

28<sup>th</sup> January 2021



***Indian Society of Landscape Architects (ISOLA) has been keenly following the developments on the redevelopment of the Central Vista.***

***Based on the details available in the public domain, we submit the professional views of the landscape architecture fraternity on this issue for your kind consideration.***

### **ISOLA STANCE ON THE CENTRAL VISTA LANDSCAPE**

ISOLA is concerned about the design approach to the Central Vista. An endeavor of this magnitude needs to reflect ecological stewardship in its planning and design, resource consciousness in detailing and materiality, and use of innovative research and technology to create a benchmark of best practices for India and the world.

We reiterate that this project, in its public transparency, design, implementation and maintenance sets precedence for similar projects in India in the future.

ISOLA strongly recommends further consideration of the proposed design, thorough examination by multi-disciplinary experts, and an assessment of long term expected and unintended economic, cultural, social, architectural, and ecological impacts to ensure the best possible outcome. This will reiterate India's commitment as a signatory to the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and our aspiration for ecological stewardship of our land and resources as the world's largest democracy.

### **SIGNIFICANCE**

The way forward requires reiterating the importance of the space as a cultural landscape and historic precinct, and as an irreplaceable resource for the nation. Therefore, an endeavor of this importance, scale and aesthetic, requires safeguarding and transmitting tangible and intangible values of our urban spaces for generations to come. In the foreseeable future this space will cater to many seminal events, collective action and potentially, natural disasters. The design approach that is applied to the Central Vista is critical as it serves as a precedent, not just in transforming use and aesthetics of our built heritage, but also as a reflection of our aspiration of the way in which we are encouraging our cities to change: professionally (through data collection, documentation, analysis and assessments, planning, design and implementation), ethically with transparency, people's participation (in this case collective action with professional expertise and due process), innovatively in use of materials and equitably by balancing ecological wisdom, cultural diversity and urban development to offer our citizens a healthy urban life.

It is our mark of respect to recognize how well this space has served (continues to serve) the city and allow it to continue as the global environment faces an uncertain decade and century. For a meaningful addition to the values and functions already fulfilled by the space, we require to begin with:

- Who is this space for? Is this a symbol of our democracy, a symbol of our respect for the environment, a showcase of good practices or all the above-mentioned?
- Has the scheme considered the larger impact of the project at city, regional and national level?
- Will the Central Vista Redevelopment communicate our democratic commitment to the world or convey a top-down initiative to build more space for the functioning of the bureaucracy at a time when institutional real estate globally is the midst of mass reduction and reimagination?
- Does the landscape approach and design details address climate crises and uncertainties, COVID-like pandemics, festive crowds and restless democracy and sustainability?

## **INDIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS**

Registered under Indian Societies Act 1860 Sec. 21 No.: **Guj2557** & Bombay Trust Act 1950 Section 29 No.: **F9417**

Communication Address: 312, Chitrarath Complex, Opp. Hotel President C.G. Road, Ahmedabad 380009 (Gujarat) India  
Telefax: +91 79 40323110, Email: [isolaoffice@gmail.com](mailto:isolaoffice@gmail.com), Web: [www.isola.org.in](http://www.isola.org.in)



- How will this approach impact the need for and value of spontaneous and informal people events/activities in a democracy and how have we considered and addressed these?
- Has the design vision reflected this global reality of climate crises and national reality of diminishing equitable healthy urban living in the master plan, site design, and crucial details at the microscale?

## LANDSCAPE APPROACH

As per the new design proposed, the character of the Central Vista will change dramatically, with significant impacts on the environment and character of Central Delhi thereby erasing the significance of this space as a vital landscape resource.

This scheme overlooks the pandemic/post pandemic global intent and action that is focused on preserving and/or restoring historic city centres, emphasizing their relevance and connectivity to the growing cities. The proposed redesign or fragmentation of the Central Vista is regrettably reductionist as a landscape approach brought in at a time when consolidation of spaces is the need of the hour. Further the lack of acknowledgement of the intangible values of this space portends the irreversible loss of a link with the people, their memories and associations.

Moving beyond national boundaries, Central Vista holds a coveted position as a historic landscape representing baroque planning principles, similar to capital cities of Canberra, Paris, and Washington DC. In New Delhi, it offers a huge opportunity to facilitate a green vision for a polluted urban centre of the world. The need today to etch the names of visionary designers in the annals of our city and nation demands an approach that connects the many green spaces with the Central Vista at its core- namely, the Ridge, heritage precincts including Safdarjung's Tomb, Lodhi Gardens, Humayun's Tomb and Sunder Nursery, Purana Qila, open spaces such as the Zoological garden, the Yamuna riverfront, Raj Ghat, Smriti Van and others. This larger green urban vision would put the CV at the centre of global recognition as the recommended way forward.

If we seek a legacy for future generations then we need to showcase a move towards a reduced use of hardscapes, greater emphasis on nature-based (NbS) solutions, and dedicated protection of larger open spaces for (re)establishing linkages with other open spaces thereby creating green networks. Most capital cities globally have large urban-level open spaces and city parks. And Central Vista is our opportunity to protect and connect to other urban open spaces.

Are we attempting to 'reorganize' the one large open space that we have, in line with how we understand or wish to redefine aesthetics and identity? Is this what the city and citizens need in the current reality?

Presently, issues of maintenance exist, and the lack thereof have rendered the space undesirable in parts. These aspects are easily remedied within the larger spatial design through a maintenance and management regimen and do not demand any attempt to redesign the entire precinct. This is an opportunity to sensitively add amenities to our public spaces. This does not require for the space to be redesigned rather to undertake a social and spatial audit and make minimal interventions, for both of which well-established methodologies are prevalent within the landscape architect's expertise.

The importance of the space, both as a strong political statement as well as a vibrant public open space needs to be reiterated. Public spaces are about experiences. And being in the capital city of a democratic nation demands that the project excel in social indicators. What are the strategies planned towards this end? The foundation of this project is needs-based; however, the impact extends to the working and recreational comfort of 75,000 or more human beings daily. We recommend the way forward focused on the well understood and practiced mandate of a rights-based approach (RBA).

Addressing the spatial organization of the Central Vista Precinct, this is an opportunity to create an inclusive, welcoming, cohesive, ecologically sound, resource-conscious space through a landscape-forward approach. Instead, aiming to maintain a semblance of continuity, central areas and parts of

## INDIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Registered under Indian Societies Act 1860 Sec. 21 No.: Guj2557 & Bombay Trust Act 1950 Section 29 No.: F9417

Communication Address: 312, Chitrarath Complex, Opp. Hotel President C.G. Road, Ahmedabad 380009 (Gujarat) India  
Telefax: +91 79 40323110, Email: [isolaoffice@gmail.com](mailto:isolaoffice@gmail.com), Web: [www.isola.org.in](http://www.isola.org.in)



the seamless softscape have been hardened. This contributes to losing the fluidity of the space and emphasizes the approach of unsustainable beautification and patterning as landscape.

## FUNCTIONAL ISSUES

The seamless quality of Rajpath is lost with the structured raised walkways on either side of Rajpath with bollards and chains. Bridges, additional footpaths etc. contribute to a disjointed, incohesive space.

On ceremonial functions like the Republic Day parade the President's horseback bodyguards ride on the bajri pathway giving the salute followed by the national anthem. The raised curb and pathway will be an encumbrance. Raising the walkway will also change the levels of the adjacent lawns causing a lot of soil filling.

The proposal to interconnect all the proposed buildings with an underground rail line does not consider the construction and operational impact on the existing trees and the landscape. This has not been mentioned or addressed in the Landscape scheme.

Facilities may be seen as a means to serve smooth functioning of the space and not become its primary vision. The plaza and food court do not seem appropriate to the 'solemn mood' of this space which should be more 'sacred'. The informality is added by the people and their association with it. Besides marginalization of vendors along the Central avenue, integration of vendors at India Gate lawns has not been considered, thus excluding a large section of society with a long history of association. Vendors are an integral part of the experience of the place adding to the cultural experience that will be lost in this proposed design due to poor connectivity and inconvenience, since the vendors are accommodated near parking areas.

Are underpasses the best way forward in the Indian scenario? As proposed, this will increase the structural footprint and services required while reducing the open space. In addition, the service requirements of the buildings on Central Vista, their underground connections, ramps and transit corridors will significantly reduce the available porous ground for the scale of the space. The proposed parking areas are further intruding into the much-needed soft areas.

The proposed new bridges across the two canals are of concern because they threaten and/or irreversibly modify the existing cultural heritage character of the canal.

A study of the current use of the space, as gathering spaces for demonstrations, at different times of the day and seasons, has not been documented, understood or respected. The design does not consider providing flexible spaces for all these functions. Its 'beautification' approach contributing to a possible 'municipal sterility', which may be seen to exclude certain sections of society in place of increasing equitable open spaces for play and recreation for all sections and abilities in our society.

Light quality, diurnal and seasonal activities, gathering and vendor interaction, safety of access to and from public transport, car parking, cycle tracks, pedestrian paths to the Central Vista avenue, add to a comprehensive and collective experience. Visual access for safety, signage, drinking water and public amenities should not be separate from the types, textures, colours and scale of planting.

The use of innovative landscape designs, technologies and solutions for soils, water, and increased root nutrients must be introduced in this, proposed architectural landscape.

## INDIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Registered under Indian Societies Act 1860 Sec. 21 No.: Guj2557 & Bombay Trust Act 1950 Section 29 No.: F9417

Communication Address: 312, Chitrarath Complex, Opp. Hotel President C.G. Road, Ahmedabad 380009 (Gujarat) India  
Telefax: +91 79 40323110, Email: [isolaoffice@gmail.com](mailto:isolaoffice@gmail.com), Web: [www.isola.org.in](http://www.isola.org.in)



## ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

ISOLA is concerned about the lack of consideration to the landscape heritage of Central Vista and the ecological, spatial and qualitative benefits it provides to citizens. Land, air, water, vegetation, wildlife and open space networks are vital contributions to the health of Delhi. The mature, verdant, and diverse canopy (which has taken between fifty to eight-five years to establish) and the opportunity for an expanding green network and improving biodiversity, are integral to the city and its future. This space, the centre of New Delhi, is potentially the pivot around which the urban green network of the National Capital Region can be linked through walkways, cycleways, and an integrated open space/ greenway network which is critical to Delhi's future generations as well and one we have been discussing for a few decades now.

A proposal for the Central Vista needs to start from the vision of its valuable eco-system services. Planting native trees patterned on Lutyen's plan, plays a small part in a larger ecological vision. The ecosystem service benefits that this space offers, as a carbon sink, for thermal comfort, for pollution mitigation, for ground water recharge, for regulating floods and disease control, for biodiversity habitat, for its low built footprint, for its resource conscious use of materials, for energy efficiency, need to be addressed as an essential part of, and not separate from, its landscape 'design'.

This is an opportunity to represent that global goals of sustainability and climate resilience can be and are being met, with nature-based solutions (NBS) by minimizing hard paving, using local and renewable materials, maximizing permeable surfaces and enhancing urban resilience through our open spaces. The critical concern of the depletion of groundwater recharge because of added basement and underground structures, amphitheatres, toilet blocks and hard paving, considering historic water consumption/recharge/management issues, needs urgent attention.

The larger ecological impact of the execution of this project (construction staging, demolition, tree protection, dismantling, material stockpiling, disposal and its consequent air and noise pollution, debris generation, water requirements, waste management, etc.) on the existing trees and the avi-fauna and fauna, and habitat in general is a cause of grave concern.

Overlooking the biodiversity value of this area in relation to both flora and fauna and their tangible and intangible values would have long term repercussions. Home to diverse habitats of monkeys, birds, bees, bats, insects and other species, no consideration for these or the role of the contiguity of green corridors across the connections to the city of New Delhi and beyond are addressed.

Central Vista as the core of verdant New Delhi, is one of three invaluable landscape resources of Delhi; the other two being the Ridge and the River. These three define its landform and act as key bulwarks against climate crises and potential natural disasters. The fragmentation of these consolidated open spaces is to be avoided and the outcomes of proposals would be evident in the enhancement of landscape value and heritage of the city. At this time, connecting and creating contiguous green corridors for climate resiliency is required. This facet of the environment is recognized as a key Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to which India is a signatory.

Some specific concerns, which need further study to avoid adverse consequences are:

- What is the diversity of flora and fauna in the zone?
- What is the existing geo-morphology and subsurface and surface hydrology?
- What is the quantity and quality of water recharge that is facilitated in this area? How will the proposed interventions impact it?
- What will be the impacts of triple basements?
- How are the water supply and alternative treatment methods for all the new buildings and all open spaces designed?
- How can these be creatively incorporated in the landscape design?
- What is the role of the softscape in air pollution control? What is its role in noise control?
- What is its contribution towards carbon sequestration?

## INDIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Registered under Indian Societies Act 1860 Sec. 21 No.: Guj2557 & Bombay Trust Act 1950 Section 29 No.: F9417

Communication Address: 312, Chitrarath Complex, Opp. Hotel President C.G. Road, Ahmedabad 380009 (Gujarat) India  
Telefax: +91 79 40323110, Email: [isolaoffice@gmail.com](mailto:isolaoffice@gmail.com), Web: [www.isola.org.in](http://www.isola.org.in)



- What are the benefits/ adverse impacts of the proposed design on these quantifications?
- Have the natural systems and human/cultural systems, ecological structures, functions and issues been addressed in the design approach and details of building and open spaces? If so, how?

## PLANTING

It is well known that planting proposals are about function besides ecological significance. The heights of buildings with respect to the trees and the open spaces along the canals create and define spaces. What is considered as 'insignificant' existing plantation in the area is incredibly significant as a mature green cover. Its unregimented character softens the monumentality of the built masses.

Planting in the proposal takes on a patterning approach, interesting in its design yet not substantive enough to reflect the dynamism of the growing conditions of trees during their lifetime based on the root space available, soil conditions and water requirements, proximity to other trees, etc.

Basement structures will ensure that large trees are replaced with smaller, ornamental species, and natural water percolation is replaced by piped conveyance systems that require regular desilting, a common monsoon complaint. Service networks required to support development will further reduce areas available for planting.

Removing thousands of trees and then using mechanical equipment to control air pollution is not a preferred solution. Wind pattern analysis of built proposals and consequent tree planting as shelter belts and wind breaks for the summer wind and winter cold could be a foundation for user comfort.

- Given that trees will be removed, should not the impact on air, noise, water and soil pollution be studied?
- Why is Lutyens' vision adhered to for the number of trees but discarded when it comes to adding buildings?
- Do the many buildings planned require more trees than suggested to mitigate the carbon emissions?
- The grass on the lawns is sparse because of tree shade and any additional tree planting will only exacerbate the problem. Is there a plan for this to change grass species?
- What will the impacts be of people movers and horizontal travelators on vegetation and ground water? How will these impacts be addressed/ mitigated?

## MATERIALS

For a progressive urban vision in a time of critical climate action, the decision to use renewable materials and minimize the use of non-renewable ones, maximizing permeability, nature-based water management and vegetation solutions are well documented. The area of paving and impermeable ground proposed including underground connectors, toilet and other facilities, utility corridors, amphitheatres, bridges and the hardscape in the India Gate hexagon cannot be only 1% more than existing, as has been stated by the designers. The beaten-up walkways and *bajri* pathways must be taken into the calculation as permeable walkways. If so, the addition of impermeable ground will be far more significant.

The use of non-renewal resources, of stone is particularly alarming. At a time when a monumental amount of waste will be generated on this site alone, it would be prudent to identify ways to reuse and reinvent materials and reconsider all resource use and allocation. Not only is stone being used in areas where it is neither required nor a better solution, but the stone used is not locally sourced.

## INDIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Registered under Indian Societies Act 1860 Sec. 21 No.: Guj2557 & Bombay Trust Act 1950 Section 29 No.: F9417

Communication Address: 312, Chitrarath Complex, Opp. Hotel President C.G. Road, Ahmedabad 380009 (Gujarat) India  
Telefax: +91 79 40323110, Email: [isolaoffice@gmail.com](mailto:isolaoffice@gmail.com), Web: [www.isola.org.in](http://www.isola.org.in)



*Bajri* in the current scheme does require maintenance but is easier to walk on, is environmentally sound, allows ground water recharge and also requires less capital investment. Reconsideration of replacing the red *bajri* along the main axis with red granite stone is essential here. It is a material alien to the landscape of Delhi and has no contextual references whatsoever. It will also be extremely harsh on the eye in the heat of Delhi and will significantly alter the 'micro' temperature. As a non-permeable surface, it will add to the surface runoff. The merits of *bajri* significantly outweigh those of red granite.

The recycling, upcycling and reuse of materials and objects in all landscape work should be maximized.

## DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

The Central Vista project could set precedence on how to enhance the potential of landscape transformation and ecological stewardship.

With reference to the Central Vista Project Presentation and the landscape aspects in particular, due diligence for the setting of the buildings within, is absent. The buildings define the Central Vista Avenue. The proposed zoning of activities appears to divide the entire space into two very distinct identities. The central path and the lawns appear extremely manicured and austere whereas the reduced edges of the space are bearing the weight of all the parking infrastructure and amenities. As a result, there will be virtually no connect of the buildings with the Central Vista - in any of those buildings, one would not be able to fathom that the Central Vista is a few meters away.

The expanse of open space that represents the vastness of the country and its facets, the accessibility of its democratic seat of government and connect to its citizens, the space's poetic sense of light and shade, soft permeability and undefined edges have been hardened. The people, their diversity and need for access to what has been- and should remain- the democratic commons, have been compartmentalized into sections of lawns and designated facilities, with little room for flexibility or intuitive use of space, especially due to vendor restriction.

Issues of gender safety, equitable access and seamlessness of the landscape contribute rather than take away from the aesthetic.

Significant increase in footpaths, facilities and connections will remove many people from possibly the only natural landscaped ground they currently have access to.

Creating buildings facing the public commons will be accessible by those using these, therefore the functional requirements of the buildings becomes an important determinant of this interface. As anyone familiar with the space can attest, if government buildings open out onto this space, security requirements will be paramount. This implies that the parking will be cordoned off (as it is in North and South Block currently), as will be the areas around it. A positive outcome could consider discouraging vehicles and increasing public transport access and cycling convenience.

## LANDSCAPE HERITAGE

The existing Central Vista public open space adds value to its context at multiple scales. It is, therefore, necessary to define these, even though the definition and value of heritage may transform from one generation to the next. The value of the Central Vista, due to this very reason, is almost priceless in its importance to national and international references.

## INDIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Registered under Indian Societies Act 1860 Sec. 21 No.: Guj2557 & Bombay Trust Act 1950 Section 29 No.: F9417

Communication Address: 312, Chitrarath Complex, Opp. Hotel President C.G. Road, Ahmedabad 380009 (Gujarat) India  
Telefax: +91 79 40323110, Email: [isolaoffice@gmail.com](mailto:isolaoffice@gmail.com), Web: [www.isola.org.in](http://www.isola.org.in)



ISOLA would support a study of the extent of the Central Vista and a documentation of its tangible and intangible landscape heritage. The site has many historic buildings /structures / artifacts in the landscape – and the response has been to “restore”, a facet that needs more clarity. A historical restoration and/ or adaptive reuse and reinvention process needs to be devised.

- Has any systematic inventory of historical/ heritage landscape structures been made?
- Has a study of internationally recognized/ recommended high standard policies and best practices been carried out?
- What should not be disturbed and restored and why?
- What will be the impacts of the new development on Grade 1 cultural heritage?
- Is not putting new bridges across the canals a violation of heritage values and guidelines?

#### IN CONCLUSION:

We recommend that

- The long-term implications of the proposal on the immediate and city context require due diligence for spatial, environmental, social, cultural, physical, and psychological impacts based on the concerns raised.
- The absence of in-depth support/background studies and precedent observations of the environmental, socio-cultural, and historic significance of the site before designing for the place, may create unintended consequences.
- A project of this scale and complexity is a precedent for all others that follow across the country, and we need to treat it as such, in process, procedure and implementation.
- A parallel integration of services, planning, and infrastructure is essential at city level.
- At the regional scale, the landscape concept should connect the Central Vista open space to the ridge and to the Yamuna river. In the context of the city, the landscape plan should integrate with the surrounding buildings and existing open spaces like the Childrens’ Park and War Memorial.
- Consideration is required to the enormous scale of material and non-renewal resources that will be laid to waste by this process; a detailed study of resource use, reuse and management is required.
- Pollution mitigation needs to be planned for the process and for the future.
- National sustainability commitments require use of local material and contextual planning and design.

The consideration and foundation of the ecosystem services offered by the Central Vista is vital for the health of Delhi and its future generations.

ISOLA reiterates its commitment to assist in the achievement of sustainable, equitable and inclusive landscapes across India.

**Sujata Kohli**

*Honorary President*

**INDIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS**

*The Indian Society of Landscape Architects (ISOLA), the professional body of landscape architects, includes over 600 members across India and around the world. The mission of ISOLA, established in 2003, is to nurture and enhance the profession of landscape architecture by providing leadership in the creation of artistic and ecologically sound designs, and in the shaping and management of our human-made, cultural and natural environments. The organisation has also been accorded the status as a member of the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) - a body representing the concerns of the profession worldwide. Details of the organisation can be accessed at [www.isola.org.in](http://www.isola.org.in).*

**INDIAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS**

Registered under Indian Societies Act 1860 Sec. 21 No.: Guj2557 & Bombay Trust Act 1950 Section 29 No.: F9417

Communication Address: 312, Chitrarath Complex, Opp. Hotel President C.G. Road, Ahmedabad 380009 (Gujarat) India  
Telefax: +91 79 40323110, Email: [isolaoffice@gmail.com](mailto:isolaoffice@gmail.com), Web: [www.isola.org.in](http://www.isola.org.in)