



CREATING GURGAON'S SOUL

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A RETROSPECTIVE

URBAN HABITATS FORUM

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Introduction

"Creating Gurgaon's soul" was the theme of the discussion at the Gurgaon consultation held in Epicentre in Gurgaon. The event held on 6th May 2009 attracted citizens of Gurgaon from diverse backgrounds.

Sanjeev Sanyal, Founder of Sustainable Planet Institute introduced the agenda and spoke about "the Mirabilis Matrix, a holistic urban strategy for India. A panel of speakers then gave presentations on topics enclosing the Mirabilis Matrix in the context of Gurgaon. Professor Rajat Ray of Sushant School of Art and Architecture spoke about the 'Lack of Urban Design in Gurgaon'. Swanzal Kapoor, founder of 'I am Gurgaon' informed the audience about their organizations initiatives to make a positive change in Gurgaon. Dr. Amit Kapoor, Chairman of Institute of Competitiveness spoke about the competitive aspects of cities with a special focus on Gurgaon. Lastly, Umesh Anand Publisher of Civil Society magazine hinged on making governments accountable for sustainable cities. As a summation, a panel discussion was moderated by Raj Liberhan, Director of India Habitat Centre.

The Mirabilis Matrix: Rethinking India's Urban Strategy

In his opening note Sanyal started by giving an overview of urbanisation in India. "India will be an urban majority country well in my lifetime. As you already know India's cities are finding it very difficult to cope with this change. Through the Urban Habitats Forum we are trying to create a vision of what India's cities should be like". He said that "Unfortunately urban issues have historically been seen as things that fall in the domain of specialised people like architects, planners and resident associations. Through the Urban Habitats Forum we have made an effort to bring in a wider community to participate in the discussion. It is very fruitful to bring in all kinds of people because eventually cities are not about the hardware but the ecological systems which depend on the contribution, ideas and visions of all kinds of people." Sanjeev then introduced 'the Mirabilis Matrix' which encompasses most of the things that

people expect from a city. Cities need to be liveable, economically competitive and environmentally sustainable. While cities require good hardware such as good transportation links, housing etc, urban software which includes social networks, clustering of human capital, low impact lifestyle etc is equally important. Lastly governance which is how the city is run is key to efficient functioning of a city.

	Hardware	Software	Governance
Liveability	Good quality housing and amenities like parks, hospitals, clubs and schools	Social networks & interaction. Clustering of amenities to create "urban buzz", a sense of place and history.	Safety and enforcement of Law. Simple and well enforced system of municipal regulation.
Competitiveness	Transport & communications links. Quality of office/commercial space.	Clustering of human capital and ability to attract talent, socio-cultural openness.	Reasonable tax rates. Efficient governance structures.
Environmental Footprint	Public transport, density, green spaces, waste management, etc.	Environmental consciousness, low impact lifestyles.	Air and water quality. Sustainable practices with regard to water supply & usage, etc.

Lack of Urban Design in Gurgaon

Ray clearly differentiated urban planning from urban design. "Urban design highlights certain factors of the physical city which are essential for a cities quality" In his presentation he explained the key missing urban design elements of Gurgaon which are essential for a city. "Gurgaon is a city without any structure but an assemblage, without centre, sense of history and clear periphery, without spine and streets, without urban space and of discrete form. It is a city without ground sensitivity, a city of figures without meaningful grounds, a city of super-structures, without infrastructure and of the private and the gated (Individuals, communities, & vehicles) without the Public (people & pedestrians)."

Ray explained that city's which have grown overtime tend to show a kind of a coherence. It is always difficult to make a city afresh. Gurgaon does not have a coherent visible structure in terms of networking. Swanzal emphasized the importance of coherence by saying that "Good signage in the city and organized public spaces helps in buiding a culture of civic pride and responsibility." Ray further elaborated that good cities have a sense of centre and a clear periphery. Thus they have a simultaneous sense of convergence as well as diversion and that sensation is understood in the city. Most European cities are known for their city centers and also have a clear periphery. Gurgaon does not seem to have it.

Modern Gurgaon was built without any recognition of the old city of Gurgaon. Hence the new development leaves the old city behind. Since olden time's arrival at cities was felt at the railway station or bus junctions and ended at the centre. The physical reality in Gurgaon is not clear. There is no end (centre) of Gurgaon or a periphery. One very classical characteristic of cities are streets. "Every city is nothing but streets. NH8 happens to be Gurgaon's main street, but that does not feel like a street".

"In good cities main crossings are given a lot of importance for example, the Oxford Street in London or the Chandini Chowk in Old Delhi. However in Gurgaon important junction like the Sikanderpur chowk is a messy patch and it is very difficult for pedestrians to traverse the crossing" said Ray. Towns and cities which have grown overtime would have adhered to the ground realities such as terrain and land. The pace of development in Gurgaon has been so fast that it ignored the ground reality. Swanzal also pointed out that "in Guragon there is no harmony between the natural and the man made context. Ray further said that water streams coming down from the Aravalli hill which could have been used to improve the aesthetics of the city, are now dirty 'nala's' on top of which roads have been built. As a result of that water movement lines are getting blocked. Private developers who mostly built Gurgaon acquired patches of land which resulted into a peculiar configuration of land pockets being built. Therefore there is no coherence of design and splashes of buildings are seen all over the city facing all directions and of various heights.

City Competitiveness – The Gurgaon Conundrum

Dr. Amit Kapoor talked about how we can enhance the competitiveness of cities. He defined a competitive city as one which is highly productive and has resources which can help organizations in maximizing the returns from every rupee invested in the city. There are four pillars of competitiveness. The first is factor conditions which includes the ratio of land and labour, infrastructure etc, Second is the demand conditions i.e whether a city can support its demand on its own. Third is whether it can support industries and companies and lastly competition. "In Gurgaon all these factors seem to be missing, it is surviving on the resources of its proximate city Delhi. Gurgaon does not produce anything on its own. Gurgaon has a crumbling infrastructure, the water level is down to 510 feet and nothing can be done to revive this water table" He said. There are inadequate number of fire tenders in the city, which means the city is not at all prepared for a crisis situation. This aggregation is not going to make a city competitive in the long run.

Making Governments Accountable for Sustainable Cities

Umesh Anand, publisher of Civil Society magazine pointed out that "a city is a good city because of its governance and therefore to bring about any change it is important to connect with the forces that govern us". If we don't do that then private builders would team up with the politicians and create unsustainable cities built purely on profit grounds. He questioned the purpose of existence of Indian

cities and said that "Indian urbanization is a magnet as indeed cities should be for growth, equality and facilities. It is also a point of last refuge for rural areas where people cannot live anymore. They are the people who require some of the trickiest urban solutions". He said that "we need to ask what the administrators did to create unsustainable cities like Gurgaon and what the alternatives are". He concluded by saying that "we need to address this issue by connecting with the government, legislating and forcing the government to act. It is possible to bring about reform if we are involved in the political process. An elitist approach will not lead to results. We need to start at the bottom".