

Building Equitable Cities

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This past year we experienced urban trauma on a global scale as cities and towns around the world came under lockdown. Amidst the devastating number of infections and general anxiety about the pandemic, city-dwellers reported that they were inhaling the cleanest air they had in decades¹. In China, the pollution level was estimated to have dropped by 25% in February, 2020². Residents in Delhi saw blue skies for the first time as particle pollution fell by 60%³. Cities around the world temporarily closed off roads to cars, resulting in a surge of cyclists around the world.⁴ These greater modal shifts have been made more permanent with governments around the world improving biking infrastructure and pedestrian walkways in place of roads and highways.⁵

Fighting climate change and improving the wellbeing of citizens remain top priorities in post-COVID-19 strategies across the world. While substantial investments in green infrastructure and policies to tackle climate change have been set in place,⁶ fewer tangible commitments have been made to address the wellbeing of people. Governments and organisations cannot solely focus on a green recovery and growth; the transition needs to be inclusive of other social issues to avoid growing inequities. As we emerge from the pandemic, governments are asking how do we “build back better”? Beyond the recovery from the pandemic, governments are re-imagining urban development.

When we build back better, growth should be focused on the people. We need to ask who are we building better for? More importantly, who might we be leaving behind? As COVID-19 forces cities around the world to pause and re-imagine growth, efforts in re-imagining our cities must be

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/photos-show-nature-is-reclaiming-urban-areas-amid-coronavirus-2020-4>

² <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-coronavirus-has-temporarily-reduced-chinas-co2-emissions-by-a-quarter>

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-coronavirus-delhi-clean-air-pollution/2020/04/10/ac23dd1e-783e-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html

⁴ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/transport/covid-19-creates-new-momentum-cycling-and-walking-we-cant-let-it-go-waste>

⁵ <https://www.wri.org/blog/2020/04/coronavirus-biking-critical-in-cities>

⁶ <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/639141/green-finance-post-covid-19-southeast-asia.pdf> <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2020/09/investing-in-a-green-recovery-volz.htm>

intentional and based on needs. This opportunity must not be used to push existing agendas and ideals. We must seize this opportunity to create fair and just cities to ensure a truly equitable growth after COVID-19.

What are cities and towns without its people? While urban infrastructure is built with people in mind, governments and city builders often take the able-bodied cis-male adult as the default person for planning. This excludes a significant portion of the population because roughly 50% are women. Even the needs of the men will differ greatly based on their age, class, race, sexuality and ability. Therefore, in reality, the default person currently being used only represents a small segment of the population, and the needs of the majority of the population are overlooked. This article looks at different sections of society which need more attention as we plan and build our urban spaces.

Cities for People

The pandemic may have had an impact on all countries around the world but the impact has not been proportionate. Our urban environment and infrastructure can enable or restrict access and inclusion in society. Governments need to question how we can balance growth and changing demographic needs. More importantly, they should ask how we can re-design our public spaces and create a diverse economy that puts people first.

Involving the human perspective in all steps of the problem-solving process is crucial. Cities around the world are starting to adopt more placemaking strategies and placing people at the heart of urban planning. Shanghai is re-imagining its historic waterfront with a human-centred design approach⁷ and Paris is creating “15-minute cities”, where each neighbourhood can access essential services and social amenities within a 15-minute walking distance.⁸

While we have been extremely fortunate in Bhutan with the leadership of His Majesty The King, the government, and dedicated frontline workers serving around the clock, COVID-19 has placed a glaring spotlight on a myriad of issues in the governance of our urban spaces, and exposed the inadequacies in our urban planning infrastructure: the lack of proper home

⁷ <https://www.archdaily.com/959061/shanghai-binjiang-avenue-revitalizing-the-historic-river-front-with-a-human-centered-design-approach>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201214-how-15-minute-cities-will-change-the-way-we-socialise>

addresses, resulting in inefficient deliveries, and sidewalks plagued with intervals of dirt mounds and holes. Families in apartment buildings were not able to access green spaces outside their movement card timings and, depending on where they lived, accessing green spaces meant walking long distances on these sidewalks.

Our urban spaces are in dire need of structural changes and, since cities are about people, they need to be seated at the table to decide how their spaces are being governed and built. When we start connecting urban planning systems to the human perspective, we begin to use different methods, designs, and strategies. We ask human questions and get human responses that lead to humane solutions that benefit us all.

Children and Youth

Young people all around the world are bearing the brunt of the pandemic with school closures, dismal job markets, as well as massive interruptions to social connections and support. Malnutrition worsened when 90,000 students who were entitled to school meals in Bhutan were not able to access them.⁹ A poll conducted by UNICEF showed that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the mental health of youth in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁰ The World Economic Forum reports that COVID-19 has stifled job markets and investments in youth education programmes worldwide. Tangible programmes that give young people the space to collaborate, innovate, and build together are essential.

Youth must be involved in the decision-making process, especially when it comes to issues that impact them. While larger holistic investments and efforts need to be placed to combat multifaceted issues, placing children at the heart of urban planning is an opportunity to build equitable cities. Bhutan currently lacks recreational spaces, playgrounds and libraries for children. There is a need to reframe the narrative that youth are the future and, instead, make them key stakeholders of the present, to collectively build a future that they are going to inherit. A book and toolkit by the Bernard van Leer Foundation called “The City At Eye Level For Kids”¹¹ explain how involving the perspective of youth can lead to building liveable, sustainable, safe and inclusive cities for all.

⁹ <https://kuenselonline.com/economic-impact-of-covid-19-worsening-the-malnutrition-status-in-asia-and-pacific-un/>

¹⁰ <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/impact-covid-19-mental-health-adolescents-and-youth>

¹¹ The City At Eye Level For Kids (2018).

People with Disabilities

The statistic that, by 2050, 68% of the world's population will live in urban centres is used widely in research. A statistic that is less widely circulated is that, out of the 68%, 15% of the population will be people with disabilities.¹² A study led by the National Statistics Bureau on child disability in Bhutan reports that 14% of children are living with a single disability, and 2.7% of children live with multiple disabilities.

Basic urban services such as transport, sidewalks, housing, education, and health care in Bhutan exclude people with disabilities. The inadequate services and barriers disproportionately impact rates of poverty and deprivation experienced by people with disabilities and have a detrimental effect on the community as a whole. While there is an increasing number of programmes and initiatives led by organisations such as Ability Bhutan Society, Disabled People's Organisation, and Phensem Parents Support Group, much of their efforts largely focus on awareness and advocacy, education support, independent living skills training, and medical support. There is a gap in urban planning, policies and practices to create a disability-inclusive and accessible environment in Bhutan.

There is a need for an evidence-based legal framework for disability-inclusive and accessible urban development policies and practice in Bhutan. This can increase awareness and commitment from urban planning stakeholders across all levels of government. Empowering individuals with diverse abilities to live independently and with dignity within Bhutanese society is crucial, and examining our urban planning policies is key to this.

Sidewalks, entrances, schools, recreational centres, commercial spaces and bathrooms need to be barrier-free and accessible by wheelchair. Additionally, public transportation, including bus stops and ticket machines, need to be accessible. Wheelchair accessible spaces do not benefit just people with physical disabilities but also parents with strollers and elderly folks. New buildings and roads need to be mandated to follow these guidelines, while old buildings need to be retrofitted. Housing providers also need to build more accessible homes.

¹² https://www.cbm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/The-Inclusion-Imperative-Towards-Disability-Inclusive-and-Accessible-Urb....pdf

Women

Domestic abuse cases increased during lockdowns, with a disproportionate number of victims being women.¹³ Fear of harassment and abuse is, sadly, a common sentiment held by women when navigating cities, such as walking alone or using public transport at night. According to a 2007 World Bank report, 73% of transport funding goes to roads. When government funding prioritises roads, youth, people with disabilities, women and the elderly are more likely to be left behind, since data shows that men are more likely to drive.¹⁴ The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women also found male bias in transport planning with roads, public transit and the very design of cars made for able-bodied men. This means women are more likely to take public transport or walk, further putting themselves at risk.

Since 1990, Eva Kail, Vienna's head of gender planning, has collected and used data to retrofit steps for prams, widened pavements, increased pedestrian street lighting, and improved crossings.¹⁵ Evidence-based solutions such as digital timetables and increased lighting in bus stops and stations that are manned were put into effect. Bus stops were located to ensure the safety of women. As a result, 60% of all journeys in Vienna today are made on foot. Using case studies like Vienna, the government in Bhutan can begin to collect gender disaggregated data and test some of the best practices in our public transport system.

In the city of Gothengurg, 80 million Kronor was spent on sports clubs and associations every year. While the funding was intended to benefit everyone, the data revealed that the majority of the funds were being accessed by boys for organised sports. This resulted in poorer mental health for girls, and the lack of physical exercise meant that they were more likely to suffer fractures from osteoporosis in the future. The study found that if they designed sports facilities for girls, the investment was far less than the cost of health care from problems arising from osteoporosis in women. Collecting gender disaggregated data is crucial to understand the needs of women.

¹³ https://thebhutanese.bt/domestic-violence-cases-increase-during-lockdown/?fbclid=IwAR3eHOgf-F4IXN3in2t4CMuDG-zbegEKceP4h03lsfH_MjqefRZ3Xf0qGnT0

¹⁴ Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men (2019).

¹⁵ Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men (2019).

Making gender-informed and needs-based decisions is not just a social justice issue, it also makes economic sense.

Transport and Housing for the Urban Poor

As a result of an inefficient public transportation system and the poor condition of buses in Bhutan, public transport is used by individuals who do not own or have access to a car. It is a service for only certain segments of the population and that needs to change. We need more investments in public transport and more ridership.

In the early 2000s, the government of Colombia implemented the National Urban Transportation Programme (NUTP). Under the NUTP the first Bus Rapid Transit, Transmilenio, was built in Bogotá. The NUTP initially faced significant challenges because of unfavourable public opinion of public transport. Competing funding priorities within the government also posed a significant barrier. But, after successful implementation, the model has reduced average commuting times and emissions. On a social level it has improved health and safety, created new jobs, and brought about public support for public transport projects. The tipping point of its success was Mayor Mockus' administration's unorthodox programmes that incorporated art, theatre and humour to change public behaviour and opinion about road safety and public transport. Mayor Peñalosa's administration built upon this and focused on creating an egalitarian transport system and established a sustainable financial plan.¹⁶

When building our cities back better, efficient and effective public transport and accessible roads should be top priorities in our urban planning agenda. While bigger structural plans are needed, we can begin with existing opportunities. There is a current opportunity to design the highway in Zilukha with wide footpaths that are accessible to people using wheelchairs, parents walking with strollers, and designated bicycle lanes. Effective public transportation routes, services, and campaigns along the highway will reduce traffic congestion and pollution and encourage more people to walk and exercise.

Other issues that affect the quality of life of the urban poor are the commodification of housing and unchecked rent control. Landlords treat

¹⁶ Turner, M., Kooshian, C. and Winkelman, S. (2012). Case Study: Colombia's Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Development And Expansion. Center for Clean Air Policy

housing as a mere product for commercial trade rather than a right for individuals and essential to human happiness and also exploit the housing shortage to raise rents. The decommodification of housing and a rent control system need to be prioritised in our national urban planning efforts.

We need to start re-thinking what homelessness means. The narrative that homelessness is people on the streets does not apply to the Bhutanese context because of the familial welfare structure. In the context of Bhutan, dependence on family and His Majesty's generous *Kidu* prevents homelessness. However, the question of adequate housing quality should be examined more critically.

Bold multi-strategy ideas are needed for mixed-income large-scale housing that provides social amenities based on what the community needs. While housing should come first, the lack of economic opportunities should also be addressed. Minimum wages should reflect the housing costs in our urban centres.

Intersectional Identities

Kimberlé Crenshaw¹⁷ coined the term intersectionality - how people's identities can overlap and further marginalise them. Every person has multiple identities based on gender, sexuality, class, race, age and ability. The forms of inequality can compound themselves. For example, girls who are disabled and from a lower socio-economic class are more likely to face multiple barriers growing up than a girl who is able-bodied and from an affluent family.

This article highlights segments of the population which are neglected in urban planning in Bhutan. As we begin to design cities with marginalised communities, we cannot separate their intersectional identities. For example, in building more equitable cities for women, it does not mean that the solution is to have 50% of women occupy leadership roles. The 50% concept is a good start but we need to take it a step further and question whether the feminist leadership is intersectional in nature. Are we taking into account women in rural areas? Are we including elderly women? What about women holding blue collar jobs? Are we considering their sexual identities?

¹⁷ Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color

When building our urban spaces, understanding intersectionality can help governments, policymakers, and urban planners understand social structures that perpetuate marginalisation and help them respond better to the needs of the most marginalised members of our society.

Collective Impact

Determining who we are building cities for helps us ask the right questions. It helps the government collect the right data, make decisions, and find solutions based on evidence, but the government cannot do it alone. While the government can play a key entrepreneurial role to create long-term innovation-led economic growth, that is more inclusive and equitable, we need housing providers, private developers, banks and landowners all involved.

To ensure policy compliance and the implementation of equitable urban planning, it is important to reframe the governance structure on a municipal level and resource *thromdes* (municipality) with the technical capacity, funding, and manpower. Additionally, providing more autonomy to make decisions and implement revenue generating tools will build the capacity of the *thromdes*.

In restructuring governance, the model must include Bhutanese citizens, not just in terms of informing them and soliciting feedback. The government needs to tap into their potential, start asking questions, and be genuinely receptive to answers that they may not have expected.

Civic Engagement

Urban planning successes depend on public consensus. The most brilliant plans fail without public consensus. Planning systems around the world have public engagement that are often seen as a performative exercise rather than a genuine planning process.

On the flip side, participation does not always lead to equity, because the loudest voices, with a NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitude, widen inequalities. Therefore, Bhutan must explore the conditions needed to enable democratic access for all residents, and to increase their capacity to self-organise, so that everyone can be a city builder.

The strategy to engage residents should be multidimensional so that they can choose what they want to be a part of - whether to get involved in the participatory budgeting process, provide input into the design of a park, or plant flowers with neighbours. There should be meaningful activities that can engage residents, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, ability, or income. Civic assets such as community centres, and activities that facilitate residents to actively shape their community, are vital. With repeated participation and interaction, there will be collective benefits to the community with, not just the urban landscape, but also on a social scale.

Conclusion

As Bhutan builds back better after COVID-19, a genuine multi-layered engagement strategy that takes into context the nuanced cultural dynamics and recognises every citizen as a key stakeholder in urban planning is essential. Governments must gather specific data and use evidence to implement innovative solutions.

Innovation does not mean re-inventing the wheel. There are endless resources, best practices and, more importantly, failures, that we can learn from in the local and global context. Placing residents at the heart of urban planning is key, because when we design for, and with, the most marginalised communities, everyone benefits.

As Jane Jacobs said in “The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961)”:

“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”¹⁸

¹⁸ The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961)