

NIRLON KNOWLEDGE PARK, GOREGAON, MUMBAI

Andrew Tindsley gives a rare example of new development combined with regeneration



In the rush for urbanisation, regeneration and renewal are words all too frequently missing from the development process in India. Cities such as Mumbai have a fine tradition of industrial as well as civic buildings, but in the drive for improvement, much of the history is lost. Whilst the Goregaon area of Mumbai does not have the same rich mix of textile related mill buildings once found further south in the city, the Nirlon estate does have a more recent industrial character.

BACKGROUND

Established in the late 1950s, the site was developed for the manufacture of nylon yarn, a production process which then ran for over 40 years. A variety of economic forces led to cessation of manufacturing and to a review of the site's future role. The area is continuing to play its part as a place of employment, and through a carefully orchestrated process of regeneration is re-emerging as a centre for high quality information technology and related commercial activity. In moving forward, Nirlon set about establishing a rehabilitation strategy for their 23-acre landholding and in doing so, appointed the Dutch masterplanner Khandekar (Urban Design & Landscape architecture pvt. Ltd, now BDP Khandekar) to prepare a site-wide Master plan and regeneration strategy. From initial concepts, a flexible Master plan was prepared and from this, a new business community is rapidly beginning to establish itself on site.

Whilst the collection of buildings left by the manufacturing process were of limited architectural value, as a whole they created an interesting composition with a number of white painted, low rise blocks, interspersed with mature trees creating the impression of a campus. Stronger visual elements, such as a tall chimney, water tanks and a block of small cooling towers identified closely with the history of the area and were worthy of retention and incorporation into the new proposals. Small temples are features frequently found amongst India's cityscape and one such building exists in the heart of the Nirlon complex. By retaining and reusing these iconic elements it was felt they would give the new development a unique flavour and provide a subtle memory of the site's previous life.

As the manufacturing plant developed, so too did the surrounding suburb of Goregaon. Located to the north of the most densely populated areas of Mumbai, the area has become an important residential suburb. Goregaon straddles the important Western Express Highway, the major trunk road north connecting Mumbai to Gujarat and then Delhi. The area is also close to the city's International and Domestic Airports, and is a ten-minute walk from one of the city's major railway stations. All these are factors which have enabled the area to become an attractive location for new commercial enterprise.

As a company, Nirlon has been sensitive to this changing environment and has sought to

↑ The central green spine, a fundamental element of the design concept

create a development which responds to the new commercial and physical context, but also recognises and builds upon the industrial heritage. From the outset the objective has been to create a high quality, international, knowledge park in which the history of the site, the heritage of Mumbai and the character of India are all present.

THE FIRST STEP: DEFINING A CONCEPT

As manufacturing came to a close, certain parts of the site were let for other short term uses; these and a desire to work closely with a number of existing elements, led to a more sensitive approach to redevelopment than would be the norm in this part of the world. Future development was to be guided and controlled by a comprehensive Master plan and the first part of this process was to develop a strong design concept that would set out the potential of the area. This was presented as the main design thrust, without digressing into details which would need to be resolved over a lengthier period of time.

At this stage, the broad parameters of the physical framework were becoming visible, though there were many issues on which the client had yet to make decisions. The design concept therefore had to have considerable flexibility and allow for multiple combinations and permutations of use that could respond to their ultimate requirements. The concept was simple, comprising three linear building zones, shaped so as to define a central park which would form the heart of the new development. This cluster was enclosed by a tree-lined ring of circulation that could feed the building zones with access to underground car parks, service areas and utilities from the outside. This robust initial concept has been adhered to throughout the life of the Master plan and can be easily read as the new environment begins to take shape.

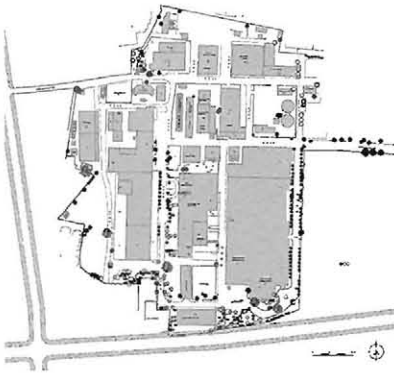
CREATING A SENSE OF PLACE

The location of the site, its rich industrial history and its capacity for change, provided interesting ingredients for a new knowledge park. Whilst its connectivity with the rest of the city and the world beyond was advantageous, its immediate context within a leafy residential enclave made it a quiet retreat, a location away from the hustle and bustle of the city, where highly qualified business and technology professionals could find the peace of mind to do their work efficiently. The design concept proposed a green core, which would be attractive to look out across and be pleasant to walk in. The existing trees created important natural features and the Master plan was shaped to retain and protect the maximum number. Their retention was important to give a sense of maturity to the new development and retain powerful natural elements which gave protection from the elements.

With its industrial past, the area contained a wide collection of building types. The objective was to develop the estate on an incremental basis, carrying out limited initial demolition and permanently retaining a number of existing structures. Early studies identified those buildings and structures that were underused and ready for removal, those in which recent investment had taken place and would have a life for perhaps a further 10 years and those, such as the cooling tower block which were to be retained as important elements in the overall Master plan.



↑ Early visualisations of the central open space
 ↑↑ Simple models were prepared to test the design approach
 ↑↑↑ Early design sketches tested the approach



↑↑ Clockwise from top left: original site plan setting out the arrangements of the industrial buildings; design concept integrating the elements of open space, built form and external movement; approved Master plan; landscape and open space strategy integrating existing mature trees into the overall composition
 ↑ The old cooling tower before and after its transformation into a café

FLEXIBILITY IN DESIGN

A series of zoning principles underlied the urban design solution and were derived from the initial concept of the three building zones juxtaposed around a central park. Each of these zones was able to be subdivided into two, three four or five individual blocks as the demands of the external commercial market changed. Each of the three building zones defined the maximum parametres of space within which one or more buildings could be built, the minimum and maximum building heights, the compulsory build-to lines, the primary vehicular and pedestrian access areas. The exact number of buildings per zone and the final contour of each separate building could be decided upon, depending on parametres based on specific user-needs. The central premise of the design was that design quality and consequently long term real-estate value was created primarily by the quality of the open space and only secondarily by the buildings.

TRAFFIC FREE

The primary organising element of the proposed development was the central park. Here the objective was for workers and visitors to have

an environment within which they could move about freely without the nuisance of car traffic, generally a source of constant irritation in most of India's urban areas. The central space would be a place for pedestrian movement within a pleasant environment, and the location for a variety of related amenities, including cafés and restaurants, a crèche, a bank, a clubhouse and the original temple. Whilst these would greatly enhance the daily life of the working community, they also had a significant effect on the quality and real-estate value of the buildings enclosing the park.

A GREEN AND PLEASANT CAMPUS

The concept of landscape architecture is inextricably linked to the urban design concept. The central park provides over 1.5ha of green space in the middle of the development. The design of the space has a sculptural quality, creating a green valley that helps to establish a unique identity. Sweeping curves are combined with generous lengths of open terraces which link the building side walkways with the pergolas, water bodies and lawns of the park. The historic temple forms a place for quiet reflection at the north end of the park, with the cooling tower block, now a café and restaurant complex, creating a lively counterpoint at its southern end.

The curvilinear water body is the feature of the Central Park. It moves from North to South, and reflects the changing moods of the landscape. By the café, it is seen as playful columns of water and a cascade over a textured mural which runs along the side of the park, with the main body of water giving a more reflective quality to the overall composition. Wherever possible, existing trees have been retained or where practical relocated. New species were then selected to provide shelter, help filter dust and sound, and provide fragrance. The creation of a sustainable development was an aspiration from the commencement of the project and the scheme has achieved the status of Gold within the LEED system of assessment.

CONCLUSION

Construction started in 2007 and many elements of the initial design concept and Master plan are now in place. The first buildings have been occupied, supporting amenities continue to be completed, and the central park is beginning to establish. The Knowledge Park has rapidly become a successful place within Goregaon neighbourhood and is acting as a catalyst for wider change. It is attracting major occupiers and is now the home of international companies such as Deutsche Bank, Morgan Stanley and IBM. Its qualities are also being recognised by others and it recently featured strongly in the Economic Times (of India) Smart Living Awards where it achieved Best Corporate Space (IT Parks / SEZs), Best Green Project (Commercial) and Safest Project (All categories). ●

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