



# SENSE AND SENSITIVITY

Our cities are characterised by organic, haphazard growth, driven by urbanisation. While the general consensus is that most of our cities lack proper planning, there is another pertinent question that needs to be addressed. Are our cities livable? Are they sensitive to the needs of the poor, pedestrians, women, children and senior citizens?

**HARINI SRIRAM** gets some perspectives...

**W**hat makes a city? Is it the glistening malls and mammoth buildings? Or is a city defined by its people, its public spaces, its past? While opinions differ, it is largely believed that some of the best laid plans are those that are sensitive to the residents of a city. It is here that our cities have let us down. Lack of pedestrian walkways and public spaces, disregard for women, the elderly, the poor and differently-abled, are just some of the many areas of concern. It is not that these issues are not given attention by planners. But somewhere between the planning and implementation phase, the original intention is lost.

Nithya V Raman, Project Director, Transparent Chennai, says, "We imbibed the idea of a master plan for cities from the British in the 50s. Development Authorities (DAs)

were set up to plan larger cities. On paper, these plans almost always account for vulnerable communities. But then, urban space, as we know it today, is largely defined by people. With soaring land prices, we see planning and development (DR) in favour of a particular section of society. In fact, planning regulations themselves are stacked against the poor and the Government does not provide paths of legality to them either." A strong advocate of inclusive planning with a focus on livelihoods, Nithya believes that slum dwellers need to be empowered, and humane re-settlement policies must be enforced to promote inclusive growth in its true sense.

This brings me to the issue of participatory planning, which is increasingly relevant in today's cities, thanks to the large urban-rural divide. Raj Cherrubal, Director - Pro-



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All is not lost though. Despite the many problems that our cities are grappling with, there is hope. All we have to do, say experts, is seek inspiration from cities across the world that have worked relentlessly towards their problems that our cities are grappling with, there is hope. All we have to do, say experts, is seek inspiration from cities across the world that have worked relentlessly towards their metamorphosis. As Sajid Sathak, MD, Inno Advisory Pvt Ltd, points out, "Bangkok was not very different from Chennai (or any other Indian city) even 30 years ago. The problems were similar - mosquitoes, polluted water bodies, congestion, and so on. But today, it's a completely different city. Over 100 years ago, the Thames river in London was worse than the Cooum river here. Today, you can swim in the Thames, even drink water from it. Similarly, Singapore managed to restore its creeks and water bodies too. The key is to first understand that it is possible to rebuild and transform a city. Every world city has gone through the process at some point. For this to happen, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the attitudes of the people, and more importantly, in the mindsets of politicians and bureaucrats."

Inno Group, through its BYC (Build Your City) initiative, has been trying to involve citizens by giving them a platform to voice out their grievances and offer possible solutions. "No matter what we do, only political will and leadership can change the scenario," says Rajamannar Ramaswamy, Group MD, Inno Group Holdings Ltd. "That said, the Second Master Plan by CMDA (Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority) is a step in the right direction, but it leaves a lot to be desired, as far as implementation goes." The city is working towards transforming itself through the Metro Rail network, proposed plans to clean up rivers, providing parking facilities, building wide roads with pedestrian walkways, the formation of CUMTA (Chennai Unified Metropolitan Transport Authority), to name a few.

Redevelopment is also seen as a way of preserving a city's culture while paving the way for its growth. Rajamannar says, "Redevelopment is a possible solution. In many cities in the West, the older towns and cities have been redeveloped to restore them and these are promoted as tourist destinations. Antwerp is a possible solution. In many cities in the West, the older towns and cities have been redeveloped to restore them and these are promoted as tourist destinations. Antwerp in Belgium is a classic example. This city has undergone constant redevelopment and its heritage structures have been restored and kept intact. Something similar can be done with the older parts of Chennai, like George Town, for instance." Sajid also touches upon the example of Soho, an older neighbourhood of New York, which is now a fashion hub.

Raj Cherrubal adds that sensitivity to pedestrians is one of the hallmarks of a well-planned city. "Pedestrianisation of Time Square (NY), Nanjing Street (Shanghai), non-chaotic city development in successful cities like Hong Kong, Barcelona, Singapore, Paris, London, New York, etc, are examples we can draw upon. Other instances include the BRTS (Bus Rapid Transit System) of Bogota, Ahmedabad, Guangzhou and many other Chinese cities, open spaces like in New York (Central Park), Vienna, Seoul, Singapore." This doesn't mean we need to ape these ideas, as they may not exactly work in the Indian context. As Durganand says, "Each city is unique. Chennai has its own ethos and history. The city today has the potential to evolve on its own. Some of the transport systems of Curitiba are worth studying though."

While we do need flyovers and skyscrapers, we also need to ensure that the women in our cities feel safe, senior citizens, children and differently-abled get their space, and the poorer sections of society live with dignity. Sensitive planning and inclusive development can go a long way towards building a well-planned city.