

Chandigarh's Future: Real Problems and Potential Opportunities

Presentation by Henrik Valeur

For the panel debate with the Indian Minister of Science and Technology, Shri Pawan Bansal, and Prof. John Bass from University of British Columbia, Canada. City Art Museum Auditorium, Chandigarh, 27 March 2011

Even though I have been here for the past six months, studying the city and working on some proposals for its improvement, what I can offer is indeed only an outsider's perspective – as Patsy, the organizer, puts it. But the advantage of being an outsider is that you can allow yourself to take a fresh look at things!

On the other hand, I have never before had the opportunity to debate with a minister of a one billion plus population, so I am not sure how fresh I'll be ...

Problems

The planning of Chandigarh is based on the rational logic of the industrial era, but India is currently leapfrogging that era. This also means that people's expectations to the city are changing.

The city is therefore faced with the challenge of reinventing itself in order to adapt to a new reality.

This is not easy because Chandigarh has been planned as a 'perfect city' and how do you change something that is perfect?

However, if you don't change you will be changed.

The question here is not only how to make Chandigarh a better – or an even better - place to live in for its citizens, though that is certainly one question. There is a bigger question, which is how Chandigarh as a city - and a wealthy city that is - can contribute more to the development of the whole country.

I have heard that Chandigarh is actually being subsidized by the national government. I don't know if that is true? But obviously, it should be the other way around.

Cities are supposed to be the drivers of development, not only economic development, but also cultural and social, scientific and technological development. It has been like that since the ancient Indus civilization.

What is seen as a problem, i.e. the massive influx of people to the city, should therefore rather be seen as an opportunity; an opportunity to stimulate development from which the whole country may benefit.

But cities are not only doing good, they also contribute to the pollution of our environment and the depletion of natural resources. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges in the world today is how

to integrate more people in the cities in order to stimulate development but without destroying the natural environment on which we all depend.

In that respect, what makes Chandigarh interesting as a possible model for other cities today is not the rational planning of roads and sectors, but the integration of nature. More than 1/3 of the city is already covered by trees, which makes the city quite unique in the world. Perhaps the goal could be 50 percent?

Half city, half nature?

The integration of nature is interesting because our aim today is not to conquer or control nature but rather to live in harmony with her – and with ourselves.

To do that we need to make better use of what is already there!

For instance by integrating every citizen in the urban economy; by exploring the resources that nature is providing us more efficiently; and by making better use of the existing structures in the city.

I have worked on some concrete proposals on how to do that, that I would like to share with you.

Potentials

1. Transform the Capitol Complex into a major new tourist attraction in India

The city of Bilbao in Northern Spain has the same number of international tourists per month as Chandigarh has per year. Why? Because of the Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry. Before that the city had even fewer tourists than Chandigarh. Chandigarh has, however, some buildings, which are of at least the same architectural importance, namely the Capitol Complex. Unfortunately these buildings are currently deteriorating, while they are also becoming unfit for their initial purpose. Why not offer the government, the administration and the high court some new modern buildings in the city, among the people where they belong, and then transform the Capitol Complex into a Le Corbusier World Culture Center, which could increase the number of tourists in the city by 20 times while also opening up this marvelous area to the public.

2. Open up the city from inside: create bicycle paths in the green belts and the market streets

What do bicycles have to do on the main roads? They should be in the sectors, and being able to easily cross from one sector to the next. Why should they risk their lives in the dangerous roundabouts? It should be attractive to walk and cycle in the city, this is the only way to reduce the number of cars. There are twice as many cars per capita in Chandigarh as in a very rich country as Denmark for instance. This is crazy, but understandable given the fact that there are no real alternatives. Why not make the market streets car-free, and at the same time make them much more bazaar-like? And then make safe crossings with traffic lights for pedestrians and bicycles from the market street of one sector to the next. And in the other direction make pedestrian and bicycle paths in the green belts with safe crossings to the green belt of the next sector. Imagine you could go on a bicycle from Burail Village to Sukhna Lake through a continuous green belt without once being in danger of being run over by a speeding car!

3. Make the city safe and healthy: make sectors car-free

The location of common facilities in the centre of the sectors and the size of them make the sectors ideal for walking and cycling, so why have cars there at all? Why not have underground parking at the four entrance points to each sector and in that way making the sector a safe and healthy environment to be in for all of us? Currently maybe around 20% of the surface area of the sector is used for cars, i.e. roads and parking. Without cars only about 5% of the surface area would have to be used for transportation, i.e. emergency vehicles, rickshaws (electrical or manual) and bicycles. Thus 15% of the surface area could be given new functions, for instance affordable housing for people working in the sector but living far away in a village or a colony, community kitchen gardens, playgrounds and other urban program.

4. Grow your own food!

To prevent a food crisis and to support community building, why not create community kitchen gardens in the sectors, vertical kitchen gardens in the resettlement colonies, and provide opportunities for small-scale agriculture and market areas in the slum?

5. Produce your own energy!

To prevent an energy crisis and to reduce pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, why not make it mandatory to have solar panels on the rooftop of all buildings, or at least on public buildings and the administrations buildings? Why not support the use of electrical rickshaws running on solar power?

6. Create your own water!

To prevent a water crisis, why not harvest rainwater and recycle water using organic treatment facilities?

“I urge governments to recognize the urban water crisis for what it is – a crisis of governance, weak policies and poor management, rather than one of scarcity”. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, World Water Day 18 March 2011

7. Make use of democracy!

Ask people what they need and then together with them find out how best to provide it. Why sit in an office somewhere think what people might need, why not go out and ask them? Why not involve them in the design and planning of their neighborhoods? I am sure they will take better care of each other and their surroundings then.

If we don't know and understand each other how can we be expected to take care of and feel responsible for each other?