



Seeing the Invisible City: Thoughts on a Post-Covid Indian Urbanism

PREM CHANDAVARKAR

- Invited for the theme of 'Reimagining the Post-Covid-19 City'

The affluent in India occupy cities where over half the city is invisible. 'That's ridiculous!', you may respond, 'Flesh and blood people live in the city, which is built with corporeal materials like brick, sheet metal, concrete, stone and steel. How can any of it be invisible?'

The answer to this question is best explained in an anecdote narrated by Robert Neuwirth in his book *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World*, a study he made of slums across the world. One of his case studies is Dharavi in Mumbai, during which he is interviewed by a newspaper reporter who asks him, 'Do slums constitute a city within the city?' Neuwirth reflects on this question, which on the first appearance seems reasonable, but actually is not. A majority of Mumbai's population, close to fifty-five per cent, live in slums, on pavements, or in other forms of housing that are not sanctioned by official urbanism, and it is the wealthy who live in small enclaves. Yet, the official sanctioned imagination of 'the city' is that of the wealthy; and the slum, despite containing far more people, is relegated to being within that imagined city. We see the city that we imagine, not necessarily the city that exists.

Official urban planning follows a methodology under which the slum is rendered invisible. It predicates itself on: (i) a land-use plan defining zoning classifications and distributions marking

“Inefficient, opaque and corrupt land markets result in the official plan setting thresholds of affordability that disqualify a majority of the population.”

where each functional use is located; (ii) building codes each zone must follow; (iii) a protocol that demands each building be officially sanctioned by a statutory authority prior to construction; and (iv) a land market that determines the prices under which the whole system operates. Inefficient, opaque and corrupt land markets result in the official plan setting thresholds of affordability that disqualify a majority of the population. The protocols for prior statutory approval of construction do not offer the flexibility needed by the urban poor. Even the lower middle class fall outside the system and are driven into unregulated developments that are not sanctioned by the master plan. Satellite imagery of Indian cities shows that close to seventy per cent of residential growth in recent decades, measured by population rather than area, happens outside the sanctioned urban planning paradigm.

How can an official paradigm of urbanism that fails to recognise a majority of the population persist over such a long time? This is because it sees the city with a kind of gaze that only recognises what it wishes to see. It believes that the official paradigm of the city represents modernity, what falls outside that paradigm is pre-modern, irrational or criminal, and one must protect the space of modernity so that the pre-modern can eventually find its way into it. Structural barriers that prevent this transition are rendered invisible in this gaze.

This is sustained in the popular imagination of the affluent through what the Belgian theorist, Lieven De Cauter, termed as ‘capsularisation’. We live within capsules whose focus is internal rather than external. Our homes are no longer externally focused toward a form of communal living like a mohalla; they are protected by security barriers shielding an interior territory defined by a single-family. With services displacing manufacturing as the dominant sector of the urban economy,

our workplaces also tend to be capsules, and we impart spatial coherence to our existence by travelling between home and work in protective capsules such as cars. This phenomenon of extreme capsularisation in the Indian city can be confirmed by perusing real estate advertisements in any newspaper or magazine, and you see that new developments are projected as refuges from the city rather than spaces deriving energy from being anchored in the city. Any affluent urban dweller can also test their own capsularisation by assessing the degree to which they recognise the housing conditions of their domestic help, gardeners, chauffeurs, or of the municipal workers who clean the street they live on.

The poor survive in the Indian city because master planning is weak in both ideation and implementation, giving them the space to negotiate and implement the informal systems of tenure that underpin their survival. However, this renders them vulnerable to dispossession and exploitation, the consequent risk obstructs investment in improving housing stock, and they are condemned to remain in deplorable environments with a poor connection to crucial urban services.

The Covid pandemic has suddenly proven the invisible city to be an illusion by suddenly rendering it visible. A lockdown, with four hours' notice, immediately launched the migrant urban poor into visibility, trudging along highways, crowding at bus and train stations, in a desperate urge to reach home. Realising that a system that rendered them invisible would offer no support, the settlements of kinship from where they originated were the only visible succour, and they immediately embarked on the journey there, even if it meant travelling hundreds of kilometres under conditions of great hardship.

Moreover, a virus knows no boundaries of class and geography, we are all connected, and if the poor are infected, all are at risk.

“The Covid pandemic has suddenly proven the invisible city to be an illusion by suddenly rendering it visible.”

The conditions of unsanctioned urbanism that dominate the Indian city, with their high densities, poor provision of water and sanitation, and inadequate facilities for public health, are the reason why controlling the pandemic has become such a difficult affair for Indian cities.

This is India's urban century, where for the first time in the country's history, by mid-century, the urban population will be larger than the rural population. As urbanism gets to prevail in the national condition, failures in the urban paradigm will become even more pronounced, even if there is no pandemic at the time. The only hope is if we learn what the pandemic has revealed to us and learn to consistently see the invisible city.

Prem Chandavarkar is the Managing Partner of CnT Architects, an award-winning and widely published architectural practice based in Bengaluru. He is an academic advisor and a guest faculty at Indian and international colleges of architecture. He writes, lectures and blogs on architecture, urbanism, philosophy, politics, education, environment, art and cultural studies.

