

## **Urbanization, Planning and Spirituality for a Sustainable World**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Global urbanization has not only changed the face of humanity but the whole planet. In 2007, world population became more urban than rural. Industrial growth, as well as soaring levels of consumption, has taken a high toll on natural resources (land, water, air). At the same time, in large parts of the urbanized world we witness social inequality and rampant poverty. Modern urban planning does not provide adequate answers to address complex challenges like climate change. As an interdisciplinary discipline it considers social, economic, historic, political, environmental, legal, and other aspects. But it has mostly failed to integrate the human interior dimensions such as identity, emotions, relatedness, psyche, and spirituality. Life occurs to us both externally and internally. In this paper, the authors argue that urban planning approaches that disregard the inner space of human beings cannot be sustainable. Socio-technical solutions, technological innovation, and economic growth must be aligned with a transformation of individual and collective mindset. In order to return to a more harmonious integration of an urbanized humanity with the natural world, urban residents must consciously transform their values and worldviews. The future of the planet depends on choices we make regarding the way we urbanize.

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## 1. Where do we stand? The Global Human Settlements Scenario and the Indian context

Global urbanization has entered a stage of superlatives over the course of barely two centuries. We are currently witnessing an urban transformation at global scale. In our times, uniquely most people live in cities. According to the United Nations (2010), in the Americas and Europe the proportion of urban population ranges between 70 to 85 percent, nearing approximately 90 percent by 2050. Asia and Africa, the other two large regions, are currently urbanising at such high rates that they will cross the 50 percent mark in 25 and 30 years, respectively. In addition, the twentieth century saw as a novel phenomenon the rise of megapolitanisation with population beyond 10 million. Two aspects of the rapid growth in the world's urban population over the last 50–100 years are especially remarkable, that is the increase in the number of large cities, and the historically unprecedented size of the largest cities. In 1950, the majority of the 20 largest cities were located in developed countries comprising population sizes between three to thirteen million, with New York at the top. This has seen a gravitational shift in projections for 2025 estimating a range no less than 11 to far beyond 35 million inhabitants in Tokyo (UN 2010). Additionally, most of contemporary megacities are already located in the global South – including Delhi, Sao Paulo and Lagos – and most new ones are expected to emerge in these regions.

It seems almost nowhere lie the challenges and potentials of urbanisation so close as in India, both spatially as well as in terms of social, economic, physical, and ecological circumstances. India's cities are made of extremes, where nightmares and dreams of a better life can be found right next to each other.

*“We are currently witnessing an urban transformation at global scale. Asia is urbanising at such high rate that it will soon cross the 50 percent.”*

These and many other issues underscore the fact that “India is at a transitional level of urbanisation with large scale variations in the trend and pattern of urbanisation over the decades and also across states. There is an increase in number of towns and cities over the decades though the level of urbanisation is still low compared to the Western standards and even among certain Asian countries” (Banerjee 2013: xvii).

## **2. *Kalyug* and Beyond: Cities' Relationship with the Environment, Nature and the Planet**

Over time the relationship of cities with their environment, nature, and the planet as a whole has changed dramatically. Mythologically, humans developed from an ideal, paradisiacal, well integrated relationship as presented in many sacred scriptures to our troubled times known as *kalyug* in the Vedic worldview. Such a notion of deteriorating cosmic times was common in the ancient Greek and Roman civilisations as well. Historically, the distinction of premodern, modern, postmodern, and what may come afterwards, can be used to describe broadly changes of cities' relationships with the world. Thus premodern cities were primarily characterised by a religious cosmology depicted in their (planned) urban layout, divine rulers, a highly stratified society, and an agriculture based economy largely in unison with, but an ultimate dependence on the natural environment.

The enlightenment and industrial revolution brought about a major shift in worldview. Cities now developed an economy based on industrialised manufacturing with a capitalist bourgeoisie and a labour class, while technological advances created a feeling of dominance over high degree of independence from nature. Urban planning became a rationalized, functional-scientific exercise of technocrats and other professionals. Cities in the postmodern world are increasingly interconnected in global city networks. Their economies build on information technology and knowledge, and ease of transport contributing to the cosmopolitanisation of urban residents. Urban planning has become a multi-dimensional task comprising the spatial-physical, socio-cultural factors for quality of life, but also showing the emergence of uniform global designs and architecture.

Alongside the globalization of the planet came also the emergence of high risk levels at a global scale leading to a "polycrisis" of multiple challenges. Whilst risks of any kind in the premodern era were only perceived as a matter of faith and fate, the modern era made us believe we could control and thereby contain risks. In the end it was the same technological progress and advancements in science that helped the birthing of new, global risks (see Woiwode 2007). In its recently published 2013 report entitled "2052: A Global Forecast for the Next Forty Years" the Club of Rome identifies five major ecological and social crises, namely an unemployment crisis, a food crisis, a global financial crisis, an economic crisis and a global ecological crisis. Further it states:

*"With the globalization of the planet came the emergence of high risk levels leading to a 'polycrisis' of multiple challenges."*

"These individual crises are, in fact, driven by many of the same root causes: Values not aligned with the crises we are facing and an antiquated belief system,

an outdated economy, outdated institutions and inadequate delivery mechanisms....Entire sets of beliefs and behaviour have become outdated and counter-productive and need to be replaced by new thinking and new approaches. The good news is that this change is effectively beginning to take place, despite the stiff resistance it faces" (Randers 2013).

In a preliminary conclusion we may concede an urgent need to reintegrate the city and human culture with nature. So how could we possibly re-integrate us human beings and the city with the natural world and the larger cosmos? In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, a newly evolving worldview is changing our cosmology. What we currently witness is an ongoing process shifting from the (post)modern condition with its critical features of an alienated human being, estranged from nature and cosmos, and exhibiting a worldview that is primarily logical, rational, intellectual, but fundamentally reductionist. In contrast, this new worldview is recognizable in such terms as "integral", "transmodern", "post-industrial". As against the (post)modern fragmented perspective, it (c)aims to be holarchic or holistic by being post-rational or trans-rational due to a transformed consciousness (Gidley 2007, Goerner 1999, Wilber 2000). At its core is the conscious effort to re-integrate with nature and the kosmos (cosmos). It is therefore a significant departure from the (post-)modern condition of man.

*"The city as an 'integral city' going 'beyond-the-modern' integrating body, mind, soul, and spirit of the human being together with its spatial and built dimension."*

In this novel way of seeing the world, the city assumes a place in the holarchy of being, for instance in terms of care of the Soul (individual)/care of the city (collective)/care for the planet (cosmic-planetary) (Doucet 2007). The city may be then conceived as an "integral city" (Ellin 2006, Hamilton 2008) that is going "beyond-the-modern" (Fingerhuth 2004), integrating body, mind, soul, and spirit of the human being together with its spatial and built dimension.

### **3. Towards integrating Spirituality in the Urban Planning Framework**

#### *3.1. Cities, Urban Planning and Spirituality*

Spirituality, in fact, is not new to cities. In premodern times, virtually all settlements were embedded in the spiritual cosmology of the respective society. And yet there is a need, as we feel, for an awakened urban community in our troubled times. India, with its long and deep-rooted spiritual traditions, can be an especially fertile ground for pioneering innovative practices in urban planning.

Spirituality has hitherto not been on the agenda of urban policy makers, professionals and many urban dwellers, at least in the context of the (post)modernist worldviews dominant in the Western hemisphere. Given these global conditions, we observe an emerging significance and re-positioning of religious and spiritual values, not merely as a 're-enchantment' in Europe, but in many parts of the world, with their own very specific local characteristics (e.g. Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Knoblauch, 2009: 27-31; Raman, 2009; Tacey, 2003).

Clearly, inner and outer transformation is a central aspect of most spiritual practices, especially if envisaged within a practical notion of spirituality that is concerned with changing one's everyday attitudes and behavior. Intrinsic of this perspective is a type of spirituality clearly rooted "in-this-world" practicing conscious action in the quotidian world situated in the 'here-and-now'. Typically, this is a feature of the current revitalisation of spirituality in many Western societies which embrace an active or 'engaged spirituality' (Tacey, 2003) or even 'green yoga' (Fürch, 2009; Feuerstein and Feuerstein 2007). Some of the more recent approaches like the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo or Roy Bhaskar's philosophy of meta-reality (Bhaskar, 2002), are rooted in the Vedas.

*"Inner and outer transformation is a central aspect of most spiritual practices, especially within a practical notion of spirituality."*

However, the growing number of Yoga centres and yoga practitioners worldwide clearly indicate that yoga has taken firm roots in the modern urban lifestyle. At its heart yoga is ancient yet modern; possibly due to the fact that its teachings and principles relate closely to the human body and mind in its varying conditions. Due to its openness, flexible adaptability and integral framework the tradition of yoga combines well with environmental activism: "Green Yoga is Yoga that incorporates environmental mindfulness and activism in its spiritual orientation at a time of great global crisis. It stands for a sattvic mind and a sattvic world" (Feuerstein and Feuerstein, 2007: 31). Both authors, Fürch and Feuerstein, emphasise the ethical and normative guidance yoga values can provide for the development of an ecologically sensitive awareness as well as an 'eco-yogic' practice (Fürch, 2009: 90).

In January 2011, the conference 'Simple Solutions for Inner and Outer Climate Change' was held in South India (Deccan Chronicle Chennai 2011). This event was hosted by the Sri Sri Institute for Agricultural Science and Technology (SSIAST), whose founder sage is Sri Sri Ravishankar. According to SSIAST, every individual needs to undergo an internal transformation in order to contribute meaningfully to climate change response. The theme focused on empowering

each individual with simple solutions that can be implemented in every walk of life. In his speech, Sri Sri Ravishankar did not only urge the audience to think towards the convergence of science, but even stressed the importance of solutions for the urban lifestyle to become much more environmentally friendly (Woiwode 2012b).

Because of the suppression of spirituality in technical disciplines, we need to generate the intellectual space to integrate it with the urban built environment. For purposes of illustration, we will focus here on planning education and community planning.

### *3.2 Planning Education and Spirituality*

A spiritually grounded urban development planning practice would need a serious review of current planning curricula. Planning education needs to play a crucial role for the planning profession to sincerely take into account spirituality as an inherent realm of the human condition. This is about learning a new “language”, the language of introspection, of self-analysis, of looking inwardly in order to consciously act according to the notions and values of interdependence and connectivity, love and compassion. It involves practices planners are usually not so familiar with and have normally not received any training in, i.e. addressing the interiority of our existence, the aesthetics of being, the art of living (Woiwode, Trialog 2012a). Eventually, urban planning practitioners need to build their own consciousness, personal transformative practices (prayer, contemplation, meditation, psychotherapy, introspection), in order to be capacitated to work with and address interior dimensions of development and when working with other people. In our planning education, we have learned to study objective facts, but we are not trained in the subjective language of human interiority. Emotions, feelings, and spirituality are not (yet) part of a standard planning curriculum.

*“Planning education must play a crucial role for planners to sincerely take into account spirituality as an inherent realm of the human condition.”*

Within the planning community, Wight (e.g. 2009) has explored the nexus of spirituality and professionalism in planning education. He outlines some areas which may assist in bringing in spirituality such as the historic roots of planning about 200 years ago when the separation of spirituality/faith from scientific methods was not yet as sharp as it is nowadays. Yet another central area is that of linking spirituality and ethics, which is slowly taken up in planning education. Another field in which there is a clear interface comprises spirituality and leadership development. Management literature and theories have discovered spirituality already some time ago on account of its potential for the well-being and

job effectiveness of employees, but also as a leadership quality that fosters empathy, emotional and psychological guidance and last not least personality development (e.g. Edwards 2010). In the planning literature there is rare attention paid to this aspect of professional self-development. Hamilton (2008: 119-123), working with integral theory and spiral dynamics, explicitly includes spirituality into a leadership development programme for city decision-makers and planners.

### *3.3 Transformative community development<sup>1</sup>*

In planning for sustainability, Wheeler (2004) has adopted a focus on co-evolutionary processes of social and institutional change based on ecological economist Richard Noorgard's model. This approach, he suggests, would help "people see the world differently (changing cognition), through teaching, writing, art, even architecture [...]. Helping values change, through spiritual practice, teaching, personal example, work with children, or other means, can likewise help lay the groundwork for social evolution" (Wheeler, 2004: 236-237).

Transformative movements such as the transnational Transition Town initiatives (Hopkins 2008) are examples of an emerging practical 'urban' spirituality, for they seek to pragmatically transform everyday life. But what exactly does this transformation entail? Is transformation more than social and cultural change? To what extent does this type of transformation differ from the use common in urban contexts? Conventionally, urban transformations comprise foremost the exterior, physical transformation of the built environment, often also considering social and cultural features yet paying no attention to personal growth and development, higher human potentials and self-transformation towards innovative, more sustainable lifestyles. In a recent empirically grounded study based on interviews conducted worldwide with religious and secular organisations, Noy (2009) presents six ideal type visions of development. The 'transformative spiritualist' approach "involves the creation of a new, evolved human order based on spiritual principles of unity, justice, expansion of consciousness and moderation of human consumption. The key to this development is spiritual transformation, either purely internally or combined with social action" (Noy, 2009: 292). It is found that social movement organisations and

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<sup>1</sup> This section, in particular, benefits from a draft chapter Woiwode, C. (forthcoming), Practical Spirituality and the Contemporary City: Awakening the transformative Power for Sustainable Living. In: Giri, Ananta Kumar (Ed.) Practical Spirituality and Human Development. London: Zed Publications.

progressive activist religious movements – e.g. engaged Buddhism, Liberation Theology, Gandhian organisations, Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga – carry such a development notion.

It is only recently that such elements of a practical spirituality are applied in various policy areas related to sustainable urban development. Urban community and neighbourhood development, action research/planning and participatory planning approaches appear particularly suitable to be enriched by practices of individual and collective transformation.

## **5. Conclusion**

Urban planners and policy makers have not tapped on the potential these social changes, initiated by urban residents and green movements, may offer for visionary urban development paths in the future. Whilst the link between sustainability, spirituality and faith is acknowledged (Gardner, 2002; UNDP, 2007), spiritual dimensions are excluded from cities and urban development by urban professions that view it mostly as a socio-technical policy area without considerations of sustainable lifestyles and cultures.

Thus self-reflexivity, self-awareness, a critical review of one's own standing, role and acting in the world is required if - as planners - we want to explicitly work with and incorporate spirituality in planning practice, what Anhorn (2006: 73) calls "self-nourishment" within a spiritual planning practice. It demands a whole new way of approaching planning and even more so in teaching and educating planners in an area largely unexplored.

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*Woiwode and Selvakumar/Urbanisation Planning and Spirituality*

Planning from UIUC, USA and B.Arch (Hons) from IIT Kharagpur. His expertise lies in Leadership Development, Capacity Development for Working Professionals, and GIS. He is interested in the study of Vedic Sciences and is looking forward to contributing to the development of the Core Curriculum for Urban Practitioners at IIHS.