

# Sacred Space - Healing islands of Urban Conglomeration

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## Article Info

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**Abstract:** India and its architecture has always been guided and shaped by its culture and traditions. Spaces reflect the traditions through the user and their activities. The word 'Sacred' has been linked in tremendously strong manner with widening its horizons from traditions to modernity. Sacred Groves as a concept is an ancient way to protect, preserve and value the mythology to give a sustainable future. People have strong attachments to sacred trees, gathering in their shade, socializing and developing economic spaces under them. Sacred is linked to any one single entity or one category of architecture. Sacred space is a healing sphere that is pure, holy and safe. The sacred space allows us to enter our quiet inner world, where healing takes place. Sacred space has shaped and provided deep meaning to cities and urban communities. Due to tremendous growth in urban cities, culture, traditions and values of city gets diverse.

Sacred space could even be an area where a person often finds peace and the religion in work. The daily routine and regime become a part of worship. Across the culture and throughout time, people have designated sacred trees and groves as special places to meditate. Sacredness is conveyed through location, symbolism, and through the social process of creating such sites e.g. - Vrindavan, Nathdwara.

Sensitivity to issues for Architecture and Urban Planners require more research and education to understand and evolve. This could be layered with social, cultural, common linkages to add more meaning and depth. The sacred can be personal, valuable in the perception of an individual or a group following tradition. The sacred space needs to achieve harmony in the multiplicity of voices found in the public. As policy makers and decision makers increasingly think of parks as green infrastructure, we much appreciate that these spaces have layered social and historic meanings..

## 1. Introduction

Government of India is propagating Smart cities under the able guidance of our Honorable Prime minister with a belief of creating State of Art and Human dignity for Urban Population. The Smart Cities focus on the more practical and crude way ignoring the emotional and spiritual requirements of Urban India. WHO is continuously stressing on lowering health issues of Urban Population, which in a way relates to emotional and spiritual problems. Crime and negative human values has created non compassionate society which further inculcated a threat to the future generation. India and its architecture has always been guided and shaped by its culture and traditions. Spaces reflect the traditions through the user and their activities. The word "Sacred has been linked in tremendously strong manner with widening its horizons from traditions to modernity. Sacred Groves as a concept is an ancient way to protect, preserve and value the mythology to give a sustainable future. People have strong attachments to sacred trees and gathering in their shade, socializing and developing economic spaces under them. The question is "Are we defining "Sacred "or linking it to any one single entity or one of Architecture. Is sacred space just restricted to religious structures?

## 2. Sacred Space

Sacred space is a healing sphere that is pure, holy and safe. The sacred space allows us to enter our quiet inner world, where healing takes place. Sacred space has shaped and provided deep meaning to cities and urban communities. Due to tremendous growth in urban cities, culture, traditions and values of city gets diverse. The sacred spaces are in conglomeration with the residences around.

Sacred space could even be an area where a person often finds peace and the religion in work. The daily routine and regime become a part of worship. These spaces eventually become the breathing space from the rustle bustle of the city.

The spaces don't intent the character of spirituality in terms of practices that are activity based. These spaces don't need to have architectural religious blocks to make it sacred. Many a time a well formatted landscape site where all the elements of nature merge

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well in a specific way can act as sacred space. These spaces can be active and live not restrictive to ancient structures like churches, mosques. Green space, in all its varied site types and forms create ample opportunities for humans to connect to nature, as refuge from everyday life and as a symbol of lifecycle.



Fig.1: Jama Majid, New Delhi



Fig.2: Nidhivan, Vrindavan

Across the culture and throughout time, people have designated sacred trees and groves as special places to meditate. Sacredness is conveyed through location, symbolism, and through the social process of creating these sites. e.g. Vrindavan, Nathdwara.



Fig.3: Tatiya Van, Nathdwara



Fig.4: Mata ki Chowki, Delhi



Fig.5: Multifunctional Spaces, Tatiya Van, Nathdwara

### 3. Sacred In a City

A city can have multiple sacred spaces, spaces that can heal people. As an individual it becomes necessary to escape into the positive spaces. Sacred in the City explores the spiritual in the urban, meeting people where they live, and helping them to discover God in the middle of the humdrum and every day. Prayer is often perceived as a difficult, 'place-less' exercise in which we close our eyes and seek God beyond our everyday experience in an invisible realm. It does not have to be this way. Prayer can have its own sense of place in landscapes which we can inhabit and explore, and we can meet God as tangibly as we might meet a fellow traveller. The question is –How do these spaces look like? Are the spaces

existing or need to be created? What are the factors and elements needed?

Sometimes the sacred landscapes can give expression to an essential nature –of an individual and a place of a city where we can engage with others or retreat in order to re connect or re nourish our spirits and generate some primary instincts and forces and generate a sensibility that heightens awareness of the emotional dimension of humans of sensory perceptions (smell, sound, touch) of desired spirituality. All are fruitful areas for self-discovery, inviting us to connect with the mystery of god in our lives. This inspirational volume will be returned to time and again as readers discover the divine in the bustle of the city streets. Sacred places range all the way from small towns with a single religious focus to cities that symbolize in their microcosm the entire sacred cosmos of a particular religion. Small settlements with goddess temples, that attract thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of pilgrims at specific occasions, but are virtually deserted after the yatra (pilgrimage), share some common elements with cities which have large "sacred complexes" (to use Vidyarthi's term) or those that are known for their massive kumbha fairs attended by millions of people.

#### 3.1 Spirituality and healing places

The spiritual dimension of therapeutic sites involves teasing out understandings of spirituality. To understand the relationship between place, spirituality and healing, unhelpful binaries of wellness/illness, inner and outer lives, body and mind, need to give way to more nuanced interpretations of human experiences of suffering and pain.

In examining therapeutic landscapes of spiritual significance, a means of interdependence, mutuality and connection is created. "Spiritual landscapes" suggest that spiritual elements offer up "new imaginations of our place in the world and how that world works" and also present "the unknown" to us. Such imaginations are contingent upon connection. The 'connection' suggested here refers to a sense in which self, others and the environment are related, including elemental forces and nature.

Spiritual experience is not necessarily religious nor is it always faith-based, and what we might call spiritual experiences of place are often perceived as traversing body and land. Spiritual dimensions of human experience range across faith-based systems of belief, ethical and moral beliefs in standards of human behaviour and heightened sense of purpose. This may also include cultural understandings of what constitutes goodness and strong feelings of compassion and love. Spiritual experience can also include momentary levels of heightened awareness of well-being induced by a variety of physical and non-physical actions, from meditation to evangelical, performative acts of prayer. It is possible for a strongly religious person to have a spiritual experience that does not directly involve any faith-based activity. Similarly, those with no faith-based practices or beliefs may be moved by participation in religious activity. In the search for healing, an experience of stillness or extreme peacefulness often has a spiritual dimension, involving a momentary or longer-lasting relief from emotional suffering and/or pain.

#### 3.2 Infusion of Sacredness in a city

The meaning of sacredness in a city that is when space, places and experiences connect and has the capability of enchantment in the city life.

A city usually has these spaces which are unexplored and if thoughtfully planned with awareness and emotional dimension of human. Human mind and psychology needs a further upliftment. The question remains how do we contribute to the liveable cities and deal with the spaces in context to the human psychology. Anything in a city is sacred when there is a visual and sensory stimulation. We can design and manage urban spaces and nourish the sacredness for human comfort by implementing few ideologies.

##### 3.2.1 Treat space as sacred

The site or any space in the city is like a living cell in a body. Every space contributes to the goodness of the city. Every space should be treated and planned very sensitively considering the

ecology and sensitivity towards flora and fauna .The land should be celebrated and not just be used as a commodity.



Fig 6: Reclaiming a sacred space

**3.2.2 Make visible in urban space stories of the past, values of the present, and possibilities for the future.**

Each space has a story to tell and artists should come forward to invent meaningful ways in understanding what was there in past so that the experiences and meanings of the past can nourish present and evolve future.

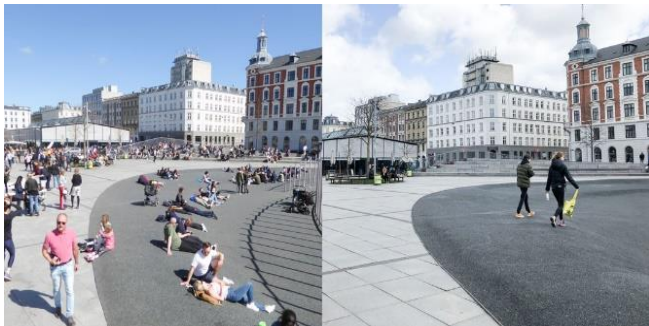


Fig 7: Change of usage of space with changing times.

**3.2.3 Articulate and map what is sacred.**

Through participatory planning and active citizenship people can acknowledge the sacred and decide what is worth preserving.

Examples are:

- participatory mapping, photography, video and crowd-sourcing of sacred spaces that identifies places or environmental elements that people care about and want to keep;
- and storytelling and local lore—constructing livability narratives that reveal the sacred place of nature in the city and precious natural places that are nourishing to the spirit.



Fig 8: Change of usage of space with changing times.

**3.2.4 Relax rules to let people create.**

Rules can be relaxed sometimes for betterment and better usage of spaces which are abandoned or not in use.

Sacredness can be created easily with joint efforts of govt policies and citizens creative ideas and efforts.



Fig. 9: Holy cities in India.

**4. Design Urban Spaces**

Every site to the city is as cell to the body. Land should be cherished not consumed. For years, sacred spaces has molded and added a deep significance to cities and urban communities as well as to the health, well being and quality of life for the people. Pattern of development historically had a synergetic co-relation with sacred spaces and gathering areas for worship.

In the generation of accelerated urban growth, technological advancements, mixed use development, the cities have transformed, embraced the diversity of uses and achieved many urban goals. Unfortunately many key elements in the mix uses of a healthy city have either forgotten or overlooked.

As architects, we need to design spaces in such a way they can engage with people to invent ways to symbolize the urban spaces that was sacred in the past .The spaces should represent what nourishes spirits of people now and what possibilities people dream of for the future.

It is important to study and analyze the important structures and spaces that are worth preserving. The process can be completed in stages by participatory mapping, photography and analyzing the environmental elements that people care about. This can be done by practicing Pop up Urbanism, Guerilla Gardening, and Human nature collaboration.

**4.1 Pop Up Urbanism**

POP up Urbanism- This concept is about cities where people themselves are putting together the tools to build people’s own journey in their neighborhood. The aim is to make people realize to live better and happier life by making their city their own place and creating an act of belongingness.[1]

“POP up Urbanism” uses the city as a site of experimentation, deploying pop-up parks, vacant retail reuse, or unsanctioned street furniture as way to reprogram the urban realm. The practice traditionally takes an activist position in relationship to environmental, political, cultural and economic factors.”[2]

Cities need to be more walkable, more inclusive and more sustainable to be part of the change to be sacred. To shift towards Sacredness cities, need to transform their values. Intercultural urbanism, sharing economies and walkability are part of those changes.

Cities have to be places where people from different cultures and backgrounds can identify themselves. They have to be inclusive providing to everyone different types of spaces to be able to develop their own lifestyles. Intercultural Urbanism is an interdisciplinary perspective on city planning and design that investigates the relationship between cultural diversity and built form. It seeks to identify what people of different cultural backgrounds value in the built environment, as well as the qualities of place that resonate with people of all cultural backgrounds. [3]. The sense of belongingness is created in a spiritual manner. The cities become more close to the individuals and help that

This can be achieved by introducing certain concepts and factors:

- Build a Better Block
- Park (Ing) Day

- Pavement to Parks
- Do Tank
- Pop-Up Café



Fig.10: Pop up intervention changing our cities.

#### 4.2 Guerilla Gardening

Guerilla Gardening was initiated by Liz Christy and her green Guerilla group in 1973 in New York. They transformed a derelict private lot into a garden. The space is still cared for by volunteers and enjoys the protection of the city's park. [4]



Fig.11: Guerilla Gardening

#### 4.3 Human Nature Collaboration

Nature and Man interacts dialectically in such a way that, as society develops, man tends to become less dependent on nature directly, while indirectly his dependence grows. While humans are getting to know more and more about nature, and on this basis transforming it, man's power over nature progressively increases, but in the same process, man comes into more and more extensive and profound contact with nature, bringing into the sphere of his activity growing quantities of matter, energy and information.

Sustainable Landscape architecture dramatically stabilizes the local ecosystem for flora and fauna, reduces runoffs and encourages carbon neutrality. Landscape architects helps in turning the human-nature relationship into a collaborative one, instead of humans harvesting unilaterally. Humans are integrated within nature – what we do to nature also affect us in return. Sustainability is a pragmatic and instrumental idea that could be implemented within numerous human practices. [5]

### 5. Tapping the Potential

In Urban India, Sacred tree species have multiple dimensional relevance wherein they are culturally important, protected and have diverse uses including medicine, food and shade. Urban planners should acknowledge and tap this potential of sacred green spaces. Species such as *Ficus Religiosa*, *Azadirachta Indica* which has potential performance towards nature and low maintenance value should be promoted. Given lack of green space and lack of space overall, these trees seem to serve as forest, park.

#### 5.1 Sacred Landscapes

A sacred landscape has a deep meaning and is layered by virtue of traditional and cultural significance. The landscape is associated with the presence of divinity, which is made accessible through religious symbols and rituals such as pilgrimage. The sacred Landscapes can be explained by the two most holy cities of India Vrindavan and Banaras. The landscapes of these cities has intervened at urban level and created a different kind of energy into the entire city. Every corner of the city is associated with purity. With the advent of Globalization, people come to these cities for experience.

#### 5.2 A sacred pilgrimage at Varanasi and Vrindavan

The city of Vrindavan that has emerged through many stories of Lord Krishna and Leela is reified by sacred groves, forests, water bodies. The Sacred sites are spread in the city in such a way that it covers the entire town of Vrindavan hence there is a pilgrimage practice of Parikrama. The pilgrimage certainly covers the most of the area of the city covering the sacred groves and temples. The forested areas of Vrindavan carries the essence of sacredness in the lush green foliage.

The mystical experience is created by various components of landscape due to which there is an arrival of many pilgrims approx. 6 million annually. On the other side due to the continuous traffic movement of pilgrim and their activities though divine is creating a huge impact on the environment. The sacred character of Vrindavan is compromised by the visitor flow. The contemporary environmental problems are due to the layers of historical process at different times with different intensities. The approaches towards the sacred pilgrimage landscape which was established since 15th century and its evolution since then through various forests which are filled with sacred trees and almost 5000 temples and the influence of local and global socio-economic processes on the cultural economy of pilgrimage, the relationship of this economy to spatial change. The contemporary pilgrimage performance of the city does not invoke spiritual connections due to the current conditions of degradation.



Fig.12: Streets of vrindavan



Fig.13: sacred Street of Varanasi

Varanasi, also called Benares and Kashi, is a pilgrimage destination in India. The ghats of Varanasi are spectacular when seen from the boat. There is massive intervention of masonry, religious buildings, sacred trees, movement of people, and human life performing

various religious activities. The vast stretches of ghats changes the character of the city at different intervals. The streets of Varanasi are remarkable for the traffic, the bazaars, the temples and holy shrines which are found everywhere and, of course, the people. There is so much of chaos in terms of multiple events and activities round the year. The pilgrims move around the city and the character of the city changes with different hierarchy of spaces contributing to sacredness of the city.

## 6. Conclusions

Sensitivity to issues for Architecture and Urban Planners require more research and education to understand and evolve. This could be layered with social, cultural, common linkages to add more meaning and depth. The sacred can be personal, valuable in the perception of an individual or a group following tradition. The sacred space needs to achieve harmony in the multiplicity of voices found in the public. As policy makers and decision makers increasingly think of parks as green infrastructure, much appreciate that these spaces have layered social and historic meanings.

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