

Case Study Report

Social Infrastructure in Delhi's Marginalised Communities

Reclaiming forgotten spaces as a means of developing, healthier and inclusive cities

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Abstract

With the increasing urbanization & shortage of space, cities are gradually evolving and city dwellers are becoming more aware of the role of social infrastructure. These include physical spaces and community facilities that bring people together to build meaningful relationships, improve their quality of life and most importantly, their physical and mental health. However, in many developing nations like India, availability and access to such spaces is challenging. There is a surplus of private-public space and space-related amenities in the most affluent neighbourhoods, whereas social spaces in marginalized communities often do not exist. This reveals forms of spatial injustices at the street, building, neighbourhood, and community levels which are further linked to the larger political economy of urbanization of the city. In such cases, it becomes imperative to focus on its least-equipped communities and integrate them into the planning process. The Adda Experiment is a project that seeks to address these issues of social, spatial and political injustices through a participatory process focusing on the needs of the communities to build healthier, inclusive cities. The pilot project incorporated the design, development and execution of playful interventions in Bandhu slum community- an under-resourced and poorly serviced colony coexisting in the urban built environment of Delhi. By developing a deep understanding of the circumstances of this singular, marginalized settlement in a large complex network of power relations, the project attempts to employ practices that strengthen a city's communal quality by including the voices of those impacted.

Keywords

Public spaces, inclusivity, play, children, urban design, Delhi

1. Introduction

"A society where people of all income levels meet in public spaces is a more integrated, socially healthier one." -Enrique Peñalosa, former mayor of Bogotá, Colombia

Public spaces "have been seen as symbols of collective well-being and possibility, expressions of achievement and aspiration by urban leaders and visionaries, sites of public encounter and formation of civic culture, and significant spaces of political deliberation and agonistic struggle" (Amin, 2008, p.6). Such spaces are unique to cities and their utilisation varies from context to context. They are spaces where city dwellers can engage with the outside world in a public setting (Arendt, 1957).

However, urban society is not equal. Likewise, urban public space is uneven in access and use and reflects conflicts and contradictions inherent in urban society. In a developing nation like India, growing pressure for urban land has put a corresponding pressure on public spaces in the form of authorized and

unauthorized encroachments on streets, parks, playgrounds and natural features. Contrary to its conventional claims of accessibility and political freedom, such places emerge as contested sites between different actors of state and society. Many urban scholars have also reflected a long-standing concern with the 'socialness' of the city experience highlighting the various ways in which access to public spaces is restricted and by whom, or by what forces and in whose interests are these restrictions established, maintained, challenged, and loosened. (Lehtovuori, 2010).

2. Spatial Inequalities in India

Urbanization in India has become an inescapable ordeal. Cities are experiencing an increasing number of implications from this population pressure, including a severe lack of housing and necessities, access to public infrastructure, and social instability. Over 364 million impecunious people are dealing with social inequalities of various kinds reinforcing the rich-poor divide already prevalent in urban areas. Moreover, India's levels of 'happiness' (Figure 1) have been declining over the last five years, in congruence to the poor ranking in the World Happiness Report. These issues can also be traced to have roots in India's deeper problems such as poverty, inequality, community vitality, psychological well-being and good governance.

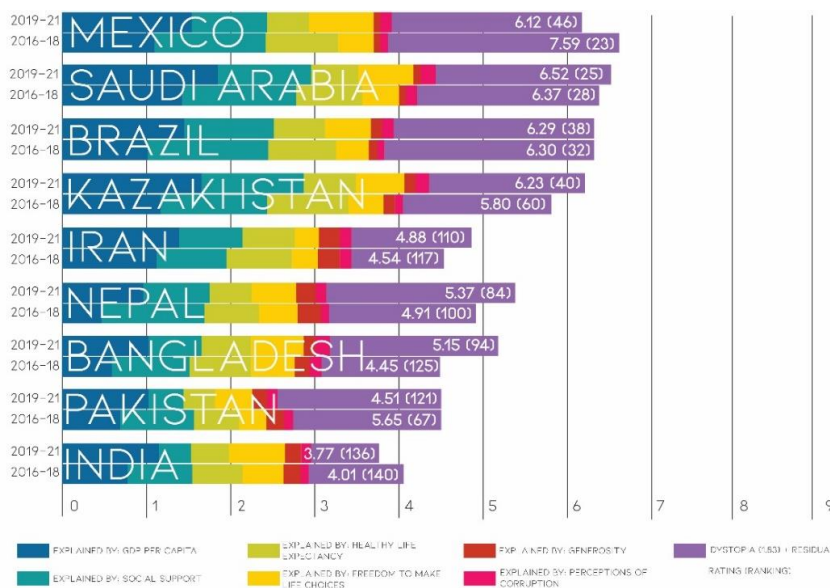


Figure 1: World Happiness Report, Source: Author

While marginalized neighbourhoods should be an important component of the urbanization process, they are often not treated as "equal" members of the ecosystem, which has a negative influence on their quality of life, and rights to the city. Moreover, women and children in such neighbourhoods are often overlooked and frequently lack a voice or identity. They are denied the chance to aspire, assimilate, and add value to their public and private living places highlighting the different ways in which daily existence is negotiated. Corporations and the government's growing control over public spaces highlight the mechanisms that limit who can be in such spaces or the types of activities that are permitted, all in the name of public safety or gentrification.

Some researchers have also observed a convergence between bourgeois ideas for clean, green cities and government planning regulations that exclude marginalized populations from public spaces. Designed for recreational and aesthetic purposes, planned public spaces predominantly serve middle-class lifestyles and are less amenable to the informal uses of marginalized groups. Elites and the middle-class often become

entitled users of parks, playgrounds, streets and open spaces. Therefore, the urban poor is only able to access public spaces through unauthorized encroachments and using the stem of bribes and patronage politics with state actors. Thus, the politics of public space has become the politics of the urban poor in Indian cities (Baviskar, 2002).

3. Delhi's Dichotomy: Rights to the City

Looking closely at Delhi, there exist various forms of geographical segregation of the marginalized groups leading to the creation of social stresses in the city. Moreover, the urban form of Delhi and its relationship to depleting public space has a large impact on the increasing divide between the affluent and the marginalized. A survey conducted in Delhi under the 69th National Service Scheme Survey (July 2012-December 2012) revealed that the capital had approximately 6,343 slums with more than a million households where 52% of its total population resided making up less than 10% of the city's area. Keeping in mind the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which has only exacerbated the misery of those living in such settlements. Although public spaces in such communities have their limitations, space is of the essence and its functionality differs from the social spaces in 'affluent' parts of the city. However, due to the absence of common spaces that meets all residents' economic, communal, and recreational needs, marginalized communities in the city are often isolated leading to deteriorating conditions.

Lefebvre's conceptualization of Right to the City highlights that everyone who lives in a city and uses urban space has a right to the city. It also argues that people who live in cities are essential to the process of creating new cities. It is an appeal and demand for marginalized city dwellers to claim their legitimate right to take part in the creation and use of urban space. It is a collective right that urban dwellers claim as users, not through any assertions of socioeconomic standing or property ownership (Lefebvre, 1996). It is also a demand for planners to acknowledge other imaginaries of urban life that complement scientific knowledge of the city (Lefebvre, 1996).

Therefore, this presents an important question of how marginalized communities can be integrated into the existing fabric of a city through the use of social infrastructure while also redefining the standards of community participation.

4. The Adda Experiment

4.1 The Project

The Adda Experiment was founded by the author in 2020. In collaboration with a design team consisting of Chakshu, Kamya Khandelwal, Yash Rathore and Ragavi the pilot project was conceptualized in Bandhu slum community in Delhi. Adda, which translates to 'nest of a group or community' in Hindi, aims to playfully utilize the unused spaces of informal settlements to encourage a far-reaching living experience with the resources available. It is inspired by one of the targets of the Declaration of the UN's Millennium Assembly, that is making public spaces available and endowing them with those facilities and services that most slum dwellers cannot create, manage and enjoy on an individual basis.

4.2 Project Phases

The initiative intended to gain support from a wide range of local partners and specialists in the field. The aim was to provide alternatives to how spaces in cities can be designed, developed, restructured and governed- a collective organic process that would bring people, identities, spaces and culture together sharing ownership, and offering a sense of belonging, of home. The following phases were conducted:

1. Prior Research and Collection of Data: The first step was carrying out a thorough analysis based on the existing condition of the site. The off-site also consisted of interviews with experts and research to understand the problem of exclusionary public spaces in India. This also involved establishing connections with key partners and actors in the communities in Delhi.

2. Neighbourhood Diagnosis: This step involved a series of activities and tools to understand the quality of spaces in the neighbourhood and influence, through a playful participatory process along with the residents requiring an extensive community engagement strategy to unite toward a shared vision.

3. Co-design and prototyping: Based on the prior research and analysis, the project vision and goals were defined. Based on the data, specific design possibilities were created for the chosen underutilised and forgotten spaces in the settlement in common agreement with neighbours. It involved the use of local materials and transforming them into realities for the residents, to strengthen social ties and collective ownership.

4. Funding and Implementation: This involved the construction, and execution of the social infrastructure that focused on contributing in reimagining the role of the 'informality' in a city to advance creative placemaking and create more equitable outcomes to improve the quality of life for all citizens. The funding came from crowdsourcing in addition to prize money received by winning a design competition.

4.3 Site Study: Existing Conditions

1. Scale, Location and Connectivity- The chosen community for the pilot project was Bandhu Camp, situated in the centre of Southwest Delhi's upscale neighbourhood of Vasant Kunj. Spread over an area of 4 acres, it is surrounded by other urban villages such as Kishangarh, Masoodpur and Mahipalpur and all settlements are within 15 minutes of walking distance from one another.

2. Urban Context – Sitting amidst various gated neighbourhoods of Vasant Kunj such as Rosewood, Green Glade, Sahyog and Rockview Apartments, the heavy urban density in the context has limited portions of green cover. While it is mostly a residential area, there are a number of markets in the vicinity.

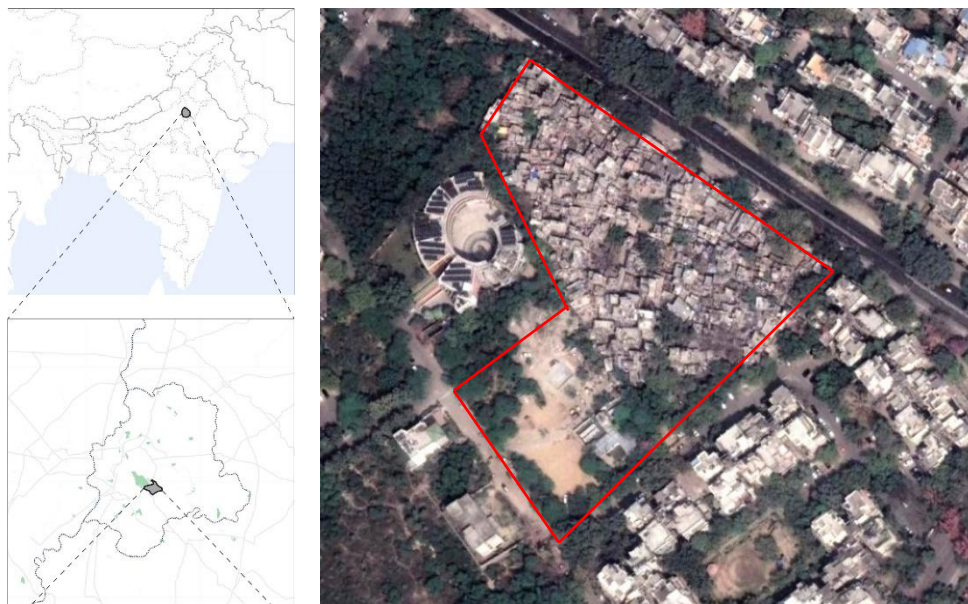


Figure 2: Map of India, Delhi and chosen site of Bandhu Camp, Source Author

3. Micro Context – The settlements consist of 2000-2500 residents. The land is currently owned by Delhi Development Authority and the earliest residents date the back to early 2000s. There are two entries to the site- the back and front sides. It is flanked by a Disability and Support organization called Muskaan Papeid which was developed in 2002. It also consists of government-owned public toilets. There also exists a small Government school within the boundary of the site, that has been inaccessible due to the ongoing Pandemic. The closest community park owned and managed by Delhi Development Authority is across the main road, making it unsafe for regular access.

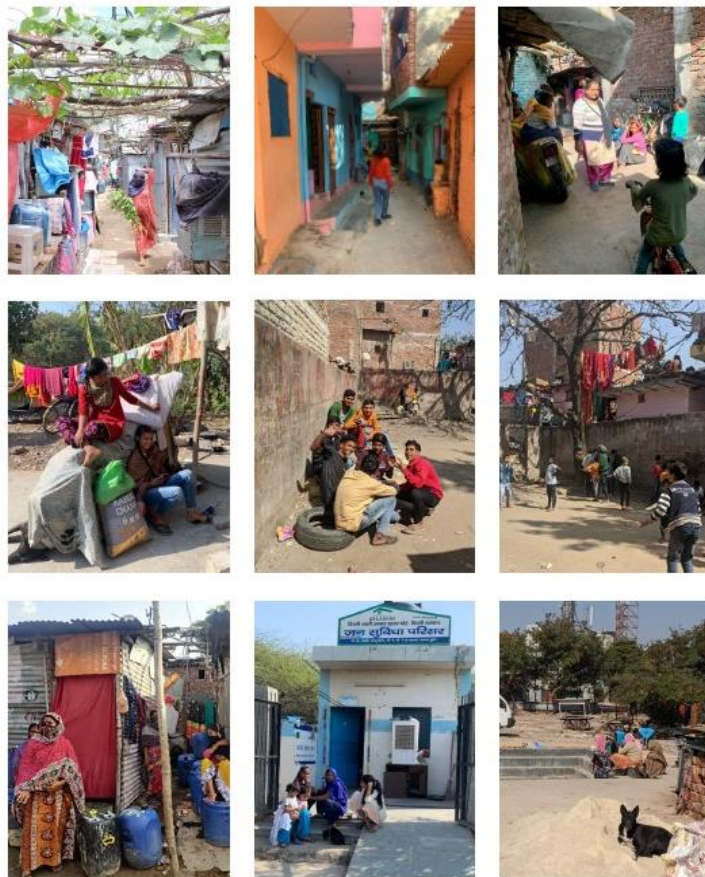


Figure 3: Examples of inadequate social infrastructure in informal settlements in Vasant Kunj, Delhi

1 - Temporary infrastructure for shade, 2 - Alleyway connecting homes, 3 - Women outside their homes in a shaded area 4 - Children lounging on a parked bike, 5 - Teenagers using tyres as seating, 6 - Children playing in a vacant plot of land near their slum 7 - Informal housing lacking basic amenities, 8 - Women sitting outside Public toilet, 9- Unused Stepwell in slum

Source: Author

4. Inadequacy of Infrastructure – It is an under-resourced and poorly serviced community. It lacks adequate living conditions, underdeveloped pedestrian access and circulation, insufficient lighting and social infrastructure. The site also lacks adequate shade for residents to sit under during the day and has become a dumping ground resulting in unhygienic living conditions. There also exists an open ground at the back of the site which is sometimes used by the children for play. However, it contains no benches, landscaping or any other form of seating to support the daily experiences of the residents.

4.4 Community Engagement

To become familiar with the daily activities of the community, various forms of spatial and urban analysis were carried out. To further understand the needs of the targeted populations, the team at The Adda Experiment designed, presented and conducted an interactive questionnaire, especially focusing on interactions with the children and women of the community. Through this extensive outreach program, we were able to identify some of the urgent challenges faced by the Bandhu camp community along with key places for intervention in the neighbourhood. Some of the issues were as follows:

Lack of social infrastructure— There are fewer opportunities for social, recreational, and skill development as a result of inadequate living conditions and haphazard growth. Despite maintaining a small playground on the site, it is inaccessible to the community children as it is locked most of the year. The absence of seating areas and safe places for mothers to leave their children while they go to work was emphasized by the women of the community. The absence of play areas in their community was also raised by the children, particularly in the vicinity of the government school. The men of the community also drew attention to the alleyways of the settlement that were too narrow to conduct large gatherings or meetings involving large groups of people.

Outsider mentality and lack of Support – Due to the patronizing power structure and lack of government initiative towards the community, there is a constant fear of eviction in the resident's minds. Similarly, their enthusiasm for improving the community in which they live is diminished by their ongoing dread of eviction. This further emphasizes the difficulties of residing in a 10-by-10-foot space, which leaves no room for relaxation and no incentive to improve the surroundings. Nearby neighbourhoods often do not welcome residents of the settlements to use their spaces as their own.

Lack of ownership – There is the prevalence of vertical relationships with government agencies that are uncertain and discretionary rather than formalized or rights-based. Therefore, this lack of trust and communal ownership of their spaces leads to limited growth within the settlement.



Figure 4-6: Community Engagement Event at Bandhu Camp, Vasant Kunj, Source: Author

4.5 Bandhu Ka Adda

By recognizing children as the primary agents of change, social infrastructure was designed and developed following a different approach. For the first intervention that was completed over the span of three weeks, the back entrance of the community (found to be one of the unused and unsafe spaces of the community) was designed and painted by engaging in interactive activities with the children of the community. This intervention aimed to encourage the community to engage with the space along with other nearby residents of the city and develop new relationships. The positive response received from the residents reassured the changes they want to see in their neighbourhood and the effort they are willing to make for it.

The second intervention was implemented near this street in an uneven land parcel adjacent to it. It focused on creating a playful seating space using readily available and economical materials such as bamboo. This was based on the previous discussions with the community and aimed to also instill a sense of belonging to the space. Several community members participated in the design and execution process helping to level the site, construct the seating structure, make the rope seats, and paint the bamboo pillars alongside the Adda team. It was evident through the process that cultivating a community's desire to participate in claiming a common space takes time and effort. It necessitates a high level of commitment and trust between various stakeholders which has a direct impact on its long-term success. Once a desire for change has been generated, it is critical to work toward obtaining the resources necessary to make it happen.



Figure 7: Painting of community street, Source: Author



Figure 8: Residents of Bandhu Camp using the painted space, Figure 9: Completed design of the painted street
Source: Author

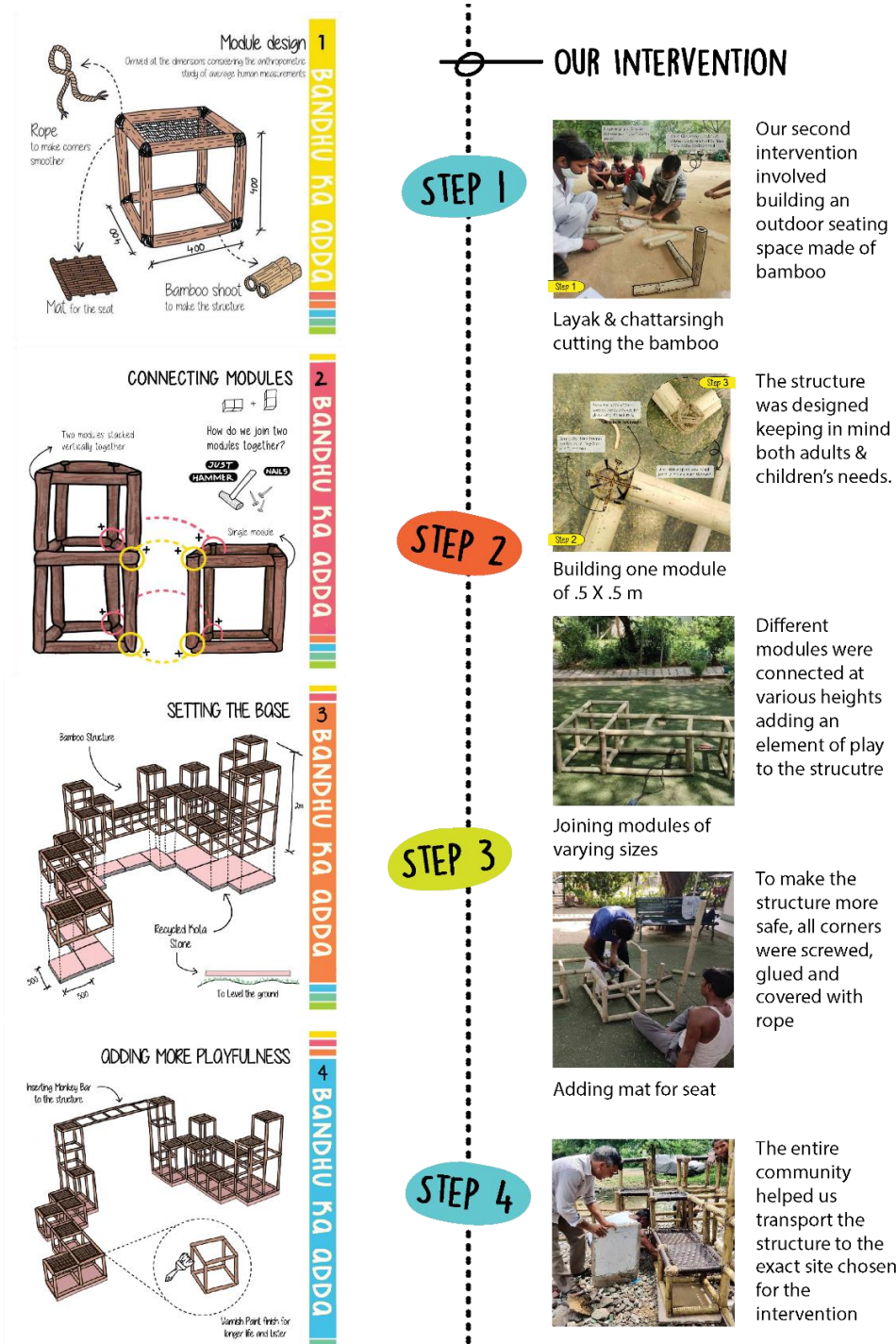


Figure 10: Process for creating social infrastructure, Source Author

Through the implementation of these projects, a sense of awareness, sensitivity and optimism was developed and aided in creating a 'sense of space' in a community. More importantly, it inculcated the community about their rights to the city, encouraging them to use and protect their neighbourhood. It was highlighted that such spaces can be an inexpensive yet potentially transformational where children and their families can thrive, build, and foster connections. It also draws in more "eyes in the city" leading to social attachment that invariably deflects wrongdoing. Activating, improving, and instilling everyday spaces

with a sense of wonder can enhance the physical character and identity of a place and the lives of the families living there.



Figure 11: Bandhu Camp residents using the social infrastructure built for and by the community

Source: Author

5. Conclusion

Through the inception, design and execution of the interventions in Bandhu Community, storytelling became an active agent of change and helped in obtaining greater support from community developers, cultural leaders, and communities themselves. It also initiated conversations about social infrastructure producing a larger impact on the design, policy and planning landscape for inclusive cities. Throughout our interactions, it was evident that most of the ‘socialising’ for all age groups happened on the streets and informal open spaces of the community than in the homes or formal parks, which reinforced the need to create new, more imaginative public space solutions for all age groups.

In conclusion, these simple yet practical interventions have the potential to serve as a platform for local governments to incorporate into their planning guidelines and development initiatives and serve as a model for other marginalized communities. The rising population of urbanized Delhi should be harnessed to great potential, resulting in social cohesion. That will be possible if fair decision-making procedures, equal distribution of resources, and sustainable production and consumption processes are followed resulting in cities that are harmonious, peaceful, economically thriving and inclusive.

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