

Design for India's Elastic Cities

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By 2030, 40% of India's population will live in cities. That's the equivalent of 590 million people, up from 350 million in 2010.



Clearly, the combination of internal migration and population growth will place a unique stress on India's urban infrastructure. Already, plenty of work has been done on the resilience of physical infrastructure: the channels of water supply, sanitation, and power. But what of the city's 'soft' infrastructure; the immaterial flows of data and social relations?

As plans for the digital augmentation of our cities gather pace, we find ourselves wondering how such schemes might be enacted in an Indian context. Given the complex, chaotic and often illegible nature of its urban landscape, and stepping back from the top-

down masterplans of Masdar and New Songdo, what would a 'smart' Mumbai look like? What might it be like to live there?

Through the Superflux Lab, we have been attempting to answer this brief with a series of projects that highlight the rich depth of informal services in the Indian city. Ultimately, this will be a tool kit for the networked stealth economy; an environment where service providers operate as urban data nodes, demonstrating entrepreneurial savvy under messy, organic conditions.

This is the idea of an Open Generative City: exploring what it might mean to design services and applications with an emphasis on serendipity, resilience, and a diversity of experience.

Moving beyond ideas of the 'map-as-territory', our initial research has seized on case studies and symptomatic details. We have used rich ethnography to frame our design of 'smarter' soft infrastructure for a rapidly-urbanizing India.





The corner shop selling 'paan' also offers real estate services. Photo credit: flickr.com/photos/rohitrath, The barber offers bespoke 'stock market' updates during a normal service.

If one locates the Indian barber and his service network on the city's map, it might look something like this. He is a datum in the city, a node stretching to cover the nooks and corners of the world around him.



Similarly, if one mapped all these other 'wallahs and wallihs' – the men and women who offer informal services – moving about the city, creating mobile data nodes, the city's map might look something like this:

You see how these various actors emerge as points of influence, rather than specific service providers. This could be a local map of soft services and networks, rich in meaning and value for the people who live there.

Planners, businesses, entrepreneurs and service providers need to recognise the worth of these ‘informal’ networks and services. Though not always operating at the peak of efficiency, these networks are a lifeline of human stories and intangible value – Site of relational exchange, rather than simple transactions.



Photocredit: flickr.com/photos/oneeighteen

As part of this project, we lead workshops on Prospecting Near-Future Cities, guiding participants to explore alternative urban strategies and prototype designs, scenarios and ideas.

The following images are from one such workshop held at Singapore's Lien Centre for Social Innovation, as part of the Young Foundation's SIX Programme.



Currently, we are working with planners, technologists and entrepreneurs to further explore this nexus of ideas. If you are a brand, NGO, or public institution with a stake in the future of open, creative cities, and would be interested in partnering on this project, we would love to hear from you.

Profile: Anab Jain



Founder and Director of Superflux - an Anglo-Indian design practice: based in London, but with roots and contacts in the Gujarati city of Ahmedabad. Born and educated in India (NID), with an [MA in Interaction Design](#) from the Royal College of Art, Anab founded Superflux in 2009. She has a proven track record in design, strategy and foresight for businesses, think-tanks and research organisations.

Honoured as a [TED Fellow](#), she is the recipient of several awards, including the **Award of Excellence ICSID**,

Innovation Award, Chicago International Documentary Film Festival and the **UNESCO Digital Arts Award**. Her experience and knowledge of design, futurescaping, emerging markets, new technologies and innovation has led her to be invited as a keynote speaker for conferences worldwide. Some of the conferences she has spoken at include **PICNIC, WCIT2010, LIFT, SIGGRAPH, EPIC, Design Engaged** and **FuturEverything**.