

The Dark Urban Age of the World Class City

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The phrase “World Class City” has a ring of grandeur to it, evoking pride on the scale of civilization itself. However, what the term translates into is often a set of practices resembling medieval lives, complete with castles, watchtowers, fortresses, high walls and wilderness. Gated communities and hallowed spaces of privilege planted in a dangerous landscape of vast, growing and unidentified urban objects with several misnomers - shanties, slums and informal settlements – is the vision that seems to have taken hold of our urban future.

According to historian and novelist Umberto Eco, the continued prevalence of medieval imagery in modern fantasies and our political imagination is no coincidence. He points out how an episodic and evolutionary presentation of history does not really mirror the diverse, complex and unpredictable way in which human lives and cultures actually unfold in space and time. Medieval concerns continue to exist deep in the human consciousness and experience because in many ways our lives have not gone beyond them. Notwithstanding the grand technological progress made by many parts of the world, as well as taking great strides in political emancipation, the world is still divided over resources like land and minerals while wars, inequalities and religious divides continue to thrive. Popular culture is replete with imagery and fantasy from medieval times because modern life is punctuated by medieval moments.

How does the medieval imagination play itself out in the urban world? It closes itself up from several

realities and hides its parochial nature behind euphemisms. The most obvious one today, and that which reminds you most of the past is the term the ‘World Class City’. It has become ubiquitous in discussions on urban and economic development in India and other developing countries. One sees it daily in newspapers and hears it on TV and at the dining table. It is also omnipresent in policy circles and academia and needs to be urgently placed in its urban and ideological context.

The emergence of the “World Class City” in discourses on urban development is linked to the disappearance of the equally problematic notion of “Third World”. When the Soviet block (the “Second World”) disappeared as a distinct political regime, “First World” capitalism spread all over the world as it seemed to represent the only possible model of governance and development. Socialism was relegated to the museum of failed utopias and the world’s political imagination was suddenly reduced to whatever could be done within the frame of capitalism.

Since (almost) every country could now be measured on the scale of its economic production and accumulation (GDP), the political nomenclature of first, second and third worlds was replaced by terms referring to stages of economic development: underdeveloped, less developed, developing, developed, most developed...

In a way, one could say that at that time the world became more politically integrated and economically “global”. Without the Second World, there could not be a Third one. The

world had become global again, with international trade networks expanding to new horizons, financial flows circulating freely from country to country, industrial processes realigning themselves along command and control centres and sites of production, and so on. With this relative erosion of political-economic borders, cities were propelled at the centre stage of the world economy. In an integrated global economy, their significance was no longer simply national –they became international entities, with high levels of specialization.

Cities came to be seen as the “hubs” of the global economy and a new nomenclature emerged to replace that of the Cold War era: first tier, second tier and third tier cities. This meant that potentially a developing country could have a second or first tier city. Shanghai and Sao Paulo are examples of that. At this point, the aspiration of many political and industry leaders shifted from a national agenda to an urban agenda. Since cities were engines of growth, it made sense to invest heavily in their development, even if it meant leaving the country behind.

This is the broad context within which the imagination of the World Class City emerges. The World Class City is not simply your “Global City”, since, in a global world, most cities are global whether they want to be or not. World Class echoes the Cold War era notion of First World, since in a world dominated by the First World, World Class really means First Class. First Class as a status is relative by nature. On the one hand, it is based on a certain imagination of what our first tier global cities (New York, London, Tokyo)



ought to look like, and on the other hand, it is a statement of superiority vis-à-vis the rest of the country.

The problem is that the cities that really stimulate our imagination when we think of World Class are not as classy when you view them from the ground. London is experiencing a rise in urban violence and unemployment and many neighbourhood shops are closing down. New York is enduring one of the most dramatic bed bug epidemic (of all things!) of its history and Tokyo has an increasing number of homeless people setting up tents and shacks in parks and squares.

The “World Class City” is a slogan that seems to be coming directly from a marketing agency and seems to be devised to sell the latest fashion in

cosmetic urbanism. It is a visual narrative made of bits and pieces taken from distant places, which exist primarily as urban spectacles in our imaginations. One never encounters the World Class City in reality. The only places where this vision seems to have materialized are cities like Singapore and Shanghai, where authoritarian regimes can sustain its artificial existence. These are closer to the model of the theme park or the “special economic zones”, which achieve perfect order at the cost of forcefully containing the mess outside their boundaries.

In India the dream of transforming Mumbai into a World Class City has given way to the more realistic ambition of developing world-class buildings and infrastructures in some parts of the city. This version of

ARCHITECTS, PLANNERS TALK ABOUT CONSTRUCTING HIGH-RISES

Vertical city: How to go up without going down

Mahika Tetta

“We are not going to talk about tall buildings over the coming three days. In fact, I say, we should stop making tall buildings because there isn't infrastructure to support them,” said Antony Wodt, executive director, Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CTBUH), while inaugurating the three-day annual CTBUH world conference 2010, titled, ‘Remaking sustainable cities in the vertical age’.

Jointly organised by the Chicago-based council and Remaking of Mumbai Federation, a focus group that advocates the redevelopment of pre-1960 structures in the city, the conference has been conceived as a networking platform for urban planners and architects, and to exchange ideas and case studies from across the world. A lineup of 72 speakers will discuss how cities can remake themselves in a way that makes them more sustainable.

The conference is being held in Mumbai this year in appreciation of the developmental potential of a city with a population of over 16 million, almost half of which lives in squat settlements.

Contrary to what the title may suggest, the conference isn't about how to create tall engineering marvels. Eminent architect Charles Correa summarised, “It's not how high a building can go, but what goes into the build-



BUILDING BLOCK

“It's not how high a building can go, but what goes into the building,” said eminent architect Charles Correa. He suggested that while creating a mass transport-supported, high-density city was the paradigm to aspire to — high rises being just one way to achieve that — they would be unsustainable without attached amenities like schools, hospitals and open spaces.

In Mumbai, he said, rather than retaining the open space next to a tall building, more high-rises are erected. “The problem is not about increasing density, but about how to provide more amenities to achieve the optimum density,” he said, pointing to the statistic that, in Mumbai, roads are a mere 8% of land use, compared to the 35% international standard.

David Nelson of Foster & Partners, London, observed that cities across the world that have voted for indiscriminate high rises without amenities to support the numbers living in them, have seen a decanting of people from the city-centre towards automobile-wielding suburbia, an unsustainable trend that would require three planets to meet everyone's housing needs.

SK Das of SK Das Associated Architects, New Delhi, said that in cities marked by conflicting aspirations, “the affluent raise the bar in consumption. The poor are excluded.” A city, he said, must be seen as a multiple city with various groups trying to exert their claim over the existing resources. While affluence, rising prices, and globalisation will definitely lead to taller cities, the Indian city,

with its diversity and complexity “has to be a mosaic of high-rise, mid-rise and low-rise structures”, one that honours the aspirations of all.

Eventually, sustainability, he said, will have to build on the idea of the traditional city which was structured to an extent by the government, but which allowed people to build with choice.

Suburbs to grow taller

MORE HOUSING State ups FSI in suburbs to 1.33, grants higher FSI to buildings built before 1969

By Anand Mahajan

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THE STATE GOVERNMENT has increased the floor space index (FSI) in suburbs to 1.33, up from 1.2, and granted higher FSI to buildings built before 1969.

Chief Minister Ashok Chavan announced that these measures will be implemented from the next session of the legislature in four months time. Chavan also said all buildings in the city constructed before 1969 will be given higher FSI for redevelopment. Buildings constructed before 1969 were given 1.2 FSI, he said.

Chavan made these announcements in the Legislative Assembly on Monday. The FSI of a plot and hence the height of buildings constructed on that plot can be increased if the owner files an application with the Municipal Corporation (MC).

The MC would then

We will amend the MHY Act that governs the city's development
KUNAL CHAVAN, Chief Minister

“Chavan said increasing FSI in the suburbs will ensure a reduction in price of residential plots and hence housing,” he said. The state's earlier decision on FSI was stayed by the high court, which said the state cannot allow more FSI by changing a provision. The government will now amend the MHY Act to make such a provision. Chavan said he had reported this to the

Suburbs to grow taller, providing more housing at cheaper rates.
AT 12.00 PM

buildings in suburbs will get FSI approved for redevelopment of residential and commercial buildings in the suburb city. There are at least 1,000 projects around buildings in the suburb city. These buildings are all FSI of 1.2 when they get the

Why you should care
In 2010, 1.2 FSI will mean more housing units of lower price. It will bring down the price of the suburb. FSI is the ratio of the area of the plot to the area of the building. A building with 1.2 FSI will mean 1.2 times the area of the plot.

The state will have to amend Development Control Rule 2010 to bring in the new FSI rule. There are 10,000-odd commercial buildings in the suburb city. The state will have to amend the rule to bring in the new FSI rule.

REDEVELOPMENT of an old building is a process of demolishing the old building and constructing a new one. The new building will be taller and have more floors. The state will have to amend the rule to bring in the new FSI rule.

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CONCRETE GETS ECO-FRIENDLY

WATER RECYCLING

A plant can be used to recycle grey water from the kitchen, bathroom, flush and other areas so that it can be reused for non-potable purposes. With extensive recycling, the intake of fresh water can be kept low, which reduces the burden on the civic supply system



RAINWATER HARVESTING

Rainwater is collected in huge tanks or reservoirs, purified and stored for future use

GARBAGE TREATMENT

Garbage should be segregated into wet and dry waste and the wet waste should be turned into manure through vermicomposting

PLANTING TREES

Indigenous trees, like neem and Ashoka, can be planted within residential complexes. The shift has been from ornamental to desi trees and an emphasis on more greenery and oxygen generation. Trees make the area cooler



REDUCING HEAT

Environmentally friendly architecture can help reduce the internal heat in a structure

BLOCKING RADIATION

Shields can mitigate the effects of radiation, especially from mobile towers and FM radio stations

NOISE REDUCTION

The design should reduce noise pollution. All negative acoustics should be not just mitigated, but positive sound elements should also be introduced

CONSCIENTIOUS CONSTRUCTION

Recycled and environmentally friendly building materials should be used. There should be no use of equipment containing chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) gases, thus reducing the depletion of the ozone layer. The building uses up to 75% of local materials for construction



SAVING POWER

Energy efficiency | Power-saving lights, like compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs), and other similar equipment can be used in flats and common areas

Solar electricity | Solar panels or batteries can generate energy for lights and even lifts

Natural lighting | Atriums, long windows and balconies are encouraged. Natural lighting is especially emphasised in common areas

the World Class City takes the form of firewalled islands of high-security and a world-'classiness' connected to similar islands around the world. Outside, the Third World continues to strive.

The World Class City as it is being envisioned and developed nowadays uses speculative projections that would humble the most spectacular of science fiction imagery and is a shortcut for the political glory of corrupt leaders or those without much imagination. The latest in that brand of development is Mumbai's aptly named World One complex, which is planned to become the highest residential tower in the world, entirely self-contained and unabashedly exclusive. From the twentieth century ideal of "One World", we have come to the vision "World One". Real estate speculators and developers have resolutely decided to keep the rest of the city at the door.

Without its second class citizens and third world periphery, the World Class City would have no backdrop to pitch itself against. It uses the label ostensibly to carry the entire city on its merit, but in reality only exists, especially in new urban avatars, as a medieval fortress, an enclave that leaves behind the citizens that do not belong to its globally networked connections. The idea has currency in the business and politics of construction, often tied up with a more respectable sounding infrastructural dimension. These infrastructures function as corridors that connect the periphery to the centre, making the World Class City look like a walled kingdom reigning over a city-region that it is simultaneously exploiting and protecting itself against.

The World Class City is not as much a vision of the future, as it is a reproduction of a model that belongs to the Dark Age with added high-tech features. Our hopes for the future do not rest in the World-Class enclaves of this world, nor in the regions they dominate, but rather in the spaces that are not yet fully ruled by them, where alternatives to the World Class City vision are waiting to be recognized by architects, planners, developers and policy-makers.

This urban vision rides on a huge wave of ideological assumptions, the biggest being that we are now all firmly entrenched in an Urban Age. What would be more accurate is to state that we have returned into a rather Dark Urban Age. After all this age is punctuated by prophets predicting apocalyptic visions about this era with images of dark shadowy habitats replacing the erstwhile fears of the forest that castles and protected urban habitats had in the past.

Every new architectural or urban fantasy that gets realized repeats such imagery, presenting itself as a fort surrounded by architectural wilderness full of danger and chaos. If it is not such negative imagery about their surroundings then it is about taming the wilderness and transforming it into acceptable notions of urban life.

Today's castles take all types of forms and functions. They range from corporate towers to multiplexes, housing estates, hotels, private clubs, hospitals and universities. You know you are entering one when you are being screened and patted down. The message is clear: inside you are protected. Outside

you are on your own. Narratives of urban development often have the urbanist-architect as their hero who valiantly steps out of the castle, braving and eventually taming wilderness around. The wilderness is epitomized by the category slum, encompassing all that is avoidable, dangerous and worthy of erasure. In reality, like the proverbial adventurer of ancient tales the heroic architect only encounters false monsters and elusive spirits. The slum emerges as a highly unstable category, slipping through fingers the moment he thinks he has found one. Eventually when he finds it – it appears as a chimera, and he realizes that the dangerous forest around him is nothing like what he had been told it was.

In Mumbai particularly, the spectacular spectre of speculation has produced the most naive narrative on slums, which justifies their transformation into high-value graveyards populated by zombie-like buildings. The scary forest was a fantasy in the mind of castle dwellers in a way that played upon all kinds of anxieties and fears. Kings and aristocrats saw them as spaces out of control, unlike the domesticated peasants and taxed agrarian lands that were caught in their web. From the vantage of the subaltern hero, the forest was Sherwoodian, full of Robin Hoodian impulses, a social space and a world of creative freedom and economic independence. Resisting control was its biggest aim.

Today the big 'other' in urban ideology is the slum-word, which has replaced the forest and the wilderness in name alone. A quick glance at the definition of the word "slum" used by the United Nations¹ suffices to demonstrate that it is a catchall that can be used indiscriminately to describe a wide range of habitats, from cardboard huts to decrepit buildings and sometimes even perfectly functional neighbourhoods.² It is always based on locally variable notions of acceptable housing. Quite simply, what a slum is in one context is not so in another. The s-word has become a Damocles sword hanging over its head. When the authorities call a neighbourhood a slum, they ensure that it can be redeveloped. No matter what's inside, how people live and how they use the space to generate income. If it is a slum it is no good. It has to eventually go and give way to good-old modern planning and housing. It has to become civilized.

The slum-word belongs to the same category of four letter words as junk, mess and dirt, and just like them (and a few others), the reaction it sparks owes more to our own biases than to any objective reality that it could be describing. The World Class City is that shining beacon in urban practice today that tries to hide the dirt, eliminate darkness and do away with all that is ugly. In reality, the brighter it shines, the more shadows in casts all around. The more it tries to cleanse the more dirt it generates.

¹ According to the United Nation Task Force in Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers, a slum is "a group of individuals living under the same roof lacking one or more of the following necessities: access to improved water, access to improved sanitation, sufficient living area, structural quality and durability of dwellings, and security of tenure."

² Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava, "The s... word", *airroots/eirut*, October 2010. <http://www.airroots.org/2008/10/the-s-word/>