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Anywhere in India - the unfinished edge - the poor crafting of the edge of a road, the lack of definition of the pavement have become emblematic of the physical state of Indian cities.
Making Indian Cities: Urban Design in the New Millennium

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The 20th century has been one of dramatic change for urban India. Today, a visitor arriving in any Indian city is bombarded with schizophrenic images. In fact, the contemporary Indian city must seem like a twitching organism, constantly inventing, re-inventing, and adjusting itself to its ever-evolving demographics. As a result of this "kinetic" quality, cities in contemporary India totally lack the legibility that they possessed at the turn of the last century, and in the coming decades a greater part of India's population will be living in urban areas, and therefore cities as physical artefacts will become more critical to our future as a nation than ever before. Urbanization has shown unprecedented rates of growth over the last three decades of this century, devastating the physical form of our cities which have been unable to deal with the swelling numbers. While this compression of people in a limited space symbolizes optimism and is characterized by many positive attributes, it has spelt doom for the urban form of our cities.

The unfinished edge

Traditional Indian towns, or even colonial settlements, which were essentially clear structured with their own integral logic, have now been reduced to incoherent urban entities inundated with waves of distress migration, chaotic growth, and general apathy in their administration. This unchecked growth has produced fragmented, and highly illegible urban structures – take for example the bazaar streets of Hubli or the outskirts of Hyderabad, Madras, Baroda, Jaipur, or Coimbatore. Besides being produced in essentially the same image, they are unfinished entities with no guiding principle at either the micro or macro level. In fact, this attitude in contemporary urban India towards the "making of cities" where the design and implementation process is not taken to its logical conclusion is producing terrible mediocrity in the built environment – regardless of whether it is an unfinished edge of a road or pavement, or the overall structure of a city. The "unfinished edge" is emblematic of the low priority we place as a society on the state of the built environment in Indian cities.

In a city, the pieces are essential to the well-being of the whole. How these pieces are put together, and their relation to each other, is what is particular about the design of a city. It is for this reason that a city is often described as a machine – the little parts adding up to create the grand design. In contemporary India there is little logic (aside from laissez-faire land speculation) that determines these relationships, from the overall plan or structure of the city, to its integral components, physical as well as social infrastructure, buildings, open spaces, streets, signage, and street furniture. How these are administered or orchestrated to work as a unified whole – greater than the sum of the parts – is what makes appropriate and relevant urban design.

In contemporary India, planners seem to have little idea as to how the emerging images of the city will connect, and architects have not developed an understandable language of connections between the various parts that they are creating. It is precisely to fill this lacuna that the discipline of urban design should be considered, bridging the void between architecture and the larger concerns of cohesiveness and legibility of the overall urban form. Large-scale architecture in cities is usually site-specific, bound by client intentions and restricted (more often than not) to superficial styling. Planning (in the sense of master plans) has rarely even attempted to represent issues pertaining to the physical outcome of its abstract number-crunching exercises, and is expressed in words and numbers, not as images or tangible end results, which citizens can relate to or aspire towards. The precise goals of urban design should
Banganga Tank (above), and a street in south Mumbai (right) - lack of urban design controls for new development produces incoherent city form and destroys the structure and identity of historic city centres.
be the creation and maintenance of those parts of the public realm that are crucial to the collective urban memory.¹

Unfortunately, in India today, architecture is no longer seriously considered by planners as an instrument for the structuring of the urban landscape. This has partly to do with the attitude of architects in India who have not engaged sufficiently to influence city policy, which in turn implicitly determines what they can build. In fact, architects in India have almost no “policy sense” and this is perhaps endemic of a larger cultural problem in India where there is a slightly non-empirical bent of mind. As a result of this, far greater premium is paid to symbolic action – represented often as policy decisions endorsed and legitimized by politicians. In V.S. Naipaul’s book An Area of Darkness, he touches upon symbolic action when he describes the sweeper who sweeps the corridor in his hotel, and at the end of the day it is dirtier than when he started sweeping! A symbolic action is one whose result is contrary to what is wanted. There is a failure to connect to reality – a tendency to go off into abstraction by creating a symbolic gesture to solve a perceived problem.

Representative of this mindset is the notion of centralized urban planning – a situation where planners, in abstraction, evolve policy across a city. In terms of urban design, this most often results in standardized building control rules that are imposed evenly across Indian cities – be it for greenfield sites or historic city centres. Again, a symbolic solution, one that supposedly addresses the issue of equity – by treating all citizens (across the city) equally. In reality however, it is an attempt to abstract on account of a deficient database, to understand emerging patterns and plan for these. In fact, this mode of centralized urban planning implies that entire cities in India will be recast in the same mould and image – resulting in monotony of urban form. In addition, the idea of blanket rules, applicable for an entire city, cannot by definition be responsive to topography and natural environment. Even virgin landscapes, swallowed by our expanding cities, are being inundated by a singular building typology – the typical block, four- to seven-storey-high, with projecting balconies, relentlessly repeated chajjas and capped by a larger than life water tank – all free of FSI.²

Moreover, if buildings on the waterfronts, hills, and hinterland are to be essentially of the same form, the natural features of the land would inevitably be destroyed, thereby negatively impacting the ecological balances that exist in the rich and diverse natural systems that form the hinterland of cities. Also, this will continue to obliterate the sense of a city as a group of precincts, neighbourhoods, and communities with their differing physical forms, expressive of particular climatic conditions, economic situations, cultural backgrounds, and lifestyles – all the wonderful indicators that give ultimate expression and uniqueness to the form and style of a city.³

This situation is further aggravated by the ambiguity in the rules and decision making that the bureaucracy or city managers thrive on. For if the rules are ambiguous not only are they open to contradictory interpretations, but more

The relentless repetition of the same building type across the Indian landscape is producing cities of essentially the same monotonous form – a view of Navy Nagar, Mumbai.
A view of the mill lands in Mumbai – a unique landscape that should be safeguarded and integrated in the planning process through special rules and legislation before it is replaced with the monotonous landscape of urban India.

politicians indulge in. Most citizens prefer to inhabit their city as though it were a hotel. They may be long-suffering “guests” but getting involved in the muck of urban politics is not worth the trouble with so many more immediately pressing or amusing things to do in cities. People grumble and complain but, so long as minimal services are provided, at least in their neighbourhoods, they remain largely unreserved with the city as a political community. This sense of detachment allows the centralized system of creating city form to rule unhampered – in the process devastating the fabric of existing cities and not harnessing the potential that exists to create fresh forms for new cities.

Historically the most robust urban environments in India (and perhaps the world over) have all grown and evolved with active citizen participation, coupled with enlightened patronage – where a set of shared values, beliefs, and rules have implicitly guided the parameters that determine the urban form of a place. That is, a series of incremental decisions through consensus is then expressed in the richness and coherence of the form resulting in a clear image as well as allowing for localized idiosyncrasies and individual expression. In contrast, today the repetitive nature of our cities coupled with this total detachment at the neighbourhood level is wreaking disaster in the way our cities look and are evolving in terms of their form.

Is the creation of a city with an unfinished edge the result of the inherent dualities that exist in Indian cities and are impossible to reconcile? Or do the complex and often contradictory layers of issues, of aspirations, political representation, like randomly moving targets, defeat easy comprehension or simplistic solutions?

Reorienting urban design approaches

How then can urban design approaches be reoriented to be responsive to the different worlds in India? For instance, could the planners and designers for south Mumbai be the same people who are formulating legislation for Dharavi (Asia's largest slum in north-central Mumbai) – would they understand such disparate aspirations? Similarly, what is the relevance of applying building bylaws and urban design ideas and approaches that have evolved in Mumbai, Jaipur, Ahmadabad to Cochin, Chennai, Coimbatore? Could Indian urban designers plan with a divided mind?

Perhaps a recognition of the multiplicity and dualities in the Indian cityscape being
simultaneously valid could be a first step in reorienting urban design approaches in India. It would then seem apt that the pluralism in Indian cities be given expression through appropriate mechanisms – that urban design policies for different areas are evolved individually and separately for the different cities and the many worlds within them. Planning policies, with urban design issues as one component, really should be made on an “area-wise” basis – where this “area” would become the basic unit which displays some cohesiveness and consistencies beyond its topographical and architectural characteristics. Then it will be possible for laws and policies to be written to focus on the problems of each area. Once policy-makers recognize the characteristics of a particular area, laws can be evolved to make the urban form respond, not only to its physical constraints, but also to the social and economic realities of that part of the city.

This sort of process will automatically result in a physical form that is responsive to the natural topography, be it the waterfront areas, hills, or station nodes. Specific building bylaws, besides taking full advantage of the physical topography of an area and being more sensitive to the environment, could also contain the possibilities of responding more accurately to the actual needs and desires of the local inhabitants. For example, presently the transformations taking place in the mill lands in the Parel area in Mumbai, do not in any way respond to either the real needs of the people who occupy these areas or to the perceived deficiencies that exist in the city. The nature of development in these areas today is determined by the efficient exploitation of the FSI and the growing speculative real estate market of Mumbai – resulting more often than not in high-rise residential blocks for the rich.

If the mill lands were treated as a separate zone with their own development controls and building bylaws, the nature of development as well as the built environment could then, through legislation, be designed to respond and give expression to the real needs of the area and the potential it holds for the city in terms of the provision of physical and social infrastructure, from parks to schools and hospitals, as well as affordable housing which ensures that local residents are not displaced despite new employment patterns that might emerge. In addition, the historic urban fabric of the area could be safeguarded by encouraging the recycling of mill buildings and stipulating appropriate urban design guidelines for new construction.

Similarly, the CRZ (Coastal Regulation Zone) rule which springs from good intentions and is conceptually critical for the safeguarding of India’s coastline and marine ecology, by approaching its implementation in a blanket manner actually detracts from its original intent. The regulation imposes a blanket ban on development within a stipulated range from the coast which is not only ridiculous from an urban design point of view (for it denies the creation and development of waterfront cities) but is also a despotic expression of centralized planning control – and the corruption that goes with it. In addition, it is symbolic of the total lack of creative ideas within the administration and government in designing legislation to provide the checks and balances to control development effectively at the local levels. In fact, what should ideally be happening is that for localized decisions such as land-use planning, built form controls, and waterfront development, power should be devolved locally, down to the smallest unit that would actually be affected. The centralized decision-making apparatus could participate in formulating broader legislation with technical experts, and address macro concerns such as ecology, integrated coastal management, etc. Based on guidelines for these broader issues, local groups and representatives could be involved to evolve micro-level concerns such as the heights of buildings, physical nature of development, permissible land-uses, etc. to arrive at a final solution – thus making for a truly democratic process, where ordinary people and final users participate in decision making.

A city is made!

How can such a reorienting in the urban planning and design approach be dovetailed into our existing social and political system? A simple shift would be to split policy formulation and implementation into two levels, the city or regional level and the area level – a level where people can present themselves, their needs and aspirations, and connect to the larger planning process. This would be a crucial shift not only in terms of the evolution and formulation of the plans but also their implementation.

Of course, crucial to these dynamics is the participation at both levels, of the citizen in the policy-making process. At the city level, the policy-making body should largely, or ideally, comprise professionals, for focusing on the technicalities at a city level cannot be successfully achieved without
The city of Jaipur is about cohesive urban structure and spatial legibility – while allowing for individual expression at the neighbourhood level.

A view of a street in Pondicherry – a simple creation of well defined edges creates a coherent urban landscape.
sufficiently depoliticizing the planning authority. But more crucial in the decentralized planning model is the process that should be set up at the area level – at the level where people have to get involved. One of the outcomes of the 1992–93 riots in Mumbai was that individuals were galvanized to act at the neighbourhood level; also, 240 NGOs in the city came together to put the city back on its feet. These efforts symbolized the enormous potential and resources that exist but remain unfocused. Similarly, NGOs, urban designers, engineers, and architects can play a role in the urban planning and design process which would be integral to creating an appropriate system of checks and balances crucial for a decentralized mode of planning for the city. A mode which brings to the planning process an understanding of technical issues germane to the idea of planning in the contemporary context. If the larger planning idea could be extended in this manner, urban design as a component of this process would easily be addressed.

In addition to the most obvious contributions, like writing building guidelines, land-use policy, and other built form legislation, the most called for shift in the planning approach, to make a decentralized system work, will be a substantial body of people within the profession of urban planning and design working with the concept of “advocacy planning”. This is particularly pertinent when policy problems are cast in a context of technical analysis too abstract for the ordinary citizen to comprehend – how many architects, leave alone citizens, understand the implications of the development control rules which directly affect the urban form of our city? Such social groups tend not only to be at a disadvantage in the political framework but still more so when it comes to dealing with those who speak the language of land-use maps, diagrams, and statistical tables. Advocacy planning has its origins in the perception that such groups need urban planners and designers to make their case and to express their aspirations at the inception of development plans and planning strategy for the city. Therefore, it should represent a search by planners and urban designers for a new kind of clientele – a constituency.  

Technical complexity cannot be jettisoned. The number of public policy decisions and the kinds of people (social, religious, and economic groups) affected by each would probably make our public apparatus unworkable if all decisions were to be handled within a framework of political debate at the local levels. In a rapidly transforming city of pluralistic goals, aspirations, and situations, the casting of policy decisions into a technical framework makes possible an operating consensus that is crucial to keep the city moving even if it does so badly. Unfortunately, as a consequence, we have developed a bureaucracy in the form of the municipal corporations, urban development authorities (MMRDA, HUDA, AUDA, etc.) all of which often seem impersonal and alien. It is important to note how polemic writing and films against squatter demolition and new infrastructure projects (airports, flyovers, housing projects, etc.) share the angry suspicion that something has been pulled over the eyes of the ordinary, helpless people by the experts.

There already exist in Indian cities a number of citizens’ groups which represent different interests ranging from low-income groups and squatters to conservation of historic precincts. So far these groups most often stop short of proposing solutions and limit their response to “protest”. Advocacy planning in its truest sense would be realized when all these groups or practitioners are able to review and evaluate specific planning proposals which affect their constituents – be it low-income families, heritage committees, or an entire neighbourhood – and go further to help them develop planning strategies, physical design, and implementation programmes. That is, to act as planning advocates for the different areas of a city in order to make public and city-level plans reflect the needs of the different citizens.

Advocacy planning may be one of the channels of action, within the present social and political
The shape of the “bazaar city” characterized by the ambiguous definition of the edge.

A human chain in Bombay post the 1993 riots. The chain and people coming together to express solidarity symbolizes the will to act but not knowing what to do. From Bombay: The Cities Within.

system, through which the form of our cities could be made less “one-dimensional”.

It is from such an engagement that will result the finished edge – the definite gesture, all the way from the kerb of the city’s streets to the variety in urban form. And from this process hopefully will emerge the new Indian city, complex in its pluralistic composition but with a robust urban form that facilitates many possibilities – truly making the existence of urban Indians in this new millennium pleasurable and meaningful.

NOTES

1. For this, the urban designer has to identify and understand the key elements that structure and bond the various components of the city. This also necessitates deciphering the implicit programme of the city and interpreting the needs and aspirations of its citizens. It refers particularly to the poor, under-represented groups, and rural migrants, whose aspirations must be woven into the emerging form and public image of the city – through its architecture and built form.

2. FSI or Floor Space Index is the ratio of the combined gross floor area of all stores of a building (including the area of walls) to the total area of the plot or premises. In short, the ratio thus stipulated is what determines the amount of square feet that can be built on a particular site. Architectural features such as balconies, porches, staircases are exempt from this calculation and therefore liberally used and often misused through enclosure and appropriation.

3. Essentially a centralized approach to the
evolution and implementation of planning, whether it be development plans, building bylaws, or rules like the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ, which disallows any new development within stipulated distances from the sea) will invariably result in recasting a region or city in a singular image. This approach, however, also does not recognize differences and prescribes but one solution, whatever the problem might be.

4 Clarity in rules is a fundamental to administer the physical form controls for a city. Clear and simple but focused rules, which are easy to implement, could go a long way in improving the physical environment. Under Portuguese rule in Goa, for example, it was compulsory to whitewash buildings and remove any awnings within one month of the end of the monsoon. This was enforced and substantially ensured an all-round maintenance and visual improvement of the built environment on a yearly basis. Although not law today, it is still followed by many owners as a practice in Goa.

5 As a society we put great premium on subverting the system – a good chartered accountant is one who knows the loopholes in the tax structure, as is the smart architect one who knows how to juggle, exploit, and maximize FSI – to maximize profit for the developer or owner, often at the cost of creating a good building!

6 These ideas about Hotele Metropole – the notion of a city being used as a hotel by a great deal of its inhabitants has been proposed by the renowned urbanist John Friedman in his seminal essay “The Common Good: Assessing the Performance of Cities” published in City, Space and Globalization, ed. Hemlata Dandekar, College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

7 Jaipur is a good example of this balance between clear big moves and small individual adjustments in a city. Its urban form presents a planning attitude that combined clear urban design gestures at the city level with the obvious need for flexibility at the neighborhood level. Starting from the city wall, moving along the main avenues or bazaars, the overall structure and cohesiveness of the city becomes evident. The avenues with their crossroads punctuated by chaupars suggest a rational system of traffic movement and a logical placement of commerce along the main arteries. The important public institutions are placed at the crossroads or other strategic points, depending on their importance. These components form the public face of the city. The individual facades of the buildings carry their own messages but are held together as part of a city composition by the larger regulating order of the nine-square grid (with its own mystical connotation).

Yet when you enter a mohalla, the informality is startlingly wonderful – irregular streets, wayside shrines, hawkers – the entire microcosm of chaotic urban India – a flexibly ever-changing organic city.

8 The failure of most recent urban design in India is that it is not only devoid of conceptual clarity, purpose, and principles but also ignores class dynamics, polarities, and interdependence that are an integral part of a city’s evolution. Cities have become far too complex for simplistic solutions and approaches to urban design. Contemporary Indian cities must necessarily recognize the entire gamut of forces that act upon and create city form – mould the physical environment. It is for this reason that planners should also look beyond issues related to the physical aspects of our development control rules and respond to and understand the social realities of the city in planning for a mix of uses and activity patterns – the crux of contemporary needs.

9 Such a planning unit could be defined on the basis of criteria which take into account a sort of urban fabric definition that goes beyond the simplistic definition of a neighbourhood. The criteria would chart economic and social levels of the residents, patterns of use, typologies of building form from the affordability angle as well as social mix.

10 The CRZ notification was issued on February 19, 1991 with the intention of regulating development along the coastline. The regulation originated in a directive from the Prime Minister on November 28, 1981 and focused on beaches along coastal areas. Interestingly, the directive evolved and was fine-tuned for different situations, viz. along the marine coast, creeks, rivers, etc.; however, in spite of this fine-tuning, the spirit of the regulation is still one which works with a more or less blanket imposition and thus is susceptible to misinterpretation and abuse.

11 In order to achieve this, a city could be divided into zones based on a combination of topographical, land-use criteria and those determining the age of the buildings in the area. Thus land-use categories could be discussed in the context of their location in a city, viz. residential or commercial areas along the waterfront, commercial areas and mixed-use areas at transport intersections, residential areas on hills or in historic precincts. By evolving bylaws specific to an area, the urban form could be fine-tuned to respond to the particular topography, perceived needs, and opportunities that the area offers. In fact, the only bylaws that should be invariable are those that relate to hygiene, public health, and safety. All other laws which have an impact on the urban form and use designation, should be evolved precinct-wise.

12 These ideas on advocacy planning have been discussed in greater detail by Lisa Peattie Hie in her landmark essay “Reflection on Advocacy Planning” published in the March 1968 issue of the Journal of the American Institute of Planners. Preceding this publication was the seminal essay by Paul Davidoff titled “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning” which was published in the Journal in 1965.