



# Cities Designed in Human Scale Make Healthier and Happier Societies: A Visual Essay

# 11

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## Abstract

Cities are built for humans. Yet most modern cities fail to keep it human centric. With challenges of constant population growth, limited land availability, most cities are now adopting the high-rise model. Vertical cities may resolve the above challenges to some extent; however, they do not represent human scale. Most often these forms of development have led to social exclusion, fewer interaction opportunities with neighbors which increased feelings of loneliness among residents. Research states that loneliness can affect mental health and overall well-being of humans. Along with other social factors, architecture and urban design play a huge role in achieving the much needed social sustainability, which is one of the main pillars of 'sustainable cities & communities' (the 11th SDG of the UN Agenda 2030). On the one hand, researchers are talking about place making for humans, the importance of public spaces and happier cities. On the other hand, modern urban design is creating concrete giants with a total disregard for human connections. In India, most cities present a combination of urban environments

with low to mid-rise residential developments in older neighborhoods and high-rise high-density developments in newer planned parts. This visual essay attempts to compare the human scale attained through the built environment between 'high-rise' and 'low to mid-rise' neighborhoods in Kolkata and analyze their impact on social sustainability.

## Keywords

High-rise condominiums · Mid-rise neighborhoods · Urban lifestyle · Social sustainability · Human scale

## 11.1 Introduction

Over the last few decades, Indian cities have witnessed a gradual transformation in their urban landscape. The urban skylines of many Indian cities today are dominated by a blend of low-medium rise traditional neighborhoods and high-rise condominiums as shown in Fig. 11.1 (Bharat et al. 2018).

Like all traditional cultures, the ancient Indian social structure was designed for human co-existence that emphasized collaborative work, spending time with family, community participation, gatherings for festivals, religious congregations etc. (ClearIAS 2022). This was disrupted only after invasion and colonization of the land by foreign invaders and the introduction

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**Fig. 11.1** Modern Skyline of Kolkata which shows a contrast of high-rise and mid-rise developments. © Sketch by Dr. Shreya Das (Author)

of the caste system (ClearIAS 2022). These political changes influenced the social structure of the communities inhabiting the region which in turn had new spatial requirements that were accommodated in the built environment. Traditional neighborhoods were dominated by low to mid-rise independent family houses, with courtyards, terraces, balconies and windows used for interactions between women within family and with neighbors (Malviya 2021; Bhagat 2021). Pre-colonial Indian settlements were clustered around forts and palaces ruled by kings. In those periods, public spaces were mostly in the form of a large tree (usually a Banyan tree which had a large canopy providing shade underneath) used for council meetings, along with markets and temple courtyards used for celebration of festivals and religious congregations (Jangir 2022) (Figs. 11.2, 11.3, 11.4 and 11.5). Thus, traditional Indian neighborhoods grew around strong socio-cultural life. Yet, the temple authorities and the monarchs had a strong influence and control on their lives (Kanaka Durga and Sudhakar Reddy 1992). Such communities co-existed with nature, in harmony, respecting her boundaries. Often various forms of nature were worshipped as gods (Pandey 2021).

Modern Indian society has a strong foreign influence and mirrors the transition from a supportive society to one driven and controlled by money. After colonization, Indian human settlements got a new character identified as urban or rural. Urban settlements are formed by industry-driven economy which further encouraged human migration and agglomeration. This pattern influenced the entire world, creating numerous urban centers with high population density which put pressure on the civic infrastructure. This further impacted local cultures, creating more of self-centered or introvert individuals and nuclear families. Such a socio-economic structure has little space for human 'co-existence'. United Nations identifies social sustainability of the Anthropocene (humans) as one of the pillars of sustainable earth. Furthermore, co-existence with humans and nature plays a key role toward sustainable human societies (The United Nations Brundtland Commission 1987). All traditional societies were structured around physical social interactions as opposed to modern societies, where social interactions are primarily carried out virtually through various social media platforms. Physical gatherings are rare today. For a modern urban Indian,



**Fig. 11.2** Community gathering under the Banyan tree. In indigenous Indian communities, trees with large canopies have a significant role in the socio-cultural system. Because of the local climate, these trees offered the needed shade, especially during the hot summers.

Thus, these were hot spots for community gatherings. Village heads also used these spots to hear cases and pronounce their judgment. © *Sketch by Dr. Shreya Das (Author)*

**Fig. 11.3** Festival celebrations at temple premises. In ancient India, the temple and priests had a huge control and influence on the locals and also on the king. © *Sketch by Dr. Shreya Das (Author)*



**Fig. 11.4** Social interactions between women on terraces. © *Sketch by Dr. Shreya Das (Author)*



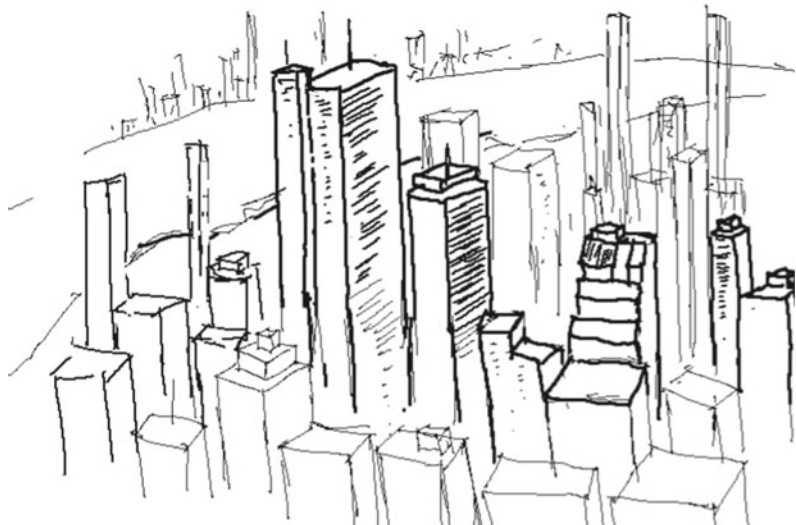


**Fig. 11.5** Traditional Indian neighborhoods with roofs and terraces in close proximity that offered opportunity for community interactions. © Sketch by Dr. Shreya Das (Author)

‘happiness’ is associated with a good job and salary, access to good infrastructure and amenities, materialistic possessions and showcase of luxury. Yet, numerous research conducted on the lifestyle of residents in skyscraper cities like New York highlight the increase in urban loneliness, depression and anxiety (Krishnan 2019; Puliyeel 2020). In such cities, as opposed to Indian cities, the race for gigantism is far greater and is of concern (Fig. 11.6).

Figure 11.7 is a picture of the New York skyline shared by an Indian living in the USA for a long time. When asked about her experience with the city, the respondent described her feelings as mixed. On the one hand, she said she enjoyed such views, looking down toward the ground, from a high-rise balcony. On the other hand, she said that such an urban skyline also came with a feeling of disconnect with neighbors and that of loneliness.

**Fig. 11.6** Modern skyline of New York city. © Sketch by Dr. Shreya Das (Author)







**Fig. 11.7** New York city view. © *Photo Credit:* Ms. Kangabam Sanjana Priyadarshini Devi, a young female respondent of Indian origin, who has been living in New York for the last 10 years



**Fig. 11.8** Women interacting over balcony in old Kolkata, the balcony from where the photo was taken is the author's own residence. The building faces a

traditional courtyard house with projected balcony, as shown here. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)

## 11.2 Comparative Analysis of Daily Life in Traditional Neighborhoods Versus High-Rise Gated Communities of Kolkata

The following figures depict the scenario in an old city neighborhood of Kolkata where the author lives. Figure 11.8 shows two women talking to each other from their balconies on a regular day. This picture was taken by the author from the balcony of one of these houses. The position of the two houses is such that their balconies, facing each other, enjoy visual and acoustical proximity. Figure 11.9 was taken of the above two houses from ground level. Figure 11.10 represents an indicative section of the right of way of the road, demonstrating the approximate height of the houses that ensures physical proximity with the street.

Figure 11.11 demonstrates how mid-rise (here G + 2) of the houses provides a connection with the activities on the road. One person is also seen lazing on the sitting area, attached to the

buildings at ground level. Such sitting joints are typical to traditional neighborhoods in Kolkata and are commonly known as 'rok' in Bengali. These 'roks' offer spaces for casual interactions on a daily basis and are primarily used by men. The locals have named such gatherings as the 'roker adda', where 'adda' in Bengali refers to casual chit chat between a group of people as shown in Figs. 11.12 and 11.13. These 'roks' are usually part of the buildings premises. However, these are usually used by the locals as public spaces, without the need to take permissions from the owner. Thus, the architecture of these traditional neighborhoods has been silently promoting co-existence, for years, by increasing 'chanced interactions'.

Women in these parts, however, primarily interact over balconies, courtyards or terraces. Another popular human activity that gives identity to an Indian urban neighborhood is the 'gully cricket'. Cricket is a game, popular among Indians along with football. The low rise of the building abutting these by-lanes of Kolkata also enables women to watch-over their kids playing on the street (Fig. 11.14). On the other hand,



**Fig. 11.9** View of above neighboring residences, taken from street level. © Photo Credit: Dr. Shreya Das (Author)



**Fig. 11.10** Visual representation of a typical road section in old Kolkata neighborhood. © Sketch by Dr. Shreya Das (Author)

such sitting joints ensure that there are enough people on the streets all the time, especially during evening hours, making them safer roads (Fig. 11.12).

Except for some stray incidents, Kolkata is still considered safer compared to other cities of India. This is due to a large population size and a

traditional neighborhood architecture having sitting joints and mixed use development which ensures presence of human beings on roads, all the time. However, there are some demerits to this urban form, including issue with privacy. This, however, is often addressed by covering windows and balconies with curtains and screens (Fig. 11.15). On the other hand, mid rises allow residents to be more visually connected with nature, with tree canopies being at eye level. Even a person who is not much interested in biophilia has more daily visual communication with birds, bees and butterflies moving around (Fig. 11.16), which is absent in high-rise living.

Life within high-rise gated communities is more luxurious, private but with higher maintenance cost. Although these gated communities come with a lot of amenities like gym, spa, community hall along with beautifully landscaped gardens, yet, busy urban lifestyles prevent the residents from using these on a regular basis. People spend more time indoors than outdoors. Moreover, vertical height often discourages the elderly to travel to the ground level to access the garden hangout spots. A typical gated high-rise condominium in Kolkata accommodates around



**Fig. 11.11** Mid-rise houses in residential neighborhood have higher proximity with street. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)



**Fig. 11.12** Typical evening scene with 'Rok-Adda' in old Kolkata. This characteristic ensures safety on roads as night. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)



1500–2000 families. Research says that too much crowd can limit one's feeling of belongingness with the place (Krishnan 2019; Puliyeel 2020). Figures 11.17 and 11.18 are pictures of views from a high-rise balcony, which were shared by a single lady (in her late 30's) living on the 14th floor of a standalone high-rise apartment complex in Kolkata. The pictures show that the surrounding neighborhood is low to mid rise. The resident said that she enjoyed the

unobstructed view of the vastness ahead and a glimpse of the river flowing in the vicinity. The picture shows that the balcony does not face any other neighbors' façade, thus enjoying full privacy and good views.

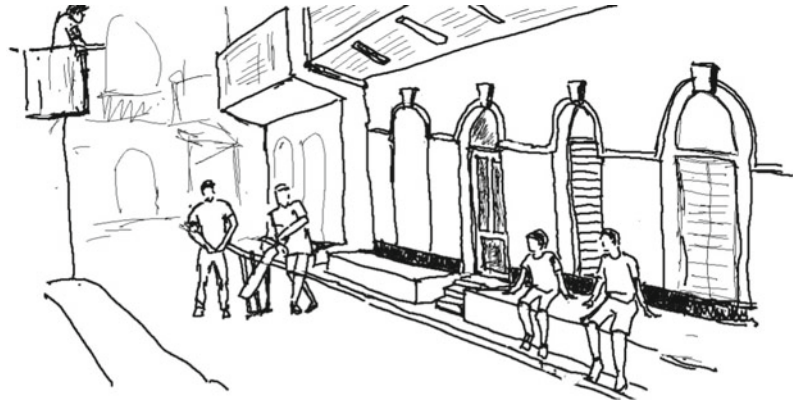
However, the experience may be different for those living in high-rise apartments, placed in building clusters. Figures 11.19 and 11.20 represent pictures of a high-rise condominium in Kolkata, where the buildings are



**Fig. 11.13** Another scene of evening ‘adda’/gathering in old Kolkata. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)



**Fig. 11.14** Gully cricket in old neighborhoods of Kolkata. The low to mid-rise built environment provides visual proximity with the street and the activities happening there. © *Sketch by* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)



arranged in clusters. These pics demonstrate that buildings placed in close clusters may generate feelings of crowdedness and lack of privacy. However, the perception may vary according to the space maintained between the clusters, which is further explained through Figs. 11.21 and 11.23.

Figure 11.21 portrays the view from a high-rise balcony from one of the premium housing condominiums in Kolkata. It shows that the neighbors’ balconies can be seen from the balcony from where it was photographed. This is due to the orientation and proximity of the neighboring towers, as designed by the architect. While this may be perceived as an opportunity to interact with neighbors, some may consider this as a privacy issue. In such cases, visual screening

may be incorporated in the balconies for better privacy as demonstrated in Fig. 11.22.

Figure 11.23 depicts the view from the balcony on 24th level from another high-rise condominium in Kolkata, which also depicts that neighbors’ balcony can be seen from there. However, the distance between the towers is such that it will not significantly affect the privacy of the balcony. Hence, placing visual screens in such cases may not be necessary.

Figure 11.24 shows how the amenities and gardens, despite being well designed, remain underutilized in a high-rise condominium in Kolkata. On the other hand, Fig. 11.25, shared by an elderly lady living on the tenth floor in a high-rise condominium in Delhi, India, depicts how building clusters can prove to be



**Fig. 11.15** Use of curtains to improve privacy from neighboring balconies, old Kolkata. Taken from the residence where the author lives. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)



**Fig. 11.16** Low-rise neighborhoods provide better visual contact with surrounding nature. Photo taken from Author's balcony. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)

advantageous. The picture shows the view from the lady's kitchen that overlooks her neighbor's kitchen. The elderly lady lives with only her husband, with her children settled in other cities. For her, loneliness can be an issue and thus it is important for her to socialize. According to her, the kitchen facing each other helps her interact with her neighbor on a daily basis over kitchen chores.

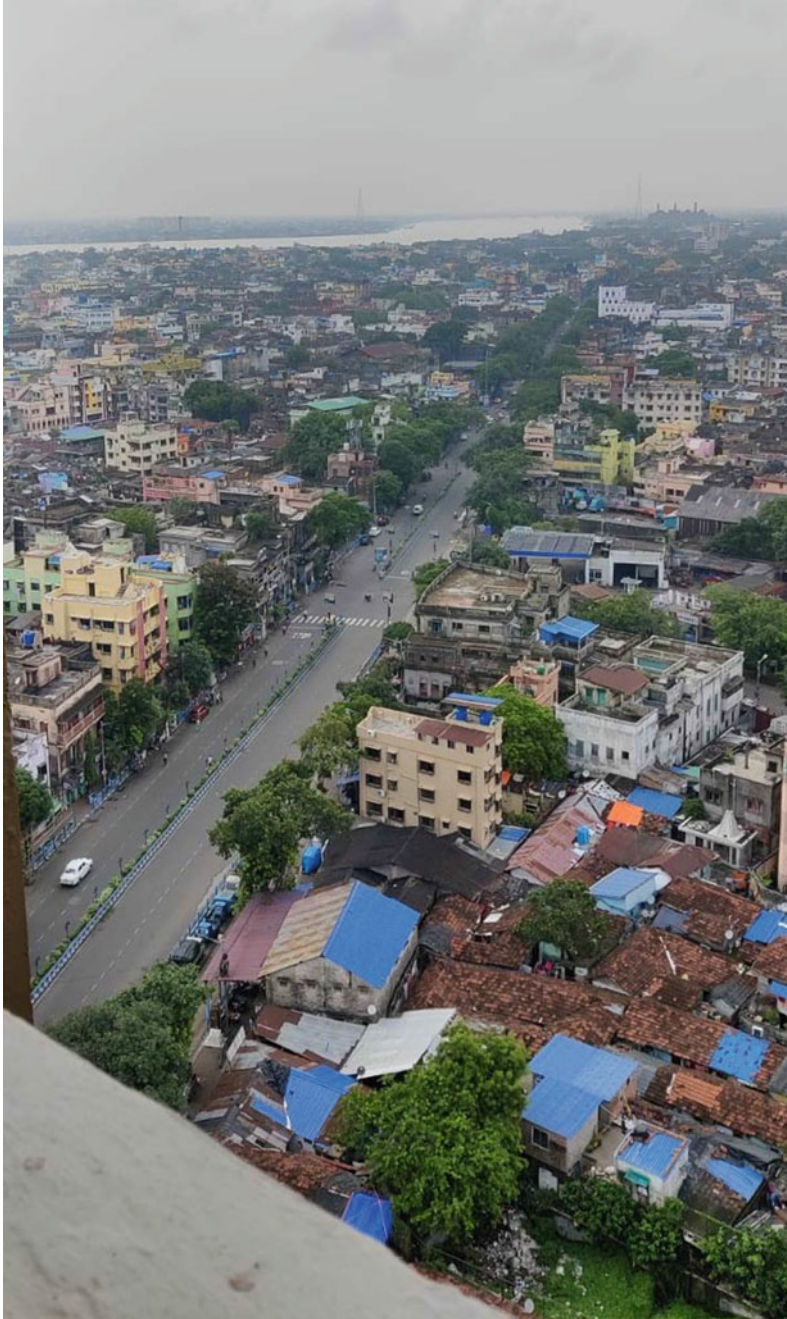
### 11.3 Discussion and Conclusion

The above visual essay indicates that high-rise structures may give a feeling of awe and grandeur to the observers because of their gigantic scale, but they do not enable human connection for the residents. Low to mid-rise neighborhoods, on the other hand, offer a relatable scale. This



**Fig. 11.17** View from a high-rise balcony, Kolkata, surrounded by mid to low-rise developments. © *Photo Credit:* Ms. Kabita Choudhury, survey participant for this paper





**Fig. 11.18** Unobstructed view from the same balcony as shown in Fig. 11.17. © Photo Credit: Ms. Kabita Choudhury





**Fig. 11.19** Views of high-rise clusters in a condominium in Kolkata, observed from street level. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)



**Fig. 11.20** Views of the same high-rise condominium observed from terrace. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)



**Fig. 11.21** View of neighbor's balcony from a high rise in Kolkata, where proximity of neighboring tower hampers privacy. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)



**Fig. 11.22** Illustration how balcony privacy can be improved by using screens. © *Illustration by Author*

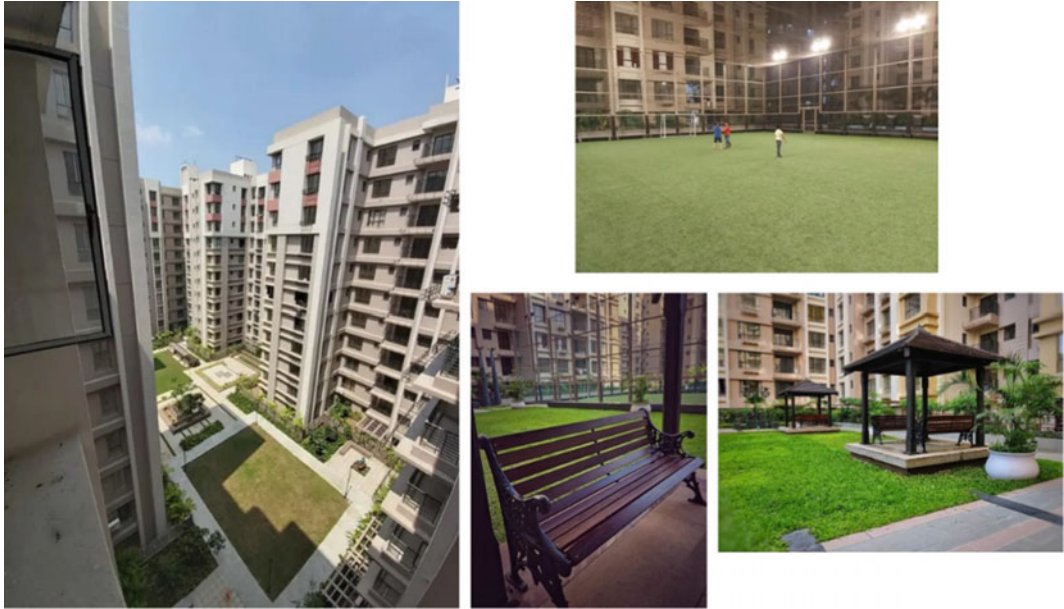
increases chanced/casual interactions and enhances the probability of knowing more neighbors. Traditional neighborhoods have their own limitations, including poor privacy and lack of space, but the human scale adopted in its urban design compels more social interactions. Residents feel safe on street and connected with

neighbors due to visual, acoustical and psychological proximity offered by the built environment. This further encourages more social interactions. Urban areas designed in human scale empathize with the human psychological needs. This promotes co-existence, happier societies and a sustainable earth.



**Fig. 11.23** View from the balcony in a high rise, located on 24th floor. This is an example that shows that correct spacing between towers in cluster may not affect privacy. © *Photo Credit:* Dr. Shreya Das (Author)





**Fig. 11.24** High-rise condominium in Kolkata where its well-designed gardens and amenities remain underutilized. © *Photo Credit:* Mr. Sandip Das, resident of the condominium in picture, Photo Collage by Author



**Fig. 11.25** Neighbor's kitchen overlooking each other, in a high-rise condominium, can improve social life for some residents. Here, adjacent towers are in good proximity, yet the kitchens in the opposite apartments

face each other, contrary to balconies or bedrooms. © *Photo Credit:* Mrs. Richa Mittal, an elderly resident in the condominium shown here

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