

The Purview of Urban Design and Planning in Bangalore

An Interview with Ar. Brinda Sastry

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Brinda Sastry is an independent urban design and planning practitioner who has worked in India and abroad with various private, public and non-profit organizations. She has been a Visiting Faculty at various Architecture and Urban Planning programs in India and abroad, and an Adjunct Faculty in the B. Arch. and M. Arch. programs at RV College of Architecture, Bengaluru, since 2004. Brinda's professional and research interests are at the intersection of spatial planning, urban governance and urban design policy. She has worked on national mission projects; regional, city, and local area plans; TOD plans; and several urban design projects. She develops methods and institutional arrangements to embed place-based urban design strategies within an inclusive, equitable, livable and sustainable planning framework. She also provides technical assistance to citizen groups and conducts capacity building and public participatory programs. Brinda holds a Masters Degree in Architecture (Urban Design) from the University of Oregon in the USA, and a Diploma in Architecture from CEPT University, Ahmedabad.



Could you describe your experience as an Urban Design and Planning practitioner in Bangalore?

I have been working as an Urban Planner and Designer since 2000 in Bangalore. Mostly, my work is in the public sector, where I have been a consultant to private firms or NGOs assisting in design and policy recommendations. Broadly, my work focuses on developing plans and policies for cities and local areas with a focus on a participatory approach. One of my recent roles was as a consultant with the GIZ, an enterprise of the German Federal Government, on a project for making Gandhi Bazaar street market pedestrian friendly. This project, which is currently underway, is supported by the Directorate of Urban Land and Transport [DULT] and the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). Prior to this, I was also involved in the Bangalore's Revised Master Plan 2015 and the Bangalore Metropolitan Regional Plan 2031, where I worked on the visioning, preparing policies and the zonal regulations.

In the NGO sector, I have worked as a consultant with EMBARQ (now WRI), on a transit-oriented development [TOD] project, for the CMH Metro station in Indiranagar, where we developed a framework for implementing TODs in Bengaluru. I was also consultant to the team that worked on the Ease of Living Index- Phase I, with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. Here we developed methods for assessing 79 livability parameters for 116 cities in the country. Most recently, I've been working with a Bangalore based NGO

called Vidhi Center for Legal Policy on auditing several Judicial Court buildings to ensure that their infrastructure and their design is responsive to stakeholder needs, and they are as per established norms. We intend to develop a handbook for court design from this audit.

Generally, I work as a volunteer with some citizen groups and NGOs to give technical advice. I've reviewed master plans of different cities such as Mangalore, Hampi, and Karaikal. It involved conducting critiques of the plans and providing them with technical assistance so that they could submit it to the government. Also, currently, I'm working on doing a social impact assessment of one of Bangalore's metro lines on vulnerable groups around the city, and we came up with some recommendations for mitigating the impacts in discussion with the international funders. And of course, I also do some independent research work. Generally, I keep myself busy with following different kinds of activities in the urban space of Bangalore.

What opportunities does Bangalore offer with regard to your field of work?

I think Bangalore has a very unique environment in terms of its natural and ecological systems. As an urban designer you could exploit some of these features and make them core to the identity of the city. When I first came here in 2000, there were very few opportunities for an Urban Designer to work because Urban Design wasn't very well recognized in the government circles as a profession. So I think it took about

three-four years before I could actually do something that was meaningful.

The first attempt where I could engage in participatory planning was through a consulting firm based in Bangalore for a JNNURM project, but that was in Goa. In Bangalore, my first attempt was to work on the master plan in 2003 or so, which I think was very interesting because it was the first time that the team was keen on using different planning methods. Bangalore had never had a GIS database at that point. So once it was put in place and the ground reality, in terms of the natural tank and valley systems, was digitally recorded it was an eye-opener for everyone. The master planning process was based on principles of balancing development while safeguarding the natural systems. A similar approach was envisioned for the Regional Structure Plan for Bangalore. For urban planners such opportunities were rare. But increasingly, now, there are many opportunities for young and experienced professionals to become a part of the government system through the Smart City Mission projects, and various national schemes and design challenges, although it is not the same.

There are different venues in which you can participate and if you are active in the professional circles, you will be part of some discussion or the other. Most recently, there was a discussion on climate change. Bangalore is preparing its Climate Action Plan in collaboration with WRI. They are very clear about the fact that we need to have various voices in this plan making process. So in a way, the government is slowly opening up to engage designers and planners in their urban development process.

You've co-authored the chapter- Intelligence for place-making and social inclusion in a book called "The New Companion to Urban Design". In reference to that, could you tell us how we can move forward with the idea of an ideal city?

That particular chapter speaks about the Smart City Mission. It was a critique on how technology is used through the Smart City program where a lot of schemes and projects were being implemented in the mode of "command and control". It was not adopting a decentralised approach which would be a little closer to the people and the on-ground social conditions.

In the article, we were highlighting that technology can be used for enhancing people's lives and including them by building social networks across time and space. There was an example in that article that talks about how Wi-Fi connectivity in remote rural areas is really helping people, especially migrant labourers who needed to connect with their families. It also gives an example of positive social spaces which are created where public WI-FI nodes are available at local tea stalls. It also touches upon some negatives in terms of how such public WI-FI nodes can become gendered social spaces, because mostly men gather there.

Upgrading infrastructure and making it more efficient were objectives of the Smart City Mission. While not denying that we need this, the chapter emphasizes that the Smart City Mission also needs to pay attention to other aspects of social inclusion. That would help us be closer to the idea of an ideal city.

What is your perspective on the way TOD's are being planned and implemented in Bangalore?

A draft TOD policy was released by the BMRCL along with the DULT in 2019. In my opinion, it seems to be a real estate oriented policy, where focus is on agendas of private sector developers. Often, this is not necessarily responsive to the needs of the local population and the ground realities of possible development opportunities. The blanket application of high FAR is not feasible in some station areas. The WRI along with the DULT had put together a very good TOD framework in 2013 or so, where the basics in terms of the design of the station's accessibility and the method for application of development regulations based on station typologies were framed. So I think one can hope that it will work in the right way.

The TOD agenda has to be integrated with the master plan and currently Bangalore doesn't have an updated master plan since 2015. It needs to be integrated with the broader vision for the city and we cannot have a similar approach for every Metro station. A holistic approach that integrates the private sector goals and the common people's needs will go a long way. Also, testing of the proposed regulations and policies is important to bring about realistic results.

How would you describe your idea of an ideal city and how has this perception changed over time?

When we speak of an ideal city, the question that arises is - For whom? Whose city is it? - as Sassia Sasken, the noted sociologist and economist asks. Speaking in the context of Bangalore, ideally, we need to nurture a participatory environment where different sections of society are involved and their needs are addressed. There needs to be a big emphasis on the ecological features and the cultural aspects of the city, and this needs to be woven into the vision for the city. At the same time, I think the people need to be provided with choices for how they can engage with the city- whether it is in terms of the transport choices, or employment choices, or housing choices. The ideal environment would be that you collaborate with the political class, NGOs and the private sector - most importantly, because they are ones who have the opportunity to make investments in the city.

For me, over time, the ideal wouldn't change, but the method or technique of achieving the ideal may have changed a little bit.

What are your views on the evolution of urban ecosystems with regard to time and climate?

The urban ecosystem within Bangalore is intrinsically linked with its natural systems. I think as far as climate change is concerned, and if you consider the most recent flooding issues that we have faced, to address that and safeguard these natural ecosystems is the first key thing. The question is: How do you actually bring about, not necessarily a balance, but a judicious response to protecting the natural resources of the city, which we are so dependent on, and we are depleting regularly? With the changes happening in the city, we have been encroaching upon them and stifling it to a large extent.

Over time, we have come to a stage where we have not been able to protect the resources and our city's development has taken over.

Secondly, we need to enhance our green areas and bring in a lot more other elements such as retention ponds or greenery to reduce the pollution levels, and manage the increase in the temperatures which we are experiencing. So building regulations also need to be changed to be responsive to such aspects, in terms of energy consciousness, greening, planning for open spaces and planning for areas where we can actually support public activity.

Have you ever shared your ideas on a public forum? If so, what effect did it have on your audience?

I haven't really shared ideas on a public forum, as in social media. But I have written a few articles and spoken at many invited talks and discussion sessions, both professional and academic. In one article I wrote for Citizen Matters, I provided a response on the Urban Design chapter of the Master Plan 2031. I don't think I got any responses directly, but I have spoken in many professional and citizen-led fora on the similar topic of urban design in the master planning process, where I have received acknowledgements.

I think the best engagement I have had is with students. I just find that it is much more effective with students because it's a learning environment for both the student and the tutor. In this environment, we can mutually nurture certain ideas, think, question and debate. This is where I've received more responses in terms of how it has helped or benefited students in their thought process or, say, when they are choosing a thesis topic.

What effect did your work have on city development and to what extent have your ideas been implemented?

In Bangalore, the Gandhi Bazaar project for making the street pedestrian-friendly, which I am involved in, is underway right now. We hope that it will enhance the cultural identity and spatial design of the place. Most of the other projects are at a policy level. They are adopted and being used, for example, the master plan and the regional plan- but they're dated. The project of assessing the impact of the Metro rail on a particular vulnerable community, got the attention of funding agencies like the European Investment Bank. They are now having a dialogue with the BMRL to compensate this particular group that has been affected.

The other work is the Judicial Court buildings audit processes. There is a very good chance of us coming out with a Handbook for Court Design, which I think will be a fruitful realisation of our efforts and a useful guide for architects and designers. It is underway, and it has received the support of senior Judicial officers.

Also, several of my city and neighbourhood level policy and design guidelines work I have accomplished when working in Portland, USA are officially adopted and city development is being shaped by them even today.

As a professor teaching the next generation of architects, how do you think the curriculum is sensitising the above discussed topics?

My longest stint of teaching has been at RVCA and I think students here are definitely being exposed to these ideas of city development at the Masters level. At the undergraduate level too, whenever I get the opportunity, I raise questions on responsiveness to the natural systems, the balancing act between development and protection of natural ecosystems, and the negotiations we need to make. The curriculum needs a better focus on how we could actually protect our resources to our advantage, while being socially responsible by looking at the diverse communities and their needs through a participatory approach.

There is a sensitivity... I think it is slowly changing. In the architecture program, I think many new subjects are being introduced and that is making students become more aware of the social dimension of architecture, the environmental aspects of architecture and also the climate perspective.

The other part of sensitising students is to do with making them think about these problems. Thinking about "How do we address this? What's the best way to do it?", because there are no solutions; they are processes which keep changing.

I was part of the initial team that formulated the VTU syllabus for Masters in Urban Design at RV College. We recently revised the Masters curriculum and we have been consciously trying to update it with the view that there are new problems and new ways of looking at how cities can be planned and designed. The syllabus is focused on equipping the students by getting them exposed to diverse aspects of city planning and design by introducing new electives. We have an elective on public participation, on urban design techniques, on GIS and others. We also have an elective on Indian Urbanism, where we get students to be sensitive and conscious of the fact that we live in a very informal and diverse setting with varied cultural practices and architectural responses.

The teaching methods also matter – such as how we expose the students to the challenges of the urban world. We do quite a bit of fieldwork. We do a lot of group work, trying to get students to understand the importance of collaboration in coming up with solutions. I don't know how effective it has been, but we do try to do this.

What would you as a professor consider major hurdles to your contributions with regard to both the fields?

The VTU schedules that are posed by the curriculum can be limiting. An autonomous institute would have more flexibility in their teaching methods. Another thing is also availability of information in terms of access to some international journals, especially in Urban Design and Planning. But, I think the college has been taking initiative to expand this. The environment where I'm working in terms of teaching is great because I have fantastic colleagues and I feel like that is making up for everything else.

How could Urban Design promote culturally rich spaces?

Urban Design holds a very huge social responsibility, and as designers, being responsive to society and its cultural practices is very important. I think we can do this by studying these practices and coming up with sensitive design options for how to respond to the needs of the people. Whether they are through conservation or through building new design strategies, we need to incorporate and enhance our cultural practices.

I'm not talking only about traditional cultural aspects but also changing cultural aspects. I think it is important to understand the connection between the people, their culture, their practices and the markers and places that are representative of those cultural aspects. So whether it's in a traditional environment or even in a modern situation, it has to be accordingly designed to acknowledge the richness of cultural diversity.

Could participatory inclusive planning play an important role in the sustainable design of Bangalore? If so, how?

Yes, if we do adopt participatory processes in making decisions for how Bangalore should grow and how it can be planned and designed, as mandated in the 74th Constitution Amendment Act, we will be opening it up for people. There will be more choices to live, work, and also recreate in, and that would help to make it more inclusive. It would also help in getting people to become more responsible for their actions, and involving them in this process will make them owners of any of the decisions. It can definitely help make the city sustainable from different perspectives, not necessarily just from an environmental perspective, but also from the perspective of keeping people engaged.

What motivates you to continue your efforts in your fields of work?

What motivates me is the opportunity to see change in my area of work. I'm always looking for new venues to intervene. So an opportunity where I can push the agenda of making sure that design gets done in a participatory way, and in a collaborative way, is something that excites me. In the little research work that I do on the side, I try to create these agendas for myself, where I think I could pursue my interests. So what motivates me is the passion for the profession, the passion for teaching particularly. I just enjoy working with students and any opportunity to make sure that I'm able to share and sensitise others is motivating.

With respect to your field, what are the various challenges you have faced after the pandemic? Have there been any drastic changes?

I feel like the pandemic definitely slowed things down, and made one a little more self-aware of where one is going. From the teaching perspective, I found that it was harder to teach through the online platform.

In the city, I don't think there have been too many changes as we have mostly reverted to the pre-pandemic situation. But, we have learned lessons on how to be sensitive to future

threats of a similar nature. The challenges were compounded due to Covid, but what we need to do in terms of inclusion, ecological sensitivity, and other aspects are still a part of the ideal.

How do you think students and academicians can help in achieving the ideal city?

I think students have an opportunity to be active, and the more they are sensitised to problems of the city and designing in the city, the more opportunities they have to engage with. In the Urban Design field, graduates are actually working with NGOs and building careers with them as they feel like they can make a difference and apply their skills and knowledge. As volunteers, students can contribute a lot. As part of some of these organisations, they can go look at issues on the ground and contribute, not as an activist does, but as professionals trained to do certain design activity that meet the ideas of an ideal city.

I think, as academicians, we need to do a lot more empirical research. While theoretical research is good, empirical work involving data collection and on-ground surveys are useful to draw out conclusions from various cases. From an academic perspective it is extremely important because this helps to understand the subject matter better. Fortunately, a lot of us academicians have one foot in the practice, so we are exposed to some of these things and hence, teaching gets bolstered with all of those experiences that we have.