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A city can't survive without a mass transit system: Ton Venhoeven

Venhoeven of Amsterdam-based architecture firm VenhoevenCS talks about Delhi 2050 project and urban planning

Ton Venhoeven's firm VenhoevenCS is one of the partners in Delhi 2050, an India-Dutch collaboration aimed at making Delhi a sustainable, world-class metropolis by 2050.Photo: Abhijit Bhatlekar/Mint

Amsterdam-based architecture firm **VenhoevenCS**, established by **Ton Venhoeven** in 1995, has developed into an international practice. Venhoeven also served as chief government adviser on infrastructure to the Dutch government in 2008-2012.

VenhoevenCS is one of the partners in Delhi 2050, an India-Dutch collaboration aimed at making Delhi a sustainable, world-class metropolis by 2050 involving government planners, urban designers and researchers and experts from the fields of spatial planning, urban and economic development, environmental and social studies from both countries. Venhoeven spoke in an interview about the project and related subjects. Edited excerpts:

How do you define urban planning as a function?

From a commercial point of view, from everyone who is investing a lot of money in real estate, or in roads, or in whatsoever, it is very important that you can rely on the value of that investment after 20 years, maybe even 30-40 years. So if you have reliable urban planning, people are more likely to want to invest.

Does this 'reliable urban planning' happen at a city level, state level, or at a national level?

At all levels. I think everyone has key issues that you have to organize through urban planning. In Holland, one of the key issues is that half the country is below sea level. If you don't organize the dykes, or create enough room for the rivers, then we will have flooding every year.

Urban planning is not a priority in many Indian city governments, which struggle to cope with growth. What is your experience?

What I have experienced as a government adviser for the last four years is that when you concentrate on today and tomorrow, it is really hard to steer thinking and what direction it should take, because every discussion is dominated by financial numbers and contracts etc.

Let me give you two examples of what issues that are important for proper planning. One is mobility—it's absolutely crucial to have good mobility systems. For example, if your plot of land is not accessible, the value goes down dramatically. Second is water and sewage. If you don't organize these systems, then that will become a threat in the future.

But you can only do proper planning of mobility systems and water and sewage management when you have a shared vision of the future. This is not a shared vision of tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, this is a shared vision of the next 40-50 years.

Do you see this kind of planning happening in India?

I do. I see, for example, there is growing awareness that mobility issues are key issues in cities, especially given the growing number of cars.

Why is the Dutch experience to urban planning relevant to India?

Until 20 years ago, we had very separate planning systems. We had mobility planning, they had their own ministry. We had spatial planning, they had their own ministry. We had economy planning, they had their own ministry. We had agriculture planning, they had their own ministry. Each ministry was guided by politicians, sometimes from different ideological backgrounds, so they didn't communicate with one other. We changed that system that because we found that investment in spatial planning, for example, was annihilated by investment in roads.

The Dutch approach is about how can you make a planning system which is not based on individual silos of decision-making, but which is based on 'design as method' through workshops, through research and public participation. In the workshops you generate a coherent, comprehensive vision for the long term, which includes the economic aspects as well as mobility and water aspects, into one integrated

whole.

The benefit for government is that when a project is executed—for example if it's a mobility project—it doesn't just benefit the mobility aspect, but also benefits the other aspects, such as quality of life or economic development in that area.

The old method of planning was based on cause and effect, and was more singular in its approach. For example, you could make a proposal to improve a road and calculate 'how much quicker can people drive through the road, and what does it mean in terms of our welfare.' You don't calculate the loss of quality of life around the project.

In the new planning theory, we work in circles—of people, planet and profit. We try to balance the three elements. We look to see how each project—especially larger-scale government projects for mobility—can have positive effects for the planet, in terms of less carbon dioxide production, or concentrated use of land so that we don't have urban sprawl.

Also, we look at how can you make profit with that development and how people can benefit from that particular development. In the current planning, we work with integrated aspects, and this is applicable also to India.

How can you plan for the informal sector?

We need to adjust what the idea of planning is. Some people have the idea that if we do planning, we have to define every plot and every road, every detail, it's like blueprint-planning.

The kind of planning I'm talking about is not so much masterplanning, it's vision-making, asking 'what kind of city do we want'—taking a great leap forward, and working backwards from there.

What could Delhi look like in 2050?

I have the idea that the poverty issues are solved, that the population is well-educated, it has kept some of its qualities as a garden city, but it has also developed multimodal nodes of higher density, in the form of high-rise buildings. If you don't develop a mass transit system that really functions, as a city, you can't survive.

With 30-40 million people, the water issue is one of the very pressing issues and it can be solved. From what I know, for better health, improving the sewage system is more decisive than healthcare. I have heard from Dutch healthcare experts that the life expectancy in Europe profited most from improving the sewage systems.

So it's a vision, and a picture, not a blueprint. You can't just put a couple of designers in a room and ask them to come up with a vision, because then it's not a shared vision. It needs to be politically fixed, and everyone has to agree with it. Then the planners can do their masterplanning and come up with a plan, once everyone is agreed about the kind of society we want.

The Dutch method is very inclusive, stakeholder participation is very important, and that's why the Indian government is interested in it.

Why are mobility systems so important?

Mobility systems shape the way we live, it is one of the decisive factors about the kind of cities that come into existence. If you don't say anything about how to use the different nodes or stations, then you run the risk that in the evenings there will be nobody around a station (increasing the risk to personal safety). So this is not what you want. If you don't have minimum regulations, then maybe the trains are full in one direction, but empty in another. This is not what you want. In the end, you run the risk that the train company, if it's privatized for example, will reduce the frequency because it's not making enough money on the line. This is not what you want as a government.

So, the rules that you write for land use around those nodes are relevant to optimizing the use of the mass transit systems, for both the train company and the public.

There is a difference with the old system of zoning from the 20th century. In that era, we would say 'commercial activity is polluting the air, you cannot live there.' Today, especially in cities with a developed service economy, work is not always a 'dirty job'. If you have offices, restaurants and some office blocks, then the restaurants can turn the area into a vibrant neighbourhood, and it profits from both the offices and the apartments. Then people start walking around, and you get a safe public space, and you get the mass that you need to have a profitable mass transit node.