

# **RE-IMAGINING INDIAN CITIES- DESIGN FOR URBAN SPACE**

**27<sup>th</sup> January 2008**

**A RETROSPECTIVE**

## **URBAN HABITATS FORUM**

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## Introduction

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Focused on the importance of Urban Design in achieving sustainable urbanisation, this roundtable was organised as a part of the Urban Habitats Forum initiative to encourage a continuous conversation around urban issues in India. The roundtable, like all other UHF events sought to involve key stakeholders to address critical issues facing the sustainability of our cities today. The discussion on this occasion concentrated on the role of design in solving urban problems. The subsequent presentations and observations emphasised the need to convert 'urban spaces' to 'urban places'.

It (*urban design*) is about adding that one strong direction, where the future of the city gets charted out. This visionary direction becomes a very important ingredient in the design output...

Arunava Das Gupta, Founder Member,  
Institute of Urban Designers – India

The roundtable included participants from a diverse set of stakeholders. They were; Raj Liberhan, Director, India Habitat Centre; Arunava Das Gupta, Founder Member, Institute of Urban Designers (India); K.T. Ravindran, President, Institute of Urban Designers (India); Ashok B. Lall, Former Dean, TVB School of Habitat Studies; Rajat Ray, Dean, Sushant School of Art and Architecture; Vikash Chandra, Manager (Tourism), IL&FS; J.K. Dadoo, Secretary, Environment, Forest and Wildlife, Govt of NCT and Chairperson, Delhi Pollution Control Committee; Sanjeev Sanyal, Founder, The Sustainable Planet Institute; and S. Badrinarayanan, Architect.

Liberhan's brief introduction of UHF and Das Gupta's overview of the role of urban design were followed by presentations on urban design by Ravindran, Ray, Lall and Sanyal.

Liberhan, in his opening comments, pointed out the secondary consideration received by the design dimension in urban planning. According to him, "Design was never a conscious primary consideration in the way the cities were being planned. It was always a by-product, landing second or third on the (*planners*) list", despite the fact that it is "...the most important and significant dimension of city planning".

Further detailing Liberhan's contention, Das Gupta stressed the need for a paradigm shift in planning to establish qualitative benchmarks for cities as opposed to sole concern with quantitative targets. He argued that, until now, urban planners have made the error of looking at cities as "a numbers problem, rather than a qualitative problem".

The crux of the urban dilemma today, according to him, is the transformation of 'city spaces' to 'city places'; a transition in which urban design can play a decisive role. With this, Das Gupta put forth the theme of the roundtable; "Can urban design play a critical and positive role in...converting urban spaces into destinations and places for people?"

## Urban Design Disasters: The Case of Delhi and Gurgaon

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Ravindran's presentation, *'Design in the City: The Case Study of Delhi'*, provided a historical and contemporary view of the City. Interspersed with little-known Delhi trivia, the presentation began by tracing the origins of the city. Taking the communication and road networks during the Harappan period as a starting point, Ravindran wove the story of Delhi through different eras from an urban designer's point of view.

I do not think we have a better example of hit-and-miss in terms of design, than Delhi.

K.T. Ravindran, President,  
Institute of Urban Designers

The core of his argument was that "...the structure of the City, still has embedded inside it the memories of very old developments".

These connectivities, between the old and the new, have been, "progressively obscured by mindless development", that refuses to recognise them. However, these connectivities, "which arose as a response to natural features" can help one decipher the organic growth of the City of Delhi.

Ravindran concluded his presentation by suggesting that urban design, instead of creating large plans, leads the development of the City by bringing together "compactness, mixed use, and liveability".

Taking up from that, Ray dissected the planning "disasters" of present-day Gurgaon in his presentation *'Lack of Urban Design: The Case Study of Gurgaon'*. Using an eclectic mix of satellite images, he demonstrated the design flaws in the city that effect and change a citizen's way of life in the area. At the core of Ray's presentation was the claim that Gurgaon is a city without a sense of space, design, and sensitivity because of the way it has been planned.

## Leveraging Urban Design for Sustainability

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Moving on from classical design flaws, the post-break session saw Lall's and Sanyal's presentations detailing the interaction between urban design and sustainability. While Lall's presentation, *'Design and the Urban Environment: Towards Greater Sustainability'* dealt with the macro picture, Sanyal's presentation, *'Walkability: A New Urban Paradigm'* advocated a shift in policy-making assumptions to ensure a sustainable cities.

Engaging the metaphor of nature, Lall equated the city to a forest. Clearings in a forest represent the exclusive enclaves of different segments of citizens, while the connecting space between them, the open area where these different segments interact, had been characterised as a “hazardous wilderness”. The City, according to Lall, is experienced in this wilderness; an experience which for most is very discomfoting and installs a fear of the city in its inhabitants. Lall visualises this as a vicious cycle, which needs to be broken. It is at this node that the role of urban design becomes crucial.

He drew the linkages between the mode of transport employed, energy guzzling electric devices, and the environment in the city. These vicious cycles that feed into each other, can be broken by employing passive urban design techniques at the city level.

Sanyal’s presentation, ‘*Walkability: A New Urban Paradigm*’, began by outlining the different variables that interact in a city like, density, urban form, public transport, liveability, economic vibrancy and competitiveness, social inclusion, sustainability, and community and social interaction. According to him, “one simple thing” needs to “weld all these things together” to build great cities. For Sanyal, that is the idea of walkability, as it “encapsulates everything we want in our new cities”.

Walking should be brought back to be the basic backbone on which we are to think about the entire urban planning platform. I think it is easy to comprehend, sell and an effective argument against most urban-don’ts.

Sanjeev Sanyal

In conclusion, the Roundtable highlighted crucial flaws in urban planning in India, and deliberated on solutions that the discipline of urban design could offer. The presentations employed various case studies and metaphors to demonstrate the importance of urban design in addressing these flaws, and as a consequence contemporary urban concerns.