

Geeta Wahidua

VIEW *from* WITHIN

India of the 21st century has become world's second fastest growing economy and at present has a population of around 1.20 billion. About 11 percent of world urban growth is currently occurring in the country. Several special investment regions, special economic zones and new townships are being planned all over the country. Besides these, State governments are initiating urban development schemes including the expansion of municipal units.

With the process of town planning being opened to private sector, such macro exercises have the opportunity to become multidisciplinary, benefiting from the shared knowledge base of urban designers, landscape architects, planners, ecologists, transport planners, environmentalists and others. Each urban development, sited in different geographic location, if analyzed and planned by a multidisciplinary group can result in a vibrant and ever evol-

ing entity of urban developments. In the last few years new paradigms of works have emerged for landscape architects and urban designers.

Role of professionals

With India in the middle of an economic boom with the attendant fast-paced building activity, there has been a drastic change in the character of urban development. With public-private partnerships and foreign investments guiding the new development model, much of the new urban development is sited in private domain for exclusive users – gated townships, information technology parks, hotels, airports, high-end exclusive residential developments. These are the most visible sites of 21st century urban development across the country. There are many examples of large-scale projects with areas in the thousands of acres, where large scale developments are taking place and land-

should these issues bother us? as specialized professionals, do we have anything to offer to the places where we live, work and play?

scape architects along with other professionals are receiving unprecedented opportunities to exercise their expertise in the field of planning and design. This is a boom time for the profession in the private sector. The involvement of private players, both as investors, builders and professionals have completely changed the equation of urban development.

On the other hand, unplanned urbanization has taken its toll. Growth without equitably distributed prosperity, urban expansion without adequate basic infrastructure and services, a rapidly increasing urban population with widespread poverty are the new realities of Indian cities. Existing Indian cities are hardly a reflection of the new found economic freedom of the country in terms of improved and upgraded public realms. 52% of the urban population does not have access to sanitation facilities. 30 to 50% of solid waste remains uncollected. The pace and quality of the new economy-driven development has further increased social and economic disparities. The lion's share of development work is taking place in the private not public sector.

In order to address the urban issues of the existing cities and towns, the main thrust area of development in the public domain is implementation of Jawaharlal Lal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, JNNURM – an integrated scheme of development of ur-

ban infrastructure over 65 cities. JNNURM aims at creating '*economically productive, efficient, equitable and responsive cities*' through strategy of social and economic infrastructure up gradation in cities, provision of basic services to urban poor and wide-ranging urban sector reforms to strengthen municipal governance. There are mainly two types of projects – those related to infrastructure and governance and other providing basic services to urban poor.

Should these issues bother us? As specialized professionals, do we have anything to offer to the places where we live, work and play? Granted there are multiple factors involved in the politics of development that are beyond our control but the first step is to recognize the need and have the will to do something about it.

There are very few examples where professionals, competent authorities and decision makers have entered in a fruitful dialogue for improving existing cities. With the exception of a few professional practices, there are hardly any independent landscape architect working in the public domain, in areas of infrastructure projects, developing drainage corridors and wastelands, on policies for urban greens, flood plains, reserved urban forests, or on Local Area Plans, where they are in a position to touch the lives of city dwellers and make a positive difference.

In Indian cities, professionals need to address multiple issues and tasks involving planning and design concerns of existing and proposed developments that are related to policy and governance in public realm. This includes the formulation of region-specific new urbanization policies in consultation with bureaucrats and authorities, a structured and hierarchical system of preparation of land planning and land use plans for the whole country including rural areas (regional plans for the districts, plans for *talukas*, master plans for the cities / towns and local area plans for the wards of the cities). The role and scope of landscape professionals need to increase and widen beyond the conventional areas to work with a trans-disciplinary approach that will address social, cultural, economic and ecological aspects of urban development. Establishing and strengthening rural-urban symbiotic relationships in new developments, formulating land use plans and strategies to ease out pressure on cities, revamping satellite towns, managing migration of population to urban centers, addressing rising economic disparities in development and managing natural resources are new areas of concern in these changing times.

With State-sponsored infrastructure projects and initiatives of planning exercises of existing cities, the scope and potential of landscape projects in the existing cities for professionals is immense. The challenge for landscape professionals in India of 21st century is not

***Kabhi aage kabhi peechhe koi raftar hai yeh? Hum ko raftar ka aahang badalna hoga;
Zehan ke wastey sancha to na dhale gi hayat, Zehan ko aap hi har sanche mein dhalna hoga.***

– KAIFI AZMI

*Sometime forward, sometime backward, what way is this? We shall have to change the style of walk;
Life is not going to prepare the mould for the mind, the mind shall have to shape itself according to every mould.*



Way to go? ORIGINAL IMAGE: web.worldbank.org

only to work and deliver in exclusive private domains, but also to work in an evolving and complex urban fabric of existing cities and towns, enmeshed in various types of forces and influences. With less than 500 landscape practitioners across India, such a vast canvas of work may be a tall order. In looking back at the efforts

of landscape architects in carving a niche of their own in the last two decades, it doesn't look like an impossible proposition however. Landscape architects across India should grab the opportunity to work in the public domain and earn the respect, honor and credibility not only in classes but also amongst the masses.

Landscape Architect **Geeta Wahi Dua** can be contacted at lajournalindia@gmail.com