

Flawed Urban Vision

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Darryl D'Monte

Freelance Journalist and a Syndicated Columnist

It is quite appropriate for every major megacity – with a population over 10 million – to develop a vision of what the city will look like in 10, 25 or even 40 or 50 years. Unless one knows the ultimate destination, city authorities will not be able to decide which alternate paths to take. London, Paris and Singapore apparently have such plans. One, a 40-year-plan for Mumbai, prepared by a team of Singapore consultants known as Surbana, was unveiled at the State Guest House known as Sahyadri, under the auspices of Mumbai First, a corporate think-tank, on March 4. Many of the dimensions of this plan are relevant to the other metros in this country.

One problem with such vision plans – as indeed, the previous one by McKinsey on making Mumbai a “world class city” a few years ago – is that they take a managerial-technocratic view of the metropolis. However, as everyone knows, Mumbai is a seething, teeming city, with a highly diverse and largely poor population, living in abysmal conditions. Several experts mentioned that the proportion of slum dwellers is likely to rise from 55 to 60 per cent when the latest census results are shortly announced, which only confirms Mumbai as the world’s leader in accommodating homeless people (as many as 9 million). Surbana’s plan, although it projects a slum-less city in 2052, does not incorporate the views of “wretched of the city” in its vision.

Not surprisingly, McKinsey’s report, also promoted by Mumbai First, died an unnatural death for lack of anyone to adopt it. Incongruously, it was described as an “executive summary”, but

when people asked for the main report, found that there was none! However, it did this pro bono, possibly in the expectation of obtaining further consultancies. The report spoke glowingly of how former Andhra Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu had transformed Hyderabad from a sleepy region town into “Cyberabad” and how S.M. Krishna had similarly metamorphosed Bangalore. The irony was that only a few months after McKinsey presented its report, both Naidu and Krishna were unceremoniously booted out of power. Their failure: to pay sufficient heed to the travails of the countryside, where the bulk of the population lives.

Surbana, which has been engaged on a more professional basis and has scoured the city for several months, looked at seven aspects: Mumbai as a global finance centre, balancing urban growth, providing jobs for all citizens, housing, transport, environment and, not least, the city’s identity. It correctly looked at the entire Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), spanning some 4,355 sq km and itself comprising one-million-plus cities like Thane and Kalyan. By comparison, the peninsula of Greater Mumbai is only some 460 sq km. The consultants project the population of the MMR at 44 million by 2052, which would make it if not the biggest, one of the biggest, urban agglomerations in the entire world. What happens to Mumbai in the next half century – 2050, incidentally, is the deadline for all countries to take on steep emission cuts to keep global warming at bay – will have repercussions for urban growth everywhere.

For all the talk of Mumbai as India’s richest city, the commercial

capital and erstwhile industrial capital, the figures are somewhat sobering. According to Djoko Prohanto of Surbana, the per capita come of Mumbaikars is now under \$1,000 a year, which is about the same as the nations. By 2052, however, Surbana estimates that it will touch \$23,000. Its competitive edge, it is claimed, is that three-quarters of the employment is in the services sector.

Nasser Munjee, who is associated with Bombay First, referred to a survey of Mumbai’s CEOs regarding the city’s competitiveness eight years ago. As many as 82 companies were downsizing. The reasons given were the cost of doing business, the labour market and lack of social infrastructure. Mumbai’s loss would be Bangalore’s and Hyderabad’s gain, possibly with Gurgaon’s and Noida’s too.

The two main objections to Surbana’s plan, however, are its emphasis on reclamation and densification. This former has already received a thumbs-down from Chief Minister Prithviraj Chauhan and Surbana hastily referred to this dimension as only one of the options. Although speakers referred at the launch to “locked up lands” like salt pans and the like, these can only be reclaimed at grave risk to the entire ecology of the city. They serve as natural sponges for the tides and excess rainfall like the deluge that occurred in July 2005. City authorities, on the other hand, are looking to the recent relaxation of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) laws as opening up “tremendous possibilities” for redevelopment.

The main reclamation that Surbana proposes is in the Thane creek, which serves as Greater Mumbai’s

