

## **The Relevance of New Urbanism**

Dhiru A. Thadani 2006

Globally cities are changing. Most are becoming worse places to live. There are many intersecting forces for this decline, including, increase in population, failing infrastructure, dependency on the automobile, outward sprawling development, and the inability to provide adequate housing for lower- and middle-income residents.

Are there any solutions to alleviate this accelerating decline? Why are some cities experiencing a renaissance and an improvement in the quality of life for its residents? While other cities experience a noticeable decline?

Cities are the largest and most complex things that we humans make. Despite evidence to the contrary, the knowledge exists on how to make them well and how to reverse the decline. For the past 15 years the Congress for the New Urbanism has been aiding both the private and public sector with techniques to improve the quality of life in cities.

### 1. Streets are for People

What makes a city memorable? For the most part it is a well-defined public realm – public spaces defined by the buildings which enfront them and peopled by a vibrant street life. A successful public realm is one that people can inhabit comfortably on foot. Unfortunately, most cities today, emphasize automobile movement while disregarding the pedestrian. Sidewalks are non-existent or permanently in disrepair, often having been dug up for utility upgrading. Today being a pedestrian in an Indian city is akin to being a soldier on a battlefield navigating through land mines strewn in one's path of travel.

Traffic engineers for the most part ignore the real needs of pedestrians. For example, parallel parking, essential to protecting and comforting people on the sidewalk, is often eliminated to speed the traffic. Every aspect of the streetscape, including lane widths, curbs, sidewalks, trees, and lighting can be designed to the needs of either cars or people. With the growing increase in car ownership Indian cities favor the former.

Additionally, fence barriers along the edges of streets that enclose pedestrians like cattle should be removed. Permit pedestrians to cross streets at grade at all intersections.

Whoever designed an elevated pedestrian crosswalk must have been in an automobile. They do not work, and they never will. And you only have to walk through a below grade street crossing once, to realize that it is a bad idea.

### 2. Overrule the Specialists

The city by definition is a general enterprise, and the specialist is the enemy of the city. Engineers are not alone in their quest to shape the city around specialized needs. The modern world is full of experts who are paid to ignore criteria beyond their profession. Cities need generalists to weigh the advice of specialists against the common good.

The traffic engineers in their quest to move traffic propose building above-ground flyovers, without consideration for what this decision does to the quality-of-life for local residents, who have to look and live with this ugly, noisy monstrosity.

Imagine for a moment if someone was to build a concrete bridge 15 feet from your bedroom window, so that the privileged few could save a few minutes of time driving

through your neighborhood in the comfort of their air-conditioned capsule.

While cities such as San Francisco, Milwaukee, and Washington DC, to name a few, are demolishing inner-city highways in the interest of quality-of-life for their residents, cities such as Mumbai have embarked on a ludicrous and expensive endeavor to build new inner-city highways.

The department of transportation proposes widening existing roads to ease traffic generated by the very sprawl that they cause. Each of these approaches may be correct in a vacuum, but is wrong in a city. It is a proven fact that expanding street width and capacity on existing streets only leads to more traffic. This in turn leads to an increase in accidents, which causes further delays, nullifying the investment's goal.

The money earmarked for flyovers and inner city highways should be diverted to improving the train and bus network. As all world-class cities have come to realize, investment in public transportation is the only solution to alleviate congestion. Imagine ten years into the future, what will be on these streets when the price of petrol doubles or triples? Buses not cars.

### 3. Mix the Uses

Another key to active street life is creating a city that pulsates at all times of the day, with neighborhoods so diverse in use that they are occupied around the clock. Eating, shopping, working, socializing, and recreation – these activities are mutually reinforcing and flourish in each other's presence.

The best parts of all cities have this diverse mix of uses. Neighborhoods are alive during the day when residents are away at work, because workplace and retail are active. Vice-versa in the evening, when the offices and shops are closed, the residences keep the neighborhood vibrant and safe.

Moreover, many businesses such as restaurants, general stores, and health clubs rely on both daytime and evening traffic to cover their rent. The key is to stop building single use zones, such as Nariman Point and Bandra-Kurla which are predominantly workplaces. These places are unsafe in the evening due to a lack of activity. Similarly, stop approving residential enclaves, which are mono-cultures and eventually become residential ghettos.

### 4. Hide the Parking Lots

In most Indian cities 90% of the population is pedestrians. The city is obligated to make the pedestrians feel safe, comfortable – and entertained.

As the infatuation with automobiles increases in India, so will the need to house these machines. There is nothing more boring than walking past a parking lot. Whether they are open-air or six-stories tall, parking lots must be banished along any street that is inhabited by pedestrians.

In the hands of a skilled designer, parking lots are easy to hide. It only takes a 25-foot-thick wrapper of housing or offices to block an unsightly parking lot or garage from view. New parking structures can easily be built above street-level shops. Enlightened cities globally are putting this requirement into law.

## 5. Small is Beautiful

People are small when compared to automobiles, and most world-class walkable cities acknowledge this fact with small blocks, small streets, small buildings, and small increments of investment.

The Fort District in Mumbai owes much of its success to its tiny blocks and fine grain that creates an incredibly porous network of streets. Pedestrians like to criss-cross through the fabric, intelligently looking for the shortest routes between two points.

Unfortunately, government planners propose development roads that create obscenely large blocks that make the city impenetrable. For example, in southern Mumbai there is only one east-west connection between the two coastlines. This problem also exists in the northern part of the city and land for street rights-of-way need to be acquired to help create a true network of streets.

Although 25% of India's population resides in urban cities, and this number is rapidly growing, building height is another place for smallness. Today's building codes prevent the making of Marine Drive, one of the most memorable parts of Mumbai.

Tall buildings place undue stress on a small land parcel. By concentrating population in a single point within the city all systems are pressured including accessibility, parking, garbage removal, water and utility supply, to name a few. In the long run, this creates an unhealthy, unsustainable living condition. A healthy real-estate development community is one of chipmunks, not gorillas.

## 6. Save That Building, and by-the-way Remove that Billboard

How many buildings need to be torn down before a city learns the lesson? Every city deeply regrets and laments the destruction of its historic/heritage structures. As a society that pays homage to its elders, historic preservation may be the best way to respect our ancestors. But, it is also justified on economic terms. Market economies suggest that the differentiated product is one that commands a monetary premium. This is why cities like Savannah and Miami Beach can point to historic preservation as the key ingredient in recent booms. It isn't always easy to find a productive use for an empty old building, but tearing it down makes that outcome impossible.

Additionally, billboards and hoardings illegally installed on buildings and along the highway must be removed. Cities should rise beyond crass commercialism and the visual assault on the human senses.

## 7. Build Normal (Affordable) Housing

Affordable housing remains a crisis in all cities, and the solution is not to build housing projects in the suburbs, which taxes the poor resident with the longest commute. Rather, to be successful, affordable housing must do two things: be integrated with market rate housing, and look like market-rate housing.

Despite the best-intentioned efforts to provide affordable housing, architects should not be permitted to experiment on the poor, or pioneer new design styles for the poor. Most housing projects that have been built in recent years play geometric games that only their designers can understand and appreciate. Experiment on the rich; they can always move out, but the poor do not have a choice. Housing for the poor should provide smaller-than-standard apartments, but they should be stylistically compatible with their

neighbors and the context. There should be no visible stigma attached to living in subsidized housing.

#### 8. Build Green / Grow Green

People have been talking about sustainable architecture for decades. However, given the burgeoning population of Indian cities, they cannot afford to be anything but sustainable. History shows us that as a country becomes more affluent, it becomes dumber, by being more wasteful of its resources, recycling less, creating more solid waste, and increasing its dependency on artificial cooling and lighting. This is absolutely true for Indian cities. As the city increases in wealth the less it seems to care about sustainability.

Architects and developers get lazier when it comes to designing buildings that truly respond to the environmental conditions of place. As children we never relied on air conditioning for comfort because the buildings we occupied passively kept us comfortable. Ceilings were higher, transom windows above doorways permitted air circulation, and windows had deep overhangs that shaded interior spaces as well as provided protection from the heavy monsoon rains.

The city needs to mandate that all new buildings be smart by using less energy than their predecessors. As an example, every residential dwelling in Israel obtains its hot water from roof mounted solar panels. This is a viable technology that can easily be adapted to the Indian context.

There is also a strong correlation between green tree cover and real estate value. The more green there is, the higher the real estate value. The new development at Powai in Mumbai, is a perfect case study proving this theory. All cities should plant more trees!

#### 9. Question your Codes

The existing building codes that govern new development within the city are made up of incomprehensible statistics like floor area ratios (fsi), setbacks and open space requirements that ignore the differences between pleasant and unbearable urbanism. As mentioned earlier, they make the city's traditional urban form, the most loved places within the city, illegal to emulate.

Codes must be based on a picture of what is desired to be built, not statistical manipulations. Close your eyes and imagine what you want the city to be, and then write a code to achieve it. Around the world a new generation of design ordinances is gaining favor among city planning officials. Referred to as form-based codes, these ordinances regulate what really matters: a building's height, disposition, location, relationship to the street, and where to place parking. Cities including Arlington, Virginia, and Miami, Florida are adopting form-based codes for their neighborhoods. Governor Schwarzenegger just signed a bill encouraging form-based codes in California. What does the Arnold know that Indian's politicians do not know?

#### 10. Don't Forget Beauty

Joe Riley, Charleston's Mayor since 1968, reminds us that cities should be places that make the heart sing. For many citizens, especially those too poor or infirm to travel, the city is an entire world. For this reason, the city should be proudly maintained, function properly, but also afford moments of beauty.

Yet, the city routinely builds to the lowest denominator, when it comes to building public schools, parks, and government buildings, – the only investments that belong to all the citizens of the city. In the interest of short-term frugality, the city cheats itself out of an honorable public realm and a noble legacy. This was not always the case, and it need not continue.

Building great cities is civilization's greatest achievement. This legacy can and must be continued.