

Where will the children play?



Most children prefer informal neighbourhood places such as vacant lots and back alleys to organised playgrounds. While streets and vacant lots offer an endless range of activities and make-believe, most playgrounds force a child into a strict set of repeated motions." Robin Moore, architect and member of international NGO, People for Public Spaces. (www.pps.org)

A Sunday game of cricket in progress at the Arun Kumar Vaidya playground —Prakash Parsekar.DNA



'Plant lots of grass here, and then just leave it alone'

As the drive to develop a Bandra *maidan* picks up, some users protest the replacement of their unfettered open space with a cookie-cutter park. Taran N Khan finds out why manicured lawns and concrete pathways aren't everybody's idea of fun

For Farhat Basheer, the best days of his childhood were spent playing with his gang in the local *maidan*, where the star attraction was not a swing set or see-saws but a large chunk of oddly-shaped rock. Each day, Basheer would cast the rock in different roles — a fortress to be conquered, a ship of pirates, or record the insects and plants in its crevices as training to be scientists. "We spent hours on that rock completely absorbed in our imaginary worlds," recalls Basheer, an exporter. His memories of those afternoons in the sun prompt him to get his nephew to the General Arun Kumar Vaidya playground where, unlike in other formal parks, there is space for him to ride his bike or just run around. "But now there are plans to develop this space as well," says Basheer wryly, "which means that soon, when I come here with my nephew, they will tell him not to run on the grass."

Located in the tony Bandra Reclamation area, the playground is a large open *maidan* flanked by trees on the periphery and soft red earth. The space has a magnetic draw for residents of the nearby upmarket buildings as well as the slums, the BMC transit camp, boys playing volleyball from the *gaathan* and *bais* walking to and from work. On most evenings and all day on Sundays, the ground is ablaze with colour and energy, as different 'clubs' engage in thrilling contests, somehow maintaining the tacit boundaries between each other's 'zones'. One of these is the Bindaas Cricket Club, captained by Khan Rehbar, or Raja, who was recently elected the local municipal councillor. "I grew up playing on this ground," he says. "It is a resource for everyone — you can see barefoot kids playing cricket with homemade stumps next to children in fancy sportswear and Nikes kicking a football."

Late last year, residents noticed a fence coming up around the playground as well as security guards on the periphery. "When we made enquiries, I was told that the area now 'belonged' to the Mumbai Educational Trust (MET), who would be developing it," says Basheer. In fact, the MET was granted the responsibility of maintaining the municipal ground by a Bombay High Court direction to the BMC in 2006, in response to a petition filed by the Trust, "pure-

ly for the purpose of protecting the said open space." An educational foundation that combines academic reach with political clout, the MET's sprawling campus adjoins the playground. In its petition to the Bombay High Court, MET agreed to construct a compound wall and provide 24-hour security to "prevent misuse or encroachment." And stated that it would be willing to "construct a tennis court, a cricket pitch, and jogging track on the playground at its own cost." While some residents have welcomed the move to more formal facilities, for many users of this playground, it is the beginning of the end for yet another place of

freewheeling play.

"There is a city-wide trend towards concretising playgrounds and imposing formal structures on them on the pretext of beautification," says Naresh Fernandes, editor, *Time Out Mumbai*. The result, he says, has been the end of traditional childhood pastimes which need imagination as well as space. "The talk is always of improving these *maidans*," says Navtej Bhutani, an independent researcher on urban issues, "but the plans are usually based on an adult idea of what children want."

To bear out this idea, Bhutani collaborated with child rights NGO Janagrata to conduct a



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Our kids don't want any tracks and courts. They just want the ground to be maintained as it is. How much money does that take?"

Khan Rehbar, municipal councillor

Sunil Karve, founder trustee & vice chairman, MET

What are the plans for the playground?

We plan to make a tennis court, cricket pitch, a jogging track, grounds for *kabaddi* and volleyball. And maybe a movable basketball court.

Were the residents consulted on these plans?

Yes, they were. Originally there were no plans for volleyball but we added that since some local boys asked for it. The idea is to make the residents happy and to improve their health.

Some people want that it should be left as an open, unstructured space.



That's how it will be — in the middle it will be all open space.

They say it should be left as it is.

We can't please everyone. We have made a commitment to the High Court to create these facilities.

Will there be entry restrictions?

It will be open to the public. There will have to be restricted timing, because the court has asked us to protect the ground.

There has been talk about MET getting preferential access for functions and parking?

Those are imaginary things. We have improved the ground a lot, in the future it will get even better.

survey in the playground. "We interviewed playground users aged 6 to 20 years from across all social classes" says Deepak Dhapat, survey coordinator. The results were emphatically one-sided. "Nearly 60 per cent of the children said they had been playing at the ground all their lives, and did not have an alternative space they could use every day," says Dhapat. "Over 70 per cent wanted their playground to be left as it is."

"They [authorities] 'developed' the ground we used to play in earlier near SV Road also," says Ehtesham Ali, 7, who works in a local bakery and comes to the Arun Kumar Vaidya playground with his friends to play cricket on his day off. "Since then, we are not allowed to enter it. I guess the same thing will happen here." Sunil Karve, founder trustee and vice-chairman of MET, insists that "public access will be ensured and no entrance fees will be charged from anyone." (see box) But, says Ali, even if he does get past the security guards, he will have no use for the facilities in the upgraded ground. "We don't want to do jogging or tennis," he says. "We want to play." Agrees Athrva Sankhe, 9, who plays football with his team. "They say they will make it really nice but then if we're not allowed to just run around, then what's the point?" He doesn't like the idea of the landscape being smothered with asphalt. "The best thing to do with the ground is to plant lots of grass over it," he says "and then leave it alone."

That is easier said than done, however, in space-starved Mumbai. "What is happening in this playground is a reflection of a larger, city-wide process," says Bhutani, "where our public spaces are being turned into cookie-cutter playgrounds—with the same manicured lawns and concrete pathways—for the elite to hang out in. But without access to unhampered open space, what will kids like these with all their energy?" she asks, gesturing towards where Ali and his friends are finishing their raucous game of cricket. For the boys themselves however, such issues are too far into the future to cause concern. "We will be back next Sunday," says Ali, walking out with his bat perched on his small shoulders jauntily, "if they let us in".

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URBAN WOLF

The munchurian candidates

Of all the "outsiders" who have settled in Mumbai over the years and had the temerity to pass themselves off as Mumbaikars, perhaps the most low key are the enterprising Chinese migrants who came some 60 years ago and set up beauty parlours, shoe shops and the much beloved Chinese restaurants.



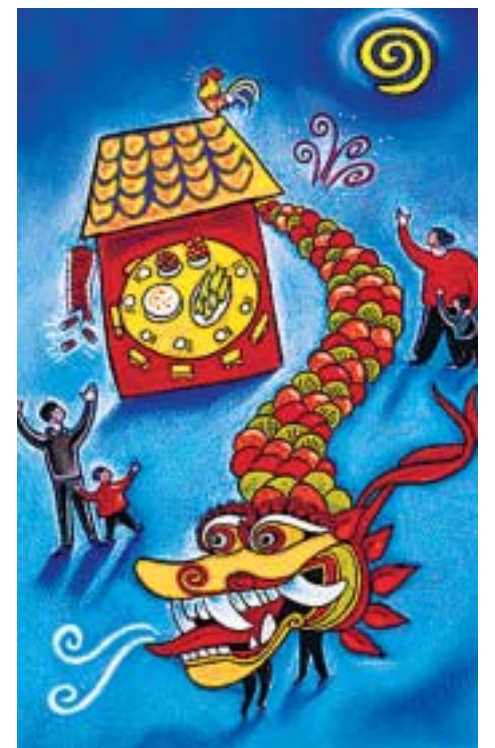
Fahad K Samaar

Nanking, Mandarin, Fredericks, Kamling, Ssi Hai were more than mere restaurants — they were Mumbai institutions where generations of Mumbaivallahs first sampled and then grew up savouring the delights of Cantonese, Mandarin and Schezuan cuisine.

The more knowledgeable city gastronomes ordered Singapore crabs and delicately flavoured steamed pomfret whilst the middle class, who knew no better, merrily walloped sweet corn chicken soup, hakka noodles and chicken manchurian in generic red-walled restaurants with precariously dangling paper lanterns and fading oriental tapestries.

Then an upstart impresario named Nelson Wang burst onto the scene some 20 years ago and transformed the Chinese restaurant scene in the city forever with the opening of his super swish, China Garden at Kemps Corner.

Apart from cuisine that intrinsically appealed to the Indian palate, Nelson also offered an upmarket ambience, fancy tableware and attentive service. Personally attending to the gastronomical whimsies of his wealthy patrons, Nelson began the cult of the celebrity restaurateur in this city. Then, in a master stroke of genius, he opened the Piano Bar lounge adjacent to his restaurant and made it hugely aspirational for Mumbaikars to be allowed entry there.



The second generation of Chinese restaurateurs like Baba Ling and Henry Tham who grew up in Mumbai realised that in this rapidly transforming cityscape they would have to renovate and re-invent their parent's legacy in order to survive. And thus were born the upscale Ling's Pavilion and Henry Tham's

He shortlisted the most prominent women of the city and gave them complimentary membership to this exclusive lounge bar. His little 'litchis', as he called them. Film stars, industrialists, sportsmen, celebrities of every kind aspired to be seen there and Nelson's investment paid rich dividends as he had the city's rich and famous literally eating out of his hand.

The second generation of Chinese restaurateurs like Baba Ling and Henry Tham who grew up in Mumbai realised that in this rapidly-transforming cityscape they would have to renovate and re-invent their parent's legacy in order to survive. And thus were born the upscale Ling's Pavilion and Henry Tham's. The old Chinese restaurateurs who couldn't afford to upgrade eventually shut shop as Indian entrepreneurs and 5-star hotels also got into the lucrative game of serving up Chinese cuisine even if it bordered on being distinctly Sino-Ludhianvi. Last week Nelson Wang opened a sprawling branch of China Garden in Khar to cater to hungry suburban hordes with high disposable incomes.

I had a drink with him at the Piano Bar and briefly met his bright son who has recently returned to Mumbai after schooling in Switzerland. Most of the successful Chinese restaurateurs I know have given their kids the finest international education that money can buy and they all have returned to take over the empires that their families have so painstakingly built.

It will be interesting to see what this third generation of Chinese migrants does with their parent's legacy. Meanwhile, Mumbaikars happily munch on.

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ON THE MOVE

Train of thought

Reading a worldly, intelligent book on a local is not going to win you any friends. Switch to some lighter fare, says Aastha Atray Banan



—Shailesh Warang

There is nothing that says you're 'intelligent' quite like the book you are reading. And when travelling on a Mumbai local, the literature you boast could immediately elevate your standing in the eyes of your esteemed co-passengers, or it could make you an eyesore. If you are one of those who likes to read a book even when squashed on all sides, holding it above the sea of heads and squinting to read in the shade of the hands holding on to the overhead strap, well, we have to hand it to you.

First, there is no space for most of us to even wipe the snot off our noses or scratch that itch in places we can't see as we are thrust into a crowded local. And there you are, reading your book with obliviousness and an obvious condescension, not to mention a superior

sense of brilliance. And as people mill about you in discomfort, they are greeted by a disgruntled look as your book slides a centimeter off your fingers.

Now don't get me wrong. It's not as if I have never tried to show-off my above average brains through a book. Till a few months ago, I was in the habit of carrying books that no one would have even heard of. So if one day it was Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick*, the next day it was John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. But when I saw my fellow passengers' eyes glaze over with boredom when they saw my books, I gave up. What was the use of reading a book when there was not even a flicker of recognition? Damn!

Let's move on to the books you read. It's easy to spot the differ-

ence between a fake and a genuine reader. A favourite with the obvious fake book aficionado is *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts. The book has far too many pages for our trains. The other favourites include *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth and even, God have mercy, Ayn Rand's magnum opus *Atlas Shrugged*. At approximately 645,000 words, it's one of the longest and heaviest novels ever written in any European language. I wonder how anyone even manages to hold on to it while balancing on one toe, sandwiched between an angry local aunty and the college student, whose wild, curly hair are poking your face.

No book readers were hurt during the process of writing this article.