

# Life in a Cube

Author - Gautam Bhatia, Published on - 22.8.2018



## Compact buildings are being experimented with the world over, but India is not listening

A unique exercise in urban living, a Tokyo apartment today is made of a single room. It incorporates living and dining areas and a cupboard containing two sets of clothes and shoes. The kitchen, bathroom and bed emerge from the wall when needed. The minimalist apartment is the lifestyle choice of a growing number of Japanese couples consciously reducing their possessions. There is a similar micro-house in the hills of Northern California, part of a prefabricated package that includes delivery and construction within two weeks. At 500 sq.ft., the wooden structure resembles a doll's house but it can accommodate a family of four.

In San Francisco, you can rent a tiny cube with a fold-out bed, a WC and sink — just the bare necessities for a night.

Efficient and economical

In Celebration, a retirement community outside Orlando, people move around between home and shops on bicycles and on battery-powered Segways. Compaction of this kind, being tried across the world, attempts to bring together several ideas at once: homes more efficient, hotels more economical, and cities more equitable and accessible.

The Indian city, on the other hand, is heading in the opposite direction. Some months ago, Donald Trump Jr. arrived in India to inaugurate a 47-storey luxury tower in Delhi. Construction has not yet even begun, but 75 of its largest apartments have already been booked with a ₹2.5 crore deposit.

Sprawling spaces

Larger, bigger Trump Towers are expected in Pune, Bengaluru and Hyderabad. This is hardly unusual in a country already brimming with 4,000 sq.ft. apartments, five-acre farmhouses, 20 feet cars, 10-room bungalows, and hotel suites with living rooms. In a consumer culture where identity is intrinsically tied to personal possessions, you learn to waste space, and build what you don't need.

India's urban life — never mind rural life — is an intractable game of daily tragedies and losses. Too many people vying for too little space and too few resources. And the growing disparity can no longer be tackled by legislation alone. Rules about car sizes, number of rooms in a house, the size of a flat and so on, can only be dictated by the individual's conscience. Growing inequity calls for a moral response. If the government's future urban ideal is to bridge the growing divide, the only solution is for everyone to buy into a complete pre-made small city. To make things physically small, and to make them clearly visible to everyone, is the best way to acknowledge the limited urban resources available.

Scope for change

For the country to change direction, three things need to happen. First, a revision of city byelaws that would allow tiny homes and apartments of 200 or 300 sq.ft. to be built. Second, the encouragement of flexible mixed-use: combinations such as home-office, restaurant-home, shop-office, or office-recreation. Third, the use of extreme technologies to enable construction using discarded material, mud, compressed plastic, and garbage. For instance, used shipping containers have been used as housing and hotels in Europe and the U.S; now in India as well. Is it not possible for us to put our own discarded truck chassis to similar use? In a country with a huge and growing back-log of housing — currently pegged at 8 million urban homes — only radical approaches can offer partial solutions.

These approaches would call for a shift in attitude, and an acceptance of new ideas: houses without living rooms, kitchens with an eating area, loft beds above bathrooms. These possibilities are in the hand of designers and builders. But who will ask the awkward questions: Can builders promote a Japanese-style apartment for the Indian consumer? Can the government build a 'small city' wholesale? Can a hotelier conceive of a space for 200 guests without land? Should people be allowed to build underground?

In a country with a history of traditional smallness, the experiments with small homes, small transport, small streets and neighbourhoods, can only come from a wholehearted reversal of urban values. Before that happens, we will need a few precedents: the prime minister will have to move into a small town house in Defence Colony, much like 10, Downing Street; when senior Trump comes visiting he will have to be picked up in a Nano; ministers will have to ride electric

rickshaws to Parliament; and the Ambanis will have to convert their 34-storey home into an Airbnb.

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