

Chapter 2

An Ethnographic and Collaborative Model of Inquiry: Activity Centre Project in India

Reena Tiwari and Yatin Pandya

Abstract This chapter proposes an ethnographic and collaborative model of inquiry for executing community scale architectural projects that facilitate capacity building opportunities for all stakeholders involved in the process. Taking on the role of an ethnographer, the designer/architect/researcher is able to locate her- or himself within the time and space of the community. In the process he/she is able to form an insider's perspective on issues and challenges. Working collaboratively, the intention is to create a horizontal power relation between different stakeholders. The model is described in general terms, then illustrated by a case-study—an Activity Centre project for an Indian slum settlement—then discussed in terms of its capacity building outcomes.

The Activity Centre project was initiated by a non-government organization, and involved the local architect, the academic researcher and architecture students, residents of a slum settlement, and skilled labour. Although each stakeholder entered into the project with different objectives, the project outcomes were able to provide benefit to all in a tangible or intangible manner. The chapter reflects on the methods employed in the project and the role of stakeholders at each stage of the process. The importance of the local context is underscored—local people, local resources, local tools and techniques—during the design and construction process, to achieve an outcome that is innovative and engenders reciprocity and learning amongst the stakeholders.

Keywords Ethnography · Collaborative planning · Capacity building · Economic empowerment · Gender equity

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Introduction

The chapter discusses an ethnographic and collaborative approach to capacity building used in a project in an Indian city (2004–2008). A group of students, led by Reena Tiwari (professor/researcher) from the School of Built Environment, Curtin University Australia, worked in collaboration with non-government organizations and other local stakeholders in India on an ‘Activity Centre’ project led by Yatin Pandya (local architect at Vastu Shilpa Foundation at that time). The chapter first outlines a model of enquiry that emerges from an ethnographic and collaborative planning context. This is followed by an overview of the methods and methodology used within this model in the project. After reflecting on the capacity building outcomes of the project and assessing its success, the chapter concludes by stressing that researchers and practitioners need to recognize the potential of the locale in which they work—its resources, its people and their knowledge—for creating and strengthening identity and enhancing a sense of community.

Model of Inquiry

In response to the failure of the traditional top-down planning approach, the idea of collaborative planning was introduced and launched by Healey (1997). Her aim was to overcome the hierarchical and bureaucratic framework that attended centralized decision-making. Contemporary approaches to planning have included citizens in the decision-making process (Healey 1999; Tewdr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998) and thus have brought many positive outcomes to projects, for the following reasons:

- Local residents help to bring an insider’s perspective to the problems;
- Because local needs are able to be identified through community involvement, the deliverables of the program are worthwhile and acceptable to the community;
- Program outcomes that involve community deliberations have longevity, since there is a sense of community ownership of them;
- Community involvement builds local organizational skills, and the capacity to develop strong successor organizations (Chaskin 2001; Ife 1995).

On the other hand, by resisting community consultations, governing agencies force local residents to respond negatively to proposed programs (Healey 1997). It is sometimes claimed by agencies that consultation becomes pointless, as residents lack the ability to understand strategies; however, as Davoudi and Healey point out, the problem here lies more in the way consultation is envisaged and carried out (1995). To address this, Healey proposes:

... planning processes need to work in ways which interrelate technical and experiential knowledge and reasoning, which can cope with a rich array of values, penetrating all

aspects of the activity and which involve active collaboration between experts and officials in governance agencies and all those with a claim for attention arising from the experience of co-existence in shared places. (1997, p. 87)

The conception and discharge of consultation should be a social process built on an understanding of the social values and social relations already existing in the place. Developing a social understanding involves an experiential and a situationist perspective (Debord 1977), where consultants/researchers are required to take an ethnographic stand by immersing themselves in the lives of the people, and need to place the phenomena studied in their social and cultural context (Lewis 1985, p. 380). Ethnography relies on locating the researcher firmly within the time and space of social actors, and thus is able to reveal the socio-scape that people collectively construct (Gille and Riain 1995). As Jon Kolko says, ethnography is about leaving the safety of the studio and going out into ‘real life’; it is about observing ‘real people’ and designing [and working] with them (Kolko 2011, p. 50). The aim ‘is to provide rich, holistic insights into people’s views and actions, as well as the nature (that is, sights, sounds) of the location they inhabit, through the collection of detailed observations and interviews’ (Reeves et al. 2008, p. 512). This allows consultants and researchers to reach an insiders’ understanding, or ‘get inside’ the way each group of people sees the world (Hammersley 1992).

There are different views on the distance that needs to be maintained between the local residents and the outside researcher/consultant architect. If the goal is to study the phenomenon/conditions within the context, traditional notions rest on researchers’ detachment rather than engagement, so as not to influence or mediate relations and knowledge existing in the local space (Reeves et al. 2008). However, in projects where the goal is to empower local residents and facilitate social change, or where (as in the Activity Centre project that is subject of this chapter), the goal is to co-design¹ and co-construct physical interventions in the built form, incorporating local socio-physical and economic aspects, the researchers have to play the role of action ethnographers (Nilsson 2000). Here they have to be more than participant observers and become change agents, facilitating local adaptations and change (Fig. 2.1). ‘This role [participant observers] positions us [them] outside the context or organization (having “peripheral membership”’, while the role of change agent positions us [them] inside the organization (having “active membership”’) (Adler and Adler 1997, as cited in Barab et al. 2004, p. 255).

Therefore, our model of enquiry and investigation is collaborative and ethnographic, with a goal of facilitating change and adaptation for all stakeholders (local residents, researchers, NGOs and local professionals) through co-design and co-construction. The involvement of all stakeholders in the design and construction stages of the project enables them to imbibe local knowledge and resources and respond to local needs. The following sections describe the project and the methodology and methods used.

¹ Within a participatory design framework, co-design is considered to be ‘collective creativity of collaborating designers’ or ‘the creativity of designers and people not trained in design working together in the design development process’ (Sanders and Stappers 2008, p. 6).

Fig. 2.1 Action ethnographer**Fig. 2.2** Randev Pir Tekro, Ahmedabad

Project and Methodology

A community action project was carried out from 2004 onwards for a slum community (Ramdev Pir Tekro) in the city of Ahmedabad in India (Fig. 2.2). Tekro is home to more than 150,000 people (Pandya 2008). The slum residents earn their living by driving rickshaws, cleaning homes, shining shoes and working as skilled and unskilled labourers. The majority of residents work as rag-pickers, especially young girls and women, in a waste recycling industry that is the main economic driver for the settlement. The land belongs to the government, and Tekro dwellers have illegally squatted for the past 50 years and more. Initially, there was no provision of basic infrastructure services such as electricity, footpaths, drainage, water supply and so on. The situation has slightly improved with the aid of NGOs and government interventions; however, more is needed in order to resolve continuing and increasing health issues, inadequate toilet and sewage facilities, poor conditions of housing, low incomes, high-interest loans, child labour and illiteracy (Manav Sadhana n.d.).

Manav Sadhana, an NGO with a strong local base and global connections, has been working towards promoting values, education and awareness among children and economic empowerment of women of the Tekro, with the objective of improving the living standards of the dwellers. One of its initiatives has been the Activity

Centre project that started in 2004 and was completed in 2006. The completed project, a multi-purpose activity centre, now serves as a community centre with health camps, festivity ground, gym, and importantly, an informal school for young children. It also provides evening education for adults, and is a vocational training and activity workshop for the manufacture of craft-based products by women and the elderly. These handmade craft-based products include paper bags, greeting cards, diaries, albums, envelopes and gift hampers, which are sold under the label ‘Manav Sadhana Manufacturers’, and the profit earned is distributed among the children and women workers. This enabling project, initiated by Manav Sadhana for the women, elderly and the children, is known as ‘Earn and Learn’ and is credited with making a major difference to the lives of the poor. The campus also includes a dormitory, an administrative unit and an all-religion meditation unit (Trivedi and Tiwari 2010).

The above project started in 2004. Curtin University students participated in two stages of the project—needs assessment and concept design—in 2005. For students, this project was also going to be assessed as part of their course. They worked with Yatin Pandya, who led the project to completion in 2006. This project won awards from the World Architecture Community (WAC), the Squat City Urban Inform Forum at Rotterdam (World Architecture Community 2009) and several national organizations.

Project Objectives

Different stakeholders had different objectives for the project. Since a huge waste recycling industry flourishes within the settlement, the main objective of the project as defined by the architect was to develop innovative building components that use waste, simple hand-operated tools and local resources and know-how. For Manav Sadhana, the project objectives had a philanthropic component that aimed to address the issues faced by the community, while for the Curtin researcher and students the objectives were ‘learning by doing’ and community facilitation through engagement. The community’s interests and objectives were represented by Manav Sadhana, as it had been closely working with the community for several years.

Within a collaborative and ethnographic model of inquiry, our methodology incorporated various stages, as shown in Table 2.1. It started with building relationships with the local community. Community needs were assessed through observations and surveys, informal chats and structured questionnaires. This stage was followed by conceptual design work and subsequent discussions on detailed designs. Building components were then tested, since new building prototypes using municipal waste were being designed. Construction started in 2005 and the Centre was formally opened in 2006.

The project’s collaborative planning had the goal of creating a horizontal power relation between different stakeholders, and to this end, a wide range of tools was employed, like meetings, surveys, observations, informal chats, co-construction, community events, and awareness programs (Table 2.2).

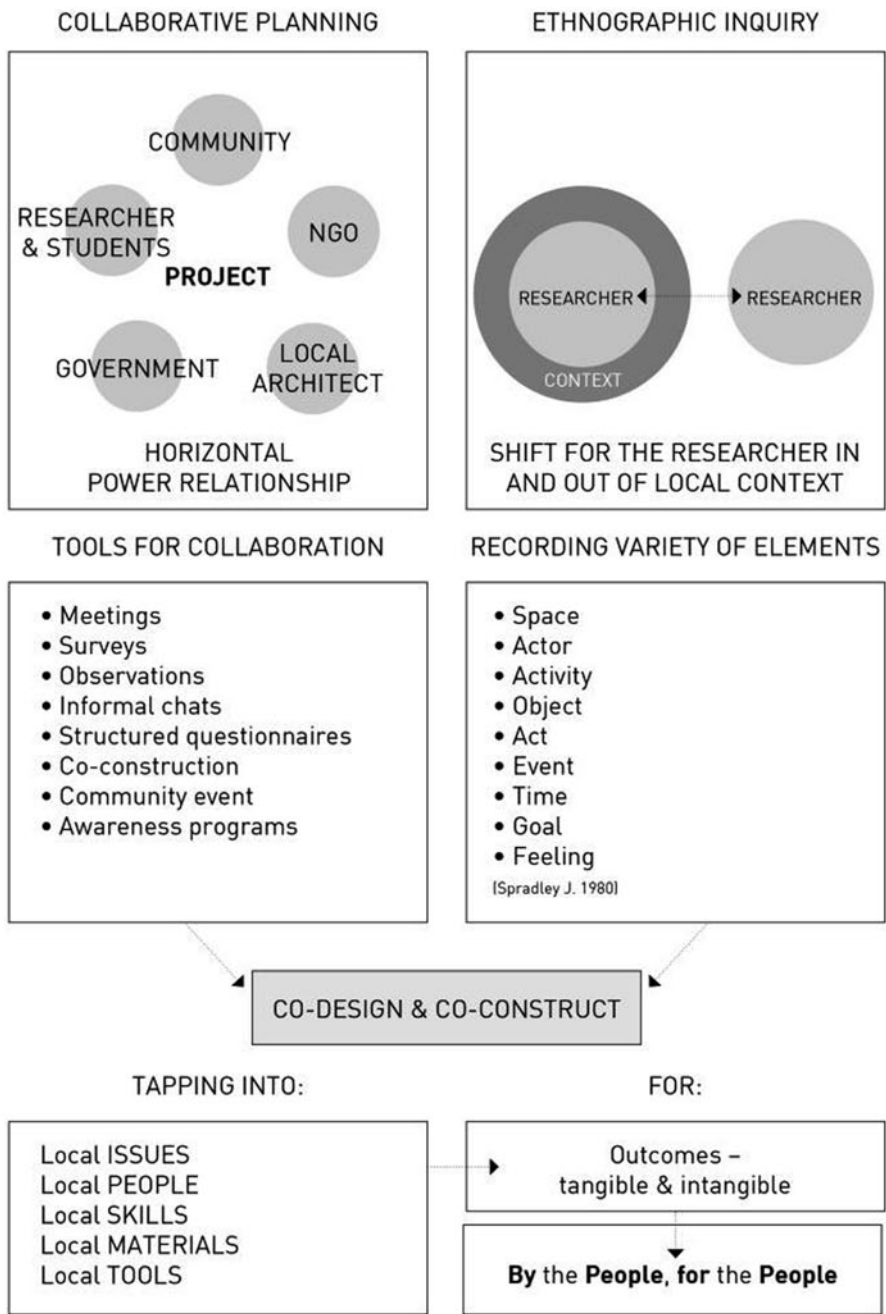
Table 2.1 Involvement of different stakeholders in different stages of the project

STAGES	METHODS	PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN EACH STAGE
Relationship building (2004/2005)	Meetings	Architect, students, NGO, community
Needs Assessment (2005)	Observations/surveys/informal chats and structured questionnaires	Architect, students, NGO, community members
Design (2005)	Workshops	Architect, students, NGO, few community reps.
Testing of building components (2005)	Lab testing	Architect, local professionals
Construction process (2005 – 2006)	Co-construction	Architect, local professionals, skilled and unskilled labour from community, NGO
Official opening of the centre (2006)	Community event	Local administration rep., NGO, architect, community
Maintenance	Awareness programs initiated, supervised by NGO	Individual community member, NGO, architect

On the other hand, ethnographic investigation involved authors shifting between the roles of change agents and participant observers, thus moving inside and outside of the context. Within these roles there were a variety of elements recorded, as illustrated in Table 2.2. By simultaneously working with the two approaches of collaborative planning and ethnography, the authors steered into co-designing and co-constructing with the community, tapping into local issues, materials, tools, skills and labour. The Activity Centre was the tangible outcome produced ‘by the people’ and ‘for the people’ (Table 2.2).

Were the methods and methodology used able to build capacity in the people involved in the project? The next section defines capacity building within the context of this project, and assesses the success of this project through its capacity building outcomes.

Table 2.2 Methodology



Capacity Building: What, and for Whom?

Capacity building is about empowering all partners in the project, so that, instead of upward answerability, downward or horizontal accountability is emphasized (Eade 2007). On this premise, and taking into account that our development project involves various contending stakeholders, we defined our roles as outsider professional and researchers, whose purpose is to facilitate the local community to identify their own issues, values and priorities. The presupposition was that during the course of the project, capacity would be built, not just in the local community members, but also in us as researchers and in other stakeholders in their different roles. The project for us did not start with the objective of building capacity, but was to be assessed as successful if capacity was built for various stakeholders during (or after) the course of the project.

How is a project evaluated on its capacity building outcomes? The concept of community capacity is not unlike what is termed 'social capital'. Social capital is the development of civic engagement, trust and reciprocity amongst community members, leading to co-learning and identity creation (McMurray and Clendon 2011).

Reciprocity, learning and creative innovation are the most significant capacity building outcomes (Innes and Booher 2003) and these are reflected tangibly and intangibly in the Activity Centre initiative.

Outcomes

1. Reciprocity is the ability to develop actors' interdependence, thus building recognition and identity.

The very idea of a community centre within the settlement was to make it the people's own, accessible to all. Critical for the formation of personal and collective identity is the direct involvement of the local residents. So, at Tekro, potters made roof-tiles and fly-ash bricks, semi-skilled carpenters made partitions and windows, and unemployed women collected city solid waste; in the construction work, housewives and old widows laboured, filling the glass and plastic bottles with fly-ash, and decorating and painting interior and exterior walls of the centre, using their local designs and skills; while children were given activities in their craft classes related to the centre development work (Pandya 2008) (Fig. 2.3).

These collective efforts developed a sense of ownership in residents and have inspired them to make decisions on their own for future extension and activity programming in the Centre, based on their changing needs. An example is the construction of a multi-religion shrine. During the installation of idols, the residents celebrated as each idol was offered by different faiths and by different construction agencies, such as contractors, masons, labourers. Yet another community initiative, introducing a gymnasium for the youth, was undertaken. Similarly, vocational train-



Fig. 2.3 Collective efforts resulting in a sense of ownership and identity. (Photos: Tiwari and Pandya)

ing programs have been introduced and computer training is conducted in the afternoons for youth to improve their employment prospects. Health camps (eye camp, gynaecology camp, malaria camp etc.) have been introduced, where all settlement dwellers are served. Another initiative has been the addition of a crèche which is run by elderly ladies of the settlement.

Thus, the community centre has been able to bring residents together and has empowered them to decide about issues regarding their own well-being.

2. Learning skills from each other is enabled because of strong relationships created between different project actors.

The hidden value of economic empowerment by transference of skill has been one of the most important outcomes for the community. The construction of the centre saw participation by volunteers on a weekly basis and used the services of local unskilled or skilled persons. Crate wood partitions were constructed by a local carpenter. Children participated in paper infill work in the door panelling during their art classes. Clay pots to be used as infill in the slab were procured from a neighbouring family working as potters. With guidance, the community learnt skills in reinterpreting waste materials and techniques for using them, and have been applying these skills in their own homes. An example has been the recycling of oil tin containers as door and window panelling, and this technique has been successfully adapted by the poorer segment of the settlement for their homes.

As well as these examples of capacity building for the community, we observed skills transference and learning by students and researchers. For students and researchers, the field visits and direct observation study were helpful in gaining a cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of the resourcefulness of the local community. Students learnt from the community while co-creating the architectural facility:



Fig. 2.4 Students interacting with the community and working on the project. (Photos: Tiwari)

The India unit took us out of our comfort zones and taught us that the most important thing about design is who you are designing for. People are different all over the world and the rich culture of a place gives it meaning. The India trip taught us to respect that. (Michael Trees, journal entry)

For the last 2 days, students volunteered to provide hygiene instruction in primary schools as a thank you gesture to the community.

Volunteering was really great ... We used our Dettol wipes to clean these kids' hands, faces and fingernails. While I did this, Charlotte clipped fingernails and Margret brushed hair. It felt very rewarding. (Sam Austen, journal entry)

Goodbye India ... thankyou for teaching me never to give pity unduly ... I will always remember to be grateful for what I have. (Melissa Ann Aroozoo, journal entry)

Besides the delivery of subject knowledge and exposure to international perspectives, such experiential projects help in building lifelong skills in students, such as adapting to and understanding a variety of situations and people while learning acceptance and tolerance of different lifestyles (Fig. 2.4).

Experiential learning draws from Stellje's Service Learning model (2008), linking theory to practice, and further contributes to democratic participation and power-sharing.

It was also in this environment where the tutor became more like a work colleague in terms of feedback and bouncing ideas off each other. It was this relationship throughout the trip where the distribution of "power" between tutor and student was far more equal than in a normal classroom environment. I felt that this was crucial in the facilitation of learning and gaining knowledge and skills. (Student, Survey Monkey 2012)

3. Innovation results due to involvement and partnership with different actors and their knowledge is considered a means of reaching creativity.

M² Models and Methodologies for Community
Engagement

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