Urban renewal and transport circuit, New Delhi, India

Project description by author

In the mid-1970s, work began on laying a single shunting railway line that would circumnavigate the extent of New Delhi at that time. Originally called the Delhi Avoiding Line, it was meant to decongest the existing city stations of in- tented goods traffic, to better facilitate the throughfare of passenger trains at these stations. Later in 1982, a parallel passenger rail service was initiated to improve the connec- tion of new residential colonies, commercial and industrial areas to the stations as well as to each other. Subsequently, the manner and extent to which the city has grown, the non-integrated development of other transit systems net- works and numerous systemic issues have left this urban transport system grossly underutilized.

The aim of the project is to reclaim the Ring Rail corridor as an urban space that will add value to the urban character of the city while providing a human-powered, inter-modal transit system that increases connectivity.

The project has been envisaged as an urban context addi- tional to its functional role as a segregated shunting line. This project imagines the Ring beyond the Rail. It puts forth the idea of creating a contiguous belt that is human-pow- ered, a precinct that is pedestrian, cycle-friendly and abuzz with activities. It is an urban corridor of studies that are rapidly losing their legitimate place in an increasingly car centric city. A zone that is not only an integral part of the city’s center but could potentially be close to its heart. The project also seeks to legitimize the informal sector, recognizing its valuable contribution to the city economy and culture. It encourages the creation of coop- eratives in the unorganized sector which enable access to social and welfare infrastructure like health, education and micro finance.

Further the rail corridor proves to be an excellent site for establishing an information cloud accessed through basic and most ubiquitous mobile technology (1G) which has witnessed a deep penetration into the city population (across income groups). The cloud empowers peer to peer recommen- dation, the age old system that drives the infor- mal sector, with cheap new age technology through which people can rate, tag and exchange information. The bene- fits are reaped by all stakeholders by activation of an urban space through slow transit and street economic activities. The project enhances the engagement of the people with the physical environs of the city. The technological model hence developed and the reclamation of the urban space has universal application.

The project was exhibited at the Urban Mobility India conference 2009 at the Urban Habitat Summit 2009 and has garnered critical acclaim. It was self-initiated but now the National Association of Street Vendors of India fully sup- ports the project and currently feasibility studies are being conducted with different land owning agencies and stake- holder communities.

Relevance to target issues by author

Innovation and transferability – Progress

The project builds on a simple rail to trail idea wherein a high capacity underutilized, resource hungry transit sys- tem is replaced by a sustainable human powered corridor boosting inter-modal connectivity. In addition, the informa- tion cloud empowers the hitherto unorganized informal sector and also provides customers usable information on goods and services provided by them. This increases their competitiveness and quality.

Ethical standards and social equity – People

Deeply rooted in social values, the corridor provides demo- cratic and equitable access to urban space and inter-modal transit, leveraging the idea’s absence of conflict with motor- ized traffic and thereby providing a peaceful, serene and safe zone nestled in the heart of the city. While legitimizing the operation of informal sector by activating a street econ- omy, the project also promotes creation of cooperatives that provides them with access to social and welfare infra- structure.

Environmental quality and resource efficiency – Planet

The under-utilized, fossil fuel dependent mode of public transport is replaced by a non-motorized mode of transit while making the best use of the infrastructure available with no negative sequel. The corridor structures including platforms and sta- tions house non-functional and utility requirements through adaptive reuse. The corridor passes through the heart of large swathes of urban forest. The scale of intervention and the provision of non-motorized transit require minimal re- sources or intrusion upon the local ecology.

Economic performance and compatibility – Prosperity

The vocalional cooperatives become the rent paying tenants to the land owners, the railways, without formalizing the informal sector, and help them compete more effectively with the formal sector. Rent from cooperatives and infor- mation cloud technology service providers generate greater revenues for the land owner (railways). Day long markets would also increase business by allowing consumers to ac- cess multiple goods at the same time.

Contextual and aesthetic impact – Proficiency

Opening up a completely new urban experience, the project seeks to reclaim a site for street based urbanism that is an integral part of an Indian city, activating a vibrant street culture of performing and public arts that belongs to its citizens. It provides and promotes an urban forest, a calm and serene environment nestled in the heart of Delhi yet hidden from chaotic city life. Encouraging slow transit, it also enhances an engagement with physical environs of the city and its people.