The '15-minute city' gaining prominence

Developing townships by establishing hyper-proximity infrastructure with essential services and recreational facilities can play a notable role in nurturing a more holistic, healthy and sustainable way of life.

By **Kausar Firdausi**

The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored various factors related to safety and health. Urban crowding, pollution, traffic woes and lack of green 'lung' space all contribute towards rendering most of our cities detrimental to overall wellness.

According to industry experts, integrated townships address these concerns to a significant extent. These are planned mini cities where every aspect is carefully planned, green open spaces are reserved as non-development zones, and most essentials of daily life are available within easy reach. "Many of the larger townships encompass retail, entertainment, healthcare and even office spaces within their precincts," says Anuj Puri, chairman, Anarock Group.

Now, India's township culture is catching on in other areas of the world, where the concept of a '15-minute city' is gaining hold. "With everything within short drivable or walkable distances and even the walk-to-work dream possible in some instances, integrated townships represent the necessary future of Indian residential real estate," adds Puri. Hence, housing, offices, restaurants, parks, hospitals, and cultural events are all within a 15-minute drive of one other.

According to Prashant Solomon, MD, Chintels India & hon. treasurer, CREDAI NCR, the concept of a 15-minute city has become a buzzword globally as this concept has massive potential for growth in the Indian context. "The list of the C40 cities created to implement a 15-minute city concept as part of the post-covid recovery plan includes five Indian cities of Delhi, Jaipur, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Chennai. This model helps address urban complexities and encourages mixed-use development and creation of a flexible and complete neighbourhood especially in sync with the evolving concepts of hybrid and remote working," informs Solomon.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic constraints had impacted the way we communicate, travel, consume, and socialise. Manoj Gaur, CMD, Gaurs Group, believes, "When the pandemic shut down city centres, it demonstrated the importance of social ties — but from a different perspective. Many people were unfamiliar with their neighbours or the parks in the area. This was discovered as a result of the pandemic. We've rediscovered the importance of place, which has improved our quality of life."

Ashwinder R Singh, CEO, Bhartiya Urban, too believes, "Today, when the world has seen several lockdowns, what is not just inside the four walls but outside the four walls of your home has become highly relevant. As the concept gets accepted widely, it will add on to the environmental sustainability quotient with reduced transport requirements, which means more time with your dear ones."

Integrated townships have become a preferred choice in tier 2&3 cities also. "The piqued interest in these cities is due to the lower prices, bigger homes and better returns on investment. Moreover, there has been an increasing trend amongst buyers to build a lifestyle away from the infrastructure constraints and challenges of city life such as persistent traffic, congestion, air and noise pollution, as well as high crime rates," emphasises Harshvardhan Neotia, chairman, Ambuja Neotia.

Omaxe Group is one of the pioneers in developing townships. "Starting with one in Greater Noida in early 2000s, the company has over the years delivered and is developing townships and hi-tech townships across various cities of North and Central India," asserts Siddharth Katyal, group director, Omaxe Ltd.

Vatika has also been among the frontrunners in modern, self-contained township development. "We have developed destination townships and delivered more than 1200 acres of townships in Gurugram, Jaipur and Ambala, which have become epicentres of well-planned habitation. Though the township spans hundreds of acres, everything is within walking distance," affirms Vinay Wadhwa, GM - sales, Vatika Limited.

Although conveniences near habitation have existed for ages, the 15-minute city concept would be beneficial in bringing a greener perspective to workplaces, cultural events, and the more transitory nature of social connections. Central Park has already made the concept the centrepiece of its successful projects such as Flower Valley outlining proximity, diversity, density and ubiquity. "Above all, the goal is to create a city of proximity — not just between buildings, but also between people. We understand that huge cities can be exhausting and might generate a sense of isolation. We want open places, but ones that aren't used for anything in particular, where people may meet and interact as much as possible. When we live together, we live better, and our social fabric will be reworked as a result," accentuates Amarjit Bakshi, MD, Central Park.

The best part of townships, as per Ananta Singh Raghuvanshi, senior executive director, sales & marketing, Experion Developers, is that it gives the best of both worlds. "It's cosy enough to have congregating spaces and develop meaningful relationships and yet, large enough to give you the space and distance. One can have both peace and pace in townships," avers Raghuvanshi. As a result, the demand for townships is increasing day by day.

Since long before the pandemic, real estate in India has been working on the concept – which is seen as a response to both the climate crisis, by bolstering green initiatives at the neighbourhood level and reducing travel, and ever-growing urban sprawl, which pushes those on the periphery further out. But Ar Nayan Raheja of Raheja Developers says, "Covid-19 has sparked a trend for localisation, putting the 15-minute city on the radar of cities all around the world. Cities such as Detroit and Paris are implementing the concept. In India, the concept would be effective if the infrastructure was built as planned and the government collaborated with the private sector to bring it to fruition."

The 15-minute city concept has become a potent brand for planners in an increasing number of communities. "We are becoming more urban as a species, but metropolitan settings have been related to poor mental health. Some people were harmed by Covid, while others benefitted. If you have a sense of belonging to your neighbourhood, that's a major guardian of your mental health. If 15-minute cities can achieve this balance, perhaps the human species can have a pleasant urban future," says Prateek Mittal, executive director, Sushma Group.

Besides, as Deepak Goradia, vice chairman and managing director, Dosti Realty, points out, this model once implemented would facilitate in minimising the infrastructure costs and will bring daily essentials in proximity to the consumer, while reducing the carbon footprint. Easy access to essential services coupled with world-class amenities, all within a short walking distance will uphold inhabitants well-being and an amplified sense of community.