

Landscape Lens - A view of Public Parks and landscape practices

Converstation with
Aniket Bhagwat

Reshma Sathe



Professor Aniket Bhagwat is a third generation landscape architect practising in Ahmedabad with M/s. Prabhakar B Bhagwat, a firm started by his father eight decades ago. Arguably with some of the most influential landscape design practices in the country, the firm is known for its research legacy and an unconventional understanding of urban and natural landscapes. Aniket Bhagwat studied Architecture from Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT), Ahmedabad and pursued his Masters in Landscape Architecture from School of Planning and Architecture (SPA), New Delhi. Drawing on the depth of his familiarity with the specialisation since childhood, Aniket is known to be an outspoken and stimulating writer, thinker and an academican. He co-edits and writes for SPADE, a chronicle on design research, theory and narrative, the only peer driven design magazine in the country. Through his discourse and practice, he strives to bridge the gap between the profession and academics and evolve design through discussion and criticism. He is of the belief that there are no bad students as such but just inept teachers who mislead students into disarray. His renegade approach to education, research, design and writing has inspired many, helping them take on the conviction, rigor and responsibilities of design.

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Reshma is a practicing landscape architect from Mumbai, her firm Green habitat Consultants believes in working synergistically with the processes of nature. She has been a part of the first IGBC platinum rated building in India. Some of her reputed projects are, TCS at Chennai, Ashok Gardens at Mumbai, Ashok nirvaan at Khandala. She also runs a non- profit, "Nirmaan Art foundation" for providing a platform to the relatively unknown talented artists.

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Volume 6, Issue 1, March 2019
pp. 58 - 65

I have known Prof. Aniket Bhagawat from CEPT as a teacher par excellence. He and his father, fondly called Bade Sir (Prof Prabhakar Bhagwat) would make it possible for all of our students to understand the core principles of the Landscape. He has written extensively on various issues faced by the architectural community today.

In this interview I discuss with Prof. Bhagwat the status of Urban Parks in the country. The Public parks have always been a Center of attention, but the result is a mere what I call Lipstick greening. In the discussion we try to understand the reason why the parks are so carelessly dealt with, while also pondering on other issues such as architectural education and the problems faced by Landscape community at large.

Sathe

The concept of Park as a Public responsibility has not taken root. The Goan ka Holi ka Maidan gets more respect than the ubiquitous park. Do you think contemporary Urban Park design has in some way failed to meet people's demands?

Bhagwat

The threshold of ownership differs. The "maidans" by the lack of any real policing, or by being mostly without fences, is belonging to everyone. There is very little that constitutes human drama that the maidan cannot absorb with generosity. The park on the other hand is policed, it has timings and gates to enter or exit; rather so often there is someone who is monitoring what you do. To an extent, this is not a completely unfair situation. Parks have greater number of elements such as plants, or lighting, or seating needing some degree of

protection against misuse or vandalism. Our social behavior in the public fora has always sadly been seen with a jaundiced eye, by those in authority. But the misgivings are extreme and really not real in the most part, and create a situation where the ownership of the park always seems to be vested not with people but those who govern at times to such an extent that it often has led to a mindset that the park is an artifact that is given to people, one that they should be grateful for! This is a feudal mindset that plagues us in many areas, and the parks are really no different. Till this changes, the sense of collective ownership or the idea that it's a shared common property, will find it difficult to take root. So to answer your question, it's the governance of the parks that is responsible to a great extent. Having said this, the idea of testing and evolving a relevant park typology is equally something that needs discussion. We have as such, and this is true across the world, not really invested in examining a culturally relevant and modern park typology. It seems to have received very little academic inquiry. If we ask, for instance, what kind of park should, a part in city which is economically disadvantaged and has a large population of people in the hotter regions of the country be as against say one up in the hills, in a small town with a very small population and large open tracts of nature around—we, of course, will get completely different kinds of parks. We mostly don't ask these questions and we should. Because, not only will it lead to the development of relevant and newer typologies, but also wrestle with the questions about imparting and instilling a sense of societal ownership.

Sathe

Current trend to obliterate the open space needs of the people has a hazardous future. What can be proper response to the climate change needs? How can the Policy makers/ designers bring the connection back?

Bhagwat

It is perhaps in exasperation that I say this, but the one thing they can do is listen, be sincere and act upon good advice; something that really seems difficult for them. We do have enough knowledge about climate change and how our cities will need to morph to adapt to this, we do know that pollution in our cities is a dreadful issue, we do know that maximized tree cover is an easy to achieve reality, we do know that water management in our cities and towns is a distressingly poorly managed affair, we do know that waste management is an area where we have huge work to do; we know all this. Enough papers and conferences occur each day. And yet we just bumble around as if clueless. It's an amazing fact that municipal corporations in our country are often advised by planners and urban designers to auction open spaces, sometimes including park spaces, to raise money to run the city! Urban forest will be decimated to lay fast trains, coastal environments will be exposed to peril to lay express roads, and rivers will be made into ponds under some misguided sense of urban design. So policy makers can do something about this, by educating themselves and learning to take good advice—something, as I said, they just can't seem to do so. And to be brutally honest, except in rare sporadic instances (which we will immediately celebrate as a harbinger of change), I don't see anything really changing for the better in the foreseeable

future as I see it.

Sathe

The society's aspirations mould the practice. Is our society in reality mature enough to make the right choices? What is your opinion on the concept public participation in design of urban spaces?

Bhagwat

One can't fall prey to sweeping generalizations. As in all parts of the world, the people here too do strive to make sense of the physical realm, and equally others who use it as a series of vanity endeavors or even careless ones. What has not happened however, is a level of public engagement in our cities and towns, and that really is critical. Much as it's easy to blame those in governance for not having created a space where this is possible and even mandatory, we as a civic society are equally to blame. We don't complain when the road outside our home is broken, and if we do, we limit it to a single attempt and when nothing happens, we dismiss it as a sorry fact of life and get back to our lives. It equally is true that the way our cities are run has much to be rued upon the problems such as vision, commitment to do the right things, and ability; many things are not what they should be. But I don't see this state changing any time soon. If it has to change, we will first need a complete re-haul of our governance structures. At present they are too unwieldy, ill equipped to deal with the problems of our cities, politicized beyond reasonable limits, and with very low motivation. Unless all this changes, our urban spaces will stutter and limp along as they are now.

Sathe

Barring a few examples most parks are just a composition of green and gray. Is it general apathy of designer? Which public parks in India qualify as good public spaces in your opinion?

Bhagwat

I suppose you have to begin imagining a response to this question by trying to articulate what is a good park. Beyond the fact that it is green and open, what makes a park truly a memorable one? Delightful palette of plant material laid out in ways in which it can be best appreciated matters. Size does matter. The large rambling parks which are remnants of our past such as the Lodhi Gardens in Delhi or the Cubbon Park and Lalbaugh in Bangalore are wonderful, because they are small universes in themselves. Parks that allow sensing the changing seasons whisper and tell us about the movement of the earth and the sun. Parks that allow us to reflect and ruminate with self are wonderful companions. Parks that remind us of our place in the order of the universe are good for the ego and to foster empathy and humility. And parks that are generous in allowing the enactment of all parts of the human drama are great theatres of civilization. It is not that many parks don't allow this; some do it in parts, some in greater degree. It is perhaps just that we don't consciously endeavour to create these worlds in our city that has led to parks that are merely caricatures of what they truly can be.

Sathe

How has the firm's experience of design in the Public realm been over the years?

Bhagwat

My father would often love telling this story. In

the 50s, when he graduated from Newcastle and declared that he wanted to return to India and do work in the public realm, Prof. Brian Hackett warned him and told him that he would have to deal with “barbers, butchers and thieves”, implying, of course, that he should not expect any refinement of conversation, nor of expectations in work. Upon his return, he invested large energies in providing design services for many cities in the Western part of the country—Baroda, Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, Bhopal and Indore to name a few, and in many cases he was the city consultant for years. He invested all his time, in teaching people inculcating the idea of relevant plant material, correct horticultural practices, and processes of design. The trees that one sees today in Gandhinagar are in large part, his legacy as is the fact that he completely changed the way many municipal corporations looked at the idea of plant material and planting design. His father had, before him done similar work in Pune where even today some parks have trees that I know were planted by him. I joined in 1986 and was witness to his hard work and equally, the heartburn because, try as he would, the end result would always be wanting in his eyes. As a young man and perhaps restless then, I chose not ever to expend my energy in areas where the discipline is undervalued or where the vision is mediocre. I also did not have the reformist zeal that he had. Much later, when I had sort of earned my stripes, I ventured every now and then and tried to do some work in the public realm—parks, street networks, recreation spaces etc., and in each case came back regretting that I had even endeavoured. It is not that the work would not be done, but just that it always was reduced to the lowest intellectual denominator, with really

no eye on quality or nuances. I somehow have never been able to reconcile myself that whatever happens is in the interest of the larger good or that “something” is better than nothing. So yes, we mostly stay away, and having seen the work that happens in the public realm barring one or two examples in the country over the last 30 odd years, I have not regretted my position. But I equally rue this because the canvas of public spaces is huge and magical for work of meaning and quality to be done in the country, as a norm, it will need those in governance to have exposure, education, and empathy.

Sathe
The Landscape Architecture practices in India, and more so world over are getting integrated into larger multidisciplinary practices; is the profession losing its identity?

Bhagwat

This is a dual edged question. It presupposes that we have evolved an identity, something that I have written and spoken about often. Both, in our academic forays and professional actions the idea of identity is sorely missed. We go about mostly solving requirements of a project, listlessly going through the motions, but rarely wanting the work to speak at many levels and over time to nurture conversations that will mean something for our times and the future. There is first the need to introspect and for the profession to find its moorings and meanings. The profession needs to demonstrate that Landscape Architecture alone; as compared to any of the other spatial disciplines, has the ability to grasp scale and complexity. Unless it is able to thread the many other disciplines together to realize a cohesive vision for our

physical realm, it will continue not to be taken seriously. The universal unwritten charter of the discipline has in it this ability stated clearly but we somehow have been unable to realize it with conviction. Till that happens, disciplines that seem to have more mathematical or tangible outcome will be seen as leaders and they in turn, will subsume all the others who deal in great part in the conventionally immeasurable. In an evolved world, I hope that someday soon the landscape offices are taking the lead; have the engineering as well as infrastructure design offices as a subset of their work and not the other way around.

Having said this, it does not matter how many multidisciplinary practices try to show that they are a one stop shop, their services will no doubt be in demand for the less ambitious or the run of the mill projects, but when the expectations are loftier, disciplinary experts will not be ignored.

Sathe
How will the future trends in park design be? What will you attribute to the good conceptual design of a park?

Bhagwat

Indian urbanity continues to be oppressive as a rule. Parks, which historically have been havens from the city have an added responsibility in environments such as those that our cities pose. But there is another larger issue of the fact that our urban environments are devoid of memory and any cultural anchorage. It's not only faceless, but also schizoid. We neither have the collective memory of spaces that are being imagined for our cities, nor those where we can connect

with our social cultures. Then there is the literal compression of space and the extremely high densities of population in our towns and cities. Simply put, there is less park space per person than, perhaps, anywhere in the world. Parks then, have the added responsibility of becoming communicators of many ideas of nature, repositories of a past, cauldrons of cultural exchange, spaces that can house large numbers of people, and an antithesis to the urbanity as we experience it.

The other issues are about resources, both economic and environmental. Parks in India have always suffered, will keep suffering from poor budgets, lack of maintainability for a host of reasons, and absence of laboratories of bio diversity and conservation. When you put all this together, it does become a tall order—one that the parks of this country will have to wrestle with and evolve idioms that are replicable.

Sathe
What do you think are the challenges faced by young landscape practices in India? Do we have enough reference material or infrastructure to support the budding Landscape Architects?

Bhagwat

At some level, I think it's a wonderful time to be a young landscape architect in India today. 60 years back, no one knew what a landscape architect was, 30 years back they were just about being accepted in a limited set of projects at the behest of some architects. Today, I can't imagine a project which does not hire a landscape architect; and also the days of the architects running their, at times tyrannical and ill formed writ on projects are over.

Projects now are a far more collaborative effort where everyone's knowledge is valued and invited. Surely, a young firm today is likely to disagree with me, but when you see the journey over the decades, the profession has come a long way and it's a good time to be doing landscape design in the country. I wonder if the younger firms rue this, but I certainly worry about the limited exemplars we have as a collective body of professional work to reflect upon, or the almost non-existent debate on design theory in the country. Professions, to grow have to climb on the back of meaningful earlier works done, and when that is absent, either because such works are just not there or they are not documented should be a cause of worry. Whenever I have had a chance, I said “what we must do is a detailed compilation of the 50-100 projects in the country that are useful to debate about, learn from, reflect upon.” Discussions emanating from such discourses will steer the conversation in directions of meaning and value. I think, the infrastructure support, for the landscape industry is not bad. It can always get better, but you do have specialized services now for all aspects of landscape design; so really that is not the cause for any lack of realization of work as true to the imagined conception as possible.

Sathe
What do you feel is the status of education in Architectural colleges today? How enriching is teaching in colleges for practicing architects? Or does teaching lose its aura after some time?

Bhagwat

I think we all know the problems. Schools struggling with getting quality faculty are divorced greatly from the reality of our times,

and hence unable to develop pedagogy that has basis in our country's present and future. It's a long discussion by itself and I won't go into it in detail here. Simply put, we are struggling to impart architectural education in the way it was taught in the 60s, in times that have vastly changed. I do believe that schools must be able to attract good full time practitioners and academicians to come and teach with great involvement and commitment. Where they do manage to call in such people, it's for really a limited engagement. I do believe that the present lot of faculty in most colleges often are products of consanguineous relationships; or really with limited exposure where they have little to show beyond their classroom engagements. I have often said that faculty in our schools have no pressure to prove their worth on an ongoing basis with work that they do outside teaching. It leads to a realm where everyone is silent and complicit in the zone of collective mediocrity. And no; teaching does not ever lose its aura—it's a privilege to be able to teach and an honor, not one that anyone should take lightly. I also think that for full time practitioners, it's a boon—the chance to work with young students is exciting and educative and keeps one's wits alive. If the question is covertly directed specifically at me as to why do I not go and teach? Then the honest answer is that, I find our pedagogical structures poorly evolved and lacking of intellectual challenge. You may well argue that if I do believe this, more so is the reason I should go and teach, and to which my limited argument is that, just going and teaching a studio is not enough—sure, it can be better than nothing at all, but it is not enough; it does require re-imagining the profession and collectively agreeing to drive the thinking in a

certain direction. In absence of this, it often is the case of the proverbial horses tugging in different directions, leaving the students bewildered, and unsure of what to do. Over time, I decided that perhaps others know better and my thinking may be too anarchic or even incorrect, and best restrained and limited to what I do in our studio.

Sathe

You had the good fortune of teaching with some of the industry stalwarts. Any exciting experiences? How symbiotic was the relation?

Bhagwat

Well, I would not go as far as that; sure, I shared the teaching space with some great teachers. My father, Doshisaab, Leo Pereira, Kiran Pandya, Neelkath Chayya, Miki Desai, Snehal Nagarsheth to name a few. I think, the hallmark of a great teacher is an exuberant faith in life and an almost childlike curiosity to see the world anew every moment and an unwavering commitment to pass the torch, to light a lamp and not worry about the immediate outcome. The other thing that I noticed about great teachers is, they almost never gave straight answers to a students' query; they roamed the world with every query; but what they said was enough food for thought for weeks and sometimes for much longer. There was almost always a kind of duality in what they said—it was as if they were responding to the students' dilemma in the present, but also leaving behind thoughts that were timeless and universal.

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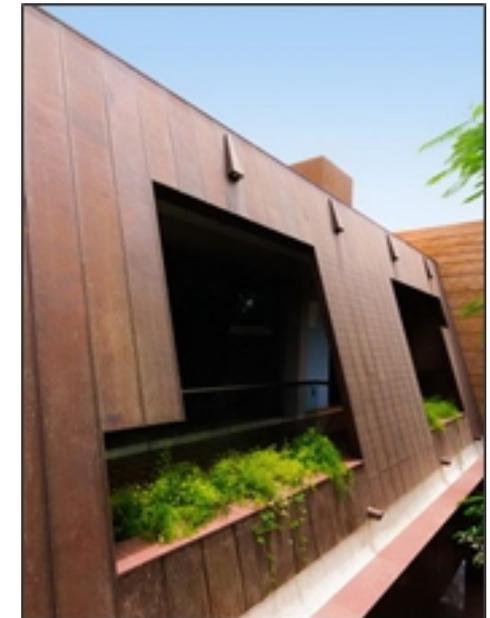
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Bridge house, Vadodara, Gujrat.



Deviratna, Jaipur Rajasthan



Orchard House, Vadodara, Gujrat