

# India

Guest topic editor Vinita Dhume brings together evidence of India's growing resilience

**W**hat is the story of India? What is the story of its diverse communities? What is the story of its vastly varying socio-economic and cultural landscapes?

As one of the ten Big Emerging Markets (BEM) economies of Asia, India today has a booming economy. In 2023, approximately a third of India's total population lived in cities. This trend shows an increase in urbanisation by more than 4 per cent in the last decade, and that people have moved away from rural areas to find work and make a living in cities. Rapid urban growth has brought several challenges, such as social inequality, a shortage of housing and affordability, and environmental degradation.

The make-up of Indian cities and their changing urban fabric, alongside climate emergency-related stressors, further exacerbate these issues. On the one hand, new gated developments are springing up as exclusive communities and are seen as a progressive model of developed neighbourhoods with all the infrastructure needed to support the middle-upper income groups in society. In steep contrast, there are the less developed neighbourhoods that lack basic infrastructure and amenities, which have organically grown into slums or resource-hungry neighbourhoods.

To tackle these challenges, the government of India launched the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) in 2015. The mission is helping to implement innovative solutions for better resource management and sustainable urban development. Technologies like smart grids, efficient waste management systems and green building practices are integral to the approach. Many of the projects featured in this issue have been curated through

SCM, so understanding its benefits and how it is impacting wider communities across India is vital.

The aim of SCM is to create more liveable environments that go beyond infrastructure development to include environmental sustainability, public safety and health. This investment is much needed to upgrade urban environments, but there is another fundamental element in making healthy places, valued and loved by local communities, and that is to improve the quality of life and lived experience of the Aam Aadmi (ordinary man) of India.

Today the role of creative placemaking goes beyond spatial design and economic development. To create positive social impact, we must recognise that culture and creativity – artists and designers – play a significant role in building a sense of community and place resilience. This raises questions for us as place-makers and place-keepers: what helps communities to survive, endure and even thrive in the face of chronic and acute threats? How might governments, professionals and institutions enable this capacity in places and help communities to adapt? Can community development strategies and stewardship models honour culture and spark creativity to improve social cohesion and resilience in measurable and long-term ways?

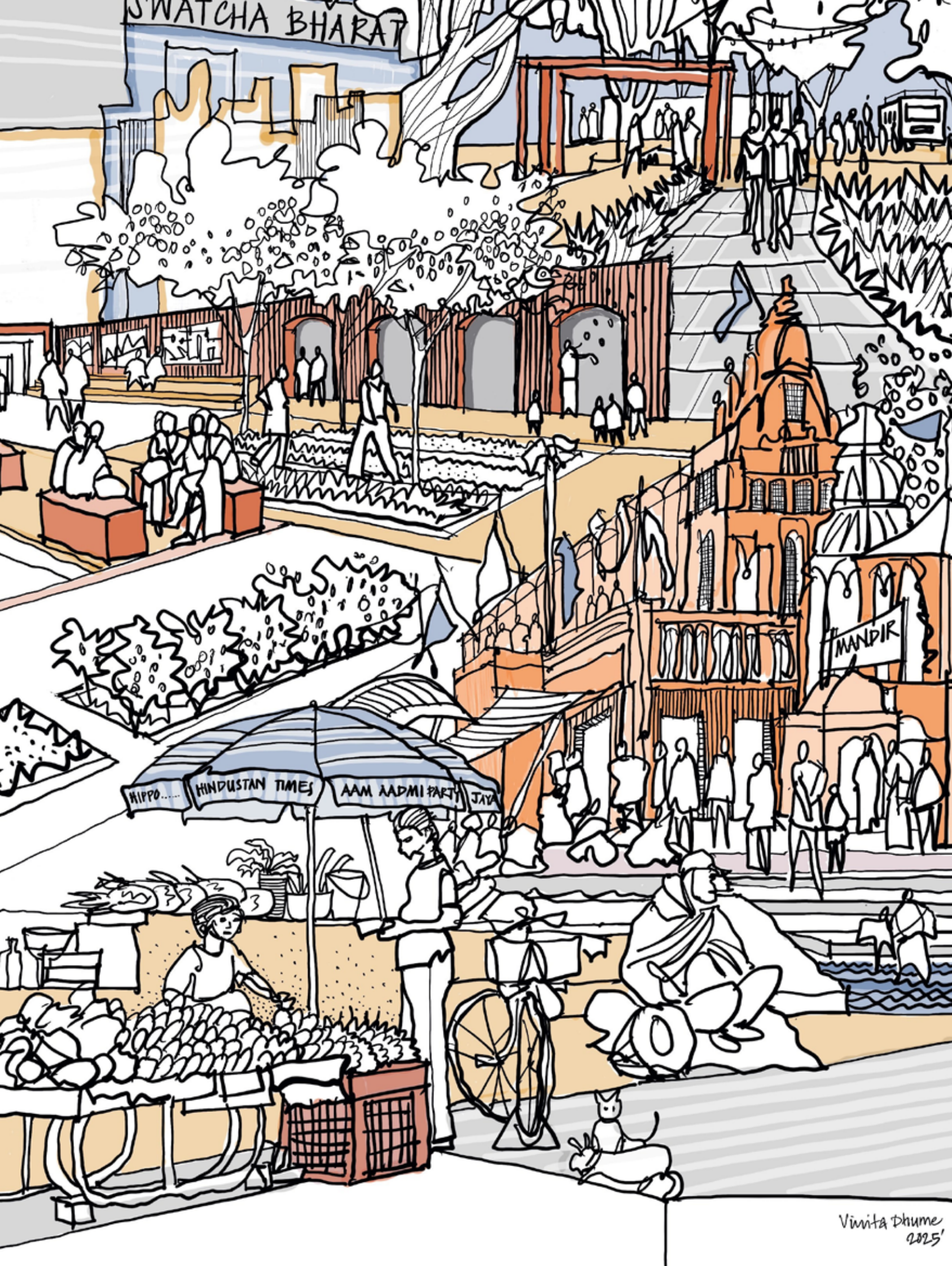
The articles that follow feature wide-ranging projects to showcase how culture is playing a fundamental role in shaping places and resilient communities across India today, thanks to the contributions of creative practices who understand the role of local culture and have built it into their place-shaping approaches, strategies or projects.

## Cultural patterns and appropriation

In placemaking we have to actively integrate patterns of cultural use and appropriation by closely observing cultural practices deeply ingrained in society. These practices influence the way that people think, use, interact and behave within their environments, and enable communities and their cultures to adapt to and recover from challenges. This approach also allows communities to take ownership of spaces and places and use them in ways that suit their everyday needs.

Looking at repurposing street trading cars, innovative solutions developed by Chaal Chaal Agency through direct engagement with the stakeholders concerned highlight how community-led projects can generate self-sufficient, equitable and cohesive outcomes. Improvements to Panjim Market by Sachin Agshikar is another example of how the architecture of a built structure has responded to the needs of existing local traders to create their new home, which appreciates the chaos of markets but brings order to this important civic space.

Cultural practices foster a sense of place, unity and cooperation amongst members of a community. Traditions and rituals practiced in public spaces bring people together, strengthen social bonds and promote mutual support. This sense of community can be a powerful force in times of crisis, enabling people to work together to overcome adversity. The Celebrating Peruvanam initiative illustrates Urban Design Collective's research into the value of historic settlements and the need to preserve a settlement's unique cultural, natural and spiritual heritage.







Map of India showing the settlements covered by the articles in this topic

The initiative helps to decode the settlement’s morphology, socio-cultural practices and economic systems in order to understand its evolution and future potential. Rohan Shivkumar’s examination of the globalising of cities shows how this threatens their complexity and authenticity.

Resilience as a golden thread

There are also local cultures that value the environment and want to use sustainable methods to promote circular economies and the conservation of resources. Local knowledge and skills can be developed from cultural practices which provide communities with

the tools needed to adapt and cope with social and economic challenges. The eco-restoration of lakes in Coimbatore by Oasis Design Inc demonstrates how nature-based solutions have reclaimed the lakefronts, enabling communities to re-establish lost connections with nature, working with its natural heritage, and resulting in valuable public open spaces for residents and tourists.

Integrating culture in civic spaces can also influence and have a positive impact on mental and emotional wellbeing. Practices such as prayer or meditation, storytelling and public art can provide a source of comfort and hope in difficult times, helping to boost the spirit and maintain a positive outlook. In Versova, Mumbai, Bombay 61 Stu-

“47% believe that the idea of weather in our society is based on culture. 53% believe that it is based on nature. ”

From Olafur Eliasson’s 2003 installation, *The Weather Project* at Tate Modern in London, the Tate Weather Monitoring Group’s survey of its employees

dio have been working with the local Koli (fishermen) community to ensure that their needs are included in urban policy-making, and depicted through art and storytelling. Local engagement has also resulted in stories told through wall murals creating compelling backdrops to daily street life.

Ultimately, in the curation of happy places what matters most is a community’s connection to place, this sits at the very heart of resilience. A strong sense of place is important for health and wellbeing, and many of the case studies set out here, such as Broadway Malyan’s work on street culture, also show us how this impacts the physical, environmental and economic health of places. We need to focus on creative placemaking, which enables local culture and community collaboration to generate resilience, just as resilience is an essential factor for attracting investment in spaces and places. ●

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# Resilient Streets and Spaces

Akash Hingorani, Sujata Hingorani and Akshat Chadha describe urban design and renewal initiatives in Srinagar, Delhi and Coimbatore



Srinagar: the key places in the Smart City improvements programme with Lal Chowk at the centre. Images by Oasis Design Inc

## Srinagar

The crown jewel of Kashmir, the city of Srinagar carries a rich tapestry of history and culture woven into its urban fabric. Under the ambitious Srinagar Smart City Limited (SSCL) initiative, the city is undergoing a remarkable transformation focusing on reimagining its historic junctions and roads. This initiative is not just about infrastructure improvements; it is a vision to create spaces that celebrate the city’s heritage while addressing the needs of modern urban life. These transformative projects are a testament to the power of urban design in unlocking the hidden potential of historic sites.

### Cultural renaissance and placemaking

A flagship programme of the Indian Government, the Smart Cities Mission aims to drive economic growth and improve the quality of life by enabling local development and harnessing technology to create smart outcomes for citizens. At the heart of the SSCL initiative lies the concept of placemaking – crafting spaces that resonate with people’s lives and foster meaningful connections. In Srinagar, this mission provided a unique opportunity to rediscover and celebrate its rich cultural identity. By focusing on placemaking, the city has sought to transform its historic core and areas along the Jhelum River into vibrant public places that reflect

its history, art and people. Integrating pedestrian friendly features, traffic calming measures and accessible design, the project aims to blend the built environment with Srinagar’s cultural and economic vitality. The key aspects of the project were the redesign of Srinagar’s historic heart into a place that balances heritage conservation with modern functionality. Once a symbol of political upheaval, protests and celebrations, the main square of Lal Chowk is now a people’s plaza and a vibrant, barrier-free pedestrian plaza in the city’s central business district (CBD) for leisure, social interaction and celebration. Historically subject to heavy military security, Lal Chowk now leverages modern surveillance technology, including real-time CCTV monitoring, to





Before: Ghanta Ghar was stranded on a traffic island



After: Lal Chowk is now a pedestrian-friendly plaza

improve safety while fostering an inviting atmosphere. Previously isolated on a traffic island, the iconic Ghanta Ghar (clock tower) is now properly integrated into the main plaza, not only enhancing accessibility, but also restoring the tower’s status as the symbolic heart of the city. Nearby, the major road junction and entrance to the city, Jehangir Chowk, has seen significant improvements making it a welcoming gateway, with smoother traffic circulation, improved pedestrian safety and greater aesthetic appeal. The street bazaars in Gonikhan and Amira Kadal have been redesigned

as pedestrian-friendly market streets. Cobblestone paving, traffic calming and dedicated zones for local vendors create a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity, inviting locals and visitors to rediscover these lively markets.

The historic transformation of Lal Chowk

As an iconic city square, Lal Chowk has long been a microcosm of Srinagar’s complex history. Witness to political upheaval, protest movements and celebrations, it holds a symbolic place in the city’s story, and today it is a place for people to enjoy, embodying a stark yet inspiring contrast to its past.

Lal Chowk now embraces inclusivity and openness, with the raised and fenced pedestrian plinth transformed into a barrier-free unified plaza. By removing visual and physical clutter, the space flows seamlessly to Residency Road, another key route in the city. Cobblestones not only enhance the aesthetic but help to calm traffic. Strategically placed bollards manage vehicle

movement, reclaiming the rest of the area for pedestrians.

Central to this work was the involvement of local craftsmen, who brought traditional techniques and materials to the project. The clock tower showcases intricate detailing inspired by traditional Kashmiri craftsmanship. Its cladding features *Maharaji* bricks (local bricks around half the size of the modern brick) laid using *dhaji dewari* – a traditional construction method combining wood and brick. This technique not only enhances the visual appeal of the clock tower, but also ensures its resilience, reflecting the wisdom of Kashmir’s architectural heritage. Local motifs, including *Chinar* leaves and carpet-inspired patterns, adorn the tower illustrating Srinagar’s artistic identity. The use of recessed arches (*taq*) further ties the design to the region’s syncretic traditions, in which ‘the blending of cultures and ideas from different places and religions’ lead to unique hybrid practices.

The clock tower’s new pyramid roof canopy draws inspiration from the pagoda-style roofs of Kashmir, incorporating elements reminiscent of the city’s most important mosques Jamia Masjid and Khanqah Maula. The addition of a spire evokes the mountain-like towers *shikharas* on temples, symbolising the harmonious coexistence of diverse architectural influences in the region.

Tradition meets modernity

The transformation of Lal Chowk also demonstrates how spaces can embrace modern technology while celebrating heritage. With features like an LED screen, shaded seating, amphitheatres and interactive fountains, the square is designed for people of all ages to enjoy together. A top destination for tourists, Lal Chowk now offers a more welcoming

experience with shops around the plaza benefiting from the influx of visitors drawn to this newly vibrant urban hub.

Renamed Srinagar Square, the new pedestrian plaza encapsulates the essence of urban renewal. Enhanced lighting, music and thoughtfully curated street furniture create an inviting atmosphere that comes to life after sunset, with the interplay of lighting and architecture.

The plaza’s design fosters social interaction and has become the city’s preferred venue for public celebrations such as New Year’s Eve as well as the everyday. The project has also catalysed a broader urban transformation, encouraging people to rediscover their city’s historic core.

Along the Jhelum: reviving the waterfront

Beyond Lal Chowk, the SSCL initiative extends to the banks of the Jhelum River. The revitalisation of the waterway aims to create accessible, vibrant public spaces that connect the city’s past with its future. With promenades, viewing decks and green spaces, the project re-establishes the Jhelum River as a lifeline through the city.

Seasonal highlights add another layer of interest to the waterfront; in autumn, the banks come alive with the golden hues of *Chinar* leaves, while in winter the promenade is transformed by snow. The integration of green tree cover and shaded walkways further enhances the comfort and appeal of these spaces, making them busy all year.

Culinary streets and community life

Srinagar’s culinary streets have also been reimaged, bringing together



Lal Chowk is now a barrier-free place for people to gather and the design of the new clock tower has been locally inspired

traditional Kashmiri delicacies with modern public realm design. From the aromas of freshly brewed *kahwa* (spiced green tea) to the intricate preparation of the multi-course meal *wazwan*, these spaces celebrate the sensory richness of Srinagar’s food culture while providing pedestrian-friendly dining areas. This blend of gastronomy and urban design has revitalized the city’s street life, attracting locals and tourists alike.

A vision for the future

The revitalisation of Srinagar’s historic spaces shows how sensitive urban design interventions can unlock heritage sites. By balancing the past with the present, it is possible to create public spaces that honour cultural heritage while meeting contemporary needs. This initiative has enhanced and redefined Srinagar’s identity, setting a benchmark for other urban renewal projects. As cities grapple with further urbanisation, the SSCL initiative is an inspiring model. It demonstrates that by integrating placemaking principles with cultural sensitivity, historic sites can be transformed into thriving, iconic spaces that enhance the quality of urban life.

Delhi

Urban transportation is the backbone of a city’s identity, social life and future. With the escalating challenges of climate change, congestion and inequality, the need for a radical shift in mobility design has never been more pressing. We must design for human behaviour and create urban spaces that encourage people to move differently, embrace sustainable modes of transport, and foster connected communities. By designing cities for walking, cycling and public transit over private cars, we can unlock new routes to sustainability and liveability.

India’s National Urban Transport Policy (NUTP) offers a vision for inclusive, non-motorised mobility emphasising mobility for all. This aligns closely with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 11, to make cities more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. However, Indian cities are heavily skewed towards vehicular traffic, side-lining pedestrians, cyclists and public transit users. This model has led to traffic congestion, rising pollution levels and a decline in public health.

A key solution lies in embracing





Delhi: the sections of major highways that have been transformed by the National Urban Transport Policy

sustainable, multimodal transport systems that prioritise the movement of people over vehicles. As cities like Delhi and Mumbai invest in metro systems and electric buses, the critical next step is to promote walking and cycling – which are low-carbon, accessible and enhance health and urban resilience.

Indian cities are increasingly turning to blue-green infrastructure to mitigate environmental impacts, including the integration of rain gardens, permeable pavements and urban greenery. These elements not only reduce storm-water runoff and the urban heat island effect, but also create more comfortable, liveable streetscapes.

By creating human-centric, walkable and cyclable streets, cities can actively encourage sustainable transport choices. The key design strategies include pedestrian-centric streets, transit-oriented development (TOD), public spaces as social hubs, and nature as the urban backbone.



Before: the Inner Ring Road had little safe space for pedestrians and cyclists

Revitalising Delhi’s Inner Ring Road

One of India’s most ambitious urban mobility projects, the Inner Ring Road redesign in Delhi, exemplifies how thoughtful urban design can reframe the city’s transportation narrative. Previously dominated by traffic and pollution, the Inner Ring Road now stands as an exemplar of how integrated, human-centric urban design can transform a corridor into a vibrant, multi-functional public space. Central to this was the creation of a continuous, legible cycle track that runs seamlessly along the road, offering cyclists a safe and comfortable route, free from vehicular interference. High quality lighting has transformed the streetscape after dark, creating a surreal, almost magical ambiance to enhance the pedestrian experience and promote safety.

At the heart of the design is blue-green infrastructure. Landscaped beds, newly planted trees and vertical gardens on metro columns form a cohesive green canopy that significantly enhances the aesthetics of the road. Buffer planting strips between vehicular lanes and pedestrian/cycling areas not only add to its visual appeal, but also create a physical barrier that helps to dampen sound and air pollution. The view from the footbridge reveals a serene, park-like



After: the street designs include designated lanes, planting and places to pause

atmosphere in stark contrast to the surrounding urban hustle, offering both visual respite and environmental relief.

Designing equitable public spaces

Equity is an important pillar of the project’s design accommodating people of all ages and abilities, with barrier-free, universally accessible spaces to prioritise inclusivity. Special provision for elderly users, children and people with disabilities has been incorporated, including wide, smooth walkways, well-lit seating areas and inclusive public restrooms. Furthermore, vendor spaces, outdoor performance areas and service zones ensure that the space remains active, lively and functional. Designed to promote community interaction, provide space for livelihoods and support local businesses, the street is now a dynamic part of the community rather than just a through route.

Automated irrigation systems, waste bins and cleaning service areas are also integrated into the design, to not only maintain the cleanliness and beauty of the streetscape, but to generate revenue, contributing to the ongoing upkeep of the area.

A place for all

The most profound impact of this design is on the daily lives of residents and visitors. What was once a noisy, congested thoroughfare is now a piece of public realm where people come to connect and relax. Children can play in the green spaces, while the elderly look forward to their evening walks and meet friends in the new pedestrianised areas. On sunny winter days, people gather to bask in the sun, while the evenings see locals enjoying promenading along tree-lined paths, savouring the atmosphere.

The transformation of Delhi’s Inner Ring Road is a testament to the power of design to influence behaviour, reduce carbon footprints and create spaces where people want to be. This is not just a street – it is now a destination in its own right, a living and breathing part of the city that connects people to each other and the world around them.

Coimbatore Lakes

Coimbatore is a bustling Indian city nestled against the verdant backdrop of the Western Ghats mountain range. A pioneering lake restoration initiative has breathed life into its neglected water bodies turning them into dynamic centres of resilience and recreation. Spanning over 1,000 acres of lake and a 30km of greenway corridor, this project is based on ecological innovation, community inclusion and cultural celebration.

Once seen as relics of a previous era, Coimbatore’s lakes are now thriving with biodiversity and activity, under the aegis of India’s Smart Cities Mission. The project has created opportunities for education, leisure and tourism while fostering a collective appreciation of nature’s role in urban life. By restoring the city’s lakes, Coimbatore has reclaimed lost ecosystems and is more equitable, sustainable and joyful.

A visionary leap

Urbanisation often extracts a heavy toll on natural landscapes, with sprawling development encroaching on rivers, lakes and wetlands, and Coimbatore faced these issues acutely. Once vital for flood management, biodiversity and water security, the lakes had been reduced to stagnant, polluted reservoirs.



Before: Shivdasपुरi Road was a poor environment for daily life



After: the improvements in Shivdasपुरi Road have changed the pedestrian experience completely

But where many saw irretrievable loss, the city’s planners envisioned an opportunity.

The restoration project began by reframing the challenges: urban heat islands, water scarcity and habitat degradation were addressed not with heavy engineering, but solutions inspired by nature. Coimbatore’s lakes became test beds for innovation, where scientists, engineers and local people collaborated to design systems that worked with, rather than against, natural processes. Today, the lakes mitigate floods during

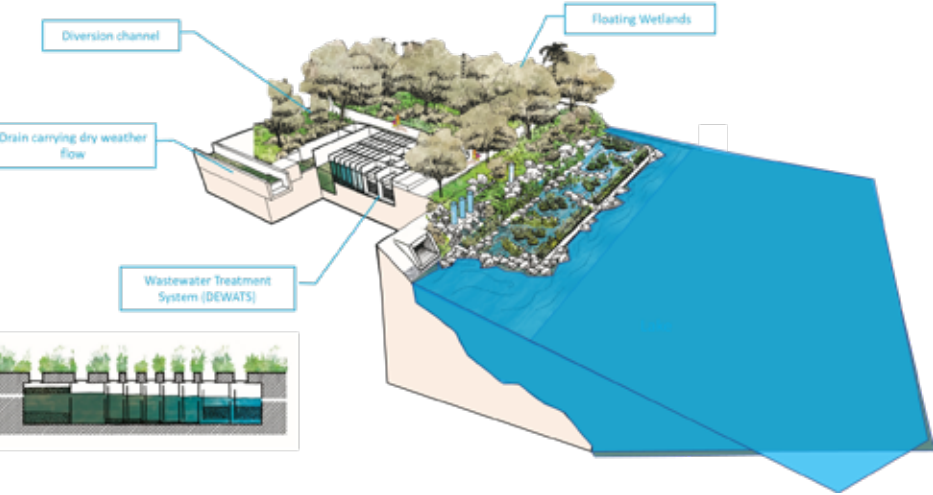


The Shivdasपुरi Road public space improvements embrace sustainable multimodal transport systems to prioritise the movement of people over vehicles





Coimbatore Lakes: waste water treatment strategies underpinning the transformation



Coimbatore Lakes: the decentralised waste water treatment strategy filters water before it reaches floating wetlands, which accommodate different seasonal water levels

monsoons, replenish groundwater in drier months, and provide much-needed cool spaces for the surrounding neighbourhoods. New wetlands have been introduced at key storm water inlets, acting as filtration plants intercepting sediment and pollutants, and purifying the water before it enters the lakes. The wetlands also provide habitat for aquatic plants, birds and insects, transforming functional spaces into vibrant living landscapes.

Terraced banks and shallow lagoons have been sculpted to mimic natural shorelines, and are now rich in wildlife with breeding grounds for amphibians and resting spots for migratory birds. Floating islands of vegetation and solar-powered aerators ensure water circulation, preventing stagnation and supporting species development. The planting of native vegetation in these areas stabilises the soil and prevents erosion, as well as creating a lush aesthetic that blends well into the city.



A typical view of the lake side areas before the improvements

One particularly striking feature is the network of silt islands formed during the desilting operations. These islands were preserved and planted with trees, creating sanctuaries for birds and pollinators and adding visual drama to the lakes.

A symphony of people and nature

What makes Coimbatore’s restoration project so important is its transformation of the lakes into animated public spaces. The water bodies are cultural and recreational havens especially as the sun sets. The city’s waterfront promenades are a revelation with generous spaces for walking, cycling and social interaction. Families stroll under the golden glow of sunset, musicians and dancers perform impromptu shows, and children race along the paths, their laughter echoing across the water.

The lakefronts have also become a stage for cultural expression. Local artists use the space for performances, from classical dance to street theatre, while traditional art installations evoke the city’s rich heritage. These places are revitalising Coimbatore’s public realm and rekindling a sense of community pride and identity. The ambiance is infectious, drawing people out of their homes and into shared experiences.

A legacy of environmental awareness

One of the most forward-thinking aspects of Coimbatore’s lake restoration initiative is its emphasis on education. The lakes have become outdoor classrooms, offering children and young people hands-on opportunities to learn about ecosystems, biodiversity and sustainable practices. Biodiversity trails wind through the green spaces around

the lakes, while interpretive signage provides insights into the flora and fauna. Schools organise field trips to the lakes, where students not only observe but actively participate in conservation efforts, planting native species or monitoring water quality. This investment in environmental awareness is about education and creating a generation that will value and protect the lakes. By engaging young minds, Coimbatore is ensuring that the lakes remain cared for and celebrated long into the future.

Tourism and economic renewal

The transformation of Coimbatore’s lakes and the restored waterfronts has also redefined the city as a tourist destination, with new cultural vibrancy and ecological splendour. The lakes have become must-see attractions, with thoughtfully designed paths, viewing decks and open spaces offering scenes of beauty and moments of tranquillity. Tourists are increasingly adding an extra night to their itineraries to enjoy the ‘City of Lakes’ promenades. Evening visits are particularly popular, as the spaces come alive with street performers, food vendors and families enjoying the cool breeze. Visitors are not just spectators but participants in an urban experience that blends leisure with cultural immersion. The economic ripple effects of this transformation are significant. The restaurants, cafes and shops around the lakes have flourished, while eco-tourism initiatives such as guided bird-watching tours and nature photography workshops generate new livelihoods. The lakes have become a source of pride for residents, as well as the wider region, drawing admiration from around the country and beyond.

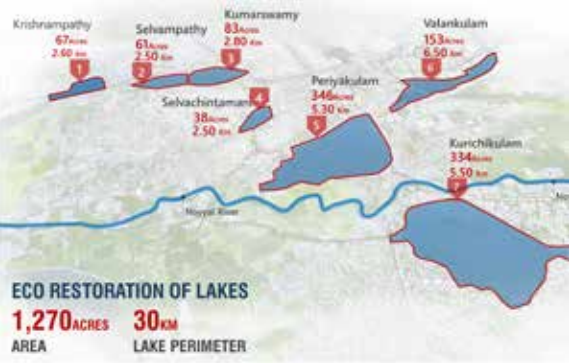


To enhance the Kurichi Lake's tourism appeal, a steel statue of the renowned Tamil poet-philosopher Thiruvalluvar was formed in Tamil script

A template for harmonious cities

Coimbatore’s lake restoration project demonstrates that urban growth need not come at the expense of nature; rather, the two can coexist and even thrive together. The city’s approach of integrating ecological restoration with community engagement and cultural celebration is a powerful reminder that urban spaces can be reimagined as places of joy, resilience and connection. ●

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Plan showing the scale of lake restoration across the area



Kovai Lake: one of the many new spaces popular with residents and visitors for the cool breezes