

Walkable Cities: Advocacy and Engagement

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Tekton: Volume 11, Issue 2, December 2024, pp. 84-92



Rishi Aggarwal is the founder and convener of Walking Project, initiated in 2012. Rishi has been involved with Mumbai’s environmental, civic and governance issues over 25 years. During this period, he has been involved with saving large urban greens like mangroves and Aarey, waste management and the cities transport policy and planning. In 2016 he founded Mumbai Sustainability Centre. Last year he released his second book - “Saving Aarey - the undoing of an environmental campaign”.



Vedant Mhatre is an electronics engineer; he is the co-founder and convener of Walking Project. He has extensive experience in civic activism, with interests centered on urbanism and public transportation. He is deeply passionate about fostering Mumbai’s growth and addressing the intricate challenges it presents. Over the years, he has effectively utilized media and digital platforms to advance his activism in both personal and professional capacities.



Aishwarya Tatke is an architect interested in the interaction of people with the built and unbuilt spaces in the environment. She is keen on analysing the design of urban spaces that shape our daily experiences; influencing how we navigate, interact, and connect with our environment.

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In this ‘Practice Essay’, we invite ‘Walking Project’- an organization, a program, founded by Rishi Aggarwal which advocates for walking friendly Indian cities. It works closely with the community and government to advocate about pedestrian infrastructure on our roads and streets. Rishi and his team members write about their objectives and various tasks undertaken by them in the area of community awareness and collaborations with civic authorities about walkability and improving walking infrastructure in Mumbai.

Introduction

There is a crisis of walkability in Indian cities currently. The most basic form of mobility which also defines us as a species finds little respect or attention to detail on our roads and streets used by millions of citizens on a daily basis. And the crisis is not being addressed with the urgency that it deserves.

Walking is a significant component of mobility in our cities and especially in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region which houses nine municipal corporations besides towns and villages. More than 30 million people reside in the region and public transport is a prominent means of transport in the entire region.

Why Walkability?

We call walkability the everything agenda. A large number of developmental and environmental agendas all dovetail into this one agenda of making our cities walking friendly. If we pay close attention to providing high quality pedestrian infrastructure on our roads and streets then we immediately impact issues like road safety, gender, senior citizens, public health, climate action, heat stress, traffic congestion and much more.

For example, in the recent budget 2025-26 presented by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), in the gender budget there is a line, “Provision for Safe Environment for Children & Teachers to access the school in Clutter free footpath.” What this tells us as an advocacy organization is that the budget should not function in silos but as a cohesive whole. The BMC and its various departments should be aware of each other's goals and budgets and be both willing and able to collaborate to achieve the desired results. Additionally, the multi-dimensional nature of each issue needs to be realised.

Gender issues are not just about girls' education or domestic abuse. A great public transport system and safe, walkable streets can play a crucial role in the economic and social empowerment of women, making mobility a gender issue as well.

Research shows that physical mobility is linked to social mobility, and improving mobility for economically disadvantaged women in this city would significantly increase their opportunities for a better life. Statistics indicate that the vast majority of them rely on walking.

In this context, improving local mobility would mean developing pedestrian infrastructure that enables them to travel longer distances and access more potential employers on foot. This could include wider footpaths to accommodate higher pedestrian flow or better continuity in footpath design to reduce the physical effort required to navigate broken pathways and enhance safety.

By simply addressing these two factors, we can positively impact economic well-being, safety, gender equity, and more—ultimately, greatly enhancing the mobility of these groups in the long term.

If there is a shortage of funds in the Road Department then funds can be pulled from the gender budget to provide for creating pedestrian infrastructure. Going further we feel compelled to ask questions regarding the outcome. Just because a lofty goal has been included in the budget and funds allocated, it does not mean that the allotted money will be used and provide the desired results.

Walking Project India and What We Do

As an advocacy organisation we add value to public discourse and policy making by helping make these kinds of connections.

We founded 'Walking Project' in 2012 realising that there was no focused advocacy group working to make urban local bodies accountable for providing the infrastructure required by pedestrians for a safe and convenient walking experience. The idea was to start with Mumbai and the Mumbai Metropolitan Region and then move to a national level. But this requires considerable effort and resources are unfortunately always difficult to find for such initiatives.

Between 2012 and 2017 we played a considerable role in elevating the quality of public discourse and thinking within BMC. But subsequently became inactive due to poor funding support and organisational strength.

Since May 2023 we have seen a remarkable revival in our activity with the joining of Vedant. We have produced high quality social media content which in simple ways creates conversation for the need of sustainable mobility and specifically pedestrian infrastructure. We have engaged the community like never before, till date we have hosted more than 30 community walks, which provide a lot of intelligent insight through observing actual street conditions during the walk. After every walk we compile a detailed report, which is then shared with the municipal corporation.

Since December 2024 we have been especially active on S. V. Road in Mumbai (Swami Vivekanand Road) after receiving funding from Asar and the joining of Aishwarya, an architect, in our team. S. V. Road is the longest arterial road in Mumbai and has dense human habitation on both sides. Our goal has been to advocate for making the pedestrian experience along this road into a benchmark one. Where all the design and management best practices are brought together at one place to create a road which will create an enviable pedestrian experience for all and stand as a landmark in the city which everyone would want replicated in their locality.

Visualization of Bhaidas Bhuta Chowk, SV Road, Vile Parle (W) with improved walkability

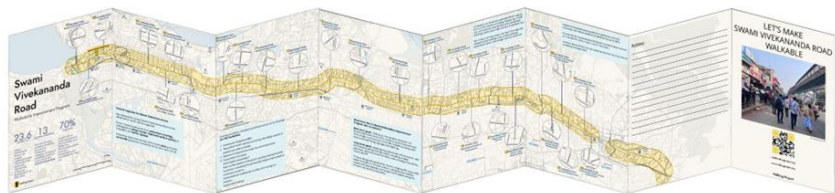


Indicative representation. Actual markings to be carried out as per detailed survey and guidelines

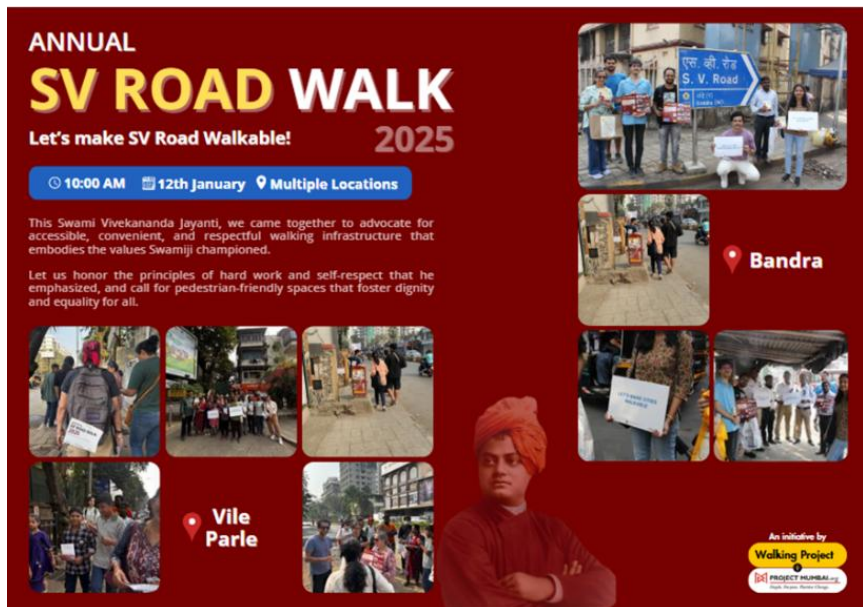
1. Traffic island : offering refuge to pedestrians as a safe stopping point for a high traffic road with tactile paving.
2. Adequate and clearly marked Zebra crossings.
3. Stop lines for cars.
4. Footpaths with adequate widths and improved surface quality for a safer walking experience.
5. Inclusion of Pedestrian timers.



Visualization of Bhaidas Bhuta Chowk near SVKM Precinct heavily used by students to improve walkability



Foldable map highlighting the entire length of Swami Vivekananda Road with a 600m buffer zone marking all the 29 junctions.



Second Annual S.V. Road walk was conducted on 12 January on the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda at four locations- Bandra, Vile Parle, Malad and Borivali.

Guidelines

Pedestrian infrastructure has been well defined over the past 15 years by the efforts of multiple organisations prominent among those being the Indian Road Congress. Guidelines exist for every aspect of pedestrian infrastructure and are continuously being reviewed through commentary from numerous stakeholders.

From the adequate width of the footpaths for a given land use to the gradient of the slopes prescribed for easy wheelchair access. Everything has been well thought through and defined in the Indian Roads Congress Guidelines. The guidelines also provide word problems reflecting some of the common scenarios with a detailed methodology to solve some of the issues which administrators usually fret about. Things like the distribution of street space on narrow streets, improving the pedestrian experience by enhancing the size of the footpath on a given road, redesigning the intersection to reduce wait times for pedestrians etc.

Guidelines also exist for things like the design, placement and spacing of bollards, pedestrian guard rails and signage. But the kind of administrative manpower required for implementing this does not exist despite budgets as large as the BMC's. That's a shame since just enforcing these guidelines vital to the creation of a good pedestrian infrastructure could create so many well paying jobs while boosting all the quality of life metrics across the city.

Theory of Change

We keep getting asked about our theory of change, especially in formal fund raising conversations. The field we work in is so difficult that there is little possibility of showing immediate demonstrable outcomes. So what keeps us going? Our theory of change has been simple. We believe that to make a difference the following actions are very critical:

1. Engage government authorities

Firstly, we need to engage the government authorities that are responsible for the creation, design and upkeep of our roads and streets. These include municipal corporations, PWD, Traffic Police and other such authorities. They need to be held accountable. Right now there is very poor oversight from citizens and hence all kinds of dereliction of duty and negligence is accepted. The role of advocacy organisations thus becomes paramount.

The laws and rules of the country provide these authorities jurisdiction over roads and to spend public funds on their development and maintenance. Along with funds there are important guidelines about how roads should be designed. Gone are the days when a road was just a path carved out on the ground. Modern roads are very thorough in their design and construction and to be made as per guidelines like the Indian Road Congress guidelines. These guidelines in minute detail cover every aspect of road design which also includes the design of pedestrian infrastructure.

But just because all of this support exists does not mean much. There is a crisis of capability in our urban local bodies and we play a small role in bridging the gap. The lack of capability is on multiple fronts and the effects are not felt within a certain front alone. For example, a lack of capability in the sanitation department will show up as unswept and unclean footpaths and streets, impacting walkability as well.

Since 2012 Walking Project has made numerous representations to BMC through letters, personal interactions and field visits. In some cases we have seen success as well. On E Moses Road, BMC ensured that the footpath adjacent to the racecourse boundary wall was widened and also the boundary wall was replaced with a see-through grill. This happened in 2020-21 but was a direct result of letters along with detailed plans between 2013-15.

Through our correspondence we have strongly advocated for the setting up of Non-motorised Transit (NMT) cells in each administrative unit of BMC. As also for the development of model roads and stretches in each ward.

In December 2016 we took a team of senior BMC engineers for a walk on Andheri Kurla Road to make sure that they see what we see on the roads and can empathise with our concerns and demands.

Since our revival in May 2023, we have very strongly taken up the issues of unnecessary concretisation of the shoulder portion of the roads in Mumbai, especially the suburbs where the provision of footpaths is poor as it is,



On field survey with BMC engineers showing conditions on Andheri Kurla Road, December 2016



The BMC office at Kandivali East houses the office of the Deputy Chief Engineer (Roads Eastern Suburbs). It is here that all decisions are taken for roads in Western Suburbs. We regularly visit offices like these to give feedback or ask for specific action.

2. Educate citizens and create awareness

The average citizen who uses the road daily is not aware of details of road designs or the governance framework, which has a direct impact on what they are experiencing. And this comes a second critical part of our work - to educate and create awareness among the community. We disseminate information widely through all available means to create empowerment. Since 2023 we have organised more than 30 community walks and 10 community talks. These help citizens develop specific observation skills and knowledge.



Participants during a community walk



Gently sloped kerb ramps help pedestrians access footpaths comfortably. Demonstration during Community Walk #11 in Dadar East, 24th January 2024

Role of Citizens

A third and key component of our theory is the role that citizens can play. Unfortunately this has also been the weakest and impacted our functioning. We feel that citizens can play an important role in accelerating the turnaround that we desire just through the power of making small donations to advocacy organisations. No citizen has the time or talent to engage with the issue but they can at least fund and sponsor the time and effort of advocacy organisations. We could have done a lot more since 2012 had we been well resourced. The reality is that we do not have even 100 regular donors as of now. Progress is inversely proportional to the amount of effort and effort is directly proportional to the amount of resources available.



Maharishi Dayanand Marg in Chembur, example of a good footpath

A Silver Lining

During 2020-22 a few roads in Mumbai were chosen for the development of exceptional footpaths. These footpaths now serve as a benchmark for us. The one on Maharishi Dayanand Marg in Chembur is the gold standard, we feel. Aspirationally, this is what we should aim all footpaths to be like in Mumbai. We no longer have to show images of model footpaths or drawings from abroad.

Conclusion

The challenges in improving pedestrian infrastructure on our roads are considerable and at Walking Project we hope to continue putting in the effort required. Advocacy efforts cannot progress without community support and we would like to acknowledge a number of individuals and organisations who have supported the effort financially and otherwise in the past two years.

In April, 2025 we are planning to organise a first of its kind - Walkable Cities Mumbai Conclave, which will bring together practitioners and policy makers to deliberate on a broad spectrum of issues to facilitate the path ahead.

We owe it to ourselves to come together and put the required effort in the absence of systems working. ■