



“Getting cities’ infrastructure up to a basic international level most important challenge”

From redevelopment to master planning greenfield projects in urban infra, **Townland Consultants** has done it all, and now it has bagged significant projects in the Smart City pie. In an exclusive interview to *Construction Business Today*, **Steven Beunder - Associate Master Planner, Townland Consultants**, discusses their projects in India’s Smart Mission, and underlines the challenges faced in executing them.

Your company has been shortlisted as consultant for Smart City projects. Tell us about the various projects you are handling in the Smart City space.

Townland is a specialist Consultancy firm in Master Planning and Urban Design from Hong Kong, and as part of a consortium with **Jones Lang Lasalle** and **Tata Consulting Engineers**, we worked on Smart City Proposals for several cities throughout India. Chennai and Amritsar are the two biggest cities we worked for that have been selected as part of the Smart Cities Mission. For Chennai the focus of the Smart City vision is on the public space and infrastructural improvements in one of its older and more congested shopping districts of the city: T. Nagar. We have proposed an integral approach to the traffic and transportation challenges and public space improvements in order for this important commercial area to regain some of its allure as the city’s favourite shopping destination. These improvements are essential for T. Nagar to withstand the increased competition of the large scale and more accessible shopping malls on the outskirts of the city.

Complex, medium term planning strategies like pedestrianization,

limitations to vehicular access at certain hours of the day, combined with a comprehensive network of separate bicycle lanes, a bicycle sharing system, and smart bus feeders connecting the heart of T. Nagar with nearby metro stations, are all part of the Smart City strategy. The ultimate goal is to make people less dependent on private vehicles and create a more sustainable, greener, and attractive public environment.

For a heritage city like Amritsar that depends for a large part on its appeal as a tourist destination, it made sense to focus the Smart City Mission on improving the infrastructure and public space environment of its historic Walled City.



Smart City Mission: Network of wide footpaths and separate bicycle lanes

The fragile urban fabric of Amritsar’s inner city has to deal with a multitude of commercial and environmental pressures and is facing a realistic prospect of losing its cultural and historical identity. Since the Smart City Mission provides the unique opportunity to comprehensively deal with these complex inner city issues, many cities around India that participated in the Smart City Mission have, just like Amritsar, opted to focus on retrofitting and urban renewal strategies instead of going for more straight forward green site developments.

In Amritsar the Smart City proposal focuses on the entire scope of implementation, operation and

maintenance issues of all aspects relating to the Walled City’s public realm. The focus on public space improvements complements the renovation strategy for the built environment of the Walled City that has already been covered under the HRIDAY scheme. Prominent parts of the Smart City vision are pedestrianization of several streets around the Golden Temple and in the Katra Ahluwalia and Majith Mandi Areas, creation of several limited vehicular traffic zones, an intelligent traffic and parking management system, retrofitting two city parks and placing cables and other infrastructure utilities underground.

How do Indian Smart Cities compare with Smart Standards in the developed world?

The objective of the Indian Smart Cities Mission is “to promote cities that provide core infrastructure and give a decent quality of life to its citizens, a clean and sustainable environment and application of ‘Smart’ Solutions.” This broad definition of what it means to be Smart is clearly different from what is considered to be a Smart City in many other countries. Getting the cities’ infrastructure (like sewage, storm water drainage, solid waste management, power supply and public transportation) up to a basic international level is the most important challenge that most Indian cities face and will make the biggest impact in creating cleaner, more sustainable, urban living conditions. It has been estimated that of all Smart City Projects that have been proposed so far actually about one third only has a ICT component. So interestingly enough Smart ICT based solutions are not essential in reaching many of the Smart City goals, but can help in general to speed up the implementation process, make operations more efficient, services more user friendly for the general public, and last but not least create more transparency in how the infrastructure is operated and maintained.

How project ready is India to implement its Smart Mission?

The picture varies between different cities. The basic infrastructure in



Smart City Mission: Pedestrian-friendly shopping streets

some of the first and second tier cities is in relatively good shape and these cities are well positioned to start implementing the next steps in creating a more sustainable and Smarter urban environment. These large cities often have an internationally oriented business community and have been able to attract the interest of large (foreign) investors, so funding of more ambitious, complex, long term projects is not such an issue. At the same time there are many third tier cities that still face an uphill battle with implementing basic urban infrastructure and services, and find it more challenging to get private sector parties on board.

The implementation of the Smart City Projects will be in the hands of SPVs, requiring close collaboration between local, State and Central authorities and private sector stakeholders. Whilst for some cities sharing of responsibilities (and power) in an SPV seems to be no problem, other cities are struggling to get to grips with this novel approach to Urban Development.

Which is the best business model to implement Smart projects, i.e. EPC, PPP, BOT, BOOT, etc?

This seems to be generally related to the size of the city and also varies for different services. The larger cities often have a bigger business community. Combined

with a higher standard infrastructure already in place, they find it easier to attract the interest of private sector investors and can more easily opt for a PPP model. In smaller third tier cities that don’t have that luxury, the government will have to be much more in the driver’s seat and are more likely to choose an EPC or BOT business model.

The business model also varies of course between the different types of Smart City Projects. Projects related to services, like power and water supply that can create a direct revenue are more likely to attract the interest of the private sector for a PPP than, for instance the upgradation of a park or road.

What kind of government policy would foster a Smart Urbane India, considering the unprecedented rapid urbanisation currently seen in India?

The challenges can be faced much better, when Indian city authorities are willing to adopt a more progressive, market friendly approach in the way they are organised and operate. The focus should be on more transparency and accountability. Consistency in policies on local, State and Central government level for the short, medium, and long term, will also help significantly in creating a more fruitful environment for private sector investments.