

DESIGN- ING/EDU- -CATION

**Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of
The Association of Architecture Schools of Australasia**

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RMIT UNIVERSITY AND
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

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"While the architectural field has changed more in the last 30 years than in the previous 3,000 thanks to the rapid acceleration of globalization and the convulsions of the market economy architectural education has mostly failed to keep pace." - Armo

This conference will bring together academics and practitioners to speculate on the future of the design studio as a pivotal platform for architectural education and production, and to consider modifications required in response to the changing demands of society, pedagogy, research and practice.



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DESIGN AS UNDERSTANDING- ILLUSTRATIONS FROM AN ACADEMIC EXPERIMENT

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**DESIGNING/
EDUCATION**
CONFERENCE

PROVOCATIVE STUDIO PEDAGOGIES

ABSTRACT

More than 50% of any city in India consists of informal settlements of which majority are slums. Only around 5% of the buildings if not less in India are designed by architects. In practice only a fraction of this 5% is studied and archived, as Amos Rapoport puts it "Architectural Theory and history have traditionally been concerned with the study of monuments. They have emphasized the work of men of genius, the unusual, the rare" and the irony is that majority of a city are "usual". This paper questions the trend of an architect as a designer of spaces for the elite, with reference to an academic experiment¹ conducted from January to May 2013 in three settlements across two states of India.

Often studios try to emphasize on design so much that the students' mind intuitively looks for problems and innovative ways to solve them. This problem solving attitude fails miserably in informal settlements, which majority of Indians call home. The experiment mentioned above started with the question –What if the project is not about finding a problem or suggesting a solution? What if we architects acknowledge the fact that the residents of a settlement are repositories of local knowledge which architects don't have? The result is an extra ordinary outlook on the society as well as on the profession of architecture. The role of an architect changes from that of a designer to a much bigger facilitator of quality life and leaks beyond the boundaries of mere buildings.

This paper illustrates the pedagogical learning outcome of the participatory studio process and the resultant projects. The projects which the students did with active participation of the residents clearly steer away from the normal processes and methods of analysis, so creating a foundation for architecture – UNDERSTANDING, so as to design with the 'other 90 percent'².

"That the new era will bring with it grave and complex challenges with respect to social and functional degradation of many human settlements, characterized by a shortage of housing and urban services for millions of inhabitants and by the increasing exclusion of the designer from projects with a social content. This makes it essential for projects and research conducted in academic institutions to formulate new solutions for the present and the future,"³

states the first point in the 'UIA/UNESCO charter for Architectural Education'. This emphasis on the formulation of 'new solutions' becomes the core of architectural education today, and with it comes the 'problem seeking attitude', for which the solution is. The Beaux Art studio type of teaching where the design problem is assigned in the beginning and solution is sought throughout the studio is the most common format in architectural schools today.

The essential lacuna of a problem seeking attitude is the construction of the 'problem' itself. Definition of a problem is a highly personal view point which essentially is a historical construct. What one architect may see as a problem may not be so for another architect. Like the 'Falling Water' discussion⁴ where one set of architects can argue that a marvelous design came because F L Wright decided to house the Kaufmann family right on the spot which they appreciated; while on the other hand the opposite argument from an environmentally conscious set of architects can be that, the 'Falling Water' spoilt the serenity of the stream, Kaufmann family liked the stream and construction of 'Falling Water' took that spot away from them. While one may or may not support either of the arguments but the idea that problem seeking is a highly personal and biased approach is fairly clear. Similar contradictory problem definitions are quite evident in many other architectural and urban discussions. Slums for instance were considered a problem but post De Soto⁵ this paradigm has changed; similarly modernists thought, the personal motor vehicle as a marvelous invention that changed the way they looked at architecture, while in the contemporary world the personal motor vehicle is seen as a big urban issue, and the list continues.

As the definition of the problem, so will be the solution. Idea of the problem is constructed based on the way the problem-seeker is nurtured, and his/her priorities and values, thus this clearly establishes that the very 'new solutions' which 'UIA/ UNESCO charter for Architectural Education' and many architectural education system seeks, is biased and baseless. The very basis of innovation for an appropriate solution is skewed and thus an architectural education system based on this will obviously sway the learning outcomes.

If seeking a problem is biased and thus the 'new solution' is skewed then the question arises on 'what then is the role of an architect'? "Architectural Theory and history have traditionally been concerned with the study of monuments. They have emphasized the work of men of genius, the unusual, the rare"⁶, thus the attitude of the students to produce master pieces rises from what they study. This 'master piece' designer attitude was also emphasized by the Beaux Art way of teaching, as the students were usually asked to design monuments⁷. Aspirations to design 'master pieces' of the sorts which Tafuri⁸ argues, are manifestations for development of capitalism, which takes away the power of architecture to bring social transformations. This outlook is academically jeopardizing as design is often seen as improvising and adding value to an existing typology, and development of a new typology essentially ends up in sheer mix matching of functions. Innovation gets limited to improvising on what already exists, and this is difficult to overcome as long as we have typology based studios.

Almost every 6th urban Indian lives in a slum⁹, a settlement where usually architectural services never penetrate. With rapid urbanization and the double digit growth rate that India targets, population living in informal settlements are bound to increase. Specific to Delhi, approximately more than 76% of population lives in informal settlements, and this juxtaposed with the fact that accessibility of an architect for the rest 24% is also limited, poses serious concerns about the profession. In the given context, can architects ever serve the majority of the population? Is architecture just a profession for the elite and can never make profit by servicing the ordinary? If the answer is yes then there is a serious threat to our urban systems, and if the answer is no then the quest begins.

"How architects construct an understanding of the social world and how that construct affects possibilities for practice and pivotal concerns for architects who seek to challenge the status quo, construct new social formations and new identities, and help reconstruct a viable democratic public life in the face of inexorable forces driving economic growth, destroying global ecology, homogenizing culture, and privatizing the public realm. These questions frame (the) point of departure for reconstructing architecture in the current period."¹⁰

From January to May 2013, a course on 'Informal Settlements'¹¹ was held at 'Sushant School of Art and Architecture', Gurgaon, India, to explore the above mentioned possibilities. The biggest hurdle in the course was how to conduct it without probing for problems and students deriving innovative solutions. Though an innovative methodology was used, but here, it is not a claim that all answers were sought. The course was based on two basic principles, firstly 'understanding' and secondly 'participation'. Students were divided in three groups and given three sites; Chirag Dilli and Anna Nagar in Delhi and Nathupur in Gurgaon, India (see Figure 1: Map showing the three settlements (Red boundary) in same scale). Chirag Dilli and Nathupur are urban villages; an urban village is a village that got trapped in a city due to urbanization. Urban villages have special development rights under *Lal Dora land* which keeps them out of the ambit of building byelaws. Chirag Dilli is a historical precinct developed because of the residence of a Sufi Saint, while Nathupur was an agrarian village which now sits next to the prime real estate of Cyber city (CBD of Gurgaon). Anna Nagar on the other hand is a slum touching its boundaries with the WHO (World Health Organization) building in Delhi. It should be noted here that all three sites were selected to create interesting juxtapositions, a slum next to WHO, an urban village next to cyber city and another urban village with a 14th century Sufi shrine at its heart, even though this is not implicitly presented to students.



Figure 1: Map showing the three settlements (Red boundary) in same scale

Students were encouraged to engage with the community, which came as a reflection on what Brian Anson pointed out as the problems plaguing the profession,

"pandering to developers and lack of ground roots community communication (which) were a result of a deeply flawed education system."

Thus now for this course the education system itself was grounded on community communication and participation. Over the course of time, many assignments were done to understand both the living and non-living aspects of the assigned informal settlement and the final assignments¹³ were a student-community initiative. Students were told that the final project is not about finding a solution to a problem; neither has it got an objective. Students were asked to do *'something'* in the settlement itself and with participation of the community. Thus when architecture students are given the freedom to do anything and think beyond problems of a building, their role completely swayed away from that of a problem seeker and solution provider. The crux of all the three projects without emphasis became to *'understand'*, to understand much beyond the paradigms of problems and solutions.

Final project was based on student's understanding and the relationship with the community. Following were the three projects –

First one is *'Kala Mahotsav'* at Chirag Dilli. *Kala Mahotsav* is a hindi term for art festival. After the whole semester's site work and interaction with the community, students felt that the settlement is a hidden treasure. A lot of things happen in the settlement but at a city level, it is not visible. The settlement is surrounded by areas which have got established markets and malls, so no one ever visit it. Thus the students decided to do something very spontaneous. One morning the students went to the settlement and one of the group members dressed as a traditional announcer and went around the streets like the *'Pied Piper'* asking kids to join him. The group gathered at a small open space in the community and were provided with art supplies and asked to do anything they like. Kids as inquisitive they are soon started to explore and the students also became one among them. With the help of the group an installation was exhibited in front of the settlement.



Figure 2: Students working with Chirag Dilli kids to develop an art installation

This innocent act gave them the first hand experience of how public relations and publicity works in an urban area. Chirag Dilli, unlike other examples is a fairly closed society because of a large number of floating population and relatively less networked residents, thus public participation is a difficult task for any professional. Interestingly the students picked up the nuances of public participation, as in a closed society they realized; kids are the entry point for any participatory work. Soon the parents and others on the street started to interact with the students and a bond was established. A trust that can easily be scaled up to a fully fledged participatory project got generated.

Second project was called *'How I see you'* by the Anna Nagar group. This group after entering the social structure of the slum soon realized that the way they see the settlement is very different from the way the community perceives it. This view point was established on more than one occasion when the community pointed out the spaces they liked which the students have judged to be the most undesirable. Thus

the project was to capture how the youth in the slum see their Sunday. Students arranged digital cameras for the youth of the settlement to shoot their Sunday. Soon they started exploring spaces in the settlement which the students have never experienced, a cycle repair shop that was heart of the young men's interaction, a leakage point on a water pipe which was like a retreat, a railway track which was a personal solitary resort and many such other spaces. Reading of a space and understanding comfort zones are based on the way an architect lives, so it becomes immensely important for a professional to understand his/her client's needs, this understanding would not have been possible unless such an exercise was intuitively carried out.



Figure 3: Student helping the kids of Anna Nagar Slum to learn to shoot the way they look at their spaces

The third project was titled '*Jiski Bhaiwa uski aishwa*' which is in Hindi and it means 'Happiness to those who have a buffalo'. Villagers in Nathupur sold their farm land to a private developer who is making immense amount of profit out of it. Now the villagers know the game and don't want to sell their land anymore. Nathupur village sit next to glass towers of the Cyber City. This background projected a strange aspiration which the students quickly picked up, e.g a shop owner didn't want a bigger shop in future, but a new beauty parlor, and similarly there are other cases.

This led the students to juxtapose the existing with the aspiration. Students found out that like a typical village there are many buffalos in Nathupur too. They juxtaposed the existing buffalos with the aspiration for glamour and arranged for a fashion show for buffalos.

This project led them to persuade the buffalo owners to decorate their buffalos and get them to the nearby ground for a fashion show. For the villagers it sounded very bizarre as they saw no logic in what was happening and students had a tough time convincing them. The interaction started with the women of the house as they take care of the buffalos and soon the students realized that to bring the buffalos out to the ground the male consent was needed. This was a very important social and micro economics lesson that they learned about such communities- namely that women are powerful in their own house but not so much outside the house, where their initiative is often not supported and is at times even mocked at. On the other hand, it was socially acceptable for men to take up risky initiatives outside the premises of the house. When the fashion show started, both the students and the residents could be seen having a participatory dynamics.



Figure 4: Buffalo owners of Nathupur urban village after the event

It is interesting to note that in all the three projects the level of interaction with the community and the depth of understanding seemed to be deeper than what could be achieved through traditional analytical tools or community participation workshops.

This course was conducted parallel to the housing studio, and while the author was not part of the housing studio, understanding of the lives and other nuances of a community indeed had an impact on the way students designed their formal housing projects. One of the examples is shown in Figure 5: One of a student's work - a formal housing studio is trying to create informal spaces (Image Courtesy: Deepanshu Arneja), where the student (*Deepanshu Arneja in this case*) tries to design informal interstitial spaces in his design. This is an example of informality in interstitial spaces (of the many other aspects) that is hard to achieve in a planned settlement. The exterior spaces thus generated are private for the clusters but at the same time are physically connected to the larger movement networks.



Figure 5: One of a student's work - a formal housing studio is trying to create informal spaces (Image Courtesy: Deepanshu Arneja)

The experience with this course leads to believe, that 'understanding without prerequisites' is a more potent methodology to comprehend the complexities of Indian society. This understanding is undoubtedly critical in Indian architectural education. By deeper understanding, an architect realizes that architecture is far beyond the sensual appeasement for human body.

"Much of what we know of institutions, the distribution of power, social relations, cultural values, and everyday life is mediated by built environment. Thus to make architecture is to construct knowledge, to build vision."¹⁴ To contribute for the development of the society, architectural education now should look deeper and understand more so as to be an essential part in the development of societies, and this understanding needs to be more wholesome.

A participatory design approach is particularly interesting at this point of time in India, as most of the new policies for development are promoting participatory approach. Many projects on ground, of which the author has witnessed does the exercise of informing the community rather than participating with the community. E.g. the RAY(Rajiv Awas Yojana), a scheme by the government to in-situ rehabilitate slum dwellers has resulted in public meetings just to inform the community of the designs that architects make in their offices, mostly completely disconnected from the social patterns of the settlement. Similar is the case with 'Local Area Planning' which is part of the master plan of Delhi, where the planning maps are displayed in public for information and no sense of participation is practiced as originally envisioned in the master plan. Though academic experiment being discussed, due to various constraints was just limited to understanding and participation, a further exploration is required to find new ways to design, for then the questions asked in the beginning will have a positive and inspiring reply.

Endnotes

- 1 Nipesh P Narayanan, in *Informal Settlements - Understanding + Interacting* <<http://infofet2013.wordpress.com/>> [accessed May 2013]
- 2 Phrase in *Design Other 90 Network* <<http://www.designother90.org/>> [accessed 01 July 2013]
- 3 "UIA/UNESCO Charter for Architectural Education", in UNESCO <<http://www.unesco.org/most/uiachart.htm>> [accessed 11 June 2013]
- 4 Resultant of a discussion during one of the studio crits at Sushant School of Art & Architecture, Gurgaon by Dr. Rupinder singh, Thomas Oommen et al. [February 2013]
- 5 Hernando De Soto, *The Other Path: The Economic Answer to Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).
- 6 Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (New Jersey: Pearson Education Limited, 1969).
- 7 Jeffery A Lackney, "Educational Design Institute", in *Mississippi State University* <http://www.edi.msstate.edu/work/pdf/history_studio_based_learning.pdf> [accessed 10 July 2013]
- 8 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, illustrated, reprint ed. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1976).
- 9 Rukmini Shrinivasan, "17% of urban India lives in slums: Census", *The Times of India*, 22 March 2013.
- 10 Thomas A Dutton and Lian Hurst Mann, eds., *Reconstructing architecture : critical discourses and social practices* (Minnesota : University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
- 11 See endnote 1 for more details.
- 12 Richard Rogers, "Brian Anson obituary: Architect, planner and tireless battler on behalf of the underdog", *The Guardian*, 17 December 2009.
- 13 This paper discusses only the final project. For other assignments see endnote 1
- 14 Thomas A Dutton and Lian Hurst Mann, eds., *Reconstructing architecture : critical discourses and social practices* (Minnesota : University of Minnesota Press, 1996)

Biography

Nipesh P Narayanan is a registered Architect & Urban Designer from India, whose keen interest is in inculcating social equity in rapidly urbanizing agglomerations. He is currently Assistant Professor at Sushant School of Art and Architecture, Gurgaon, India. He takes studios based on cultural understanding and reinterpretation of functional notions. Apart from teaching undergraduate students he also works in slums of India.