BACKGROUND

Today’s urban development is oriented towards innovative approaches. It has started taking into account new ideas such as the Smart Cities, Urban Living Labs, Inclusive-Cities and many such interesting nomenclatures. Though, the intentions behind all of them remain the same. It covers a plethora of domains, right from public participation to basic services and ‘supposedly’, interacts with the 3 major pillars of city development: liveability, health, and happiness of its people. There are also conundrums in the context of these approaches, mostly related to the unarticulated needs of the urban fabric. These account for ‘people’s needs over the city’s aesthetics’ and creative destruction is where the problem lies. For the professionals, it is primarily an ‘either or’ approach. The rigidity in development policies leaves no scope for people-centric approaches. It creates a bubble that might seem visionary from the outside but is a prick away from a reality check. This kind of development can also create a highly speculative market that may generate ghost cities.

THE ISSUE

Instant development, organised development, revamping, etc., are good to look at but not necessarily what is needed. The race to camouflage the unorganised, incremental development through the means of creative destruction is where the problem lies. For the professionals, it is primarily an ‘either or’ approach. The rigidity in development policies leaves no scope for people-centric approaches. It creates a bubble that might seem visionary from the outside but is a prick away from a reality check. This kind of development can also create a highly speculative market that may generate ghost cities.

WHY BRING ATTENTION?

Contrary to what most urban professionals regard as habitable places in city development, the general perception is seemingly different. The understanding is that one cannot approach liveable spaces through a dualist notion divided into polar opposites like order and chaos. Both constitute the most intrinsic aspect of the city’s fabric and cannot be culminated into two different shares. Isolating the two would be like committing blasphemy.
How can your research serve the community and help cities achieve SDGs?

When cities envision a future of vibrant, equitable, and resilient communities tied together by utilitarian and social infrastructure, it becomes a crossroad for diversity and a site for coexistence. Incrementalism supports this idea and reinforces community-centric development with the help of broad stakeholders, from the inhabitants to the government, to co-create a workable model for cities, highlighting the ever-improving and never-ending nature of the space. This synergy of people, government, and infrastructure makes the concept ideal for community-driven city development. Unlike the new approaches, where rampant infrastructure expansion happens through creative destruction in the blink of an eye, incrementally developed cities tend to maintain a place’s essence and give its community a sense of belonging. It also aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, which captures the critical role of people and the government in developing sustainable and inclusive cities while acting the role of government as enablers in doing so. The concept of incremental development allows community upliftment by keeping the people in place with the help of available resources instead of big-scale site clearances to replace old, shoddy infrastructure with extravagant projects.

Contrary to building infrastructure from scratch, which is cost-intensive and has a large carbon footprint, incrementalism builds on the existing infrastructure and provides a better opportunity to construct inclusive communities. It utilises small-scale developers as the development realm relies on smaller sites and neighbourhoods. This scale provides an advantage to local developers who work within the community to get into the business of development with no or minimal entry restrictions. Outside the purview of incremental development, local developers tend to perish due to a lack of social and financial capacities expected to help them bear the overwhelming economy of need. Incremental development helps them take up retrofitting or greenfield development because they do not have to bear the huge infrastructure cost of large-scale development. This way, the concept helps in bringing social cohesion while maintaining a Tight knit community-based approach toward city development.

Then the question arises: how to instigate development without diving into the comedy structured and organised facades while maintaining an amicable relationship between the people and their space? The answer lies in redefining the idea of development through an approach of incrementalism. Like in any city building game, one tends to build on the population’s requirements while exploiting available resources and providing basic infrastructure through the means of incremental development; real-life city planning also needs people-centric, incremental goals. A plan of action that is not dependent on creating mindless infrastructure but needful and fabric conscious infrastructure that dwells well into the city’s aesthetics.

City development has been following the concept of incrementalism, knowingly or unknowingly, for ages. As a matter of fact, many European and American cities developed incrementally before industrialisation. They started with utilitarian structures while improved infrastructure quality happened over time by accumulating wealth and new occupants. Public infrastructure also improved in tandem as new businesses thrived.

Tokyo, which is tagged as the world’s largest city and ranks at number 7 among the world’s most liveable cities, also developed incrementally after the World War.

The key was to follow a time-intensive urban design framework that big structured scale changes through small-scale interventions. This included citizens on the frontline while the government took the role of a facilitator, providing just the basic infrastructure. Thus, the idea of incrementalism is a solution in itself. It defines a place as ‘ever-improving and never-finished’ without forcefully pushing it towards a ‘so-called’ utopian concept of city growth.

Motivation

In one of my urban development courses in grad school, I came across an interview piece of a famous Metabolist architect Mr Kisho Kurokawa. He was a pioneer of post-war Japanese architecture and urbanism. His work on incremental development was an eye-opener for a South-East Asian student like me. It was impactful because it was relatable, especially due to its contextual similarities in the urban domain of the Indian sub-continent. It gave a different perspective to my understanding of the development and motivated me to explore the topic.
THE IDEA’S POTENTIAL TO EVOLVE

The consolidation of tangible and intangible aspects of city development to promulgate community growth and sustainable infrastructure sets the basis for the incremental development model. It thrives on people, government and utilitarian infrastructure, contributing to the city’s evolution. Cities like post-war Tokyo became exemplary in demonstrating these ideals. The government acted like enablers in bringing about meaningful, people-centric changes through the virtues of versatile and flexible development policies. The fact that the government took a backseat to the city’s master planning and let people decide what is best for them by providing them with basic infrastructure is a precedent in itself that people-centric, incremental development can thrive if legitimacy is given to such kind of development.

Just like any Tokyo neighbourhood, Dharavi, the world’s largest slum, is a self-sustaining, mixed-use hub which generates and caters to its demands and needs. Dharavi has also developed incrementally but lacks two significant aspects of incremental development: Legitimacy from the government and basic infrastructure. The uncanny similarities between the two development start fading when the government’s role surfaces. This highlights the importance of government, people and infrastructure in mainstreaming incremental development.

OUTCOMES

Something is exciting about a city defined by its people, history, culture, chaos and noise. Even with a lack of outward charm, there is a promise of creating something magnificent. Incrementalism is that promise which thrives on people and not just the space. It is a people-centric approach where the inhabitants govern development policies for the inhabitants. It allows the city to grow with all its externalities without setting a tone of bias between order and chaos.

WORKS CITED

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