The Missed Opportunity to Reimagine Mumbai

If Charles Correa’s vision for Mumbai had been implemented in the 1990s, the Elphinstone Road stampede could have been avoided.

For all the success he achieved internationally, Charles Correa was unable to truly leave his imprint on the city he made his home. That is to Mumbai’s lasting detriment. It has paid a heavy price for the political apathy and corruption that scuttled the architect and urban planner’s work. The stampede at the Elphinstone Road railway bridge on the 29th of September 2017, is a reminder of that price.

Through the post-independence decades, Mumbai’s industrial strength had been built on the back of its textile mill heartland. This ended in 1982 with the year-long mill workers’ strike led by Datta Samant. Of the 58 mills in the city, 26 were deemed sick and taken over by the government. Unsurprisingly, what should be done with this vast swathe of centrally located high-value land proved to be a contentious question. In 1996, Maharashtra’s Bharatiya Janata Party-Shiv Sena government set up a study group, headed by Correa, to come up with an integrated development plan.

The group submitted the so-called Charles Correa Committee Report by the end of the year. It proposed a three-way split: one-third of the land to be used for public spaces that could accommodate gardens, schools and hospitals, one-third to be developed by the government for affordable housing, and one-third to be given to the erstwhile owners for residential or commercial purposes. The plan, incidentally, included the redevelopment of the Elphinstone Road station, with a broader over bridge allowing exit into a large plaza—measures that would...
have left it far better situated to deal with the rush of commuters that ended in tragedy last week.

Nothing came of this. ‘Open land’ was redefined so that the land reserved for public use shrank from 166 acres to 32 acres. The bulk of the land was used for private development without any semblance of planning. This resulted in the absence of, as Correa put in his essay, *The Tragedy Of Tulsi Pipe Road*, “the enabling sub-structure of roads, of engineering services, of a rational decision-making system”.

This was Correa’s second great disappointment. The first came decades earlier in the 1960s when his plan for the creation and development of New Bombay was implemented half-heartedly by the government. If venality was to be the cause of his mill land plan’s downfall, it was apathy that did the job this time. Instead of a well-connected sister city built around commercial districts, relieving the strain of Mumbai’s exploding population, New Bombay remained a dormitory town for decades. The suburban railway was extended to it only in the 1990s.

None of this is likely to come as a revelation to anyone who resides in Mumbai—or indeed, in urban India. Delhi apart—it being the national capital affords it certain advantages in this respect—no metropolis in India has been well served by its administrators and state governments. Corruption is an easy answer to the question of why this is so. So is the failure to fulfil the directives of the Constitution (74th Amendment) Act, 1992, and adequately devolve authority and autonomy to urban local bodies—and with it, bring about more accountability. These are not wrong answers. But they are incomplete.

At the heart of India’s urban planning failure is a failure to understand what urban planning truly is. Correa held that “market forces do not make a city; they destroy them”. He was wrong in this. While regulation and planning are necessary, the
inhabitants of a city will naturally organize themselves in a manner that allows them to best participate in economic activity. This dictates the urban space around them.

At the other end of the spectrum, Jane Jacobs, who deconstructed urban planning in 1961 with *The Death And Life Of Great American Cities*, believed that urban growth should be organic and central planning, broadly, was an evil. She was vastly overstating the case as well. But where both schools of thought converged was in their concern for the inhabitants of a city—the belief that cities should be organized in a manner that enhances the well-being and economic participation of all strata of urban society.

Indian urban planners have rarely observed this, defaulting instead to a largely mechanistic vision focused more on infrastructure than the interaction of citizens and infrastructure. Inevitably, this has resulted in static, non-participative master plans that are outdated even as they are made, or just plain don't work. Witness the endless attempts to redevelop slum land in Mumbai and resettle its inhabitants. Or the crores of public funds poured into cleaning Mumbai’s Mithi river—a Sisyphean task when the slums and shanties along stretches of the river and its numerous feeder drains don't have access to sewage or garbage disposal systems. Or the fact that it took until the Metro rail policy released last month to recognize the need for nodal transportation bodies that coordinate the development of discrete public transportation systems in a city.

Last year, Prakash Javadekar, then minister of state for environment, forest and climate change, said the greatest failure “after independence is in our urban and town and country planning”. Recognising the problem is only the first step.

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