

WE NEED TO BUILD TALLER, SMARTER

VISION 2020 India's cities and towns will be judged on their eco-friendliness and original character



Aashish Karode

Architect, urban designer and partner at Design Atelier

CITIES ARE WHERE URBAN stories are written, part real, part imaginary, always in the making, allowing for anticipation, expectation and action.

The change and renewal of Indian cities calls for continuous engagement with myriad facets. With continuous inward rural migration and increased global connectivity, Indian cities are on the radar, as every informed citizen seeks to understand the mantra for their sustainability and efficient functioning.

Recent reports put India's urban population at 340 million, roughly 30% of the total population of the country. This percentage is expected to grow by 40%, to 590 million, by 2030. This means we will need about 700 million sq metres of residential and commercial space for homes and jobs. And, to meet demand, we will need to create about 180 million jobs, 7,400 km of roads, new airports and subways, millions of square feet of schools, colleges and shopping malls, and so on.

DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT URBAN DESIGN LOSES TOUCH WITH THE 'PLACE', THE ARCHITECTURE AND THE FORM OF THE CITY. ONE POSSIBLE SOLUTION IS TO INVITE CITIZENS TO GET INVOLVED

With 250 million people to be added to India's cities and towns over the next 20 years, the country needs a vision of the future, to inspire the next generation of cities to become world-class centres of urban endeavour, business, finance, sport and culture, while ensuring that smaller cities become stronger and more able to efficiently participate in the growth story. So what should India's future cities look like? Should they be like sanitised Singapore, or skyscraping New York?

Indian cities, in comparison with cities around the world, are sorely under-invested, and the biggest challenge is creating an improved quality of life that balances economic opportunities with access to social amenities like housing, schools and

hospitals, urban services and infrastructure.

One has only to experience the vitality of many of our cities, the beauty of their gardens and monuments, their charming irregularity and spontaneous celebrations of human life as well as their impromptu adaptations of space to the varied demands of our heterogeneous populations, to see that we already have a strong urban design foundation of useful principles to make sense of contemporary city design. However, for the most part, our cities are deeply dissatisfying, with a glaring incompatibility between aesthetic engagement and utility.

Take the increasing angst of traffic congestion, the absence of reliable public transportation, the unsympathetic view towards pedestrian rights, the lack of adequate road signs and the creation of new bottlenecks by new flyovers. Add to this the impersonality of our buildings, our callousness towards streets and landscapes, our irrational priority on low-rise land use planning that has led to the shortage of affordable housing in urban hubs.

Development without urban design loses touch with the 'place', the architecture and the form of the city. The result is a monotonous and arbitrary repetition of traits that, instead of interpreting and emphasising the particularities of individual places, weakens them and produces a homogeneous quality, be it Mumbai, Nagpur, Kanpur or Delhi.

One way to avert this is

through citizen-initiated proposals for urban development with clear local concepts, based on ideas relevant to particular places. Policymakers could then address how people want to work, travel, shop and earn and stimulate the desired quality of life in each city.

Most Indian metropolitan regions arose from dense, monocentric cities that grew spontaneously via multiple commercial centres or business districts, then morphed further into today's modern polycentric networks of interconnected metropolitan areas — each one now a megacity of decentralised, supposedly self-sufficient towns, suburbs and satellite cities, with their own specialised agglomerations for industry, jobs and housing.

The flaw in this vision is that our urban spatial structures evolve slowly and do not grow equitably, being instead shaped by market forces interacting with regulations and complexifying politics.

Most importantly, urban real estate becomes prohibitively expensive with this version of expansive, privatised low-rise development. Equally, the absence of dependable water and electricity, affordable housing and transportation infrastructure imposes the most stringent limits to growth and the accommodation of rural-urban migration. The centres thus do not work self-sufficiently, as intended; instead they compete interdependently with the city and each other for jobs, housing and schools.

Accordingly, a suitable alternative vision with a new paradigm for sustainable city modernisation has to be found — one that reduces the problems of the pres-

ent while meeting our desired criteria. You would imagine that, for what are amongst the densest, most populous cities in the world — Delhi and Kolkata, for instance — their choice of a uniformly low-rise development with few public or open spaces and some of the lowest floor-area ratios in the world would have been challenged.

Contrast this experience with that of developed global cities like Tokyo or New York, where suitable areas are built up very high. We should perhaps do the same, building tall in our urban centres, where we can most efficiently use the scarce land available, and offering more public amenities and open spaces.

In the coming decade, cities will be judged by their environmental performance, quality of life and how well they are prepared for future challenges. 'Place making' and 'sustainability' will become important concepts in our urban design. On this score, Indian cities have not performed well. While it does take vision, long-term planning and time to turn a city around, we already have some excellent models in Surat, which has so rapidly revamped its waste management system, and New Delhi, which transformed its roads, infrastructure (via the Metro) and district centres.

Before you can adopt such systems, though, people must be convinced they will improve their city's performance and support the diversity of their collective and individual needs. The design of cities is no longer the concern only of urban designers, planners

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and policymakers. Private citizens are increasingly involved in shaping the city, offering their pertinent observations and insight. With high citizen aspirations come strong governance structures and civic leaders who see sustainability as a priority and recognise that current consumption and living habits may be leading to long-term problems.

The idea of sustainability can seem like a luxury at a time when so many cannot afford homes. But with more than half the world's population living in towns and cities, incremental improvement towards 'place making' and 'sustainability' will become vital.

By 2040 two-thirds of us are expected to live in the cities. To overcome the contradictions of urban living, we need solutions based on a collective vision of how we want to live and what we have to do to get there; then we have to invest in that future.