

The Case for Fixing India's Cities

Episode 69 | Big Ideas

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Transcript

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Abstract

India's major cities like Bangalore and Mumbai have become productive economic centers through natural market forces and historical advantages, but they suffer from serious problems of affordability and mobility that limit both quality of life and economic potential. Rather than abandoning these established agglomerations for new cities or townships, Suyash Rai argues that existing cities can be dramatically improved through better urban planning that addresses inefficient land use patterns.

His research across thirteen Indian cities reveals a striking imbalance: only 15% of urban land is allocated to streets (compared to 25% in well-functioning global cities like London) and barely 3% to parks and public spaces, while 42% of land within private plots sits unused as open space around buildings. This creates a unique opportunity for planning reforms that could simultaneously expand the public realm for better mobility while increasing floor space availability through more efficient private development. The solution lies in reforming development regulations and implementing careful redevelopment policies that rebalance private and public land use as properties naturally undergo renovation cycles.

Key Insights

- **Existing productive cities should be improved rather than abandoned:** Places like Bangalore and Mumbai have natural advantages from concentrated economic activity, markets, and agglomeration effects that would be difficult to replicate artificially elsewhere
- **Indian cities have dramatically less public space than functional global cities:** Only 15% of land is allocated to streets versus 25% in cities like London, and barely 3% goes to parks compared to about 5% internationally
- **Massive inefficiency exists within private plots:** 42% of land in studied urban areas sits as unused private open space around buildings—a suburban-style land use pattern in dense city centers

- **Planning reforms can solve both affordability and mobility problems simultaneously:** By taking some private open space for street widening while allowing more efficient building coverage on remaining plots, cities can expand public realm and increase floor space availability
- **Development regulations need reform to enable efficient land use:** Current rules require excessive setbacks and margins that waste valuable urban land while limiting floor space creation
- **Historical precedent supports urban improvement:** Many cities worldwide, from 19th century Europe to post-war East Asia, successfully solved similar problems of affordability, congestion, and informal settlements through planning interventions
- **Redevelopment timing creates natural intervention opportunities:** As private plots undergo renovation cycles over decades, planning policies can guide this process to contribute land to public realm while maintaining or increasing private floor space

Supplementary Resources

- **Order without Design: How Markets Shape Cities** by Alain Bertaud (Book) [1]
- **Triumph of the City** by Edward Glaeser (Book) [3]
- **How to Redraw a City** by Anya Martin (*Works in Progress*, Issue 19, 2025) [4]
- **Modernizing Indian Cities** by Bimal Patel (YouTube Video, CCBA Designs, 2020) [5]
- **Ideas for Indian Cities** by CEPT Urban Planning and Design Foundation (Substack Newsletter) — Suyash Rai writes for this newsletter [2]

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The case for improving existing cities

[00:00:09] **Suyash Rai:** So my big idea for today is that we should try to improve our existing cities instead of looking for solutions in terms of building new cities or just looking outside the cities in new areas and all of those. Even though those ideas are not necessarily bad, I mean, we could have new cities, we could expand cities into new townships and all of those ideas are worth considering in some contexts.

[00:00:36] **Suyash Rai:** We already have fairly productive agglomerations in place, especially in places like Bangalore and Mumbai and other such places, where markets, history, various factors have led to certain concentration of productive activities. And people have also moved to these places in search for opportunities and created more opportunities by doing so.

The affordability and mobility crisis

[00:01:00] **Suyash Rai:** And, but when we look at these places and look at the kind of lived experience of these places, we find that there is a certain kind of discomfort, certain set of problems that come in that shape the quality of life, but also limit the productivity of these places.

[00:01:18] **Suyash Rai:** Primarily these are problems related to affordability of floor space. It's not easy to afford a good house in places like Bangalore and Mumbai, even if you are a reasonably well-to-do person. You have you can only afford a small apartment. Most firms have to manage with very little floor space, uh, per per employee.

[00:01:18] **Suyash Rai:** That also affects the quality of the workplace and environment and all of that.

[00:01:45] **Suyash Rai:** So that's one set of problems, the problems of affordability. The other major problem that we experience in India's big cities, many of the big cities, not all, is that, uh, there is a lot of congestion. Mobility is hard. So if you look at Mumbai, it doesn't feel like it's one city.

[00:02:02] Suyash Rai:

It's feels like there are many different cities. And if you take a one-hour commute or a forty-five minute commute, you cannot cover the large part of the city in that. So you have to basically if you take the city as where you can get into in forty-five minutes or one hour, you can only go get to a part of the city. And that practically is the city that you can access as far as for work and other purposes.

Why building new cities is not the answer

[00:02:27] Suyash Rai:

So, we have problems of this kind and other such problems, I mean affordability, mobility and all of those in our existing cities. So people look at these problems and they say, oh, there's not much that can be done about them. Let's try to build new cities, let's go outside the city and create townships that are self-contained and let's have kind of a solution which is outside of what exists.

[00:02:51] Suyash Rai:

I think that's not a good idea simply because of the fact that there is a lot of advantage in paying attention to areas that are working well in terms of, so for example, Bangalore has a certain concentration of IT, IT enabled, bio, biotech, and other sectors. And now new ones are also coming up. And we should learn from that and we should build on that, rather than trying to artificially create such agglomerations elsewhere.

[00:03:19] Suyash Rai:

But I am very sympathetic to people who say that these cities are a mess. They are, they have become unaffordable, they have become congested, they have become polluted, and it's not easy to live in them. So, what is the way out? So I think there is a way out.

[00:03:19] Suyash Rai:

And this is not the only thing that needs to be done, other things are also important, but core to my argument is that the current cities can be improved.

Land use imbalance in Indian cities

[00:03:44] Suyash Rai:

They can be improved by a better urban planning. And there is a specific reason why I'm making this argument. The reason is this, that in Indian cities, we have got a lot of inefficient use of land. So, and if you improve the efficiency of use of land in Indian cities, the current existing cities, you can have a move towards a situation where you've got much less of these problems of affordability and mobility, and in existing areas you can get more productive activities, more people living and working in these areas.

[00:04:17] Suyash Rai:

Let me explain. One is that in our research that we are doing at the CEPT Urban Planning and Design Foundation, we are looking at land use in Indian cities. We've looked at as of now about thirteen cities, we will eventually go to about thirty-thirty cities to look at land use. What we find, I mean, many interesting phenomena, but two of them are relevant for this big idea.

[00:04:38] Suyash Rai:

One is that we have very little land in public realm, very little land in streets and parks, and other public places in India compared to other well-functioning cities across the world. So usually, if you see a well-functioning city, about twenty percent, twenty-five percent of the land would be in streets. So if you go to New York, it's much more than that. If you go to London, it's about twenty-five percent in streets.

[00:05:02] Suyash Rai:

And maybe about five percent or so in public realms, say the parks and other kind of, uh, open spaces in public. In India, what we've seen so far in our analysis about forty areas across thirteen cities is that only about fifteen percent of the land is in streets. And barely three percent or so land is in other public spaces, so in parks and other such public spaces.

The inefficiency of private land use

[00:05:28] Suyash Rai:

So that creates a huge problem of mobility, congestion, pollution, all of those. On the other hand, the other interesting phenomenon that we see is that inside the private plots, so these are plots that are owned by residential plots, or mixed-use plots, or commercial plots, and and so on. What you see is that a lot of land is not being used efficiently.

[00:05:48] Suyash Rai: So, a lot of land is left open around buildings or inside buildings. So you've got setbacks and margins around buildings that are left. Uh, there are open plots inside inside the in private plots. So, and that you don't see in especially city center areas in other countries.

[00:05:48] Suyash Rai: If you have go to say New York or London or Hong Kong or Tokyo, you don't see so much land in private open spaces inside private plots.

[00:06:18] Suyash Rai: In India, so far our analysis shows that about forty-two percent of the land in the areas that we've studied, and these are mostly areas in the city, not on the periphery, not in the suburbs. But they the use of land inside private plots is almost suburban. So forty-two percent of the land in these areas is actually in private open spaces. So you can think now in terms of a planning intervention that plays out over decades where as and when the private plots go into redevelopment, as more new buildings come up.

A planning intervention to rebalance land use

[00:06:48] Suyash Rai: At that point of time, planning interventions which are done in advance, can create a situation in which part of the plot goes into the public realm, so use for street widening specially. And the remaining plot you can cover more. So you don't suffer in terms of floor space. So you can get the floor space you had even more than what you had earlier, much more, while you are also the private plots are contributing towards the public realm.

[00:07:13] Suyash Rai: And this has to be done fairly. So it shouldn't be like somebody is being victimized in the in the process of creating a larger public realm and so on. So it has to be done well, it has to be done very carefully, very surgically, in very, very, through a process that follows the rule of law, due process and all of that. But if you look at the grand phenomenon of very small public realm and a very large amount of space in the private open private plots, uh, in terms of in the form of private open spaces, what you see is a possibility of improving cities through planning instruments that rebalance this private and public realm.

[00:07:51] Suyash Rai: You have more of a private realm, more of a public realm, and a more efficient use of land in the public realm. And one of the keys to this riddle is going to be a reform of the development regulations. So if you look at the private spaces in India, in private plot development, development regulations are set up in such a way that a lot of land has to be left in the plot open, with setbacks and margins for various reasons that planners best understand.

[00:08:17] Suyash Rai: If those can be further liberalized and may made more specific to what the problems of the markets are because of which the regulations are made, it is our belief, it is my belief that, uh, you can use more of the land more efficiently in private plots. If you do that, then you can take the part of the land for street widening and the remaining land because you can build more on that, you will get a much more floor space in that land.

Learning from global urban transformation

[00:08:44] Suyash Rai: So that's my big idea that we should focus closely at existing cities where there is already a lot of productive activity happening, people are agglomerated, firms are agglomerating, ideas are agglomerating. We should not accept that this will always be a mess, this will always be a unaffordable, congested, low mobility places. We should try to improve them.

[00:09:06] Suyash Rai: Many cities in the world have gone through these kind of problems when they were organizing rapidly, and they solved them. So if you look at nineteenth century Europe, they had a similar kind of an experience. Post-war, uh, East Asian cities had similar kind of problems, and then they solved them. They improved their cities, they, so over time, slums, uh, I mean were redeveloped and became from formal settlements.

[00:09:29] Suyash Rai: Over time more and more of the public realm got improved. Urban design took over and places became public places became more comfortable and safe and nice to be in, you know. Cities can be improved and we should work with that hope and with that expectation, generate knowledge, improve practice of planning, of design, and basically improve our existing cities.

[00:09:52] Suyash Rai: Thank you.

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