

**KEY WORDS:**

Urban Vitality, Place Making

## The need for Urban Vitality Studies in India

**Daniel DSouza**

Tekton Volume 12, Issue 1, June 2025, pp 102 - 111

---

**ABSTRACT**

This essay argues that studying urban vitality in public spaces is an important prerequisite for good urban design in Indian cities. This essay draws on Maas's definition of urban vitality and examines how these elements manifest in India's urban context. Urban vitality requires attention in India's rapidly urbanising context where space is actively repurposed through informal means. The implications are that prioritising urban vitality studies in both professional practice and urban design education would enable urban designers to develop context-specific strategies that respond to the characteristics of Indian urban space and, in turn, help create more inclusive and vibrant urban environments.



**Daniel DSouza** is a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Planning and works as a visiting faculty at CEPT University. Daniel's research focuses on place making practices in public spaces and the impact of urban vitality on the production of *place*.

[daniel.dsouza.phd23@cept.ac.in](mailto:daniel.dsouza.phd23@cept.ac.in)

## Introduction

The foundations of urban vitality studies and literature are rooted in the seminal work of Jacobs critique of the modernist, car centric urban planning paradigms in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jacobs, 1961). She argued that modernist planning overlooks the intricate complexities of human life and the diverse communities that animate cities. She advocated for a vibrant street life as a measure of urban success. Building on this, Maas (1984) conceptualized urban vitality as “*the synergism of a sizable number of varied and somewhat unique, commercial and experiential opportunities, and a relatively dense and socially heterogeneous pedestrian population, which animates city areas, almost continuously, throughout each day and evening*”. This definition offers a robust framework for understanding urban life through its economic, social, spatial and experiential dimensions.

Urban design engages with several sub-themes within spatial organisation and morphology, social and cultural dimensions, economic and informal systems, environmental and ecological concerns, mobility and infrastructure, and political and governance frameworks. Within these, Urban vitality is a concept that is often overlooked, especially in the rapidly urbanising context of Indian cities. Urban vitality refers to the inherent quality of city spaces that successfully attract diverse populations to engage and participate in multiple activities across various times of the day. This gives these spaces a sense of liveliness and vibrancy. On the other hand, spaces that lack this quality are perceived as unsafe and in turn are less likely to attract the crowds necessary to activate it. This quality is a fundamental indicator of a city’s development potential, urban quality and the liveability of the city (Zeng et al., 2018). Cities that have spaces that show high levels of urban vitality also show high levels of resident well-being, can attract talent and capital, and as a result, enhance the cities competitiveness (Liu et al., 2022).

India is undergoing a period of rapid urban growth within complex socio-spatial dynamics. This kind of urbanization blurs the boundary between rural urban centres as well as urbanized areas that are not recognized as such (Ferry et al., 2018). Given this rapid and uneven urbanization, its distinctive socio-economic stratification and the informal nature of its urban spaces, it is necessary for urban designers and planners to study the urban vitality

in a way that fits its context. Here Maas's framework can help us better understand how Indian cities work and offer insights to make Indian cities more resilient, inclusive and human centred.

Indian cities are characterized by high population densities. While increased density can foster productivity, innovation and efficient space utilization, it also raises significant concerns such as congestion, loss of green spaces, reduced inclusivity and heightened vulnerability to climate change and disasters (Jha, 2025). This duality brings out a critical tension. Maas's (1984) definition explicitly includes a relatively dense population as a component of vitality thereby implying that density is a necessary condition. However, just achieving density in the Indian context does not guarantee vitality, but instead can lead to negative outcomes like social exclusion and congestion (Jha, 2025). Hence, for density to contribute positively to urban vitality, it must be managed with a nuanced understanding, moving away from the quantitative measurements of modernist planning to qualitative assessments of the urban experience. It is therefore important for planners to plan to mitigate the negative impacts of high densities while also harnessing its potential for interaction between different groups of people.

Current urban vitality studies leverage big data and advanced analytical tools for measurement (Liu et al., 2022). However, existing studies often rely on single-source data or subjective evaluations, which can limit their capture of urban dynamics. Indian society is very heterogeneous with deep divisions of class, caste, religion, and gender. Indian public spaces are often shaped by informal activities and socio-spatial segregation (Ganguly, 2018). Furthermore, medium-sized towns face rapid urbanization coupled with limited planning capacity and significant socio economic diversity (Jha, 2025; World Bank Group, 2011). This suggests that global measurement tools when used directly, may not capture the on-ground realities. For example, Night time Light (NTL) brightness is used as a common proxy for economic activity (Liu et al., 2022). This proxy may be lower in affluent residential areas than busy market centres due to lower residential densities, thus challenging the assumption that NTL reflects prosperity. What signifies as vitality in one context may not signify the same in another. Therefore, there is a need for the development and adaption of measurement frameworks that are highly sensitive to India's specific cultural, socio-economic and spatial characteristics. This includes understanding how informal activities, traditional public spaces and diverse social groups contribute to or are excluded from urban vitality. This would require a nuanced research methodology that is culturally sensitive.

Traditional methods of data collection include direct observation, behaviour mapping, surveys, and interviews, each with its own set of advantages and limitations. Whyte (2010) used time lapse photography to document urban vitality in New York's public spaces, arguing that spaces are vital when seating is available, sunlight and shade affects social use, and that food acts a social anchor that makes people linger for longer. Mehta (2013) uses ethnographic methods to map user behaviour along with interviews to suggest that the vitality of streets comes from the diversity of users, behaviours, and physical form of the space. Jacobs (1961) relied heavily on direct observations of activities in public spaces, through which she brought out the complexities of urban life. She argued that the vibrancy of public spaces comes from several factors including the presence of mixed-use

neighbourhoods, safety through eyes on the street, the presence of small block sizes as well as dense street networks, and the emphasis on cheap rents for small businesses, artists, and newcomers. These techniques were often labour intensive and limited in scope. Furthermore, these studies were confined to specific locales for short periods of time. The reliability of these methods can be challenged on the basis of the biases of the interviewees and interviewers, as well as the sample sizes of the study. Montgomery (2013) uses pedestrian counts to measure the vitality of a street area, suggesting that higher foot traffic equates to higher vitality. These counts are often snapshots that do not capture the changes of urban vitality across the day. This shortcoming can be overcome by taking multiple readings throughout the day. These methods provide ample ways in which quantitative and qualitative data can be gathered to understand urban vitality in an area.

## Commercial and Experiential Opportunities

Maas's definition of urban vitality emphasises the importance of "*a sizable number of varied and somewhat unique, commercial and experiential opportunities*" (Maas, 1984). The presence of an assortment of amenities including diverse shops, cafes and restaurants is essential for drawing a population that consistently utilizes the area throughout the day and evening.

Modernist urban planning approaches in India were adopted from the British blueprint based technical planning approach, with the 1962 Masterplan of Delhi becoming the planning model for many cities in northern India (Kumar et al., 2021). The Delhi Masterplan demarcated zones for different single uses, which segregated and weakened community bonding and neighbourhood culture. However, post 1985, planning and design practitioners argued the legitimacy of the statutory master plans, stating that they served little utility in shaping the spatial form of the city. This formed the start of the shift towards sector and project oriented plans, giving rise to mixed use development which we see in some cities today (Kumar et al., 2021). These mixed-use developments integrate residential, commercial, and recreational spaces. A primary advantage of mixed-use development is the ability to encourage walking, which in turn fosters visual and verbal interaction among residents. These developments stimulate economic activity and generate employment opportunities (Bahadure, 2012). Historically, traditional Indian settlements have been mixed-use that were compact, walkable, and self-contained. These settlements merged living, working and recreational spaces (Bahadure, 2012), and are still seen in parts of the city, especially in the old city areas. The contemporary resurgence of mixed-use development aligns with the traditional patterns and promotes social sustainability. Mixed use development is thus a powerful strategy to cultivate the conditions for urban vitality in Indian cities.

The informal economy is another important component of urban India. Self-employed individuals including street vendors, home-based producers, and waste pickers rely on public space for their livelihoods (M. Chen, 2016). These activities blur the distinctions between work and home, public and private, and formal and informal spheres (Potter, 2017). The presence of informal vendors creates dynamic and vibrant streetscapes. Informal economies provide essential, affordable, and accessible services that formal systems often neglect.

These services benefit a large portion of the population including the middle class. For example, Delhi has approximately 500,000 street hawkers (Schindler, 2017). The volume of hawkers itself indicates a significant contribution to the overall economic activity in the city.

These Informal workers frequently face marginalization, harassment, evictions (often violent) and a lack of secure work or basic services (M. Chen, 2016). The national policy on Urban Street Vendors (2004) and the Act (2014) aimed to create a more supportive system. However, authorities use acts such as the Motor Vehicle Act 1988, Local provincial acts, and the Indian Penal Code 1860, to override the rights of street vendors (M. A. Chen, 2022). Furthermore, the informal sector is often excluded from privatised public spaces such as mall plazas and regulated parks, resulting in social exclusion and the creation of a less diverse, more homogeneous public (Saxena, 2022). This contrasts with historical Indian public spaces which balanced formality and informality.

The informal economy is thus a critical component of Maas's *varied and somewhat unique commercial and experiential opportunities*, yet its exclusion reduces urban vitality by reducing social heterogeneity and inclusivity. The forces that animate spaces are suppressed. For Indian cities to foster urban vitality, there needs to be a shift in the perspective of viewing the informal economy as an encroachment to an integral part of Indian urban life. The informal economy is a creative response of the people to the inability of the formal economy to satisfy the basic needs of the marginalised (Soto, 2006).

## Dense and Socially Heterogeneous Pedestrian Populations

Maas's framework for understanding urban vitality highlights the role of a *relatively dense and socially heterogeneous pedestrian population*. High population density is considered a prerequisite for urban vitality, but it does not guarantee a vibrant environment (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020). Urban areas with high building and population density often correlate with increased pedestrian traffic which in turn positively affects urban vitality. The social diversity in Indian cities is an essential component of heterogeneity. This is seen across various social markers such as age, caste, class, ethnicity, gender and disability. It is in the presence of a varied population that different interactions generate conditions needed for good urban vitality.

Some scholars argue that high density fosters productivity and efficient space usage, however, critics argue that excessive compactness can compromise a city's permeability, exacerbate congestion, eliminate green spaces, reduce inclusivity, and increase vulnerability (Jha, 2025). To understand urban vitality, it is necessary to understand the various forms of density present in the area. This includes residential density, building density, fluctuating density, and internal density (Jha, 2025). Residential density is the amount of people living in the area, who would potentially contribute to the vitality of the space due to their everyday activities. Building density refers to the number of buildings in an area, which when combined with mixed land use, gives an idea of the number of commercial opportunities present in the area. Fluctuating density is the density that changes across the day, such as in areas with a high concentration of offices. This density is a result of people coming from

outside the neighbourhood, who can potentially contribute to the heterogeneity of the population in the space. Internal density is the idea of the total number of people inside a building. Urban vitality is observed in areas with overlapping densities of population, commercial establishments and public facilities (Gómez-Varo et al., 2022).

Indian society functions as a relational space (Ferry et al., 2018). Indian subspaces include caste, region, religion with their own unique rules and dynamics, which interact and shape each other. Furthermore, socioeconomic stratification significantly influences the dynamics in a city. For example, the emerging Indian middle class relies heavily on the services provided by the informal sector (Schindler, 2017).

The caste system perpetuates discrimination and inequality. It intersects with class, influencing access to educational and economic opportunities (Afsana et al., 2023). Research also identifies residential segregation by caste and religion in Indian cities, which in turn impacts access to public goods and economic outcomes for marginalised groups (Adukia et al., 2019; Ganguly, 2018). Furthermore, access for women and other vulnerable groups (such as children, elderly persons with disabilities) in public spaces are often restricted.

Spatial segregation is a persistent feature of urban India, which often leads to the formation of ghettos (Ganguly, 2018). Contemporary public spaces in cities like Delhi have increasingly shifted from being sites of socio-cultural exchange to *spaces of consumption*. This is seen in the newer mall developments (Saxena, 2022). This shift results in restrictions on social accessibility and the exclusion of the informal sector. This results in the reduction in social interactions and diversity of users as people from different ages, classes, genders and religions have fewer opportunities to interact. This results in a loss of a sense of community belonging.

Maas explicitly calls for a *socially heterogeneous pedestrian population and varied experiential opportunities*. The trend towards homogenization directly contradicts this by reducing the diversity of people and activities that are essential for urban vitality. Historic Indian public spaces (such as bazaars, ghats, and chowks) were vibrant and inclusive hubs that had a mix of formality and informality, which in turn fostered social interactions between diverse user groups (Saxena, 2022). This current trend represents a departure from this inclusive history. Furthermore, spaces planned with order and security in mind, often suppresses informality, which in turn has the negative impact on urban vitality. These spaces become sterile, consumption-driven spaces that lack organic, spontaneous and diverse interactions that are required for a vibrant city.

Maas's emphasis on *socially heterogeneous pedestrian population* assumes that different groups can freely access and interact in public spaces. If social stratification limits who can physically access public spaces, it directly affects the formation of *social heterogeneity*. Spatial segregation leads to reduced opportunities for interaction and areas with reduced vitality. This directly affects the *synergism* between elements in urban areas. For Indian public spaces, is necessary to incorporate these dynamics in urban studies to understand why certain areas are vibrant while others are not.

## Animating City Areas (almost) Continuously

Maas's definition highlights the importance of the temporal dimension of urban vitality on the basis of its urban vitality's ability to animate city areas almost continuously, throughout each day and evening.

According to Lyon (2021) Urban life is inherently rhythmic. On Indian streets, people engage in multiple activities including transit, working, cooking, conversing, sleeping, eating, reading and performing various daily routines in full public view (Potter, 2017). These constant organic activities contribute to the animation of urban areas. The concepts of *fluctuating density* and *population density rhythm* (Jha, 2025), which describe varying densities across the day are crucial to understanding the temporal patterns in Indian public spaces.

Despite this vibrancy of Indian street life, the pedestrian environment faces significant challenges. There is a lack of footpaths, and when present, are often poorly constructed or maintained. Furthermore, widespread encroachment by vendors and parked vehicles forces pedestrian onto the carriageway, increasing the risk of accidents.

There are also the safety concerns on streets. These include drunk driving, increasing crime (such as theft, eve teasing and sexual assault), and a public perception of inefficient traffic policing (Bharucha, 2017). Poor road quality and deteriorating air quality further discourages walking and outdoor activity. Despite these challenges, there is a public desire for improved walkability (Bharucha, 2017).

There is a tension between the spontaneous and *continuous animation* generated by the informal sector and daily life patterns on urban streets, and the formal urban planning infrastructure that neglects and actively works against pedestrian life. This animation occurs despite these infrastructure issues. This shows an important disconnect between street life and formal infrastructure in India. Thus, studies on urban vitality in India must acknowledge and understand this disconnect. Urban planners and designers must aim to enhance these organic rhythms and uses of space, rather than impose top-down, car centric designs.

Furthermore, Maas's definition implies that vital spaces should be safe. If people feel unsafe, their willingness to use public spaces or engage in activities would reduce. This would directly affect the dense and socially heterogeneous pedestrian population aspect of Maas's definition, which in turn would negatively impact the potential for *continuous animation* of city areas. Cities like Chennai, Pune and Bengaluru are adopting policies that encourage walking and cycling over motorised transport (ITDP, 2018, 2024). Without a perceived sense of safety, the potential for spontaneous social interaction which is essential for urban vitality remains weak.

## Concluding Remarks

The core components of Maas's (1984) definition of urban vitality are uniquely manifested and challenged within the complex Indian urban context. Urban vitality is recognized as a

driving force for sustainable urban development and contributes to enhancing the well-being of people (Liu et al., 2022). Vibrant cities are more attractive to investment and talent thus fostering economic growth.

The study of urban vitality is important for designing sustainable, equitable and resilient Indian public spaces. By understanding the synergism of commercial and experiential opportunities, urban planners can highlight the role of the informal sector, street vendors and traditional markets in animating urban areas and providing for livelihoods. This understanding can inform policies that integrate these components, thus contributing to equity and economic opportunities for all strata of society. Furthermore, understanding the local dense and socially heterogeneous population helps urban designers design public spaces that are inclusive and safe, while also fostering a sense of collective ownership and belonging. In a similar manner, by understanding the *continuous animation* of Indian city areas, planners will be able to design spaces that are safe, while still retaining the components that contribute to the economic vibrancy and social cohesion of the place.

Maas's definition for urban vitality provides a framework that captures the complexity of urban life in Indian public spaces. It encourages planners and designers to leverage existing vitality while developing their strategies for intervention. Studies on urban vitality can provide empirical evidence to advocate for policies that promote walkability, mixed use development and the protection of informal economies. By systematically studying urban vitality in the classroom as well as the field, Planners can create interventions that are socially vibrant and culturally rich, while also being economically prosperous.

## References

- Adukia, A., Asher, S., Novosad, P., & Tan, B. (2019). Residential Segregation in Urban India. Center for Effective Global Action.
- Afsana, Vishal Maurya, A.K Singh, Rajjan Kumar, & Tehjeeb Alam. (2023). CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIAN CULTURE: A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS ANALYSIS. *Madhya Bharti -Humanities and Social Sciences*, 84(12), 136–146.
- Bahadure, S. (2012). Social Sustainability and Mixed Landuse, Case Study of Neighborhoods in Nagpur, India. *Bonfring International Journal of Industrial Engineering and Management Science*, 2(4), 76–83. <https://doi.org/10.9756/bijiems.1744>
- Bharucha, J. (2017). An investigation into the walkability problem in Indian cities. *Safer Communities*, 16(2), 77–86. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-02-2017-0010>
- Chen, M. (2016, August 16). The Urban Informal Economy: Towards more inclusive Cities. *Urbanet*. <https://www.urbanet.info/urban-informal-economy/>
- Chen, M. A. (2022). The Struggle for the Soul of Bhadra Chowk – A Heritage Plaza or Heritage Market? (WIEGO Resource Document No. 27). WIEGO.

Ferry, M., Naudet, J., & Roueff, O. (2018). Seeking the Indian Social Space. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.4462>

Ganguly, S. (2018). Social Construction of a Segregated Urban Space and Its Effects on Education: A Case Study of the Balmikis of Delhi. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 15(1), 51–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973184917744972>

Gómez-Varo, I., Delclòs-Alió, X., & Miralles-Guasch, C. (2022). Jane Jacobs reloaded: A contemporary operationalization of urban vitality in a district in Barcelona. *Cities*, 123, 103565. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.103565>

Introduction: Rhythm, Rhythmanalysis and Urban Life. (2021). In D. Lyon, *Research in Urban Sociology* (pp. 1–23). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/s1047-004220210000017029>

ITDP. (2018). Pedestrianisation In India and Across the Globe. ITDP India. <https://itdp.in/resource/pedestrianisation-in-india-and-across-the-globe/>

ITDP. (2024). Streets For People: Pathways of change from India’s Smart Cities. ITDP India. [https://www.competitiveness.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Streets-For-People-Publication\\_Small.pdf](https://www.competitiveness.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Streets-For-People-Publication_Small.pdf)

Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities* (Vintage Books ed). Vintage Books.

Jha, R. (2025). *The Urban Density Debate: India’s Story*. Observer Research Foundation, ORF Occasional Paper No 468.

Kumar, A., Vidyarthi, S., & Prakash, P. (2021). *City Planning in India, 1947–2017* (1st ed.). Routledge India. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003055969>

Liu, H., Gou, P., & Xiong, J. (2022). Vital triangle: A new concept to evaluate urban vitality. *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems*, 98, 101886. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compenvurbsys.2022.101886>

Maas, P. R. (1984). *Towards a theory of urban vitality* [University of British Columbia]. <https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0096212>

Mehta, V. (2013). *The Street: A Quintessential Social Public Space*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203067635>

Montgomery, C. (2013). *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*. Penguin.

Mouratidis, K., & Poortinga, W. (2020). Built environment, urban vitality and social cohesion: Do vibrant neighborhoods foster strong communities? *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 204, 103951. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2020.103951>

Potter, M. (2017, November 13). Street Life in India. Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. <https://folklife.si.edu/talkstory/street-life-in-india-photos>

Saxena, R. (2022, August 12). The modified public realm: A study of contemporary public spaces in Delhi - Question of Cities. <https://questionofcities.org/the-modified-public-realm-a-study-of-contemporary-public-spaces-in-delhi/>

Schindler, S. (2017). Beyond a state-centric approach to urban informality: Interactions between Delhi's middle class and the informal service sector. *Current Sociology. La Sociologie Contemporaine*, 65(2), 248–259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116657296>

Soto, H. de. (2006). *The other path: The economic answer to terrorism* (6. print). Basic Books.

Whyte, W. H. (2010). *The social life of small urban spaces* (7. print). Project for Public Spaces.

Zeng, C., Song, Y., He, Q., & Shen, F. (2018). Spatially explicit assessment on urban vitality: Case studies in Chicago and Wuhan. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 40, 296–306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scs.2018.04.021>