SUTRADHAR: THE EMERGENT SOCIAL DESIGNER?

NITIN BATHLA IS A SOCIAL ARCHITECT AND RESEARCHER BASED OUT OF DELHI. HE WAS THE LOCAL COORDINATOR FOR THE DEUTSCHE BANK URBAN AGE AWARD, DELHI IN 2014 AND FOR URBANXCHANGER IN 2015-2016.

In 2014, the experience of coordinating the Deutsche Bank Urban Age Award in New Delhi led me to realize the innovativeness and ingenuity with which people were responding to urban challenges from the bottom up. Furthermore, it motivated me to find new forms of practice that would engage with people at the grassroots level, empower the marginalized and help foster social equity, and reposition communities at the centre of the design process. A whole new facade of the city opened up as I became aware of the implications of top-down urban policies on the lives of ordinary people. Continuing to develop small experiments of my own in co-creation with communities, I constantly reflected upon how to utilise this newly gained knowledge for action and how to translate the lessons into pedagogical tools. It was in this spirit that I excitedly acceptedthe invite to participate in urbanxchanger as a local coordinator.

The brief for the project was very open and looked at synthesising new and fresh ways of engaging and designing with communities, – ways of representation, communication and later, ways of practicing as an urban professional. As with everything new, it takes much time and effort to discover and refine these new ways, but however difficult such a process might be, it offers very important learnings for those brave enough to embark on the journey. I have tried to capture some of these lessons from the Delhi exercise below.

For the purpose of simplification and to provoke reflection on the topic, I would like to suggest calling what could be the 'new profession' emerging from this process, 'Social Design'. To work with the community, a Social Designer is required to possess a level of humility and patience, but also to play another role, that of the narrator. In a conversation with Dr. Renu Khosla (Director of CURE) one February winter evening, she said in summarising the project, that one of its important contributions had been the creation of a Sutradhar. In Hindi, Sutradhar means narrator and facilitator, that is, one who connects the dots and helps disjointed things and phenomena to come together and work seamlessly.

The younger professionals might be the biggest takers from such processes and projects. During the course of the project I had the impression that it was the young professionals from the architecture offices that came closer to the professionals from the community initiative's office. Their motivation to design for a larger section of the society was accompanied by their noticing that the formal education process was limited to preparing them to design only for the top 10 percent of the society. Young professionals might be more open to changing their approach towards designing for communities.

Open discussions held inside the community offered an opportunity to create awareness about the challenges and engage in overcoming them. In the first week of activities in New Delhi, we organised for two outdoor workshops that were open to the public: one on social design in general and the second to reflect on the project-specific process. In my view, these were the moments that proved the most insightful and triggered longer-lasting discussions that later became relevant in the context of the developed design strategy. These events also helped disseminate messages to a larger audience and spread awareness of the potential of innovative design solutions to respond to social problems plaguing the city. In addition to more traditional

NEW DEHLI

NOTES ON THE PROCESS

presentation drawings and techniques, the team explored alternative ways of conveying ideas using real life objects that allow for spatial experience. At an advanced stage of the Delhi intervention, the Google pin-shaped balloon evolved as an important tool to demarcate physical events taking place on the ground, thus making them visible and tangible for the local residents.

New technology, more specifically Social Media, proved invaluable in bridging the gap between different actors in the process. Through the use of hashtags to publicise and disseminate our work and the 'actions' taking place, an increasingly large number of residents and people working locally in the civil society space came to connect with us and participate. This proved especially useful while operating in an area as large as Sangam Vihar.

Co-creation is a non-hierarchical, organic process, best done through equal participation and without authority. It requires substantial time and deliberation, achieved in this case through numerous visits, walks, meetings and discussions. In addition, there arose a need to find a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches, which the team attempted to do with an Action

Plan. The problem of flooding in Sangam Vihar for example is very much related to the apathy of the government owing to the settlement's unclear status on official master planning documents. This lack of clarity leads to the non-performance of essential civic functions like the provision of drainage and sewage infrastructure and solid waste collection inside the community, so the dynamics at top-down level are seen to have a very profound influence on the situation at the ground level in the community. The Schizo-plan tool devised during the urbanxchanger process provides for an approach that alternates and moderates between interventions at the top-down at the bottom-up level, and as such, allows the intervention to transcend beyond just a once-off guerrilla tactic.

Such intense and focused transfer turned out to be the springboard for some very interesting and hybrid initiatives. The urbanxchanger project was just the beginning of my engagement with CURE and the communities with which it works, and the methods employed proved useful to begin to imbibe new ideas and concepts and recontextualise them in Delhi. One example of this is my continued collaboration with CURE to develop a livelihoods program in Savda Ghevra, a

resettlement colony on the western fringes of the city. Then, during our exposure visit to Berlin, Dr. Khosla and I visited CUCULA, a Berlin-based initiative described as a 'Refugees Company for Crafts and Design'. Deeply inspired by what they stood for and how they strived for social equity through an activity as simple as coming together to build furniture, we returned to Delhi and immediately began identifying stakeholders to try something similar. Three months later, we started a training workshop with the community of Savda Ghevra, experimenting with the making of furniture using local resources. In addition, through academic work at the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi and The Design Village in NOIDA, I am now able to pass on the pedagogical understandings developed through the urbanxchanger process. I believe exercises like these help to dissolve the superficial barriers that exist between the Global North and South, and have realised not only the value of transformative processes arising out of such transnational idea exchange, but also how ordinary ideas from ordinary places can synergize in a quiet yet powerful way.