



View from Charminar, Hyderabad

Pedestrianisation and the Indian City

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Indian cities are famous the world over for a host of different reasons. One of them is certainly their unique urban street life. It is not difficult to see the universal attraction that beholds with their bustling streets and bazaars lined with an extraordinary composition of historic buildings and an interesting variety of shops, open air markets and street vendors. This picture of the quintessential Indian commercial street is changing, however, before our eyes on many different levels. The improved quality and diversity of choice in retail outlets and chain stores, cafes and

restaurants over the last decade has brought a more international edge to India's city centres. Unfortunately, many old commercial districts in India's inner cities are also prime examples of the adverse effects of growth where frustrating levels of traffic congestion, pollution and safety hazards show the dangers of exponential growth in combination with unrestricted accessibility of traffic to the historical parts of Indian cities.

The adverse effects of growth on the liveability of city centres with a finely grained urban fabric are the result of

three inter-linked universal truths about developing economies. Firstly, a fast growing economy and a modernising society has driven rapidly expanding middle class families eager to have their own private vehicles. Secondly, governments, in their drive to stimulate crucial economic growth, tend to adopt a traffic policy primarily aimed at accommodating the ever increasing spatial demands of motorised traffic. Thirdly, a government that lets the urban public realm be taken over by motorised traffic tends to give the least consideration to the spatial and environmental needs of

what actually remains the vast majority of traffic users: the pedestrians.

These three facts add up to a familiar picture that all Indian metros are experiencing today. When addressing these issues, it's important to realise that these universal truths used to apply to many Western and East Asian cities when they were going through the same cycle of growth and urbanisation, resulting in similar environmental and spatial issues detrimental to the quality of life in their inner cities. For Indian cities to repeat the same misguided choices that other cities across the world have made in the past is a costly and avoidable mistake.

The Skywalk Controversy: With a building frenzy of elevated roads, flyovers, foot-over-bridges and skywalks in all major Indian cities, it's clear that most city governments are prioritising a drastic increase of road capacity and the creation of a spatial separation between motorised traffic and pedestrians. This is being achieved by lifting either the motorised traffic or the pedestrians up into the air.

Whilst investments in metro and bus systems are being taken up as well, the majority of the infrastructure investment remains focused on providing space to accommodate the growth of private vehicles rather than the expansion and long overdue upgrading of systems of mass urban public transportation. In extreme high density inner city environments in other Asian cities such as Hong Kong's central district, a network of pedestrian only skywalks and foot-over-bridges have been put in place over the years. These 'above grade streets', directly link to a series of metro stations, shopping malls and office towers. As comfortable as this is for pedestrians, with much of the pedestrian traffic taken off the street level, some of its streets have unfortunately

turned into barren traffic thoroughfares, devoid of any traditional street life.

Having pedestrians elevated six meters above grade has its clear benefits in terms of increased traffic flow capacity and pedestrian safety, especially when separating vast numbers of commuting pedestrians from the vehicular traffic around large nodes of public transportation. A good example here in India is the first Skywalk in Mumbai, connecting Bandra station to Mumbai's newest CBD, the Bandra Kurla Complex. This skywalk has proven its value by allowing a large number of commuters to take a comfortable walk on their final stretch to work, avoiding the traffic nightmare around the train station.

To lift pedestrians from the streets onto skywalks, however, is not the ideal solution for India's inner cities where pedestrians are a crucial part of the street-life and where people come to enjoy the interesting mix of small 'unorganised' shops, the newest chain stores and restaurants and the colourful variety of hawkers and other street vendors. The

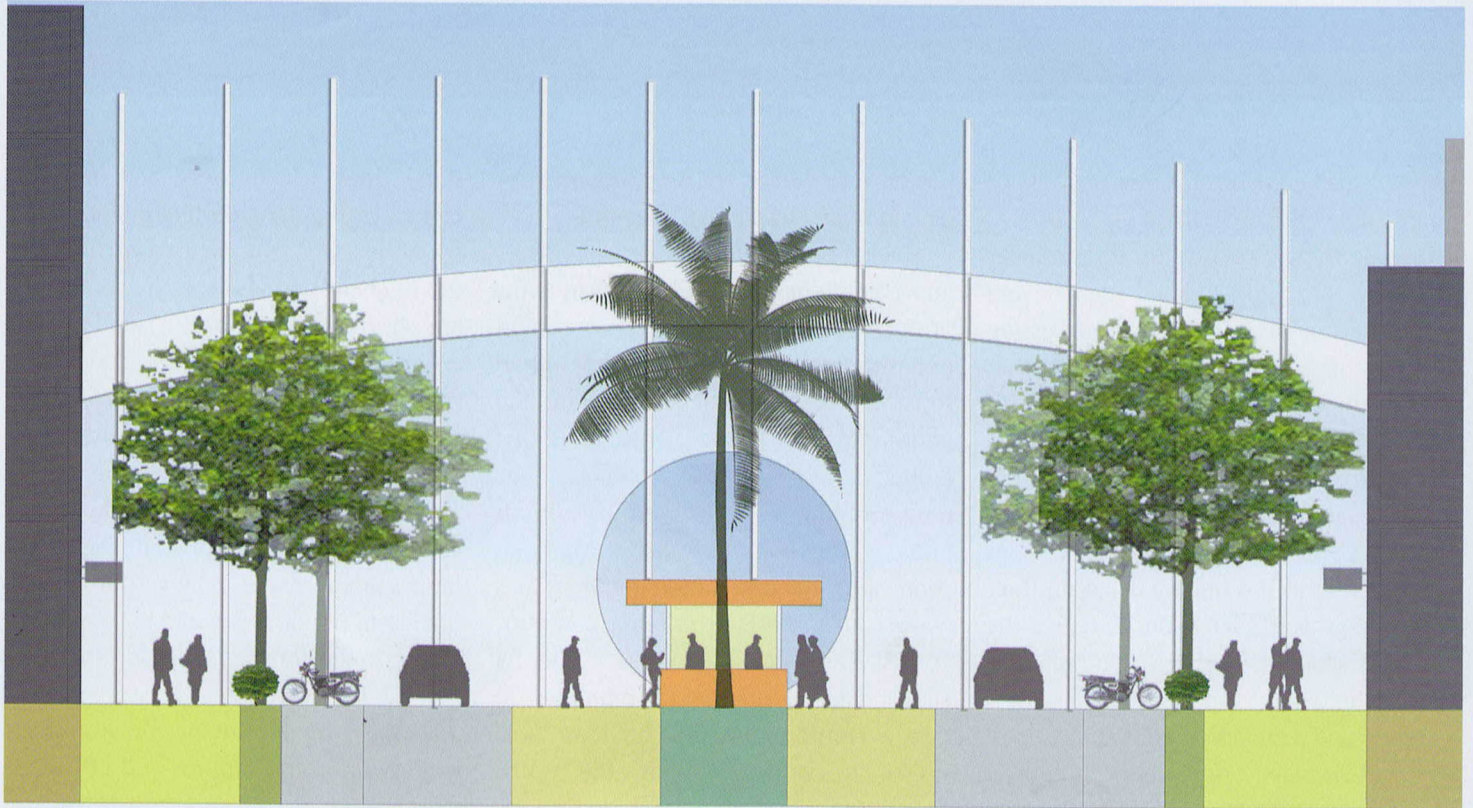
same goes for flyovers and elevated highways that are perfectly suitable to solve the traffic jams on arterial roads and thoroughfares around the city centre, but are not the solution for the small grained urban fabric of India's most iconic inner city areas.

An American Scenario: To sustain the momentum of investment in the middle and higher segments of the retail, commercial and residential sectors in India's urban centres, an investment in the quality of public space and the liveability of the inner cities is as important as its accessibility. With so many shopping malls and high quality living environments coming up in the suburbs and in various new townships, the threat of a scenario along the lines of the desertion of American inner cities in the post-world war era is not unimaginable.

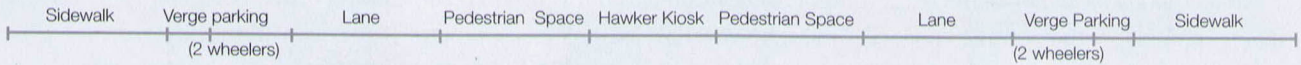
How long will it take for the upper and middle class residents of India's cities to tire of the urban chaos, constant traffic jams and pollution and to abandon the city centers in favour of the newly planned new towns? When that happens,



Traffic jam, Mumbai



SECTION (Thyagaraya Road)



the higher segments of the commercial and residential sector will follow suit, leaving the inner cities to become second rate urban districts only able to retain the lower end of the housing, retail and office markets.

Pedestrianisation to the Rescue: Instead of indiscriminately paving the way for motorised traffic, the time is right for India's urban authorities to start adopting alternative planning scenarios with a focus on pedestrianisation and traffic calming along with investment in mass transit systems to reduce car dependency. The pedestrianisation concept has proven its value in cities the world over, but as an integrally planned answer to inner city woes, it has never been implemented in India before. Pedestrianisation itself doesn't need to be a complicated nor a costly affair, but it can only be successfully implemented



Redevelopment proposal, Thyagaraya Nagar



Skywalk, Bandra

when it is embedded in an integral plan of fresh government traffic policies and a clear set of parking regulations.

As evidenced by the impressive new network of metro lines and dedicated bus lanes, the nation's Capital is at the forefront of pedestrianisation initiatives in India. The chaotic traffic situation at Chandni Chowk and the Red Fort area at the heart of Old Delhi could be soon a thing of the past. The ambitious plan to make Chandni Chowk a 'pedestrian-friendly zone' during the daytime is scheduled to get underway in 2011.

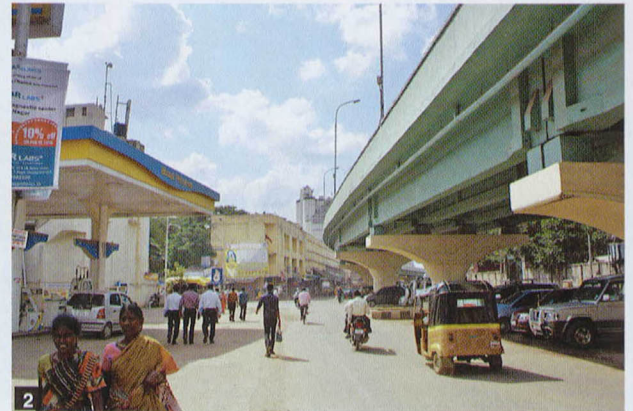
A set of calming measures have been formulated which are centered on a no-motorised-traffic-zone and the use of environmentally-friendly modes of transport such as battery-operated buses. The initiative has received a lot of support from both residents and traders of Chandni Chowk, who say that the new project will give a boost to trade as it will attract more customers and tourists to the area. A similar proposal for a car-free, pedestrian-friendly zone around the Charminar in Hyderabad is also in the final stages of planning and is slated to be implemented this year. The famous landmark of the city of Pearls will get the 'urban stage' it deserves under this plan. As so often is the case with complex

projects like these, the project has come to fruition thanks to the tireless efforts of the city's chief planner, who has been crucial in convincing key stakeholders including the government, local traders and residents to get behind this important project.

Thyagaraya Nagar pedestrianisation project: Another large-scale pedestrianisation project is being planned in the heart of Chennai, around the overburdened public space within the commercial district of Thyagaraya Nagar (T Nagar). The rapid commercialisation of this area, which was primarily residential in the past, has led to a situation where it's streets are bursting at the seams and this is especially evident during popular festival days. Large numbers of shoppers, commuters, street vendors, rickshaws, cars and buses compete here in a daily struggle for space. To ensure all local stakeholders will be on board with the far-reaching plans being formulated, the city authorities are preparing an integrated development strategy to tackle the interconnected spatial issues in a sustainable manner. The strategy puts forward measures ranging from a focus on accessibility by means of walking and by public transport, developing regulations to meet the spatial demands for parking

and for street vendors, through to developing plans to control the quality of the newly-designed public realm aimed at satisfying the wide range of target groups. A series of public consultations have been taking place to ensure that proposals have a voice from both residents and the local business community.

At the core of the interconnected redevelopment proposals lies the desire to create a network of pedestrian-friendly streets which keep motorised traffic out as much as possible. By dividing the pedestrian-friendly zone into an eastern and western zone, with no vehicular traffic being able to travel at grade through T Nagar's centre from east to west and vice-versa, a large segment of through traffic is proposed to be taken out of T Nagar's commercial centre. Since it would not have been feasible to shift all of the traffic from the pedestrianised zone to other already overburdened streets and flyovers around T Nagar, an underground tunnel has been proposed cutting through the T Nagar central area and this has been put forward as a crucial component of the traffic solution. At the same time, the growth of destination traffic is proposed to be mitigated through the use of a feeder system of light public transport connecting the T Nagar shopping district to four brand new metro stations in less than five minutes. Major shopping streets are proposed as a continuous car-free spine through the heart of the pedestrian-friendly zone, stretching from Mambalam Train Station at Ranganathan Street via the west side of Usman Road and Panagal Park to Pondy Bazaar. Other streets in the pedestrian-friendly zone will be transformed into 'traffic-calmed streets', with no on-street parking allowed for non-residents, and with restricted vehicular traffic on a narrow segmented area of the road. At the edge of the pedestrian-friendly zone, several strategically located multi-storey-car-parks are proposed to provide for ample and affordable parking space. In combination with the feeder



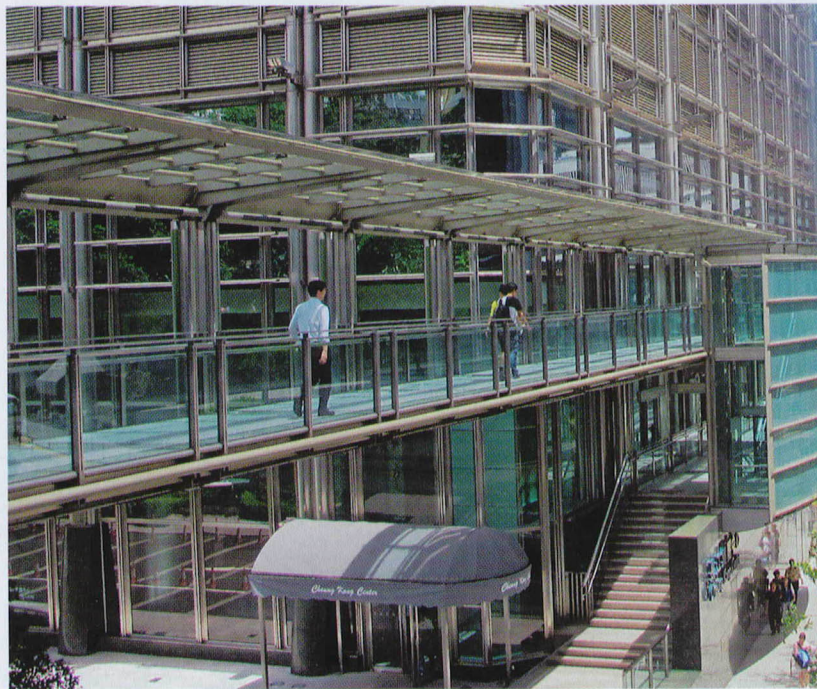
1. Thyagaraya Nagar-Pedestrianisation montage (After)
2. Thyagaraya Nagar-Pedestrianisation montage (Before)

system that will run through the pedestrian-friendly zone, the multi-storey car parks will ensure that all destinations in the pedestrian-friendly zone remain accessible within a five minute walking radius, which is generally accepted as a comfortable walking distance for most pedestrians. Various mitigating measures are also proposed to deal with the climate including the planting of a significant amount of trees and the building of large canopy structures at strategic locations. These are important elements in ensuring the transformation of the public realm into an enjoyable space that is inviting for people to walk through. Space for robust

street furniture including benches and permanent street vendor stalls, dedicated areas for cultural events and passive recreation at outdoor cafes, will all add to a more relaxing and varied experience for visitors.

A Unique Place: Skeptics that don't believe pedestrianisation will work in India have pointed out that upper and middle class consumers prefer not to walk to their destinations considering the unfavourable climate for most of the year in many cities. They insist that in the light of the many, easily accessible, air-conditioned malls coming up all over India's cities, direct car accessibility to

every shop is crucial in order to retain this important part of the consumer market. However, plausible this sounds, it is not a sustainable answer. With the estimated growth of motorised traffic in the next decade, it is clear that no amount of flyovers and road enhancements will ever be enough to satisfy the spatial demands posed by the traffic. The persistence of constant traffic jams and pollution will only worsen and will sooner or later drive customers away. To face the growing competition of suburban malls head-on, it's important for India's inner cities to build upon their 'Unique Selling Points' (USP) in order to maintain a competitive



1. Pedestrianised area, Times Square, New York 2. Pedestrianised street, Malaga 3. Skywalk, Hong Kong

edge. The key USP should be to provide a hassle-free outdoor shopping experience in a pollution-free environment, that celebrates the unique characteristics of an organically grown urban environment, with a constantly evolving mixture of shops, markets, restaurants, offices, cultural, religious and educational institutions, recreational parks and events spaces. Places should be viewed as spaces for social interaction and cohesion, shared by people from all walks of life. By investing in the quality of the public space, authorities can set the right example for the private sector to take up

their share in an investment in the quality of the built environment. Every suburb and township is capable of building a host of new shopping malls, but they will never attain the set of unique historical, cultural and socio-economic characteristics as evidenced in the urban centres and which have developed organically over many years.

It is these vibrant urban centres that are an essential part of each city's urban identity, which forms an important social foundation for the well-being of its citizens. In a globalising world where its cities, their people and lifestyles all start

to look the same, it is actually of universal importance for citizens to be able to identify with their city as a unique place in this world. The value of that should not be underestimated.

Steven Beunder is based in Mumbai and works as Associate Master Planner for TOWNLAND, an award winning international, multi-disciplinary planning and design consultancy headquartered in Hong Kong and with an office in Mumbai. TOWNLAND is currently the land use and master planner for the pedestrianisation and redevelopment project in T Nagar, Chennai. +