

# FREEDOM

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH FEMINIST ECONOMIST AMARTYA SEN

by Raj Mankad

When Amartya Sen won the 1998 Nobel Prize in economics, the announcement from the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences made clear he had earned the prize multiple times over. Much of his work involves complex mathematical equations but the central questions are clear. Among them, what are fair and effective ways to include individual preferences, especially of those who are least fortunate, in the decisions of a society as a whole? Many of his discoveries are, as he points out, common sense.

For example, Sen links food and freedom. He showed that famines are caused not so much by a lack of food but by unequal distribution and suppression of information. He connected the absence of democracy and a free press in Maoist China to upwards of 30 million deaths during the famine of 1958-61.

Sen also brought light to what is arguably the worst of all genocides. He compared ratios of men and women in different countries to reveal more than 100 million missing women. Of those, 50 million are missing in China, where the ratio of women to men has been as low as .94. Why these women are missing has become a research field of its own that considers selective abortion, nutrition, land

rights, dowry, social norms of patrilineal descent, and other factors.

Sen also theorized what has come to be called the Capability Approach and helped implement the Human Development Index (HDI), an alternative to using Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and average per capita income to compare nations or regions. First of all, averages hide inequality. Secondly, while growth can improve a society, the good largely depends on what is done with increased public revenue. The HDI treats money as a means not as an end, and it emphasizes outcomes like female literacy rates and life expectancy.

Sen's attention to gender inequality is longstanding. Sen considers himself a feminist. He serves as an editorial board member of *Feminist Economics*, a journal founded by Diana Strassmann at Rice University. I came to know Sen during the five years I worked at that journal.

He also serves as an advisor to a leading Chinese university and as recently as 2011 he published his insights on the country. In "Quality of Life: India and China," Sen points out that India's growth rate is now approaching that of China. Does that mean the two giants are equals? The measures used in the HDI tell a different story. He writes:

Life expectancy at birth in China is 73.5 years; in India it is 64.4 years. The infant mortality rate is fifty per thousand in India, compared with just seventeen in China; the mortality rate for children under five is sixty-six per thousand for

Indians and nineteen for the Chinese; and the maternal mortality rate is 230 per 100,000 live births in India and thirty-eight in China.

Though Sen is as ardent a supporter of democracy as it comes, he chastises the Indian government for its failures and praises the Chinese government for investing in health, and education, while reminding us of the potential drawbacks of authoritarian government, like catastrophic famines.

Shortly after returning from China, Sen visited Houston in October 2011 to give talks at the Rothko Chapel and Rice University's Baker Institute. I volunteered to pick him up from the airport. I didn't hold up a sign. I knew I would recognize him. I have had the privilege to meet him three times, once at a feminist economics conference in Oxford where he spoke about the great 19th-century philosopher of human rights, Mary Wollstonecraft, and twice in Houston. Like my own father, Amartya Sen typically wears his suit coat, dress shirt, and slacks a size too large. His shoulders stoop a little from age but he remains spry and rolled his own bag.

He sat in the passenger seat of the car and called up his assistant at Harvard, Chie Ri. While I drove, Sen dictated correspondence to editors and scholars. He spoke a prose gracious and rounded out in style like the paper letters people no longer write.

At one point, his assistant read out an email I had sent a few hours earlier, which parlayed a question from the Baker Institute. Did he want Indian flags at the stage where he would speak? He was in fact born in what is now Bangladesh but at the time was British India.

Sen turned to me and laughed. He said he was a proud citizen of India but did not require the flags.

When we reached the hotel front desk, he pulled out his wallet and searched for the appropriate pieces of plastic. I have never seen a wallet so packed with assorted IDs. One writer called Sen a man of many hats but no one wears hats anymore and it is the bulkiness of the wallet that gives our complexity away. He lives on three continents. He is both an economist and a philosopher. He is listened to both by prime ministers and activists on the streets. He is an Indian citizen, as he said, but he used his Nobel Prize money to start a training program for women journalists in Bangladesh.

The sight of Sen's wallet reminded me of a key passage from his landmark book, *Development as Freedom*: "the same person can be, without any contradiction, a South African citizen, of Asian origin, with Indian ancestry, a Christian, a socialist, a woman, a vegetarian, a jazz musician, a doctor..." If the wallet is a metaphor for Sen's thought, we might ask, how might we design a wallet (or a building, a city) to accommodate the many identities of single individuals (or for the societies we make up together)?

I had a chance to probe that kind of question with him. I caught up with Sen again just before a lunch with Rice students in the Poverty, Justice, and Human Capabilities Program. This time I had his undivided attention for an interview. He preferred not to have the full transcription published so I summarize it below with quotes. My questions all aimed to connect his ideas to architecture and urban planning.

The Human Development Index and the Capability Approach are often used to compare nations, but the analysis can be brought down to the level of cities, neighborhoods, and even specific developments. I asked him to connect the Capability Approach to architecture. He informed of the architect Romi Khosla who he said answered just this question in his book *Removing Unfreedoms: Citizens as Agents of Change in Urban Development*, written with Jane Samuels. (See inset.)

Then Sen added, "In architecture, there is a question of aesthetic beauty, of course, and the freedom to enjoy the beauty of a building is itself something. At the same time, you're also concerned with two things, one which may give the most ability or capability to a person. And secondly, how much opportunity it gives to the person to change their mind on what they would like to do with their life."

He then gave an example from his own life. Sen was an avid runner and has had to have one of his knees replaced with a titanium joint. He now needs a railing when going up stairs and complained about how often he must climb up to podiums without anything to hold on to. At an Italian building he described as "gigantically beautiful," he tumbled down seven steps. He hit his head and developed a hematoma, though, fortunately for him and the world, he lost none of his acumen.

The question of access is one that all U.S. architects have had to take on since the Americans with Disabilities Act passed 20 years ago. However, as Kelly Moore wrote in a contribution to the Spring 2011 issue of *Cite*, wheelchair accessibility is perversely most uneven in "walkable" neighborhoods.

Sen's point about access and capability, I would argue, goes far beyond railings. We can ask more broadly, does the physical configuration of the city give the same capabilities to elderly GLBT individuals, disabled veterans, single parents, children, etc. as it does for able-bodied men? The community college surrounded by a moat of parking on the edge of the freeway comes to my mind as symbol of imperfect access. I think of my grandmother alone in a giant house and nobody with whom she could share her thousand songs and stories.

In Houston, we know we are good at creating money. We are a city of entrepreneurs, inventors, speculators, hucksters, and hustlers. We don't just love money, though. We love liberty. So how can we know how well we match up with other cities in terms of freedom and capabilities? I asked Sen to comment on looking not only at per capita income but at other measures of what people can be and do.

"Mainly, it's very obvious," he said. "Income and wealth are not what we're seeking. We're seeking them for the sake of something else which we really value. Secondly, there are many other things you have to do in order to make use of the income. And that's where the whole idea of organized thinking about architecture and town planning [comes in]—organized thinking about sanitary facilities, organized thinking about educational opportunities. With the same per capita income you could produce vastly different results in terms of human freedom depending on how that money is spent." In a city without zoning,

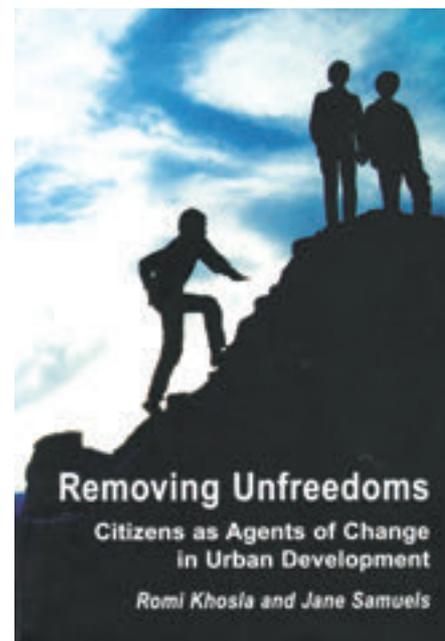
"organized thinking," as we know, is a critical challenge.

I tried to get at questions of freedom and architecture more directly. Checklists have transformed architecture through LEED certification and I asked if a certification checklists might do for freedom and human capabilities what they have done for environmental sustainability?

Sen became a little agitated. He has been associated with rankings because of his landmark work on the Human Development Index, but he has had to stress over and over again that a single numerical indicator—like the ones LEED certification produce—are insufficient. In addition, his work on the Capability Approach was developed by Martha Nussbaum, but they diverge on whether to set out a list of capabilities. It is talking about and debating issues, with the help of math and statistics, that he encourages instead of fixing a universal list.

"What about checklists as a means to discussion?" I asked.

He responded with great verve, "Begin with the checklist, then critique the checklist, then modify the checklist, then think about more than a checklist way of thinking about the problem." 文明



"A compassionate city needs to blend two aspects of urban living—the static physical and the kinetic perceptual aspects," writes Romi Khosla with Jane Samuels in *Removing Unfreedoms: Citizens as Agents of Change in Urban Development*. The static city is the skyscraper and city hall, the law and order, the city of elites. In the same place are the slumdweller and homeless, the improvised lives of the subaltern. He argues the quality of life in the latter city, what he calls the "middle city," can be improved by focusing on five instrumental freedoms drawn from the work of Amartya Sen.

Learn more about Sen's ideas by visiting the Capability Approach Wikipedia entry, written by a student in Rice's Program in Poverty, Justice, and Human Capabilities.