In a searing critique of the Chennai government’s ability to cope with the December 2015 floods, planner and academic K.T. Ravindran points to “spineless” local planning organizations, land mafia and inept governance. This nexus of urban issues affects not just Chennai, according to him, as valuable floodplains in Kolkata, Delhi and Bangalore are increasingly encroached upon—a story of insatiable development trumping sound watershed management. Flooding is just one instance in which the lack of adequate urban planning is made visible, and unpacking the limits of planning is the core aim of *India’s Reluctant Urbanization*. The volume is timely given the ever-pressing questions of provisioning water, building reliable transport, and ensuring affordable housing for the poor, among many others that face current urban policy-makers.

At first glance, however, the title begs the question, reluctant for whom? The Chennai flood waters failed to recede from ill-conceived and rampant development—on the part of corporations, housing developers and so on—laying bare urban desires that are outpacing appropriate regulation. Perhaps urban planning entities and the Indian government at large struggle to acknowledge and accommodate urban growth, but there is no denying that a home in the city is aspirational for millions of Indians and often anything but reluctant.

Speed of urbanization aside, the authors, Piyush Tiwari, Ranesh Nair, Pavan Akinapalli, Jyoti Rao, Pritika Hingorani and Manisha Gulati, seek to situate their book amidst all of the messiness: urban planning bodies, policies, history, economies, and actual qualitative measures of well-being. Indeed, they follow the theoretical argument that many scholars of the South Asian city advance, namely that theories drawing on Western contexts are of “limited use for
understanding the pace, scale, and complexity of urbanization in India” (p.17). Their intervention describing the Indian city from the “South” uses an analytical lens encompassing five “dimensions” (also referred to the authors interchangeably as “environments”): [i] built, or the temporal and spatial land policies; [ii] productive, or the economic functions within the city; [iii] living, or the qualitative assessment of liveability with a particular focus on the urban poor; [iv] natural, or the management of natural resources; and [v] governing, or the various models of city management. It follows, then, that the logical application of these dimensions can lend insight into city-building processes and reveal the crucial disjunctures between ideology and planning.

While, on the one hand, the reader is sympathetic to this organization of the book as a heuristic device, on the other, the divisions between the “dimensions” almost seem forced. Take, for instance, the third chapter on the built environment. Tiwari et al. describe postcolonial discourses on the city, such as Jawaharlal Nehru’s belief that urban development was ancillary to investment in large infrastructure projects followed by Indira Gandhi’s largely “anti-urban” stance. They continue to the post-liberalization reforms that led to urban dwellers emerging as a political voice, the top-down interest in cities as spaces for economic growth, and, currently, a growing middle-class that actively seeks to shape the urban agenda. However, beyond this historical urban perspective, the chapter’s main focus is on economic policies, such as the various Five Year Plans that addressed the country’s economic growth, with no explicit mention by the authors of the role the urban played. Moreover, the chapter adopts a passive view towards urban policy. For example, a quote from the Indian Institute for Economic Development (IIED) is included stating that India is “inhibiting” its urban development and could draw on

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1 Chapters 1 and 2 “set the stage” and focus on “drivers”, respectively.
2 On India’s contemporary urbanisations, see the virtual issue of Antipode published in 2015: https://antipodefoundation.org/2015/04/15/people-without-property-in-jobs/
experiences from other BRICS countries. It seems that the political economy section briefly mentioned in the introduction by the authors actually serves as a better organizing and overarching lens (and, indeed, would provide more insight into what is being inhibited and why on multiple scales). As the authors themselves note in the above section, it is the spatial and temporal circulation of capital and its impact on policy institutions that raises the most interesting questions.

The subsequent chapters take much the same format, each dealing with a specific aforementioned ‘dimension’. Chapter 4 addresses the “productive” environment, reviewing theoretical perspectives on urban growth and looking specifically at how industrial policies have impacted urban growth. Kolkata is given as an example of a city where industrial policies have decimated textile manufacturing, because the central government limited the ability for such industries to agglomerate and therefore grow. Cities and states also promote urban growth, according to the authors, through competitive tactics used to attract foreign direct investment. Yet the most interesting policy dilemma is saved for the conclusion of this chapter; namely, where the Indian government should focus its infrastructural investment: in big cities or in small and medium cities to offer growth opportunities beyond the metro center. In the two chapters following, Chapters 5 and 6, the discussion largely focuses on what makes for healthy living in a city, touching upon poverty, social fragmentation and natural sustainability. It is Chapter 7 that returns to the material the authors discuss best: governance. By engaging with the heart of the debate, or questions of who governs and what is governed in a city, the authors explore the tensions between urban local bodies (ULBs) – or bodies with development, planning and public health mandates, amongst other functions – and urban development authorities (UDAs) – bodies that hold land and develop for public purpose – with the former often rendered as empty governing shells. ULBs were meant to take the lead through Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban
Renewal Mission (JNNURM)-funded projects, but politics and a lack of knowledge of ULB operations meant they were once again left out of the picture.

The authors often get mired in economic models to explain growth, as is seen in the final chapter, entitled “Thinking Beyond”, even though they admit at the end that “creative thinking” is required to break out of dichotomous frameworks (e.g. either economic growth or social redistribution). In terms of adequately theorizing from the “Global South”, the book mostly neglects to amplify voices from “below”. Discussion on citizen engagement remains at middle-class demands for transparency, mainly instituted through e-governance. The reader is left wondering how an urbanization model might explain the exclusions from, co-optations by, and at times successful challenges to governance that the urban poor experience. Does the “reactionary” planning of the government, in the words of the authors, allow any room for negotiation for the most marginalized? This isn’t to romanticize the current status quo, but acknowledge the true complexity of it: a governance model includes disparate voices and stakeholders, with multiple agendas and demands—and at times, though few and far between, this clamor leads to small but important victories for ordinary urban residents. Indeed, to theorize from the “South” and have it hold resonance elsewhere requires this missing component.

We come full circle then to the idea of reluctance and what it really means for planning: urban governments implicitly encourage rampant urbanization—through encroachment (from slum dwellers to wealthy elites) and a blind-eye to development violations, complicated by urban entities that must compete for legitimacy. Reluctance perhaps describes the frequent attitude towards planning as nothing more than a stop-gap measure, its inadequacy made clear during situations like the Chennai floods.