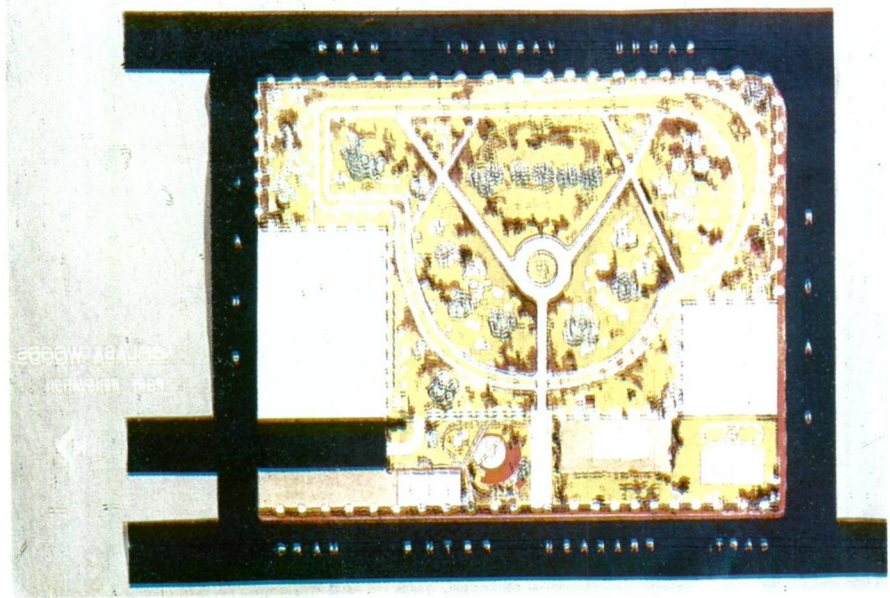


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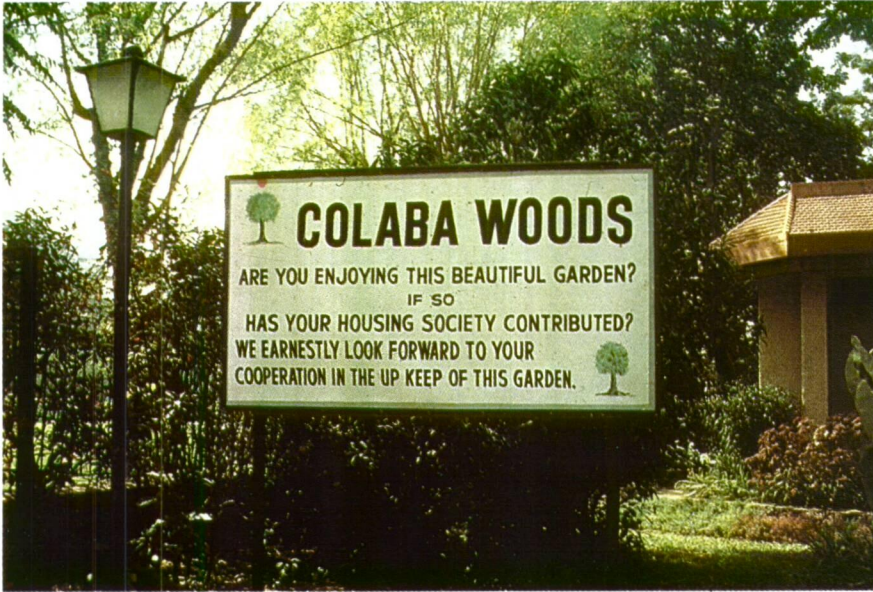
## FROM WASTELAND TO A GREEN HAVEN

Archt. Brinda Somaya

Aldo van Eyck was a firm believer in the principle that it is devilishly hard to combine, let alone reconcile, that task of an architect with his involvement in the sociopolitical sphere, and equally hard to be loyal to both at once; loyal in such a way that one sustains the other, instead of thwarting or distorting it. Shattering such myths, the Colaba Woods and Sports Complex project stands as a testimony to the intense personal involvement of architects and concerned citizens in giving back to the community, while enhancing the built environment in a way that only architecture can. In today's world, architecture does not end with the built form – architects have the power to shape the environment, they have the power to give society the framework for a way of life. Continuing along this ideology, the Colaba woods project is a perfect example of how architectural planning was able to resurrect seemed to be a barren wasteland and transform it into the locality's very own oxygen plant-nurturing and rejuvenating downtown Mumbai.

For a long time, the Colaba Woods was described using the most degrading terms-garbage dump, bane of the vicinity and an eyesore being just a few. Brinda Somaya, a key player in the conversion of this wasteland into a green haven in the concrete jungle of Mumbai's Cuffe Parade, herself confesses to driving past it as quickly as possible just to avoid being confronted by the "beleaguered mess". Originally a refuse dump, this 8-acre plot had a number of hutments and a couple of PWD (Public Works Department) employee's quarters on it. Determined to overcome the bureaucratic inertia preventing the use of this land for recreation and more constructive purposes, the citizens of the locality along with the Tata Electric Companies leased the area from the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC). They then approached Mrs. Somaya, who held a firm belief that the need of the hour was and still is the environment. As she has eloquently stated, "Environmental protection is everybody's concern, and as citizen's we are being subjected

Designer-  
Archt. BRINDA SOMAYA



to a fast deteriorating environment. Parallel action is necessary to ameliorate the harmful effects of ecological imbalance. The urgency for city planners to provide parks and open spaces in residential areas in future development schemes cannot be overstated". This dream was soon fulfilled-where there was a dumping ground, there now stands a pristine park which, to use an oft repeated clichés, is truly of the people, by the people and for the people. The park caters to a wide spectrum of users, from the residents of the posh high-rises of Cuffe Parade to the office goers in the nearly business district and to the underprivileged slum dwellers, Colaba Woods has come to be a veritable melting pot for people of all ages and from all walks of life.



Breaking free from the architect's traditional role, Mrs. Somaya has gone beyond buildings to work on this project that has transformed the lives of the Colaba and Cuffe Parade residents. The Colaba Woods project personifies her belief that architects must be seen by the public as guardians and pay attention to local needs and community interests, and become proactive. Managing with the land available and designing the park to fit into existing buildings, was a challenge one. Careful planning ensured that every bit of space was used as efficiently as possible, while trying to incorporate all the needs and requirements of the people living around it.



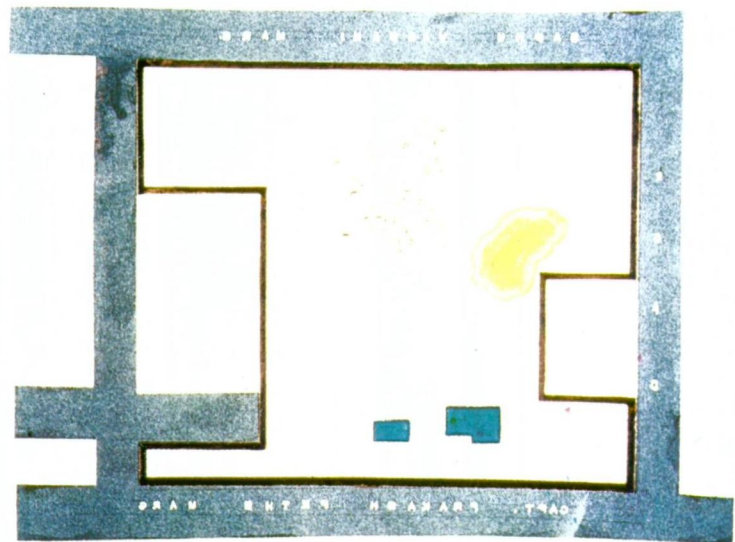
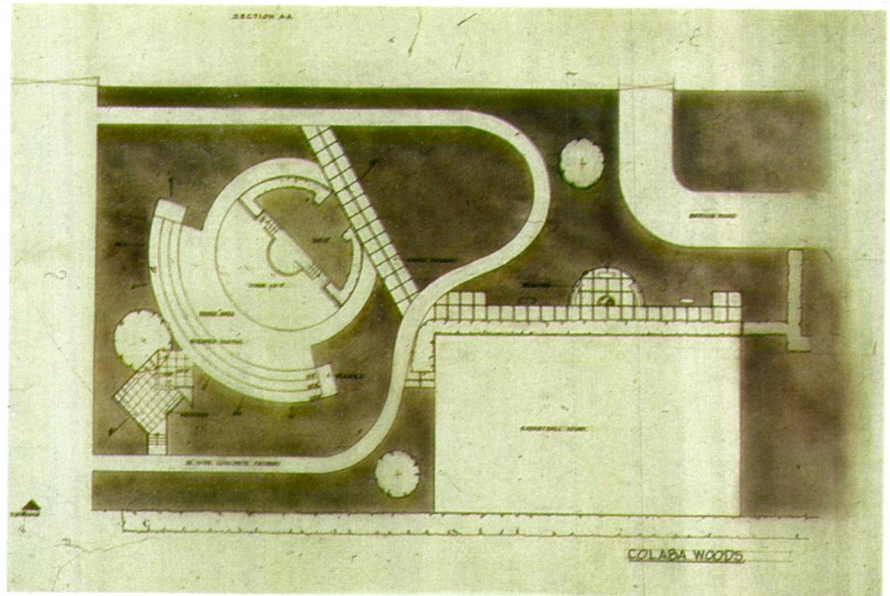
Upon entering the Woods, you are greeted by a terracotta-tiled watchman's hut and a signboard urging the residents of the locality to contribute to the maintenance of the facilities. A broad concrete pathway lined with bricks leads you further into the Woods, winding its way through the gardens and lawns. Once in the heart of the Colaba Woods, you can hardly be blamed for losing touch with reality that is the polluted, crowded city of Mumbai. The same city that is ridden with garbage and beggars is responsible for keeping the Colaba

Woods utterly spotless—the citizens themselves take the responsibility of looking after their park.

The immaculate green lawns are enhanced by an amazing variety of rare flowering plants that, add an abundance of colour to the gardens. Shade trees are placed in clusters and in rows to give maximum shade. A sillage water system for watering the garden has been installed, as had a sprinkler system for the lawns and the plants. The Woods are home to over 200 species of trees and rare plants, in addition to a wide variety of birds and insects. The plants are indigenous and help educate the children about plant life that is hard to find in the city of Mumbai. A team of accomplished and knowledgeable horticulturists from the Tata Electric Company is responsible for ensuring that the plants are well looked after and that the park is always green.

Being the lung of the locality is just one of the many benefits that the Colaba Woods offer to the residents of the area. The jogger's track and the walker's track winding their way through the lawns and the trees provide fitness fanatics a clean outdoor alternative in a city where space and fresh air are extremely hard to come by. More than 80 well maintained benches are strategically placed along the walkway, making this an ideal place for some rest and relaxation, away from the bustling city outside. The most significant contribution of Coloba Woods is its contribution in the social sphere; At one end of the Woods is an amphitheatre which has the capacity to seat fifty people, and is now used as a venue by various NGOs to address issues of social importance such as drug addiction and AIDS. It is also a popular place for the staging of various plays and shows.

Children, especially those who are underprivileged are certainly not forgotten in this park. A covered reader's corner, with comfortable



benches and tables is illuminated after dark and provide them with convenient, and safe places for study. Basketball courts, an open space to play football, and a children's playground are just some of the child-friendly features of the Woods. Apart from these facilities, the children also learn the importance of caring for the environment and looking after public properly.

The day to day management of the Colaba Woods is looked after by a trust that was established in 1987, The trust was established for the sole purpose of maintaining the park and carrying out improvements that the citizens feel will enhance their park. The Tata Electric Company and the Lions Club of Cuffe Parade nominate the trustees. Funds for the upkeep of the Colaba Woods are raised through corporate funding and voluntary donations from the actual users of the park. Additional funding for the maintenance of the Colaba Woods is provided by the interest generated by a Corpus Fund created by the Tata Electric Companies.

No fee is charged for the use of the park so as to enable all strata of society to equally enjoy the facilities offered, although this move was earlier criticized and opposed as it would allow slum dwellers to enter the park and possibly dirty it. Today it is truly a melting pot where you can find people from all walks of life, side by side, with no damage done to any of the facilities or the plants. As Mrs. Somaya remarked, "I am happy to tell you that after ten years; we have had absolutely no problem. Nobody hurts the park; not a single tree has been cut; I often see the poorer children pickup the occasional plastic bag dropped by children from the more sophisticated buildings around. It is a process that has evolved. We have worked with the people around to enable this to happen. It has also worked as a catalyst, and that's why such projects are important". The efforts of architects and citizens to improve the quality of the environment



and provide residents with a better quality of life has not gone unnoticed- the Colaba Wood and Sports Complex has received the Urban Heritage Award in 1989 from the Indian Heritage Society and the Bombay Civic Chapter Award in 1994.

The Colaba Woods project acted as a catalyst for similar citizen initiated projects all over the city, starting a new trend in the urban planning of Mumbai. A forerunner in the sphere of citizen-run parks, this project has come to symbolize the efforts of the citizens of Mumbai in giving back a little to society and the environment through detailed architectural planning.

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