

GOING TO TOWN

Go vertical at shopping centres

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The Supreme Court pronounced an interim order recently on the various issues of land use abuse being adjudicated by it. By holding back all action on sealing of illegal buildings till the end of the festive month of October, the Court has shown it is benevolent. It has also given the Central Government adequate time to introspect and find solutions to a problem which is essentially one of bad and corrupt governance.

The government must realise that solutions are actually staring us in the face — we only have to grab the opportunity to start the healing process. At the ground level, this is what it can do quickly.

Firstly, change the development control rules in the convenience shopping centres. Most of these still have only single-storeyed shops though the residences they cater to are allowed three floors. A little bit of redevelopment — using the traders' associations to help with finance if need be — could add elevators, escalators and better stairways. Some reconstruction with storage allowed in the basements could triple capacities. Such a measure will release much needed vertically available floor space in existing under-

utilised convenient neighbourhood markets and also improve the quality of local convenience shopping. Secondly, many local shopping centres fall largely under the mixed land use category — shopping on the ground floor and residences above. This could be changed by charging a conversion fee. The LSCs are, in any case, not good enough any longer for decent residential living. A good example of such a folly is Connaught Place where most of the first and second floors are still designated residential.

Thirdly, the designated parking spaces of community centres could be converted into multi-storeyed parking blocks allowing them to go three floors high (as high as the neighbouring residential plotted blocks).

There are a lot of other small reforms which can solve some of the issues — quickly allow kindergarten and pre-schools to operate from residential neighbourhoods (in addition to the 22 uses which the apex court has reiterated). There may be some more relevant uses which need to be examined. These will need the cooperation of local residents as they are the stakeholders in their neighbourhoods.

Though the Supreme Court has restrained itself from issuing orders on a lot of issues being adjudicated before it, there is one which needs the urgent attention of the Group of

Ministers (GOM) constituted by the PM — the manner in which the public participation process has been ridden over roughshod while issuing the notifications which the Court shall rule on after October is over.



The fact that a host of RWAs and civil society groups are the petitioners in this case is an indicator that the public participation process has been abused by the ministry of urban development.

The DDA Act drew its inspiration from the County Council Acts in Great Britain and the process of public participation in urban planning and redevelopment planning has its beginnings in similar problems which have been tackled by other cities. There is no harm in learning from those examples.

Going by the photographs of Dussehra effigies published in newspapers — effigies painted as corrupt official and unscrupulous builder are standing next to Ravana and his brothers — the public clearly understands that the system of governance has become far too rotten and needs urgent cleaning up.

The Central Government must also be reminded about another home-truth: those who are part of the problem can never present solutions. Both DDA and MCD — beside the nexus between the executive and the legislature — are to be blamed for the mess. The sufferer is the common man. Even solutions of how to have cleaner governance will not emerge from within these two proverbial mega white elephants; their hands are far too stained. The solutions shall emerge from outside these organisations.

Whether the clean-up process is initiated by the executive or by the judiciary is for the future to tell but there are heartening signs that we are moving towards rule of law, albeit slowly.