a Little Space for Democracy
Finding Place for (and Among) Youth Driven Social Change in Chennai, India

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Diploma Thesis 2015
Oulu School of Architecture
University of Oulu
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“My feeling as an architect is that you're not after all trying to put up a monument which will be remembered as a 'Laurie Baker Building' but Mohan Singh's house where he can live happily with his family.”

- Laurie Baker
I find architecture is richer when people actively participate in the design process with their fresh perspectives, giving one valuable inputs to continuously edit and improve the end product. The same has been true for this project.

My biggest thanks go to my supervisor, Prof. Hennu Kjisik, who helped structure the entire attempt, shared experiences from his decades of teaching and practice, helped avoid the common pitfalls, and made sure my enthusiasm was unwavering till the end. The comparisons we made between the challenges in India and Finland were eye opening, and proved the issues being discussed are often relevant in cities across the world.

I wish to thank my family and friends back home in Chennai, who enthusiastically participated in the interviews, helped organise the onsite events, provided additional information from the site, and in general make sure the project considers as many local issues as is possible in the short time frame available. Without their efforts, working on a project set in Chennai while living in Finland for half the duration, would have been far more challenging than it ended up being.

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Last, but not the least, my thanks go to the numerous inspiring young change-makers in India, who continue to blaze new trails as they bring knowledge and experience from diverse fields, to tackle some of India’s biggest development challenges. Many of them have provided crucial inputs to the work presented here, and enabled the project to transform from a sketchy idea to a diploma work that considers practical concerns. I look forward to continuing an exciting collaboration with them in the coming years.

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A country of 1.2 billion people. More than 800 million voters. The world’s largest democracy.

Despite these fascinating facts, contemporary Indian politics in reality is considered a murky field with which only a select few dare to engage. Architecture has served these powerful through history, by helping erect monuments that capture the leaders’ influence over the inhabitants and the inhabited.

A generation of youngsters, often highly educated, technologically savvy, and fiercely enthusiastic, is questioning the status quo characterized by corrupt politics and inefficient administration. By working towards a better society, while bypassing the traditional party based political system, an endeavour is being made to wipe out the pervasive sense of helplessness.

These youth have found innovative ways of collaborating towards positive social change, instead of waiting for conventional approaches to bear fruit. Education, employment, health care, transportation - few sectors have been left untouched by this wave of youngsters in their 20s and 30s who are thirsty for a more equitable society.

What can architecture do to support this laudable development?

If it can reinforce the existing power structure, it can surely help question in too?

‘A Little Space for Democracy’ is an attempt to recast the architect as an active participant within the realm of youth driven and community focused social change movements in urban India.

A neighbourhood in Chennai, a city of 10 million inhabitants, is used as a test case to discover the contribution that architecture can make towards such initiatives’ continued success. Departing from an understanding of the current socio political context through theoretical research and on-site observations, proposals are made at three levels:

1. neighbourhood level visionary (urban strategy), which encompasses: 2. local level permanent (public building architecture) 3. local level temporary (frameworks for improvised design).
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INTRODUCTION

As the contemporary city is characterized by places for private consumption, and public space is ignored in the rush to become a competitive and modern 21st century urban environment, architects have an important role to play in ensuring the continued sustenance of a quality physical public realm. While the task to stem the loss of spaces for democratic co-existence is not one that can be handled by design professionals alone, it is important to explore the role they can play in a collaborative attempt to create and maintain attractive, well designed public spaces.

A crisis of public space
“The contemporary city is a variegated and multiplex entity – a juxtaposition of contradictions and diversities, the theatre of life itself.” (Amin and Graham, 1997) This multifaceted ‘theatre’ is unfortunately being turned monotonous in our contemporary, profit driven model of city making, where areas for consumption dominate, and public spaces become little more than infill, landmarks and tourist spots. This situation warrants our immediate attention.

The idea of a democratic platform in the city, a physical forum where inhabitants can meet to discuss, debate and hopefully arrive at a consensus about issues of common interest, is almost relegated to the history books, as forces of commercialisation, and rise of virtual networks, threatens what is a vital part of city life. ‘A Little Space for Democracy’ is an attempt to explore ways in which architects can stem this crisis, resuscitate what is left of the public realm in our cities, and deliver it to those those could gain the most by having access to quality public spaces.

Designing process
Central to the discussion in this project is the urban planning and design process that is the norm today, especially when it comes to projects that directly influence public life in contemporary cities.

As Sandercock (2003) says, the planning system is biased towards those who have political or economic clout, and our cities end up reflecting the ways in which this privileged minority wishes to use space.

In an age where nearly every creative industry is dominated by the ‘prosumer’, where the user also adds to the experience by actively creating instead of purely consuming, the phenomenon of architects continuing to design in isolation, while inadvertently looking out for the interests of the powerful clients, needs to be tackled. The recasting of the architect, in response to a setting where young citizens are taking the initiative to be social change agents, will hence be closely linked to a reexamination of the current processes that privilege a few instead of the many.
Fig 1. **South Indian Temples**, such as the Kapaleswarar Temple in Mylapore, one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Chennai, continue to have a towering presence in the city, serving as reminders of a time when monumental architecture was used to express religion’s important role in society.

Fig 2. **The Fort St. George** in Chennai, built by the British and currently home to the state assembly, is a recognizable landmark that signifies political power in Tamil Nadu state. The grand columns and pediments evoke a sense of awe and respect.

Fig 3. **TIDEL Park**, a building in south Chennai constructed in 2000 to kick start the development of work spaces in the IT sector, has come to represent Chennai’s pre-eminence as a software development hub in the region. The glazed facade, at the time a rarity in the city, became a symbol of a globally competitive city.

Fig 4. **Tamilnadu Government Multi Super Speciality Hospital**, inaugurated in 2010 as the new state assembly building at a cost of 1092 crores rupees (Ramakrishnan, 17 May 2011) (approx 147.4 million euros), is today used as a hospital. The extravagantly scaled contemporary building is a reminder of how architecture continues to give physical form to political power.
ARCHITECTURE AND POLITICS: PHYSICAL MANIFESTATION OF POWER

“This nexus of built form with power is, at one level, a tautological truth - place creation is determined by those in control of resources...Because architecture and urban design involve transformations in the ways we frame life, because design is the imagination and production of the future, the field cannot claim autonomy from the politics of social change.”

(Dovey, 1999)

The Political Built Environment
The built environment is, almost without exception, re-readable as a sequential narrative tracing the shift in power over time in urban society. As Bridge and Watson (2000) point out, the contemporary city is often a site “for production of images and cultivation of spectacle”.

Politicians today, as they have done for years, exploit the permanence offered by monumental structures to express their power. While some of these attempts create massive public infrastructure, like libraries and hospitals, much of the architecture is consciously created as a means to make a permanent mark on the cityscape. This unrestricted game of monument erection takes a considerable toll on everyday democratic practice.

Effect on everyday life
According to Harvey (2009), spatial forms give shape to social processes, and decide the directions they take in future. With every large glass, metal and stone clad structure built as a private refuge from the chaotic city, a quality public realm, where citizens engage in positive social interactions, becomes harder to imagine.

It is not only the lower income groups who feel disenfranchised by the meteoric rise of the neo-liberal city, but also youth from the middle income groups who see no way to question the status quo. Development proceeds at an uncontrollable pace, with entire gated communities housing thousands of residents being planned, executed and occupied in a span of two to three years.

Possibility for a role reversal
It is fascinating to ask what the architecture profession, which has often been called on to raise the monuments that help concentrate political power, can do to disperse it. In a setting where everyday democratic practice is gaining ground as an efficient way to effect social change, and bottom-up initiatives are proving successful, in part thanks to new ways of organising citizens in the virtual world, how can architecture discover new ways of creating physical spaces tailored to support collective thought and action.
Shopping malls (Fig 7. above) are replacing beaches and parks (Fig. 5. & 6. top) as public spaces.
Background

QUALITY PUBLIC SPACES: A NECESSITY FOR AN INCLUSIVE AND JUST CITY

“We cannot know, ex ante, what will be the most fruitful source of change, but by continuing to converse about justice, we can make it central to the activity of planning. The very act of naming has power. If we constantly reiterate the call for a just city (as conservative forces forever refer to economic development and the Congress for the New Urbanism talk about smart growth and stopping sprawl), we change popular discourse and enlarge the boundaries of action.”

(Fainstein, 2006)

Public space as a basic necessity
Ascher (2003) discusses the modern condition as one characterized by constant movement, with very little opportunity to stay in the public realm. This acceleration of existence in the city is especially intense in the Indian context, where citizens are clamouring to compete with millions of fellow inhabitants for facilities like water, sanitation, public transport, and safety. While public space might come across as a luxury in such a scenario, it is actually even more crucial to have access to in such cases. For, it is in the parks, streets and squares that collective thought and action towards tackling the urban challenges facing modern society can be organised.

It is especially important to focus on the creation and maintenance of a thriving public realm when planning towards the just city that Fainstein advocates, as it is the public spaces are the stages where even the ones denied basic opportunities get a chance to have their voices heard, connections made, and lives improved.

Loss of difference and erosion of space
Young (1990) argues that urban justice does not arise from a consensus among inhabitants, but from allowing for the coexistence of difference in urban space. With increasing private player involvement in development of the contemporary city, be it the MNCs that occupy Special Economic Zones that operate like islands within cities, shopping mall developers who take pride in bringing global brands to the newly affluent Indian consumers’ doorstep, or condominium promoters whose selling point is the provision of public facilities in private surroundings, difference in the city is constantly being wiped out.

Aside from most of the modern quasi-public spaces springing up from this model of development being prohibitively expensive for most, they are all focussed on consumption. Crowds of people, in airconditioned luxury, gives the false idea of a thriving public scene, when in reality all we have is an archipelago of regulated activities in controlled environments.
The IT corridor (Fig 8. top) and Kathipara flyover (Fig 9. above) have become symbols of modern Chennai, thought they are both grand gestures that do little to consider the human scale urban lived experience.
 Background

**DEMOCRACY IN THE SMART CITY: BALANCING TECHNOLOGY WITH LIVABILITY**

“The public is heterogeneous, plural, and playful, a place where people witness and appreciate diverse cultural expressions that they do not share and do not fully understand.”

*(Young, 1990)*

**The generic world-class city**

Showcasing the capital city, as a global competitor, even if it is the capital only of a district within a state in India, as a hub of creativity, innovation and enterprise, with conducive conditions for business, is an often repeated goal of the political and corporate powers. The Information Technology boom in the early 2000’s was an apt opportunity to push the image of the city as a cutting edge metropolis further, as technology companies were interested in occupying thousands of sq m of office space in new glass clad, towers set in expansive green campuses outside the city.

The differences that exist between Indian conditions and the west where such models developed, between Indian cities themselves, and within the city’s boundaries, are all ignored in the mass produced IT based developments, and the surrounding upmarket residential areas that spring up. In hoping that everybody will be able to fit into one conception of the ideal city, the population has been denied a chance to have an active urban life. Privatised facilities are privileged, and citizens today lead increasingly compartmentalised lives away from those in different social groups.

**Technology as a solution**

In 2015, with the launch of the smart cities initiative by the central government, as part of which 100 cities are planned to be provided with a high level of IT infrastructure to make everyday life hassle free, the challenges brought about by lopsided urban development and the increasing replacement of public spaces with private collective facilities, are hoped to be overcome by the same tools. It is planned to have efficient basic infrastructure, prompt grievance redressal, assured internet connectivity and so on. However, what is missing is the discussion of how technologically well endowed urban environments are not automatically good places to be in and live in.

If history is any indication, especially in the Indian context, the use of expensive technology in urban environments often brings with it increased surveillance, stricter regulations, patronage restrictions and even complete abandonment of facilities by members who are inconvenienced. It is far smarter to have urban spaces with appropriate, even minimal use of technology, with a focus on quality design, easy access, and general livability.
Fruit stall in a residential neighbourhood (Fig. 10, top) and snacks kiosk on the beach (Fig. 11, above) in Chennai. User designed and built small elements like this dot the cityscape, and often bring liveliness that is missing in the monotonous new developments.
Background

THE USER GENERATED CITY: 
A TRADITION OF DESIGN BY IMPROVISATION

“The space of everyday urbanism is a rich and complex amalgam of wide boulevards and trash-strewn alleys, luxurious stores and street vendors, manicured lawns and dilapidated public parks; it is a product of the intricate social, political, economic, and aesthetic forces at work in the contemporary urban environment. Everyday space can be spirited, spontaneous, vital, and inclusive; all too often it is neglected by its inhabitants, ignored by city planners, and disregarded by critics.”

(Chase, 2008)

Creativity as a necessity
In the highly competitive, and often resource scarce setting of the Indian city, new ways of using existing conditions are always being found by residents, without help from any formal design setup. Be it the old advertisement banners that become waterproof roof layers for huts, cycles that get converted into makeshift shops, crates that become entire stores on the sidewalk for morning milk delivery, or one sq m kiosks that set out movable furniture to become open air restaurants, inspiration for frugal solutions are plenty.

These temporary solutions, which stem from a culture of constant improvement through continuous testing in the real world, are often more resilient and suited to the uncertainties that are connected to urban life. Unpredictable demand patterns, premium land prices, fickle weather, scarce raw materials and challenging working conditions have all been addressed by some of these little design examples. The spirit that drives the creation of these miniature pieces of urban design, and the flexible character of the objects themselves, make them great studies for what sensitive design can achieve.

Improvisation for social change
The tendency to start without a proper plan, hack one’s way through continuous (re)development along the process, and create something new for others to build upon, has been adapted to the social change sector by a number of people in their 20’s and 30’s. These are often people tired of the unexciting world of engineering jobs for large corporations, who give up conventional careers, and get involved in initiatives to address some of modern Indian society’s most pressing challenges.

This sector, with enthusiastic youngsters hungry for new ideas, which attempts to better mainstream actors at delivering positive social impact at scale, provides a fantastic testing ground for exploring the role architecture can play in achieving our collective societal goals.
Fig. 12. Chennai has grown radially from the historic city centre, along major rail and road connections.
CHENNAI: MEGA CITY UNDER RAPID TRANSFORMATION

Chennai is one of India’s largest cities. It has transformed from manufacturing and commerce hub to a mixed economy with a service focus in the last two decades. Strong social infrastructure, diverse cultural life, reasonable living costs and varied work options make it a magnet for migration in South India.

Colonial city to modern metropolis
Founded in 1639 by the British, Chennai is today an important hub in India and South Asia. A steady flow of immigrants (CMDA, 2008) has made the city a multifaceted centre for education, healthcare, manufacturing and services. Like most million plus Indian cities, Chennai attempts to house 9 million residents in the metropolitan region in comfortable conditions. Transportation, water and waste management are especially critical. Delivery of basic services to the urban poor, and allowing benefits of rapid growth in the tertiary sector to reach the general population remains a major challenge.

Erosion of the public realm
Private actors’ involvement in the city’s development has increased rapidly since 2000, and is especially apparent in areas like the IT corridor, where MNCs and gated communities dominate. The city centre has changed in character, with the arterial Anna Salai’s colonial and post-independence era buildings now replaced by multi storey hotels, cinemas and shopping malls. The public realm, once dominated by parks and beaches is threatened by consumption based private spaces. This reinforces the rich-poor divide, as access to collective spaces is now based on users’ economic ability.

Impact of semi-planned explosive growth
Chennai has grown in spurts through history, with development tied to newly created economic opportunity. The most recent example is the development around the IT corridor after setting up of companies with support from the state. This combination of planned and unplanned expansion has resulted in large disparities between quality of life in the neighbourhoods, with well planned area rivaling western cities in residents’ living standards.

Right to the contemporary city
In a city where 29% households live in slum conditions (Census 2011), public spaces that are inclusive become even more necessary. The mistrust that exists between different socio-economic groups today needs to be overcome. A first step to achieve this is creation of spaces for collaboration around social change. The distribution of such spaces is as important as the spaces themselves, to avoid reproducing current locational disparities.
Helsinki’s development from the planned central city structure into the outer neighbourhoods, with conscious distribution of built spaces, transport corridors and green areas, is obvious.

Chennai’s growth from a mix of planned and unplanned steps, with rectilinear layouts mingling with organic, and undeveloped pockets punctuating the expanding suburbs, is observable.
**Streethouses (1650-)**
The colonial city centre has low rise structures with direct street access. Private courtyards are small and frequently nonexistent from centuries of rebuilding on small, narrow plots. Streets are vibrant with diversity in facade and function.

**Villas on avenues (1970-)**
Residential layouts planned by the state follow a pattern of rectilinear streets with a clear hierarchy. Private open spaces within the plots are narrow, and often usable only for circulation. Small neighbourhood parks at regular intervals support public activities.

**Mixed typologies (1980-)**
Areas developed by the state housing board exhibit a mix of plot sizes and building typologies. Lower, middle and higher income groups are catered to. Two and three bedroom apartments in towers of 3-4 floors high expand the areas’ user diversity further.

**Towers in a park (2000-)**
The newest developments by private companies are characterised by tall towers of 10-30 floors, sited in artificially landscaped green areas with shared facilities. These gated communities have strict access control to enter both open and built spaces.

Fig. 14. Open space and built form relationship in Chennai (200 m x 200 m at 1:4000)
A density of 26903 persons per sq km makes Chennai among the densest in the world. The metropolitan area continues to expand rapidly, posing challenges to sustainable urbanisation.

Chennai ranks third in India in percentage of households in slum conditions without basic amenities. This makes social change initiatives that create a just city an immediate necessity.

Population within Chennai city limits and the Chennai Metropolitan Area from Census 2011. The city has, through history, been one of the largest and most densely populated in India.
Key findings concerning age and place of origin among Chennai residents (Census 2001). The age distribution and diversity create potential for innovative modes of social action.

A large percentage of residents are in their 20s, making youth driven initiatives successful.

Number of migrants living in Chennai city over the years. A sustained growth is visible.
Fig. 19. View of George Town, the historical city from the colonial times, in 2008.

Fig. 20. View of development around Anna Salai, the central business district today, in 2011.
Chennai: A city where old meets new, with modern glass clad buildings rubbing shoulders with centuries old temples and colonial buildings. Where newly established nightclubs and historic temple festivals are equally popular socialising possibilities. Where people from all anywhere are able to go about living extremely different lifestyles. Where the streets are colourful and vibrant, if a little too chaotic, and opportunities are aplenty.
Fig. 22. Traffic on Mount Road.

Fig. 23. Sidewalk on Sardar Patel Road.

Fig. 24. Sidewalk on Shanthi Colony Main Road.
An Absence of Public Space
With parks kept locked for most of the day to prevent misuse, and the beach too warm save for a couple of hours in the morning and evening, and buildings for common use increasingly centred around consumption, the street is the only truly inclusive and accessible public space, especially in a city with a big income gap. Recent explosion in automobile growth, however, has resulted in a slew of changes that have made streets completely unusable from a pedestrian perspective.

Most streets, even the main thoroughfares through the city, lack sidewalks. They are often less than a metre wide on the main roads that have been modified for flyovers that ease vehicular traffic. In cases where they are wide and usable, they are occupied by parked vehicles. The authorities’ measures to overcome this abuse of public space has only been partially successful. It is obvious that accessible public spaces, not prone to usurpation by private interests, are an immediate necessity.
Fig. 27. While Mogappair is served by private schools and hospitals, parks are almost absent.
MOGAPPAIR: SUBURB WITH AN EVOLVING CHARACTER

Mogappair is an upcoming residential neighbourhood in Chennai. It is popular among middle class families, thanks to a variety of education, healthcare, retail and transport facilities. The area has transformed phenomenally over the last decade, but deficiencies of basic amenities makes everyday life challenging.

New part of the expanding city
Mogappair was part of the Ambattur municipality adjoining Chennai corporation until 2011. The area has changed from agricultural village to residential area, to a diverse mixed use locality over the past three decades. The neighbouring industrial estate is being converted to an office zone, reflecting the shift from a manufacturing base to a service base. The number of schools continues to grow as new inhabitants move into the newly built housing stock. Explosion in retail that caters to the growing population has made frequent travel to the city centre, which can take up to an hour, increasingly unnecessary.

Potential for long term change
The schools and affordable property prices make families buy their first home in Mogappair. This lends the neighbourhood a young feel, as people in their 20s continue to reside in the same locality even after moving on to university and work life. This concentration of well educated youngsters with worldwide networks, plus a sense of belonging to the area, makes for a potent resource base that can be leveraged to work towards citizen led improvement. The social involvement of Mogappair youth, some of whom have provided inputs to this project, is proof of the potential that exists here.

Need for local action
Rapid construction, first by public housing agencies in the 80s and 90s, and then by private developers, has created a disjointed neighbourhood with stark differences. Good education and shopping possibilities coexist with lack of basic facilities like proper drainage, good roads and sustainable garbage disposal. Complaints that flood local newspapers make it obvious that concerted local action is a must to improve quality of life in Mogappair.

Increase in availability of public space
While inhabitants are socially aware and eager to create lasting change, meeting spaces to support their actions are absent. Affluent neighbourhoods in central and southern Chennai, such as Nungambakkam and Adyar, host a bulk of the cafes that support meetings of social initiatives today. A better distribution of public space within the neighbourhood can help localize social change actions and help realize youngsters’ vision for a better society.
Fig. 28. Advertisements for properties in Mogappair in local weekly (Mogappair Mail, 2015).
Fig. 29. Lived experience far cry from promised luxury, as obvious from reports in same weekly.
Fig. 30. Eri Scheme with its diverse house types. Current condition 1:2000.
ERI SCHEME: PLOTS FOR HOMES, AND LITTLE ELSE

Eri scheme in Mogappair, laid out by the state housing board with individual housing plots and apartment complexes, has changed from a sparsely built area in the 90’s to an increasingly vibrant residential zone today. Public space, however, has taken a backseat in this market driven development pattern.

Planning with good intentions
Eri scheme is laid out as a mix of plots for independents houses and apartment complexes. Plots of 3 sizes are targeted towards three income groups and allow for customisation in plan based on user preference. The apartment complexes also offer diversity in unit plans, despite being built by the same agency. A combination of parallel streets and loops keeps vehicular speeds low, creating in safe residential environments. Large parcels of land allotted to the playground and community hall are intended to provide opportunities for residents’ social life. The larger streets are sized to accommodate local retail.

Increasing relevance of public spaces
Being an area where most residents commute an hour or more everyday to their workplaces elsewhere in the city, time available for locals to socialize in their neighbourhoods is reduced. The local public space within walkable distance hence becomes important. With children present in almost every household in an area dominated by schools, safe spaces become even more necessary. The same features are often also required for public spaces that cater to women, physically challenged and senior citizens, all of whom are ignored in the playground that is the only public space in the locality today.

Changes during realization
The community hall is yet to be built, and the playground is occupied solely by young men playing cricket. Many plots are built up to heights greater than those envisioned in the original plan, creating dark streets. Rise in car ownership in Chennai in the last decade has resulted in even the low and middle income group housing areas being dominated by parked vehicles. The area this falls short in offering public spaces for the diverse population it houses.

Potential offered by empty plots
Empty plots punctuate today’s built fabric at regular intervals. While these are expected to become residences in the future, they can serve as sites for local, human scaled public spaces until then. Simple techniques for enclosure have a long tradition in the Indian context, and are apt for use in this condition. These can also serve as connectors between isolated streets as they did in the past, and thus bring people together through chance interactions.
Fig 31. One to two storey wall to wall residential construction, on narrow streets less than 5 metre wide, creates spaces suited to pedestrian movement.

Fig 32. Approximately 6.7 m wide plot frontage, and construction of residences by owners using a variety of contractors over the last two decades, has resulted in varied street facades.

Streets are suited in scale and aesthetic to creating a welcoming urban environment.
Fig 33. The large playground in the neighbourhood is popular among young male cricketers. Women, young kids, families and elders do not have public spaces that cater to their needs.

Fig 34. A plot allotted to a community building is overgrown and awaits funds for construction. It is unclear when the project will be realized, leaving residents without spaces to meet.

Public spaces are absent today, forcing residents to travel long distances or stay at home.
The typical plot is built with a lower storey two bedroom unit for one family, with an upper floor often let out to a tenant family or group of students. One car park is usually integrated within.

Fig. 35. Middle income group plots of 82 sq m popular, very few plots left unbuilt as of 2015.
2002 - Street and plots are difficult to distinguish. Sparse buildings as masses in greens.

2008 - Street enclosure stronger. Empty plots create connections across neighbouring streets.

2012 - Very few empty plots remain. Streets well defined. Open space at a premium.

Fig. 36. Typical piecemeal development in Eri Scheme over the last decade. Map Data © Google
Fig. 37. Residential plots remain unused for decades when owners living elsewhere focus on profit from their real estate investments. Demand for scarce land makes this a viable business.

Fig. 38. Such plots are sometimes cleared of vegetation and used by neighbours as car parking. The experience in the narrow streets becomes unpleasant when the cars start dominating.

Empty plots awaiting construction punctuate the locality that is still under development.
Fig. 39. Boundary walls constructed to protect empty plots from overgrowth and illegal encroachment end up as surfaces for advertisements. This affects the street experience.

Fig. 40. Onstreet parking and garbage dumping are common in unsupervised empty plots. This results in a degradation of the street experience for local residents and occasional visitors.

Conversion of empty plots to public spaces can improve local experience and prevent misuse.
Mean Maximum and Minimum Temperatures

Temperature rarely falls below 20 degrees, necessitating sun shading through the year.

Mean Total Rainfall

Quick disposal of rainwater is crucial all year round, as cyclones can cause unexpected showers.

Fig. 41. Mean monthly temperature and rainfall in Chennai (1901-2000). Graphs plotted using data from Indian Meteorological Department (2014).
TO BUILD OR NOT TO BUILD: ARCHITECTURE FOR A HOT HUMID CLIMATE

Chennai is infamous for its uncomfortable heat and humidity. Newer construction, mostly air conditioned boxes clad in glass and metal, often ignore this reality. A change of approach is a must if increase in energy consumption and decrease in thermal comfort in built and open spaces is to be rectified.

Building and the climate
As is obvious from the climatological data presented here, temperatures in Chennai can above comfortable conditions for most part of the year. Vernacular architecture from the region, as well as the Indo-Saracenic style from the colonial period, utilize open corridors, verandahs and courtyards to allow inhabited areas to remain comfortable. In contrast, modern buildings, which are built to much higher densities using materials that are not conducive to heat protection and air movement, are often too warm and humid to be used comfortably. Heat islands created by their glass and metal facades, especially in newly developed areas such as the IT corridor, make outdoor areas unpleasant as well.

Dependence on devices
Thanks to replication of models developed in different weather conditions, as part of a mad rush to create an image of a global city, coupled with loss of knowledge about traditional methods of building for the local climate over the last few decades, use of mechanical devices to regulate indoor conditions is widespread in Chennai. Electric ceiling fans are increasingly replaced by air conditioners even in small residential buildings, without consideration for the environment. Many of these devices are simply fitted onto older buildings which have not been insulated well enough resulting in unnecessarily high energy consumption. In a city with frequent power and water scarcity, large climate control systems which have come to dominate the newly constructed mega developments only make matters worse.

Need for simpler solutions
Any intervention that minimizes the requirement for heavily climate controlled spaces in Chennai is a welcome development. Simple passive solutions, such as orientation of buildings, sizing and placement of openings and choice of building materials can help mitigate harsh climatic conditions throughout the year.

Observed usage of climate protection in the city, techniques that are applicable to the Chennai climate (Koenigsberger et al, 1975), and key features of successful projects elsewhere are presented in this chapter as a starting point to inform a low tech approach to climate sensitive design.
Fig. 42. Built structures, both independent houses and newly constructed apartment complexes, have windows shaded from sun and rain. Trees are used for micro-climate improvement.

Fig. 43. Streetside large trees, common in older neighbourhoods which were planned around shaded avenues, become hotspots of spontaneous activity. Pictured here is a sidewalk tea shop.

In a city said to have three seasons - hot, hotter and hottest, shade becomes crucial.
Standalone roofed structures, which cut out the sun but let the sea breeze pass, are popular.

Fig. 44. People crowding under any available shade is a common sight. This picture from January at the Chennai Bus Terminus proves sun protection is required even in the coldest months.

Fig. 45. The roof without wall to provide space for passengers and families by Frederic Schwartz Architects, Gensler, and Creative Group in the new airport terminal’s entrance area.
Ventilation is the most efficient way to create thermal comfort. Opening placement should allow air movement at a zone up to 2.0 m from floor level.

In the absence of ventilation, indoor temperatures can quickly rise to uncomfortable levels with a humid air envelope formed around the body adding to the discomfort.

Shaded outdoor areas, with a roof that does not absorb heat and a structure that lets ample air movement are often more comfortable than indoor areas.

Boundary demarcation and privacy should be provided by screen walls and fences that allow air to freely pass into the inhabited areas.

Fig. 46. Basic principles for thermal comfort in warm, humid climate. (Koenigsberger et al, 1975)
Verandahs and galleries can protect from the often nearly horizontal rain, while allowing air to pass through. This is necessary as it can be warm even during the rains.

Wide roof overhangs, as are common in traditional architecture in such regions, can help shade walls and keep out most of the rain from affecting the walls and from entering the indoor areas through windows.

Verandahs which are open on one side can serve as circulation, shade walls and openings, and provide space for outdoor activities in more comfortable conditions.

Fig. 47. Protection from wind, rain and sun in warm, humid climate. (Koenigsberger et al, 1975)
Fig. 48. Alternative forms for comfort in warm, humid climate. (Koenigsberger et al, 1975)

**Double roofs with reflective upper surface**
and ventilated space between roof and ceiling can help keep indoor spaces cooler, especially when expensive insulating material for roofs is not available.

**Pergolas and frames**
with climbing plant can provide better conditions in outdoor spaces, as part of the sun is cut out and airflow is maintained.

**Raising buildings on stilts**
can allow better airflow in the upper flows as ground level obstructions will play less of a role. The space at the stilt floor can be used for outdoor activities.
Handmade School in Rudrapur, Bangladesh by Anna Heringer and Eike Roswag, 2005

Primary School in Gando, Burkina Faso by Francis Diebedo Kéré, 2001

Fig. 49. Successful application of low tech, climate sensitive design solutions in projects (The Aga Khan Development Network, 2007)
Fig. 50. Restaurant in Thiruvananthapuram with characteristic circular form, brickwork and jaali.
LAURIE BAKER:
AN ALTERNATIVE INDIAN ARCHITECTURE

Architect Laurie Baker advocated a cost efficient and climate friendly method of building, drawn from centuries of local knowledge, as the only realistic way of meeting the needs of independent India’s diverse and growing population. His philosophy and fascinating work are even more relevant in the 21st century.

Laurie Baker, (1917 - 2007) was a British architect who spent more than 5 decades living and designing in India. His unique way of making user experience rich spaces can be seen as a modern architecture that builds upon India’s rich and diverse local vernacular traditions, which were developed over thousands of years of onsite research and development across a range of climatic, social and cultural contexts.

His argument that the architect’s primary goal is to serve user needs, and belief that sensitive building techniques that have been around for years can go a long way in meeting modern challenges related to the built environment, applies to any location. The fact that much of his work is located in Kerala, a region not far from Chennai, with similar hot humid climate, makes his projects an invaluable source of reference for the project. His hands-on method, involving minimal site modification, found materials, local labour and traditional techniques, is not very well known. The potential it offers for sensitive development of a city currently obsessed with a narrow idea of development, makes a Baker inspired approach an apt choice.

Role of the professional

“My feeling as an architect is that you’re not after all trying to put up a monument which will be remembered as a ‘Laurie Baker Building’ but Mohan Singh’s house where he can live happily with his family.”
- Laurie Baker (1986)

Baker was one of the few who questioned the role of architects in contemporary Indian society. He saw the profession as causing irreparable damage by advocating techniques and methods imported from the west and informed by the modernist school of thought, resulting in steel, concrete and glass becoming indicators of development that are blindly used all over the country without regard to cost and environmental impact. He saw this as a denial of right to quality spaces to a vast majority of the population still unable to afford even the simplest house constructed adhering to the modern movement. He felt architects need to take a proactive role in leveraging the immense local knowledge and labour pool that exists in India in order to explore possibilities for building with small budgets in tight conditions.
“I am now convinced that good or bad design, or good or bad taste has little to do with colour, or form, or texture, or costliness – but that it has only to do with honesty and truth in choice of materials and the method of using them”

Back to the basics
Baker believed in a common sense approach to architecture, devoid of theoretical justification or stylistic articulation. He advocated simple building using what was available, and proved that this is more than enough to provide spaces that exceed user expectations, as long as it is done with humility and understanding of the constraints and opportunities presented by the site, materials and local skills.

“Baker’s return to the traditional has little in common with a romantic’s preference for the primitive life. His local use of tile and brick is not to be viewed as an expedient stylistic device. It stems from his desire to conserve and the need to elaborate and extend the architectural tradition to the modern designs. The result is an optimum use of scarce materials. The dramatic reduction of building costs, the proportionate increase in habitable space, and the environmental efficiency and thermal comfort that follow, are, in Baker’s scheme of things, the key concerns in building.” (Bhatia, 1991, p.66)

Celebrating efficiency
Laurie Baker gave a lot of importance to efficiency in his work, building less, and building with less. He drew inspiration from nature and culture in this endeavour, whether using the circular form to minimize wall area for a given area or building walls and using doors only when absolutely necessary. All this was done not to cut down costs of building and make better returns for the builders, but so that the end users would be able to afford their spaces and the negative effects on local environment could be minimized. Even in Baker’s early work, such as the houses in Pattom, Trivandrum commissioned by the Archbishop of Trivandrum in 1970, one sees a fascination for appropriate design - an approach that is today gaining increasing acceptance in a condition where material and energy scarcity has become more norm than exception.

The efficiency idea is also taken beyond techniques and materials, into planning of space itself. As early as in 1975, Baker proposed planning for multiple uses of the same space as a logical way of reducing cost of building, which would free up finances for more necessary construction work elsewhere in the country.

Baker also worked to propagate these efficient construction techniques. His easy to understand sketches were presented as guidelines for building in areas without access to professional services. Whether the filler slabs which optimise on concrete, the rat trap bond that reduces brick required without sacrificing stability of the walls, the perforated brick walls (jaalis) which supplement or even replace windows, or the corbeled and semi circular arches which bestow a unique spatial quality on his buildings while saving valuable cement and steel, Baker’s explorations with efficiency have created a unique and unmistakably humanistic aesthetic.
Fig. 51. Laurie Baker took advantage of simple improvements, such as the rat-trap bond, which saves labour and material while increasing thermal performance, without losing on strength.
**Flat Arch**
A simple and easy to construct replacement for RCC lintels that are currently the norm.

**Reinforced Flat Arch**
For larger openings, a few steel rods embedded in concrete above a regular flat arch to carry the load of the bricks above.

**Segmental Arch**
Creates a visually appealing opening with fancy brickwork pattern above it. Suited to openings not to be covered by shutters.
Semi Circular Arch
Another great solution to add to the aesthetic of door and window openings, especially when shutters will not be used.

Corbelled Arch
An easy to construct alternative that requires no formwork and very little modification to the regular brick courses.

Fig. 52. Range of cost saving techniques used by Baker to span openings in various projects. These solutions, have become a signature element of low cost construction in modern India.
Fig. 53. Perforated walls (jaalis) serve functions of windows at a fraction of the cost.
Climate as opportunity
Local climate is a crucial actor in Laurie Baker’s buildings. He rejected as wasteful and inappropriate the modern approach of making climate protected boxes which are artificially maintained at constant internal comfort conditions through the year.

Baker’s buildings let in daylight in carefully planned quantities to provide lighting without excess heat, allow daily winds and even cyclones to pass through without damaging the structure, use the microclimatic effects of site vegetation, and orient themselves to make the most of morning and evening conditions.

“… we should remind ourselves that it is not ‘Advancement’ or ‘Development’ or ‘Progress’ to indulge in modern building materials and techniques at tremendous expenses and at no good effect when there is no justification or reason for their use, instead of older, simpler, inexpensive methods.”


Honesty of material

“How wonderful it will be when our architects and engineers combine the lessons learned from our own traditional building styles with the honest undisguised use of our regionally plentiful, inexpensive materials.”

- Laurie Baker (1974)

The master architect saw India’s varied landscapes as a source of inspiration. He believed in using materials sourced locally, and enjoyed displaying them in their natural states, with the inherent imperfections adding to the experience.

Instead of being a force that needs to be overcome to create habitable spaces, the elements enter the buildings and create effects that are beautiful, yet disappointingly absent in conventional contemporary architecture. Just the perforated jaali walls which create impressive light and shade effects, give glimpses of the surroundings, let in cooling breezes and reduce building costs are prove that working with, and not against, climate can be rewarding.

As many of these materials are extracted, processed, manufactured or prepared by unskilled and semi skilled labourers, his buildings also supported local enterprises. They are thus examples of positive social impact from architecture.

By using one visual language for a specific site condition, irrespective of whether it was for an affluent family house, a cyclone rehabilitation scheme for tribal populations or a computer institute, Baker also managed to make irrelevant India’s socio-economic divisions in his work.

Much of this stems from the close study of older techniques from an era when buildings were at the mercy of nature. That the intentions from the past have successfully transitioned to a modern architectural language proves the potential that exists if one is ready to experiment.

Laurie Baker’s projects and writings continue to be appreciated and are a source of inspiration for a new generation of socially driven Indian architects and builders.
POLICING URBAN FORM:
CHENNAI DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS

The Chennai development regulations, published by the development authority, provide rules for planning buildings in Chennai. While the intentions behind regulating built form are for the most part laudable, they often result in urban environments that are unattractive and beneficial only to a select few.

Chennai masterplan
The Development Regulations, forming part of the Chennai Masterplan document published by the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA, 2008), provide rules for new buildings in Chennai. The maximum building heights, setbacks from plot boundaries, built up area, plot coverage and special regulations around rain water harvesting some of the key features included.

Urban design by regulation
As urban design in the modern sense, involving conscious design of streets, public spaces and the built form around them, is non-existent in Chennai, the development regulations end up shaping the city in unexpected ways. The intention is to ensure minimum standards of daylight, natural ventilation, accessibility, open space etc. Many of these regulations, like the ones that specify that all parking must be provided within the plot, prevent macro level challenges, but ignore the local qualities.

The street experience
Provisions in the development regulations are based on the modernist view of a building as a tower in a park. The resultant city, a collection of individual structures within plots, cannot be further from what is found in the older parts of Chennai, both in areas which were villages before the city was founded, and in the old town from the colonial times. Buildings are placed next to each other and at the street boundary, with open spaces finding form as private courtyards. That these areas are also the most vibrant and pedestrian friendly is obviously not a coincidence.

Need for a rethink
Even a cursory look at the areas built over the last decades proves that the imposed typology fares poorly. People end up flouting the regulations and bringing their shops and homes to the street front anyway, resulting in chaos on the streets. Regulations that do not consider the actual lived experience, and ignore a culture of building based on optimization and improvisation, hence need to be re-imagined.

Some of the undesirable impacts of current regulations on lived urban experience, and possible ways of overcoming them by holistic urban design, are discussed here.
Fig. 54. A road in the Eri Scheme locality, the site for this project, where recently built apartment complexes from the state are easily identifiable by the lack of street life around them.

Fig. 55. A well dimensioned sidewalk on the 36 m wide main road in Mogappair continues to see minimal use as the walls and parking behind make for a poor pedestrian experience.

Uninteresting streets as a result of regulations that result in isolated ground floors in buildings.
Permitted Form
Residential on two floors, with setback on all sides, with dimensions of the open space depending on street width and plot extent.

Permitted and Popular Form
Entire ground floor, reserved for parking, with residential on upper floors. Preferred especially in redevelopment of single family housing plots into multi family buildings with 4-8 apartments.

Alternative Form
Built mass moved to street front and one side of the plot, with large open court accessible from the street.

Fig. 56. Regulation for ordinary residential buildings (p. 22 of Chennai Development Regulations) applied to small retail building on 224 sq m plot abutting a 12 m wide mainly residential street.
**Advantages**
A more usable open space allows for parking if necessary, but also areas for children to play and the adults to hang out away from the street. The possibilities for gardening are also better in this solution.

**Drawbacks**
Narrow setbacks ensure daylight and ventilation in rooms, but create difficult to use strips of open space sandwiched between the building and the boundary wall. They end up being used only as parking and passageways.

**Drawbacks**
Residential neighbourhoods start feeling like parking zones as more single family houses are converted to small apartment blocks. High walls are punctuated only by large gates to let in cars, making walking unattractive.
Fig. 57. Regulation for ordinary commercial buildings (p. 24 of Chennai Development Regulations) applied to small retail building on 224 sq m plot abutting a 12 m wide mainly residential street.

**Permitted Form**
Stores on ground and first floor, with parking in cramped spaces around or on street, blocking views of the merchandise.

**Permitted and Popular Form**
Entire ground floor, reserved for customers’ parking, with stores on upper floors.

**Alternative Form**
Built mass divided in two and placed on either side of an open space with car access.
**Drawbacks**
The narrow set backs prevent usage of the open spaces in the plot as anything more than onsite parking and passageways to reach different stores in the building. The cramped spaces can also be challenging to high footfalls.

**Drawbacks**
Valuable street level frontage and possibility to attract customers is lost to parking. While easy access to this facility can make it convenient for some customers, the damage it causes to a vibrant and pedestrian friendly street cannot be ignored.

**Advantages**
More frontage and space to display directly to the street is the main feature. A semi private court between two building masses allows air movement and makes it possible for onsite parking away from the street, while also accommodating outdoor activities like sales and markets without requiring more built area. The part at the rear of the site can be used for offices or retail which needs distance from the street.
Permitted Form
4 floors of apartments with more generous setbacks than for independent houses.

Permitted and Popular Form
Entire ground floor, reserved for parking, with 4 floors of apartments above, and each apartment getting 1 covered and possible open parking.

Alternative Form
Temporary partitions on ground floor to make use of empty parking spots during the day.

Fig. 58. Regulation for special buildings (p. 34 of Chennai Development Regulations) applied to apartment block with 12 dwelling units on a 660 sq m abutting an 18 m wide road.
**Advantages**
If providing parking within the plot without building expensive basements is a must, one can at least use the car spots for other activities during the day when most cars are parked elsewhere. These could include small outlets for home-based entrepreneurs, services like ironing and small appliance repair, temporary play areas for children etc.

**Drawbacks**
While the minimum required setbacks are larger in this typology, the higher building makes the open spaces feel narrow and difficult to use. Parking along the boundary wall is quite common in this instance, defeating the purpose of having private open space within the plot.

While parking is provided without the builder losing buildable area, the negative effects on street life cannot be ignored. The pedestrian experience is very poor, as all one sees are parked cars behind high gates. The possibility for interesting solutions for ground level retail, living and work is also lost.
OLD, NOT OUTDATED: INSIGHTS FROM VERNACCULAR ARCHITECTURE

Tamil Nadu, the state where Chennai is located, has a continuous, centuries old tradition of settlement planning and dwelling design. While all the concepts may not be directly usable in today’s challenging urban situations, some of the solutions can serve as a model for efficient, context sensitive design.

Settlement structure
The traditional Tamil town was organised around the temple, which was the largest structure and main public building, comprising easily identifiable entrance towers over concentric enclosures. The towns were planned to capitalize on site features like local wind patterns and river access. Streets were either parallel or perpendicular to the temple boundary. Public activities were placed in the streets closer to the temple, and the town became increasingly residential further away. A key feature of most such settlements, including ones such as Mylapore and Triplicane which are today considered neighbourhoods in Chennai, is the large central tank.

Builtform for flexibility
Traditional dwellings in Tamil Nadu, irrespective of the affluence of the family, follow a similar pattern. The thinnai, a semi open buffer space that divides street and the private spaces is an important feature present even in the simplest one room dwelling. The courtyard, placed beyond the main door that separates the thinnai from the private spaces is the central area around which all other rooms are organized. Larger and wealthier families often had houses with more courtyards, and spread over more than one floor. Rooms are small and are often used for storage, with most activities happening in the courtyards and the open corridors around them. This dwelling form allows for a variety of flexible spaces with varying levels of privacy and weather exposure. One space is often used for many purposes based on the time of the day and year, and a seemingly compact unit can accommodate both work and home related space requirements of many family members.

Architecture for local climate
Local clay is an important material in the mud walls, brick masonry, tile roofs and terracotta floors. The porous material keeps built spaces free from damp. Wide roof overhangs protect the walls from heat and rain, while providing cool outdoor spaces for activities. The courtyard, often combined with doors opening to streets on either side, is a microclimate modifier that increases rate of air movement through the inhabitable spaces. It also supports the collection and storage of rainwater from the large sloped roofs.
The tank is centrally located and easily identifiable as an important public space, even when challenged by new urban developments around. Steps leading down to the water lend themselves well for informal meetings and for watching rituals and events on the water or tank bed. The main city street market often thrives around the tank as it is an area with heavy usage.

As is often the case in traditional Indian architecture, the tank’s utilitarian function of collecting rainwater becomes an attraction, thanks to its conscious design. The combination of a large open space with an important public building results in unexpected new activities springing up around. This potential for organic and growth from a kickstarter project is fascinating.
The thinnai is a platform under the roof overhang which separates the private areas of the house from the street. Its complexity depends on the owner’s affluence, but all variations aim to support engagement with the public realm. The climate in the thinnai is a comfortable middle between the hot outdoors and stuffy indoors, making it a popular hang out for all ages.

This unique space is great for spontaneous interactions with strangers and acquaintances. Morning discussions with coffee, evening preparation of vegetables for dinner, afternoon playtime with the neighbours are all easily observable even today in streets where thinnais dominate. It is a fantastic supporting space for both street and home during larger events.
The courtyard is the nucleus of the traditional family house. It is the major source of light and ventilation, and a useful expansion of the house when the need arises. Open galleries surround it, and lead to the smaller rooms. In a setting where furniture is uncommon, it becomes even more versatile as all one needs is a selection of floor covers to change the use of the space.

Gardening, hosting performances, feeding wedding guests, raising animals, celebrating festivals, washing utensils, making handicrafts, praying, cooking for feasts and drying grain are only some of the activities that usually occur in the courtyard. The fact that it is only used by one family encourages even domestic activities like dining and sleeping to occur in the open.
Onsite Observations

ROOMS WITHOUT WALLS: LEARNING FROM THE EVERYDAY CITY

Chennai streets are home to a variety of sellers and service providers. Despite their occasional reputation as contributors to pedestrians’ inconvenience in the chaotic city, they provide unique lessons in site sensitive shaping of space for bringing people together without leaving permanent footprints.

Small structures that dot open spaces in Chennai, like the streetsides, beaches and sometimes even parkfronts, are an irre- placeable feature of the informal city. They take many forms, and offer goods and services that are otherwise unavailable, while defining space in unconventional ways. Examples include tender coconut shops on the beachfront, shoe repair cab- inets on sidewalks etc. There is a lot to be learnt from these structures about design for ephemerality, flexibility and efficiency. Some structures, studied in Chennai in January 2015, are presented here.

Ephemerality
Thanks to unclear status for such struc- tures in the formal planning framework, and authorities’ changing opinion about their desirability in the cityscape, they are built to be easily moved when such a situation arises. While vendor carts are by far the easiest to transport, even the more permanent seeming eatery kiosks and tea stalls follow a construction logic that makes sure the owner doesn't lose when it is time to relocate. The continued pres- ence of these in the same location, over a few days or weeks, ends up making up for the unpredictability that might challenge retaining of regular patrons.

Flexibility
Ease of use for different activities is a characteristic of most of these structures. The carts are made to accommodate a range of goods, from fruits to plastic wares. The kiosks can serve anything from newspapers to take away dinners. The systemisation of their fabrication by local workshops results in basic frames that are readily customised to intended function, with diverse visual and spatial effects within a set assembly logic. The structures can also be combined in convenient ways, as in the case of the cabinets, where stor- age units of different sizes can together define a space and support an activity.

Efficiency
As space, especially in public areas, is at a premium in Chennai, and occupying it comes with numerous practical challenges, such structures are built to maximise facil- ities with minimal footprint. In addition, they are often built from reused or re- imagined elements, such as bicycle wheels and packing crates, to keep costs low.
Crowd Pulling Content

Features
The simple presence of a large number of items, especially seasonal tender coconuts and water melons, or festival related terracotta pots and clay idols, creates a strong visual statement on the streetscape. The periodic rise and fall in demand results in the occupied space constantly changing in size. A regular cycle of this (re)appropriation bestows a certain predictability.

Possible Application
Enough space in a location where people pass regularly and will stop to take notice, without their movement being hindered, is all that is needed. Such settings can support short term, occasional activities such as street theatre, open air music and communal festival celebrations, that require little physical modification of the space before or after their occurrence.
Protective Tarpaulin

Features
In a city with unbearably warm weather for most of the year, punctuated by short but unpredictable wet spells, a waterproof shade is often the bare minimum to create shelter. The tarps that dot Chennai often protect valuable goods from weather damage, and offer the users a refuge when it becomes absolutely necessary. A doll maker’s streetside workshop is shown here.

Possible Application
Activities that need basic weather protection over part of the space are best served by the tarp. Examples include community gardens, semi open meeting spaces, outdoor reading rooms, and open air gyms. The light weight and flexibility of the material also allows for it to be kept rolled up during good weather and used to cover spaces only during intense sun or rain.
Self Contained Cabinet

**Features**
Popular among service providers such as motorcycle mechanics (pictured), bicycle technicians, cobbler​s and locksmiths who prefer their tools safely locked away overnight, the cabinet also advertises the space available for servicing one’s belongings. Its capacity and complexity vary with type of use, along with the consequent area it ends up defining in open configuration.

**Possible Application**
The cabinet lends itself to temporary activities that need a certain amount of supporting materials and free space to happen. Examples include presentations, skill demonstrations and awareness campaigns. The compact form factor allows the materials to stay on site without hindering other activities, while still announcing the potential that exists.
Activated Boundary Wall

Features
A small shed, of a couple square meters area, breaks the monotony of blank boundary walls, without occupying valuable pedestrian space or affecting the private property behind it. The local “tea stall” selling hot/cold beverages, and small eateries, with up to 10 customers around them, end up creating a small yet vibrant public space when housed this way.

Possible Application
Any activity that requires secure storage space and delivery of materials across a counter can occupy the shed-in-a-wall. The activity should not have more than around 10 users at the same time. Examples are street library, tools hire station, and handicraft store. The shed can double up as an interesting visual element in the streetscape in its closed position.
Conspicuous Kiosk

Features
Kiosks span the entire gamut of complexity and visual appearance, from the low tech steel tube and sheet metal structure (pictured here), to high end affairs with their own cooking facilities for preparing street food. In settings where kiosks have to compete for the same customers on a streetside, design becomes crucial, with bolder and brighter often doing better.

Possible Application
Recognisable appearance of kiosks can be harnessed to locate crucial common facilities at regular intervals on the site. Examples are toilets, bicycle service stations and device recharge points. Off the grid solutions are especially interesting to explore with kiosks. They can also be designed as wayfinding elements that lead people to more conventional spaces.
Transient Table

**Features**
The light and easily dismantlable plastic table, often accompanied by a bright umbrella, is a familiar sight at parks and beaches in the mornings. It few hours long presence creates a place for morning walkers and joggers to wind down over healthy juices and beverages. The entire setup completely disappears on a motorcycle or autorickshaw post operation.

**Possible Application**
Small scale activities for groups of two or more people are best served by this type. Placing tables at different locations can immediately enable casual meetings, flexible work and even group dining. The ability to dismantle and relocate with ease makes for interesting space division when used in quantity over large open spaces for supporting temporary events.
Movable Cart

Features
The cart is an adaptable platform for sale of anything that can fit on it, from house plants to toys. They are moved to vantage points based on demand through the day, and are often seen standing on the edges of busy roads or pushed around along inner residential streets. Their mobility allows them to not obstruct smooth flow of people and vehicles during peak hours.

Possible Application
Any temporary activity, which attracts at least a small crowd of users, can benefit from auxiliary facilities brought to site on carts. For example, a meeting held in a semi open space can be supported by refreshments on carts for a couple of hours. The portability allows for resource efficiency and releases space that would otherwise be taken up permanently.
6 of the 9 conversations were held in Mogappair and the neighbouring Anna Nagar.
CONVERSATIONS: INPUTS FROM YOUNG CHANGEMAKERS

A series of conversations with Chennai residents in their 20s, from architecture as well as other backgrounds, was conducted. The informal discussions happened in public and private spaces, which were not necessarily designed keeping such discussions in mind, to discover the importance of atmosphere.

Process
Conversations were structured around topics of interest for this project, from the role of youth in Indian politics to challenges in bringing people together in public space. They took place on site in the second half of January 2015. The 11 participants who were involved in the 9 discussions were not informed about the topics beforehand. They were asked to choose venues themselves, so as to understand meeting space preferences among young Chennaiites. Key findings are presented in a visual language in the chapter, alongside information on the settings, the spaces and the participants.

Participants
The participants represent a mix of young people in urban India who are passionate about social change. They are at different stages of taking this further in their work, ranging from career changes to teaching, to still being unsure about taking online activism into the real world. Each one of them is familiar with the author, which allowed for more open conversations about what are often personal and sensitive topics for general discussion in India.

Topics
1) Opinion about and involvement in conventional party based politics
2) Involvement in modern, alternative and impact focused politics
3) Role of today’s youth in this context
4) Importance of democratic meetings for participation in civic life
5) Availability of public spaces for groups of youngsters to meet for social change
6) Gender issues when using currently available public spaces
7) Desired facilities within and activities around new public spaces
8) Challenges in running such shared public spaces

Findings
Participants were as disinterested in mainstream politics, as they were excited about youth getting interested in social change. Lack of proper spaces to meet was felt to varying degrees. Women are more cautious about unfamiliar organizations and spaces due to safety issues. A range of facilities and activities seems to be needed. Maintenance of shared space seems to be a recurring concern. Many suggested a small scale start to ensure success.
Politics is full of corruption, making it unattractive.

Armchair activism on social media is popular with youth.

One hears a lot about social change organisations on the radio. It can be a crucial ally as **it is important to spread awareness about the space**.

We don’t need a landmark. A simple space will do. Four columns and a slab. A mosquito mesh all around. A bit of privacy.

Not much is required. Drinking water. Food can be brought by users.

Need for built space is unpredictable in our context. **Keep goals real, start small, and build up slowly.**
“As a designer, I believe even a very basic space is good enough. The iconic presence of railway stations and other large landmark buildings is not even required. The architecture shouldn’t become a symbol and overpower the actual action. Such drowning would go against the intended purpose.”

The setting
Elliot’s Beach is a popular hang out for youngsters, thanks to easy access from a number of educational institutions in the vicinity, reasonably good public transport access and ample parking. The neighbourhood is one of the more expensive areas of the city, but the easily accessible beach keeps the user group quite diverse.

The space
The water’s edge is buzzing with activity in the evenings. The mornings are a little calmer, with residents from the neighbourhood visiting for a short while before beginning the work day, sharing space with fishermen. The waves and wind presented challenges for hearing each other, but otherwise the space was fine for conversation. One did however have to consider the possibility of being overheard, especially while discussing politics which can often be a sensitive topic.

The person(s)
Subash is an architect and interior designer who has lived in Chennai since 2005. He is also an avid graphic design enthusiast and animator, and has helped a number of startups find a visual identity and reach their audience. His animated shorts encourage the viewer to look at everyday phenomena from a fresh perspective.

The conversation
The relevance of politics to youth today, and how it could be made more interesting and convenient for more of them to engage was discussed. The need for scale sensitive and context specific design was emphasized from an architect’s perspective. A very simple space that does not overpower the activities it supports was suggested. Avenues to spread awareness about meeting spaces for youth run organisations, and strategies to grow incrementally were also talked about.
Voting once in 5 years. **25 million** members of political parties just in our state. I am frustrated like most people. Increasing literacy is extremely important in India. Many youth organisations are doing this.

Private residences, local parks, wedding halls and the beach are used for meetings.

Good connectivity to the space is a must in a mega city like Chennai.

Financial considerations affect youngsters’ ability to participate in social change.

Temporary spaces are great for meetings. If the available space does not meet requirements, just put one up for the duration of the event.

We need to spread awareness. About our rights guaranteed in the constitution.

Institutions and large corporates can get involved by lending meeting facilities.

Extensive local networks are a prerequisite for success in our context.

A lot of such meeting spaces are required. The challenge is to keep them in use when the meetings don’t occur.
“Youth who have family support, with resources and networks to spare, are the ones who are able to succeed with organizations already when they are 23 – 24 years old. But if there was a clearer system for running and participating in social initiatives, more people will definitely get involved.”

The setting
The beachfront promenade abuts the popular Elliot’s beach located in a relatively affluent part of Chennai. The road, with premium eating establishments targeting the upwardly mobile youth on one side, and street-side eateries and informal fish markets on the other side, is representative of economic disparity in the city.

The space
The walkway which divides the road and the sandy beach is one of few areas in the city that is designed with pedestrian welfare in mind. It is popular stretch for the neighbours’ daily morning walks and runs. Little shops serving refreshments to these beach regulars punctuate the linear path. The place doubled up as a great public space for conversations, save for the fact that the weather was a little too warm even early in the morning in January. The cars parked nearby were an eyesore.

The person(s)
Balachandar is an architect who went on to study space science in France. He has taught building construction at university level, and been instrumental in building up a couple of young architecture practices in Chennai. He has a keen eye for detail, and continues to mix design on earth with design for space.

The conversation
The frustrations of a typical concerned citizen, combined with challenges faced by youth in the middle income groups who attempt to work on social change were highlighted. Comparisons between the situation in Europe and in India, with respect to availability of space, nature of meetings and issues that gain precedence were fascinating. The possibilities offered by temporary spaces which could be put up and dismantled based on the event’s needs were explored as a real alternative.
Noise levels often make the spaces available today unsuitable for serious meetings. One doesn't want to disturb or be disturbed.

3 possibilities exist for meetings. Cafes, institutions lending spaces to trusted organisations, and the newly established shared offices.

Lots of wall space to pin up. A board to write.

A large space with some smaller areas. The space should have all the basics taken care of, so the meeting can be productive.

Food at or near the premises.

We need to take better care of our commons. Cleaning and maintenance could be a big challenge.

People are willing to pay for a space that enables an efficient and fruitful meeting. The focus should be on that.

Newspapers help stay up to date with the political happenings. Hunger for power is rampant.
“There is definitely a drastic change. Youth are far more political now. People are tired of the way society is run, are stuck in a rut with what they thought were dream jobs, and want to do something they find meaningful. And that often ends up being something that helps change society.”

The setting
The restaurant is located in Mogappair, the area that is under focus in this project. The predominantly middle income neighbourhood had the normal levels of activity on the street for a weekday. A bunch of young men chatting, middle aged people walking in the park nearby, people shopping for groceries on their way home etc.

The space
The restaurant had a regular weekday evening level of operation, with about half the tables empty. It was very convenient to have the meeting there, save for regular disruption from the food being ordered and served. The topics did not have to be tempered, and street noise was next to non existent despite the space being on the ground floor. The only disadvantage was the conversation had to be continued outside on the street past the restaurant’s closing time at 22 30.

The person(s)
Kamalesh is an educationist who is involved in improving the learning experience for school going children in India. Previously, he had stints in a few tech startups, before a two year fellowship as a primary school teacher with Teach for India, where he worked with children from economically weaker sections.

The conversation
The power hungry politician narrative was offered as a reason for youngsters’ disinterest. Experiences as a member of one of India’s most widespread social change organizations, Teach for India, were discussed. The crucial factors that such groups, as well as young startups, look for in meeting spaces were elaborated on. The lack of respect and responsibility for collectively owned commons was presented as a hurdle any new space looking to serve the common cause would have to address.
Social media has made the youth get more involved in issues affecting society.

There is still only so much liking and sharing can achieve. Old school protests are a lot better.

Even the simplest of structures is very popular for meeting and working together today.

Free Wi-fi and power outlets are a first step to get youngsters interested.

A space with good variety and relationship between activities. Eg: Childcare would attract families and secure the space for women.

A certain amount of access restriction is a must to ensure the purpose is served.

Misuse, more than under-use, for antisocial activities needs to be prevented.

Responsibility for cleaning and maintenance will be crucial.

Suitable natural and artificial lighting.

Connectivity to attract a range of age groups.

Water at least, and preferably food.

Comfortable furniture.

Parking in Chennai remains difficult. Offer that and you get users.
“I believe we as architects need to find a way to make ourselves useful. I definitely believe there is a big disconnect between what we do and the rest of society. We act like we live in our own world, and that the general public cannot understand, let alone appreciate, our work.”

The setting
The residence was in Anna Nagar, a higher and upper middle income group neighborhood. Cars were parked on either side of the street, with little to no street life to speak of in front of the high walls and heavy gates. Trees and the occasional security personnel outside some of the houses made the area feel comfortable.

The space
As it was a large private residence of a joint family, spread over 3 floors, the space available at our disposal for the conversation was more than adequate. The guest host dynamic was at play though, with one sharing in the family’s dinner while discussing the various topics. There was nothing affecting the content of the meeting, but the duration had to be restricted so as to allow the family, including the child, to get enough rest after a typical long and tiring day at work and at home.

The person(s)
Sindhu and Prashanth juggle running a young family and an upcoming architecture practice, while pitching in with the family’s hotel business. They have years of experience living in Chennai and working with people from a range of backgrounds. They are keen advocates of good design as a tool to create positive user experiences.

The conversation
The role of architects in contemporary Indian society, especially youngsters who are looking to contribute to social change, formed a big part of the discussions. The challenges to wider awareness about what architecture can do were touched upon. The potential that exists among youngsters today, which often remains untapped due to structural inefficiencies within academia and practice were seen as one of the reasons a lot of people who want to enable change are not able to.
Representative democracy doesn’t work like it should. Local issues are almost never discussed by candidates.

It is challenging for a newcomer to join an existing organization.

Network and finances make social change initiatives easier to run for affluent youngsters.

Roof terraces have always been hotspots for Chennai youth.

Access and legibility are must haves.

A range of refreshments to meet user preferences.

Good stationery and lots of wall space to make mind maps and so on.

The space doesn’t need to be very elaborate. People run successful startups from their living rooms these days.

A board to pen down thoughts.

Chance encounters and unplanned collaborations are possible in a shared meeting space. Better outcomes and more impact could ensue.

Convincing users to use the space could be challenging. People want to save money and effort.
“One constraint could be convincing people that a space is needed. A lot, even among youth, seems to happen in a very chaotic way. People don’t seem to care about creating a nice space. There is a lot of indifference. People want things to be simple and easy.”

The setting
The standalone cafe in Anna Nagar was in a livelier area than the residence mentioned earlier. Metro construction work in the arterial road nearby caused more traffic than is usual in the locality. The coming of a number of small commercial establishments has resulted in a very busy street scene over the last half decade.

The space
Youngsters of school and college going age were present in considerable numbers in the cafe, which is usual on a Saturday evening. The presence of partitions and smaller spaces prevented interference in the conversation. Save for the occasional interruptions by the wait staff, the space was extremely well suited for discussion. The inability to accommodate groups larger than 4-6 people comfortably would however be a big disadvantage if it were used for more than just one-on-one talk.

The person(s)
Suhasini is an avid proponent of equal rights for oppressed groups, with a special focus on women’s rights. She has an engineering degree from Chennai and studied sustainable development at the master’s level in Sweden. A keen interest in positive social change keeps her engaged with the volunteering scene in Chennai.

The conversation
The rise of social responsibility and involvement with social change organisations as a trend among the urban youth, especially those with good finances and strong local networks, was stressed upon. The barriers that prevent socially driven young people from giving their best in the current scenario were highlighted. Difficulties in translation of armchair activism on social media to actual work on the ground with measurable social impact were also presented as an issue.
Online activism has made a difference, but it remains difficult to get youth together in the real world.

Online platforms have revolutionised community gatherings. We have learned to use them efficiently.

New concepts for social spaces are coming up. Sports cafes for instance.

Professional childcare is now a popular service at work and recreational spaces.

A computer and projector if needed for professionals.

Movie watching possibilities for small groups.

Gaming for teenagers and enthusiasts.

Comfortable furniture.

Food is very important as a social connector in our context.

Board games for all age groups.

Art displays for the adults.

Pet-care.

A variety of activities to attract different age groups will keep the space active even outside meeting hours.

Convenience is key. The youth want ease of use. An app to book and use spaces would change the way we approach the idea.

Different packages, with increasing levels of service, can be offered in the same space to attract diverse clientele.
Online activism has made a difference, but it remains difficult to get youth together in the real world. Online platforms have revolutionised community gatherings. We have learned to use them efficiently.

Professional childcare is now a popular service at work and recreational spaces. New concepts for social spaces are coming up. Sports cafes for instance. A computer and projector if needed for professionals. Movie watching possibilities for small groups. Comfortable furniture. Gaming for teenagers and enthusiasts. Pet-care. Art displays for the adults. Food is very important as a social connector in our context. Board games for all age groups. A variety of activities to attract different age groups will keep the space active even outside meeting hours.

Convenience is key. The youth want ease of use. An app to book and use spaces would change the way we approach the idea. Different packages, with increasing levels of service, can be offered in the same space to attract diverse clientele.

The increasing importance of social media in driving groups that bring strangers together around shared interests was mentioned as an important phenomenon. The necessity to have inclusive spaces that are attractive to people from diverse economic backgrounds, as well as a variety of age groups, in order to create a vibrant public space was addressed. The challenges a young professional faces in balancing work, social life and family life in a mega city was also presented as a key issue.

“The social definitions are definitely very strong. A person in a car visiting a streetside eatery is very rare. Some exceptions exist. The youth are definitely a lot less bothered by the social divisions these days. Experiences are being valued over status. We do need some time to break down those barriers.”

The setting
The area around the cafe which was first planned to be the venue was extremely noisy, thanks to a local residents’ association taking up street space to hold a prize giving ceremony. This caused us to shift to a bakery a couple of blocks away. Traffic was heavy and the street full of people, even though it was a national holiday.

The person(s)
Sharanya is an entrepreneur, food critic and engineer. She is active in the Chennai Food Guide community, a group that celebrates food, attempts to build a positive social culture around eating, and organizes events that bring people together. Sharanya juggles work for CFG with a full time job and a daily commute across Chennai.

The space
The space was far quieter than expected. There were fewer customers than usual, probably because schools were closed that day, and since a number of such cafes, bakeries and other hangout spaces targeting youngsters in the Mogappair area have come up in the past 5 years. Conversation was a breeze and there was no limit to the length of time either as the number of patrons was limited. The street noise did affect the ambiance though, but was not bad enough to impede discussion.

The conversation
The increasing importance of social media in driving groups that bring strangers together around shared interests was mentioned as an important phenomenon. The necessity to have inclusive spaces that are attractive to people from diverse economic backgrounds, as well as a variety of age groups, in order to create a vibrant public space was addressed. The challenges a young professional faces in balancing work, social life and family life in a mega city was also presented as a key issue.
Newspapers aren’t always simple enough to understand the political situation.

Cycling in Chennai is next to impossible. Both physical and social context prevent it.

The gender ratio in public spaces, and especially in outdoor activities, is extremely skewed in our city. Women often feel uncomfortable.

Clean toilets are a necessity in Chennai.

Projectors and other equipment not a must.

Simple shaded area to meet. Even walls are unnecessary.

Activities for kids and healthy food so women feel comfortable coming.

Good libraries are sorely needed and will attract more than just readers.

Vandalism is a threat that cannot be ignored. Even rugged bus shelters are not left alone. The space should still feel welcoming.

Possibility for physical activity in our neighbourhood will be a definite crowd puller. One cannot drive 5 km to train everyday.

The online generation is breaking old barriers and choosing alternative careers within social change. It is heartening to see.

Juggling family and social activism in the limited time available after work is a herculean task.
“We definitely need a lot more public spaces. We have very exclusive spaces like music venues where the clientele is restricted to connoisseurs. We need more public spaces where different groups can coexist. If that becomes the norm, not everybody will blindly chase a stressful modern lifestyle.”

The setting
The conversation happened in the Eri Scheme locality in Mogappair, the site of the local scale interventions in this project. The extremely calm sand silent streets did not feel uninviting, thanks to visible and audible activity within the houses. A few shops that have come up in recent years helped create a mix in the residential area.

The space
As the space was a residence, many of the usual challenges, such as cost, duration and noise were not issues at all. It was perfect for long discussions, though having more than three people would have been a challenge. The mosquito menace in the locality proved to be a problem later in the evening, causing some distraction. One concern was that the talking should not end up waking up the neighbours, as the area was extremely silent after 10 pm and the houses are built next to each other.

The person(s)
Kamali and Srinivethan are engineers by training. They are passionate about cycling in cities, physical activity in contemporary urban life, volunteering for education and cleanliness initiatives, among others. They are involved with a newly founded tech startup that aims to harness technology to tackle uniquely Indian challenges.

The conversation
Society’s reluctance to accept new ideas, such as a culture of biking in cities, a fascination for startups rather than secure careers, and even the presence of more women in public space were discussed in some detail. The lack of avenues for expression in neighbourhoods, especially through physical activity, and the results it has on the public sphere was also highlighted. The potential offered by flexible spaces to address the current lack of social infrastructure was a key topic in the talk.
A combination of indoor and outdoor areas, with movable partitions for different types of meetings will be great.

Daylight and good natural ventilation can go a long way.

Good waste management at the venue is a must have.

Most facilities can be arranged by event organisers. A **good sound system** is important.

Reasonably priced **food** can be convenient.

**Parking** is challenging with larger meetings. Carpooling could be encouraged.

A system for **proper maintenance** has to exist.

The **basics need to be thought through** before building up the project. A good start and slow expansion will do wonders.

The space should have other uses so it is active outside the in-demand weekends and late evenings.

**Representative democracy** doesn’t work like it should. Local issues are almost never discussed by candidates.

**Recruiting volunteers** with long term commitment to a cause remains a big challenge for organisations.

**Young women** are far more interested in spending their free time on social causes than young men.

**Politicians** are intent on creating publicity around themselves and their project, and ignore lived experience of the citizens.

**Environmental awareness** is often poor.

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“People seem to want social change as quickly as new technology is being invented. It is like planting a tree. You dig the earth, plant a seed, pray for rain and hope something good happens for somebody later on. The interest is definitely very big, but involvement is not necessarily there.”

The setting
The conversation was planned to take place at a streetside eatery in another relatively busy part of Anna Nagar. That proved impossible thanks to a lot of customers occupying the nonexistent sidewalk, and considerable noise from vehicles. We then had to shift to a cafe a couple of blocks away, which was calmer.

The space
The cafe is part of a national chain, which was mentioned by many participants as the most popular locations for youngsters to meet across the city. The sofas and other furniture were comfortable for longer conversations and work sessions. The users were engrossed in their own computers or conversations and were not bothered by us. The space was visually connected to the street, and yet well protected from the noise. An outdoor area in front was suited to causal chats before without the space.

The person(s)
Harikumar is a montessori teacher for 3 - 6 years old children. He was closely involved in various capacities with voluntary organisations working with underprivileged children in Chennai. In addition, he also has an engineering education and years of work experience within the information technology field.

The conversation
The young generation’s preference for immediate results, and the consequent impatience and lack of long term commitment when volunteering for social change organisations were presented from an insider’s perspective. The challenges associated with conducting meetings and getting projects realized in a context of a large city, long working hours, unpredictable schedules and ambiguous access to resources were discussed. The importance of starting small and strong was stressed.
Our civic sense needs to be better. We don’t even take care of our private spaces well. **Public spaces need to be collectively cared for.**

An **inspiring space** that stimulates creative thought.

**Wifi** and comfortable spaces to access it from.

A small **selection of good books.**

**Projector** for larger presentations.

**Ability to play music.**

It is important to create a buzz around the space. **Something always needs to be happening.** People need to be familiar and look forward to using it.

The diversity in our country results in many points of view that often don’t match. Politicians try to navigate this complexity. Change cannot happen overnight.

Youth are involved in social activism. The state is starting to work together with non-state actors for positive change.

My involvement in politics is extremely limited. I don’t think my vote makes a big difference.

The design needs to be of **high quality.** A large space with smaller spaces for closer interaction.

One space won’t be enough. **Smaller offshoots spread out across the city** can work.
"Making a place people always want to go to is important. Our museums and libraries are examples of underused public spaces. If you could get people somehow always be there, you could end up with chance meetings and so on. You don’t want the space to be dead."

The setting
The Race Course Road in Coimbatore, a city a night’s ride away from Chennai, is a hot spot for upscale restaurants. Cars of patrons were parked along the busy street, and there was not much street life to speak of. A number of large trees gave a feeling of cosiness despite the traffic and the closed, uninviting facades of buildings.

The space
The restaurant was a on a smaller lane branching off from the main street, resulting in a very calm space without vehicular noise. There were next to no other patrons, which led to heavy attention from the wait staff and some disruptions to the conversation. The decor was inviting and resulted in a very comfortable feeling. It was a fantastic place to discuss, though a busier time of the day or week would have put more pressure to temper the topics and keep the talks short.

The person(s)
Smrithi is an associate architect in a successful mid-size architecture office. She lived in Chennai for decades, and now sees the situation there from an inside and outside point of view. She believes in the ability of high quality, well designed spaces to touch people. She is also an artist who works with a range of media.

The conversation
The necessity for collaboration between state and non state actors to achieve effective and long lasting social change was presented as an important concern. The need for a space that supports social change organisations to not only provide facilities, but also to be inviting and inspiring was highlighted. The challenges associated with having such spaces within accessible distance in a large city, without resulting in lack of patronage and consequent failure, were elaborated upon.
Wish going green was a lot more fun?

Let’s create an open source game to learn about planet friendly living!

A whole day of brainstorming and prototyping. We will make a fun game to spread the greener lifestyle at OSCEDays’ Chennai edition. See you there!

WHEN?
Sunday June 14, 10:00 am to 6:00 pm

WHERE?
Medai: The Think and Do Space
MIG 373, 3rd Cross Street
Mogappair Eri Scheme
Chennai 600037

Details and registration at https://goo.gl/3IDfuT

Poster that was shared on a number of digital platforms, to encourage participants from a wide range of backgrounds to come together for the one day design and prototyping event.
OSCEDAYS CHENNAI:
GREEN GAME MAKING DAY

OSCEdays (www.oscedays.org) is a global event that aims to create a circular economy through by freely sharing knowledge in an open source format. In June 2015, events took place in 33 cities around this theme. We conducted a one day board game making workshop in Chennai as part of the initiative.

The daylong event was an apt precursor to the longer and more elaborate CycleHack Chennai hackathon which happened a weekend later. A residential building in Mogappair Eri Scheme, the locality in Chennai that is the focus of this project, was temporarily converted into an event space named ‘Medai’ - Tamil for ‘platform’ or ‘stage’, a place for collaborative action.

OSCEdays Chennai saw participation of youngsters from design, technology and education. A collaborative board game, that children could use to learn about planet friendly living was co-created. The way flexible spaces support group activities, and the workings of a collaborative design process, proved valuable for further development of the project.

33 cities conducted events of varying duration and focus. Our Chennai event was a small but crucial part of global discussions around open source education on the circular economy.
The temporary event space was christened ‘medai’ - Tamil for platform or stage. A simple logo was made and a social media page setup to get the local community interested.

The living room and dining room of the house were converted into one informal work space. Design choices were made through conversations with some of the participants beforehand.

The re-imagination of a domestic space as a temporary public space, open to first time visitors as well, proved challenging. The aim to make it welcoming took some effort to achieve.
As suggested by some of the participants, the feel of the space was kept informal. Living room furniture was removed, and replaced by mats, carpets and cushions to sit on the floor.

A corner with drinking water, tea and simple refreshments proved popular. Books for inspiration, and stationery for prototyping were placed in an existing shelf, away from the main space.

Most furniture was removed, and using a combination of materials already available in the house, loans from participants and cheap purchases, the space was set up for the event.
The initial presentation was kept short to allow for more collaborative and interactive group work. Inputs from OSCEdays events in other cities like Helsinki, shared online, were valuable.

The group discussions were informal, and participants were able to express their views freely. This was mentioned later as something that is not usually possible in larger gatherings.

The space lent itself well to presentations and discussions involving the entire group or around 10 participants. Lack of furniture was a big help in managing to accommodate so many people.
While lack of furniture allowed for the space to also support other forms of group interactions, its suitability would have been better if it was a space designed for such happenings.

The workspace was also an eating area during the lunch break. This was far from idea despite everyone being used to eating on the floor, as the work could have been affected by spills.

Breaking up into smaller groups for more focused conversations became problematic, as the single space resulted in disturbances from overhearing other groups.
Results of the day-long workshop. A team of enthusiastic youngsters in their 20’s, who had never worked together before, managed to make a playable prototype of the board game.

Participants of OSCEdays Chennai 2015. Game enthusiasts, teachers, architects, artists and engineers were present.

The work in progress board game, where players collaborate to make planet friendly lifestyle choices, and thus collectively ensure the continued sustenance of our living environment.
Stage set to hone new ideas

When a few academics, architects and designers from across the city got together, it resulted in *Flip Flop*, a board game that teaches sustainable living and spreads environmental awareness. The idea for this game was conceived on the OSCEdays movement (June 11–15), which aims at promoting an open source circular economy, where knowledge about a circular system, in which waste does not exist and resources are used in an efficient and environment-friendly manner, is freely available. This concept inspired Arvind Ramachandran, an urban designer and architect, to start *Medhai* (meaning stage), a temporary event space to aid such meetings.

“We are currently based in an independent house in Mogappair. By conducting small-scale, local events like *CycleHack* and OSCEdays Chennai 2015 in an informal setting with around 20 participants, we hope to encourage collaborative thought and action around issues affecting everyday life in Chennai. While studying in Europe, I saw many such events and wanted to bring them to our city,” he smiles.

The board game is designed for eight to 12-year-olds and the nub of the game is that the player gets to make choices that will help the environment — whether to use a plastic bag or how to protect a lake from further pollution, for instance.

Hari Kumar V, a Montessori teacher explains, “The game is a collaborative experience and not a competitive one. The message is that if we work together we can make a difference. It will be introduced to school students by the year-end,” he concludes.

We hope to encourage collaborative thought and action around issues affecting everyday life in Chennai

_— ARVIND R_
Chennai = Beach!
Chennai = Bicycle?

Let’s make Chennai bicycle friendly!

A weekend of collaboration to generate ideas for removing barriers to bicycling in our city. Join us!

WHEN?
Saturday June 20, 10:00 am to Sunday June 21, 8:00 pm

WHERE?
Medai: The Think and Do Space
MIG 373, 3rd Cross Street
Mogappair Eri Scheme
Chennai 600037

Details and registration at http://goo.gl/MwFTeM

Poster with CycleHack Chennai logo designed by C. Subash, Chennai based architect, to reflect the unique urban environment that makes everyday cycling a challenge.
CYCLEHACK CHENNAI: REMOVING BARRIERS TO BICYCLING

CycleHack (www.cyclehack.com) is a global movement to reduce barriers to bicycling. In June 2015, 22 cities had weekend workshops to ideate, prototype and test ways to encourage cycling. Conducting the Chennai edition helped engage with locals, while revealing challenges in hosting small public events.

Preparation
Preparations for CycleHack Chennai began in April 2015, by establishing contact with Glasgow and Vancouver, where the global organisers are based. The initial online campaign with a logo, poster, social media page and ticket management page were up by May. By early June, local experts from the urban design and cycling communities, who could provide inputs to the participants, and judges for the concluding session, where participant groups’ proposals to improve cycling conditions would be discussed, had been invited.

Venue
Medai, a temporary event space which was already setup by us in an existing residence for the OSCEdays event a weekend earlier, played host to this event too. A longer public use helped understand the challenges in conducting an open event in a functioning family home. Substantial effort was required to move furniture, do up the walls, serve food, get materials for group work and arrange safe cycle parking. The effort that went into this could have been used on delivering a richer event, had a suitable public facility been available.

Participants
Around 12 participants, and 5 experts, took part in the two day event, with about half of them already familiar with the author. Everyone was either already cycling or extremely interested in starting to cycle regularly, whether they were architects, urban designers, product designers, engineers, artists, teachers, researchers, or doctors. Despite the group never having worked together before, quality output in the form of simple hacks to make cycling easier was created over the weekend.

Learnings
It was obvious that the final outcome could have been even better in a space better suited to a group event. Lack of familiarity with the venue kept the participant number lower than expected. Paucity of equipment for projection of presentations, scarcity of facilities to work with bicycles outside the main room and lack of good tools were felt. Conducting CycleHack Chennai still provided valuable firsthand inputs of what users desire in informal collaborative work spaces, and how they end up using such spaces for short durations of intense creative work.
CycleHack 2015 was conducted in 22 cities, spanning an entire spectrum of cycle usage, from Amsterdam to Beirut. Solutions generated are available at http://cyclehack.com/catalogue/.

Videos and reading material from CycleHack headquarters tied together the local editions, and helped participants understand the objectives of the weekend’s collaborative event.

Local challenges specific to Chennai, like the weather, traffic, street design, and road courtesy, were addressed while remaining connected to a global network of cycling enthusiasts.
Jaya Bharathi Bathmaraj, traffic planner from the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), presented her experiences working on a bicycle sharing system for Chennai.

Kamali Mohan, engineer and avid bicyclist, shared a collection of innovations that make cycling easier from across the world, which became departure points for the brainstorming later.

Short presentations helped punctuate the group working sessions, and injected inspiration into the participants’ solution for better cycling conditions in Chennai.
The living room, which was converted to a space for informal collaborative work, worked well when the group size was small and everyone was used to sitting on the floor to work.

Barriers to bicycling in Chennai were discussed and put up on a clothesline for everyone to discuss. Using the content to create the ambience was thus a successful attempt.

After the presentations, groups converged to the centre of the room to discuss and generate ideas together. Lack of furniture thus enhanced the flexibility of the space manifold.
Participants found ways to make the space work for the various smaller tasks that were part of the collaborative ideation and prototyping phases.

When actual testing on bicycles became necessary, the group had to relocate to the parking area downstairs. A closer inside/outside connection could have made it a better experience.

Bicycles were also brought up into the main work space for testing some solutions, which though not ideal but necessary in this context, ended up enlivening the space.
A range of contextual solutions were developed over the collaborative work weekend.
Bicycle Friendly Grocery Bag: A bag that will be usable by both pedestrians and cyclists, and will decrease motor vehicle use for short shopping trips within neighbourhoods.
Addition of a steel plate to newly installed bollards on sidewalks make them suitable for secure parking of cycles on the streetside.

The bollards can also serve the purpose of completely absent street furniture, allowing pedestrians to rest in the absence of a parked bicycle.

**Bollards 4 Bicycles:** Bollards adorn most of Chennai’s newly redone streets, to keep vehicles off sidewalks. This solutions will make the bollards to do double duty as bicycle parking poles.
Bicycle Parking @ Work: A modular solution for sequential conversion of covered car parking bays at workplaces into bicycle facilities. A sixfold decrease in space needed is achievable.

Parking Module: 8 bicycles minimum

Shower Module: 4 stalls (2 each)

Workshop Module: 5 bicycles + workbench

Locker Module: 20 lockers

Existing Car Module: 12.5 sq m for one car (often 1 person)
A local baking business was invited to provide thank you gifts to invited experts for the opening and concluding sessions. Chennai and cycling themed cupcakes added to the local feel.

Kamali Mohan, engineer and avid bicyclist, shared a collection of innovations that make cycling easier from across the world, which became departure points for the brainstorming later.

The final session where the solutions were discussed, and general conditions in Chennai for cycling were debated, lasted 2 hours and provided everyone a lot of valuable inputs.
The final session, where participants were joined by three doctors and an urban designer, all enthusiastic about cycling in Chennai, pushed the 25 sq m space to its capacity.

Final group discussions with invited experts, with solutions laid out on the floor. Not ideal, and yet another example of improvising with what the space had to offer.

The CycleHack Chennai team, with hosts, organisers and some of the participants. The event involved a considerable amount of planning, but the results were appreciated by everyone.
design approach based on minimal intervention in the existing urban fabric, through usage of residual and temporarily unused spaces, such as yet to be developed empty building plots, implementable over a sequential timeline of a few years as finances become available is a natural choice.

From the onsite work, it became obvious that a strategy specific to the unique conditions of a lack of public space, a pressing need for the same, and a parallel absence of resource to acquire land or build structures on acquired land, was necessary. Saltzman (2006) uses composting as a metaphor to discuss the relevance of temporary use of spaces in transition that are awaiting (re)development. The empty plots in the Eri scheme neighbourhood lend themselves well to such short term use, if they are seen as valuable open spaces, instead of just plots somebody will build on later. An approach based on flexibility, temporality, modularity, and resource efficiency hence becomes crucial to enable creative, collective reuse of space.
Architecture of sequential addition.

Possibilities for space without complete enclosure.
Defining spaces without walls.

Easy to assemble, disassemble, reassemble.
Flexible structure: Close, open, change, grow.

Framework: Open for user led modification

Spaces as connectors and destinations
Situation today: Streets and plots occupied by cars at ground level
Future condition: Pedestrian focussed ground level, creating vibrant public realm

Tomorrow?

PUBLIC FUNCTIONS (TEMP.)
ON EMPTY LOTS.

PUBLIC MEETING SPACES.
(TEMP PERMANENT/FLEX).
UNDER STILTS.

PUBLIC SPACES.
ON STREETSIDES.

PEDESTRIAN SHORUT.
BET. STREETS.
Fig. 62. ‘Anjara Petti’: Traditional spice box, a mainstay in Indian kitchens, enables near limitless taste combinations.

The proposed ‘toolbox’, offering similar mix-and-match possibilities, for collaborative and participatory design of small public spaces by local residents, to co-create a lively and inclusive urban environment.

Current condition of site, where the toolbox can be tested. 82 sqm middle income group plots with 1-3 storey houses. 32 empty plots (11% of total 284) are possible sites for public spaces.
TOOLBOX FOR COLLABORATIVE DESIGN: CATALYSING CITIZEN DRIVEN PUBLIC SPACES

A successful public realm can be realised when diverse stakeholders play an active role in shaping the very spaces they will use. To achieve a democratic design process, the conventional architect-client-user power division, and the design-present-object-approve process, need to be redefined.

For democracy, through democracy

The history of 20th century spatial design is proof that inclusive and welcoming public spaces, are often challenging to design using conventional tools. Sandercock (1998), in her call for a radical alteration of the way we plan, favours abandoning the notion of certainty, and embracing complexity and contradiction specific to local settings as positive aspects while attempting to shape our cities.

If complexity needs to be leveraged while designing, it follows naturally that the combined might of the larger community will prove handy. Vernacular and informal approaches presented earlier, where an organic and continually evolving (re)design process, in which citizens shape space to suit lifestyles, achieve higher impact, often with lower levels of financial investment, prove the benefits of this way of working.

A democratic design process is proposed as a neighbourhood level strategy. The aim is to tie together the Eri Scheme area with a lively public realm, comprising temporary and permanent small scale spaces, of the open, semi-open and built up varieties.

Model as centre of a continuous process

Willim (2006), in his thoughts about ‘menuing’, discusses choice and how it is affected by what is on the menu. An open ended design process, where users are given alternatives they can relate to, while being encouraged to make their own from ‘outside the box’, can be an exciting method to co-create urban space. At the core of such a method proposed here is a model of the neighbourhood in an easy to handle 1:200 scale, supplemented by a toolbox containing pre-developed public space design ideas, along with materials for citizens to create miniature versions of their ideal public space.

Architect/Activist/Facilitator

A series of low cost and high impact solutions can spring from using these tools in a regular schedule of participatory design workshops, where ideas are crowdsourced from enthusiastic citizens. The architect is also an imaginer-cum-facilitator in this setup. Their task of giving physical form to people’s ideas, though more challenging now, will be rewarded with spaces that are used and treasured by the very inhabitants who have co-designed them.
Collaborative design toolbox: 24+ public space design ideas for the locality, as 1:200 models.
The toolbox is dimensioned (390mm x 220mm x 70mm) to be carried between community design events. Cardboard from old packaging has been exclusively used for all models and the box, to showcase that even simple creative actions can enrich the participatory design process.

Ideas in the box were developed from studying local community needs, climate constraints, resource availability and vernacular techniques. As design issues change, citizens can use the provided materials to continue modeling their own ideas, thereby enriching the collection.
The initial public space design idea collection spans a wide range of permanence, level of enclosure, and investment required. Citizens, supported by design facilitators, can use the models as starting points for discussing co-creation of a vibrant and thriving local public realm.

The toolbox has been designed to engage the general public unfamiliar with planning and design processes. The models are made to an easy to handle scale. Maps and drawings, which dominate professional practice, have been avoided to create a level collaborative design table.
The partitions between the model spaces reflect different edge conditions in the empty plots (number of storeys in surrounding buildings, ranging from 0-3). Using a study lamp, the design ideas can be evaluated for light and shade in different site scenarios.

The building blocks, empty plot templates and street sections enable quick studies of street experience with the different design ideas. Shown here is how the community kitchen would work in the narrower residential street, with one and two storey buildings flanking it.
Elements from the box can be used to discuss various alternatives among citizens. Shown here is one possible conversation about a plot surrounded by a one storey and two storey building, located on a 4.3 m wide street in the neighbourhood.

“How can the empty plot next door to our home be used? It is only the neighbour’s car that is taking up the space now.”

“How not create a garbage segregation centre? Our area generates enough waste to sustain one, and landfills are choked!”

“That might be difficult immediately, unless we get all the neighbours on board. What about a place to celebrate festivals?”

“Great, but that will be too expensive for us. We could just begin small by making a temporary racket sport space. Let’s do it!”
Initial collection of 24 possible ideas for new public spaces in the neighbourhood.
32 plots, in one (or more) of which temporary and permanent public spaces can be created.
Temporary Market

Structures to sell local produce during occasional neighbourhood festivals.

Need
Lack of temporary selling areas in the area, making people travel to other neighbourhoods for festival shopping.

Target User Group
All age groups, with specific festivals being geared towards certain demographics, with shops being run by locals.

Features
Adaptable framework that can support selling of small products of different kinds. Modularity for easy expansion.

Possible Activities
Buying and selling of goods grown and produced in homes around. Small crafts manufacture outside shopping periods.
Neighbourhood Kitchen

Spaces for social cooking and eating with varying levels of enclosure.

Need
Socialising around food important in India, difficult today with compact modern homes and expensive restaurant options.

Target User Group
Youngsters with large social circles, families, school children, senior citizens living on their own, local culinary experts.

Features
Traditional courtyard reinterpreted to facilitate food preparation and consumption as an enjoyable group activity.

Possible Activities
Traditional social eating on the roof terrace, informal gatherings around food, cookery classes, restaurant day events.
Banana Grove

**Sheltered open meeting space dotted with multi-functional banana trees.**

**Need**
True public spaces, without access restrictions, absent in neighbourhood. Greenery disappearing rapidly as buildings come up.

**Target User Group**
Residents, gardening enthusiasts, green lifestyle proponents, children.

**Features**
Fast growing banana trees, all parts of which are eaten, use up greywater and create a shaded public space.

**Possible Activities**
Casual conversations, traditional games popular in villages, mat and basket weaving, rope making.
Herb Nursery

Exhibition and rearing of medicinal and other herbs for community use.

Need
Knowledge of traditional home remedies fast disappearing, lack of space for herb gardens in urban homes.

Target User Group
Alternative medicine enthusiasts, gardeners, school children, senior citizens, fitness conscious youngsters.

Features
Temporary structure with varying lighting levels for herbs’ different requirements. Small meeting space between greenery.

Possible Activities
Events related to herb rearing and use, cooking workshops, gardening demonstrations, community meetings.
Open Air Theatre

Outdoor space suited to casual gatherings and informal meetings.

Need
Potential of open spaces to conduct group events ignored in contemporary urban environments.

Target User Group
Local residents of all age groups. Senior citizens lacking avenues to socialise. School children groups.

Features
Inspired by traditional temple tank. Central pit collects and allows water to seep recharge groundwater. Stepped seating.

Possible Activities
Casual conversations. Group discussions. Study sessions. Startup pitch meetings. Event planning sessions.
Origami Landscape

*Artificial play landscape for children and adults to relax in outdoor space.*

**Need**
Public parks few and closed for parts of the day. Closed spaces thermally uncomfortable or expensive.

**Target User Group**
Local residents of all age groups. Children and their caretakers.

**Features**
Uneven landscape with small hills and valleys as climbing structures for children. Double up as seating niches for adults.

**Possible Activities**
Pet Park

**Mini open space for pet owners to let their animals off the leash.**

**Need**
Controlled spaces for pet animals to be free in open space absent. Challenging to have pets in dense residential area.

**Target User Group**
Pet owners. Residents who are unable to have own pets but happy to spend time with animals. Children.

**Features**
Small buffer space between street and open space for people to meet as their pets play. Greenery and climbing elements.

**Possible Activities**
Playtime with animals. Group activities for pets and their owners. Workshops on training and grooming.
Exhibition Space

Platform to display works by local creatives and share public information.

Need
No physical setting to stay updated about happenings in the area. Lack of opportunity for amateur artists outside art circles.

Target User Group
Alternate art aficionados. Local residents interested in civic issues. Experts concerned with the area’s development.

Features
Display walls bounding flexible central space suited for models and sculptures. Auto rickshaw pick up and drop off zone.

Possible Activities
Outdoor art shows. Participatory design workshops. Exhibitions of projects. Discussions on themes of public interest.
Entrepreneur Zone

Small open, semi open and closed working rooms for self help groups.

Need
Youth and womens’ self help groups supported by government grants often unable to afford market rents for work spaces.

Target User Group
Youth and womens’ self help groups. Home based business owners who would like to share a work space occasionally.

Features
Inspired from vernacular courtyard house architecture. Open, semi open and sheltered work spaces for 3-4 persons each.

Possible Activities
Manufacturing of handicrafts, packaging, gift items, imitation jewellery, art work, paintings, embroidery, pottery, ceramics.
Sports Area

Space for sports often overshadowed by the popularity of cricket in India.

Need
Large playground only suited to young men playing cricket or body building. Spaces for other sports absent.

Target User Group
Girls and women who lack spaces to play outdoor games. Fitness enthusiasts interested in outdoor group training.

Features
Platform for spectators doubles up as barrier for car parking. Removable net for badminton/volleyball and on rear wall.

Possible Activities
Basketball, badminton, volleyball, traditional sports, group exercises.
DIY Framework

Setting for the maker community to build and inhabit their own space.

Need
Tendency to improvise with local materials fading in urban India. Ambitious makers without spaces to test ideas.

Target User Group
Maker groups. Architecture students. Teenagers. Resident groups wishing to hold small events in self-designed spaces.

Features
Poles in an open space, with hooks to attach fabric and build structures on. Possibility to separate and create new spaces.

Possible Activities
Book Cafe

Niche for inculcating and nurturing the reading habit.

Need
Lack of public libraries. Schools often undeserved with books other than course material. Challenging to acquire books.

Target User Group

Features
Small yard in front to relax while watching the street. Closed reading room. Terrace and backyard for reading in private.

Possible Activities
Book reading sessions. Poetry recitals. Reading club events. Workshops. Events related to languages and literature.
Flexible Ground

 unequal landscape for use as residents please in otherwise flat neighbourhood.

Need
Public spaces without access usage restrictions use absent. Spontaneous meetings increasingly difficult.

Target User Group
Families with children, Local residents who would like to meet informally or invite friends over for conversations.

Features
An uneven, sloping landscape that rises from the street. Interesting climbing possibilities for young children.

Possible Activities
Casual meetings. Children's supervised play. Basic gardening and landscape maintenance.
Meeting Room

Meeting room with basic facilities for small group events.

Need
Rooms for hire for groups of 10-20 people absent. Residences and cafes ill suited for successful work and leisure gatherings.

Target User Group
Local residents, visitors attending events, local small offices requiring temporary use of larger meeting spaces.

Features
Small front buffer space inspired by traditional thinnai, toilet facilities, daylit meeting room, small rear yard.

Possible Activities
Business meetings, talks and seminars, demonstrations, hackathons, workshops, residents’ association meetings.
Recycling Station

Centre to bring and sort waste for processing by informal channels.

Need
Lack of source segregation facilities at household and neighborhood levels. No infrastructure for waste separation by city.

Target User Group
Environment conscious local residents, NGOs working with waste management, local waste recycling stores, ragpickers.

Features
Bins and containers sized based on observed trends. Convenient to sort everyday domestic waste close to home.

Possible Activities
Everyday sorting and transportation of waste for recycling. Events like OSCE-days that create awareness around waste.
Infrastructure Stairs

Backup water and electricity, housed in a festival and social space.

Need
Water shortage and electricity failure quite frequent. Residents’ everyday lives often affected without warning.

Target User Group
Local residents, students, artistically inclined community members.

Features
Rainwater and solar energy from surrounding houses’ roofs stored for use in small quantities in emergencies.

Possible Activities
Causal everyday conversations, community movie screenings, annual doll exhibition festival.
Play Zone

Outdoor play area for children with space for caretakers to converse.

Need
Lack of adequate open spaces for children to play outside school. Available playground dominated by young adults.

Target User Group
Children, from toddlers to pre teens, their caretakers, neighbourhood kindergartens and creches without own play areas.

Features
Central sand pit for free play. Surrounded by seating all around for parents and grandparents to socialise outside home.

Possible Activities
Regular playtime for children from the neighbourhood during weekday evenings and weekends. Guided play on occasion.
Festival Courtyard

Space for celebrating the frequent Indian festivals with the neighbours.

Need
Challenging for nuclear families to celebrate festivals in modest dwelling units. Neighbours’ interaction waning.

Target User Group
Local residents adhering to different religions. Small organisations lacking own facilities for bringing members together.

Features
A large courtyard for participants. Winding galleries around for spectators to watch and to conduct smaller rituals.

Possible Activities
Day and night time celebration of festivals. Secular events unrelated to traditional celebrations. Workshops and courses.
Sheltered Platform

Fabric covered semi open space for outdoor activities.

Need
82 sq m plots apt for local small group gatherings, but weather often too harsh to meet in open. Inexpensive spaces absent.

Target User Group
Fitness enthusiasts, meditation clubs, yoga groups, prayer associations, craft groups, residents’ association.

Features
Fabric can span simple poles, or be hung on hooks between neighbouring houses. Removable and reusable as required.

Possible Activities
Group activities of all kinds that do not require any supporting infrastructure, other than shade and a flat surface to sit on.
Graffiti Centre

Courtyard with blank walls, roof, and floors as canvas for amateur artists.

Need
Street art gaining popularity. Scarce opportunities for creative expression by local youngsters in the public realm.

Target User Group
Youngsters, local school children, artistically inclined homemakers, painting teachers, senior citizens, general public.

Features
Semi public streetfront reminiscent of traditional thinnai. Lavish wall areas in varying sizes and orientation for painting.

Possible Activities
Painting workshops, street art testing, community co-painting festivals, any group event in the courtyard.
Compost Hut

Yard and shed for collecting organic waste and converting to compost.

Need
Chennai landfills overburdened, local organic waste management non existent, residents interested in green living.

Target User Group
Environment conscious residents, school children, gardening enthusiasts without space in cramped, fully built up homes.

Features
Drop off area for bio waste at street side. Structure to shade plants from direct sunlight. Rear yard for compost preparation.

Possible Activities
Small workshops to teach composting at home, gardening lessons, awareness events, storage for sale of compost to other areas.
Cycle Hub (Based on co-created design, CycleHack Chennai 2015)

Cycle parking, workshop, storage and showers to replace car parking areas.

Need
Cycling catching on among planet and health conscious youth, secure parking on street and at homes not planned for.

Target User Group
Cycling enthusiasts, school children, employees, neighbourhood stores, delivery personnel.

Features
5m x 2.5m car parking bay modules re-purposed for cycling support facilities. 24-30 cycles replace 4 car parking bays.

Possible Activities
Parking, pre work showers, cycling related events like CycleHack, custom bike build workshops, cycle repair lessons.
Performance Park

Open park with space for regular learning and display of performance arts.

**Need**
Children and adults compelled to make do with inadequate private spaces for music and dance lessons. Public stages scarce.

**Target User Group**
Children attending after school lessons, parents who do not get opportunities to watch them, general public in the area.

**Features**
Simple open area, with pits that accommodate plants or spectators. Informal stage also usable as seating platform.

**Possible Activities**
Daily courses, seasonal workshops, invited performances from surrounding neighbourhoods, casual everyday conversations.
Shared Office

Work and meeting space for formal and semi formal startup enterprises.

Need
Current co-working spaces few and far away. Many young entrepreneurs forced to work from home for lack of better options.

Target User Group
Entrepreneurs with company size less than 5 people. Mainly young co-founders, but also homemakers and senior citizens.

Features
A large co-working and meeting room, supported by flexible furniture, adequate storage and a variety of smaller spaces.

Possible Activities
Regular workdays, hackathons, evening events, weekend classes, workshops, seminars with up to 25 participants.
FIRST NODES IN A NETWORK: SPACES FOR LOCAL PUBLIC LIFE
Proposed small public buildings in the existing residential built fabric.
Development of key principles for space distribution, lighting and ventilation
NEIGHBOURHOOD KITCHEN:
SOCIAL GATHERING AROUND FOOD

The neighbourhood kitchen will play the role of social connector, allowing neighbours living in increasingly smaller family sizes to cook and dine together. It is especially suited to the traditional social meal ‘nilachoru’, where the family used to dine under the open sky on full moon days.

Food Preparation
The ground floor area, with the core kitchen, the gallery around the courtyard, and the open courtyard can all serve as spaces to prepare food, similar to how it was tradional in the vernacular South Indian courtyard house’ kitchen courtyard. The possibility to socialise while making food exists thanks to the configuration of these semi open and open spaces, in sharp contrast to modern, compact kitchen which privilege space efficiency over user experience for the person cooking what are often extremely time consuming and elaborate meals.

Formal Dining
Formal dining on special occasions, be it eating from a banana leaf while sitting on the floor, getting food from a buffet counter, or being seated under the stars, can all happen between the ground and first floors of the building. Residents will be able to use the neighbourhood kitchen also as a social space, to invite friends and family for larger gatherings, as the 82 sq m typical residence, often laid out to maximise each room’s size, is very impractical for groups larger than 6 members.

Casual Eating
Ledges for casual lounging and eating are distributed through the building. The visual connection between roof terrace and ground floor make it possible to accommodate more users, without having to break the gathering into two.

Event Space
As fixed furniture is completely absent, thanks to people’s familiarity with eating while seated on the floor, the space can also double up as a setting for small events. Family gatherings of 15-20 members for small function will be a good fit. Exhibition sales of locally made products, demonstrations of skills, group studying and communal movie watching are also possible on the neihgbourhood terrace courtyard combination.

Temporary Market
Goods sold from street carts often do not make it to the doorsteps of those living in apartment complexes that flank the residential area. Bringing such products for a day or two to the shared space can make it a hotspot for meeting neighbours from outside the immediate vicinity.
1. 6.1m wide street
2. 1:12 entrance ramp
3. stairs to roof terrace
4. eating courtyard
5. prep and eating area
6. storage
7. hand wash
8. toilet
9. core kitchen
1. built in seating
2. roof terrace

FIRST FLOOR PLAN 1:100

NEIGHBOURHOOD KITCHEN
NEIGHBOURHOOD KITCHEN

ROOF PLAN 1:100
LONGITUDINAL SECTION 1:100
Development of key principles for space distribution, lighting and ventilation
PUBLIC BUILDING DESIGN

**SHARED OFFICE:**
**WORK ZONE FOR UPCOMING ENTREPRENEURS**

The shared office, in an otherwise residential area, will become a hub for collaboration among current and new local entrepreneurs. It will also double up as a centre for the residents to meet over current issues affecting the area.

**Everyday Work Space**
The neighbourhood misses a place where those running home businesses can meet occasionally, or even work from regularly. Of special interest are those involved in non IT-related startups, as they are ignored by systems that usually offer new firms spaces and facilities for co-working. The main space is a large room with indirect natural lighting, natural ventilation and generous storage. The proximity to home will allow even those who hesitate to be self-employed for practical reasons of commuting, picking up the children from school, attending to chores etc.

**Conference Venue**
The furniture, which is designed to be made locally out of reclaimed joinery from older buildings, is modular and can be joined to formed conference tables. While the main space is too small to be partitioned for smaller meetings, the two built-in benches in the entrance court can make it a makeshift group meeting area.

**Event Space**
All furniture is sized to be stowed away under the build in desks on the side walls. This creates a free floor spaces, suited to events like yoga classes, dance lessons, and theatre workshops. The temporary stowing away of furniture can also substantially increase capacity for more conventional events, as users can sit on the floor.

**Reading Niche and Smoking Terrace**
A small niche is provided in the mezzanine level of the double height work space, with a desk, chair and bookshelf. This space would be useful for those wanting to take a pause from the more active work area in the middle of the space. The scale is intentionally kept domestic, to convey a sense of familiarity that is often lacking in regular office spaces. The smoking terrace, accessible by stairs from the main work space, is another smaller space for those wishing to have two person conversations.

**Fabrication Lab**
The upper levels of the storage shelves on the side lend themselves well to larges elements which can see occasional use. The rough finished interiors, and movable furniture, allow the space to be turned into a workshop for weekend demonstrations of skills like carpentry, robotic, bicycle fixing, electronics repair etc.
1. 6.1m wide street
2. 1:12 entrance ramp
3. informal seating
4. flexible work space
5. storage cum desk
6. stackable furniture
7. ladder to alcove
8. toilet
9. stairs to roof

GROUND FLOOR PLAN 1:100

SHARED OFFICE
1. reading alcove
2. storage

FIRST FLOOR PLAN 1:100

SHARED OFFICE
ROOF PLAN 1:100

1. solar cells
2. smokers’ corner

SHARED OFFICE
FRONT ELEVATION 1:50

Gi sheet
special sloped brick

DPC

PCC 1:4:8

BRICK WALL WITH STEPPED FOOTING 1:20

EXPOSED BRICK ENTRANCE ARCH AND WALL

SHARED OFFICE
Streetside facade render
headers, stretchers flush

Inner facade render
headers set back 10mm
gap finished with mortar

Bigger mortar joint
(approx 15mm)

Narrower mortar joint
(approx 5mm)

Regular 230mm x
115mm x 75mm brick

Streetside facade render
headers, stretchers flush

BRICK LAYING PATTERN FOR ARCH AND WALL
RAT TRAP BOND IN EXTERNAL LOADBEARING WALLS 1:20

SHARED OFFICE

186
12 mm dia steel rod in cavity filled with M20 concrete for corner reinforcement
450 mm long pieces of 48 x 30 sections, which can be cut out from old window and door frames.

Stacking technique provides unique light vs shade aesthetic.

Furniture assembled with wood glue, with a jig to maintain form, for citizens to put together without any prior experience.

Finished unit of 450mm x 450mm x 450mm.
Cube that is easy to assemble and possible to combined in different ways.

Prior experiences fabricating the modules at Bergen International Wood Festival 2014.
View showing parts above and below ground
INFRASTRUCTURE STAIRS: FUSION OF EVERYDAY AND OCCASIONAL

The infrastructure stairs will function as a backup service facility for the residents, providing emergency water and electricity facilities during shortages. Small spaces for socialising, and possibilities to conduct modern reinterpretations of the traditional Indian doll festival are other features.

Water Collector
While many houses in the neighbourhood have facilities to let rainwater drain into the ground, it is often not efficient as a short term supply alternative. Water shortage is often, and households are sometimes left without water for hours or even days, until they can have water delivered by trucks. The large underground sump, connected to rain drain pipes from the neighbours, through a system of filters, allows residents to use a handpump to satisfy their emergency needs. The socialising potential the pumping activity occurs, similar to how it was in traditional settlements, is important as well.

Power Bank
Electricity failure in individual houses or even the entire neighbourhood, especially when it occurs at nighttime, is a frequent occurrence. For students who might be especially vulnerable to study or sleep time lost before examinations, the public building has provisions to store energy collected from solar cells on neighbours’ roofs. Small reading corners on every landing, are lit with alternate energy for use everyday and during such emergencies.

View Platform
The stairs tower over the surrounding development, offering residents in the otherwise low rise development a view of their own locality as well as the area around. An idea of the rate at which development is progressing in the city on steroids is discernable from the top, while the unique setting allows one to socialise across roof terraces with neighbours as well.

Sitting Stairs
The large stairs, sized to be comfortable for sitting for the casual conversations, front the street, which is aimed to encourage passers by to join the conversations. Reading in groups, watching videos on a temporary screen hung in front, and eating socially are all possible as well.

Exhibition Stairs
The nine day festival of Navratri in the fall, is celebrated in some South Indian households with exhibitions of dolls representing Hindu Gods. The modern reinterpretation of the exhibition stairs, in an outdoor avatar, affords the possibility for residents to hold unique formats of art and craft exhibitions and sales.
1. 6.1m wide street
2. 1:12 entrance ramp
3. handpump from rainwater sump
4. seating + exhibition stairs
5. prep and eating area
6. domestic workers' toilet
7. electrical room
8. filter maintenance
9. tools storage
1. seating + exhibition stairs
2. informal seating
3. storage below stairs
4. stairs to view platform

FIRST FLOOR PLAN 1:100

INFRASTRUCTURE STAIRS
1. reading corner
4. view platform

ROOF PLAN 1:100

INFRASTRUCTURE STAIRS
Architect as the initiative taker, and facilitating design professional, in a new process where various stakeholders collaboratively design together, over regular design meetings.
ARCHITECTS AS PROACTIVE CHANGE AGENTS: A ROLE SHIFT FOR DESIGNING A JUST CITY

It is obvious that architects have a crucial role to play in supporting youth driven social change movements, and hence everyday democratic practice, by delivering sorely missed public spaces that are accessible to society in general as well. As current systems do not naturally allow such projects to see the light of the day, it becomes necessary for the design professional to also become the initiative taker, kicking off a long term and continuous process for change.

Proactive instead of Reactive
Harvey (1992), in his conclusion to ‘Social Justice, Postmodernism and the City’ encourages us to bring down the ‘walls’ in our cities, and create urban environments that accommodate the interests of the ignored. We as architects have an especially important role in maing this possible.

The usual case, where a client with secure finances, approaches an architect for a commission, is unsuited to situations where user-clients are stretched for funds and unaware of the role of good design. The architect here has to seek out challenging socio-spatial situations, and co-create a convincing case fit for implementation.

This proactive way of designing the city is already seeing adoption. TripleO Studio, a young architecture practice in Chennai, often imagine better urban environments, create visions to achieve them, and attempt to build support among stakeholders to try and realise their work. A wider acceptance of this alternative way of practicing architecture, can only bode well for the goal of a more equal urban society.

Long term process
A key takeaway from this project has been the necessity of focussing on citizen driven change, as local residents usually have many answers if the designer is only willing to look with the right lens. Centuries of succesful vernacular and informal approaches to design stand testimony to this fact. By approaching context specific challenges with sensitivity, and being closely involved with the users, the design professional can build trust and bring valuable skills to the table to help make the dreams and aspiration of local populations a reality.

To achieve takes months, if not years. The 3 months spent onsite during this diploma project have been adequate to establish links and begin initial conversations about collaborating. The next steps are to take the the project proposals back to organisations in Chennai, secure support for testing the participatory design process, convince authorities about the advantages of temporary conversions of unused plots to public spaces, and hopefully realize at least a few little spaces for democracy.
REFERENCES


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Fig 28. Ramachandran, A. (2015). Collage of advertisements from Mogappair Mail local newspaper, Jan - Apr 2015. Own work. [Created on 5 May. 2015].


Fig. 41. Ramachandran, A. (2015). Mean monthly temperature and rainfall in Chennai.


Fig 59. Ramachandran, A. (2015). Traditional South Indian temple tank. [image] Own work. [Taken on 10 May. 2007].

Fig 60. Ramachandran, A. (2015). Traditional South Indian thinnai. [image] Own work. [Taken on 10 May. 2007].


ABBREVIATIONS

CMDA - Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority

DIY - Do It Yourself

IT - Information Technology

MNC - Multinational Corporation

OSCEDays - Open Source Circular Economy Days