



Henrik Valeur. *India: The Urban Transition - A Case Study of Development*. Copenhagen: Arkitektur B, 2014. Illustrations, graphs. 344 pp. \$44.50 (paper), ISBN 978-87-92700-09-4.

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## Development Urbanism, International Expertise, and Solutions to the Crises of India's Urban Transition

In an age when star architects dominate our attention, the Danish architect-urbanist Henrik Valeur's book on India's urban transition is an important reminder to us of a longstanding parallel history of architecture and urbanism, one where architects tackle social problems through practical engagement with the built environment. Some of these architect-urbanists, such as the eminent Indian architect Charles Correa (1930-2015), are also writers who have published essays and books about architecture and the city. Through their writing and their buildings, these architects have shown how one can positively transform the social conditions in which people live. In the book *India: The Urban Transition - A Case Study of Development Urbanism*, Valeur makes his own debut as a writer of India's cities, a country that he first visited as a youth and later influenced his decision to train as an architect. Although not intended as a scholarly book, *India* is well grounded in data, and supported with relevant statistics, footnotes, references, and graphs that prove the great challenges that India is facing in terms of poverty, pollution, housing, water shortage, and so on. Valeur's monograph is a humane and personal account. While the statistics make one confront an overwhelming urban crisis in India, through case studies, his intimate narrative orients us toward realistic solutions that can make a difference to improving people's lives in cities. Valeur's *India* is an important contribution and call for action to everyone who wants to make a positive and concrete difference to the urban environments of developing societies.

Valeur intends his book to serve as an introduction to "development urbanism." This is a field that draws on many disciplines in its concentration on sustainable urban development as a way of alleviating poverty while taking responsibility for the care of the climate, environment, and natural resources. Thus "it addresses ba-

sic human concerns in urban settings, seeing cities not as 'dumb' machines but rather as sophisticated ecologies in which people are adapting to a constantly changing environment" (p. 23). These are worthy goals that many people can agree on. However, according to Valeur, it is also a field committed to new models of collaboration between international experts and a range of local actors, from professionals and bureaucrats to activists and ordinary citizens. They work together "on projects and programs that are related to specific urban conditions and situations, thereby establishing an ongoing learning and sharing process among a broad range of disciplines." The collaboration of "international experts" with a range of local actors will not necessarily appear as a "novel" approach to many, who may be discomforted by the notion that international expertise is still necessary to solve the problems of formerly colonized populations (p. 23). However, if we take this to mean a broader interdisciplinary and multidirectional global cross-cultural collaboration, then it would point in the direction of what Valeur calls "the co-evolution of all people" (p. 22).

Valeur's book poses a number of solutions to India's urban problems, and he uses two different cities, both influenced by the West, as case studies: Chandigarh and Bangalore. Chandigarh was founded after India's independence and planned by the French architect and urban planner Le Corbusier. Thus, this new northern Indian city was influenced by "modernism and the ideology of socialism." Bangalore, in southern India, is a product of colonialism, globalization, and "the ideology of liberalism" (p. 7). According to the author, the problems faced by these cities are common to a large number of Indian cities, and thus the solutions he proposes might be adapted to a number of different settings.

The main body of the book is organized as follows: an introduction; a chapter introducing the two cities that

form the case studies for the book; a second chapter with five sections, each of which deals with one of the fundamental needs of human existence (air, water, food, housing, and mobility); and an epilogue, with which the book concludes. The book is generously illustrated and its many images visually demonstrate and underscore the point being made, explain designs, and show the projected outcomes.

Oriented around two core issues tackled in separate sections, titled “The Poor Are Moving to Town” and “Indian Challenges/Opportunities,” the introduction is an attempt to present some of the larger issues of the day to plan for the future. It is accompanied by graphs that visually illustrate the points being made on such issues as poverty and population distribution (urban and rural). For example, the United Nations has predicted massive growth in the world’s population in the next thirty years with most of the growth taking place in the developing world. According to the World Bank, most of the world’s poor live in rural areas, and for many, the only route to escape poverty is a move to the city. Thus Valeur argues that rather than encourage people to stay in rural areas, they should be encouraged to move to cities where employment opportunities, education, health facilities, and housing can and should be improved so that people can lead healthier lives and do not simply end up living in slums.

The first chapter introduces the two cities. Almost every page opens up to a large colored photograph. The image illustrates the point being made in the accompanying text. Valeur uses a personal narrative to bring home the academic points he makes. For example, after briefly introducing us to the history of planning in Chandigarh, he recounts how he came to the city in 2010 with the plan of staying for a few days but ended up staying for about half a year working on, among other things, a new plan for the city. Through the efforts of a former Indian student intern whom he had hired to work in his office in Shanghai, Valeur received an invitation to give the prestigious annual Le Corbusier Memorial Lecture in Chandigarh. Valeur gives affectionate snapshots of people he met during his stay in Chandigarh, such as his landlord, and also M. N. Sharma, who had been part of Le Corbusier’s first team and was later the first Indian chief architect of the city. These brief introductions help to personalize his account.

While recognizing his own elite status, Valeur is careful to distinguish his position from that of others to show his concern for the poor, sometimes through the use of sly humor. Thus, for example, he compares Le Corbus-

ier’s plan of Chandigarh with that of the Chinese imperial city of Chang’an. While living in India, Valeur made contact with the chief architect of Chandigarh, Sumit Kaur, and worked with students on various proposals for a new master plan, the first since Le Corbusier’s, and which was under Kaur’s purview. On a drive with Kaur, which included visiting the only preexisting village that still stands in the planned city of Chandigarh, he subtly contrasted his sympathy for the village, while showing that Kaur could only see violations of the law. Valeur presents himself as someone who could bridge global and local divides by, for example, leading a three-day workshop of students and teachers at the Chandigarh School of Architecture where the project was to encourage IT workers and their neighbors, the slum dwellers, to interact with each other. Valeur’s very real concern for the poor is demonstrated throughout the book and in his design solutions.

The second chapter focuses on the five basics of air, water, food, housing, and mobility. Here, Valeur shows, through case studies, solutions to some of the problems revolving around these basic needs. Thus, in the section on air, he writes about a “self-organized green office space.” This is particularly interesting because this is a project that builds on the work of a businessman in Delhi, Kamal Meattle. Meattle, an environmentalist, is famous for being one of the two plaintiffs in a public interest litigation case twenty years ago, which resulted in a verdict where the Supreme Court ordered the control of air pollution in Delhi. Meattle also transformed his office complex to improve the air quality by the use of a greenhouse and plants. He asked Valeur to use this idea in the design for a new office hotel, the GreenSpaces. Valeur discusses his design, which improves on Meattle’s by using natural ventilation and “growing fresh air” through the use of Areca palms and Mother-in-Law’s Tongues in a vertical greenhouse on the façade of the building (p. 109). In his section on food, Valeur shows how one might tackle food affordability and shortage of land by constructing vertical kitchen gardens attached to building blocks. He takes the example of a rehabilitation colony in Chandigarh and shows how these vertical kitchen gardens might be built. Water, of course, is of equal concern to human needs, plants, and food production, so in the section on water, Valeur discusses Bangalore’s waterways, sketching out the water network of the city in the context of the larger landscape of Greater Bangalore. His photographic images contrast the present to various scenarios of what the future might look like if the waterways in Bangalore were revitalized. Connecting neighborhoods through the *Pagdandi* (literally, footpath) that follow wa-

terways and extend beyond, in one illustrated scenario (with the current situation as a small inset image), for example, Valeur notably maintains the houses of the poor along these paths. At the same time, he carves out windows and doors and adds balconies to the walls of these existing slum houses that face the waterway. His visions for the city are inclusive of all social classes rather than schemes for gentrification.

Valeur is clear-sighted about the fact that proposed plans for change in the city often fall by the wayside. The interview with Ashwin Mahesh, a scientist, environmental activist, technology candidate, and now a politician in Bangalore, with which the book concludes, shows Mahesh arguing that engagement with political processes is

necessary to bring about change. While Valeur demonstrates that the problems that urban India faces are serious, he contends that they are not insurmountable. Thus he encourages the reader to rethink his or her surroundings and imagine futures that would improve the neighborhood and city for all sections of society. The epilogue, which functions as a conclusion to his engaging, thoughtful study of India's urban transition, urges readers to not be passive, but instead to invoke their own individual responsibility and participation in the processes of resolving India's urban problems. This well-supported study, excavating some critical problems facing South Asian cities and offering a range of solutions, is a fascinating and invigorating work that deserves a wide readership.

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