

Analysing the Urban Quality of Upper Bazaar: A Key Public Realm in Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract: This paper presents the qualitative analysis of ‘Upper Bazaar’, a key public realm of Hamirpur, a small hill town in the state Himachal Pradesh, India. The analysis is based on primary visual surveys, which were undertaken to determine the present-day building and land-use distribution, condition of the building stock, condition of open / un-built spaces, type and quality of open spaces, presence / absence of trees and, the temporal activity pattern of the chosen study area. A questionnaire-based, random survey was also conducted to get the users’ feedback on their experiences of the public realm as well as to know their aspirations from the place. The study reveals that the success of ‘Upper Bazaar’ depends solely on its vivid and varied activity patterns, while it lacks appropriate physical conveniences and visual appeal. The study brought into focus the urgent need for preparing suitable urban design guidelines and development controls, taking into consideration the aspirations, need and priorities of all stakeholders, so as to ensure its long term vitality, viability and vibrancy.

Keywords: Hill town; Public Realm; Qualitative Analysis; Visual Survey; Stakeholders; Urban Design Guidelines: Development Controls.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Public Realm of a town consists of all exterior places like the promenades, pathways, plazas, courts, linkages, gardens and parks which, regardless of ownership, are physically and/or visually accessible to all sections of people. The Public Realm may also have evolved as a series of destinations that are connected by a network of roads and pedestrian pathways (White, 1999). In effect, the Public Realm of a town consists of the places which are frequently visited by the people to fulfill their need, desires and, also to rejuvenate

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themselves. Public Realm has room-like stability of shape and proportion, with tangible and intangible spatial characteristics. The quality of Public Realm can affect the quality of people's life in many ways (Beck, 2009). Often, it can be seen that people take great pride by associating themselves with a public place of distinct character, even using such places to identify themselves (Cheshmehzangi, 2012), and cherish the moments of being there. The various qualities and aspects of public places, with their benefits, have been discussed in detail by the author in a previous publication (Sarkar, 2008).

Physical and visual surveys are valuable tools in recording the inherent character and quality of a public realm, and can also be very useful in identifying critical issues and for framing policies and plans for any future course of action that may be needed to maintain the viability, delight and vitality of the place (Blaenau Gwent, UK & Westtorrens, Australia reports). This paper presents the qualitative analysis of 'Upper Bazaar, the most popular public realm of Hamirpur, a hill town in Himachal Pradesh, India. The findings are based on on-site surveys conducted by the author during the month of April, 2014.

2. THE STUDY AREA AND ITS CONTEXT

The Geographic Context: A part of the western Himalayan region of India, Hamirpur town lies at 31.68° North latitude, 76.52° East longitude, with an altitude of 765 meters above mean sea level. It lies on the Shimla-Kangra national highway (NH-88), and is well connected by roads with all other district-headquarter towns of the State and other neighbouring States of India¹ (Fig. 1). The town has a sub-tropical climate with an average annual rainfall of about 124.8 cm. It is quite hot in summers, while winters cold with occasional fog. The temperature varies from 42°C in summers to 5°C in winters. July-September are the monsoon months (DP-Hamirpur, 2004).

Historical Background and Administrative Status: The settlement in Hamirpur town has a long path of evolution. History tells us that the present town of Hamirpur got its name from King Hamirchand of the Katoch dynasty who ruled Kangra from 1700 CE to 1740 CE. Other key rulers of the region include Raja Sansar Chand (1775 - 1823 CE), after whose reign the Sikhs were in control till 1846. Thereafter, the region became a part of British Empire, included in the Kangra District of Punjab. The town become a tehsil headquarter of Kangra district in the year 1888. After independence (in 1947), in the year 1971, a separate Hamirpur District was formed through trifurcation

¹ The road distance of Hamirpur town from Dharamshala, Chandigarh and the Indian capital New Delhi is 80 km, 210 km and 460 km respectively.

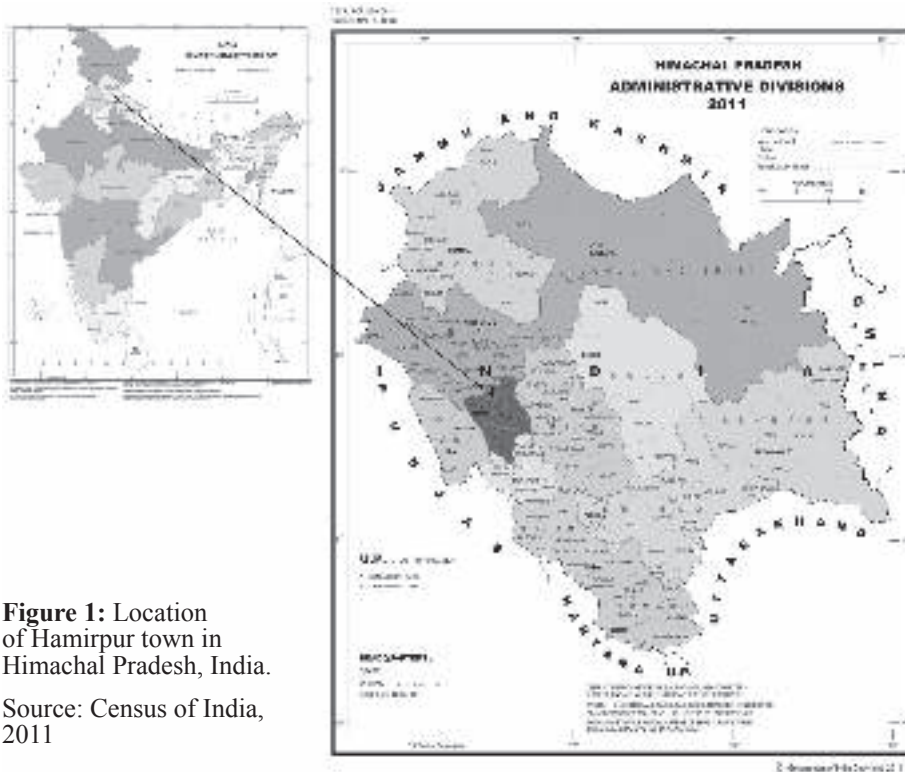


Figure 1: Location of Hamirpur town in Himachal Pradesh, India.

Source: Census of India, 2011

of the then Kangra District into Kangra, Hamirpur and Una Districts. On September 1, 1972, Hamirpur town was made the district headquarter of the new Hamirpur District². Today's Hamirpur town is spread over an area of 5.20 sq. km. It is classified as a 'Class IV town' with a population of 17,604 persons, and a population density of 3,385.4 persons/sq.km.³, making it one of the most densely populated area in Himachal Pradesh. The town has been governed by the Municipal Council since 1968, and now consists of 11 wards, represented by 11 elected Municipal councilors, and three nominated councilors.

Following its designation as a 'District Headquarter' in 1972, Hamirpur witnessed a rapid growth of development and construction activities. The growth pattern indicates that transit-oriented, ribbon development occurred along the national highway (NH-88) which passes through the town, with commercial activity getting increasingly concentrated along the transit corridors (Fig. 2).

² Himachal Pradesh is divided into 12 administrative districts.

³ Source: Census of India, 2011

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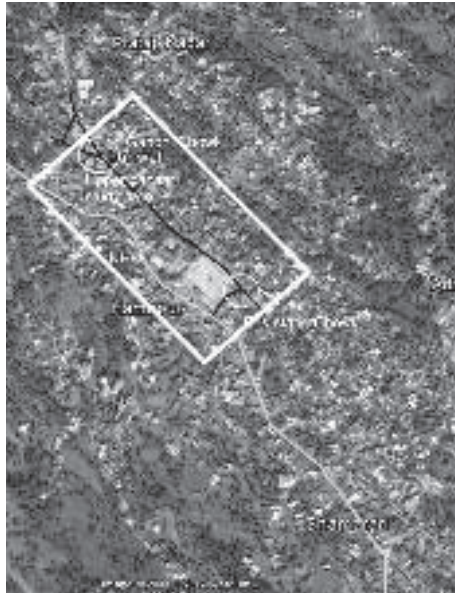


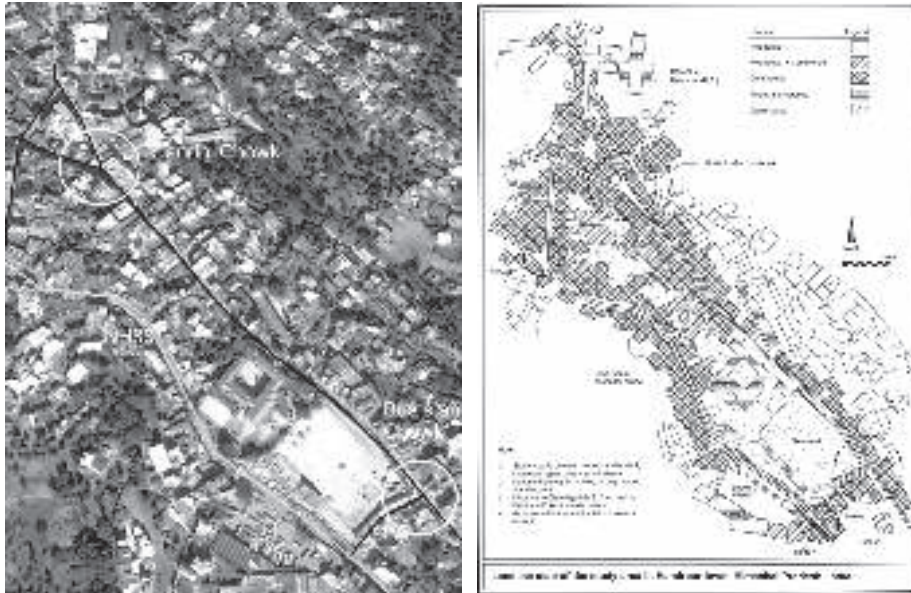
Figure 2 (Left): Morphology of Hamirpur town. Source: Google Earth Map. [Accessed: August 8, 2014]

Figure 3a (Right): Morphology of the StudyArea. Source: Google Earth Map. [Accessed: August 8, 2014]

Figure 3b (Far Right): Landuse pattern of the StudyArea. (Source: Graphic by the Author)

Over the years, the town has become a major centre for commerce, trade, tourism, and transport of the Hamirpur District and the state of Himachal Pradesh, as also the administrative headquarters of many public and private offices. In addition, Hamirpur town has acquired the status of a high-quality education hub of the State of Himachal Pradesh, comprising many schools, coaching centres, training institutes, polytechnics and, an engineering institute of national importance and, thus, draws scholars from all over India. Hamirpur town has experienced rapid pace of urbanisation since its designation as a district headquarter, with increasing investments in retail and wholesale trade, commerce, as well as in the education sector. The boom in economic activities and in the education sector has resulted in more influx of capital investments, especially in retail trade and commerce, in turn generating wealth and multifold job opportunities for the residents. All this has led to a large mass of haphazard, uncontrolled building activity, particularly outside the municipal limits falling along the major transit corridors.

To curb this trend, the Government constituted the 'Hamirpur Planning Area', consisting of Hamirpur Municipal town and 13 villages covering an area of 913 hectares, under 'Himachal Pradesh Town and Country Planning Act, 1977' of May 30, 1984. The first 'Development Plan for Hamirpur Planning Area' was approved by the Government on July 1, 1994. Subsequently, after observing the tendency of people to carry out building work beyond



the notified 'Planning Area' and along the major roads, the Government of Himachal Pradesh re-constituted the 'Hamirpur Planning Area' on January 28, 1997, enlarging its ambit to Hamirpur Municipal town and 81 surrounding villages to ensure regulated and planned development over an area of 3710 hectares. Subsequently, in 2004, yet another 'Revised Development Plan for Hamirpur Planning Area' was prepared.

3. THE STUDY AREA

The study area is demarcated by the rectangular box on the map of Hamirpur town in Fig. 2. It comprises the 'Upper Bazaar' road, (from Node 1 around 'Gandhi Chowk' to Node 2 around 'Bus-stand Chowk'), and runs almost parallel to the national highway, NH- 88 (passing through Node 3, known as 'Dev Pal Chowk', and Node 4, known as 'ISBT Chowk'). The length of the study area is more than 1 km and the width is primarily 2 plots deep on either side of the road (Fig. 3a, 3b). This urban corridor forms the major public realm of Hamirpur town, consisting of a mix of heterogenous activities all contributing to the public and economic life of the town. Morphologically, the study area is a linear structure centred around the 'Upper Bazaar' (between Node 1 and Node 2), with a network of transverse lanes connecting the parallel land parcels to it. This central road and its lanes act as spine and arteries respectively to provide lifeline to this public realm.

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The detailed landuse pattern and other qualities of the public realm in the study area, as found from the physical survey, will be discussed in the following paragraphs. The discussion will also reveal that the development activities in the study area have not taken place in the desired coherent manner. The study points to a development pattern caused and dominated mainly by the market economy, as in the case of Hamirpur town itself.

4. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

The study area, as already stated, is from Node 1 near ‘Gandhi Chowk’ to Node 2 near the current bus stand in Hamirpur town (Fig. 3a, 3b). The primary objective of the study, which was conducted in April 2014, was to analyse the quality of the major public realm in Hamirpur, and determine indicators and parameters for its enhancement. The tools used by the author include visual and other field surveys. Visual surveys helped to record the present-day building-use and land-use distribution, condition of the existing building stock, type and quality of open/ un-built spaces, condition of open / un-built spaces, presence / absence of trees and the temporal activity pattern in the study area.

An on-site questionnaire-based random survey was also conducted to assess users’ perceptions of the area, as well as the evolution of the place (written records not being available). Additional data was collected from secondary sources. Also, the ‘imageability’ of the public realm of the study area, as perceived by the people, was analysed in terms of the five elements identified by Kevin Lynch -- namely path, node, landmark, edge and district (Lynch, 1960). Since the public realm in the study area has grown organically through accretion, largely built by the owners themselves without any major intervention by planning or design professionals, it was expected that the result of the qualitative analysis would reveal the aspirations of the people, which subsequently may be taken into consideration for any future intervention to strengthen and enhance the quality of the study area.

To begin with, the respondents -- randomly selected 50 individuals -- were informed and sensitised about the purpose of the survey. Their names, sex, and address of the respondent were noted to attract their attention to the survey. The questionnaire survey sheet had 12 questions divided into 4 tabular parts. The first part comprised questions to establish understanding of usage pattern of the study area, including the number of visits made per week by the respondent, their impression and visual experiences of the place as compared to other market places they may have visited, issues of walkability, safety and other issues of pedestrian & environmental comfort, existing plantation, condition of the road and other public infrastructure, etc. The second part



Figure 4 : The pavilion at ‘Gandhi Chowk’- a landmark of Hamirpur town.

presented a variety of possible future images from which the respondent was asked to choose one. The third part asked the respondent to nominate the most important and well-known area in the stretch so as to determine a focal point for development. The last and the fourth part asked the respondents to list the major problems experienced by them so as to match them with / cross-check the veracity of the issues identified during visual survey. The findings from this primary questionnaire survey and the visual survey were used to bring out the existing urban design quality of the public realm of the study area, and then to propose future course of action and/or interventions necessary to strengthen and enhance the vibrancy of the public realm.

5. RESULTS FROM THE FIELD-SURVEY

Land-use Distribution in the Study Area

The building-use / land-use as shown in Fig. 3b, is heterogeneous and of ‘fine grain’. Node 1, the ‘Gandhi Chowk’, is characterized solely by commercial establishments, banks, high-end shops, restaurants, cinema halls located along the roads meeting at the chowk. A pavilion created there is considered as a ‘landmark’ by the local people who take pride in it (Fig. 4). In contrast, Node 2, the ‘Bus-stand Chowk’, is surrounded by small shops selling clothes and garments, fruits, vegetables, gift items, etc. More commercial establishments are to be found on either side of ‘Bazaar Street’, the central spine. Residential buildings are situated behind these commercial structures.

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Figure 5: View of the Government School's playground used for cultural activities.



Figure 6: Use of modern materials in new constructions in the study area

There are also buildings with mixed use, with shops on the ground floors and residences on upper levels. The 7 meter wide and a kilometer long spine gives connection and continuity to all uses and holds together the public realm. Along this, are also located important public buildings like the Town Hall, Municipal Office, Post Office, a school and, a playground. The survey brought out the absence of organized public parks in the study area. The only blessing is the playground of the Government Senior Secondary School, which is maintained by the H.P. State Education Department, and is used to organize cultural events such as *Hamir Utsav*, *Holi*, *Dusshera*, etc. (Fig. 5). However, very few trees were found along the main 'spine' of the study area .



Figure 7: Deteriorating condition of Tehsil office in Hamirpur town, H.P.

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Figure 8: Dilapidated condition of Land Revenue office in Hamirpur town, H.P.



Figure 9: View of the Town Hall, showing good architectural quality



Figure 10: View of the Government Senior Secondary School with good architectural quality

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Figure 11 (Left top): View of the narrow lanes in the study area



Figure 12 (Left bottom): View of the seating area, which is not maintained properly.

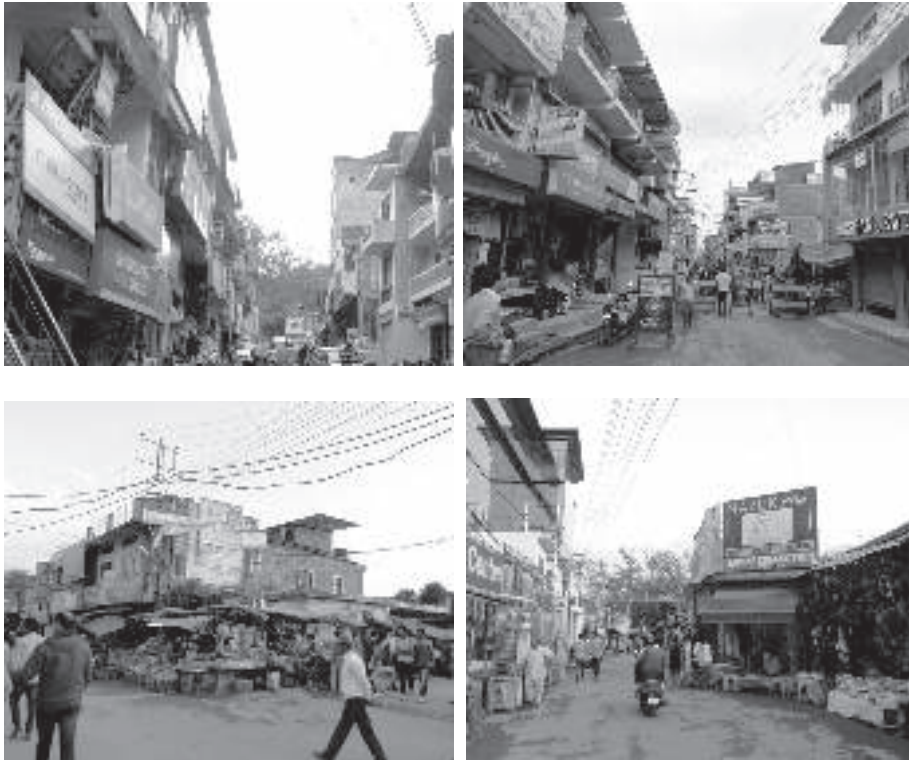
Figure 13, 14 (Right top): View of the large commercial activities around Node 1

Figure 15, 16 (Right bottom): View of the small to medium commercial activities around Node 2

5.1 Condition of Built, Open and Un-built Spaces

Most buildings in the study area are two to three floors high and were constructed during last 10-20 years, using a reinforced cement concrete (RCC) frame structure. All possible 'modern' construction materials, including glass curtain walls, have been used (Fig. 6). Some of the old public buildings are not in a good condition and require maintenance (Fig. 7, 8). A few public buildings, like the Town Hall and Government Senior Secondary School, designed by the professionals, shows better upkeep and quality (Fig. 9, 10).

Open and un-built spaces in the study area are in the form of narrow lanes and alleys connecting the interior lots with the main 'spine' (Fig. 11), a few parcels of plots where old constructions have been brought down to construct new buildings in RCC, open spaces in public buildings, and the parking areas, which are found insufficient due to high vehicle ownership. A few kiosks with benches have been provided for seating along the spine at intervals, but they are ill-maintained, and some are getting damaged (Fig. 12).



5.2 Activity Pattern in the Study Area

The activity pattern around Node 1 (Gandhi Chowk) and Node 2 (Bus-stand Chowk) is seen in Figs. 13 and 14. As stated, high end and large commercial establishment are located near Node 1. In contrast, grocery, fruit, vegetable, and small eating joints are located near Node 2 (Fig. 15, 16). But, since the large playground with seating gallery and public offices are located near Node 2, it is a popular destination for leisure activities like sitting, playing, etc. The study area has good mix of various activities. It draws a variety of people who make frequent visits for shopping of all necessary items, eating, strolling and window-shopping, leisure activities, recreation, and also for social meetings. The vivid activities of the public place enrich everyone and make the visit an enjoyable, refreshing and memorable experience. Vehicular access is restricted in the market area during the peak hours in morning and evening, giving the users a safe and walkable public place. This public realm was found to be vibrant and vivid with activities both during day and evening (Fig. 17, 18).

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Figure 17: Bustling day-time activities



Figure 18: View during evening.



Figure 19, 20: View of the skyline and building facades found in the study area

Visual, Physical and Use Quality of Study Area's Public Realm The analysis of the existing visual and physical design quality of the public realm in the study area was restricted to characteristics of the skyline and building facades. The findings are summarily presented in Figs. 17, 18, 19 and 20. It can be seen that the skyline of this public realm is scratched with all sorts of service wires. The building facades have no continuity and sometimes lack legibility. In the absence of proper design guidelines, the skyline and building facades of the study area seems to be missing a great opportunity to become a quality destination place for local people and visitors alike. The local user (respondents) has shown great propensity for adopting better urban design features, if presented to them in a viable manner. The study has also revealed that aspirations and perseverance of people can create a public realm, filled with jostling activities, out of a market place. The greater the number of people who visit a public place; the more would the local economy grow and create more income and job opportunities.



Figure 21: View of the skyline and building facades found in the study area

One can become rejuvenated by taking a stroll and pause through this market road, soaking in the energy flowing through this ‘spine’. The market road of the study area is a free-flowing organic public place without any boundary and separate districts. Activities are taking place around the nodes and also along the path. Each point on this path acts as destination for their activities. So, the ‘pathway’ of the market takes people from destination to destination giving them an enjoyable experience.

The findings from the questionnaire survey have led to the following observations regarding the users’ perceptions. Most respondents were fairly frequent visitors to the study area and considered Node 1, the ‘Gandhi Chowk’ as the most important and best-known area in Hamirpur town. The foremost problem highlighted by the people -- as also witnessed during the Visual Survey -- was inconvenience and anxiety caused by chaotic vehicular movements and the lack of segregation of vehicular and pedestrian paths. Other aspects of pedestrian comfort, such as provision of shady trees, adequate seating areas and street lights, covering of unsightly and smelly drains, etc. came next. While

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most respondents rated the Study Area in comparison to other market places as ‘above average’, they were, nevertheless, conscious of the visual anarchy created by disorderly manner in which new buildings were being constructed, and the shop signs, banners and hoardings were hung, and expressed the desire for better development controls (Fig. 21).

The result of the above analysis shows that the public realm of the study area has been able to create a positive image in people’s mind over time and that it is evidently growing with economic opportunities of present time. The place, however, requires preparation and implementation of urban design guidelines, along with ensuring strict adherence to the existing development control rules, to shape its future growth with cultural, social, ecological, economical, and spatial sustenance.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Most scholars have emphasized that every public realm should have a ‘sense of place’ (Tibbalds, 1992). The ‘sense of place’ depends on mainly two concerns; one is sociological and the other psychological. The first one is connected to the identity of a person in the society, and the second one is related to the sense of one’s belonging to a region and a regional culture. The first concern should be addressed through the ‘imageability’ and legibility of built forms, and the second concern should be dealt with the environmental and cultural impact of built forms with reference to local context. This approach should make any intervention more meaningful and acceptable to public. Architecturally, the public realm should encompass a dynamic relationship between open spaces and surrounding built environment.

Any successful public realm should be well defined, providing a sense of arrival and a culminating experience. It must be sensual. All our senses should be aroused and invoked to feel and enjoy the spaces in many ways. To be in the public realm should be a multi-dimensional experience. Views, sounds, scents, textures, tastes, movement, time in the public realm must create holistic memories for everyone.

The development authorities should prepare proper urban design guidelines, in the form of density control, sky-line, façade control, proper pedestrian design, creating more greenery, and vehicular control, for this public place to ensure that it keeps on growing and function smoothly with vitality and vibrancy to give people a quality public realm. While preparing the guidelines and making interventions to rejuvenate the public place, the aspirations, needs and priorities of the stake-holders should be kept in mind (Hague & Jenkins, 2005). Any future vision for this public place must be

shared with all the stake-holders, so that more creative solutions will emerge and the implementation will become more viable and acceptable to all. Local architects, urban designers, landscape architects, engineers, and other professionals should also contribute by extending their expertise to realize the aspirations of the people in a holistic manner. All solutions should be practical, flexible and built on existing successes. Above all, people should be empowered to actively participate in shaping their public realm to ensure commitment from all the stakeholders.

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