

Romi Khosla delivers the Keynote address
at the Inside Outside Mega Show, Chennai.



TEXT: GEETA DOCTOR

The Future of our Cities

'This is the future, technology at your fingertips!' exclaims a team of sharp suited salesmen as Romi Khosla sits on a comfortable sofa in a mock-up cabin at the Inside-Outside Mega show at Chennai.

At the press of a button, the blinds slide down the glass windows on two sides of the fake room. Pinpoints of light flash from the false ceiling, soft music wafts through the area as the salesmen demonstrate how the plasma television comes alive, more lights snake across the walls and floor and the mood changes with the music that surges through the room. 'You can create an instant hotel lobby in your bedroom,' says the salesman. Another surge of electronic ripples by pressing the right buttons and it is morning once again.

'Is this what Romi Khosla's future is going to be like?' I ask myself as he languidly detaches himself from the sofa, nods at the salesmen and heads for the auditorium. He wears his hair long, scraped back from a handsome face in a grey ponytail and has an easy way with all the people who come to shake his hand.

As he climbs onto the podium to face an audience of professionals, architects and designers who have come to listen to him talk about 'The Future of Our Cities' a new Romi Khosla emerges. His is a stirring call to action.

'It's not about architecture, it's about the way you are going to live,' he tells us as he unveils his plans for a new direction to urban planning.

'Any solution for the future direction that our cities are going to have to take must come out of our own country. We are not planning for the future. We are not reflecting enough about our future. We are driving into a future that nobody is interested in which is why I have tried to come up with a plan for the Future of our Cities that I have called "Natural Cities".'

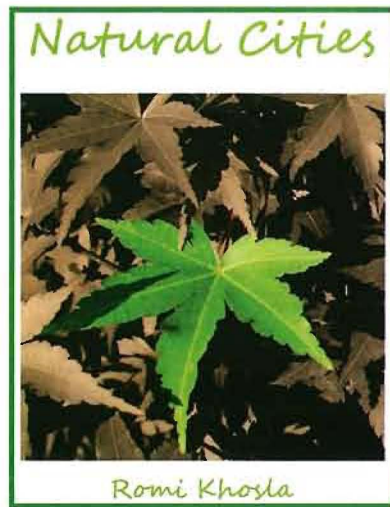
He warns us that with so many multi-nationals eyeing Asia as their next target we will soon forfeit the right to decide what we need to do and instead give in to the demands of a global approach where maximising profits and commerce tend to become the main parameters to progress.



Speaking against the backdrop of an erratic Monsoon this year, Khosla paints a bleak picture of our Cities being ringed by a severe water shortage. He describes how when travelling from Delhi to Mumbai we have to traverse across nine rivers, all of which, according to him are dying or are slowly being poisoned by effluents.

While there has been a large scale migration of people from the hinterland to the cities that will continue, the corresponding ground water resources as traditional methods of storing and harvesting of rain-water are given up. Along with the gradual failure of the mega hydro-electric systems at harnessing our river systems, this can only add to the problem.

Though Khosla does not talk about the South Indian, or specifically the Tamil Nadu example, it's worth recalling the older systems of water conservation in the area. They were known as the 'Ery Systems' of water management that were created by the use of bunding, or the creation of earthen walls to contain the water flowing down from a catchment area into large ponds or even lakes. There were channels to allow the water to overflow by gravity into the surroundings fields that were at a lower level to the ponds. There was also a regular practice of water storage by building temple tanks, or stone reservoirs close to every temple that was situated at the centre of a village, or with the village at the periphery, with a sacred grove of trees nearby.



Until the present times these tanks, or reservoirs have been an aesthetically pleasing feature of South Indian temple towns besides being, at the same time, a practical response to the needs of keeping the ground water levels viable.

As underlined by T M Mukundan in his book (From 'The ery systems of South India – Traditional water harvesting on the subject;)' 'The ery is not merely a reservoir of water for irrigation. The presence of ery provides an appropriate micro-climate for agriculture. Khosla's plan for an integrated development of his 'Natural Cities' makes use of some of these traditional methods being integrated into his plan for an urban habitat. For one thing, his Natural Cities would include only about a million people, so they are in effect micro-conglomerates for living. He suggests methods by which the natural water from rainfall should be channeled into canals and water bodies that flow through the centre of the town in which the different housing units have been planned. None of these should be more than four floors in height, ideally.

He then proposes the creation of urban agricultural blocks that would also be irrigated through the use of channels from the central water systems. As he explains, a large amount of our energy supplies go into bringing food via great distances to the cities, as may be seen from the pre-occupation by eco-friendly groups with 'food miles' and insisting in consuming produce that is grown locally. If well managed, the urban agricultural blocks could supply a large amount of the food needs to these micro-environments.

He dismisses the high tech solutions that are being proposed by planners in the West as being technology driven. Not only does this create a highly polarised society that is already evident today, by reducing its citizens to being passive victims of a way of life that they cannot enjoy, excepting perhaps for a very small minority of the very wealthy living in designer ghettos, but the State takes on powers that will eventually guarantee its failure. Again, whether this is the end of Capitalism as some scholars have predicted or merely its decline into a million mutinies, as citizens prefer to march through the streets of their capital cities, thrashing all vestiges of authority, can be debated.

More than anything else, what we need now is a people's participation in the creation of a more sustainable future.

Romi Khosla's 'Natural Cities' might be one way to this future.