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Aerial View – Hyderabad

Open Cities, Closed Spaces

Envisioning inclusive landscape design

Nupur Prothi Khanna

Monocle's Quality of Life Survey (initiated in 2006) and Mercer's Quality of Living Survey have listed out criteria that are popularly believed to determine the liveability status for a city. Cities are ranked based on parameters such as political and social environment, medical care and health considerations, public services, recreation facilities and natural environment or access to nature, culture, quality

of architecture and urban design amongst others. The capital city of Delhi figured as low as 154 on the Mercer QOL Survey of 2015. With cities across 230 nations surveyed across the globe, Hyderabad was nominated as the most liveable amongst Indian cities, ranked at 138. Pune at 145 and Mumbai at 152 were close contenders (Mercer's QOL 2015). Likewise, UN Global Compact Cities Programme statistics for Delhi in 2012 reiterated its poor

ecological condition, proclaiming it to be a city with an unsustainable environment for growth of individuals (Circles of Sustainability, 2012). For the historic lineage that Delhi has inherited, it has been served with a harsh, though possibly deserved verdict. A part of this urban reality and actively contributing to it, we as practitioners and academics involved with landscape architecture need to deliberate on our (leading?) role in steering our urban

environments towards liveability.

Tracing the recent past of say the last two decades of the profession offers an insight into the relevance of our profession in India's development manifesto and our place in urban governance. Those of us who began our career in the last decade of the 20th century may recollect the preoccupation with works commissioned by residential (many of them farmhouses), industrial and institutional clients. Our professional opportunities became generally aligned with those who could afford; therefore, landscape architecture in its nascent decades in India became synonymous with projects that catered to the privileged. On land this translated into a design language that communicated individual aspirations, creating aesthetics that were distinct from the prevalent context relying often on imported expressions instilling awe amongst the common folk. This led to a trend of a marked disconnect in the ambience of the development from the urban reality it emerged within.

As a young professional at the time I had an eye opening experience at a conference and visit to celebrate the decade long IBA Emscher initiative (International Exhibition from 1989-1999), an iconic programme spread over 7400 acres engaging landscape architecture as a tool to initiate urban revitalisation created for a term of 10 years, to give an impulse for new ideas and projects in war torn Ruhr region of Germany (Internationale Bauausstellung Emscher Park, 2015).

Rehabilitating industrial landscapes was far from our design boards then as we were in the midst of addressing site issues of newly set up manufacturing industries. A visit to the Emscher Landscape Park served as a crystal ball for our not so distant future.

As relevant to our context, the takeaways from the project were two fold. First, it showcased the possibility

of landscape architecture being employed as a means of improving self-esteem of a community over an entire geographical region that had been severely impacted in the quagmire of the Second World War; their voices being heard nearly half a century post the event. The historic industrial lineage of the area was brought alive through landscape design, art installation, interpretation (coal museums), community events and activities. There was a concerted effort towards revitalisation and reuse of their industrial heritage with no attempt at building over what many had begun to view as an inglorious past. New and innovative uses were

master planning, technological innovation was called upon to address sustainability through water harvesting and conservation, reuse of waste material and restoring soil and plantscapes demonstrated through pilot projects (Küppersbusch Housing Estate in Gelsenkirchen, for instance).

IBA Emscher demonstrated early in my professional career how we too would come full circle. Abandoned industrial sites like the Union Carbide India Ltd. pesticide plant in Bhopal that have notoriously fallen into disuse opening possibilities for recreation while respecting the many negative memories associated with them. The Girangaon case presented by Neera



Garden landscape – Parkinfina, Pune

found for factory buildings and premises. Coal dust and rust, wild grass and pioneer vegetation were central to the landscape design palette.

Second, this was a serious endeavour to employ renowned German technology to recover the lost ecological landscape. Nature conservation was at the forefront of repairing the ravaged terrain. Beyond

Adarkar in the 2014 ISOLA (Indian Society of Landscape Architects) national conference held in Delhi on 'Sense of Place' highlighted the reality of closure of textile mills in Mumbai and the loss of community life and spaces that had flourished over decades is another such example. How are we to play our role in the public realm setting in place programmes to address multiple pulls, that of real estate and

land prices versus the evolving needs and aspirations of community, respecting the right to an identity they have built over the last century? What is our role in developing a new landscape aesthetic which does not attempt to overwrite the past or context but rather reinforces its significance keeping it alive in popular memory so that new developments and newer users 'remember'?

The first decade of the new millennium brought with it renewed hope, enthusiasm and a host of newfound aspirations for our nation that would announce its coming of age and begin to be recognised as a world leader in information technology. Government PR campaigns went the extra mile to present the new brand of 'India shining'. In delivering this image of the country, our design fraternity engaged with works centred on infrastructure projects with landscape design being called upon in vicinity of highways, metro stations, airports and public transport hubs. TOD, MUD and other acronyms were the new buzzwords reverberating in the corridors of landscape practices and educational institutions.

Commerce centric development, both, retail and office complexes, IT parks/campuses, Special Economic Zones found pride of place on drawing boards across the country. A visit to the IT campus of Infosys at Mysore showcased the localisation of the global, each building and space representing a distinct style of global architecture. The sheer size of operations and infrastructure of the Infosys Global Education Centre lent the much coveted tag of the largest corporate education centre in the world to this enterprise. It led (misled?) the way for the chosen vocabulary in which we would dip our quills to compose the next era of landscape design.



The fountains and sunken water garden of the Italian Gardens – Hyde Park, London.



The Seoul Skygarden; Architects: MVRDV, Rotterdam

On the whole, cityscapes underwent plastic surgery. Streetscapes, waterfronts, large urban parks and the not so large ones within gated enclosures rendered the urban environment with a 'universally acceptable' imagery of design with materials, both plant and building, accelerating the shift from the local towards the global. While Bangalore and Hyderabad celebrated the return of the talent pool recreating the Silicon Valley glitz, the Common Wealth Games 2010 catalysed the image makeover of Delhi. Urban scale projects such as Metrorail and BRT, cycle tracks and pedestrian spaces redefined our cities, contributing to the 'world class

image' that was being sought.

While many may believe this to be a leap towards improving the imageability of the Indian city, we may have lost out on the opportunity to make a 'real' difference. In announcing the new century, the emphasis was on the future and the global, and to reiterate/reinforce this, the design language chosen was one that was universal/ accommodating of all nationalities (style) without striving for a taste of our own or coming up with a hybrid which could have lent a new direction to landscape design in India for the coming decades. So while India has shone on the global map and received accolades as an IT hub, the opportunity to reign supreme

in the field of innovative design thinking in creating/maintaining liveable environments has thus far not been utilised.

DIAL Terminal-3 (a project in which our firm was intensely involved), Commonwealth games, setting up of new housing estates, IT parks in the metropolises and Tier-I cities offer us blank canvasses to engage and emerge with innovative landscape design which is an extrapolation of our 'culture, context and common sense'. This is also our contribution to the design heritage of the future. In place of all regional towns emulating Terminal-3 (Bhopal, Varanasi, etc.) each needs to emerge with a design that is a response to the place that is its own. This practice of 'global design' has manifested itself in towns in many other avatars as well.


In Lucknow, for instance, regional history is being rewritten. Politicians have identified

landscape architecture to carve themselves (indelibly?) in public memory, which may be a positive trend. However, what may not be appropriate is the language of expression. While personal aspirations have found expression in open spaces, bequeathing the historic context with extravagantly designed landscapes is at odds with the sense of place. Swathes of granite have replaced grass and statuary has taken the place of trees. Should this be considered a natural evolution over time or is it to be viewed as a disruption in the historic continuity of the place? Was this borne out of the need of the majority? If so, what was the message being conveyed through the grandness of design and materials employed?

It is time to discourage the trend of metropolises informing the design palette of the rich and

myriad geography of growing towns so that each emerges with a unique landscape that reverberates to India's multi-cultural and natural context. These need to be viewed as opportunities offered by towns and cities at a point in time to reinforce their imageability. As a design fraternity, we are responsible for guiding political vision and aspirations in making our interventions meaningful and sustainable, leaving behind a legacy of contextual landscape design to be remembered by.


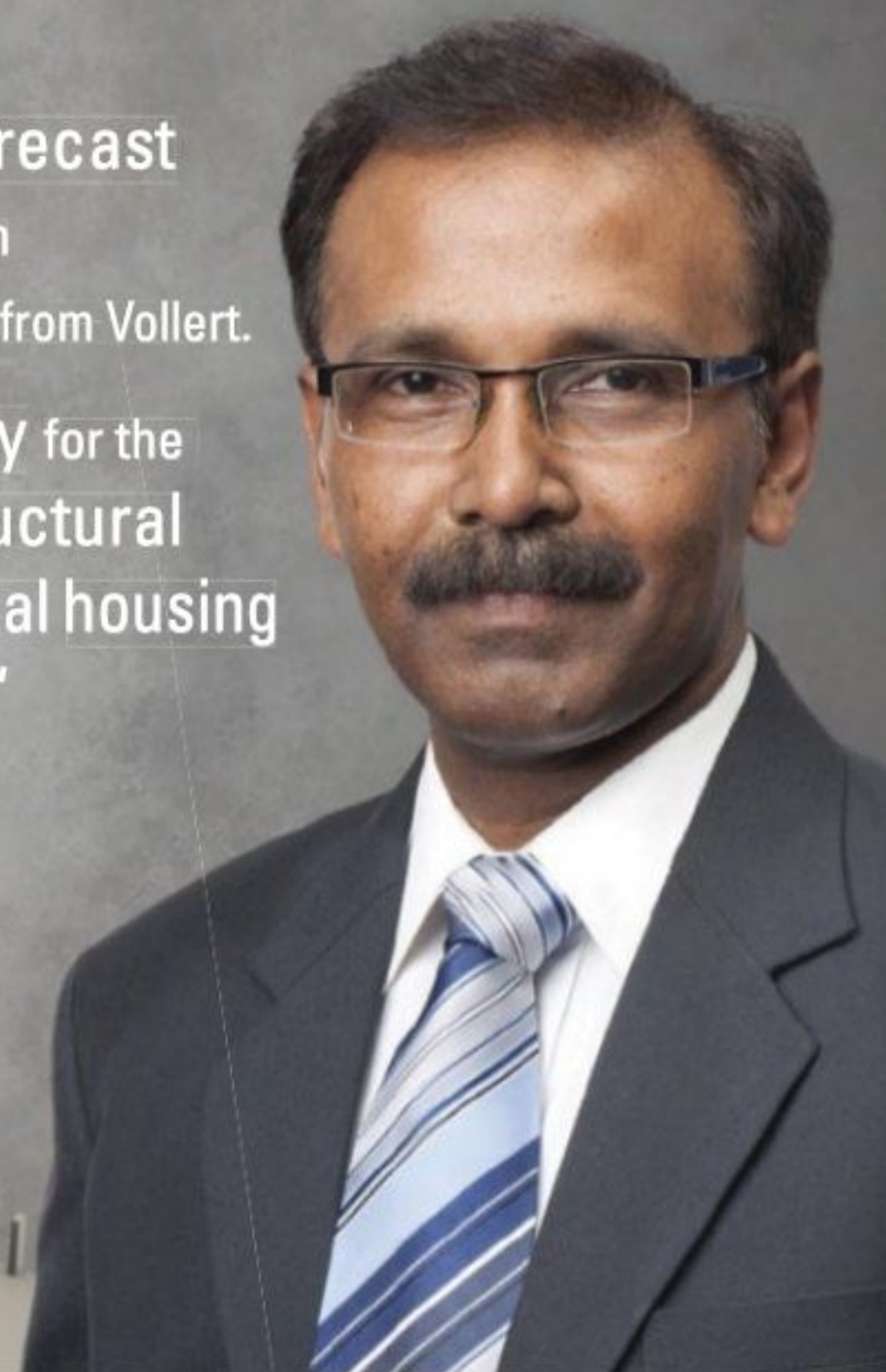
Keeping in perspective the past trends, should the next decade be defined by luxury and uber-expensive landscapes? Our design like our youth today is aspiring to be everything that the West represents. Development has become linked with a visual vocabulary of what is exotic. This trend may be borne out of a deep-rooted legacy often



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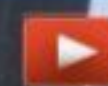


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discussed in urban conservation forums. Our need to imitate has contributed in some measure to the deeply divided urban environments we inhabit today, where the marginalised cannot associate with the posh landscapes and the well off with the deprivation of the majority.

On our generation then lies the responsibility towards initiating/constructing/reviving a new aesthetics, a new perspective, a fresh way of addressing urban landscape design. Can we, instead or alongside the current trends, also deliberate on the relevance of design as a lifeline

equal accessibility, moving beyond addressing the physical dimension, designing for liveability would also involve employing aesthetics that offer a psychological connect with the majority.

Conclusions

While the world is looking towards us for wellness solutions, management mantras, health tourism and spiritual nirvana we need to revisit problems that exist in our cities and find solutions from within. The deep schism already seen in our urban environments

Sustainability and maintenance are rooted in common sense. What is closest to nature requires least intervention and resources to remain in that state. While the world is realising the impending water crisis that shadows our future, contemporary Indian landscapes have to propagate indigenous plant vocabularies and productive landscapes that are resilient to thrive in the environment. We need to address the fast disappearing dharohar of traditional knowledge, which was born out of centuries of experimentation and experience. Unless we apply it in our work in the present there is the imminent possibility that it may be irretrievably erased from our memories ceasing to exist for the next generations. Looking at visionary projects such as Rao Jodha Park may give a possible direction for the future (Krishen 2011).

A rich and resilient culture, we need to bounce back with a contemporary vocabulary of design that is contextual to address problems which are specific to our needs. Landscape architecture, part of spatial planning and design, is inherently an extension/ expression of its context. Accepting the vital role, we can play in the urban realm to create equity and balance, and a futuristic vision based on our past wisdom may be the much needed impetus to lead us onward from the polluted, deprived and divided environment that is the Indian city today.

Delhi-based Nupur Prothi Khanna is the founder and director of Beyond Built Pvt Ltd, a research-based landscape and heritage consultancy. ✚

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Beijing Purple Park, Garden of Eden Valley, China

for urban liveability. To respond to the Indian reality, the next decade should perhaps be centred on 'designing for equity' expressing our 'culture, context and common sense', as mentioned before.

As is being demonstrated the world over, landscape architecture can make a difference to the lives of the common people. It is time to employ our versatility in applying and innovating so design can serve the larger cause of humanity, to make slums liveable, riverfronts accessible/bathable, and on the whole working towards inclusive cities (Anon 2015). Further to allocating spaces for equitable uses and prioritising

is being further deepened as a result of rampant use of imported design ideas and vocabularies in attempting to create world-class cities. World-class and smart are unfortunately being used interchangeably. The reality of our urban environments where more than 50% (Poverty in India: Causes, Effects, Injustice & Exclusion, 2013) community has no access to formal shelter stares us in the face making it imperative that open space infrastructure is accessible to all. Besides physical access, how are we to ensure psychological access through designing for the majority that most needs it.?