

URBAN INDIA



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Special Issue on Migration

Overview of Migration
Seasonal Migration
Gendered Migration
Migrant Child Labour
Job Search and Labour Market Outcomes
Migration and Conflict
Legal Aspects of Migration
Book Reviews
Workshops





National Institute of Urban Affairs

The National Institute of Urban Affairs is a premier institute for research, capacity building and dissemination of knowledge for the urban sector in India. NIUA conducts research on urbanization, urban policy and planning, municipal finance and governance, land economics, transit oriented development, urban livelihoods, environment and climate change and smart cities.

The Institute supports policy formulation, programme appraisal and monitoring for the Ministry of Urban Development and other Ministries and Departments of the Government of India and also undertakes research and capacity building projects with multilateral and bilateral agencies and private sector organizations.

The Urban Data Centre at NIUA promotes research and evidence based planning and management of the urban sector in India.

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(Centre for Policy Research)

CALL FOR PAPERS

URBAN INDIA invites contributions on issues related to urban development, management and governance including urbanisation, poverty, environment, municipal finance, e-governance among others.

Papers sent for publication should not have been published earlier or simultaneously submitted for publication to another journal.

Guidelines for submission of manuscripts:

- Articles should not exceed 8000 words, including notes and references.
- Articles should be accompanied by an abstract of a maximum of 150-200 words.
- Research notes or book reviews must be not more than 4000 words.
- Graphs and charts need to be prepared in MS Office (Word/Excel) and not in jpeg or other formats.
- Full citation for all references and sources must be provided.
- Articles should be sent by email in MS Word format to the Editor, Urban India along with the declaration that the article is unpublished.
- Authors are requested to provide full details for correspondence (postal and email address).

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by Henrik Valeur, Published by Architectura and Natura,

Book Sellers and Publishers, Amsterdam

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BOOK REVIEW

India: The Urban Transition - A case study of Development Urbanism by Henrik Valeur, Published by Architectura and Natura, Book Sellers and Publishers, Amsterdam

Mukta Naik

*Senior Research Associate
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Drawing from his own experiences of practicing and teaching in Shanghai, China and focusing on his recent work in the Indian cities of Chandigarh and Bangalore, Henrik Valeur's book is a commentary on the liveability of cities from the perspective of human health and safety over the long term. Henrik describes himself as an architect-urbanist and uses a series of personal anecdotes and observations to understand the city as a lived experience. The book, therefore, is structured to address separately the five elements he considers essential to the quality of human experience—air, water, food, housing and mobility. These are also the areas where Indian cities are severely challenged and Henrik's observations appear valuable in repositioning important questions and seeking opportunities for creative solutions.

India: the Urban Transition could be criticised for leaving aside academic rigour (though parts of it are meticulous cross-referenced), but in doing so it brings to the table the value of a close-to-the-ground, interconnected way of looking at our urban fabric. It celebrates the contributions of people in a way academic literature rarely does. Descriptions of the Namma Cycle rental project being piloted on the campus of the Indian Institute of Science and the creation of a movable, transformable and sustainable working space called Jaaga also in Bangalore, for instance, tell of an immense power to innovate that the author urges us to tap.

Within its focus to five specific areas, which are of course inter-related, the book offers a historical view as well as picks out examples from the present. In this way, the book builds on theme of India's urban transitions across these areas of study. However, there is an attempt to look at issues across disciplines and with the view to formulate solutions, some practical and others conceptual.



Air: This section delves into the details of Delhi-based Kamal Meattle's system for purifying and managing air inside a built structure. Describing this as a *jugaad* solution, Henrik describes how Meattle's use of air purifying plants to create green walls and large air purifying greenhouses combined with his design of moveable desks and flexible space could be a solution for multistory urban workspaces.

Water: Here, Henrik uses the examples of Mavallipura, Bangalore's erstwhile landfill that still continues to pollute groundwater, as well as the continued dumping of untreated waste into the Yamuna in and around Delhi to illustrate the relationship between water pollution and health. At the core of his thought process is a belief that, as compared to the "rural ills" like malnutrition and infectious diseases, India has given inadequate thought to the impacts of "urban ills" like "stress, pollution, social isolation and physical inactivity" on human health.

In this context, the discussion on water stress attempts to look at the problem from a broader perspective. By making the interesting observation that the green revolution in India "prevented hunger but created thirst", the book connects events and policies over a larger period of time to describe India's water present security situation. By bringing concepts like water stress and the inequality in water access into the discussion, the book makes the point that regional approaches that look at the renewal of natural water resources as well as urban efforts to maximise the re-use of water are the ways ahead.

Included in this section is Henrik's proposal for cleaning up the waterways of Bangalore, called *nullahs*, to reconnect social landscapes as opposed to the current practice of putting them underground to create more usable urban land, ostensibly for roads. The solution lies in interconnecting the waterways by revitalising them into a walkable green network that also aids the 'last mile connectivity' lacking in the transport system of the city. In describing the methods and positive impacts of such a plan, Henrik urges Indian urbanists towards a more inclusive and long-term view of cities. The waterways plan alludes to one aspect that is often missed out in the kind of urban analysis done by planners and policymakers—the enjoyment of urban spaces, in this case that of peace and nature, which is so essential to restore the balance caused by the "urban ills" of stress and overwork. However, the implementation of such a plan would be contingent not only on political will but also on the continued engagement of communities that live along these



nullahs. Unfortunately, the author recognises the physical and design challenges without dwelling too much on other aspects of the sustainability of such a project.

Food: In this chapter, *India: the Urban Transition* explores the feasibility of urban farming, a concept that is gaining traction globally and has been successfully implemented even in Asian cities like Surabaya, Indonesia.

Throwing a light on the urbanisation of poverty in India as seen by malnutrition data, the author asks an interesting question: “Instead of making poor people depend on the government’s central food distribution systems, why not let them grow their own food?” The book draws from European practices to suggest measures like allotment gardens for community farming and places the idea of urban farming in the context of not just growing food, but also the reutilisation of waste materials both biodegradable (as compost) and non biodegradable (plastic cans, tins and tyres as planters for example). It also recognises the challenges posed by high costs of urban land, soil contamination, water scarcity, etc. Here, the book proposes the solution of vertical kitchen gardens and illustrates a solution designed for the Dadu Majra Rehabilitation Colony on the outskirts of Chandigarh, a social housing scheme for the city’s slum dwellers.

Housing: Drawing from his experiences in both countries, Henrik makes the observation that while rapid urbanisation has helped China succeed in pulling people out of extreme poverty; the slower pace of urbanisation in India has meant that poverty alleviation has been more or less stagnant. Of course, scholarly work to refute that is available, however what is interesting is that *India: the Urban Transition* attributes India’s failure in this aspect to the poor housing and living conditions of rural to urban migrants in urban slums.

Looking at Census data, the author contends that the idea of housing the urban poor has been reduced to game of numbers as reported by municipalities, which are able to report a reduction in city slums simply by not notifying poorly services areas as slums. However the author observes, like others have done, the negligible difference in service levels and quality of life between slum and non-slum areas in Indian cities. Turning its attention to policy matters, *India: the Urban Transition* comments on the immense difficulties of meeting the government’s self-proclaimed goal of Slum Free



India owing to an essential resistance of elite planners and politicians to accepting slum dwellers as entitled citizens.

Using Bangalore's example, the book illustrates how targets to rid cities of slums in a bid to become "world class" often fail because of misplaced priorities and rampant corruption. In a particular case, the scarcity and high value of urban land meant that slum dwellers were displaced without compensation to make way for a mall in Bangalore, even as the families were issued documents that recognised their rights to live on that land!

The strategy of using slum rehabilitation schemes to free up inner city urban land is also illustrated in the book through the example of Chandigarh Housing Board's massive social housing projects that consolidate slum dwellers into four massive developments built under the 'Small Flats Scheme' at the periphery of the city. The author alleges that redevelopment schemes are doubly advantageous to government officials, who can make money from selling inner city land to private real estate developers and also in the form of kickbacks from the construction of the new houses for the poor. More importantly, *India: the Urban Transition* clearly recognises that the failure to house the urban poor within cities is a loss not just to the urban poor, but to the city as a whole, which loses out on the productivity of this important segment of the urban population.

Henrik uses his design expertise to redesign a block of dull low-income homes into something quite different—a set of garden flats inspired by the diversity and intelligent usage of space observed in self-constructed homes. In fact, the idea is to provide a structural shell that residents can individually build out over time. This project, located in Bangalore's Diamond District is presented in the book. With a financial model conceptualised around the pooled resources of manufacturers in the area who employ the future residents of the project, the garden flats are also a model for a sustainable, walkable, car-free community.

It is easy to feel a tinge of concern at the blatant idealism in the author's solutions; however, Henrik seems self aware about this, as he ends the presentation of his design with an interview with a local politician who affirms that inner city land is too valuable for the urban poor who must be located on the periphery!



Mobility: *India: the Urban Transition* deals with urban transport also as a health issue, not just in terms of pollution and the risk of injury and death in road accidents, but also in terms of increased motorised transport exacerbating the problem of physical inactivity among city dwellers. Here, the author explores e-vehicles and bike sharing as solutions. The book illustrates the design of the car-free sector (19) in Chandigarh, which has recently been ordered by the High Court even though architect Aditya Prakash proposed it decades ago!

In conclusion, the book contextualises city making as a complex highly political process and contends that it is the Indian city that can truly be the landscape on which the idea of India, with its diversity, flourishes. The author's use of humour and his complete honesty while describing the struggles of Indian cities with development urbanism is worthy of appreciation.