and life of cities.

Unbridled urbanisation in the wake of globalisation has drastically inflicted changes on these spaces and has paved the way for hybrid and newly evolved variants. The spatial and temporal links as elucidated by Foucault, “*it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space*”, defines the contemporary status of these spaces that are facing a serious threat in terms of complete or partial conversion to facilitate urban development.

Extensive research on the privatization of the public realm (Madanipour, 1996), changes in the experience of public spaces (Boyer, 1996), shift of active users to passive viewers of the public realm (Sennett, 1992) trace the lines of change that public spaces have been exposed to in the current scenario.

The dichotomy also exists in two parallel and contrasting approaches to urban public spaces starting from addressing the loss of civic life (Camillo Sitte, 1889), failure to deal with minor signs of decay (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) and the “fall of the public man” (Sennett, 1992) to the recasting of public spaces as a revival mechanism advocating “publicness of the public space” (Akkar, 2006).

### **Public Spaces: “Defining the Realm”**

Open spaces have dictated the “*axiom of people – activity – sense of place*”. In her book *The Human Condition* by Hannah Arendt (1958), discusses the meaning of the public realm as an open and shared space. This represents the Indian philosophy of spaces for the people, of the people and by the people. Zukin defines public spaces as “*the window into a city’s soul*”, a window to look beyond, that brings in the haptics, the views, sounds and feel of the city.

Formulation of the concept of a public sphere proclaimed as that which “stood or fell with the principle of universal access” (Habermas, 1998), highlighted the space – people nexus. Public spaces are not only a visible and available means of integrating and allowing social diversity to proliferate but has changes the “public face of the city” – advertisement to the city’s image (Zukin, 1995).

The paradigm shift at attempting to include the lesser known spaces and the “non - spaces” that exude public activity as part of a larger urban public realm has generated a new line of thought in the inclusive classification process of such spaces.

### **The Crux: Hypothesis**

The paper focuses on the main hypothesis that the “public realm is a **temporal phenomenon of human construction**”. The research done is to understand the public realm in the context of time, to outline the changing language of the public realm and to

assess the human phenomenon as in the functional construct. The paper has been structured on 3 constructs:

- 1. Timeless & Ephemeral**
- 2. Place & Non Place**
- 3. Bounded & Boundless**

The first construct defines the core of the paper bordering on the hypothesis wherein the index of change as a constant has been addressed while the second construct works towards understanding the generators that embody a public space, renders its activities and functional dimension. The third construct arrives at the typological classification, the physical connotation of public spaces. The 3 constructs clearly outlines the physical, socio-cultural and the functional aspects of urban public spaces.

### **Public Spaces: Manifestation of Tradition**

Human settlements have integrated public spaces as an extension of the dwelling architecture and community living. While some spaces resonate the religious fervour, the others elucidate political power, commercial traces, leisure and recreational dimensions. Public spaces manifesting lifestyle and ethnic Indian culture have taken shape in the form of public gardens (“*Thottam, Nandavanam*”), sacred groves (“*Kaavu*”), bathing ghats (“*Kadavu*”), step wells (“*Kunds and Vavs*”) and temple tanks (“*Theppa kulams*”).

A strong binding factor being religion and customs rooted in nature, the ecological consciousness of people to such spaces was inbuilt into the societal norms. While the temples gathered public for sacred activities, the gardens found congregations to enhance the arts – dance, music and literature had established these spaces as the podium. The sacred groves preserved the sanctity of pristine nature and the religious connotation as the “*abode of the serpent gods*” found people engaging in activities that fostered and conserved nature.

Traditional planning systems that respected climate and the cardinal directions, nature with its green and blue grids can be traced from the early times when man worshipped nature and human settlements were transposed on the eco grids. Settlements of the Indus, the Vedic villages and the medieval Jaipur city are such classic examples where public spaces form an integral part of day to day life and activities.

### **Public Spaces: “Generics and Specifics”**

The elements that encompass the public space domain need to be grouped broadly at the macro level as the “*generics*” and at the micro level as the “*specifics*”. This would greatly enable the planner to keep the focus on larger governing issues as a unifying factor yet concentrating on the specifics that etches the unique experience of the space.

Urban public spaces have often been discussed with reference to the generics of:

1. Access and linkages;
2. Purpose and activities;
3. Comfort and image; and
4. Sociability (Project for Public Places, 2000)

With inclusive planning measures, access has become a universal dictum in all spaces and while function and purpose classify the space, the image and sociability border on the macro level aspects of the community. The specifics lay emphasis on “local distinctiveness” as in:

1. Character
2. Continuity
3. Sense of space – enclosure,
4. Sense of place
3. Quality of the public realm
5. Legibility
6. Adaptability

These are the tools that the planner has to identify to revive, reclaim and at times even create potential urban public spaces in the fast pace hyper-dynamic urban scenario. Dynamic, turbo speed cities that evolve need to conserve its public spaces. The necessity to save such spaces, allow them to adapt and absorb changes that breathe life into them can be attempted only if the ingredients and the basic composition of such spaces is understood.

### **Public Spaces: “Generators & Catalysts”**

The catalysts of rapid change is the influx of globalisation, univalent, singular architecture, race to join city branding that exert a tremendous pressure and thrust on public spaces to either adapt or adopt the turbo urbanism. Generators of public space are the conscious effort to bring and gather people to discuss, share and transfer ideas and thoughts in a common, unified space – “the public realm”. Tradition, culture and ethnic lifestyles have been a major influencing factor in generating such spaces.

The politics of power brings together people at such places where the freedom of thought is expressed. Public squares & plazas as podium of power, the arena to spread free thinking has been the imprint from the Grecian agora, the Roman forum to the Medieval parvis and the squares of the Renaissance. Politics and its shades “in the context of “polis” and the space & structure in the city for action” (Arendt, H., 1998) elaborates on the power of politics in defining the public spaces.

### **Public Spaces: “Classification”**

Urban public spaces can be broadly classified as functionalist, performative, symbolic, political and cultural. While the large parks and playgrounds get to become the functionalist category, the variation appears in the form of active and passive usages, termed as contemplative spaces (Galen Cranz, 2007). Performative spaces culminate the celebration of arts and literature, while the symbolic attach meaning and significance on the canvas of the city.

Carr (1992) discusses the distinctions between (and evolution of) different types of public spaces. The most fundamental of these distinctions is between public spaces which have developed naturally, largely unplanned, and public spaces which are planned, designed to be public spaces

This distinction is similar to the distinction Lefebvre makes between representational space, space which has been appropriated by everyday people for their own use, and

representations of space, space which is constructed and imposed, and which serves the purposes of those in power.

### **Case study - Chennai City**

#### **Public space: “Ethnic Typology”**

The city of Chennai has a rich heritage of being the port of the Pallava kingdom in the southern region of India. With its humble beginnings as a fishing hamlet, the settlements agglomerated around focal temples. The temple settlements of Mylapore, Triplicane, Thiruvanmiyur & Thiruvottiyur formed the early foci of the city.

The temple tanks with their float festivals (Theppakulam – “Theppa”=float, “Kulam”=tank), the chariot or the temple car street (“Therveedhi” – “Ther”= temple car, “Veedhi = street), the bazaars lining the streets formed the ethnic early public urban spaces of Chennai city.(Refer Fig.1)

Markets that exhibit the local produce were the local flavour of commerce and public interactive space theory. The Kothwal Chavadi market, the Ryots Market (“Uzhavar Sandhai”) was the commercial and trading spaces of the enterprising public. Water-side market (“Thanneerthurai”) to which fruits and vegetables could be brought by boats plying on the Buckingham Canal was a distinct public space of Chennai. (Refer Fig.2)

The public spaces were a representation of the passion for arts and literature where podiums or spaces (later formed as “sabhas and mandrams”) were created. The Suguna Vilas Sabha of the colonial times is a classic example of the traditional space that thrived during the British rule, with its base deeprooted in music, dance and theatre of the ethnic local inhabitants. (Refer Fig.3)

The Marina Beach promenade, the second longest coastline dons the dual role of contemplative space but elucidates an interesting history of being part of the esplanade under the British. The city expanded to form the Fort area under the colonial power and simultaneously several smaller hamlets were added onto the city.

The wide spectrum of public spaces of the western influence emerged during the British colonial regime. The esplanade, sprawling lawns, country clubs, race courses were developed as unique spaces for the British royalty, but the vast, open stretch of the esplanade with its sandy grounds (maidan) saw the possibility of an overlap of nature bound public spaces. (Refer Fig.4)The Fort Square was an exclusive, distinct space created for the British elite, while the maidan or the grounds were the buffer spaces.

The People’s Park which was compared and modelled on the lines of Hyde Park in London was an attempt at imprinting the western public space typology in Chennai. (Refer Fig.5) The Victoria public hall which later became the haven for performative arts, the Museum Theatre complex – symbolic to the theatre and drama, the Madras Boat Club – contemplative public space with a combination of active and passive uses. (Refer Fig.6)

The post independent era saw the fusion of several spaces into public parks and playgrounds. With the advent of globalisation, public spaces have donned a new role and have re-casted into malls, amusement parks and spaces of recreation.

### **Public Spaces: “Phenomenon of Temporality”**

The causes of transformation, change and decline of the public spaces are mainly attributed to the loss of popularity of the activities that define the space. While the People's Park declined due to neglect, several spaces were sliced to a smaller extent to allow for urban development as in the case of tanks and water bodies (example - portion of Ambattur and Velachery Lake for housing projects).

The Maidan, portions of the Esplanade and the Parade grounds of the colonial era paved way to the creation of the commerce driven central business district (CBD) of the city. The shift of priorities kills these spaces during fast paced and rapid urbanisation in hyper-dynamic situations. The planner has to resort to change of functions that suit the transforming patterns of development.

### **Emerging Traits: Evolving Facets**

Describing the changing notions of urban public spaces, the pronounced end of “traditional “ public spaces or the proclaimed recasting as “contemporary” public spaces. The privatisation of the public realm concept (Madanipour, 1996), the militarisation – gated communities (Davis, 1992), Analogous city (Boddy, 1992) and the simulated generic spaces (Sorkin, 1992) trace clearly the paradigm shift in the approach to urban public spaces highlighting the ephemeral qualities of space – space that changes, transforms and undergoes metamorphosis.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Construct 1 – Timeless - Ephemeral***

The traditional spaces owing to the strong factor of culture, religion and community fervour have remained timeless (Theppukulam, Thaerveedi, Temple bazaar). The ephemeral – constantly changing / evolving is evident in some of the colonial parks being reduced to community green spaces. In many cases the sheer size has got engulfed into urban development as scale / activities to the neighborhood play a significant role. Prime location and poor maintenance rendered the vulnerability of such spaces. .

### ***Construct 2 – Place – Non Place***

The study reveals the known – unknown (lost) and the lesser known public spaces of Chennai, where the changes over time (temporal) has had an effect on the spaces. The loss of cultural spaces due to change of use, poor maintenance, Conversion of prime open spaces (water bodies) for urban development and loss due to encroachments have been the factors.

### ***Theme 3 – Bounded – Boundless***

The natural edge formed by the coastline is boundless and has its porosity (Sennett) and has continued to be a successful public space in Chennai while the water bodies being not bounded or defined became the factor for decline of public realm.

The learning quotient for the planner is multifold. The allocation of priorities, space to a suitable activity, newer functions that can be absorbed by spaces have to be the planners line of thought. The planner needs to fix the strategy on viable functions, activities that thrive and pump life into the spaces need to be identified and plugged in. Physical connotations of public spaces and as in the boundary, edge and domain conditions the urban public spaces. In the context of hyper – dynamic cities, public spaces have to be physically and socially integrated as the social connotation gets to be an omission

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Figure 1

**evolution**

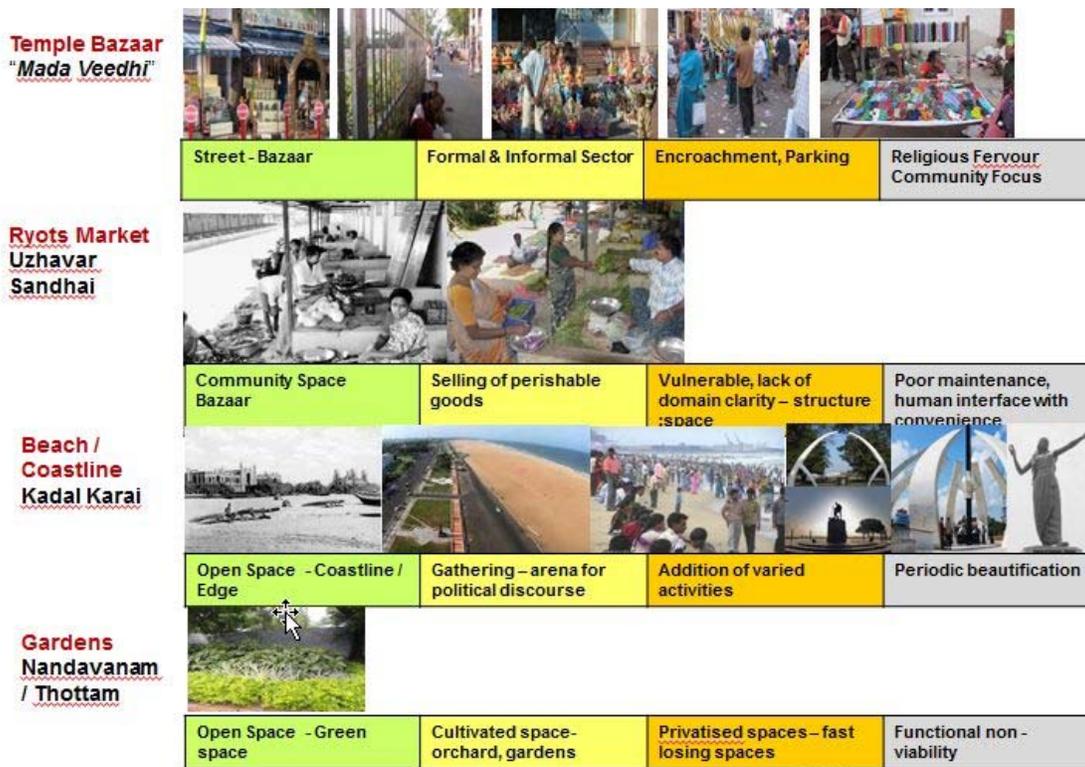
**case study - Chennai**



**traditional spaces of the locals**

||| traditional spaces

Figure 1



exploring the PUBLIC REALM

||| traditional spaces

Figure 2

**Sabha  
Suguna Vilas  
Sabha (SVS)**



**Saundarya  
Mahal**

Public Space - Cultural	Fostering Arts	Change of use – conversion - adaptive	Change of ownership / function
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**Gokhale Hall,  
1914**



Standing in a 30,000-square foot area, the building houses a gymnasium and a table tennis coaching centre at the atrium and a library and the administrative office of the YMIA on the first floor. A boxing coaching class it was in Gokhale Hall that Annie Besant delivered her famous "Wake Up India" series of lectures.

Public Space - Cultural	Fostering youth	Change of use – conversion - adaptive	Change of ownership / function, poor maintenance
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Figure 3

**Fort Square**



This was the oldest part of Fort Saint George, where Government House was located. Because it was built around an interior courtyard, the building above was also called the Piazza. Arrayed around this courtyard were the principal boards of the Madras Government and the chambers of the Governor-in-Council.

Square of the western world	recreation	Recreational grounds – part of administrative complex	Significance of the complex - retained
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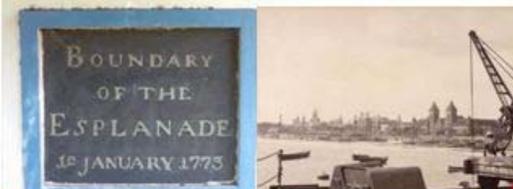
**Maidan /  
Parade Ground  
(Hesketh, 1986)**



Looking across the open Maidan from the Esplanade - the open field of fire separating the Fort from the Black Town. In this photo, we look south down the Coromandel Coast, toward Triplicane and San Thome.

Elite Space - Amusement	Elite Space - Amusement	Recreational grounds - Prime commercial area	Change of use – urban development
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**Esplanade**



Boundary of Esplanade Madras-Monument present outside Dare house building - Parry's corner

Esplanade - View from Madras harbour

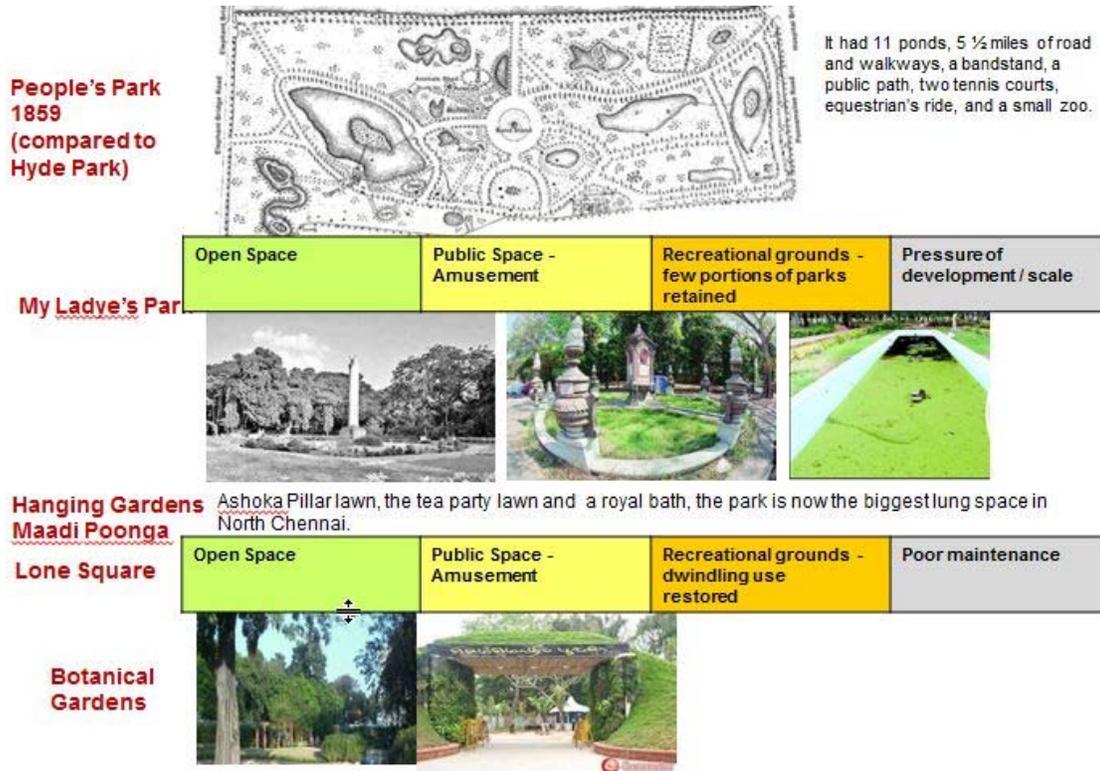
Elite Space - Amusement	Recreational – open space - landscape	Recreational grounds - Prime commercial area	Change of use – urban development
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**colonial spaces of the British bourgeoisie**

exploring the PUBLIC REALM



Figure 4



exploring the PUBLIC REALM

||| colonial spaces

Figure 5

<b>Madras Boat Club</b>	
<b>Victoria Public Hall</b>	
<b>Museum Theatre Complex</b>	
<b>Gymkhana Club</b>	

Gymkhana", in the Oxford Dictionary, the meaning is "A location which tests the skills of its competitors". It was with this in mind that the British came up with the idea of this association, a small British colony where they could socialize and play sport

Open Space + Complex	Public Space – Amusement / Arts	Specific use – user group Restored	– heritage value Cultural spaces
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exploring the PUBLIC REALM



*colonial spaces*