Removing Barriers And Inserting Reforms To Promote A Stronger Public Realm

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Abstract

Cities are a complex matrix of several layers imposed over each other. From policy level decisions to on ground realization, everything shapes the city. Cities also boast of ownerships, where several interests create their territory to stamp their presence. These ownerships are defined by physical barriers. Barrier, the word in itself brings in a sense of hindrance which creates an unwelcoming signal indicating restriction. As the city get older, these barriers become stronger and make their presence felt even more, thus creating a disjointed urban realm. If we have to look at future urban spaces in a positive manner fostering stronger urban realm, we need to look at these barriers in a different perspective. A barrier free environment or a strategy advocating so will bring in vigorous, interactive and seamless urban realm. In an age where technological connect is given more priority over personal meeting, urban spaces providing an opportunity to marry both are required. Lavasa, a development nearby Pune, India takes a cue from this perspective and represents a strong case to demonstrate a barrier free urban realm. Lavasa city has tried to incorporate this barrier free policy advocating a healthy mix of life in urban spaces, thereby becoming a model for a barrier free city. The town center area of this development depicts a vibrant and positive urban realm and assures varied experiences to the people. The city exhibits a seamless and well connected urban space that brings in myriad flavors to the lives of the residents. Such a city creates a niche for itself amongst the conventional 'barrier driven' urban development. The paper is an attempt to explore the policy decisions and on ground reality in Lavasa, highlighting barrier free public spaces. It tries to examine the role of this decision onto the city planning perspective.

Keywords – barrier free, urban realm, policy reforms

INTRODUCTION

A city is a conglomerate of several aspects of living. It is a gathering of people from different social set-ups, it also a matrix of numerous layers of infrastructure, planning, architecture, open spaces and public realm. History of city building has stated examples of urban planning. While the organic form of city design relied heavily on commonly used spaces called as community spaces, the post industrial cities and the newer urban planning exertions adopted newer urban planning mechanisms focusing on the compartmentalized approaches of use segregation. Along with the complex matrix the city gradually represented a mix of people from different communities living for their aspirations. Each community has a different take on society and majorly form their own presence in their own particular manner. Different owners and stakeholders boasted of their holding of in different areas.

These ownerships started getting defined by physical barriers called as compound walls. As the city ages, these barriers became stronger. It started gaining so much importance in the overall process of city building that a barrier or a compound wall was the first thing that started getting built at the initiation of the building campuses. This element directly indirectly made an impact on the urban planning and urban design aspects of the city design and development. Gated communities, heightened sense of insecurity started popping up in several parts of the cities.

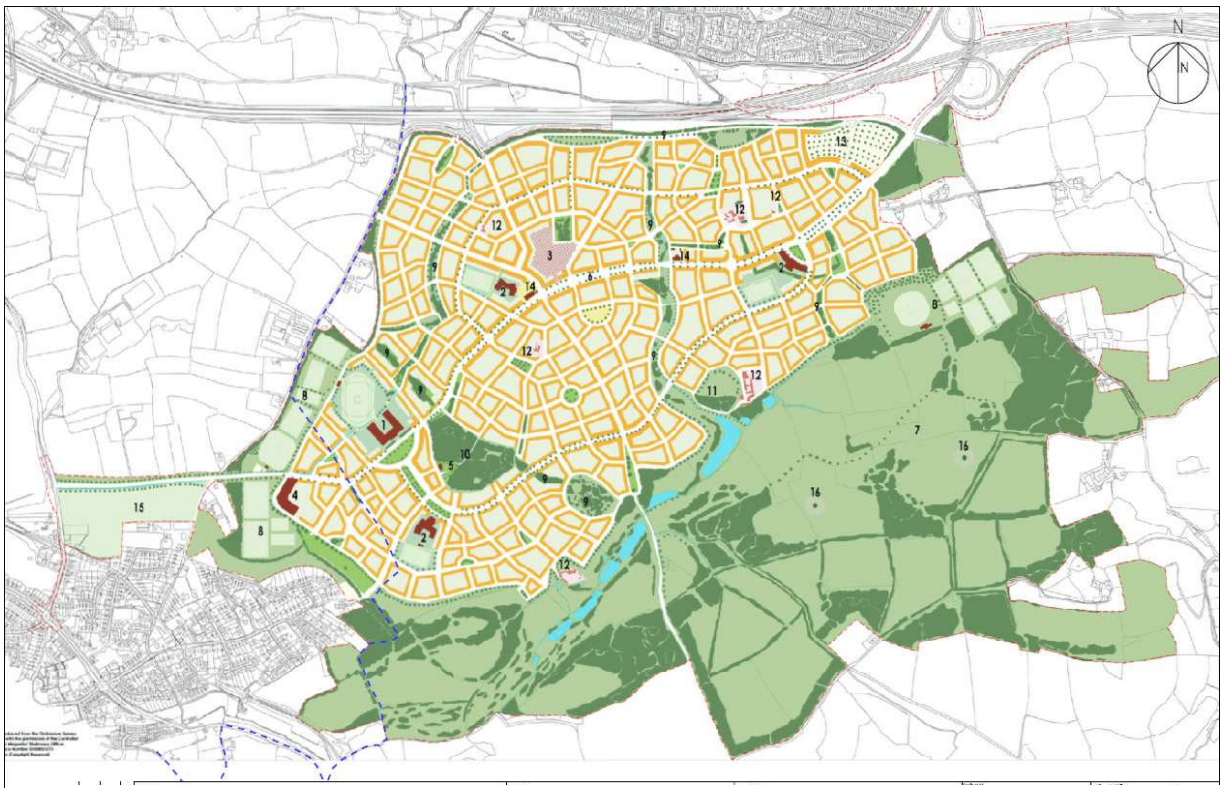
NEED FOR A BARRIER

Barrier, the word in itself brings in a sense of hindrance which creates an unwelcoming signal indicating restriction. As the city get older, these barriers become stronger and make their presence felt even more, thus creating a disjointed urban realm. A sense of community and shared community spaces gets diminished due to these barrier walls. Rather than having a free flowing urban realm, the urban open spaces were jailed in these barriers.

Cities during the medieval period had a much holistic and healthy city plan in terms of undivided city scape. No presence of the compound wall was one of the key features of the medieval cities. Rather than creating barrier wall between two buildings, the entire city was demarcated with a large enough wall called as the fortification wall.

Medieval towns had large fences built around them and gates of these fences were locked at night to keep out undesirables

With technological advents, hysterical rise of the cars and nuclear lifestyles lead to a newer methodology of urban planning and adapting to these ‘essentials’. Compartmentalized planning mechanisms and creation of pockets and precedence to motorized movement is what the city plans for newer developments signify. Community spaces happen in one of these compartments and urban open areas are given less of an importance.



Newer City plans adopt the more compartmentalized approaches forming fragmentation and disjointed urban realm

NEW URBANISM IN INDIA -

New urbanism aims to visualize physical design – regional design, urban design, architecture, and landscape design and community esign as key elements to the future of our society. The belief I that design plays a crucial role in resolving problems that governmental programs and economy alone cannot. It aspires to attempt to update the traditional urbanism advocating diversity, street life and human scale to fit into the modern lifestyles and increasingly complex economics. Thus a design perspective at the level of urban planning, urban design and architecture is required to foster healthy livable spaces.

India is on the verge of a economic boost with the massive urban development shaping in the Indian cities. Due to the fast paced lifestyle, lack of ‘livable’ cities is the need of the hour. The need of the times is to reshape or reconfigure the urban landscape significantly with the principles of New Urbanism i.e the creation of walkable, varied yet inclusive and sustainable developments where people will aspire to be in the now and in the future. The kind of housing developments emerging in the Indian cities call for a change and a different perspective rather

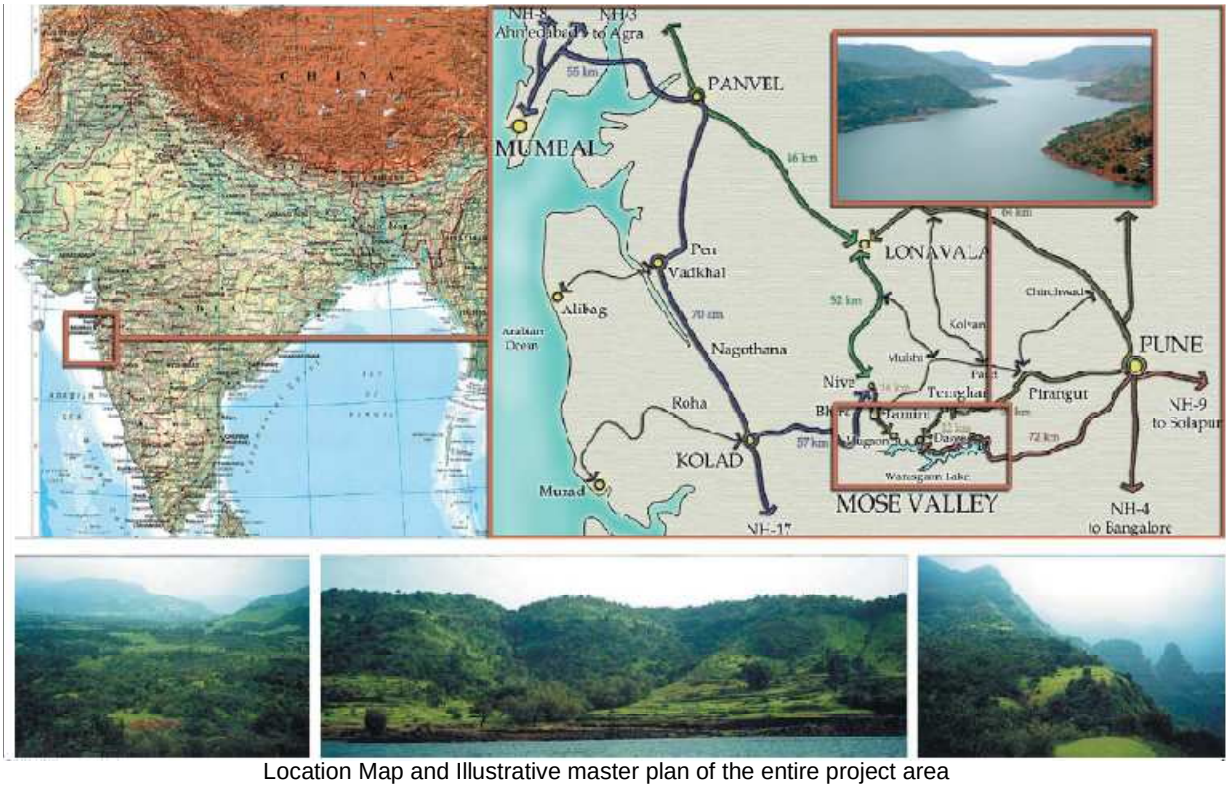
than the ‘barrier driven’ environments. Researchers have established a fact that more and more people living in the urban scenario would want their city to be inclusive. People hope to a more wakable, walk to work kind of scenario where the human is at the prime. Planning measures and urban design should respond in an apt manner to make the Indian cities more future centric.

Lavasa, as a case is trying to build on this thought and is aiming to build a city which connects the human to the nature and its communities. With the kind of unique setting, Lavasa puts forth an interesting case to future cities advocating New Urbanism to its core. It thus has a large interrupted urban realm, pedestrian connections, connection with nature at very onset inducing a fresh perspective to look at a city. The planning theory and the urban design initiatives too reflect this thought process.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

An upcoming city development called Lavasa is nestled amidst the lush green Sahyadri mountain ranges towards the western region of the state of Maharashtra in India. The entire development is around 25,000 acres and is being developed in phases. The first phase is the village called Dasve. The closest cities near this development are Pune and Mumbai. It is blessed with well connected road infrastructure and attracts significant number of tourists. Dasve is planned for a populace of 40,000 out of which 30% have started living. The master plan of Lavasa as a whole is inclined in to provide a healthy urban realm focusing strongly on creating strong urban values like Live, Work, Learn and Play.

To elaborate further on the development, Dasve village is located on the flat area at the confluence of the two major streams on the site. A check dam is built to retain a portion of water from the main lake within the Dasve site. This is also intended to be used as fresh water supply, and add value to the development by increasing the aesthetic and recreational opportunities adjacent to the town. Dasve has been designed to accommodate the highest density of uses at the center. This includes mixed-use development with retail on the ground-floor and residential units or small offices on the second and third levels, as well as attached housing, hotels and a village school. The center flatter portion of the valley comprises of the town center area. From the town center, extensive network of trails also connect several tourist attractions on the hillsides. These attractions include several Parks, a Campground, Nature Park, Childrens Play Area and more. Moving away from the town center, the density gradually decreases, with predominantly single-family residential land uses. Several special hotel locations, including at the edge of the main check dam, one at the switchback of the main access road, one on the hilltop, and at least one in the town center. These hotels provide multiple levels of service.



Location Map and Illustrative master plan of the entire project area

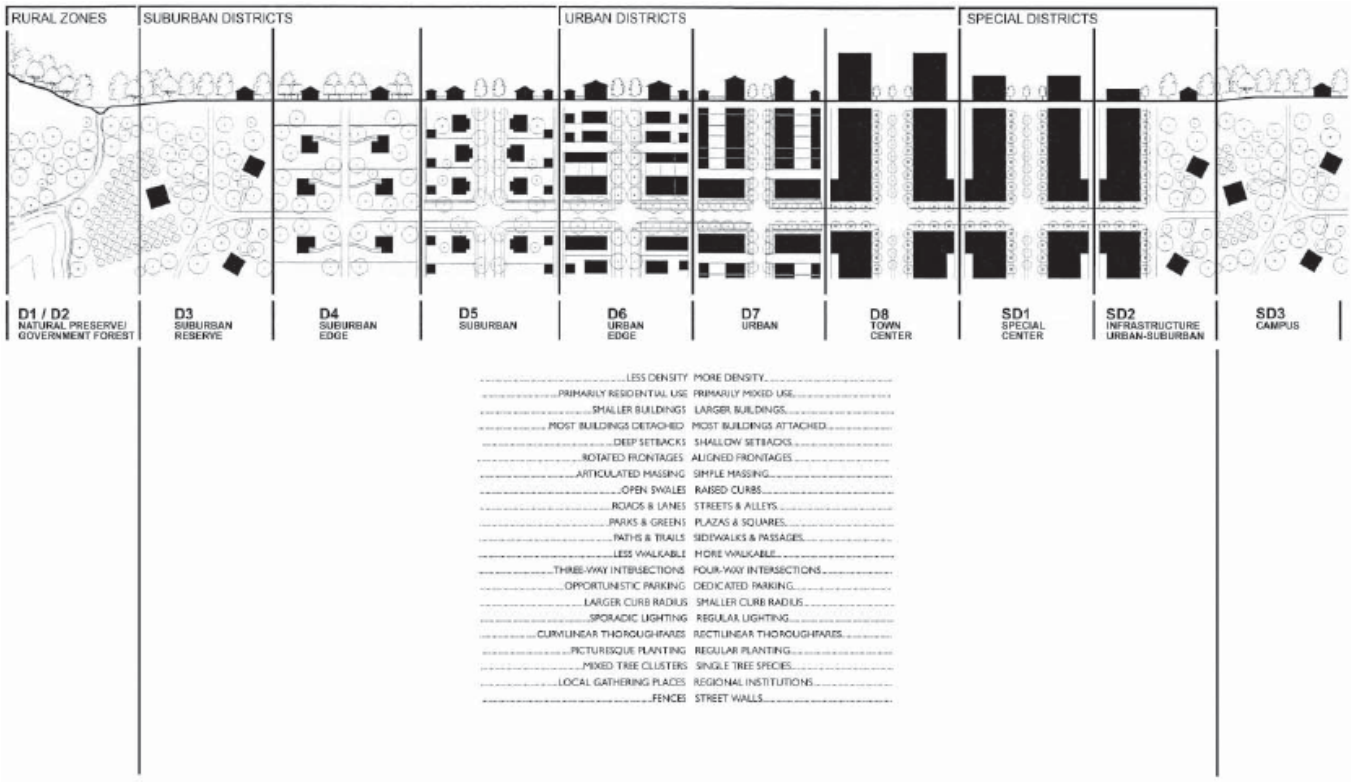
The master plan of Dasve has taken into account the different communities that will inhibit the valley. Considerations for the already residing villagers and their upliftment are also a part of the master plan. It aspires to achieve a holistic and a comprehensive development where people from all communities will be residing. Traditional communities are also marked by the inclusion of Public Spaces. In conventional planning, open space is often simply a quantitative requirement. At the moment that quality becomes a design consideration, and then open space makes an elevational transition to public space. Public Space is owned collectively and is organized according to use (passive or active) and type (determined by context, scale and level of maintenance requires). Public Spaces are generally organized into Parks, Greens, Squares and Plazas. Dasve includes each of the four types of Public Space, and disperses them

equitably throughout the site. Parks are allocated as edge buffers, naturally designed and require little or no maintenance.

Right from the design incubation stage, the Public Realm Standards were laid out to describe all of the hardscape and landscape elements in terms of materials, placements and, in some cases, assembly. They refer to all the design elements that exist from private property line to private property line across any type of thoroughfare or right-of-way zone.

TRANSECT CONCEPT AS A PLANNING TOOL

The Transect is the organizing concept for the arrangement of development that is compact, diverse, walkable and environmentally sensitive. It is structured to protect areas of natural and cultural significance; the structure recognizes the traditional pattern of development From a central active commercial core to the natural habitat, while creating coherent, walkable and memorable neighborhoods. The districts also recognize the importance of the Public Realm as the common element that unites communities, districts and Neighborhoods. The architecture of the street and the civic spaces, natural elements together form a unique and humane place to live, work, learn and recreate.



GUIDELINES FOR BARRIER FREE CITY

The Design Standards and Guidelines for Dasve control the development of lots, buildings, architecture and landscape of a city. These guidelines are intended to be prescriptive rather than prohibitive, permitting variety in a predictable manner – according to the historical methods of traditional town planning principles. The controlling document for the Dasve Guidelines is the Regulating Plan. The Regulating Plan is a map that creates different Districts in each Village based on development intensity. Each District is then defined by the appropriate allocation of the elements of Urbanism, Architecture and Streetscape. The Regulating Plan further provides the categories by which the other four sections – the Development Standards, the Architectural Standards, the Public Realm Standards and Thoroughfare Standards – are organized. Within these four sections all of the elements that form a community can be found categorized according to their appropriate urban context.

The Development Standards describe building placement, massing and relationships to the public realm and other buildings. Appropriate mix of uses and building types are also very important part of creating a quality urban place.

The most significant design standard is of not providing barrier walls or compound walls between two adjacent properties. This was meant to ascertain a thoroughfare between two neighboring plots and to provide a seamless and integrated kind of development.

Urban design plays a significant role in such a scenario to ascertain this policy of providing barrier free city. To actually make it happen on ground is a task in itself. To marry the architectural standards, new urbanism intents, safety and security of the residents, inclusion of the SOS (Sons of the Soil) community is a challenge.

PERILS OF BARRIER FREE POLICY

City is a conglomerate of different stakeholders and owners. Such varied interests, intentions and aspirations shape the city, which if not are not aligned can lead to an unwholesome scenario. To create a comprehensive, sustainable urban environment, it is apparent that the city builders should be on same page in terms of the understanding of policies and reforms.
Lavasa being privately developed has adopted this policy and becomes comparatively trouble-free to get this implemented on ground, irrespective of different stakeholders.
But for cities with different authorities and owners, it can be a challenging prospect. This can be overcome with a memorandum of understanding that certain policy decisions have to be abided to its fullest. A common understanding that such reforms are meant for a holistic and inclusive aims shall aid in proper implementation of such policies.
Design documents at the preliminary stages of initiating a sub project in city can help in understanding the details of the entire scheme. In case of Lavasa, a detailed design manuscript is supplied to the concerned party, the understanding and approval leads to the physical implementation on ground.

Sensible governance is of utmost importance to ascertain that the reforms and policies are being proper implemented. Technological advancements which can aid the governance aspect must be applied to create simplistic and effective mechanisms. Heavy use of GIS applications can help useful contribution of governance to maintain positive urban realm in the urban set-up.

Security is a prime issue when a city decides to go barrier free. Intrusion, encroachments, thefts can become a recurring phenomenon. A strong security support is what a city needs in such a case. The residents need to be relaxed that a vigilant security system is working to make their life trouble free. Building automation systems, outdoor cameras, proper lighting, alarms and more need to be in place to determine that a place remains safe enough for users throughout.

In the case of Lavasa, proper governance and security is in place. But with the growing demands of the citizens to provide some kind of fencing to them, design options for a less translucent and in accordance with the policy are in process. A document related to the design of fences for villas mentions details for the same.
Though Lavasa carries the philosophy of compound-wall free development, there is a demand for boundary demarcations from villa owners, which resulted in the policy to allow fencings only for villas. In lines with the landscape control, fencing can be viewed as a landscape element enhancing the visual quality of the streetscape, thereby bringing in a sense of uniformity.
Fencing types were suggested keeping in mind the porosity and transparency

Illustrative diagram showing the picket fence assembly

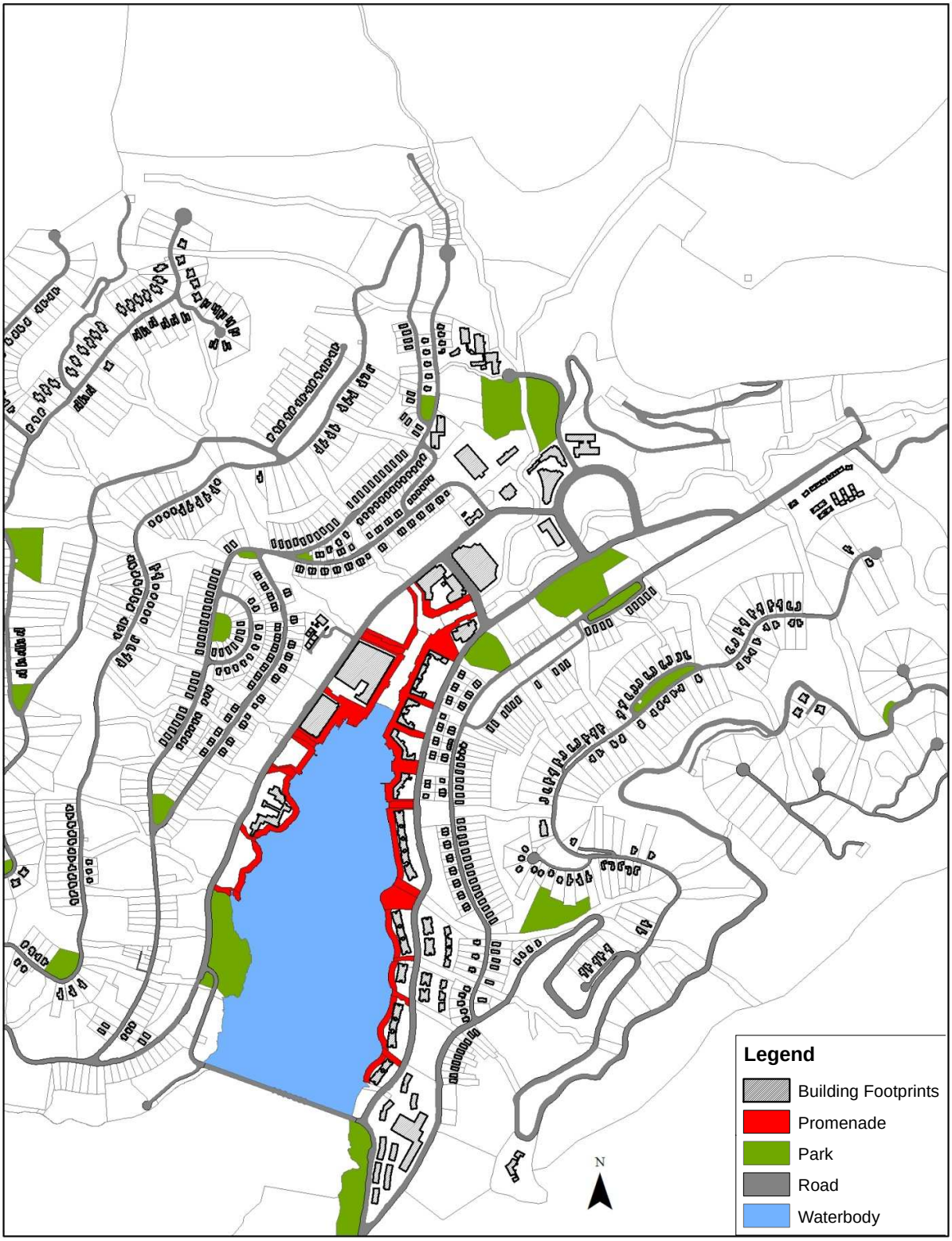
Illustrative diagram showing the Chain Link fence assembly

Illustrative diagram showing the Bamboo fence assembly

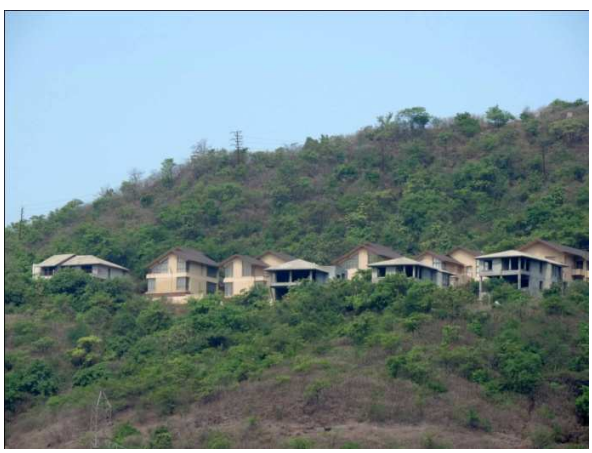
PUBLIC REALM AT ACTUAL

As shown in the figure below, the promenade (marked in red) is an uninterrupted urban open space covering an area of 6.14 hectares which intercepts more than 17 plots. This promenade forms the lifeline of the city which presents open spaces of different hierarchies bound together into a seamless urban realm. People get different experiences on the promenade – commercial, recreational, leisurely, educational. The buildings abutting the promenade are mixed in nature comprising of hotels, residential, recreational and mixed use. The thoroughfare accessible space spans a distance of 2.5kms which wraps around the Dasve Lake. This incessant urban open space is possible because of the absence of the barrier walls between two buildings. The promenade thus becomes a shared urban open space.

Promenade acts as a seamless urban plaza giving experiences of varied interests to the people. Right from an intimate space for a couple, to a mid scale gathering space for a gathering to a platform for a large event is the kind of platter this urban space can offer. Pedestrian connections which feed the promenade from adjoining streets create a heightened sense of street life and added pleasure to walking. Street furniture and urban art elements creates a sense of awe to the visitors and residents alike.

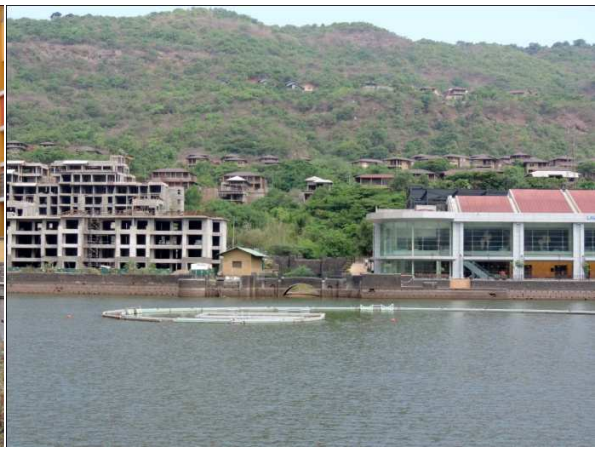


Map showing Dasve with the urban open spaces




Illustrative diagram showing the Bamboo fence assembly


No barrier wall makes an example for a space between two buildings to be treated in a manner which will heighten the experience for the people thereby blurring the plot line between them

Space between two buildings is treated in a manner to heighten the experience of the people thereby blurring the plot line between the buildings

The lake edge also has been kept natural to enrich the connection with the nature

LEARNINGS FROM NO BARRIER POLICY

Case of Lavasa presents an interesting array of observations and learning's

1. New Urbanism is the way forward to create sustainable livelihoods
2. Enriching lives of people through appropriate design interventions are essential for a better future.
3. The designs should be contextually and culturally apt
4. The human is the primary focus of the city and the overall approach of the city building should revolve around the same.
5. Understanding the traditional urban planning practices and retro fitting them in modern context shall help in creating futuristic cities
6. Futuristic cities is not only enabling sophisticated technology, but also creating livable, positive and healthy environments.
7. In an age where technological connect is given more priority over personal meeting, urban spaces providing an opportunity to marry both are required.
8. Design of barriers needs to be though more innovatively , rather than creating secluded islands, inclusive barriers needs to be provided
9. Reliance on vehicles needs to be reduced to infuse healthy street life and vibrancy.
10. Spaces between two buildings should be inclusively thought of for because public realm also happens in such spaces.

Photographs of Lavasa are on site pictures and are recent

Maps and diagrams are for representative purposes only

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