THE POWER AND PARADOX OF TRANSIENT URBANISM



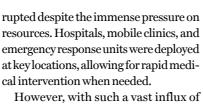
Clockwise from the left: Amit Kapoor & Meenakshi Ajith

CROSS THE world. cities are measured by their permanence, their towering skylines, deep-rooted nistories, and ever-expanding infrastructures. Yet, some of the most fascinating urban experiments exist not in permanence, but in transience. Transient cities have historically been a key feature of human settlements and urban governance. From the annual Burning Man festival in Nevada to the sprawling city of Mina during Hajj, these spaces offer valuable insights into adaptability, resilience and also the vulnerabilities of urban planning.

Nowhere was this phenomenon more closely observed than in the re-



For a few months, Prayagraj transformed into a 76th district of Uttar Pradesh, complete with a functional civic administration. Over 400 million visitors passed through the city's sprawling network of roads, tent clusters, and public service hubs. Infrastructure that would typically take years to build was put together in mere weeks: 30 pontoon bridges, vast network of renovated roads, thousands of sanitation units, and a vast AI-monitored security system ensured the safe movement of people across the *mela* grounds. That this system functioned with remarkable efficiency is a testament to meticulous planning and execution. Water supply, sewage treatment, and waste disposal were strategically mapped out, ensuring that essential services remained uninter-



However, with such a vast influx of people, the limits of temporary urbanism were inevitably tested. Stampedes, bridge collapses, and occasional fire outbreaks – though managed swiftly – served as a reminder that even the most well-planned transient cities must constantly adapt to human unpredictability. While Kumbh 2025 successfully navigated most logistical challenges, these incidents highlighted the delicate balance between meticulous urban planning and the significance of collective responsibility. Among the most pressing concerns of a temporary city of this scale is sanitation.

The sacred immersing in the Ganges also posed a major environmental challenge. Despite extensive planning for sewage treatment and bans on plastic waste, the sheer scale and density of human activity left an adverse impact on the rivers. The government's investment in eco-friendly infrastructure, the



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widespread use of solar lighting, and stricter waste disposal policies were visible this time. However, ensuring true environmental sustainability remains an ongoing challenge. While many pilgrims followed responsible waste disposal practices, habitual behaviours, logistical gaps, and the enormity of the gathering itself meant that some damage was unavoidable. The key takeaway is that sustainability in transient cities cannot be an afterthought. While Kumbh 2025 saw notable improvements, future iterations must integrate environmental consciousness into every stage of planning from waste management and water conservation to ensuring minimal ecological disruption once the city disappears.

For many, Kumbh was not just a pilgrimage; it was also a critical economic opportunity. This year, the *mela* was estimated to have generated Rs 2 lakh crore in revenue, benefitting not just major industries like hospitality, retail and tourism, but also small vendors, transport operators and local artisans. This

ability to create millions of short-term jobs highlights an interesting economic model: a city that exists temporarily but provides livelihoods that extend well beyond its physical existence. However, it also raises the question: how can such an economic boom be sustained beyond Kumbh?

As the makeshift city disappears, what remains is a blueprint for adaptability, efficiency, and resilience. Kumbh 2025 once again proved that a city does not have to be permanent to be functional, well-governed, and impactful. There are several key lessons that urban planners, governments, and researchers can take away. The ability to construct, operate, and dismantle a city with millions of inhabitants provides valuable insights for managing urban expansion and disaster response.

No amount of infrastructure can fully predict the organic, often chaotic nature of large gatherings. Successful urban planning must account for both engineering precision and human un-

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predictability.

Kumbh Mela 2025 may have ended, but its significance extends far beyond its physical disappearance. It is a reminder that cities whether permanent or transient are ultimately about people, not just infrastructure. The success of Kumbh is not measured by how grand its scale was, but by how well it served those who came seeking meaning, community, and faith. In a world where urban challenges are rapidly evolving, a deeper look into the Kumbh Mela offers a fascinating paradox: that a city designed to disappear can teach us the most enduring lessons about sustainability, efficiency, and adaptability.

Whether for centuries or just for a fleeting moment, the true test of any city lies in its ability to serve its people and respect its environment. In that sense, the city of Kumbh lives on long after its roads, tents, and bridges have vanished.

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