

Pedestrian focused cities: The need of the hour

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In a smart city, much of the safety infrastructure and programs are designed to enable pedestrians and automobiles to co-exist harmoniously. Therefore, pedestrian infrastructure is expected to play a key role in building smart cities.



Since the beginning of our civilization, pedestrians are a natural extension of the infrastructure to ensure a convenient living environment. If we are to optimize and sustain the resources of our cities and thereby, quality of life, understanding how the city transforms people is just as crucial as understanding how people utilize and shape the city.

According to economists the “induced demand” phenomenon of the cities, where roads are constructed focusing on vehicular traffic has only resulted in a deteriorating traffic position. The noted traffic engineer Walter Kulash said, “Widening roads to solve a traffic problem is like loosening your belt to solve an obesity problem.” The 2011 census found that less than 13 per cent of Mumbai households use cars as a mode of commuting, so it is easy to imagine the burden on our infrastructure as this number would only increase in the near future.

According to the International Energy Agency, if motorization continues to rise at the current rate, by 2050, India will need an area 35 times the size of Mumbai just to park its cars. A 2012 study by The Transport Corporation of India and IIM Calcutta estimated that India loses Rs 60,000 crore every year due to traffic congestion.

Only rich countries with lower oil prices, such as the USA and the Middle Eastern countries, can afford automobile focused cities. India's cities will not be internationally competitive if we force our citizens to pay so much for mobility. The United Nations Environment Programme has showed that prolonged traffic congestion amounts to time and productivity losses, and such costs can add up to nearly or over 10 per cent of a region or country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). A report by Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at George Washington University School of Business in conjunction with LOCUS found that higher education levels and one third higher GDP per capita correlate with the provision of walkable places.

Smart city investments will be strongly influenced by building codes and development control regulations, which will help improve walkability. The city that is walkable will be affordable and accessible to its citizens. More people on the streets will also mean quality opportunities for social interaction, and this will facilitate a socially inclusive community. Pedestrian focused cities rally the health of their citizens. People live longer in cities like Tokyo, Singapore and Hong Kong, where walking and public transport are used over automobiles. Walkable urban design is now being recognized as a key tool to build healthy societies. The US Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now recommends implementing walkable community-scale and street scale urban design and land use policies to promote physical activity.

Roads within cities should allow last-mile-connectivity between mass transit points. Roughly 30 per cent of the city should be used for roads and footpaths. A variant of this model is supported by New York University's Urban Expansion initiative. Implementation has begun in Ethiopia and Columbia. The IDFC (Infrastructure Development Finance Company) Institute is working to adapt and implement this model in India

While planning broad roads like highways and expressways, access into a city should be limited as much as possible. Highways will impede free movement within a city. Fast moving highway traffic jeopardizes the safety of pedestrians and cyclists, besides increasing automobile dependency.

Advance planning for structured road layouts, adequate public open spaces, acquiring land to develop urban public amenities should be made liable under Land Acquisition and Rehabilitation & Resettlement Act (LARR). Certain provisions of LARR, particularly those requiring land to be developed within a specified period, should be relaxed for land acquired for public urban spaces, such as roads. This will enable municipalities and other planning authorities to reserve land in advance (land acquired under LARR has to be developed within 5 years, which may not always be feasible for long term urban planning) and can manage budgets through incremental development.

Indian cities don't have the best and the widest roads. Yet India adds over 5,000 cars a day to its city roads adding to pollution, congestion and long commute time to work and back. An efficient transport system with pedestrian-friendly and cycle-friendly roads, as in all major cities of the world, is the need of the hour. We need pothole and obstruction free levelled sidewalks that help smooth and safe travel for pedestrians within our smart cities.

Author's Note: The author is the Founder and Chairman of the House of Hiranandani. He has been globally recognised for his outstanding contribution to the real estate sector, particularly for his architectural acumen. He has also been honored with numerous awards such as for adapting the best of foreign technology to the skills of Indian engineering and labour artistry by the American Concrete Institute. He is credited with the introduction of copper plumbing and the use of fly ash in concrete across the country. He is also an eminent member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.