

# Understanding our urban mess

Most citizens live without awareness of aesthetics and planning, so don't demand basic infrastructure and facilities

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A July photo of a traffic jam at Connaught place, New Delhi. Photo: Ramesh Pathania/Mint

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A friend told me shortly before I returned to Hyderabad that he would never move back to India from the US despite having the ability to relocate to Kerala to live a comfortable life and a best friend who had setup a brand new hospital in his hometown. His concern was that if were to fall ill, his ambulance would be stuck in traffic and he may die en route and never make it to the caring hands at the new hospital.

This is not that far fetched.

Since being back in Hyderabad for the past six months, I have dealt with many aspects of a city with every infrastructure and basic amenities stretched to a never envisioned length. Water scarcity and power shortages are on the rise even as new buildings are under construction on almost every street. The roads are clogged and air pollution levels are alarming. Ten minute trips can stretch to over an hour at odd times not just during peak traffic hours. But this situation is common in all fast-growing major Indian cities. The need for sustainable urban planning is urgent as India's major cities are projected to grow massively in the next two decades.

A McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) report "India's urban awakening: Building inclusive cities, sustaining economic growth" from April 2010 throws up some interesting and alarming statistics. By 2030, 700-900 million sq. m of commercial and residential space needs to be built, 2.5 billion sq. m of roads will have to

be paved and 7,400km of metros and subways will need to be constructed—20 times the capacity added in the past decade. Some 590 million people will live in cities and 91 million urban households will be middle class.

“India is in a state of deep inertia about the urgency and scale of urban reform,” the report says. “Despite the perilous state of many Indian cities, there seems to be comfort with the status quo, resistance to change, and a lack of recognition of the urgent need of change.”

Against this backdrop, challenges related to urban planning, public transportation, sustainability, education and urban culture and a focus on sustainable urbanization took centre stage last weekend at a public symposium organized by the Goethe-Zentrum Institute in Hyderabad.



In the context of Indian planning and particularly in the context of planning in Hyderabad, some issues that came up are that governance failures and revolving political parties make for plans that are prepared, but never implemented. Most citizens live without any awareness of aesthetics and planning and, therefore, don't demand basic infrastructure and facilities; citizens fail to take ownership of their surroundings or go to extremes as the affluent increasingly live in gated communities.

The venue was Vidyaranya High School, a school whose main building is a great example of architecture that incorporates climate, site, location and culture as noted by Peter Gotsch, an architect and city planner. Designed by German architect Otto Konigsberger, who once served as Mysore's chief architect and planner, the building perfectly incorporates the school founder's unique vision to encourage students to learn without fear and freedom to explore their own private spaces—inner and outer. The building is cosy, well ventilated, inspiring and stately.

And as it turns out, the venue may be the best long-term impact investment the event makes. A practical suggestion for long-term change came from Srinivas Murthy, an architect and chief executive of the firm SMG Design Inc., who gave the example of the city of Chicago's programme to teach awareness of aesthetics and city planning to children from primary school onwards.

He is working towards starting such a push locally. Primary, middle and high schools would do well to consider expanding their curriculum to introduce city planning and aesthetics. For now, the children of at least one school are getting exposed to these issues and will no doubt make for better informed citizens who are in tune with aesthetics and the importance of sustainable planned development.

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