

Dispatch from Delhi: The Wisdom of Cities

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Written by [Rick Fedrizzi](#)

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Sulzon on Earth, LEED Platinum. Pune, India. Photo by Sunil Rikhaye

I find myself in one of the most amazing cities in the world as I write this. And I'm here, ironically, to talk to the people of this city about, of all things, cities.

Delhi, India is undergoing one of the most stunning physical and social transformations in the history of civilized man. A gigantic urban network that was once marked by an almost mind-numbing sprawl of ghettos and man-made blight, and a city that was once defined by a deeply rooted and centuries-old caste system – a social dynamic brought to world-wide attention in the film *Slumdog Millionaire* – Delhi is now a city which seems to reinvent itself just that much more each day.

Indians are not merely some of the most spiritual, cerebral and thought-provoking people I have ever encountered in my life. They are a people uniquely positioned to fundamentally change how the rest of the world forever views the function and design of the 21st Century urban landscape. And they can do that by how they choose to re-imagine, and in many ways re-build, their beloved Delhi.

Look, cities have long been much smarter than a lot of people ever gave them credit for being. In fact, in many ways cities were downright brilliant in ways that only the wisest and most learned could fully comprehend.

Think about it. When you start putting stuff randomly in your garage or in some dark closet, once you got too much stuff in there, what did you do? You started organizing it and started piling things on top of one another; heavier things on the bottom, lighter things on top. Pretty soon you had everything you needed in a series of neatly stacked and readily accessible piles.

When you heard tales about survivors of plane crashes or shipwrecks who were hungry, stranded and waiting desperately for rescue, what did they invariably do during those long, cold nights in an attempt to survive? They huddled together in masses, because (either consciously or subconsciously) those survivors realized that the heat being lost by any one of their bodies would be recaptured, at least in part, by the others.

Or when civilizations dating back to the ancients wanted to solve a societal problem, gain a deeper understanding of an issue, or achieve some kind of scientific breakthrough, what did they do? They gathered their wisest, most learned, and most creative minds and formed schools and universities, so that those men and women could regularly interact, exchange ideas freely, challenge accepted beliefs, build upon their current body of knowledge, and in the end collectively achieve things they could never achieve individually.

Well, aren't those just three of the basic principles upon which our cities were originally built?

But Delhi has the opportunity to become something so much more than just another city. Delhi can be a model for the highest level of intelligent and sustainable urban design; a living laboratory of ideas, human innovation and oneness with the environment that will be able to mirror something I sense that so many of the men and women I've met on this trip have embedded in their souls.

I'm not telling you here anything you haven't read or heard before. India, like China, is a slumbering giant just now awakening to the vast promise of alien concepts like technology, innovation and social mobility. And because this remarkable country – a land of roughly four times as many people as the U.S. in about a third of the space – has the benefit of both its inherent wisdom and spirituality and an exploding middle class now brimming with eager workers, engineers, scientists and entrepreneurs, India finds itself in the unique position to create and build a whole new kind of city for a whole new world.

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Oh, I'll be sure to remind them of the facts. I'll remind them, for example, that for the first time since the dawn of man more than half the world's population lives in a city.

I'll remind them as well that cities are responsible for 2/3 of the world's energy consumption and almost 3/4 of all carbon dioxide emitted into the environment.

I'll remind them that many firms undertaking green building projects and embracing the tenets of the LEED certification system are not only consuming significantly less energy and water, they're realizing costs savings of up to 15% over five years and achieving paybacks of as little as seven years.

I'll be sure to remind them that, while cities may not be perfect – after all, if people live close enough to share new ideas, they also live close enough to share a common cold, or worse – they could be so much better, and so much smarter than we imagine them today.

But more than anything, I'll remind them of something that I'm certain most of them continue to remind themselves all the time: they have an historic opportunity to show the rest of us just how much better, how much smarter, and how much more sustainable all cities may one day be.

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