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WorldView

Creating Places for People

An Analytical Framework for Urban Thinking

MIRABILIS

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It is quite clear to anyone looking at urban India that the country's cities are in dire need of re-engineering. The conventional wisdom is that the solution is a matter of increased investment in physical infrastructure. In recent years, we have seen investment in new malls, houses, flyovers, toll roads, suburbs, and, in a few cases, even in public transport. However, the urban landscape does not seem to be improving. The "new" cities of Gurgaon, New Mumbai, Pune and Bangalore have witnessed a deluge of investment over the last decade but have failed to create urban spaces that really work. Why?

In our view, the investment has limited impact because the problem itself is being analyzed from a very narrow perspective. Virtually the entire effort appears to focus on urban "hardware". Thus, the investment has been on large projects like toll roads, large townships, tall glass-and-chrome office blocks. These may be necessary but, by themselves, they do not create vibrant urban eco-systems. If poorly combined, they just create soulless landscapes that serve neither the social nor the economic needs of the citizens. For a city to work, it must focus on the people who inhabit it and not the buildings. Twenty-first century cities will be a places where people of all classes can live, work and play. Furthermore, they should be able achieve this goal in a way that minimizes the environmental impact.

Clearly, it is necessary to take a wider view of urban planning. Here we introduce a 3X3 analytical model that provides a broader view while retaining simplicity. The Mirabilis Matrix has three verticals: Hardware, Software and Governance. The horizontals are: Livability, Competitiveness and Environmental Footprint. There is not a priority list but a way to think about how a successful city comes together by combining different ingredients. Successful urban planning is about organically combining these facets. This is not a "mechanical" approach but one that explicitly thinks of the city as an evolving eco-system.

The Verticals

Hardware: The residential/commercial buildings, roads, theatres, museums, stadiums, airports and so on. The physical manifestation of the city. Clearly these are important though, in India, all urban thinking tends to be limited to this aspect.

Software: This relates to the activities people conduct in the urban space: Economics as well as socio-cultural interactions that give a city its life. As with a computer, hardware should be judged by its ability to allow the software to work well. Grand and expensive projects do not always create great cities if they do not actively engage with the lives of the citizens.

Governance: Cities are complex systems and require regulation in order to function efficiently. Rules must be rational and enforcement must be visible and even-handed.

The Horizontals

Livability: At a fundamental level, cities are meant to be lived in. To succeed, they must be pleasant places to live, work and play for a large cross-section of society. Hardware, software and governance are all important factors that define livability. There is no formula for how these ingredients combine to make a city livable. Different cities have evolved different recipes that fit the particular needs of that society.

Competitiveness: From times immemorial, cities have competed for influence, power and commerce. In the 19th and 20th centuries, this often meant industrial prowess. In the 21st century, however, cities will compete attract talent and human capital. Rather than cause dispersion, the telecommunication revolution appears to have increased the value of human capital clusters.

Environmental footprint: More than half of the world's population now lives in urban areas. India too is likely to urbanize very quickly over the next few decades. There is a need to consider the environmental costs and benefits of this shift. A conscious effort to design dense cities with public transport systems and sustainable energy, air and water practices is a necessary pre-condition for leadership in the 21st century.

SANJEEV SANYAL

The Mirabilis Matrix: An Analytical Framework for Urban Thinking

	Hardware	Software	Governance
Livability	Good quality housing and amenities like parks, hospitals, clubs and schools	Social networks & interaction. Clustering of amenities to create "urban buzz", a sense of place and history.	Safety and enforcement of Law. Simple and well enforced system of municipal regulation.
Competitiveness	Transport & communications links. Quality of office/commercial space.	Clustering of human capital and ability to attract talent, socio-cultural openness.	Reasonable tax rates. Efficient governance structures.
Environmental Footprint	Public transport, density, green spaces, waste management, etc.	Environmental consciousness, low impact lifestyles.	Air and water quality. Sustainable practices with regard to water supply & usage, etc.

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