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Fourteen years ago, when Mumbai was a far more livable city than it is today, experts had already begun sounding warnings about the need for sustainability and an urban vision. The metropolis was dirty, noisy, crowded and full of cars and slums; in 2012, the situation is worse. A global survey of 140 cities last year found Melbourne to be the world's most livable city; Mumbai, India's business capital, was at a miserable 116th position.



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"The basic few factors which make a city livable are culture and environment, education, healthcare, political and social stability and infrastructure," says Surebhi Arora, MRICS, Associate Director-Research, Colliers International. "Ample job opportunities, social opportunities, a ground for creativity

is what make life attractive in this city despite its poor infrastructure, traffic congestion, parking problems, moderate level of overall cleanliness, and slums."

Much work certainly needs to be done, but the good news is that, as livability becomes a buzzword around the world, awareness in India is slowly seeping in and Mumbai's developers are beginning to recognise their role in building a sustainable city. Green buildings form a major element in building sustainable cities; a 2008 Jones Lang LaSalle Meghraj study titled 'Greenomics' observed that real estate development uses "about 40% of the energy and it is one of the prime contributors to global warming due to the emission of Green House Gas. " It also noted that buildings in India consume about 20% of the country's total electricity and have a significant impact on

the environment and resources.

Mumbai's developers took their time to respond to this global imperative. As the industry matured over the last decade, however, more real estate players began recognising the need to establish green buildings and work towards sustainability in multiple ways. While such structures were largely commercial, residential buildings too have begun to go green, with water harvesting, solar panels and eco-friendly construction, among other things; the growth of townships only encouraged the trend.

"In a typical residential building in India, approximately 60% of total electricity is consumed for lights, 32% for air conditioning, and 8% for refrigeration. Considering this, there is an increasing need to go green," says Lalit Kumar Jain, National President, CREDAI. "We need to incorporate systems that

save on resources such as water and electricity". Sustainable development in real estate, says Jain, "uses design techniques, materials and technologies that minimise a building's impact on environment. They provide occupiers with several operating cost reductions."

Shalish Purnanik, Managing Director, Purnanik Builders Pvt. Ltd, adds, "Protection of environment is everybody's responsibility including the real estate sector. As a responsible developer, we have included green practices in some of our projects." Purnanik's Rumah Bali at Ghodbunder road, for instance, is based on green practices, including rain water harvesting, water efficient landscaping, and energy saving equipment. "Adopting eco-friendly materials and equipment also results in low maintenance cost of the project," Purnanik adds.

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While green buildings are crucial to Mumbai's growth as a sustainable city, there are many wider challenges that need to be tackled, such as public transport and infrastructure. When Maharashtra's somnambulant government finally announced measures to improve transportation systems, Mumbaiers cheered, and then grew increasingly frustrated over the delays, and disasters that accompanied the construction of the Metro and Monorail projects.

"In a burgeoning megapolis like Mumbai, the residents and city administration are constantly dealing with the gap in urban infrastructure," says Manoj John - VP: Corporate Planning & Strategy, RNA Corp. "Roads are always crowded, water and electricity are in short supply; public transport is stretched to the seams, air quality is appalling and garbage is overflowing...not a pretty picture for the most expensive real estate proposition in India. While citizens clamour for more fund allocation from government and conscientious spending on development plans, many action groups in the form of AIMS, corporate sponsors, NGOs and real estate developers are contributing towards improvement in their capacity." RNA Corp has adopted principles of Responsible Living in its new residential project RNA VIVA at Mira Road; among other things, the project provides for fly ash bricks, low-VOC paints and vermi-compost units, in addition to a green cover of about 50,000 sq. ft.

So what does it take to build a livable community and what does it mean to the average citizen? The US Dept. of Transportation Draft Strategic Plan calls "livable communities" places where "transportation, housing and commercial development investments have been coordinated so that people have access to adequate, affordable and environmentally sustainable travel options." Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood put it succinctly - "being able to take your kids to school, go to work, see a doctor, drop by the grocery or post office, go out to dinner and a movie, and play with your kids in a park, all without having to get in your car." In one online contest, the winning entry was just six words: "Accessible places, natural spaces, minimal traces".

Globally, sustainability is gaining momentum. In September, Siemens opened its first conference centre for sustainable urban development in London, with the world's largest exhibition on the theme. In the US, the International Making Cities Livable movement, initiated in 1985, has become a part of the national agenda. In India, Indian Green Building Council (IGBC) has been receiving enthusiastic response; developers like Rustomjee, K Raheja Corp Pvt Ltd, Kalpataru Limited, and Mahindra Lifespace Developers Ltd are among several committed to green construction.

As a Kalpataru Limited spokesperson points out: "Real estate defines the development of a city and impacts the environment. Today, across the world we are facing the challenge of climate change. The only way to address this challenge is to protect the environment and conserve it through sustainable practices. Following sustainable practices in real estate development can play a significant role in protecting environment and help everyone live a better and greener tomorrow."

Mumbai has a long way to go towards becoming a livable city, but hopefully we are getting there.

INPUTS: ANURADHA RAMAMIRTHAM

AS TIMES PROPERTY CELEBRATES ITS 14TH ANNIVERSARY, MENKA SHIVDASANI REFLECTS ON WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO MAKE MUMBAI A LIVABLE CITY

MEET THE CHALLENGE

