A Case for Reimagining Urban Environments

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Covid-19 has opened up many questions about our present understanding of societal relationships in all forms and at all levels. These changing relationships and the cities inability to be responsive, agile and inclusive raises questions of appropriateness and relevance of current urban form and demands new ways of seeing and introducing new methods of planning our cities.

Today, we live in a very interconnected world. It is precisely this interconnectedness that spread the virus over such a short period. We are also wrapped in several other global economic slowdown issues, increasing differences, and the unpredictability of the impact of climate change and a degrading environment. From pandemic to climate change, all of these dichotomies are global in nature and largely unpredictable, which breeds a sense of uncertainty at all levels, from local to global.

Trust is the next casualty after certainty and predictability. The trust deficit is a direct consequence of behavioural patterns of nations, institutions, communities and individuals in the course of the pandemic for various reasons. China did not reveal the truth to the world in time for fear of economic backlash, manipulated institutions such as the WHO, which lost the trust of the world. Countries are forging new alignments and drawing new lines. Travel is banned to certain countries while forging new travel alignments with the others.

At the local level, communities started identifying some as outsiders, suspended exchanges and transactions to avoid

contact. In India, at the city-level, despite several efforts by the state under a frugal resource base, the lockdown crammed the working-class indoor with little support and no income certainty. Consequently, some twenty-three million workers chose to walk back home a thousand miles. They wanted to get back home any which way, at the cost of their lives, a home defined not by the shelter and better living conditions but by relationships of trust and love. Such was the scale and nature of human tragedy borne by this crisis of trust.

The current situation demands new ways of seeing our urban environments. For several decades, the city's development is based on ideas of a static land use plan over a twenty-year horizon and FSI as instruments of control. Huge gaps in health, education, public open spaces and other infrastructure continue to be ignored plan after plan. In recent time, with the increasing frequency of changes in developmental demands alongside various vulnerabilities due to environmental disruptions, climate change and the recent pandemic, we can ill afford a sleepy long term master plan. A plan of static land-use developed through a limited lens that leaves a large majority of people out of its vision, making them even more vulnerable to the adverse impact of these events.

There is a need to reimagine a future that will bring some certainty and predictability, re-establish trust, and blur the divide. We need a new vision for a resilient city that develops the city's capacity to adapt and change with rapidly changing conditions. This calls for new definitions in urban spatial understandings, categorisation of urban space and new imaginations of how we define the infrastructure and one that allows for substantial adaptability and agility. It calls for a new configuration that possibly abandons the rigid notions of land use categorisation that is spread horizontally over space to one that is a multi-functional agile use of urban space as infrastructure that is

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imagined in layers over time. An idea that is anchored, more, in location and less in the territory, more in commons, less in ownership. In a society such as ours, with frugal resources, a shifting spatial use may lend better to optimise opportunities across society and build a resilient, inclusive and agile space-use to respond to the dynamic needs of development alongside uncertainties of our time.

There is no better time than now to rethink our urban environment. There is a certain willingness at this time and a sense of urgency within our people and the government. The pandemic and the lockdown has opened up a new dimension of collective consciousness. We have always known the benefits and the ability of the internet to substantially substitute physical presence and mobility. We have known the value of frugality, family time, community engagement and most importantly, the value of a healthy environment. All of this came to life as a lived experience concurrently during the pandemic. Some of us experienced these for a prolonged period across society during the lockdown. This allowed these attributes to be internalised and become a part of our collective consciousness and alerted us to an alternative way of life.

At the level of the state, too, there are serious, urgent engagements of alternative thinking. To give a few examples, the emphasis on health and health infrastructure, seeing globalisation and an *atma-nirbhar* (self-reliant) economy within the same framework, and use of digital technology to improve responses in health service over space and time are all important steps towards building a new vision. A comprehensive public discourse is needed on all fronts to explore the new thinking between the governments at various levels and the public at large to explore the possible new conceptual frameworks for the city and its planning that are inclusive, agile and relevant to our times and respond to the opportunities this moment brings to the table.

Ravindra Punde is an architect and an urban and regional planner. He studied architecture at the Academy of Architecture, Mumbai and urban and regional planning from the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. He is the co-founder of the landscape and planning practice 'Design Cell', which works from Gurgaon and Mumbai.

Ravindra has extensive experience in master planning, landscape and urban projects. His practice extends to many parts of India, where he has led teams to design and execute large and complex projects.

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