

Mumbai/Shanghai: Prospects/Problems **Imitating global, failing local**

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I speak here not as an expert or as a decision-maker but merely as a citizen of an exciting and complex city and an observer and recorder of what people in that city say and think, and how they live. But because I am a journalist, let me start with a few questions.

First, why Shanghai? Why do we begin thinking about city renewal by comparing to another city? I can understand if you're building a city from scratch. You perhaps then need some role model. But what do you do with cities that have evolved, such as Mumbai? Do you raze them to the ground, block by block, and refashion them? Or do you evaluate the strengths and the indigenous development models that have survived, and seek to modify, improve, and build on them?

I would steer towards the latter only because I believe each city is unique. Its history is specific to its growth and even if the end result, the way it has grown, has landed it in an unholy mess, as has happened in the case of Mumbai, there are still options available that obviate the need to imitate another city.

The second issue, linked to the first, is the question of setting priorities. We all know that those charged with developing and improving cities are faced with competing demands. Funding constraints often dictate these priorities. Ultimately, city governments decide on their priorities according to the vision they have for their city. Do we aspire to be a 'global' city like Shanghai, with all the spit and polish to attract foreign investors by the drove? Or can we aim to be a city with a sustainable plan for its development – one that marries ecology with economy? Is it more important for us to forge links with the rest of the world or should we make sure that we are not divorced from our own roots in the hinterland? These are questions and choices that planners must face and make. These choices, I believe, set the priorities.

Coming specifically to the city of Mumbai, there is much current talk about making it into a global world-class city by 2013. The state government commissioned McKinsey to prepare a Vision Mumbai document that essentially sets out the steps that need to be taken to reach this goal. But in-between the pauses during the glib power-point

presentation that usually accompanies such a “vision” document, there are gaping holes through which the majority of the current population of Mumbai would fall.

What do I mean by this? The stress on recasting Mumbai into a global city – actually it has always been a ‘global’ city given that it was a manufacturing centre for textiles and a port city – is that the emphasis tends to be on creating the structures that will be attractive to global capital. What the city actually needs is structures that will make it a city that is livable for the people already living in it. These are certainly not mutually exclusive but if you are talking about priorities, then there is a definite clash between competing interests.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Let’s look at public transport, something that is basic and essential for all cities. The most livable cities in the world are those with the most efficient public transport systems.

So far, Mumbai has been better served with public transport than any other city in India. Even today, over 80 per cent of the city’s population, or an estimated 6.5 million people travel on the suburban rail network that links the southern tip of Mumbai to its distant suburbs. The trains are packed to capacity most of the day, but they generally run on time and the majority of Mumbai citizens would be severely handicapped if this relatively cheap and fairly efficient public transport system were to break down. In fact, the only way a general strike can work in Mumbai is if the train network is held up. The city also has an extensive bus system with over 3000 buses that transport around five million people each day.

To make the city more livable for the majority of its citizens, it is obvious that a high priority should be to strengthen the existing public transport system and add to it because of the growing population of the city. Instead, if you look at investments in the last decade by the government relating to transport, most of the money has gone into making road travel smoother for the passenger car, serving only around 8 per cent of the population. Crores of rupees have been spent on flyovers and on projects like the West Island Freeway Project that envisages a road on the sea. If even half this amount had been invested in the existing network of trains and buses that is fraying at the seams, life would have been considerable better for a huge number of people in the city.

The overcrowding of trains and buses has prompted those who can afford cars to buy them or to invest in two wheelers – motorbikes or scooters. In fact, the automotive industry in India has seen an explosive growth in the last decade and especially in the last five years. Of course, as compared to the size of our population, the number of passenger cars on our roads are relatively few, only 7.5 million. But the numbers are growing at an exponential rate. The growth in the manufacture and sales of passenger cars in 2003-04 was 27 per cent, the next year it came down to 17 per cent and now it has slowed down further to around five per cent. But the availability of finance and the decline in public transport has encouraged/forced many people into investing in private modes of transport.

So it is a chicken and egg situation. You don't improve public transport so people buy cars; because people own cars you build flyovers and freeways. These are never enough, are expensive and are only used by a small percentage of the population. The majority meanwhile continues to struggle with the existing system. Belatedly, tenders are now out for a metro rail network. But by the time it is in place, it will be too little too late.

Take another aspect of a city, the crucial one of housing. The state government has put forward some suggestions on how to deal with the huge gap between demand and supply for a city where half the population lives either in slums or in dilapidated buildings. Some of these ideas were put forward in the first report by the Chief Minister's Task Force "Transforming Mumbai into a World-Class city" submitted in February 2004. We are already half way through 2006. Nothing substantial of the many suggestions made in that report has been implemented so far or is even underway. If it was a priority, if there was a sense of urgency, it is hard to believe that something could not have been initiated by now.

What has been done is when either a funder, like the World Bank, or a disaster, like the flooding that took place in Mumbai during the monsoon last year, forces the government to act. Thus under two World Bank funded schemes, some 60-70,000 slum dwellers have been resettled in alternative houses as their slums had to be demolished to make way for a road or some other infrastructure project. Similarly, the illegal structures along the Mithi River, which has been abused and dumped on to the point that it virtually disappeared in some areas even though in times past it was a navigable river, have been demolished and the people in them resettled. But this again was done only because the Bombay High Court intervened in the matter.

Neither of these two actions constitutes a housing policy. Of course, it is a complex issue in which laws will need to be revised or scrapped, where incentive systems will need to be devised so that it is profitable to build low cost rental housing, where the government will have to act firmly against land mafias who are closely interlinked to local politics. But if the government were seen to be taking even one step in these directions, we would believe that they are really bothered about dealing with the housing crisis. There is no evidence of this. Instead, there is a flurry of construction in Mumbai but all of it is high-end housing and commercial space. Yes, all this is good for a city that imitates 'global' but fails entirely to serve the "local".