



Editorial

The environmental quality of urban areas has been a subject of interest for research for a long time. Research on environmental quality includes a vast range of subject areas such as the physical characteristics and visual aspects of streets, neighbourhoods, public open spaces, etc; comfort levels varying due to heat, moisture, dust, etc in them; the perceivable characteristics such as pleasantness, safety and conduciveness; and the management of the energy, waste, security and public funds for those.

Beside the fact that the urban areas in Asian region in general, and South Asia in particular, seem to have many issues unique to their environments, attention is mostly attracted by a few issues common to many countries around the world. This edition of *Bhúmi* also presents four articles based on some common concerns on environmental quality. The first paper by Ranjith Perera highlights the importance of implementing Environmental Management Systems (EMS) in urban local authorities. With two cases from Japan and Thailand the paper takes our attention beyond what the local authorities achieved by implementing EMS. Both public and private organizations all over the world are interested in standardizing their business processes through subscribing to international accreditation bodies. In the area of environmental management ISO 14000 is the most popular source of accreditation. One of the difficulties that most of the local authorities encounter in this regard is the heavy costs involved in registration and progress reporting to the international body. Interestingly, these processes would sometimes become unnecessary burdens for local authorities costing more than the savings out of implementing EMS. What is left to the payer is nothing more than the pride of maintaining a white elephant. In a situation like that the central governments need to seriously think more about setting their own standards in line with the widely accepted concept and norms rather than submitting to international standards. The paper indicates a timely need for the same.

When talking about urban environments the streets and their sidewalks cannot be forgotten as they are the bases from which the users experience the urban area. Sidewalks, therefore, were at the focus of Jane Jacob's critique on post war urban planning in the West. The second and the third papers reiterate the importance of maintaining the quality in sidewalks. The paper by Hewawasam and Ranasinghe is an empirical investigation on the envious qualities of sidewalks of streets. Although the emphasis is on the 'rough sets', which is a conceptualizing tool of mathematical orientation, its employment to explore the users' perceptions of street characteristics should be regarded as an attempt to enrich environment quality research with stronger methods of investigation. The paper that evaluated streets in an institutional area of Chennai, presented by Rakesh and Mohamed also got sidewalks at its focus. Apart from the evaluation of the pedestrian space, it presents a case for us to rethink the popular solutions to motor traffic such as flyovers that are increasingly coming into our urban areas, standing as gigantic alien ships landed at the city centre transforming inhabitants to minuscule. These

solutions often revamp all human characteristics in urban environments, while creating many other problems that otherwise wouldn't have existed in the city.

However, quality is not achieved only by mere surface treatment of the physical environments of isolated project sites. Rather, it is an outcome of the appropriate designing of the urban environments, going beyond narrow visual and aesthetic focuses into broader conceptualizing of processes and systems. The last article is an argumentation in this direction with the view that the ultimate objective of urban design is to furnish urban areas with quality environments that are conducive for living, working and enjoying. The paper is an invitation for all to join a discourse on this matter, as the term 'urban design' and its practice are currently loomed with many questionable conceptions, appropriations, and uses. Than anything else urban design must be conceived more as a common practice engraved to all those who engaged in making the urban environment. The fallacies presented in the article are only a few out of many that the author wish to highlight, but they are open for discussions and constructive criticisms by those who believe that urban design must find a better future in academia and practice.

Although numerous amounts of research materials and discussion papers are available on the subject, prevalent state of knowledge still shows vast gaps and thus, demand more work on the substance and the methods for better achievements. To cater to this demand what is contributed by this issue may be quite insignificant, yet valuable. In order to develop a healthy discourse on environment quality and the related, Bhúmi is always ready to provide an arena for all those who are interested.

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