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development
digest



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This digest features important articles on development and social transformation in order to reach those working in the field and not having knowledge of these documents. It is aimed at promoting further reading of the originals, and generating public debate and action on public issues. The articles are compiled and edited for

easy reading and comprehension of the concepts, and not so much to reproduce the academic accuracy of the original texts.

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Inclusion for Urban Sustainability

Urbanisation is one of the essential ingredients that define human civilization. Large agglomerations make for interactions on a large scale, which make quantum leaps in the arts, science, technology, culture, and the economy possible and fruitful.

As a large country, with a sizeable population, India has also been going down that road. The much touted 'India Shining' campaign was the result of the massive progress that was made in these last few decades since independence.

But the exclusion of large sections of the population from this process dented that 'shining'.

*The lessons of the futility of such exclusion have not been learnt. The same class of interests that marketed the 'shining' have in substance co-opted the new UPA government. **Sainath** shows us that it is this same mindset that goads the Maharashtra government, part of the UPA parivar, to publicly equate 'good' urban governance with mere removal of 'eyesores', while surreptitiously allowing greedy realtors to reap unlimited benefits.*

The Unbearable Lightness of Seeing, *P. Sainath*, The Hindu, Saturday, Feb 05, 2005.
<http://www.hindu.com/2005/02/05/stories/2005020500611000.htm>
[C.ELDOC.1077546]

Patriotic and Worthy, *Dilip D'souza*, The Hindu, Sunday, Jun 05, 2005.
<http://www.hindu.com/lr/2005/06/05/stories/2005060500020100.htm>
[C.ELDOC1. 0507/ Patriotic-and_worthy.html]

Towards Cities of Poverty, *John Vidal*, Frontline, Volume 21- Issue 20, Sept. 25 - Oct. 8, 2004. [C.ELDOC.1076812]

*Such narrow visions are self-defeating, not just for political and electoral consequences, but for the economic, social and cultural well being of society - even of the very classes that bemoan urban blight. Enlightened self-interest apart, **Neuwirth** reminds us of ethical and moral issues of rights, equity and justice.*

*These insights are important not just for the metropolitan dwellers, but also for the small towns that are bulging at the seams, as the same narrow vision prevails across the regions in South Asia, and elsewhere. **Vidal** says these are as impoverished as the rural areas we normally associate with poverty, and even more exploited and polluted.▶*

The unbearable lightness of seeing

P. Sainath

How agonised we are about how people die. How untroubled we are by how they live. Number of homes damaged by the tsunami in Nagapattinam: 30,300. Number of homes destroyed by the Congress-NCP Government in Mumbai: 84,000. How agonised we are about how people die. How untroubled we are by how they live.

Maharashtra's Chief Minister, Vilasrao Deshmukh, Chief Minister would like to leave behind a legacy., ... believes, will be that of the man who cleaned up Mumbai. Mr. Deshmukh, in short, wishes to be remembered.

He will be. His Government wiped out 6,300 homes on a single day. A record the Israeli army would be proud to match on a busy afternoon in the occupied territories. It is a figure their bulldozers, with tanks and air force support, have not quite notched up yet.

The Mumbai mass evictions – now in pause mode – demolished a lot more than slums. They reflected well an elite mindset towards the deprived that fully matured in the 1990s. It is a lot about how we see the poor today. About a view marked by contempt for the rights and suffering of ordinary people. Unless that suffering is certified as genuine by the rest of us.

Mr. Deshmukh now says the destruction of "some" houses was "an accident." Not intended. Which perhaps places his government in the category of natural calamity. However, most of Mumbai's beautiful people, some of whom attended `tsunami

dinners' after expressing satisfaction over the city's mass demolitions, are firmly with their Chief Minister.

No one from that fraternity has 'adopted' a demolished slum for adoring cameras. Nor organized relief operations for people, including many babies shivering without shelter, in one of the coldest winters.

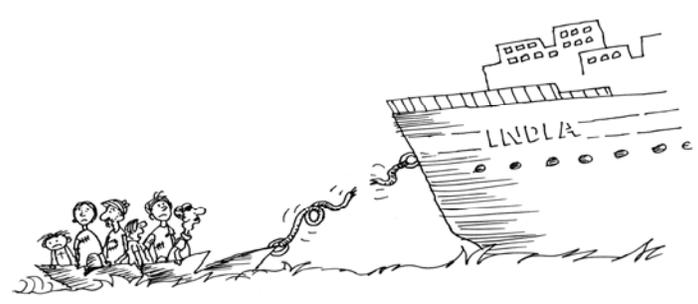
Disenfranchising the Poor



Instead, Mumbai's elite now feels the need to carry the logic forward. Last year, 11 prominent Maharashtrians moved the Bombay high court to bar slum dwellers from voting. This year, the city's municipal corporation itself asked the Chief Electoral Officer to drop residents of the demolished slums from the voters' lists. (A curious move in a society contemplating voting rights for NRIs and PIOs.) No one uses the real word – disenfranchisement. But it is what they mean. One way or the other, take away their vote. That should teach them they cannot live amongst us.

It would also blunt the one weapon ordinary Indians have and use. Unlike their American counterparts, the Indian poor have the audacity to believe their votes can change things. They certainly did that right here. Mumbai's slum dwellers played a critical role in defeating the BJP-Shiv Sena in the 2004 Assembly polls. (Quite a few local leaders of the Congress know this well and are fearful of a backlash. What if slum folk attempt similar adventures the next time around?)

Maybe India will move towards as on most other things – the American model. As a Human Rights Watch Sentencing Project report shows, 1.4 million African-American men – 13 per cent of their total number – are denied voting rights because of their criminal records. As many as 15 American States bar former felons from voting even after they have completed serving their sentences.



Of course, excluding large numbers from voting involves minor problems of constitutional rights. But the *avant garde* amongst the elite have found the answer to that one: criminalise them. That would be a good start. "Book them for trying to steal public property," is one bright idea. The Mumbai police have obligingly promised criminal trespass cases against dazed victims hanging around their razed homes. Satisfying, but annoyingly it would still leave them with the right to vote.

In Alabama and Florida, nearly one in every three African-American men is permanently disenfranchised. In six other States the ratio is one in four. All this in States with significant African-American minorities. As the report notes, no other democracy denies as many people the right to vote because of their criminal

records. A feat that could be eclipsed in India if the current mindset towards the poor goes the distance.

America has around two million human beings behind bars – more than any other nation in the world. Of these, 63 per cent are African-American and Hispanic. Consider that these two groups together form only 25 per cent of the population. You are far more likely to go to prison – and lose your vote – if you are African-American. Substitute poor for African-American and it is an idea much of India's elite would go for.

Total disdain for even the foreseeable future is another element of this mindset. According to a UN Habitat report, one in every five Indians could live in a slum by 2030, many of them in shanty towns. Imagine how many voters we could do away with by criminalising slum dwellers. Just 'reform' the laws. Adopt the Mumbai idea nationwide – and India will be demolishing more homes than it has ever built.

Whose Sacrifice?

.....last December, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai and the Maharashtra State Government have bulldozed 52,000 hutments in Mumbai, forcibly evicting 250,000 people, out of a targeted population of 2.2 million dwellers residing in settlements erected after 1995.

The eviction of 250,000 poor people, as well as their current living conditions, contravene their right to adequate housing, especially their entitlements to security of tenure and freedom from dispossession; access to public goods and services; information; participation; compensation, and physical security. All are elements of the right to adequate housing as codified in international law. Specifically, the authorities have breached their treaty obligations under articles 1, 2, 4, 11, 12, and 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which India acceded to on 19 July 1979...

Urgent Action Appeal, Housing and Land Rights Network of Habitat International Coalition,

[C.ELDOC1.0510/HIC-petition-on-mumbai-demolitions.html]

<http://www.doccentre.org/tod/HIC-petition-on-mumbai-demolitions.htm>

"Many people will have inconveniences and will have to make sacrifices if the city has to develop..." says the Chief Minister. The city's builder and real estate mafia will not be amongst those inconvenienced. The sacrifices are to be made by the poor. The power of those driving the process is immense. The protests and appeals of the slum folk themselves are simply dismissed. Those of some 28 slum dwellers organisations, housing rights and human rights bodies, political parties and trade unions are sought to be played down. It was anxiety over the fallout (at far higher levels of the congress in New Delhi) that led to some slowing down of the demolitions, and to Mr. Deshmukh's admission of "accidental" evictions.

Class interests are asserting themselves across the major parties here. The Congress elite is far more in tune with Bal Thackeray on this issue than it is with its own panicking base. The Sena chief has praised the government for the terror visited on the slum populace. This is also one issue that unites the otherwise bickering Nationalist Congress Party and Congress. Hopefully, the coalition of a large number of organisations protesting the action will create a basis for some relief and resistance.

A crucial part of the mindset is the idea that promises made to the poor have no meaning. It matters little that millions of such people in Mumbai helped the Congress win a State it would surely have lost. At the Centre too, that party came to power riding a wave of popular anger against the policies of the National Democratic Alliance Government. And then quickly buried its anti-'India Shining' campaign. Today, a Montek Singh Ahluwalia can signal moves towards the privatisation of water without batting an eyelid. All earlier assurances on not making life harder for the deprived mean nothing. That was an election. This is reality.

URBANISATION

That is why the better off – anyway miniscule in numbers – hardly bother to vote. The rich run governments by other means. Not by electing them. When governments have reneged on their most fundamental promises in the past 15 years, the media have welcomed this as "pragmatic." It is pragmatic to lie to the poor. It is also pragmatic to break your commitment to the 1993 United Nations resolution which terms forced evictions "a gross violation



of human rights."
Whose Gain?

A vivid symbol of the pragmatic new world was the sensex soaring to a record peak – at the height of the tsunami damage. This phenomenon was repeated across most of the tsunami-hit nations as "markets sensed" a windfall in reconstruction spending.

The mindset is visible in our dealings with tsunami-hit citizens, too. We are now in the process of converting people's entitlements into our charity. Health care, access to clean water, sanitation, schools – all these might now happen because of our generosity. Not because human beings are entitled to them. You might get a house because we feel sorry half your family was washed away. Not by right of your citizenship of a decent nation

and society.

There is one thing larger than Mr. Deshmukh's bulldozers: The process by which millions are uprooted from the countryside and forced to seek a living in the nearest city. What India is building is not an employment guarantee but an unemployment guarantee. As agriculture collapses and people vote with their feet, the Deshmukh Doctrine is the best we can think of. Mopping the floors with the taps all open and running.

The Indian elite wants a society geared up to deal with disasters that may or may not strike once in a hundred years but shows no urgency at all when it comes to ongoing misery not caused by nature. Towards the destruction of the livelihoods of millions by policy and human agency.

We want effective and advanced planning for events distant and hard to predict. But reject planning for the near future in favour of 'the market', which alone should be the one true guide. We want to build walls against the sea all along the coast after having done away with nature's own – the mangroves and sand dunes. Maybe we will build walls around Mumbai next to keep the plebeians out. Mr. Deshmukh's legacy would then be forever secure. ▶

URBANISATION



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Patriotic and worthy

Dilip D'souza

Read Neuwirth to understand what slums are really about and what cities must do to tackle them.



**Shadow Cities:
A Billion Squatters,
A New Urban World,**
Robert Neuwirth,
Routledge, 2005,
p.335, price not
stated.

One way you can read **Shadow Cities** is as a voyeur: use it to peer into the lives of people who live in what we more genteel folk think are dreadful conditions. Do that, and you'll find plenty of images to gape at in wonder: flying toilets; the fan that threatens to but never quite does decapitate; pipes that need oral resuscitation... do such things really happen?

Oh yes they do, and **Shadow Cities** offers other opportunities to gape as well. But it is more useful by far as an examination of attitudes and policies towards squatters, in the four cities Robert Neuwirth lived in while researching it, and historically, in several famous Western cities. Look at it that way, and you may wonder with Neuwirth "about the morality of a world that denies people jobs in their home areas and denies them homes in the areas where they have gone to get jobs".

And that's the issue, isn't it? In Mumbai earlier this year, an elected government tore down nearly 1,00,000 city homes,

leaving nearly half a million citizens homeless. All on the grounds that these homes were "illegal". Funny, the jobs this city generates – the jobs that, as an engine of vibrant economic growth, it will naturally generate – are in no sense illegal. But when affordable rental housing is essentially nonexistent, where must the people who fill those jobs live? Answer: Where they can. Often, in slums.

Where's the morality?

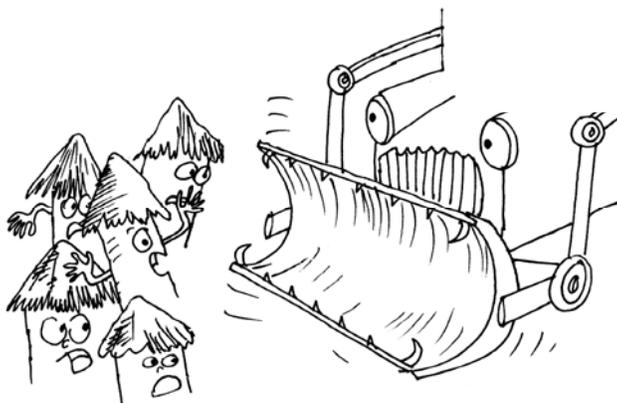
And yet, when they do that, the Shobhaa Des and Vilasrao Deshmukhs – indeed, all of us – climb the moral sand dune of "legality". We use that to deny them homes, or smash their homes. Where's the morality? Why does it seem to me like perversity and nothing else?

Neuwirth got a MacArthur grant to do something few journalists would. For months at a time, he "embedded" himself in slums – he objects to the word, but he'll indulge my use of it here – in Rio, Nairobi, Mumbai and Istanbul. The result is this work of hard-nosed, yet compassionate and thoughtful journalism.

In his time in Mumbai, living in one room in a Goregaon slum, Neuwirth became something of a star. Local journalists interviewed him with an odd air of wonder: for them "it was important", he realised, "to have face time with a strange nonsquatter who had become a squatter". And with this air of wonder, or perhaps even without it, they would often not even listen to him or pay attention to his experiences. There was the time he told a reporter who interviewed him that "of course, there was some crime in squatter communities", but not in the ones he had lived in. Besides, he felt safe in his Goregaon home, where he "never saw any crime". In print, the reporter had him saying: "There is high crime in slums, certainly".

"I felt", writes Neuwirth, like I was entering a twilight zone where journalists had no compunction about bending the facts to fit the mould they thought their editors or readers wanted". Because that is what we all journalists, editors, film stars, Deshmukhs, Des – want to believe. That slums are writhing with crime, their

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residents filthy, their very existence illegal. Think like that, and destroying half a million lives becomes just one of those things you need to do to "beautify" the city, turn it into another Shanghai, make it "more liveable".

More liveable for whom? Not for those half million unfortunates, clearly. Yet, think what might change in these numbers, these attitudes, if more of us recognised what Neuwirth does in this book: that they might be squatters, yes, but these also are people. And these people building homes for themselves – which is what squatters do – is a process that's "sensible, patriotic and worthy of a true citizen".

"Patriotic"? "Citizen"? You're spluttering, I know. Illegal

encroachers, and they're "patriotic"? Tax-evaders, and they are "true citizens"? What's the man been smoking?

The unstated message

Whatever it is, it's humane, practical stuff. But you don't need to smoke it yourself. Read Neuwirth to understand what slums are really about and what cities must do to tackle them; to understand what a monstrous exercise in futility, destroying their homes amounts to. Futility, because such destruction, such attitude, is the sure way to perpetuate poverty and slums. To
Slums 13

me, this futility is the unstated message of this book.

And correction: they do pay taxes. In Mumbai, something called octroi forms well over half of municipal revenue, and it's paid by every single one of its citizens every time they buy anything at all: pin to vegetables to a Skoda Superb. Yes, every citizen. Even the "illegal" ones. So maybe it's time we started thinking of them as Neuwirth does: as people. ▶

Towards Cities of Poverty

John Vidal

Humanity is all set to cross the line from being a rural to an urban a transformation that will redefine culture, politics and the way people live.

Honufa came to Dhaka last year. Severe erosion on her family's patch of land on one of the islands in the mouth of the Ganga forced the young Bangladeshi woman to leave her village for the capital. She took a boat and then an overnight bus ended up in a shanty town called Bari Badh, which sprawls on the slopes of a new flood embankment.

Honufa was lucky to find work immediately. She gets about £ 4.40 a day for breaking bricks with a hammer. A tenth of what she earns goes on fresh water, the same on transport, but almost a third is needed to pay the rent for the room that she shares with two other women and three young children.

It is 0.6 sq meters, built of a bamboo rusty corrugated iron and cardboard and squats on stilts over a fetid lagoon. The monsoon-swollen water swirls just a few feet below the floor. A latrine at the end of a walkway empties straight into the water. In August, the whole community of 5,000 people was flooded out.

Bari Badh is not typical of Dhaka's slums, some of which are long established and reasonably secure with electricity and drainage. It appeared three years ago, as soon as the embankment was build and it will probably not exist in three years because businessmen are already filling in the lagoon with rubbish in advance of building more solid homes.

When that happens, Hounfa and the others will be moved on to new, equally vulnerable slums on a new edge of the world's most rapidly growing cities. Dhaka, growing more than 5 per cent a year, will have exploded from fewer than 600,000 people in 1961 to a projected 22 million in 2030. The number of slum dwellers like Honufa could double within 25 years to more than two billion people, almost one in four of the world's projected population. According to the United Nations Population Fund, almost 95 percent of the expected 2.5 billion increase in global population expected over the same period will be in African and Asian cities. By then, more than 80 percent of North America, Europe, Australia, and Latin America, and half of Asia and Africa will probably be living in urban areas.

Put the global population and poverty trends together and it is clear that the world is making a major transition at a breathtaking pace. **Some time in the next two years, humanity will cross, probably forever, the line from being a rural species to an urban one.** It will mark a turning point, a revolution potentially as significant as the passage from the Middle ages to the modern age, which will redefine culture, politics and the way we all live.

The scale of the redistribution of people now taking place is vast. Just 100 years ago, only one in seven of the world lived in a town or city and there were 16 places thought to have more than one million people. Today, there are more than 400 cities with over one million and in 15 years time, a further 150 are expected to join the club. The global urban population increased 36 percent in the 1990s alone.

Contrary to popular imagination, however, the future is not expected to be a world of mega cities like Dhaka, Cairo or Manila. According to a new book by a group of Demographers

working with the Washington based United States National Research Council (NRC), **the lion's share of the world population increase over the next 25 years will be in towns and cities with fewer than one million people.** They expect these places to account for 60 percent of the developing countries urban population.

The authors suggest that the largest cities, although stretched to the limit in poor countries to provide even minimal services for their inhabitants, will be well placed to attract international money for housing, infrastructure and services. In 15 years, they expect 60 cities to have more than five million people.

Of these, a premier league of about 30 "world cities" is developing. All of which are becoming dominant in their regions. The economic globalisation process, says the NRC team, is forcing them to compete more strongly with one another for events such as the Olympics, but also the world's financial markets and business centres.

The authors fear, however, that the smaller cities will be increasingly left out and will be under - served by governments who will choose to funnel money into ever more dominant capitals. *"The implications of globalisation for smaller cities are potentially disturbing. If capital is diverted from smaller cities to prepare large cities for their global debuts, significant costs for many of the developing world's urban dwellers could result"*, the author say.

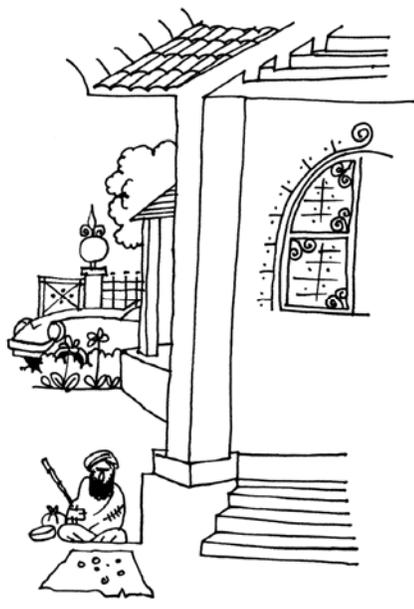


Massive urbanization means hundreds of already near-bankrupt cities trying to cope in 20 years with the kind of problems London or New York only managed to address with difficulty in 150 years. The strains are showing in a growing global fresh water and sanitation water crisis, air pollution leading to continent - wide smogs and 48- hour traffic gridlocks, and reports of dwindling food reserves in many countries.

According to the United Nations, hundreds of cities will be in real trouble within a decade. In China, where urbanization has been extreme in the past 15 years, 400 out of the 670 biggest cities already have serious water deficits. Elsewhere, many cities are depleting underground stocks and finding that salt water is getting into the aquifers. Competition for supplies is leading to increased conflicts between industry and agriculture, and, while better management could clearly improve supplies in many places, cities are often right up against their financial or physical limits.

What scares many governments, planers and policy-makers is the real prospect that the majority of cities in developing countries will become sprawling slums, with people living without piped water or sanitation, with poor standards of housing, and health and nutrition problems on a par with anything found in the most poverty stricken rural areas today.

Last year, the U.N commissioned a 300 page report on the growth of slums. The



authors found that slum-dwellers account for an average 43 percent of the population of developing countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of urban residents in slums is highest at 71.9 percent, while Oceania (Australasia and island groups of the South Pacific) had the lowest at 24.1 percent. South - Central Asia accounted for 58 percent, East Asia 36.4 percent.

They concluded that local authorities were already failing to keep up with the infrastructural problems posed by rapid urbanization. More surprisingly, they suggested that the greatest underlying reason for the growth of slums *laissez-faire* globalization - the tearing down of trade barriers, the liberalization and privatization of national economics, structural adjustment programmes imposed on indebted countries by the International Monetary Fund, and the lowering of tariffs promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO).

According to the authors, this “fundamental” economic restructuring of the world, which is seeing rich countries move away from manufacturing and poor countries industrializing, drove rapid urbanization in the 1990's. In South Korea, cities have been flooded with new arrivals since world trade rules allowed cheap, subsidized rice and other food imports to flood the market. Fishermen in Senegal, Mexico, Ghana and else where had left the country side because the global fishing fleets have not only denuded catches, but made it impossible for small operators to compete with big foreign fleets.

The young of Burkina Faso and Mali had largely left for cities throughout West Africa and hope of work, rather than try to scrape a living off marginal land. It was seldom the process of globalization alone that made people leave the land, the land, the authors found, but often the expectation of work and fulfillment, fuelled by global TV networks.

But the authors found that globalization was not just one of the major causes of urbanization, it was actually making life worse for the poor in cities. It may have offered unparalleled opportunities for entrepreneurs, but barely any of the benefits of increased trade work reaching the poor. Research in sub-Saharan countries found conditions deteriorating throughout the 1990's in many cities.

In the past decade - the period of the greatest wealth creation in history, as well as the largest recorded growth in cities - the rich had gained and the poor had lost. Some developing countries, the others suggested, would have done better to stay out of the globalization process altogether if they had the interest of their own people in mind. The situation may actually be worse than small towns According to Diana Mitlin and David Satterthwaite of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in London, the state and depth of urban poverty is under estimated because of the way poverty is measured in poor countries. **They suspect that the poorest half of the urban population may be malnourished, ill and exploited as the poorest people in rural areas. If this is the case, it demands a different approach from governments and international charities who traditionally focus on rural areas.**

But is it possible to have cities free from slums? The consensus is yes, but only if countries help to prevent their cities being swamped by congestion, environmental degradation and social unrest. The onus will be on cities themselves, and particularly the self organizing slum/dwellers, to find solutions.

The solutions, says David Satterthwaite, may not be with global bodies or national governments but with local authorities and urban grass root groups. He says large scale self help community groups are now working together and beginning to take over from traditional developers.

“It is easy to be pessimistic about the problems”, says Mitlin. “But the energy of people to improve their environments is enormous. People are investing a lot because it means so much to them. You can see real progress when people have a vision and get together with local government”. Local government is critically important, she says. ▶

The Innovative Space

Urbanisation is normally associated with exciting innovation and novelty. But this is not always true. For hidden communities in vast swathes of urban spaces, innovation and ingenuity is focused on just survival.

*Taking the theme of inclusion to another dimension, **Spannos** outlines the various dimensions of innovations and ingenious organisation of urban communities.*

*Thus, **Ghosh** tells us, Shanghai's urbanisation is not just gloss and spick and span. It contains the whole gamut of living, working and cultural spaces, and yet again - inclusive of different interests. If Indian cities need to re-create spaces like Shanghai, we need to change our mind-set from setting out to create exclusive spaces for a small section of people, to more complex networks that serve diverse interests.*

Architecture of the New Society, *Chris Spannos*, Znet| Parecon, Aug 19, 2004.

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=6066>

[C.ELDOC1. 0509/ Architecture_of_new_Society.html].

The Shanghai difference , *Jayati Ghosh*, Frontline, Volume 22 - Issue 14, Jul 02 - 15, 2005.

<http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2214/stories/20050715003910500.htm>
[C.ELDOC1. 0509/The_Shanghai_ difference.html].

Towards green cities, *B. S. Padmanabhan*, Frontline, Volume 22
- Issue 08, Mar. 12 - 25, 2005. [C.ELDOC.1079024]

Architecture of the New Society

Chris Spannos



Every city is a deeply interconnected web of spatial design patterns. From the urban to the suburban, our built environment is carved out into commercial and residential areas. Apartments, houses, yards and sidewalks all lead to schools, churches, temples, parks, grocery stores and restaurants. All woven together and mediated by noisy traffic, nauseating air pollution and aggressive advertising. 

The private ownership of productive property, markets, and corporate hierarchies of capitalist cities produce and reproduce class rule, social segregation, and hierarchy. Housing is stratified by income so poor people are ghettoized, their communities living in decomposing buildings and neighborhoods. Residences with nice houses, safe streets, pleasant views, and clean parks are often reserved for rich and upper class communities. Communities from separate ethnic backgrounds often live in separate ethnic quarters. Sex and gender development in society has evolved into spatial patterns founded on the myth that the women's place is either in the home or out shopping.

Of course, not everything is bad, we can consent or resist the institutions of our built environment. Islands of community and social space have been fought for and won. Important experiments have emerged and provide valuable lessons. However, the vast majority of our built environment is not the product of our own decision making needs and desires but that of someone else's.



This essay describes a broad vision of how cities, architecture, spatial design and our built environment evolve within a participatory economy. It assumes construction and design within the context of a participatory economy and equally liberatory political, community, culture, and kinship visions.

Post-Capitalist Visions of Cities

That the institutions within our city space can produce and reproduce racist, sexist, classist, and authoritarian social relations within our society is not controversial; what is controversial is to suggest concrete values, procedures, and defining institutions about how cities of a new society might be built.

There have been proposals for what future post-capitalist cities may look like. Dolores Hayden, in her 1983 essay "Capitalism,

Socialism and the Built Environment”, succinctly outlines classical visions from many communitarian socialists of the 19th century where “...a return to the environmental harmony of the pre-industrial village was essential to their visions of the socialist future. Even Marx and Engels observed the Shakers carefully, while Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, William Morris and Ebenezer Howard all shared their environmental ideals to the exclusion of much urban concern at all.”⁽¹⁾

In the same tradition, but later in the 20th century, Murray Bookchin proposed a "Communalist" vision of the city. Bookchin's Communalism is comprised of "Social Ecology" and "Libertarian Municipalism", which “...seek to recover and advance the development of the city (or commune) in a form that accords with its greatest potentialities and historical traditions.”⁽²⁾

In 1887, Edward Bellamy published “Looking Backward: 2000-1887”. Bellamy imagined a socialist Boston city in the year 2000 which was technologically advanced, decadent, and where consumer goods were plenty and in abundance.⁽³⁾

From the 1950's to the 1970's social movements rose that sought to break away from older traditions in the classical Left. Among those who attempted a complete break, proposing a radical departure were the "Situationists". Inspired by the DADA and Surrealist art movements, and playing an agitational role in the Paris uprising of 1968; broadly, Situationist visions were comprised of concepts of "psychogeography" combined with workers councils, self-management, poetry and art to construct a "revolutionary every day life".⁽⁴⁾ Ivan Chtcheglov developed an early proposal that later inspired many Situationist visions of cities.⁽⁵⁾ Other Situationist proposals included the "New Babylon", a city designed by the utopian architect Constant Nieuwenhuys.⁽⁶⁾

Other visions for cities include sustainable cities, small scale cities, self sufficient cities, walking cities, garden cities, etc. Some modern tendencies include “anti-civilizationists” and primitivists who both oppose sidewalks, bicycles, cities, and almost every other construct that is “unnatural” and harmful to the environment.

Although many of these proposals provoke our imaginations about spatial design and spatial reorganization, they are vague at best since they do not specify any guiding rules, procedures, or institutions for how architecture, design or social space could be allocated in a democratic way in day to day life, they don't address better ways of organizing worker and consumer life. Some of these visions, if pursued, would mean potential human catastrophe on a grand scale. Others have lots to offer that we can learn from, there are many common values, goals, and motivations.

Parecon (participatory economy)

Building cities, by using the defining features and institutions of a participatory economy, is only one part of societal construction. Cities are not made of economics alone, but overlap and intersect into other spheres of social life.

A participatory economy is comprised of federations of worker and consumer councils, socially owned productive property and participatory planning determining which goods and services are produced according to a set of rules and procedures all accommodated by various Facilitation Boards. Workers in worker councils propose what they want to produce, how much they want to produce, the inputs needed and the human effects of their production choices. Consumers propose what they want to consume, how much they want to consume and the human effects of their consumption choices. The allocation system

generates both qualitative and quantitative information used for “indicative prices.” These prices are used by the Facilitation Board to update proposals for further rounds of iterations. A participatory plan is a feasible and desirable choice distributing the burdens and benefits of social labor fairly.

The Architect and City Planner

Today, under capitalism, architects and city planners go to school and get technical training. They are remunerated according to bargaining power, output, genetic endowment, talent, skill, better tools, more productive co-workers, environment, inheritance, or luck; within a participatory economy, architects and city planners also get education, training and work. However, their efforts are both balanced for desirability and empowerment, are remunerated for effort and sacrifice.

Urban vision

Another implication of the institutional context of parecon is that in a classless society, by eliminating class barriers, more people will have the opportunity to learn the art of architectural design. A positive consequence of having the profession open to more people is the tapping of rich and diverse skills, perspectives, opinions and practices in architectural and city planning.



Similarly, architectural innovation would not be biased, rather, private and public space is dealt with on equal footing through

the participatory planning process. Quality is geared towards societies needs, interests, and what is socially responsible.

One final note is the concern some may have about potential corruptibility. With all planning information freely available and architects and city planners working in balanced job complexes issues of corruption, or abuse of power, is practically a non-issue. In fact, I find it difficult to imagine what incentive there would be to manipulate the built environment, much less how someone may benefit from such manipulation.

A New City for a New Life

We want a city with social space distributed fairly; we want a built environment where people have decision making input in proportion to the degree they are affected; a city that embodies and reflects the creativity, cooperation and diversity of it's inhabitants -- we want a city that promotes equity, solidarity, diversity, self-management and efficiency.

Through participatory planning, building, maintaining, and developing a city is a social process. People plan the space they use on all scales and because work is remunerated in accord with effort and sacrifice there will not be huge disparities in wealth within or between cities. Remuneration in parecon is also tempered by need, in cases where certain communities may need space, but are unable to pay for it, say a community theater, in which case they would get their request for free.

A city facilitating self management and diversity allows those who are affected to build their spatial environment. Inhabitants of one city may want work places near their homes, day cares, community centers, etc.



Inhabitants of another city may want these things spread further apart, because they like that better or for reasons that may be very practical. City boundaries and borders are defined by those affected, although this may also be an area that overlaps into the political and other spheres. Community gardens, libraries, and schools are all determined primarily by the people who use them. City planners, architectural designers and experts, work together with artists, construction workers, women, people with multiple barriers, minorities, community, and cultural members. City inhabitants plan and design their physical environment as they should, generating a diversity of outcomes and life styles. Inhabitants of cities based on a participatory economy have concern for the well being of others in other parts of the city. A benefit of spending working, commuting, and social time, in other parts of the city is that it gives people an understanding of what life is like under those conditions.

Indicative prices also help people make informed decisions about how their choices will affect others. Information about the social and environmental cost and benefits of having skyscrapers, landfills, highways, private or public automobiles, urban expansion, etc. are included in the planning process to help people make socially responsible decisions. Highly desirable city spaces or protected areas such as coastal zones or wilderness areas, that would otherwise be expensive for private consumption, would be left public for all to enjoy.

Participatory city planning in a parecon generates an efficient spatial design mapping out road, freeway, and transit routs; utilizing societies human and scarce resources without unnecessary waste. Pollution will be limited to what is environmentally sustainable. Information based advertising will be limited to only what is necessary to communicate important

information. Spatial design and the built environment embody the social costs and benefits to society distributing them fairly.

In addition to generating equity, self-management, solidarity, diversity and efficiency, a city based on parecon must also include spatial design that facilitates engagement in participatory processes. Options could be rooms in houses, neighborhoods, workplaces or communities designed specifically to facilitate an interactive flow of information necessary for democratic planning. Modern day technology allows much of the above information technology to be transported conveniently through multipurpose gadgets, which may also be made available on persons, in transportation, or in other convenient locations.

Cities are constantly shifting and changing environments. A future parecon city (Participatory City?) will have to simultaneously utilize already existing space while building new spatial designs. Transition from capitalism to parecon would have to begin with "building the new society in the shell of the old". ⁽⁷⁾ After a period of successful transition we could begin to engage in massive reconstruction projects. The creation and functioning of this kind of city deepens its inhabitant's capacity for participation in social life, tapping rich human potential that is reflected in our built environment. It is this life that is waiting for us. We only need to build it. ▶

About the Author

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The Shanghai difference

Jayati Ghosh

Although Shanghai represents the aggressively expansionist model of East Asia, its expansion rests on a more egalitarian and enlightened socio-economic base than those of the other cities in the region.

A century ago, it was the siren of the East in Western eyes, attracting the usual colonial mix of gold-diggers and carpetbaggers and becoming an international symbol of corruption and exploitation, ill-gotten gains and fickle fortunes. Some decades later, it was a cradle of the Chinese revolution, the birthplace of the Communist Party of China in 1921. Today, the international gold rush is once again evident in Shanghai, as profit-seeking businesses from all over the world flock to a vastly different but even more fascinating city.

The origins of Shanghai reflected its early character of international degradation. After the Chinese defeat in the First Opium War in 1842, the British quickly used the terms of their victory to establish a trading port on the Yangtze river basin, at the site of what was then little more than a large fishing village. Other foreigners like the French quickly followed, and the city became the base for the rapidly growing trade in opium, silk and tea.

The term "den of vice" was probably invented to describe Shanghai at that time, as it became a byword for decadence. The essentially colonial foreign business presence, reinforced by the power of the European (and later American) troops positioned there, encouraged the proliferation of opium dens, gambling houses and prostitution. By the early part of the 20th century,

the oppression of Chinese workers in Shanghai was worse than even the most extreme stereotype, with the persistence of child labour in slave-like conditions in the most unsavoury activities, the routine degradation of ordinary men and women and the fierce suppression of any kind of workers' resistance.

So it was not surprising that Shanghai became a breeding ground for revolutionary thought and produced many of the future leaders of the Communist Party. Radical opinion of all sorts has dominated in Shanghai - the now infamous Gang of Four had their power base here during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. (Even now, incidentally, much of the top leadership of the Chinese Communist Party tends to come from this city, including former President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji.) But now the city is the emblem of another kind of radicalism - the aggressive economic expansion that characterises the new China.

It has become the glittering and showy archetype of the results of massive state investment in infrastructure combined with active encouragement to private investment. The emphasis until recently was on manufacturing, but increasingly the city also seeks to rival Hong Kong by diversifying into a range of services, including finance.

The sheer visual impact of the city is astounding even if not beautiful, and it is clearly intended to astound. Shanghai today is a megalopolis of futuristic skyscrapers and other high-rise buildings held together by a vast network of state-of-the-art motorways. The skyline is as spectacular as that of Manhattan, and even more eager to invite the visitor's gaze. Tourist boat rides along the Huangpu river in the evenings provide images of the main centre of the city lit up in gaudy colours that highlight the outlines of the surrounding buildings, creating the impression

of a city at once brash and self-confident, yet also anxious to attract attention.

And attention - of an international kind - it is certainly receiving. Shanghai is clearly the place to be for multinational capital today: it is hard to think of a major global brand name that is not jostling for space among the neon billboards or vying for offices to rent in the new edifices that are continuously emerging.

An interview with Medha Patkar by Joe Athaily

What's wrong with the 'Shanghaification' of Mumbai?

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Except for a handful, Shanghai is not a model for development. Some corporations came together to form Bombay First and termed it as an NGO. No individual can become its member, only corporate bodies can. Bombay First appointed McKinsey & Co. to draw out a plan for Mumbai and it is termed as Vision Mumbai Plan. That is neither accepted by the state cabinet, nor discussed in the Assembly -- lower or upper houses. It is not made public for debate. That Plan has the goal of changing Mumbai into Shanghai. No one really knows what Shanghai is like and what were the processes involved in making it.

The Shanghai dream, as it is reflected in the Vision Mumbai Plan, is to reduce the slum population, which is 60 per cent today to 10 per cent. But it fails to say how. There is only one paragraph suggesting affordable housing. The crux of the Plan is clearing, or reducing the slums, but not making housing affordable. It recommends that the Urban Land Ceiling Act be withdrawn. We feel that the 15,000 acres of land occupied in violation of this Act by corporates like Nasli Wadia and Godrej and the builders should

Much of the skyline is new. Most of Shanghai's recent expansion is very recent, dating from the early 1990s when the government decided to develop the hitherto barren area of Pudong which lies to the east of the Huangpu river. Pudong is now full of glitzy ultra modern buildings and commercial centres that compete with the most opulent anywhere in East Asia. Even the new public buildings in the older parts of the city - such as the Shanghai Museum - display an architectural audacity that is very 21st century. The older colonial style buildings lining the famous "Bund" along the river now seem less like the symbols of Shanghai's complicated past, and more like dowager old ladies bemusedly watching the frenetic development disco being performed all around them.

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Does the Vision Mumbai Plan have any 'vision' for other residents of Mumbai?

Only the rich. The plan recommend the withdrawal of the Coastal Zone Regulation Act. How can that happen? If the Act is withdrawn, the fisher folk will be deprived of their means of livelihood and the rich will come and occupy the seashores. It would also destroy the mangroves and would disturb the ecological balance. That would be vulgar and unjust.

The propaganda by the Shiv Sena-BJP alliance government for the Singapore model or the Shanghai model by the present government comes from the same insensitive, narrow and profit- oriented mindset, which helps only the rich and the powerful and not the poor.

The 'Shanghaification' Of Mumbai, Medha Patkar & Joe Athialy, The Humanscape, Aug. 11, 2005.

<http://www.countercurrents.org/hr-athialy110805.htm>

[C.ELDOC1.0510/The_Shanghaification_of_Mumbai.html]

The central area around People's Square is chock a block with shopping malls and spanking new office buildings, and the new prosperity is only too evident. The region round Shanghai has grown much more rapidly than the rest of China in the past decade, and per capita income is currently estimated to be slightly more than double the national average of \$1,000 a year. The signs of recent wealth and ballooning consumption are everywhere, from the endless and varied restaurants where huge amounts of food are routinely (and almost compulsorily) wasted by diners, to the split air-conditioners attached outside almost

every window even in the workers' housing complexes, to the gargantuan cars clogging even the very wide streets, to the range of High Street goods on offer in shops that could be anywhere in the developed world.

Across the city, construction continues at a breathless pace. Local residents joke that the official bird of the region is the crane, and indeed it is difficult to turn one's eyes in any direction and avoid seeing that ubiquitous indicator of ongoing construction activity. Despite the absence of greenery, it would be wrong to describe it as a concrete jungle, since a jungle is a more messy, unplanned and varied environment. Shanghai, by contrast, is highly regulated, with little of the chaotic informal sector activity that multiplies and messes up the streets in other large metros. In fact, it is one of the cleanest cities in the developing world, reflecting not only regulation but also the greater civic sense of its residents.

The massive infrastructure expansion extends well beyond Shanghai to the enveloping regions of Jiangsu and Zhenang provinces. A trip out of Shanghai by road can extend for several hundred kilometres, revealing very little farmland and instead only contiguous industrial areas served by gleaming motorways and filled with extensive housing settlements for workers.

If all this seems to have relatively little to do with communism as it is generally understood, it is certainly very much part of an aggressively expansionist development model that has already been experimented with, especially in other parts of East Asia.

Jakarta in Indonesia, for example, expanded upwards in a rapid fashion in the 1980s, with infrastructure growth both fuelled by and fuelling the state-led export-oriented manufacturing boom that led to a huge shift of the workforce within less than a generation. But Jakarta's growth was never as regulated, and

that particular overall development strategy came to an abrupt and cathartic end during the East Asian crisis, from which the economy of Indonesia has still not fully recovered. In consequence, Jakarta's woes now resemble those of other Third World cities, with overburdened infrastructure, inadequate public services and substantially underemployed urban workforce.

So this is a strategy that involves high risks even as it delivers apparently enormous material benefits very quickly; presumably the Chinese government is aware of at least some of these risks although others can be more difficult to predict. And it is also true that the socio-economic base on which this material expansion in Shanghai is occurring is very different, with a much more egalitarian income distribution at the start of this process, The shanghai model - educated workforce, especially in this part of China.

The different social nature - the legacy of what could now be called the Communist past - is evident in the Shanghai Book Store, the largest book shop in the city and probably one of the largest in the world. Located on a road full of book shops, it still amazes with its breadth and range. Its massive seven floors are full of an enviable variety of books on all subjects, including literature, philosophy and social sciences along with the more obvious technocratic disciplines, written in or translated into Chinese.

And all of these floors on a normal working day are also full of people, mostly quite young. The very fact that such a bookshop can exist, and be so full of mainly young people, is actually a wonderful comment on Shanghai society: that it has produced educated people who are willing to read books in sufficient numbers and also have the income to buy these books.

If this is indeed the case, then the future may hold different and more varied possibilities for Shanghai's inhabitants than are currently projected by the material expansion alone. For that to happen, of course, the life of the city will have to go beyond what seems to be its current intoxicated obsession with growth. ▶

Towards green cities

B. S. Padmanabhan

The inevitable process of urbanisation has brought with it environmental degradation, affecting the quality of life and striking at the root of sustainable development of cities and towns. This is more pronounced in developing countries than the developed countries.

As Klaus Toepfer, Director-General of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), points out in his message for the World Environment Day, too many of today's cities are breeding grounds of pollution, poverty, disease and despair.



With careful planning they can be turned into flagships of sustainable development. The theme for the occasion is thus both a warning and a declaration of faith in the ability of nations to turn the expansion of urban centres into an effort that would benefit all.

In fact, the economist Jeffrey Sachs views the process of urbanisation as one of the most promising aspects of global economic development. He notes that urban areas have outperformed rural areas during the last century in every aspect of economic development. He attributes the problems of

urbanisation to poor urban planning, poor development strategies and ineffective urban governance. More than a billion people in the developing world live in poverty and ill-health because they are denied clean water, basic sanitation and adequate shelter that people in the developed world often take for granted.

In this context, Toepfer rightly argues that easing the burden of the world's poorest people will yield a double dividend - giving them a foothold on the ladder to a better life and helping to protect the environment.

He points out that providing improved sanitation to the slums will protect freshwater resources and the sea into which all rivers flow, besides helping to save the lives of many of the 6,000 children who die every day from preventable diseases associated with the lack of safe water and poor hygiene. Replacing wood fires with more sustainable energy sources will not only help preserve forests but also reduce air pollution, which causes respiratory diseases. Air pollution can be checked by cleaning up vehicle exhausts and preventing the release of toxic fumes from burning plastic and other refuse by promoting appropriate waste collection and disposal systems and methods.



"Towns and cities are humanity's home - and its future. Making that a

future of peace, dignity and prosperity is the responsibility of all. We need to look forward with hope. That hope lies in Green Cities," Toepfer says.

His concept of the city of future is one where buildings use solar power and waste less because they use power-saving lighting and are well-insulated, where public transport is affordable and efficient and where vehicles pollute less because they are powered by electricity or hydrogen. with the support of the community, business and, above all, government, such cities can be created even now. ▶

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House of bamboo

Maitreyee Handique

Colombian architect Simon Velez is propagating the use of bamboo in modern buildings.



To construct a 46-metre long pedestrian bridge in Bogota last year, Colombian architect Simon Velez used over 3,000 bamboo poles and covered it with clay tiles, handcrafted by local workers.

Sometime ago, the Bogota-based architect also constructed a performing

House of bamboo, *Maitreyee Handique*, Business Standard, Mar. 1 2004 <http://www.business-standard.com/today/story.asp?Menu=98&story=36183>
[C.ELDOC. 1073612]

stage for Christopher Blackwell, founder of Island Records and owner of Bob Marley's song rights, in the sea coast of Ochorios in Jamaica.

The place, a memorial to Marley, was built to provide a new platform to upcoming reggae musicians. But for Velez, it is an effort to lend "prestige" to bamboo in regions where it is abundantly available. "My aim has been to prove that bamboo is a high-tech material and has great engineering potential for big roof structures and bridges," he says.

Velez was in India recently to attend the World Bamboo Congress in Delhi. In all probability, he may return soon to collaborate with the Delhi-based architect Pradeep Sachdeva to build a bamboo bridge at the capital's Garden of Five Senses.

From bagging contracts for building a \$1,000 a night eco-lodges in Brazil to assisting construction of a 100-room eco hotel in China's Guanzhou province, Velez's workload makes it seem that bamboo is the new buzzword in building. However, on the contrary, the architect feels that the importance of bamboo over concrete has been eroding with time.

"In Colombia, it is every poor man's dream to build a concrete house; they buy cement instead of food and end up in debt. It takes two generations to build a house and yet they want to live only in a concrete house," he observes.

He firmly believes that in poor countries obsessed with concrete and steel, it is critical to restore bamboo's importance. Bamboo, Velez points out, is strong and can last for 300 years if used properly and protected from moisture. Besides, its cost works out to be three times cheaper than concrete. It also gives employment to skilled workers.

Venu Bharati - a comprehensive volume on Bamboo. Vinoo Kaley completed this volume just days before he died of a heart attack in June 1998. He was 52 years old.

The book has now been lovingly produced by his colleagues and was released at Wardha on June 11. This book is an account of Vinoo's journey and his bond with Venu, one of the many Sanskrit names for bamboo. Here bamboo is the central point of a larger vision for a different, smarter, kind of development.

This alternative approach would make more efficient and rational use of natural resources in ways that create far more livelihood opportunities than the current policies can ever provide. This is a vision in which artisans become a vital and sizable segment of the industrial base, instead of just manufacturing handicrafts.

Bamboo is one of the world's best natural engineering materials. Its strength to weight ratio is better than that of teak wood and mild steel. Bamboo grows much faster than wood and requires relatively little water. It can also be recurrently harvested. Ample bamboo cover enriches the soil by arresting erosion and taming flash floods. It offers stakes to trees, fodder to animals and food to humans. This makes bamboo a key element in maintaining the ecological balance and ensuring sustainable food and livelihood security.

Bamboo can be used to produce many items of daily use that are currently made out of plastic or other less eco-friendly materials. Vinoo Kaley had made his home a living illustration of this with a mechanical door-bell, soap-dishes, utensil-racks, beds, tables and chairs - all made out of bamboo. Yet this is a tiny part of the potential for bamboo as an industry.

Venu Bharati is both a documentation of the various bamboo species of India and also an analysis of how and why this resource is being misused. India is perhaps the only country that uses almost 60 percent of its annual bamboo crop to make paper. This is a stark illustration of resource illiteracy, since there are many better sources of pulp for paper.

Bamboo man, Rajni Bakshi, The Hindu, Jul. 02, 2005.

<http://www.indiatogether.org/stories/kaley.htm>

[C.ELDOC1.0510/ book_review_of_venu_bharati_rajni_bakshi.html]

Clearly, with complex arrangement of bamboo poles and joineries strengthened with cement and iron vault, Velez is attempting to speak a new language in affordable architecture.

“But it has to start with the rich and the moneyed first,” says Velez who has built several bamboo mansions in his country. “It’s only the rich who can set an example and it’s criminal to experiment with the poor,” he adds.

On the outskirts of Bogota, Velez has made 50 bamboo-roofed condominiums for a plush golf course. But right beside the course boundary, he secured a contract to complete a 100-house complex for the poor, also with his trademark bamboo roofing from the local Guadua variety of bamboo. And after receiving a positive response to the Bogota bridge, he’s got similar projects in the Colombian towns of Medellin and Cali going.

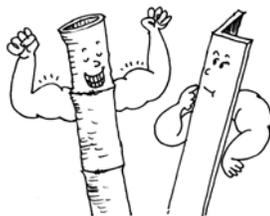


“I’m not a fundamentalist and am not against steel per se. But most of the steel, even steel bridges, that are imported from North America are prefabricated and they can be fitted in two days by three workers. Apart from it being expensive, the bridges I build employ 46 skilled workers so most of the money spent on the bridge went to the workers,” he says.

But it hasn't been easy to propagate the idea of bamboo roofing technology. While Velez visits American universities with slide shows of his work, it's tougher to get projects.

And sometimes Velez says he renders his designing services free to expose the practical application of bamboo as he did for a government environment building in Pareira, a town of 600,000 people in Colombia.

"Bamboo is a strong material. While its strength is equivalent to steel it weighs many times less. We need to propagate that we don't need mass industrialisation but we need to keep poor people occupied and use their skills," says Velez.▶



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Vir Sanghvi on Calcutta

Vir Sanghvi

Most modern Indian cities strive to rise above ethnicity. Tell anybody who lives in Bombay that he lives in a Maharashtrian city and (unless of course, you are speaking to Bal Thackeray) he will take immediate offence. We are cosmopolitan, he will say indigenously. Tell a Delhiwala that his is a Punjabi city (which, in many ways, it is) and he will respond with much self-righteous nonsense about being the nation's capital, about the international composition of the city's elite etc. And tell a Bangalorean that he lives in a Kannadiga city and you'll get lots of techno-gaff about the internet revolution and about how Bangalore is even more cosmopolitan than Bombay.

But, the only way to understand what Calcutta is about is to recognize that the city is essentially Bengali. What's more, no Bengali minds you saying that. Rather, he is proud of the fact. Calcutta's strengths and weaknesses mirror those of the Bengali character. It has the drawbacks: the sudden passions, the cheerful chaos, the utter contempt for mere commerce, the fiery response to the smallest provocation. And it has the strengths (actually, I think of the drawbacks as strengths in their own way). Calcutta embodies the Bengali love of culture; the triumph of intellectualism over greed; the complete transparency of all emotions, the disdain with which hypocrisy and insincerity are treated; the warmth of genuine humanity; and the supremacy of emotion over all other aspects of human existence.

Vir Sanghvi on Calcutta, *Vir Sanghvi*, NC State university.

<http://www4.ncsu.edu/~pchakra/VirSanghviOnCalcutta.html>

[C.ELDOC1. 0509/Vir_Sanghvi_On_Calcutta.html]

That's why Calcutta is not for everyone. You want your cities clean and green; stick to Delhi. You want your cities, rich and impersonal; go to

Bombay. You want them high-tech and full of draught beer; Bangalore's your place. **But if you want a city with a soul: come to Calcutta.**

When I look back on the years I've spent in Calcutta - and I come back so many times each year that I often feel I've never been away - I don't remember the things that people remember about cities. When I think of London, I think of the vast open spaces of Hyde Park. When I think of New York, I think of the frenzy of Times Square. When I think of Tokyo, I think of the bright lights of Shinjiku. And when I think of Paris, I think of the Champs Elysee. But when I think of Calcutta, I never think of any one place. I don't focus on the greenery of the maidan, the beauty of the Victoria Memorial, the bustle of Burra Bazar or the splendour of the new Howrah 'Bridge'. I think of people. Because, finally, a city is more than bricks and mortars, street lights and tarred roads. A city is the sum of its people. And who can ever forget - or replicate - the people of Calcutta?

When I first came to live here, I was told that the city would grow on me. What nobody told me was that the city would change my life. It was in Calcutta that I learnt about true warmth; about simple human decency; about love and friendship; about emotions and caring; about truth and honesty. I learnt other things too. Coming from Bombay as I did, it was a revelation to live in a city where people judged each other on the things that really mattered; where they recognized that being rich did not make you a better person - in fact, it might have the opposite effect.

I learnt also that if life is about more than just money, it is about the things that other cities ignore; about culture, about ideas, about art, and about passion. In Bombay, a man with a relatively low income will salt some of it away for the day when he gets a stock market tip. In Calcutta, a man with exactly the same income will not know the difference between a debenture and a dividend. But he will spend his money on the things that matter. Each morning, he will read at least two newspapers and develop sharply etched views on the state of the world. Each evening, there will be fresh (ideally, fresh-water or river) fish on his table. His children will be encouraged to learn to dance or sing. His family will appreciate the power of poetry. And for him, religion and culture will be in inextricably bound together.

Ah religion! Tell outsiders about the importance of Puja in Calcutta and they'll scoff. Don't be silly, they'll say. Puja is a religious festival. And Bengal has voted for the CPM since 1977. How can godless Bengal be so hung up on a religions festival? I never know how to explain that to a Bengali, religion consists of much more than shouting Jai Shri Ram or pulling down somebody's mosque. It has little to do with meaningless ritual or sinister political activity.

The essence of Puja is that all the passions of Bengal converge: emotion, culture, the love of life, the warmth of being together, the joy of celebration, the pride in artistic expression and yes, the cult of the goddess.

It may be about religion. But is about much more than just worship. In which other part of India would small, not particularly well-off localities, vie with each other to produce the best pandals? Where else could puja pandals go beyond religion to draw inspiration from everything else? In the years I lived in Calcutta, the pandals featured Amitabh Bachchan, Princes Diana

and even Saddam Hussain! Where else would children cry with the sheer emotional power of Dashimi, upset that the Goddess had left their homes? Where else would the whole city gooseflesh when the dhakis first begin to beat their drums? Which other Indian festival - in any part of the country - is so much about food, about going from one roadside stall to another, following your nose as it trails the smells of cooking?

To understand Puja, you must understand Calcutta. And to understand Calcutta, you must understand the Bengali. It's not easy. Certainly, you can't do it till you come and live here, till you let Calcutta suffuse your being, invade your bloodstream and steal your soul. But once you have, you'll love Calcutta forever. Wherever you go, a bit of Calcutta will go with you. I know, because it's happened to me. And every Puja, I am overcome by the magic of Bengal. It's a feeling that'll never go away. ▶

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