

India no longer lives mainly in her villages.

The numbers on the growth of cities are staggering. Between 1901 and 1991, the urban towns or agglomerations have doubled to 3768 in number. The 23 big cities have grown the fastest and have retained a third of the total urban population for the past 30 years.

India's cities have become the gateways to the country's economic growth and opportunities, and the waves of urbanisation have become larger and stronger. At the turn of the millennium 305 million Indians lived in nearly 3,700 towns and cities spread across the length and breadth of the country. This comprises 30% of its population, in sharp contrast to only 60 million (15%) who lived in urban areas in 1947 when the country became independent.

During the last fifty years the population of India has grown two and half times, but Urban India has grown nearly five times. In numerical terms, India's urban population is second largest in the world after China, and is higher than the total urban population of all countries put together barring China, USA and Russia.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'S CITIES AND TOWNS

While this is good news in many ways, this growth will have profound implications not only for the quality of life of Indians, but also for our demographics – on where and how we live.

As our cities grow, we – all of us - need to ask more meaningful questions about the true identity of a city, and – going further - to start thinking about what a great Indian city would be like. But these seem audacious to even contemplate today, given how utterly dysfunctional our cities are. Getting to the other side means breaking many myths and re-thinking many ideas that we currently hold. For example, we need to respond to fundamental questions about ownership of spaces, and why this seems to be lacking in our urban centers. Why is it that we are not preserving our heritage buildings? How do we go beyond the transactional nature of our cities? Is the wild growth of slums a symptom of a deeper social malaise? How DO we plan new areas? What about the impact on the village markets, the Sunday shanties that are often seen at the edge of every city? What about our own cultural identity, which seems to be getting submerged in a sea of structural glazing? But rather than solving these problems, we are actually adding to this problem heap every day!

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLE

A village in the city's periphery suddenly finds itself bifurcated by the construction of a National Highway. The adjacent City Development Authority rezones green fields to non-protected land. Soon after, the Industrial Development Board announces a new IT Corridor and acquires several hundred acres of the village. Often, embedded in these decisions are swirling political interests meant to capitalize on land prices, largesse and loopholes.

In all this, the local administration - the "Gram Panchayat" - has not been consulted. They have no choice.

This act sets in motion a chain reaction. The village is now geographically divided, making administration cumbersome. Right-to-property is invalidated and locals are displaced. Village community identity is overwhelmed, and existing economic activity is disheveled, with no employment opportunities or job guarantees for the locals.

In terms of planning and design, not much science has been applied. Developers capitalize on the new opportunity and buy up vast tracts of land. Local authorities can be coaxed into sanctioning land use and zoning that provides maximum monetization. Pockets of agricultural land are now juxtaposed between areas of settlement and industry.

Predicting what will happen ten years down the road is simple: rampant land use and zoning violations; a comprehensive failure in infrastructure delivery, waste management, traffic patterns, public transport, drinking water supply; disenfranchised residents.

Multiply this hundreds of thousands of times and the picture of India's urban melee is unveiled.

THE IMPACT OF SPACE ON URBAN ISSUES

The pattern of these discontinuities suggests that planning urban space is actually a major piece of the urban puzzle.

Immense work is being done on several fronts related to urban growth and development, by experts and champions both inside government and outside of it.

However, the troubling reality is that “solutions” are being articulated and attempted in isolation. Academia is not engaged with administration; planners are unaware of political forces; lawmakers are out of touch with the realities of land-use. As a result, these energies are neither snowballing into a positive force of large change, nor even keeping pace with the growing problems.

While there has been much debate about the elements that make up good public governance, much of the emphasis has been on issues like transparency and accountability.

Without taking away from the importance of these issues, there is an urgent need to also recognize that the planning of SPACE impacts the quality of governance. We need a new paradigm for planning our cities. Not one that takes a myopic view of planning as zoning and land use, but one that is informed by the issues of public governance, the need for connectivity, environmental cost of urban expansion, of the impact on depleting resources and vanishing ecological diversity, the requirements of universal access to water, power and infrastructure. Of planning that ensures social housing, that fosters the building of communities. One that gives us public realms that are inviting. That allows street vendors to earn their living and provide a valuable service and yet is not illegal or inconvenient. That allocates space for new industries and businesses to thrive but builds in flexibility for changing economies. That provides and works towards a vision for the city, that all of us share and own.

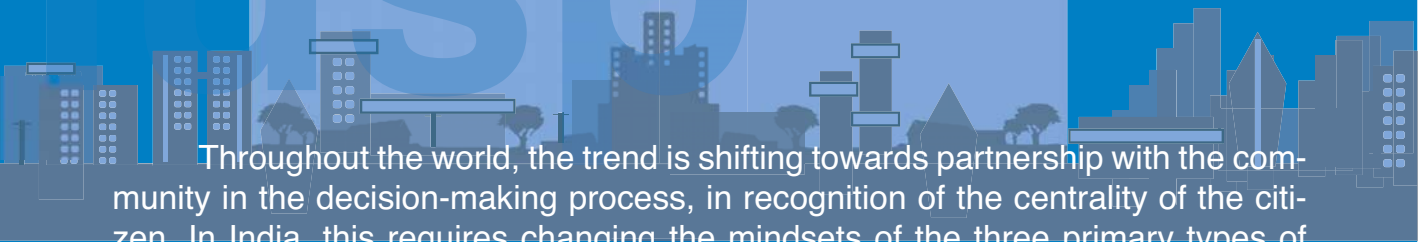
In this globalised world, many of us have traveled overseas and had opportunities to see and live in cities that we had previously only read about.

Barcelona, London, New York, Paris – these are some of the most loved cities in the world. What makes them such magnets for visitors? What makes each of them a source of energy, pride and opportunities for residents? Quite simply, it is the quality of their urban SPACE. These are cities with beauty and character in the public realm. They are loved for their parks and open spaces, their waterfront developments, their wonderful streets that make walking a pleasure, their living history and architecture, the museums galleries and cultural diversity, and the public transport that provides easy access to all of this.

This exposure has created more vocal professional Indians, demanding better and asking questions of our governments on why it cannot provide quality spaces and services.

THE NEED FOR PLATFORMS OF DIALOGUE AND DEBATE

In order for us to plan cities and towns with an equitable and high quality-of-life, those involved in governance and planning must recognise the complexity of their brief. Their clients are the rich, the middleclass, the slum-dwellers, industry, government, the disabled, children, senior citizens, the surrounding rural folk, etc.



Throughout the world, the trend is shifting towards partnership with the community in the decision-making process, in recognition of the centrality of the citizen. In India, this requires changing the mindsets of the three primary types of stakeholders: the government, the experts and the citizens themselves, and establishing institutional arrangements for such partnerships to succeed. Doing this requires complete clarity on the boundaries within which the expert or government can assert authority. Very significantly, it requires building capacities in all three stakeholders so that each may efficiently exercise their role in a democratic process.

Making this a reality requires different stakeholders to find common spaces: government, administrators, citizens, planners and architects, ecologists, sociologists, lawyers, NGOs, media etc. The diversity of these players means that there are few spaces for them to come together to even discuss common issues, let alone find common ground.

While Urban Forums across the world are engaged in lively debates on urban issues, there has been no such platform to discuss the issues of urbanization in a comprehensive and focused manner in India.

Out of a total of 346 conferences around the world in 2004, 138 were held in North America, 134 in Europe, and 51 were in Asia Pacific, including 6 in India. However, it is important to dig beneath the surface to examine the thematic content of these workshops, to determine if spatial issues are among the agendas of these conferences. Thematically, the largest number of conferences were for Transport (75) and Water (68); “Planning” as a theme – implying a clear spatial focus – had only 36 conferences. Even these did not look at urban issues in connection to space. Significantly, not one of these is in India. Australia alone held 5 planning conferences; Malaysia, Korea, Hong Kong each had one. Clearly, the time has come for a world-class Urban Forum in India.

There are four compelling reasons for such a conference in India:

- India is a vast country with a diverse ethnic, religious and social population. Most issues in other urbanizing Asian countries, with the exception of China perhaps, reflect a sub-set of those in urbanizing India. How we address challenges to religion and class in our cities, will be of greater relevance to other countries closer to home than examples from the West.

- The recently launched Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) is the largest urban initiative in the history of our country. It acknowledges the emerging importance of urban issues and provides hope for systemic urban transformation. A conference will provide the space to share the outcomes of urban projects and reforms on our cities.

- Indian cities face multiple administrative and political challenges. A conference addresses the need for a national platform for broadening local and regional capacity by networking successful practices and practitioners.

-India's young democracy provides rich experimental ground for its government and citizenry to define joint tools and processes of decision-making and action. The effort is relevant for both urbanizing countries as well as democratizing countries. "How" our urban growth takes place is as important as the "development" itself. In East-Asian countries such as China and Singapore, development has been centralized and technocratic in nature. As the largest democracy in the world, India has a unique opportunity to urbanize in a manner where the "means" share centre-stage with the "ends".

INDIA URBAN SPACE – A WORLD-CLASS URBAN CONFERENCE IN INDIA

"India Urban Space" (IndiaUSP) is a conference that has been conceptualised to address precisely this need. It takes the filter of SPACE in examining the various urban issues.

IndiaUSP was launched a year ago. The challenges of Urban Space relating to four themes were debated during the first conference in Goa, 9-11 February 2006. The two-day conference brought together an invited list of eminent participants to a common discussion table - government, policy experts, economists, environmental conservationists, media, planners and developers, infrastructure and financial players, NGO activists and citizens. The 2006 India USP conference resulted in a Goa Consensus on proposed solutions and action steps. Details of the conference can be accessed at www.janaagraha.org/indiausp/

Following that success, IndiaUSP is now expanding in scale and ambition. This year, it will be held in collaboration with IA&B, and will become India's pre-eminent annual urban conference. The conference will be held on September 29, with a thematic focus on the impact of Urban Land Reforms on Urban Space, and will include more people and have a three-tiered structure:

- o Public Programme: This will include project exhibition stalls, lectures, discussions, awards etc. on various aspects of public spaces
- o Exhibitor Programme: This program will include city corporations, industry participants, infrastructure players, etc, so that they may showcase their products, programmes, successes etc.
- o Policy Programme: This will bring together a small, invited group of national and international repute comprising policy-makers, planners, practitioners to craft a policy agenda for the Thematic Issue of Urban Land Reforms.

In addition, three design studios with 6 international and national architects of repute will present work on design briefs given by three selected cities.

IndiaUSP

WATCH THIS SPACE

A graduate of SPA recently told me that he abandoned his planning profession a few years ago because government was the only planner and he found no opportunity to practice. He is now a successful senior executive in a management position. Another architect friend in Bangalore stated that most urban planners have become architects. Who then is planning our cities? Is it really surprising that there is such a difference between Mumbai and Madrid, or Pune and Paris?

As architects, planners, builders and designers, we all care deeply about the personal spaces that we create. However, few of us have paid much attention to the context of the surrounding character and scale. Fewer still have been concerned with the state of our public spaces. None of us feels any ownership over the roads or footpaths in front of the buildings we create, or the surrounding parks and playgrounds, the post-office or the police stations. Nor do we worry about issues of connectivity, transport. Why? Perhaps because we have only been bystanders to the decisions related to public space, not participants. We are dis-interested because we are dis-enfranchised.

It is time that this changed.

The good news is that more planners and developers are asking more meaningful questions about their cities as well as exploring how they can impact change. And in a democracy, the net outcome will always be positive precisely because of such questioning and debate. We need to begin by participating in such dialogue.

Leading up to the India USP 2007, Mumbai, this magazine will contain a special section on IndiaUSP every month, featuring two articles: a short piece on the conference theme of Land Reforms, and a larger article on a theme impacting the public realm, ranging from Public Mobility systems, Urban Landscape Architecture, Energy systems, bridge designs, sewage systems, street furniture, etc. The success of IndiaUSP will not be complete without your involvement, as a professional working in the urban arena. Get in touch with IndiaUSP for further information, to share ideas or comments regarding the conference, or to get involved, at ...

