

Placemaking in Bengaluru

An Interview with Ar. Madhura Kulkarni

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Madhura Kulkarni is a Program Manager with the Sustainable Cities and Transport program at WRI India. She currently manages the Nurturing Neighbourhoods Challenge, an initiative by Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs focused towards health and well being for young children and their caregivers in Indian cities. She works on initiatives related to inclusive development focusing on different age groups, abilities and gender. Her work involves street & public space design, community engagement and capacity building for government and non-government organizations and supporting them to establish processes to achieve long term sustainability. Her research is currently focused on developing street design toolkit to suit needs of young children and caregivers. Madhura holds a master's in Urban Design from School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal and bachelor's in Architecture from Nagpur University. She was a gold medallist in her Bachelor as well as Masters degree.



How have the last couple of months been with everything opening up after the Pandemic?

The Pandemic made us realize how much we crave the great outdoors. Cities began to take up placemaking as a way in which we can also have social distancing or 'physical distancing', I would say. There's still some warmth in connecting with people. A lot of initiatives have been taken up in our cities during the Pandemic especially in the process of not just recovering but also understanding the importance of public spaces and social interactions. By taking smaller trips on foot or by cycling, the importance of having our daily necessities near home has come to light.

Various national initiatives launched by the Ministry of Housing and urban affairs, such as placemaking marathon, the cycles for change challenge, streets for people, nurturing neighborhoods and many more which have created a momentum towards created public spaces in cities. Every challenge focuses on different aspects of how we can develop cities for people while being inclusive women, children, elderly and differently abled.

While these initiatives have started as a response to the pandemic, cities are now working towards institutionalizing them and scaling.

In your opinion, what exactly is an ideal city? How has a city's ideal changed over time and how has it been perceived? Furthermore, how do you think cities can be molded to better perform under distress?

There cannot be an ideal city. A city is livable when there are equal opportunities for everyone. As far as urban environment

is concerned, a livable city should have clean air to breathe, safe streets to walk for people of all age groups and abilities, comfortable and reliable public transport, access to nature, parks and play areas near their houses, accessible healthcare and education. There's a very famous saying, said by the Mayor of Bogota," the developed countries are not places where poor have cars, but it is where there is a rich use public transport." Have cities changed over time? Yes, we have seen a lot of cars on roads, and they are being designed for cars. But non-motorized transport including pedestrians and bicyclists have more that 50% of mode share on our streets. We need to focus on them to reduce use of private vehicles which are a major cause of air pollution. Another way is to build cities to be climate resilient by incorporating systematic approach towards greening the cities, rainwater harvesting, rejuvenation of the green and blue infrastructure in the city, etc. For better performance in distress, we need to prepare today.

You work with partners to change cities from the inside out, along with creating inclusive and people centric designs. How exactly do you aspire to achieve that?

I am currently working at the intersection of early childhood development and urban development as part of my engagement with the Ministry of Housing and urban Affairs and smart cities mission. I am leading work under the Nurturing Neighborhood Challenge where we are supporting 10 cities across the country to support interventions for designing neighborhoods while incorporating needs of young children- zero to five years old and their caregivers. Especially from the vulnerable communities because they have poor access to mere necessities such as access to

anganwadis, primary healthcare centers and parks and public spaces.

To be able to bring any change, it is very important to understand the barriers for that change to happen. It is not just infrastructure that is required, but a supportive behavior of all stakeholders to be able to create sustainable change.

To give you a small example, many times we design a beautiful park, but it is not used. There could be various reasons for this- may be there are more elderly who want to use the park but the design does not have space for them to rest, mothers with babies and toddlers want to use the park but all play equipments are for older children and nothing for babies or may be the park is locked for most of the time or children from nearby slum are not allowed to play in the park, park is not maintained and is dark in the evening making it unsafe. Then what is the use of such spaces?

To be able to make design work, govt. officials need to understand the needs of the users, collect data, activity mapping, intercept surveys from the residents nearby (civic engagement). Design must be prepared based on the data analysis- go back to people, discuss and incorporate their needs. This creates a sense of ownership among the community and they themselves start taking care of the space, ensure safety. These kind of supportive behaviours from government officials and community make a public space project work!

Congestion, fuel waste, harmful transport emissions and other concerns affecting our health and well being are all symptoms of inadequate urban infrastructure in almost every metropolitan city in India. Do you think your work has changed it in any way?

Yes, congestion, fuel waste, all these emissions do affect the living conditions of the city especially the vulnerable- children. We are working with cities to develop strategies towards greening in the city. Solutions such as mass plantations with native species, peripheral plantation to improve air quality in public spaces, increasing green cover which act as points for absorption of rainwater. Cities can reduce transport related fuel consumption.

Transport is a major reason for emissions. Creating pedestrian infrastructure has been one of the areas of work that I have been working across a lot of cities. We've supported Bengaluru to create cycling infrastructure as well as safe walking infrastructure in some areas. These initiatives are towards encouraging people to shift to public transport from private vehicles.

How exactly is road safety ensured for non-motorized vehicles? Assured through your plans, how do you plan to encourage people to adapt to environmentally friendly travel options like walking and cycling?

Majority of street users in India are motorised street users which means the walk and cycle. Most of the people are pedestrians at some point- either they walk to catch an auto or to bus stop or metro station. Their road safety is ensuring safety of pedestrians and cyclists from the motorized vehicles on the street specially at crossings, junctions. This can be

achieved by providing a dedicated space for pedestrians and cyclists on the street, providing a network of continuous unobstructed footpaths, cycle tracks, pedestrian crossings, traffic calming specially in the neighbourhoods, near schools, hospitals, parks and gardens where we generally see high footfall of pedestrians. Some design elements such as green buffer between the carriageway and footpath helps in ensuring safety of pedestrians and cyclists from vehicles. Creating infrastructure and encouraging people to shift to sustainable modes of transport go hand in hand.

Bengaluru has seen various campaigns as Cycle Day which is organized by DULT is one such initiative to bring communities to cycle every month. There are a lot of other campaigns conducted for encouraging people to cycle to work, use public transport. One way is to create demand through campaigns from the people and other end is creating network of infrastructure for people to walk and cycle safely. We supported Directorate of Urban land transport and Bangalore Smart City to design and implement cycle tracks and cycle lanes.

Currently isolated, discontinuous footpaths and cycle tracks exist in the city, but a network of footpaths and cycle tracks are required for people to use it safely and more often.

How important is it to survey people with their opinions and experiment with design iterations accordingly? How do you think we, as a society, embrace community? In order to ensure equity and accessibility, how do we ensure that most vulnerable groups of the population that are at a risk of social exclusion are given that special attention?

I will give you a simple example from Kohima where we are working on the Nurturing Neighbourhoods challenge. They developed a pocket park, in one of the neighbourhood. It was created in such a way that people in the community come together, they crowdfunded implementation of that park. So, in every stage of design, they were involved, starting with data collection, and understanding their issues. We could look at converting research in every stage of design. What happened post implementation was the community around pitched in and said that we will maintain it. And even when I visited six months later, it looked as it was, very well maintained. This is what we can achieve through community engagement. It is extremely important because this helps in sustaining a project in long-term. Community engagements help creating champions among the communities. These champions then help nudge and create more spaces, walkable footpaths or cycle tracks or public spaces.

How can we improve vulnerable groups. We did a spatial analysis of green spaces in Bangalore where we realized that there is a clear gap in access to gardens and parks around slums. This kind of analysis helps us to include one segment of population while planning.

My current project also looking at improving access to public health care centers, anganwadi, public transport. In many cities slums are situated in low lying areas. Every time it floods, they are the ones who end up getting affected. So, we need to look at building resilient infrastructure as well. One of the examples from Indore where we are supporting

in building climate resilience through improving green and blue infrastructure by creating of 500 parks across the city. The locations of these parks are also being decided based on spatial mapping and data analysis while focusing on the vulnerable settlements.

Describe the ways in which you believe that contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals will enhance inclusion, safety, sustainability, and disaster resilience in cities.

Creating resilient infrastructure has a major role along with public spaces in building such communities, having participatory planning, user centric planning, scaling, and sustaining, are also very important. A key towards doing all these initiatives is to test solutions which can be improvised and replicated all the time. Scaling these initiatives, institutionalizing them for long term sustenance is the key. This requires capacity building of everyone involved, dedicated finance, constant civic engagement. To make this happen, communities, government and non-govt agencies have to come together.

How can we design a solution to increase sustainability in local communities? Does public space design have a role to play?

There are so many examples where we have engaged with communities, and they're signed with the city governments for operation and maintenance of that space. Another thing I wanted to mention in terms of community engagement is that in a lot of places we generally end up designing public spaces, but the crime rate is high or there's a lot of activism which is seen. But if we involve communities, it helps in changing their behavior towards the space because when they take matters into their own hands it becomes their space and they tend to take ownership of the space. It's a two way approach and is generally negotiated based on the community it is built for.

What would you consider a halt with respect to your work, ideologies and contributions? What motivates you to continue your efforts in the field?

There is a daily struggle in creating these spaces and nudging cities to create these spaces with interest. So there are many challenges which come up on a daily basis. Considering working with cities, a challenge arises when there is change in leadership. Let's say we are working with one CEO or the Commissioner, and suddenly the next day he or she gets transferred. We have to start from zero all the time. This is one of the major issues we face everywhere. It takes time to build a particular idea and sell the idea to the other person because they might have come from a different mindset, they might have come with different priorities or they want to do something else. Many times, funding is a problem. Now, the Smart Cities Mission is set to end next year. So, the project gets stalled.

Another thing that we are also experimenting with is how can we get CSRS for cities? How can we ensure convergence with different other schemes that the government had? So, we look at different ways to transform the city for the better, and we face challenges everyday. At times there is no political

support. Then, in that case, how can we keep talking to them, keep nudging them, keep telling them how this will help?

We tend to use various strategies to convince them. If there is an upcoming election, we need to tell them that if such initiatives are taken forward for the public, then it would add value to their election. It's a very different strategy every time - changes, funding crunch, and political support, and there are so many such things. But the only thing that keeps me going is looking at the efforts that people have made.

People have been working, NGOs, have been talking and advocating around this for so long, and we have come so far because of their efforts. So it's our responsibility. Especially as architects, as urban designers, we have that tool. We are the ones who can create drawings, we have been trained to do that. How we can use it towards a greater good is something that we should look at. I think that's what inspires me every time. How can we use it in the best way possible, to create something that people can own? So that's what keeps me going I think.

Again, with respect to your field, how has it been recovering from the effects of the pandemic? Have there been any drastic changes then and how do you see the cities developing in the future?

With the measures taken up by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, we are moving ahead with implantation. One important initiative where more than 70 to 80 cities participated was the 75-hour placemaking marathon. Piano festivals were held, where people came together and it was the first-time people came out of their houses. Children came to paint on walls too. A lot of things in those 75 US cities were able to transform so many spaces across the country. We supported around 10 cities to do this. These are initiatives being taught across the world right now. But how do we scale it? Can we institutionalize it? How can we generate demand and supplies? Hiring designers is another area that we are working with in cities to develop this. Now, it is up to cities to make it long term.

This entire process is quite long. And there's a lot of scope for all of us to volunteer. So is there a way in which students in particular can help out, or is there a volunteering system?

Yes, this role of academic institutions is very crucial. Architecture students especially, have this tool of design. It's great if you can participate in certain competitions that are being floated by the government agencies. That's a way in which you can support cities to be able to develop. The Directorate of Urban Land Transport has fellowship programs. They partner with academic institutions to run a studio, so that is another opportunity where institutions can engage their students. Students can take up live projects, a form of workshops, then we can take those designs or insights to the city governments, and they could be tested on the ground too. In data centric planning too, students can conduct surveys. So we as WRI also engage with students and encourage the same.