

TRYING TO BE “SUSTAINABLE” AND “GLOBAL”: AHMEDABAD AND THE SABARMATI RIVER FRONT DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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Abstract

The recent celebrations for the 600th anniversary of the foundations of the city of Ahmedabad in 2011 represented a crucial moment during which a reflection on the past of the city was combined with a strong push towards future changes. While the city centre was proposed for the nomination as a UNESCO heritage site, new large development projects started to appear both at the core and in the outskirts of the largest city of Gujarat. The Sabarmati River Front Development Project represents one of the most important investment sites for both public institutions and privates, as well as a translation on the ground of the city vision to become both “global” and “sustainable”. Combining a large body of interviews with current debates about globalisation, politics of scale and political ecology, the paper aims at highlighting different narratives and their role in shaping the future Ahmedabad. The paper pays particular attention to the importance of the State in the creation of “new state spaces” (Brenner, 2004), thus contesting its loss of relevance in the age of globalisation and in the “space of flows” (Castells, 1996).

1. Ahmedabad, an aspiring global city

In its 600 years of existence the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat (Western India) has faced any sort of challenge and changed its role in India and at the international level, but some elements have remained incredibly stable through time. One of the main features is represented by the strategic position that the city has always had through history: as a matter of fact it has represented the crossing point between the Silk Route and the Spice Route, as well as one of the gateways of India (Yagnik, Sheth, 2011), as it still is thanks to its international airport. The relevance of the geographical location has been playing a significant role also in promoting a sort of “mercantile ethos” (*ibidem*) within large part of the population, not only of Ahmedabad, but of Gujarat in general. It should not surprise then the dynamism of the economy in that part of India, which has always been considered one of the richest: still today Ahmedabad is the seventh Indian city in terms of GDP². A further element that has proved to be constantly relevant throughout history is the relation between the city of Ahmedabad and its river, the Sabarmati. As it is described by the fifteen-century poet Hulvi Shazi, the myth of the foundation of the city by Sultan Ahmed Shah is strongly bound to the river: “The Shah, while on a gracious walk,/ stopped at the bank of the river Sabarmati/ The ground was clean and charming,/ the water pleasant, the air pure./ On seeing these attractions, by the grace of Allah,/ he

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² www.rediff.com accessed on 20 March 2012.

dreamt of a wondrous city” (Yagnik, Sheth, 2011). Along the river several institutional as well as educational and religious buildings or open spaces rose, the most famous of which are probably the *ashram* created by Gandhi in 1915 or the Mill Owners’ Association building realised by Le Corbusier in 1955. It is therefore not surprising that also nowadays the future of the city is both reflected in and promoted by the developments occurring within and along the Sabarmati.

The Sabarmati River Front Development Project initiated in 1997 by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) through the newly created Sabarmati River Front Development Corporation Limited (SRFDCL), is actually listed among the main projects to achieve the municipal vision of a “Vibrant Ahmedabad – Vibrant Gujarat” or of a “Greater Ahmedabad” (fig. 1)³.



Figure 1. One of the visualisations of the future of the Sabarmati presented to the public by HCP in December 2011 (Pessina, 2012)

Further major projects are the sixty-meter-wide and seventy-six kilometres long Sardar Patel Ring Road, the Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS), the Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT) between Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar, as well as the opening of the Tata Nano plants in the southern outskirts of the city. Despite the difference in terms of uses and nature of the different projects, they are all characterised by bigness, both in spatial as well as in economic terms and tend to be aligned with (and hence funded by) the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) which is mainly promoting large infrastructural projects. The issue of bigness is once again stated in the vision for a “Greater Ahmedabad” also in terms of population: the AMC in facts foresees a consistent

³ Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority with Technical Support from CEPT University, 2005, City Development Plan 2006-2012, Ahmedabad.

growth of population by 2030, rising from the current 4 million inhabitants to more than 10 million.

All those projects pose questions of globalisation in large cities of the South, as well as of scales and distribution of powers among actors, but the case of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project differs from the others because of the presence and relevance of the issue of “sustainability” in its implementation.

2. The Sabarmati River Front Development Project: facts and figures

The idea to develop the natural banks of the river inside the city of Ahmedabad has a longer history than the ongoing project: the first proposal was formulated in 1961 by the French architect Bernard Kohn which suggested to reclaim 30 ha of land on both the banks of the river in order to develop a mix of commercial, recreational and residential activities in some points of the river, mainly close to the major bridges. The feasibility of such proposal was studied and confirmed in 1966 by a commission appointed by the government of Gujarat and a further proposal was done in 1976 by a group of local professionals including Ahmedabad Study Action Group, the architect Hasmukh C Patel and K B Mehta Builders. The group agreed on the reclamation of land and proposed the strengthening of the Pirana Sewage Treatment Plant in the south of Ahmedabad and the construction of retaining walls to protect the city from floods and to give space for development. The need to improve the sewerage system was confirmed also in the National River Conservation Plan of 1992 for the interception and diversion works, the construction of trunk sewers, the desilting of storm water drains and the provision of sanitation infrastructure in the river bank slums.

A last proposal was formulated by the CEPT University of Ahmedabad just one year before the currently implemented project was submitted: it envisaged to add to the 30 ha to be reclaimed 20 more meters along the west bank and 10 along the east bank to develop publicly accessible open spaces and recreational areas connected by walkways and promenades.

Although several projects have already been proposed since the Sixties only in 1997 the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation decided to finally implement a plan and therefore created a specific public body, the Sabarmati River Front Development Corporation Limited (SRFDCL Ltd.), for the supervision of the process.

The proposal was commissioned to the Environmental Planning Collaborative (EPC), which in 2002 merged with the HCP Design and Project Management Pvt. Ltd., responsible for the urban design of the project. The works started in 2005 and are still ongoing.

The project regards a stretch of 9 km of the river comprised between the Subhash Bridge and the Vasna Barrage within the city of Ahmedabad and its main features are the following:

- the reduction of the riverbed from a variable width of 600-300 m to a fix width of 275 m, thus reclaiming 185 ha of land;

- the construction of RCC diaphragm walls (10-20 m depth) and anchor slabs (10 m) to prevent the riverbanks from erosion. After the finishing the anchor slab is turned in the so-called lower promenade;
- the construction of interceptor sewers on both the riverbanks able to prevent the waste water to flow directly into the river and diverting it to the two sewage treatment plants of Vasna and Pirana;
- the construction of RCC retaining walls (2.5 - 9 m) to protect the city from flooding. The height of the walls is determined by the 100-year flood level. An upper promenade is created on top of the retaining walls (figure 2 and 3);
- the dredging of the river bed in order to provide soil for the filling of the space behind the RCC retaining walls. At least 67.500 cubic meters are required for the filling;
- the relocation of slum dwellers and the provision of better living conditions to them. The amount of families initially considered was 8000 but the number was increased to 15000 after further surveys in 2002. The first proposal was to relocate them in three sites along the riverbanks, but the plan has changed afterwards and the relocation sites are now far from the river.
- the use of the reclaimed land for private residential and commercial developments with a view on water to be sold to finance the project (the percentage has decreased from 20 to 15% because of the high increase of the land value), two major roads, one on each riverbank (30%), gardens (26%), promenades (6%), informal market (3,6%) and the rest for other public facilities.

The main declared goals for the implementation of such actions are:

- the elimination of the danger of floods in the current context of climate change;
- the establishment of better hygienic conditions through a new sewerage system;
- the ground water recharge through the storage of water within the river bed;
- the improvement of the living conditions of the slum dwellers.

The expected cost of the project is 15 billion indian rupee and it will be covered by the sell of parts of the riverfront (15%) to private investors, as well as by funding from the JNNURM programme.

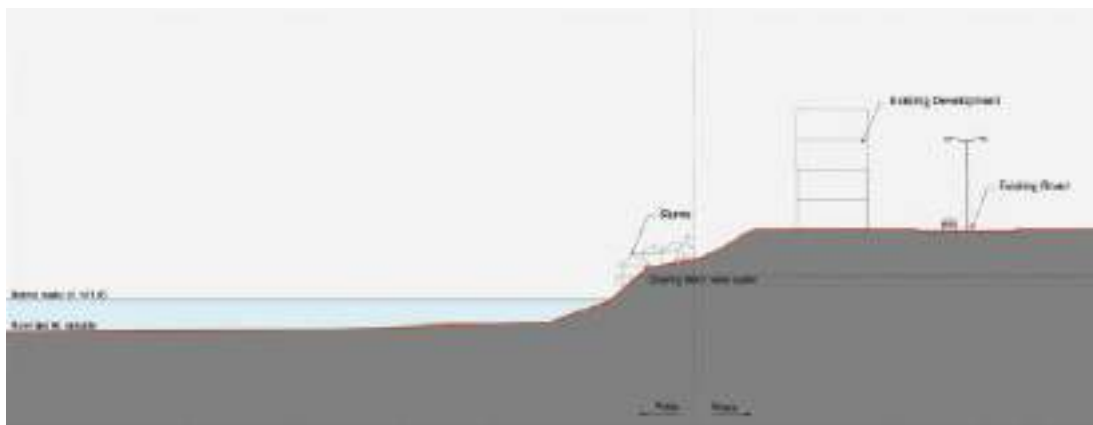


Figure 2. the riverbanks of the Sabarmati before the project (SRFDCL and HCP, 2008).

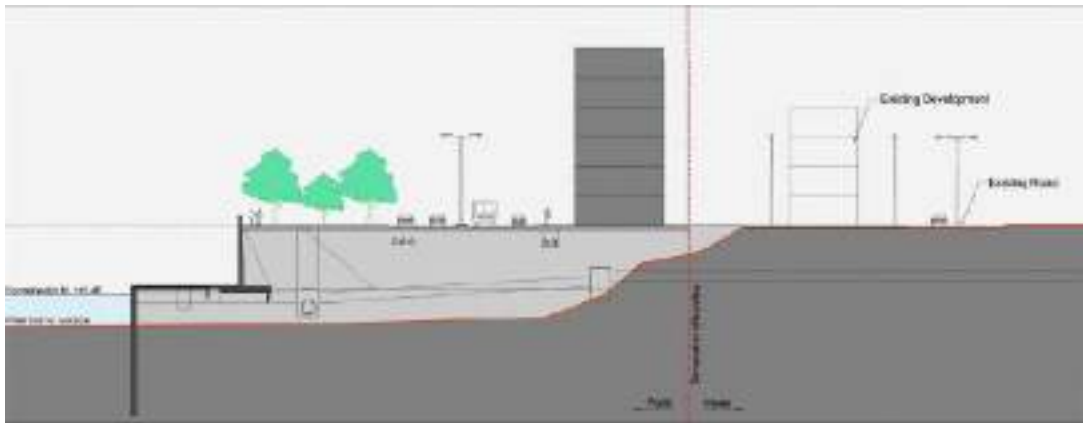


Figure 3. the riverbanks of the Sabarmati after the project (SRFDCL and HCP, 2008).

3. Narratives around sustainability

Looking at different descriptions of the project, one issue is quite recurrent, that is to say the importance of the environmental concerns. Among the different possible sources a couple of them are quite noteworthy given their capacity to reach wide audiences: one is the case of an international landscape architecture journal, while the other are public speeches by the politicians who mainly promote such project.

In an article published in 2009 on the TOPOS journal the project was described in this way: “though implementation will be challenging, the city hopes that this integrated environmental project will be a model for the nation” (Fenk, Schaffer, 2009), particularly stressing the capacity of the urban designers to deal with flood protection, sanitation as well as development.

Interestingly, the project is also mentioned several times in official speeches by the Chief Minister of Gujarat as an example on the ground of the current state policy of “climate justice”, meant as a “convenient action” against the “unconvenient truth” of climate change (Pessina, 2011).

Both examples relate in different ways to recent developments in the debate about sustainability started in the early Seventies. Moving from a definition of sustainability as a challenge to standard growth models (Daly in: Scoones et al., 2007) to “the ability of systems to bounce back from shocks and stresses and adopt stable states” (Holling in: Scoones et al., 2007), more recent debates focus on issues of risk management, as emerged in the United Nations Conference on Climate Change held in Copenhagen in 2009. In the water domain, the issue of risk is often identified with floods due to climate change, as it is in the case of the descriptions of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project given its political supporters. Among the tools for risk (and especially flood protection) as well as for an achievement of sustainability in general in the water domain, the Integrated Water Resources Management promoted in the Nineties by the Global Water Partnership seems to be still one of the most popular, as the words used by the TOPOS journalists seem to confirm.

While in theory the narratives of risk protection and integrated resources management (and integrated design) seem to work very well, looking at the specific case of the Sabarmati river some issues seem to be overlooked.

As a matter of fact, none of the official studies nor the wide spread articles seem to stress the dynamic nature of the Sabarmati, a non-perennial river, fed by the uneven and infrequent rain occurring during the monsoon between July and October and is therefore dry for large part of the year. The Sabarmati basin has traditionally been known as a good agricultural production area where cultivation was carried out being very careful towards water. A pattern of villages were developed along the course of the river with respect to the floodplain and paying attention to leave the silting areas for agriculture. After the heavy floods that occurred in 1973, the Dharoi Dam was created in 1974 at the feet of the Aravalli chain in northern Gujarat in order to regulate the Sabarmati and to provide water to the city of Ahmedabad. Downstream of Ahmedabad the water started to be retained through the Vasna Barrage. Since large amount of the water is diverted for agriculture directly from the Dharoi dam itself, the dry condition of the Sabarmati for most of the months became even more evident and the floods decreased in their intensity and frequency.

The legitimacy of the project, aiming officially at reducing the flood risk, is thus significantly reduced, as pointed out by an hydrologist based in Ahmedabad “Floods are unlikely to happen but in case they will take place the covering of the riverbanks with concrete will affect the capacity of large part of the city to absorb water and let it percolate in the soil. Moreover the channelizing of the river for such a long stretch will affect negatively the areas both upstream and downstream of Ahmedabad where the flood will be more violent. Ultimately such sort of canal will act as a funnel” (Pessina, 2011).

It seems clear therefore that the use of words is not neutral and large part of the environmental policies put in place in recent times are the result of specific discourses strongly bound to different forms of knowledge. Some consolidated and often institutionalised discourses can become “environmental orthodoxies” (Leach and Mearns in: Forsyth, 1993) that are hard to be contested. In the case of water the debate seems to be shaped mainly by major global players such as the World Bank, the Global Water Partnership, the World Water Council etc. (Forsyth, 2003; Mehta et al., 2007; Karpouzoglou and Zimmer in: Nicol et al. 2012;). As in one of the latest contributions on political ecology it is stated “it is not science as a specific and useful form of knowledge production that is questioned [...]. Instead, it is the way specific forms of ecological knowledge are selected and validated [...], what assumptions and practices become normal and internalized for people” (Peet et al., 2011). Political ecology represents for some scholars an attempt “to establish the political forces behind different accounts of ecology as a representation of biophysical reality” (Forsyth, 2003). In acknowledging the political nature of environmental policies and projects some recent contributions define therefore Sustainability (differently than sustainability) as a “contested, discursive resource – a boundary object – that facilitates arguments about the diverse pathways to different futures” (Scoones et al., 2007). The idea of sustainability in the case of the Sabarmati seems to be highly contested not only in terms of narratives around flood control and protection from

risks as a declared aim, but also on a large number of other issues raised by several actors.

(1) One of the main features of the project, its high level of engineering (Khavthekar in: Pessina, 2011), represents also one of the main concerns of academics, practitioners and local dwellers: the use of concrete for the embankments of a long stretch of the river, in fact, strongly affects the environment and seems to have counter-effects to the expected protection from floods, especially downstream (Vasavada, Chayya, Choudhuri in: Pessina, 2011). (2) Hydrologists and representatives of environmental movements point out that the dredging of the riverbed to get sand for the earth filling on one hand represents an attempt to reduce distances to bring materials for the construction works on site, but on the other hand is dramatically affecting the nature of the river, thus increasing the speed of the water, promoting the erosion and endangering the stability of the bridges (Vasavada in: Pessina, 2011) (3) Slum dwellers organisations, NGOs as well as some academics active in the fields of sociology and urban planning are suspicious also towards the declared “economic sustainability” of the project, meant as sale of part of the land. Many of them are actually afraid that the effective public use of most of the project area could then be restricted just to part of the population through the introduction of fences and of entry fees as it happened in other cases in the city of Ahmedabad as Kankaria Lake (Pathan, Patel in: Pessina, 2011) (4) Economists and academics point out that as a result of the start of the Sabarmati River Front Development works, the prices of the land have already increased dramatically, thus endangering the affordability of the city (Chayya in: Pessina, 2011). (5) Slum dwellers organisations, human right protection organisations, advocates and activists have also pointed out that one of the most controversial points is represented by the relocation of slum dwellers. While the need for better housing conditions cannot be questioned, both the relocation sites and the housing typologies seem to affect the possibility of the slum dwellers to carry on with their usual activities. Looking at the former uses of the river, it is evident that many of the seasonal activities that used to take place within the dry river bed and that are still present upstream and downstream of Ahmedabad have disappeared now within the city, thus depriving many people of their source of livelihood and their possibility to sustain themselves (Pathan, Patel in: Pessina, 2011).

4. The politics of scale

Questioning one of the core issues of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project - the origin of water - a whole range of new issues come into the picture. As already pointed out in the previous paragraph, the nature of the Sabarmati river is that of a non-perennial one, dry for most of the year. Quite surprisingly after the creation of the embankments in 2006, water became a constant feature of the river.

Such interesting and apparently strange phenomenon becomes clearer when looking at aerial views of the city (fig.4): the water is actually present only in the stretch of the river within the city of Ahmedabad, interestingly appearing just a few hundred meters southern than a canal.

In the relation between the river and the canal the relevance of the scale issue becomes evident: as a matter of fact, a connection has been created between the Narmada Canal, stretching from the eastern to the western border of Gujarat, that is to say, between the Sardar Sarovar Dam (or Narmada Dam) to the arid region of Kutch, at the border with Pakistan.



Figure 4. Aerial view of the city of Ahmedabad (source: Google Maps, 2011).

Again, the legitimacy of this action is questioned by lawyers: “Now they want to beautify the Sabarmati, therefore they want to take water from the Narmada. Legally speaking they cannot use Narmada water for Sabarmati [...]. There was a longstanding dispute between Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat about this Narmada water and about the Narmada Dam. So ultimately there was a tribunal for deciding the distribution of water and the height of the dam and that dispute went on for a number of years, from 1960 to 1980s. So that Tribunal has allotted a certain amount of water to Gujarat, but it is mainly meant for agriculture [...]. In the map that has been prepared by the Tribunal Ahmedabad is not in the picture. Because Ahmedabad will get the water from the Dharoi Dam. So this Narmada water was not meant to Ahmedabad” (Patel, G: in Pessina, 2011).

A part from the question around legitimacy, the issue of water clearly shows the interconnectedness of different territorial scales (fig.5), which are not mentioned and apparently not taken into account in the Sabarmati River Front Development Project. The different scales does not seem to be connected only through flows of water, but also and probably more significantly by “flows of power” (Worster, 1985). The case of the Sabarmati river shows therefore the “politics of scale” (Smith, 1984) around which a large debate has risen in the last two decades.



Figure 5. The city, the river basin, the Narmada canal (authors elaboration on Google Maps, 2011).

While introducing such concept, Smith actually redefined scales as socially constructed, historically contingent, politically contested rather than related to fixed boundaries. One of the most engaged authors who tried to summarise the debate about scales (and the 'politics of scale') is certainly Neil Brenner (1998; 2004) whose works mainly aim at questioning the mainstream literature about globalisation and at investigating the transformation of various scales (especially the scale of the state) under contemporary capitalism. Even though large part of the literature about globalisation and world cities tends to depict the State as a weak actor that is retrenching and ultimately losing its power in a growing "space of flows" (Castells in: Brenner, 2004), Brenner argues that the State is actually just changing its (spaces of) actions, as suggested by Lefebvre already in *The production of space*: "Each new form of state, each new form of political power, introduces its own particular way of partitioning space, its own particular administrative classification of discourses about space and about things and people in space". Such process is thus defined *rescaling* (Brenner, 2004; Swyngedouw, 1999; 2004).

As Swyngedouw wrote (1999), "the preminence of the 'global' in much of the literature and political rhetoric obfuscates, marginalises and silences an intense and ongoing sociospatial struggle in which the reconfiguration of spatial scales of governance takes a central position". According to Brenner (2004), such globalisation rhetoric masks "the national state's own crucial role as a site and agent of global restructuring processes".

Referring mainly to Western Europe and to the United Kingdom, Brenner acknowledges the rise of new actors mainly operating at different scales than the one of the state mainly after the 1970s crisis: on one side global corporations, international organisations and cross-border institutions play a decisive role, while on the other side more powers are decentralised to the local level. Nevertheless he stresses the re-scaling of the state as “a key accumulation strategy” (Jessop in: Brenner, 1998) through which “cities throughout the world economy are being promoted by their host states as locational nodes for transnational capital investment” (Brenner, 1998).

It is evident that the role of the state, and its space of action, has significantly changed from the time in which it represented the main producer of welfare and the main mediator of spatial inequalities, nevertheless, the production of a “spatial fix” (Harvey in: Brenner, 2004) seems to be still needed, or maybe even more, in the age of globalisation.

Among the “new state spaces” Brenner lists “science parks, conference centres, waterfront development schemes and enterprise zones” that differ from the infrastructure that Keynesian states used to build after World War II in terms of aims and shapes: while in the past the State was mainly aiming at promoting an equal spatial development of national territories, nowadays such infrastructures – usually implemented by private investors but still requested by state authorities - are often “splintered” (Graham and Marvin in: Brenner, 2004), aiming at enhancing the global competitiveness of just some areas within national territories. A clear example of this trend is represented by the Thatcher policies to promote the primacy of London (and the South East of England) as a main financial centre through the (re)development of areas such as King's Cross, the Isle of Dogs, Canary Warf and Thames Gateway, while other parts of the country were becoming poorer.

Against the literature that sees the retrenchment of the state as a necessary outcome of globalisation, Brenner quotes Swyngedouw (2000) in order to highlight the growing role of various newly created state controlled agencies in planning and managing these local mega-projects as it is the case – particularly diffused in the Thatcherite policies – of the Urban Development Corporations or think tanks such as London Forum and London First. As a matter of fact, through the process of state re-scaling, not only exceptional spaces but also exceptional actors – that are not elected, nor responsible towards the citizens - enter into the arena. As Swyngedouw writes in 2005, “in fact, it is the state that plays a pivotal and often autocratic role in transferring competencies (and consequently in instantiating the resulting changing power geometries) and in arranging these new networked forms of governance” in which “the internal power choreography is customarily led by coalitions of economic, socio-cultural or political élites”.

The case of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project seems to clearly support the theories that show the centrality of the state even (or maybe, especially) in a context of globalisation. As a matter of fact, the State of Gujarat represents one of the main promoters of the Sabarmati project and considers it one of the strategic actions on water in Gujarat, alongside with the construction of canals and dams. Moreover, the river front represents an “exceptional space” (Brenner, 2004) within

the city in terms of design, foreseen uses and scale and as it happened mainly in the context of UK an “exceptional agency” (ibidem) - the Sabarmati River Front Development Corporation Limited (SRFDCL) - has been created by the AMC under the request of the State of Gujarat and is therefore strongly bound to the state.

Looking at the state at a broader level, the National Government of India is contributing to the project through the JNNURM programme, while multinational companies are attracted by the real estate opportunities on the riverbanks, thus creating a not clearly accountable “governance-beyond-the-state” (Swyngedouw, 2005)

5. Conclusions

The case of the Sabarmati River Front Development Project in Ahmedabad shows the power of narratives around sustainability and ecology (Mehta, 2005; Scoones et al., 2007; Swyngedouw, 2010) in the promotion of the aspirations towards development and globalisation. Exceptional spaces such as the Sabarmati River Front Development Project, mainly managed by newly appointed institutions, seem to represent the new necessary “spatial fix” (Harvey, 1985) for the production of capital and power at multiple scales, not excluding the State one, often neglected in the literature about globalisation (Brenner, 2004).

Such case shows also the contested nature of sustainability (Scoones et. al., 2007), through some of the voices of dwellers, practitioners, academics and in general persons affected in different ways by the project.

These elements would not be enough to justify the interest of the case and the will of the author to go back to Ahmedabad in order to further explore the issues so far emerged, if it was not considered a replicable example throughout India: “Whatever the outcome, the project is a leitmotif in the context of river and waterfront redevelopment projects now popping up in Indian cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Calcutta and Lucknow. Ahmedabad is breaking new ground, both literally and figuratively, in the redevelopment of Indian cities” (Fenk, Scheffer, 2009).

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