

## Development Urbanism, Issues and possibilities:

In Conversation with  
Henrik Valeur

Richa Sharma



*All photos courtesy : Henrik Valeur*

Tekton  
Volume 2, Issue 1, March 2015  
pp. 94 - 109

**Henrik Valeur** (b. 1966) is an architect-urbanist, founder and creative director of UiD – a networking urban consultancy and a pioneer in the field of collaborative and participatory planning and design. As the curator of the Danish Pavilion at the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2006, he conceived and orchestrated the project *CO-EVOLUTION: Danish/Chinese Collaboration on Sustainable Urban Development in China*, which was awarded the Golden Lion for Best National Pavilion. In 2007 he founded UiD Shanghai Co., Ltd in China. He has served as a juror on architecture competitions, a moderator and speaker at architecture conferences, a teacher of architecture and urbanism and an independent researcher. Henrik Valeur is the author of the recently published book *India: the Urban Transition – a Case Study of Development Urbanism*, which is based on his experiences teaching, researching and practicing in India since 2010.

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Henrik Valeur's career straddles three distinct cultures and this has shaped his worldview about how cities function. He sees a great potential in urbanisation leading to change, particularly in the developing world. Valeur advocates a theory of urbanisation as a means to address poverty while safeguarding the environment, this theory he describes as 'Development Urbanisation'.

He has an architectural stance in dealing with the urban. Rooted in collaboration, he sees the role of design professionals as facilitators. Valeur is sensitive and sharp in reading places and people, a skill that has helped him adapt readily in foreign lands. His latest foray in urban India has been self compiled as a publication that reflects upon and develops his ideas and ideology. This conversation draws out Valeur on urbanisation in Asia, especially in the context of India.

#### **SHARMA**

**India has had a profound impact on your professional life. Your affiliation to architecture has its roots deep down in India and in particular it's culture, if I am correct in understanding. Also, you did want to become a writer..., would like to hear that story.**

#### **VALEUR**

I have spent most of my time since 2010 either in India or on work related to India. Initially I was invited to give the Le Corbusier Memorial Lecture in Chandigarh and conduct a small workshop at Chandigarh College of Architecture but ended up staying there for six months. The following year I spent six months in Bangalore and since then I have been coming back frequently. Before that I had been to India only once, in 1986 when I was 19. At that age, and never having been outside Europe before, the many different expressions of life as well as the strange examples of architecture obviously made a huge impression on me, but the story of how I decided to become an architect is rather more mundane.

I was sitting on a beach in Goa building a sand castle. It was a very long and relatively deserted beach. Two local guys were going up and down the beach on bicycles. At long intervals there would be a foreign woman in a bikini taking sun and as they passed her, the two guys would quickly turn their heads and then look straight ahead again. But when they came to me they completely stopped. They just stared – an adult, sort of, building sand castles. At that moment I knew what I wanted to be! Thus, coming back to India after so many years, to practice as an architect, was like closing a circle. However, I had had some second thoughts about what I wanted to do after I had come back to Denmark the first time. I had thought I would perhaps try to become a writer instead. Ultimately I stuck with architecture, but because my recent experiences in India prompted me to write a book, coming back to India also closed a second circle for me in the sense that I can now call myself a writer too.

**SHARMA**

**Being an architect-urbanist, how do you look at the two, theoretically from the perspective of intervening at different scales and addressing altering complexities? More so, has your training as an urbanist altered your way of looking at architecture or vice-versa?**

**VALEUR**

I don't really distinguish between architecture and urbanism in that way. I call myself an architect-urbanist to say that I work with urbanism from an architectural point of view, but I am actually trying to understand the processes of urbanisation from multiple perspectives. In fact, I believe that it is a natural thing for an architect to do because without a broad-based approach architecture tends to become either an artistic object, like a sculpture, or an engineered appliance, like a machine. It is the same with urbanism, you cannot understand the city from only one perspective; you have to employ as many different perspectives as possible. And those perspectives are constantly changing because the city is not only defined by its physical structures, but by multiple systems of resource exchange and energy flow, which essentially makes the city impossible to

thoroughly comprehend.

The city is obviously infinitely more complex and dynamic than any piece of architecture, but for me the fault line is not between architecture and urbanism. In my view buildings, spaces and cities are all complex and dynamic entities and should be treated as such. Unfortunately, there are strong forces pulling in the opposite direction. As a result, many architects, urban designers and urban planners tend to see buildings, spaces and cities as simplistic and static entities and to focus on the end result rather than on initial conditions.

#### SHARMA

**Your book "India: the Urban Transition - a Case Study of Development Urbanism" reflects on some basic concerns of Indian cities. What in your opinion are the most important challenges being faced by 'Urban' India?**

#### VALEUR

In my book and, since the book reflects my work, in my work I have focused on the challenges related to air pollution, water contamination and depletion, food insecurity, lack of decent housing and the human health and environmental problems related to motorized transportation in Indian cities. But I would like to point to another, perhaps somewhat interrelated, challenge, which is how to make cities productive – economically, culturally and scientifically – and how to make the whole country benefit from that productivity.

Because if cities are not productive and the surplus of that productivity is not shared with the rest of the country, then it is difficult to see what the argument for urbanisation in India really is.

If you look at economic productivity, which is measurable, then a city like Chandigarh is, as I understand it, actually being subsidised by the central government. If that is true, then there is something fundamentally wrong. Chandigarh of course is a special case because it is now the capital of two states and thus home to a large administration. Still, this doesn't explain why

there is so little economic production that the city actually has to be subsidised. In addition, you see a lot of people there who are servants, and I am not talking about the so-called civil servants, but about people who serve other people like maids and chauffeurs and so on. It may make life more comfortable for the people who are being served but it doesn't create any economic dynamics.

Bangalore, by contrast, has been very productive and vast fortunes have been made there. The problem, as I understand it, is that only a very few people and some large companies - Indian and foreign - have profited from this. And now it seems like many of them are beginning to migrate, partly because of the environmental deterioration. Bangalore was once known as a so-called garden city and for its pleasant climate, which was mainly due to its intricate network of waterways and water bodies, developed over many centuries, and its extensive green cover. However, after three or four decades of sustained economic growth, especially in the IT sector, the environment has become quite hostile with the green cover now acting to trap the pollution from the vastly increased number of motor vehicles - I don't mean to say that they should cut the trees, the problem is not the trees but the vehicles and the mentality of people driving those vehicles having become quite aggressive too. And the waterways and water bodies that have not yet been filled up to create land for new buildings or been put underground to make room for more roads have been turned into sewers and garbage dumps.

Thus, it is no wonder that people and companies are moving away, but they are leaving a devastated city in their wake.

#### **SHARMA**

**Bangalore and Chandigarh represent two diverse ideologies of creating, supervising and defining futures of Indian cities. Of the two, do you feel that Bangalore has evolved to become a more realistic but alarming example of the state of affairs of urbanisation in India?**



*Rural and urban population in India in 1950, 2000 and 2050*



*The results of 90 minutes of cycling in Bangalore*

#### VALEUR

Bangalore is certainly a good example of how urban growth has been unfolding during the past decades in many places. I don't think it is a good example for the future though!

One of the problems in Bangalore, as I see it, is the *laissez faire* attitude towards the design, planning and management of the city. But you may actually find the same apathy in the government offices in Chandigarh. There, however, I suspect that the reason might be that, as a socialist-modernist model, the city was too planned to begin with.

#### SHARMA

**Mumbai envisages becoming another Shanghai. In the present time, the idea of a city is constantly becoming a consumable one where future visions rely on obvious and borrowed intellect and imposed dreams become drivers of change. How would you respond to that? What in your opinion are the impacts of globalisation in the Asian context particularly?**

#### VALEUR

This is interesting because the old, colonial Shanghai was actually very much shaped by some Jewish and Parsi businessmen from Bombay – the Sassoon family probably being

the most prominent. Then, as now, money played an incredibly important role in shaping urban environments, which one can still see in the many monumental buildings that family left behind in both Bombay and Shanghai. But money is also something very elusive. So as architects, I believe, we have to be concerned with other issues and look at the city from other perspectives too.

However, in terms of economic globalisation, I think its impact in the Asian context today varies quite a lot. Thus, it is interesting to note that the outsourcing of production and services from the West, which is what is often meant when we talk about globalisation today, started in the late 1970s with the establishment of a Special Economic Zone in Shenzhen in China and the establishment of an Electronic City in Bangalore in India. However, the ways in which China and India have embraced the opportunities related to economic globalisation are very different. But, as I said, as architects we should also look at other issues and in that regard I would like to point to the potential of cultural globalisation, not to be confused with cultural imperialism but understood as an increased interaction between people with different cultural backgrounds. I think those potentials remain largely untapped in both China and India today.

#### **SHARMA**

**And your involvement as the curator of the CO-EVOLUTION project at the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2006 was a creation evolving from 'cross cultural interaction'...**

#### **VALEUR**

Yes, but cross-cultural interaction is not something new. The greatest piece of architecture in India, and arguably the greatest piece of architecture in the world, the Taj Mahal combines styles and elements from many different cultures.

This is one of the potentials of cross-cultural interaction, that you might be able to create something new out of different influences, which is what we tried to do with the CO-EVOLUTION project - the Danish contribution to the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2006. The national pavilions



*The Danish Pavilion at the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2006*

there are usually about own national architecture, a kind of national competition like a World Cup in soccer. That year, however, the Danish Pavilion was not about Danish architecture. As the curator, I had asked Chinese professors and students of architecture to work together with young Danish architects and students to see if, through collaboration, they would be able to come up with some new architectural solutions to the challenges related to rapid urbanisation in China.

This kind of collaboration is not easy because it requires us to acknowledge that, what we each bring to the table might be of equal value even if it is quite different. It also presupposes curiosity, an open mind and a genuine interest in learning from each other. If that is there, I believe cultural globalisation may help us solve some of our common, global challenges. Another potential is that you may actually become more aware of your own roots. When I grew up in Denmark, in the 1970s, the Danish cuisine was quite horrible - very heavy and overly simplified. But as Danish people began to travel abroad for vacation, they slowly began to realize that food could actually be something different, light and sophisticated. At the same time, Indian, Italian and other foreign restaurants began to come up in Copenhagen and new spices and ingredients became available in the local shops. After a few decades, this influence from the



outside began to spark an interest in the herbs and other ingredients that were available in our local nature and which had long been ignored. This interest led to the development of what is now referred to as the New Nordic Kitchen and to a Danish restaurant having been named the best restaurant in the world four out of the past five years.

I hope something similar will happen to Indian architecture because, apart from some remarkable exceptions, contemporary Indian architecture does actually remind me a little bit of the Danish food I grew up with. Those exceptions, however, seem to be able to combine something that is deeply Indian with something that is very contemporary. The result is a new kind of architecture, which is different from both the shallow “fashion architecture” of Europe and the uniform “corporate architecture” of America.

#### SHARMA

**Can you elaborate a bit more on the connection between urbanisation and poverty alleviation as realised by the Chinese.**

#### VALEUR

Well, after the death of Mao, the new leadership under Deng Xiaoping decided to turn around the Chinese development strategy. Until then, China had attempted to create development through industrialisation of the countryside and collectivisation of agriculture. However, from the late 1970s they began using urbanisation as a driver of development by allowing experimentation with market economy in the so-called special economic zones. It is important to note that these zones were confined areas and the potential negative effect of those experiments, if failing, would be limited.

In reality, the special economic zone was a city in the making, which was, in simplified terms, based on three components: 1) land and infrastructure provided by the Government, as well as certain tax incentives 2) foreign investment in manufacturing production and soon after in the building industry, and 3) cheap

migrant labor from rural areas where agricultural reforms had rendered their labor superfluous. The agricultural reforms were quite crucial for the process of urbanisation because they effectively forced a great many people to move to cities and, by making agriculture more efficient, they also enabled the country to feed a growing urban population. The people who had to move from their villages were not skilled labor, in the sense that their skills were not useful in the city, however, there was a huge demand for so-called unskilled labor in the manufacturing and building industries, and even though salaries were, and still are, quite low, they are usually much higher than what these people can hope to earn in the rural areas and many migrants are therefore able to support their relatives in the villages thus helping them out of poverty too.

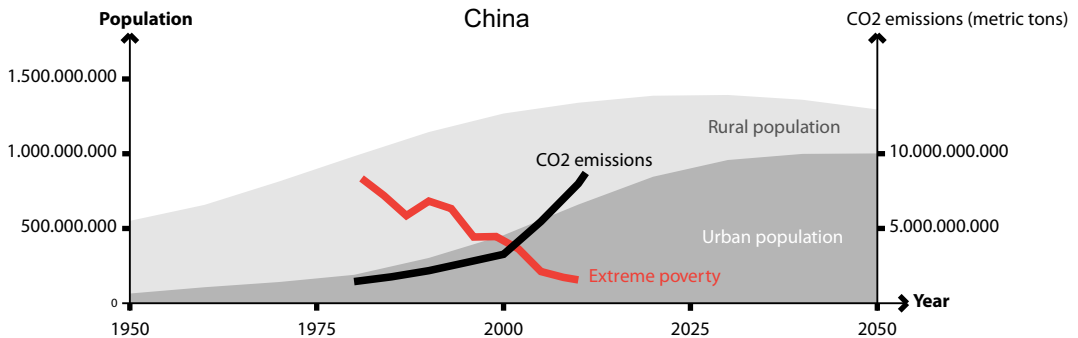
Forcing people to move away from their villages may seem pretty harsh to us but when you look at the long-term effects, there is no question that these reforms have been greatly successful in the sense that they have helped lifting hundreds of millions of people out of extreme poverty over the past three and a half decades, an achievement that is simply unparalleled in human history. But there is nothing surprising in this. Throughout history, development has been intimately related to urbanisation. However, history also shows that urbanisation may lead to resource depletion and environmental degradation. So the challenge remains the same: how can we use urbanisation as a means to create development without destroying the very nature on which we all depend?

#### SHARMA

**Besides direct economic and environmental cost-benefits, large scale urbanisation also comes with an inevitable transformation of socio-cultural landscapes. How have the Chinese responded to that? In the case of India, embracing or resisting this cultural change is a question that is still unaddressed and warrants deliberation.**

#### VALEUR

I think that is a very interesting discussion, which is often overlooked, as you rightly point out. I don't think the socio-



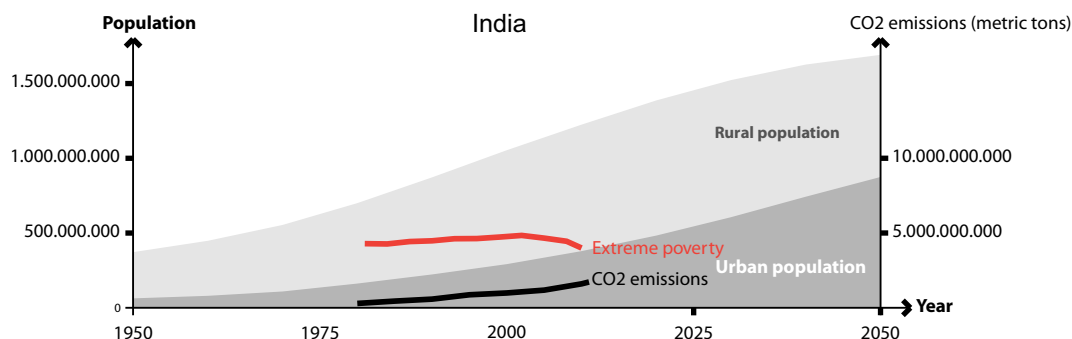
*Rural and urban population, extreme poverty and CO2 emissions in China*

cultural landscape, as is called, was ever static. But, as India transforms itself from a primarily rural to a primarily urban society, it is likely to undergo more profound changes than ever before. One could be worried what this will bring, and with good reasons I believe, but one could also see it as an opportunity to rid of some of the more negative elements of rural tradition like oppression, injustice and superstition. In China, a long period of civil war, world war and the Cultural Revolution effectively erased all traces of tradition. There were people who tried to resist the cultural destruction during that period, such as the great Chinese architect Liang Sicheng who fought to revive traditional Chinese architecture and to save the old cultural monuments of Beijing, but it was all in vain.

As a result, Chinese people don't really have any cultural foundation today. Indian people, on the other hand, are perhaps sometimes stuck a little bit too much in their cultural foundation.

#### SHARMA

**The Indian government has floated the idea of creating a hundred 'Smart Cities' in its endeavour to promote urbanisation. What opportunities does this initiative hold for urban India? Also, what in your opinion constitutes smartness in a city?**



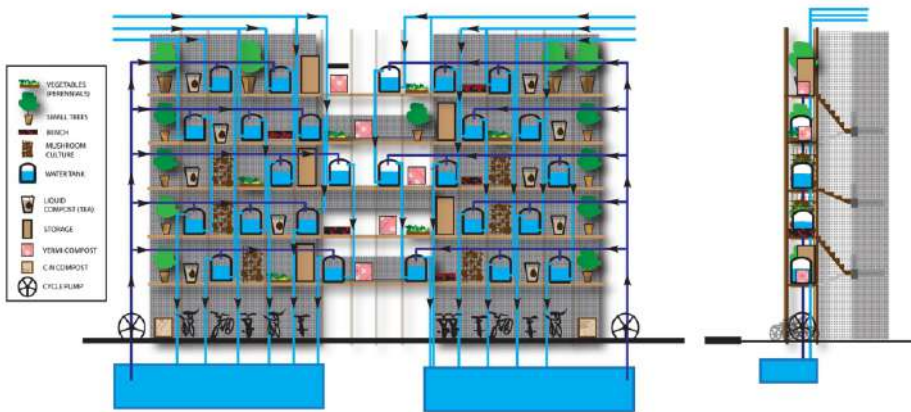
*Rural and urban population, extreme poverty and CO2 emissions in India*

#### VALEUR

Even though I don't agree with the concept of "smart cities" – the idea of controlling a city and its citizens through the use of smart technologies seems much more like a Chinese idea than an Indian idea to me – I hope the pro-urban focus of the new Indian government will ignite a more profound debate not only about urbanisation as the driver of development but also about how to make that development inclusive and somehow sustainable.

In that sense, the government's vow to create a hundred "smart cities" may have a very positive influence on the future of India. The question, however, is whether the rest of the political establishment and the vast bureaucracy will shed off its passive or even defensive attitude towards urbanisation and engage proactively in such a debate.

There are obviously too many unresolved problems in our cities today, but my point is that many of these problems can be solved by very simple and inexpensive means. Smart technologies are rarely necessary and may, in fact, create more problems than they solve.



*Vertical Kitchen Garden proposal for Dhanas Rehabilitation Colony, Chandigarh*

**SHARMA**

One likes the idea of food being addressed by an architect-urbanist. Can you throw some light on it with reference to the Chandigarh project?

**VALEUR**

Food has always been of great concern for cities. In fact, the creation of cities only became possible when primitive subsistence farming was replaced with more intensive forms of farming that would yield a certain surplus. Thus, the world's first cities were all located in fertile regions that enabled large-scale farming. However, with the revolution in transportation during the past century or so, cities began to ignore the issue of food and many cities are now being built in non-fertile regions where food production, at least in the traditional form of agriculture, is not possible.

The result is that urban dwellers have become increasingly vulnerable to fluctuating prices in the global food market and to various local conditions over which they exert no influence, including extreme weather conditions, which may affect food production in distant parts of the world. The problem is also that the environmental costs associated with the transportation of food across the globe are very high and that the impact on the environment of modern, high-intensive agriculture can be



*Dhanas rehabilitation colony on the outskirts of Chandigarh*

rather adverse. This you have experienced here in India where the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides as well as the proliferation of bore wells for irrigation, the so-called “green revolution”, has resulted in the depletion of groundwater resources, loss of biodiversity and degradation of soil.

In the case you are referring to, we worked with a local NGO on a proposal to create community kitchen gardens in one of the so-called rehabilitation colonies in Chandigarh. The idea was to provide people with the opportunity of a meaningful occupation and a nutritious diet while making them less vulnerable to fluctuating food prices and less dependent on government aid. You know, the entire slum population of Chandigarh has been forcibly shifted to four huge colonies located on the outskirts of the city, where these people are not seen and where livelihood opportunities are extremely restricted.

The former slum dwellers are not only being isolated from the city but from each other too because a lot of activities now take place inside small individual flats rather than outside. If your dwelling is on third floor you don't go down on the ground and do the cooking there together with the other women living around you, as you would in the slum.

Thus, another reason for the community kitchen garden-project was to enable the recreation of the social ties that were broken when these people were “rehabilitated”.

Because the colony is densely built up with few open spaces, for which there are many other takers, we developed the concept of vertical kitchen gardens. These structures have a footprint of only 50 square meters and could be attached to the blank end walls of the four-storey buildings of the colony. Rainwater would be harvested from the flat roofs of these buildings and organic composting would be collected from the households.

**SHARMA**

**Your professional experience spans across the continents of Asia and Europe majorly; two very rich and diverse geographies and landscapes of the world. Are there “learnings” for both from one another?**

**VALEUR**

Practicing architecture is a never-ending learning process, I believe, and I am grateful for having had the opportunity to practice first in Europe – mostly out of Copenhagen in the North and out of Barcelona in the South – then in China and now in India.

Europe, China and India constitute three great cultures that are distinctively different from one another; in fact they are each composed of many different sub-cultures. But, as genetic science has taught us, no two humans are genetically identical yet on average we are 99.9% similar to each other, there are probably many more similarities between these cultures than there are differences. However, we tend to focus on the differences, I assume, because that tells us something about ourselves. So I guess that is the first important thing about learning from the other that we get to know about ourselves.

The second thing, I suppose, is that we learn from each other in order to develop ourselves. Thus, cultures have also developed by learning from each other. Who learned exactly what from who is not so important, I think. What is important is to keep this process going, to continue being open to learning from the other.

However, in order to do that we also need to be critical – not only of the other but of ourselves too – and most people,

companies, organizations, cities or countries today are not in the business of being critical, especially not of themselves. They are in the business of selling, so one has to be a bit cautious when “learning” from others, because those “learnings” can be quite manipulated.

That being said, India is actually in a unique position, especially when we talk about urbanisation and development, as it may learn from the experiences of both the East and the West. There seems to be a greater interest in learning from the West in India today but there might actually be more to learn from the East because their experiences of development and urbanisation are more recent. ■

### **Richa Sharma**



Richa Sharma is an Associate Professor and Program Coordinator of M. Arch. Urban Design course at Pillai College of Architecture, Navi Mumbai. She is a gold medalist Architect and Urban Designer from GCA, Lucknow and SPA, New Delhi respectively. She has recently received the 2013 MASA Best Teacher Award for related design discipline in Urban Design. She freelances as an Architect-Urban Designer and is actively associated with research based in and around Mumbai. Most of her research work revolves around the domains of the public realm, urbanism and sustainable development and has been read and published at international platforms.

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