We Don’t Have Enough Homes for Everyone, but Can Our Cities Still be Inclusive?

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Half of humanity lives in urban areas. The urban population in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa is expected to double in the coming two decades, and this accounts for a vast majority of the population growth globally (United Nations, 2014). Urban transformations associated with these changes in population shares are credited with lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, and also with allowing cities to become sites of entrenched inequality.

India is an important case in point. Presently, 65 million people live informally in urban India (as per the Indian Slum Census 2011), and, as one study estimated, 700 to 900 million sq m of commercial and residential space needs to be built to accommodate India’s urban population in 2030 (Sankhe, 2010). To meet this requirement would entail the equivalent of building a city the size of Chicago every year. But much of the demand, and the most pressing challenges, are in fast growing secondary cities where the deficits in the infrastructural and revenue bases are most pronounced.

Informality in India

The Indian government has responded to this challenge through flagship interventions like Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) and the Smart Cities Mission. However, there continues to be a risk that investment strategies will be diverted into serving a narrow set of interests, and become more divisive than inclusive. This risk is greatest for those who
live in informal settlements who may be excluded from using, or worse, may be displaced by new infrastructure.

A quick glance at the mismatch between the demand and supply of affordable housing in these countries reveals two important trends: First, supply has almost never kept up with demand. In Mumbai, for instance, the demand for social housing can be traced back to before 1948 when the Bombay Housing Board was established. By the time the Maharashtra Slum Improvement Board was instated in 1973 and socially provided housing became a reality in the city, the demand already stood at 400,000 housing units. Second, given the current pace that affordable homes are being built, future demand is also likely to vastly outweigh supply. Simply put, there aren’t enough homes to house everyone.

Well, this is not entirely true. Across India, where urban population is expected to grow from 410 million in 2014 to 814 million by 2050, there are currently 10 million unsold homes lying vacant (Mammen, 2017). And yet, according to the most recent Census, 65 million people live informally in urban India (Government of India, 2011). The majority of urban residents cannot afford the homes lying vacant.

The real crisis is that land and property markets are such that new investment into high-end apartments continues unabated despite the unsold stock, and all the while, these developments are also displacing those urban residents who informally inhabit cities. As Gautam Bhan argues, the risk of ever greater numbers of informal dwellers being evicted from cities grows (Bhan, 2009). He shows that in Delhi, over a 13 year period between 1990 and 2003, just over 51,000 houses were demolished under “slum clearance” schemes. However, in the following three years alone, at least 45,000 homes were demolished.
People are now being routinely evicted from cities under the narratives of ‘the greater common good’ and ‘in the interest of the country’ (as described in Roy, 1999), narratives that originally were used to rationalise the displacement rural people living in areas that required large scale infrastructure developments like dams.

Whether in rural or urban contexts, such displacement is highly politically charged, not only as the benefits of such displacement accrue to those that are already on strong economic and social footing (Gupte and Mehta, 2007), but the displacement itself is often based on the wrong categorisation of ‘informal’ inhabitation and resulting production of space as ‘illegal’ (Anand, Bhan, Idicheria, Jana, and Koduganti, 2015).

Evictions are therefore built on the criminalisation or incarceration of people as a form of social control (Bhan, 2016). Those who are evicted, are often very resilient, and settle for what they can get, but criminalising them ignores their continued significance to city growth.

Evidence shows that nearly 85% of employment in India (outside of the agricultural sector) is informal and this contributes 38.4% of non-agricultural GDP (Charmes, 2012). Informal sector workers are characterised by a lack of labour contracts and lack of social protection, and most also bear the burden under-provided and informal living arrangements (Chen, 2007). The variety of arrangements they put in place to be able to live productive lives in the city are very delicately balanced (Gupte, te Lintelo, and McGregor, 2015). Eviction risks upsetting this balance and can have disastrous consequences for the city overall.

The phenomenon is not limited to India alone. Saskia Sassen points out, in her new book titled ‘Expulsion’, the new global market for land, and the triumph of finance capital, continues to displace a dramatically increased number of people (Sassen, 2019).
This has led to a rise in homelessness due to foreclosures and underemployment, and causing the criminalisation or incarceration of people as a form of social control. 1 in 4 people are worried about losing their home against their will in the next five years revealed in a survey of nine countries (Totaro, 2017). People are being expelled at historically remarkable levels, not only from their habitats, but also from the benefits of the global economic system.

Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Opposition in the UK Parliament recently remarked “[urban] regeneration is a much-abused word. Too often what it really means is forced gentrification and social cleansing”. He too is referring to the nature of global capital that is driving the housing sector away from affordable homes and towards high value properties; away from urban centres that are inclusive of diversity and towards cities that are simply containers for high value assets.

The fluidity of the built environment
This is where we need local municipal regulations to trump the current global economy. Local regulations need to ask who has the incentives to build affordable housing at a scale required to meet the rising global demand; what are their incentives; and how these incentives might be shaped to produce shared urban spaces that respond to the needs of the most marginalised residents.

Consider that the built environment can, at once, indicate the imposition of a state-centric infrastructural order, and at the same time, be an indicator of social and class conflict. The highly irregular nature of Mumbai’s built environment, characteristic of cities across the developing world, arises at least in part due to the insurgent practices by which city dwellers themselves produce and appropriate spaces (Holston, 2008).
This implies that the nature of urban form – whether the streets are crowded, dense or sparse, for example, is intrinsically linked to the socio-political and historical processes that engender urban spaces. But such relationships are not singular. We see that informal (or 'non-state') activity can thrive even in spaces where the state imposes its order (Gupte, 2017).

Take, for instance, the informal infrastructure of electricity: where urban residents in cities across the global south are reduced to drawing electricity by jerry rigging connections to the formal electricity grid, they have created the unmistakeable tapestry of electricity poles and lines riddled along under-serviced streets. Tapping into the official electricity supply is illegal, and often worsens the overall stability of the system. But, the practice of ‘bending’ the formal electricity supply enables mundane everyday purposes like charging a laptop, reading a newspaper in the hours of darkness, or powering a fridge (Boeck, 2016). The labyrinth of informal infrastructure that such practices create makes it straightforward to identify the households, streets or neighbourhoods that are successful in drawing informal supply. At a broader level therefore, the morphology of the infrastructure related to essential urban services is as much an indicator of social and class conflict, as it is an indicator of the vibrancy and hybridity of the services provided.

**Need to get the balance between formal and informal right**

It is very unlikely that the infrastructure in the cities of tomorrow will be any different than it is today. Municipalities are therefore going to have to manage the fluidity of infrastructure and ensure that urban spaces that are truly inclusive. If city regulatory bodies are not capable of being in command of the vast urban transformations that are at play, not only will poverty and inequality become further entrenched, but cities will
consequently cease to be the engines of growth they are charted out to be. But we are not learning from our own mistakes.

Badly planned social housing had to be torn down in other parts of the world long before the same mistakes were made in India (Bristol, 1991). And yet, in urban India, crores continue to be invested in vast tenement blocks of social housing, to ‘rehabilitate’ those evictees lucky enough to be considered for resettlement.

Resettlement colonies will be a common sight to most urban residents in India—multi-storied structures that are imposing from afar, but at closer glance, residents’ everyday lives can be seen to be damaged by sub-standard building material, a lack of natural light and proper air-flow, lack of even basic fire safety equipment, in adequate lifts, topped off by worse water and electricity provision than the rest of the city (Gupte, 2010). Similarly, double and triple tier expressways that cut through cities are literally being torn down in other countries (Kurutz, 2017), but in India, we celebrate them as a symbol of modern city living.

There will be more than 400 million new urban residents in the next three decades whether Indian towns and cities are ready for them or not. Simply persecuting informality in order to replace it with formal infrastructure will not work. The key for municipalities will be in finding the right balance between formal and informal infrastructure to ensure all urban residents find a place to live, work and play.

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2. See http://amrut.gov.in
3. See http://smartcities.gov.in
4. The full speech can be heard at the following link: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-41415568/labour-conference-jeremy-corbyn-s-2017-speech-in-full
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