

Paradigms of Spatial Planning

Its red and orange, yellow, green, blue and indigo, violet... no not the rainbow silly! That's the description of any and all development plan aka master plan of cities that have bright colors of the rainbow but very little substance to them.

Planned settlements are not new to India ; Mohen-jo -daro, Harrappa and Lothal are the earliest settlements whose ruins have been discovered and they all indicate that planning techniques were harnessed by our ancestors 5000 years back. The mounds of dead, as the three literally mean to us, were designed keeping in mind the wind direction to have a cleansing effect, Drains from household to the main roads of the settlement, Granaries for food storage, dedicated market places and the great baths for the public. Thereafter many a settlement was planned and destroyed by invaders from across the world, who then altered and planned the settlements to meet their own socio- religious requirements. India boasts of thousands of walled settlements and temple towns. Thus our great country is home to diverse settlements which have imprints of all the settlers and the invaders who resided there, each exhibiting a unique tradition of architecture and life.

Well-travelled people from around the world will tell you how much they enjoy travelling through in India. It is not only the easy -going, unrushed lifestyle but the sweet dialect, unique building elements, smells and flavors that they relish and are pulled to explore further the offerings of this nation. Many a times foreign travellers may be found roaming the lanes and streets of the cities. Foreigners are fascinated at how the indigenous people find it more recreational to go to the temple and pray and discuss any and all issues in the religious premises. Parks and gardens were not the original idea of recreation for the masses but were meant for the royalty's pleasure. The masses enjoyed local community spaces like chawks and chaupals, where they got together, celebrated festivals, held marriages and discussed local politics. These open spaces have slowly disappeared - their land value has appreciated exponentially, people no longer have time to sit and relax in the presence of other people and often the lands have been encroached.

Is lack of apathy to blame for this loss of space? Why are our open chawks and yards giving way to concrete shops and uninhabitable rooms? Why are our traditional house designs with central courtyards, backyards not being replicated and are instead being replaced by multistoreyed apartments? Even schools do not have adequate space for students to run about and play. It seems our settlements have shrunk.

The land of villages is fast giving way to monstrous buildings and deforestation has rendered the greens black or brown. Is this the price for urbanization? Losing open spaces, unhygienic and unventilated settlements, letting go of our traditional cost efficient architectural practices? Are we willing to relent to the call of urbanization to lose the knowledge accumulated over centuries?

Planning as we know it has always been a state subject and a matter which requires both state intervention and monitoring. Both Hindu Kings and the Mughal rulers convened meetings with their councilors on matters relating to land including allotment and revenue collection.

With the advent of the current planning practices though we have come to ignore the importance of land ownership and comprehending the need of organic open spaces. The Government Authorities have not been able to cope with the exponential increase of land records and their management. The volume of records is difficult to manage with the same and lesser trained man power in place. Technology has not been tapped till date to keep a tab of land ownership! The current planning practices involve plane table survey of cities and further delineating areas as residential – yellow, Commercial- red (blue in some cities), public semi-public blue (red in some places), parks and open spaces-green, industries – violet and the latest addition to the rainbow mixed use as orange! These colors are used in existing use maps as well as a proposed land use plan. The proposed land use plans are predominantly yellow. With specks of the few other colors sprayed in between.

And these are called development plans? No provision for parks, no open spaces, no schools, no hospitals, no institutes of higher education. Only yellow! Sometimes our contemporary planners do use other color stamps- a cluster of school, hospital, commercial space and a park- a complete activity node! Wow! Oh that our settlements grew in this fashion. And in spite of the foresight of our planners our settlements tend to take the organic route!!! This isn't fair can't the cities grow in the planned manner.

I beg to differ from my esteemed contemporaries; firstly, people hardly have knowledge of the master plans drawn by the Authorities and its implications, if and when they do get to know of the such a plan, the plans are not self-explanatory or linked to ownership besides nobody in the Authority assists them with finding out the land use of their specific land parcels, left to their own devices they can either go to touts who offer the Authorities proposal in their favour or develop the land as per their own whims and fancies.

In this scenario how and why would the development be according to the grandplans of the authority?

Planners are learning the hard way that plans need to be drawn to meet the requirements of the people because ultimately it is the people who are affected by grand or poor plans. Earmarking sprawling acres for parks, institutions, district centers and the likes without acquisition will lead to blatant defiance in the form of jhuggis, slum cluster, and fraudulent sale of land parcels and erratic use of land with no provision of any amenities.

Similarly planners are the loudest opponents of channelization of water ways. But cities like New York along Hudson, London on the banks of Thames and our very own Varanasi on the banks of Ganga are few of the various success stories of water front developments which have stood the test of time and have also added to the image and character of the cities.

The concept being propagated is that we need to go back to our original idea of recreation where we were one with nature as well with the society. And our necessities need to govern our developments not the other way round. We need to adapt planning in a way that it help the society at large and does not create crisis and conflict.

— Apala Misra