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***Aspirational Urbanism*¹ & the Indian Metropolis–**

A case study of Delhi

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Aspiration is one of the key factors that have been driving India's urbanism since independence. The whole idea of defining a new nation on modern cities, which was based on aspirations that swayed towards the skewed image of the developed world still holds true. Such aspirations have more physical manifestations in Indian urban context, as state and central government have more power in cities than the city government itself (even though 20 years have passed after 74th Constitutional Amendment). Delhi presents a special case as land is under the control of the central government and Indian politics at the centre has been for more than a decade now governed by mixed ideologies of the multi party coalition government system.

Delhi is India's power house and urban initiatives that happens here is replicated all across the country, as can be seen from examples ranging from slum eviction to ultra modern metro rail replicated all across the country. Delhi now is on its aspirational image makeover to become a 'World Class City!' the new master plan vision, much flaunted by almost everyone in the government and development authorities. Recently Delhi wanted to become like London, before that it was Paris. All these aspirations are mere images which some have enough faith to call a vision, but have no concrete grounding on what needs to be done resulting to urban blunders.

Citizens are fed with these images, constantly over different medias by interpreting it differently and as a result there started to have a contestation on urban facets between the authorities and the civil society where by the courts stand as mediators. The contestations have a wide range from mid 90s M C Mehta case that changed the industrial landscape of Delhi, to the ongoing BRT case that questions the very basis of a socialist nation called India.

On the first day of February in 1991, the 69th amendment to the Indian Constitution came into effect, thus creating the National Capital Territory (NCT), essentially Delhi as we know it today. Provision for an elected government was put in place with a legislative assembly and Chief Minister as the elected head and Lieutenant Governor as administrative head. The land, police and physical development rights are directly controlled by the Central government, of which the administrative head being the Lieutenant Governor. Thus the elected government of the

¹ Aspirational Urbanism was first used by author while presenting his paper titled 'Invisible Man' identifying the issues on homelessness, at "Digital Deliberations", a one-day workshop on digitization of identity and its impact on homeless masses; held at National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore, India, July 2012. The workshop was a CSCS (Centre for the Study of Culture and Society) - NIAS Urban Research and Policy Programme initiative.

National Capital Territory, with the Chief Minister at the helm, has very little say in the physical development (*except in transport related issues*). On the other hand, the elected Municipal government under the jurisdiction of the Mayor has only maintenance and upkeep of the city in their purview.

The current governance system thus makes the Delhi Development Authority (DDA²) the sole custodian of physical development activity, headed by the Lieutenant Governor, who is not an elected representative. Thus the physical development activity in Delhi is not under the control of the public, that too in the largest democracy of the world.

In 1992 the 74th Constitutional amendment was brought which gave more power to the city/municipal government for localised-bottom-up development, but Delhi was exempted from it. This resulted in schemes like *bhagidari*³ by the elected Government of NCT for public participation with no constitutional bearing, making the development governance further more complex than any other part of India.

Even though the Master Plan Delhi (MPD) has provision to accommodate public opinion, there is no compulsion to comply with citizens' suggestions; in fact, it is only in MPD 2021 that the idea of a Local Area Plan (LAP) came in, which mandates for public participation through the locally elected representative of the municipality. Municipal elections were at one point an entry point to Indian politics, but less change making powers entrusted on a municipal councillor has reduced the capacity of a councillor over a period of time. This political system and the lack of power of municipal councillor has lead to a very low capacity at the municipal level, which has lead the Lieutenant Governor to decide to outsource the LAP work. Currently local area plans are being developed by Delhi Urban Arts Commission (DUAC⁵), which again is not accountable to the citizens of Delhi.

Physical development is generally a state subject in India (as land is a state subject), but the projection of Delhi's physical development as publicised in media by the political agenda of the

² DDA is the government development authority that is responsible for the development of Delhi and is the largest land owning agency in NCT. DDA also makes the Master Plan for NCT which is essentially a statutory development document.

³ "Bhagidari", the Citizen's Partnership in Governance - is a means for facilitating citywide changes in Delhi, utilises processes and principles of multi-stakeholders (citizen groups, NGOs, the Government) collaboration, applies the method of Large Group Interactive Events and aims to develop 'joint ownership' by the citizens and government of the change process. (8)

⁵ DUAC is under the parliament of India, thus under the elected representatives of the centre hence diluting the stake of the elected representatives of Delhi.

central government, skews the idea of development in the nation; But for more than a decade now, the central government is a multi party coalition system. A multi party coalition system erases the stamp of a political party over any development work, thus the development projects are seen in a more apolitical manner making them easy to be adopted by anyone. This leads to a case where the smaller regional parties of the coalition, adopts the development strategies in Delhi and plonk them in their respective constituencies without showing any sensitivity to the context. E.g the metro rail in Kolkata started in 1973 and it remained a localised development for decades with no replicas in other parts of the country, but the metro rail in Delhi started to function in 2002 and by 2010 studies for feasibility of a metro rail in more than 12 Indian cities already began and operations started in Bangalore.

Housing again is a State subject, which brings in democratic checks-and-balances in play which safeguards the interests of the general public. In Delhi, housing is under the central government, thus the democratic checks-and-balances works to safeguard the general aspirations of the nation and not the actual stake holders. Central government, irrespective of the kind of ruling coalition, tends to launch many programs that benefit the public or the so called common man; but when it comes to Delhi, it is the turf for it to implement the general national aspirational idea of development, thereby completely ignoring the local citizens. Eg. there are so many slum eviction cases in Delhi, which dates as recent as 2004 Yamuna Pushta⁶ eviction, where the interests of the local residents (*slum dwellers in this case*) were ignored to fulfil the aspirations to build a “beautiful city”.

Even though today Delhi by all means will qualify to be called a democratic state, but the development process is far away from being democratic. The development is driven by the aspirations which are usually prophesised through the skewed image of the western developed world and more so because such images are easier to bank political mileage and further more easy for the media to publicise. This has resulted in Master Plan vision which wants to brand Delhi as a *world class* city. The definition of world class and the projects emanating from it clearly shows a huge disconnect between the needs of the general public and the aspirations of the urban middle class. The idea of development in Delhi, begins with the aspirations of the urban middle class of which a majority don't vote, and the voting population of the economically weaker section are blinded by the projections of the media. E.g. Delhi government proposed

⁶ Yamuna Pushta was a slum on the banks of river Yamuna which was evicted 2004 and the residents were sent more than 35 km from their homes to be relocated in a remote resettlement colony named Savda Ghevda.

Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS), with a dedicated lane for the bus and public transport vehicle, which was vehemently opposed by the car owning urban middle class (who essentially don't vote) and the voice of the urban poor, who votes and uses the public transport and dedicated bicycle lane was unheard; to an extent that there were court orders condemning the project.

One such example is the case of building shopping malls, which is a direct manifestation of aspirations and borrowing developmental image from the west. "In 2003, the Ridge *Bachao Andolan (Save the Ridge Movement)* submitted a petition to the Supreme Court of India challenging the construction of India's largest shopping mall complex for being built on Delhi's southern ridge, a protected green space, in the up-and-coming South Delhi colony of Vasant Kunj. This constituted a land use violation of the statutorily binding Delhi Master Plan. Expert testimony by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA)—the agency that drafts and is legally bound to implement the Master Plan—defended the project in the Court for being "planned" and thus legal because of the involvement of professional builders, its high-quality construction, and its strategic function in boosting Delhi's architectural profile. Showing graphic models and architectural blueprints of the proposed development, emphasizing the project's 300 million USD price tag, and describing the (shopping) mall as a "world class" commercial complex, the DDA suggested that the visual appearance of the future mall was in itself enough to confirm the project's planned-ness. How could a project of such strategic importance in Delhi's effort to become a world-class consumer destination not be planned, the DDA's lawyer argued. This was so even after its own "Expert Committee" found the complex in "flagrant violation" of planning law. During the course of the mall proceedings in the Supreme Court, an adjacent multi-generational slum settlement in conformance with the land use designation listed in the Master Plan was declared "unplanned" and illegal by the DDA for being a "nuisance" to the neighbouring middle class residential colonies. Based on a set of photographs showing the "unsightly" conditions in the slum and despite the absence of a survey or scientific evaluation of its so-called "nuisance-causing activities", the DDA demolished the settlement without compensation, an action upheld by the court." (1)

This aspiration which leads and controls urbanism in Delhi have over a period of time become a fetish of those who have public voice and is commodified as images (from the west by media and political propaganda). As a result of this we can see terms like 'Transit Oriented Development', 'New Urbanism', 'Land use control', 'Flyovers and Foot Over Bridges', 'District

Centres' and such creeping into the development vocabulary, of which many are failed models of modern planning and design regime or are redundant in a developing nation like India. These commodified images in contemporary Delhi, seems to be in the constant state of flux, which re-emerges with every discourse in the development sector.

Delhi is the power hub of India and being the capital city makes it sort of a showcase 'by India for an international audience'. The idea of development by the central government will always be abstracted by the perspective of the larger good of the nation, and development of Delhi being under central government makes it a laboratory of showcase projects and iconic buildings which essentially be always disconnected from the ground realities. Similarly the aspirations of the urban middle class who are not part of the electoral politics and benefit most from the post-liberal booming economy will be that of a benevolent state catering to a globalized society and disconnected from the actual urban needs.

This abstraction of the urban middle class aspiration to a commodity (which essentially is just a graphic/image), and dilution of the interests of a voting economically weaker section is leading to an urban disaster and increasing disparity in Delhi and in-turn being replicated across the nation. The indigenous urban areas are considered redundant and sometimes even termed as 'slums', due to lack of conformity towards the commodified image. Any development is judged based on its conformity with the commodified image, more distant it is from the image, lesser are the possibility of it getting accepted. The affiliation to this image is sometimes subdued due to development controls arising from urban activism by urbanists, but an outburst of this can be seen in the satellite city of Gurgaon, Faridabad and NOIDA. At a point when India is booming or so called 'India shining', it is high time to look back at the root cause of political mayhem in urban development in Delhi and its repercussions in the social life of Indians.

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Abstract

During the last few decades the discipline of landscape ecology has emerged as a framework for planning and design. This paper aims to show how the concept of edges and ecotones has great potential, both literally and metaphorically, as a basis for design strategies across several scales from city, site, to building. Edges, across many disciplines, have extremely functional characteristics. In landscape ecology, edges are the portion of an ecosystem near its perimeter that filters movements and flows of plant material, wind, sun, water, and animals that physically encounter the edge. An ecotone is a specific type of ecological boundary, which is a zone of transition and interaction between two ecosystems. Thus, edges and ecotones are highly dynamic features in the landscape, and define the relationship between two areas of interaction. Furthermore, they offer us great insight into how processes work across the landscape, both natural and urban. Two projects, a competition entry by Greenworks PC titled *Urban Ecotones: Transitional Spaces for Commerce and Culture*, and a thesis project by A. Bogusat, titled “Re-interpreting and Re-programming the Edge: Site, Infrastructure and Community” demonstrate the use of ecological boundaries as a tool for design by creating multifunctional landscapes to accommodate disparate human uses and natural processes. These projects illustrate that design is a process of relation building, in which edges have a primary role. Creating such landscapes is becoming increasingly important; with increasing urbanization and environmental concerns there is a need to create sustainable designs that allow for human activities while supporting essential natural processes.

Key Words: Edges, Ecotones, Landscape Ecology, Multifunctional Landscapes, Urban-rural Fringe, Relational Perspective

Introduction

Landscape ecology studies the relationships between organisms and landscape patterns and processes. In this context, landscapes are a heterogeneous assortment of ecosystems, and are composed of biotic and abiotic processes that function across space and over time (Forman 1995, 19-20). Examining these complex interactions has led landscape ecologists to the conclusion that all landscapes are highly dynamic and profoundly interconnected. This new understanding challenges the conventional notions that natural systems are both predictable and controllable. Moreover, the discipline as a whole confronts the deeply imbedded dichotomy of nature versus humans, countryside versus cityscape, by establishing that accounting for human agency in ecological studies is integral to understanding ecological and landscape systems (Lister 2010; Reed 2010). Thus, landscape ecologists examine not only natural processes, but also the reciprocal relationship between humans, nature, and the landscape. They have provided a new understanding of all landscapes based in a relational perspective of the world: “The important word here is relationships” (Karvonen 2011, 26). This relational perspective is central to planning and design, as design is a process of relating programmatic elements and site.

While ecology is a scientific study and design a cultural action, both disciplines share a fundamental interest in the landscape (Nassauer 2002, 217). These two very different lenses through which to view the world are being further integrated as designers and planners address the concerns identified by ecologists. The need to better understand and manage human impacts on ecosystems has resulted in the development of new theories, such as ecological urbanism, that are founded on the principles of ecology.

Projects such as the competition entries for Downsview Park in Toronto and Fresh Kills Park in New York exemplify a design process rooted in ecology. For instance, the winning entry for Fresh Kills by James Corner/ Field Operations, called *Lifescape*, makes use of the concept of a landscape matrix [Fig. 1]. This theoretical construct, beyond simply prescribing solutions to specific ecological problems, is used metaphorically as a spatial framework for the design as a whole. Composed of threads, clusters, and mats, these elements form sets that make up landscape matrices. The purpose of each matrix varies depending on whether it is to support programmatic activities or ecological processes, allowing for these disparate functions to occur simultaneously on the site (Pollak 2007). Applying the concept of a matrix acknowledges the dynamic complexity of the site and program. Therefore, using ecology as a guiding framework is a powerful tool for designers and, as Corner has suggested, a wellspring of original visions for the future, as it enables designers to focus on creating relationships within the built landscape instead of static objects (Johnson and Hill 2002, 15-16).

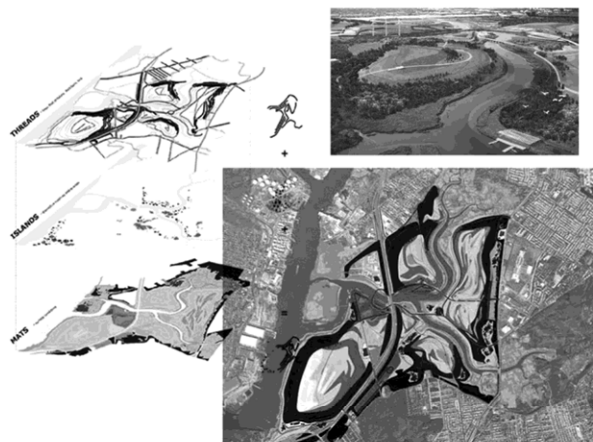


Figure 1. *Lifescape* by Field Operations. (New York City: Department of City Planning 2006)

Ecological Boundaries

At the core of landscape ecology are movements and flows between ecosystems. These interactions are concentrated in the boundaries of landscape features. Boundaries, or edges, are the outer band of a patch, and thus are significant elements in a heterogeneous landscape (Cadenasso et al. 2003, Forman 1995). Across disciplines boundaries have strong functional characteristics. In biology, boundaries are permeable cellular membranes that filter material in and out of the cell [Fig. 2]. This analogy is often used to help visualize the function of boundaries in the landscape (Forman 1995). Similar to cellular membranes, edges are the zones of contact between two separate elements, where the rates and magnitudes of ecological processes change abruptly (Wiens, Crawford, and Gosz 1985). Moreover, edges may be permeable to some processes while impermeable to others. This depends on the type of process and the characteristic of the boundary itself.

Three main characteristics are used to describe an edge: the length, which also describes the curvilinearity; the width between the border and interior of a patch edge; and the height, including stratification [Fig. 2]. Thus, these characteristics insinuate how flows and movements navigate through an edge in the landscape. For instance, it has been found that a curvy edge increases interaction across its width, while a straight, hard edge tends to promote movements along its length (Forman 1995).

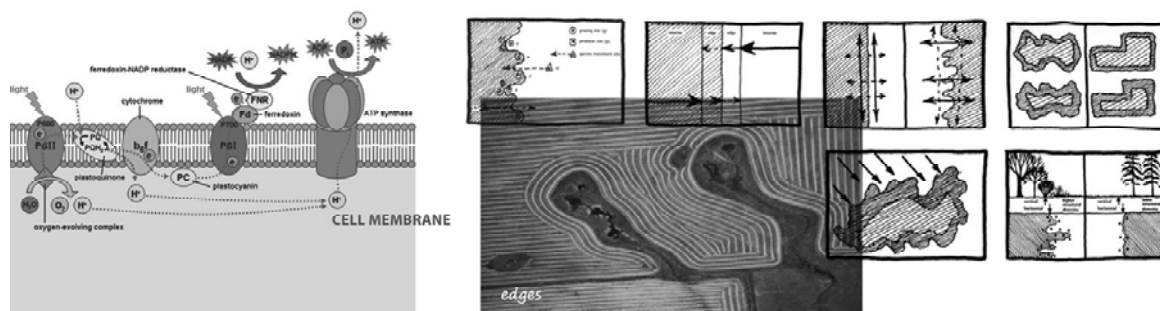


Figure 2. Cellular membrane as an analogy for ecological boundaries. Characteristics of edges are described by width, length and height. (Dramstad, Olson, and Forman 1996)

A more specific type of ecological boundary is an ecotone, which is composed of multiple edges. An ecotone is a zone of transition between two ecosystems; containing aspects of both ecosystems, it becomes its own unique and distinct zone in the landscape (Forman 1995). Since both edges and ecotones influence landscape processes, they also define the relationship between separate elements in the landscape, and thus describe how diverse landscapes interact with one another. Applied to designed landscapes, the concept of ecological boundaries can be used as a tool for relating diverse programmatic elements or land uses.

Multifunctional Landscapes

Being able to relate diverse land uses becomes particularly important when addressing the issue of multifunctionality. Rigid land-use planning of the 20th century tended to separate land-uses. However, ecology offers a new perspective of landscapes that accepts spontaneous interplay between functions in the landscape. This can guide more sustainable planning and management of landscapes as it encourages the coexistence of and the beneficial relationships between humans and natural processes (Gallent, Andersson, and Bianconi 2006, 21). Thus, we need to develop new urban typologies that assume social, economic and ecological roles. It is here that the concept of edges can be used to create synergies between disparate land uses and natural processes.

Edges of Cities

There is one area of all cities which is inherently full of disparate land uses: the city edge. Also known as the fringe, the edges of cities occupy ambiguous grounds between urban and rural landscapes. As described by Gallent, Andersson, and Bianconi in *Planning on the Edge*, the edges of cities are a

“degraded area, fit only for locating sewage works, essential service functions and other, necessary but disliked, land uses.... But the fringe is also...where a range of urban uses, including large shopping centers, office buildings and business parks and leisure facilities collide with rural uses, such as farming and forestry, outdoor recreation and conservation” (2006, i).

Thus, it is a highly dynamic zone that is under pressure from the tension between urban growth and rural protection. Similar to ecological boundaries, the edge of cities separate two distinct landscapes, the rural and urban, and becomes a distinct and unique zone, in which these interactions are concentrated. Thus, the insight provided by ecological boundaries is particularly useful for managing, planning, and designing at the city edge.