

# The Study of Cultural Landscape in Public Open Spaces (Waterfronts)

Sakshi Chachre<sup>1</sup>; Ar. Ratima Dagaonkar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Student; School of Architecture, IPS Academy, Indore

<sup>2</sup> Faculty; School of Architecture, IPS Academy, Indore

**Abstract-** The cultural landscapes of cities like **Ahmedabad** and **Bhopal** have witnessed significant transformations due to riverfront development initiatives. The **Sabarmati Riverfront** project in Ahmedabad, spanning eleven kilometres, was a pioneering planned waterfront, aiming at environmental enhancement and urban rejuvenation. However, its impact on the river remains unclear. Similarly, Bhopal's **Upper Lake**, once a polluted water body, is now being revitalized, emphasizing the cultural context of Madhya Pradesh. This comparative study examines the implementation and lived experiences of these projects, emphasizing the role of waterfronts as vital public open spaces. Insights from Ahmedabad and Bhopal inform the ongoing **Kahn Riverfront revitalization** in Indore, highlighting the need to restore rivers as essential cultural heritage and communal assets. The analysis considers design elements, community engagement, and ecological sustainability, providing valuable lessons for urban planners and policymakers seeking to create vibrant, inclusive waterfronts that resonate with local culture and enhance the quality of life for residents.

**Keywords:** Public open space, cultural landscape, urban space, Sabarmati riverfront, Bhopal lakefront, Kahn riverfront.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A landscape, encompassing both natural and human elements, reflects the interplay of human activity and the environment. When we refer to a “cultural landscape,” we recognize it as a collaborative creation of humanity and nature. These landscapes can take various forms: intentional designs, organic evolutions, relict remnants, or ongoing historical contexts. An “associative cultural landscape” intertwines natural features with religious, artistic, or cultural significance. Notably, the World Heritage Convention now considers sites rather than individual monuments, blurring the lines between nature and culture. Local communities actively participate in the listing process, emphasizing the inseparable relationship between people, their surroundings, and the landscapes they shape. Ultimately, every landscape carries cultural value, reinforcing the need to protect and cherish these multifaceted environments. The exploration of cultural landscapes highlights their profound impact on our lives and underscores the intricate connections between humanity, nature, and the spaces we inhabit.

More recently the expression urban landscapes have been proposed and substituted with cultural landscapes. Very likely this new terminology intends to focus on the fact that landscapes are increasingly the result of interactions between human and economic forces, the role of the nature been marginalized. Moreover, it may be considered that the main challenge is now to wonder whether our cities manage efficiently or not their landscapes, more than 80% of people living in urban contexts.

Public space is open to all citizens, and it is a socialized place undertaking public life. Its appearance creates a new form of communication for people and makes citizens' sense of social participation clearer. Due to the lack of systematic planning and design of most public spaces in current cities, the presentation of the landscape is inconsistent with the surrounding environment, resulting in a decline in the quality of the space, and a fault in the inheritance of

regional culture. This paper takes the river fronts as an example to discuss how to conform to the development of The Times, establish a landscape with unique regional culture, and how to reflect regional culture and site spirit through landscape design. A city's historical, economic, political, socio-cultural & topographical aspects also impact the shaping of the waterfront.

The new emerging waterfronts not only affect the curb, but can also make a paradigm shift on their city structures. "The very factors which shaped the waterfronts, can therefore be influenced themselves, leading to the city's identity shift."

Comparisons between material and value elements in case studies referred to in this paper demonstrate that they share similar characteristics that can be addressed by following culturally sustainable practices. For example, waterfronts are further classified into ghats, ports, stepwells, riverfronts, lakefronts, etc. which vary in the terms of cultural references. The limitations of this paper is to study and analyze waterfronts of almost similar cultural references.

This paper with the help of comparative analysis of Sabarmati riverfront and BhojTal lakefront, will further review the condition of Kahn riverfront after the revitalization measures in context of cultural landscape and its effect on city image.

## **2. Cultural Landscape in India**

In India, cultural landscapes of public open spaces epitomize the country's rich tapestry of traditions, community life, and artistic expression. These spaces, ranging from bustling bazaars to serene parks, serve as vital hubs for social interaction, recreation, and cultural exchange. One of the most iconic examples is Delhi's Chandni Chowk, a bustling market dating back to the Mughal era. Here, narrow lanes teem with vendors selling everything from spices and textiles to street food, offering a sensory feast for visitors. Chandni Chowk not only embodies Delhi's vibrant street culture but also serves as a melting pot of diverse communities, languages, and cuisines, reflecting the city's cosmopolitan identity. Moving southward, Mumbai's Marine Drive stands as a testament to the city's enduring spirit and resilience. This iconic promenade, overlooking the Arabian Sea, is a beloved gathering spot for locals and tourists alike, offering panoramic views of the city skyline and serving as a backdrop for leisurely strolls, street performances, and cultural events. Moreover, Marine Drive's iconic Art Deco buildings add a touch of architectural splendor to the landscape, underscoring Mumbai's status as a cultural and economic powerhouse. In Kolkata, the Maidan—a vast urban park in the heart of the city—provides a verdant oasis amidst the hustle and bustle of city life. Spanning over 1,000 acres, the Maidan serves as a recreational haven for joggers, picnickers, and sports enthusiasts, hosting cricket matches, football games, and cultural festivals throughout the year. Additionally, the Maidan's iconic landmarks, including the Victoria Memorial and the Shaheed Minar, serve as reminders of Kolkata's colonial past and rich cultural heritage. Beyond these urban centers, India's cultural landscapes of public open spaces extend to rural areas, where village squares, temple courtyards, and communal grounds serve as focal points for religious ceremonies, agricultural fairs, and traditional performances. These spaces not only foster a sense of community and belonging but also provide opportunities for preserving and celebrating India's diverse cultural heritage. As India continues to urbanize and modernize, safeguarding and revitalizing these cultural landscapes becomes increasingly crucial, ensuring that future generations inherit a legacy of vibrant public spaces that celebrate the country's rich tapestry of culture and tradition.

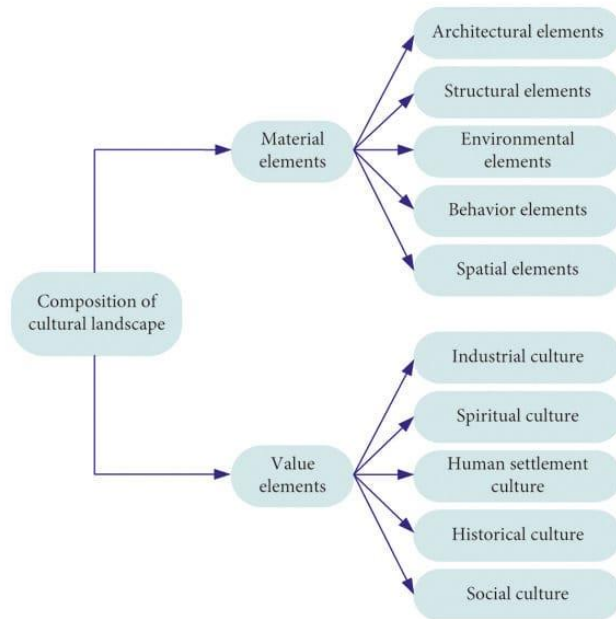


Figure 1: Basic composition of cultural landscape dynamics promote the formation of and change in

(Credit: Wenting Xu)

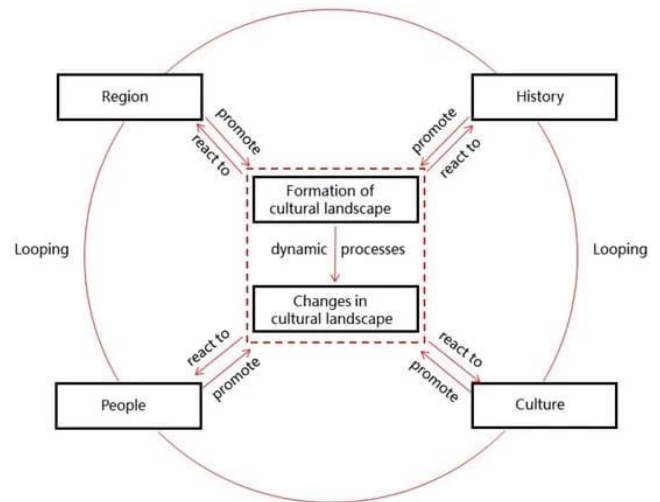


Figure 2: Four different spatial

cultural landscapes (Credit: Qi Yang)

### 3. Importance of Public Open Spaces in Urban Areas

Open spaces play a pivotal role in shaping our urban experience. Drawing from Hannah Arendt's work in *The Human Condition*, we recognize these spaces as open and shared realms—a reflection of the Indian ethos that champions spaces *for*, *by*, and *of* the people.

Beyond functionality, public spaces contribute to a city's identity. Advertisements, for instance, shape the city's image. Recently, there has been a paradigm shift—an inclusive approach that recognizes lesser-known spaces and “non-spaces” as integral parts of the urban public realm.

Public open spaces encompass undeveloped land or areas devoid of buildings and other constructed structures. These spaces are accessible to the public, serving as recreational havens for residents. Their presence enhances the aesthetic appeal and environmental quality of neighborhood. Across cities, various types of public open spaces exist, including:

- Parks
- Gardens
- Playgrounds
- Public beaches
- Waterfronts

#### **4. WATERFRONTS**

Cities and towns possess unique identities shaped by a blend of community influence, geographical features, local culture, and demographic factors. In a diverse country like India, urban spaces serve varied purposes for different user groups. However, this diversity can lead to conflicts and hinder optimal space utilization.

Waterfronts bring settlements and hence become focal points in a city for rise of other services, although the use and purpose of these is a major question. Waterfronts often span for long ranges and can be segmented for multiple uses.

##### **Types of Waterfronts**

1. Commercial or Industrial
2. Cultural, Educational & Environmental
3. Recreational
4. Residential
5. Working & Transportation:  
Include ports, harbours for international overseas trade of goods.

#### **5. LITERATURE REVIEW**

##### **5.1 The Cultural Metamorphosis of Sabarmati Riverfront: Shaping Ahmedabad's Urban Identity**

The **Sabarmati Riverfront**, a dynamic urban development project in **Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India**, has redefined the city's relationship with its lifeline—the Sabarmati River. From a neglected waterway to a vibrant and sustainable public space, the riverfront epitomizes Ahmedabad's evolution and aspirations.

1. The Sabarmati Riverfront's makeover has profoundly altered Ahmedabad's cultural scenery, marking a significant shift in the city's image.
2. Initially neglected, the Sabarmati Riverfront underwent a dramatic overhaul starting in 2005, aiming to reclaim its banks while addressing environmental concerns and flood risks.
3. The project, led by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, fused modern infrastructure with the city's historical roots, resulting in a blend of functionality and beauty.
4. The renovated riverfront now features spacious promenades, green spaces, and recreational facilities, inviting locals and tourists to enjoy various activities by the water.
5. Cultural elements like art installations, performances, and festivals have been seamlessly integrated, fostering community engagement and celebrating Ahmedabad's diverse heritage.
6. Commercial establishments, hotels, and leisure amenities have sprung up along the riverfront, spurring economic activity and urban renewal in adjacent areas.
7. Beyond its physical transformation, the Sabarmati Riverfront symbolizes Ahmedabad's resilience and adaptability, showcasing the city's commitment to sustainable progress.

8. It serves as a model for urban revitalization worldwide, embodying Ahmedabad's forward-thinking approach and its residents' sense of pride and ownership.
9. The riverfront's ongoing evolution mirrors Ahmedabad's growth trajectory, serving as a reminder of its past, present, and future potential.
10. Ultimately, the Sabarmati Riverfront illustrates the transformative impact of visionary urban planning and community involvement in reshaping a city's cultural fabric and redefining its identity. The Sabarmati Riverfront transcends its utilitarian purpose to become Ahmedabad's beating heart—a place where culture, nature, and community converge.

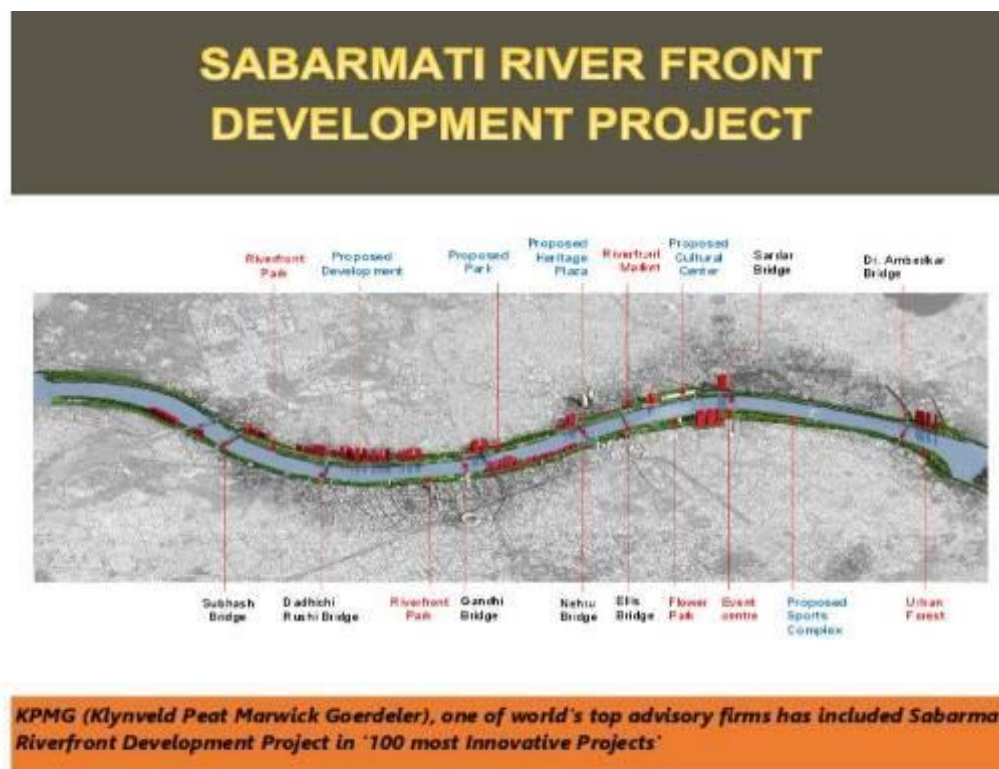


Figure 3. Usage of Sabarmati riverfront after development project

Source: <https://smartnet.niua.org/learn/library/2528/2443>



## 5.2 The Cultural Transformation of Bhopal's Upper Lake (BhojTal): A Reflection of the City's Identity



Figure 4. Upper Lake and its surrounding landmark

Source: Google earth imagery, 23.2477907N, 77.3751276W, Alt 3487m



Figure 5. Upper Lake and its surrounding landmark

Bhopal, the capital city of Madhya Pradesh, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and the harmonious coexistence of tradition and modernity. At the heart of this vibrant city lies the **Upper Lake**, locally known as **Bhojtal**. This man-made lake, steeped in history and cultural significance, has undergone remarkable changes over the centuries, shaping both the physical landscape and the city's image.

### 1. Historical Origins and Cultural Significance:

- According to local folklore, the Upper Lake was built by **Paramara Raja Bhoj** during his reign in the 11th century. Raja Bhoj, a visionary ruler, established Bhopal (then known as Bhojpal) to safeguard the eastern frontier of his kingdom.

- The lake served multiple purposes: a source of drinking water, a place for religious rituals, and a hub for social gatherings. Its creation was rooted in a legend—a cure for Raja Bhoj’s skin ailment involved merging 365 tributaries into a single reservoir.
- Over time, the Upper Lake became an integral part of Bhopal’s identity, symbolizing resilience, community, and natural beauty.

## 2. Environmental and Urban Changes:

- The Upper Lake’s transformation reflects broader shifts in urban planning and environmental consciousness. As Bhopal expanded, the lake faced challenges such as pollution, encroachment, and neglect.
- In recent years, concerted efforts have revitalized the lake. Restoration projects, stricter regulations, and community involvement have improved water quality and preserved its ecological balance.
- The lakefront now boasts walking trails, recreational spaces, and viewpoints, enhancing its appeal as a public amenity.

## 3. Cultural Landscape and City Image:

- The Upper Lake’s cultural landscape extends beyond its physical boundaries. It evokes memories, emotions, and shared experiences for people of Bhopal.
- Artists, poets, and photographers have immortalized the lake’s serene vistas, capturing its changing moods—sunrise reflections, monsoon ripples, and moonlit nights.
- The lakefront serves as a canvas for cultural events, festivals, and celebrations, reinforcing Bhopal’s identity as the “City of Lakes.”

## 4. Symbolism and Civic Pride:

- The renaming of the Upper Lake to **Bhojtal** pays homage to Raja Bhoj’s legacy. A towering statue of the king stands sentinel, emphasizing Bhopal’s lakeside heritage.
- The lake’s rejuvenation aligns with the city’s aspiration to balance modernization with preservation. It symbolizes civic pride, environmental stewardship, and a commitment to cultural continuity.

## 5. Challenges and Future Prospects:

- Despite progress, challenges persist. Sustainable management, waste disposal, and maintaining water quality remain critical.
- The Upper Lake’s cultural landscape must adapt to changing demographics, tourism, and urbanization while preserving its essence.
- As Bhopal evolves, the Upper Lake will continue to shape the city’s image—a mirror reflecting its past, present, and aspirations for the future.

The Upper Lake transcends its physical boundaries to become an integral part of Bhopal’s soul. Its cultural landscape weaves together history, ecology, and human connections, reinforcing Bhopal’s unique identity on the canvas of time.

### 5.3 COMPARATIVE LITERATURE ANALYSIS

#### **Sabarmati riverfront and Bhojtal lakefront**

The Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad and the Bhojtal Lakefront in Bhopal both represent ambitious urban development projects aimed at transforming neglected water bodies into vibrant cultural hubs. While each project has its unique characteristics, a comparative study of their changing cultural landscapes in the context of city image reveals several interesting similarities and differences:

- 1. Urban Revitalization Goals:

Both the Sabarmati Riverfront and the Bhojtal Lakefront projects were initiated with the goal of revitalizing their respective cities' urban landscapes. They aimed to reclaim underutilized waterfront areas, enhance public spaces, and improve the overall quality of life for residents.

- 2. Historical and Cultural Significance:

- The Sabarmati River holds historical significance as it was a focal point of Mahatma Gandhi's activities during India's independence movement. The riverfront project in Ahmedabad aimed to preserve this historical heritage while modernizing the area.
- Bhojtal Lake, also known as Upper Lake, is an ancient reservoir built by Raja Bhoj in the 11th century. The Bhojtal Lakefront project sought to highlight the lake's cultural significance and promote tourism while addressing environmental concerns.

- 3. Architectural and Design Elements:

- The Sabarmati Riverfront project in Ahmedabad features modern architectural elements such as wide promenades, landscaped gardens, and recreational facilities. It seamlessly blends contemporary design with historical references.
- The Bhojtal Lakefront project in Bhopal emphasizes the preservation of natural beauty and heritage. It incorporates traditional architecture, eco-friendly designs, and sustainable practices to complement the lake's surroundings.

- 4. Cultural Programming and Events:

- Both projects have integrated cultural programming and events to engage residents and visitors. The Sabarmati Riverfront hosts art exhibitions, music concerts, and festivals, celebrating Ahmedabad's diverse cultural heritage.
- Similarly, the Bhojtal Lakefront features cultural events, including folk performances, water sports competitions, and heritage walks, showcasing Bhopal's rich cultural tapestry.

- 5. Economic Impact:

- The redevelopment of the Sabarmati Riverfront has had a significant economic impact on Ahmedabad, attracting investments, spurring tourism, and boosting local businesses along the riverfront corridor.
- The Bhojtal Lakefront project aims to drive economic growth in Bhopal by promoting tourism, creating job opportunities, and supporting the development of hospitality and recreational facilities in the surrounding areas.



In conclusion, both the Sabarmati Riverfront and the Bhojtal Lakefront projects have played pivotal roles in reshaping the cultural landscapes and enhancing the city images of Ahmedabad and Bhopal, respectively. While they share common goals of urban revitalization and cultural preservation, each project reflects the unique historical, architectural, and socio-economic context of its city, contributing to their distinct identities and fostering pride among residents.

## 6. REVIEW of Indore's Kahn Riverfront

The depleting cultural landscape of the Kahn Riverfront, spanning from the Krishna Pura bridge to Jawahar Marg, is casting a shadow over the city of Indore, altering its once vibrant image and signalling a call for urgent revitalization efforts. Once a bustling hub of cultural activities and community gatherings, this stretch of the Kahn Riverfront is now witnessing a gradual decline, with neglect and environmental degradation taking their toll on its significance and appeal.



Figure 6. study area of Kahn riverfront

The Kahn River, historically revered for its role in shaping Indore's identity and providing a lifeline to its residents, has long been a symbol of cultural heritage and natural beauty. However, in recent years, rapid urbanization and unchecked pollution have contributed to the deterioration of its surroundings, turning what was once a picturesque waterfront into a neglected and underutilized space. Encroachments, industrial effluents, and solid waste dumping have marred the riverbanks, robbing them of their charm and cultural vitality.

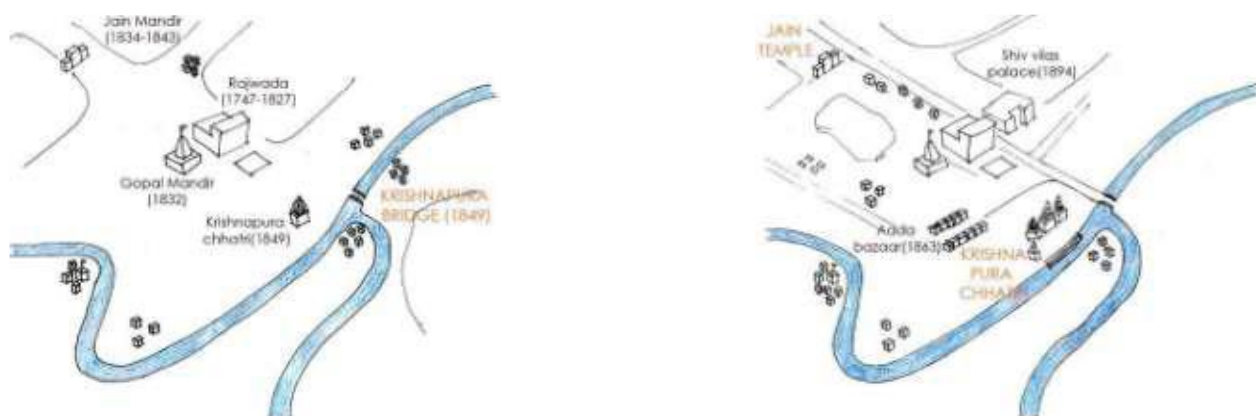


Figure 7. Evolution of the riverfront in the city of Indore.

*Figure 8. Dhobi Ghat**Figure 9. Bridge over Kahn River**Figure 10. Krishnpura Chattri*

The repercussions of this decline are profound and far-reaching, extending beyond the physical environment to impact the city's overall image and identity. The Kahn Riverfront, once a source of pride for Indore's residents, is now increasingly viewed as a neglected and forgotten asset, overshadowed by the city's rapid modernization and urban sprawl. Its depleting cultural landscape reflects a disconnect between the past and present, as memories of vibrant cultural events and communal gatherings along the riverbanks fade into obscurity.

*Figure 11. Before and after revitalization measures taken on riverfront*



*Figure 12. Present day picture of Krishnapura bridge*      *Figure 13. Proposed rejuvenation project for Kahn riverfront*

The changing city image of Indore, characterized by the decline of the Kahn Riverfront, underscores the need for concerted action to revitalize and reclaim this vital space. Efforts to restore the riverbanks to their former glory must prioritize environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and community engagement. This requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses pollution, encroachments, and infrastructural shortcomings while also fostering a renewed sense of pride and ownership among residents.

One potential avenue for revitalization is the implementation of comprehensive urban planning and beautification projects aimed at transforming the Kahn Riverfront into a vibrant cultural and recreational hub. This could involve the creation of green spaces, pedestrian walkways, and public art installations that celebrate Indore's rich cultural heritage and natural beauty. Additionally, efforts to mitigate pollution and restore the ecological health of the river must be prioritized through initiatives such as waste management programs and water quality monitoring.

Moreover, fostering community involvement and participation is essential to the success of any revitalization effort. By engaging residents, local businesses, and stakeholders in the planning and implementation process, a sense of ownership and stewardship can be cultivated, ensuring the long-term sustainability and vitality of the Kahn Riverfront.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the plight of Indore's Kahn Riverfront underscores the urgent need to preserve and rejuvenate our cultural landscapes. Once a vibrant symbol of the city's identity, neglect and environmental degradation have tarnished its former grandeur, prompting a call to action. The challenges facing the Kahn Riverfront reflect broader issues encountered by urban areas grappling with rapid modernization and uncontrolled growth. However, this decline also presents an opportunity for renewal and revitalization.

Reviving the Kahn Riverfront requires a holistic approach that prioritizes environmental sustainability, cultural conservation, and community engagement. Addressing issues such as pollution, encroachments, and inadequate infrastructure is crucial to restoring the riverfront's cultural significance. Through comprehensive urban planning and ecological restoration efforts, along with active involvement from residents and stakeholders, Indore can reclaim the Kahn Riverfront as a vital element of its identity.

By revitalizing the Kahn Riverfront, Indore has the chance to not only reclaim a neglected asset but also redefine its urban landscape. Embracing its cultural heritage and natural beauty, Indore can create a lasting legacy for future generations. The revitalized Kahn Riverfront will serve as a source of civic pride and a welcoming destination for residents and visitors alike, fostering a sense of unity and community spirit. This transformation represents a pivotal moment for Indore to honor its past, embrace its present, and chart a sustainable future.

The depleting cultural landscape of the Kahn Riverfront stretching from the Krishna Pura bridge to Jawahar Marg represents a pressing challenge for the city of Indore, one that requires immediate attention and concerted action. By prioritizing environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and community engagement, Indore has the opportunity to reclaim and revitalize this vital space, restoring its cultural significance and enhancing its city image for generations to come.

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