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Social Responsibility in the Light of Sustainability

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As architects we take pride in associating ourselves with sustainable and eco-friendly buildings. We highly regard the sustainable development goals and green- building rating systems. However, it is rare that we reflect on the meaning of 'Sustainability' in a complete sense. As defined by UNESCO, sustainability is "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." In a broader sense, 'Sustainability' does not merely mean 'being environmentally conscious'. It also includes economic viability and social responsibility. Unfortunately, the latter is commonly a forgotten aspect. This article elaborates on the 'Walk for Arcause' campaign in the light of social sustainability.

During the five years of our B. Arch program, we are exposed to the subject- 'Professional Practice', in which we are taught the types of offices and our roles and responsibilities as architects towards our clients. Surprisingly, we do not often discuss our responsibility to society as architects. At this juncture, I am prompted to wonder whether 'Professional responsibility' does not solicit 'Social Responsibility'.

As I ventured into the professional world, I chose to be a part of 'Ethos', an organisation headed by Ar. Gita Balakrishnan. When invited for an interview, I was asked if I had ever been interested or involved in any social service to the community. While I had been expecting questions related to my skills, experience, etc. this particular question left me perplexed and stupefied. Foraging for words, I could just recall a socially-relevant project in my school days. It was this instance that really made me ponder and reconsider my responsibility to society.

There are numerous examples of cross-country walks that have been done for a cause. Some of these examples include Srishti Bakshi's 3800 walk from Kanyakumari to Kashmir for Women empowerment, which eventually led to the start of the WOMB foundation. While I am sure there are many such examples of cross-country walks, there seem to be no past references of a cross-country walk for Architecture and Design. Being a part of the design fraternity, we all realise and proudly acknowledge the significant role that design plays in our lives and how it can transform our living. Design and Architecture are not merely professions, but indeed a way of life. We understand that small design changes and interventions can have large impacts. However, it is not that very often that we take the responsibility to reach out to people and make them understand the role of design and its importance.

It was some of these thoughts that sparked Ar. Gita to do a cross-country walk and definitely for the cause of architecture. The Walk for Arcause campaign was a 1700-kilometre, 70-day long journey, from Kolkata to Delhi, across 7 states, 849 cities, villages and towns. The 2,550,000 step journey reached over 2000 people on the walk and many more digitally.

The main cause the walk aligns itself to is to spread awareness on the importance of design and architecture and the importance of architects and designers in nation-building. As India celebrates its 75th year of Independence, the walk highlighted the importance of architects in society and also made them realise their responsibility towards society.

As an Explorer at Ethos, I had the good fortune of working closely on the 'Walk for Arcause' campaign. Each day of the walk brought with it a new story and a new learning that left me amazed, yearning to learn more. It included conversations with people from various walks of life such as women from villages, tribals, construction labourers, children, disabled people, other travelers on the street and, of course, architects.



Photo 1: On the Walk for Arcause campaign
(Photo courtesy Ethos Foundation)



Photo 2: On the Walk for Arcause campaign
(Photo courtesy Ethos Foundation)

As India moves forward to a major goal, a possible challenge for the country is its 'Sustainable Development'. A common point of reference while talking of Sustainable development are the sustainable development goals laid forth by the United Nations, also known as the SDGs. These 17 goals provide a framework for sustainable development. Although they do not directly address social responsibility, they highlight the issues in various spectrums of life that are in turn linked with social development and hence sustainable development. Reflecting back to the Walk for Arcause campaign, I found a strong connect between some of the goals set forth by the UN and a few actions or activities done as a part of the campaign. I believe this connection indicates and outlines our role as architects in the social realm and eventually in the larger realm of sustainable development. The article further describes this interrelatedness between the campaign and the SDGs.

Fundamentally, the first goal of the United Nations 'No Poverty', refers to the eradication of poverty and establishment of equality. One may wonder how this is relevant in the architectural realm. To put it simply, architects and construction workers are connected through a common building that they work on. These are the hands that bring to life the architect's dream. They translate lines on the paper to brick and stone, and yet many of us, architects in India, barely know the hands that bring our drawings to life. The Flag Off for the 'Walk for Arcause' campaign also marked the presence of two such construction labourers and craftsmen- Prasanta and Vijay. Prasanta learnt the skill from his father and he has been working as a carpenter for the last 20 years. He does not want his son to be a carpenter and instead encourages him to pursue Mathematics. The pandemic has been very hard for him and finally he is seeing a ray of hope. Vijay on the other hand, is a mason and both his children are pursuing Computer Science. The pandemic forced him to go back to his village as he lost his job and had to wait for another. There are many such labourers and craftsmen who have similar stories to tell.

On the other hand, there are many architects who do not know the names or faces of the labourers on their construction sites. Prasanta and Vijay were a hard find, as we at Ethos were on the search for construction workers for the flag-off event. Finding a woman worker was even harder, because Kolkata did not have many. While the reason remains unknown, Goal 5 of the SDG, Gender Equality, is put under question. Many of the architects we spoke to said that they had to ask the contractors about the construction workers on site. Thinking along these lines, I wonder that even though we as architects do visit sites to check if the construction is in order with the proposed plans, etc., it is very rare that we have empathetic conversations with the construction labourers at site. In one of our casual conversations, Ar. Gita described to me the times when she would sit and have lunch with the labourers at site. I was left wondering about the possibilities of that today.

On the 'Walk for Arcause', we definitely did realise that many architects are not aware of the construction workers on their site. Conversely, Ar. Gita also noticed that many construction workers do not know who an 'Architect' is. Frequently people



Photo 3: Construction Workers during the Flag-Off for the walkfor Arcause campaign
(Photo courtesy Ethos Foundation)

did not know the term 'Architect' or 'Vaastukaar' or any related term in local languages. When asked 'Makaan kaun banata hai?', translated to 'Who builds a house', people often answered 'Engineer'. While Ar. Gita travelled from Kolkata to Delhi, this scenario only became more familiar. The link between architects and Construction workers thus appears more broken than ever, with both sides being equally unaware of each other's existence.

As mentioned in Subhomay Saha, 2021, according to a survey conducted by the NSSO in 2016-17, the number of construction workers in India are estimated to be around 74 million. According to, Re-thinking the future, n.d. "As of 2019, there are over 90,000 CoA-registered Architecture firms/ architects in India, practising independently or with other architects, engineers and developers co-creating the environment that we all share." Moreover, as per an article in City, 2018, there are over 400 Architecture schools in India that produce around 24000 graduates per year. Considering the number of architects, fresh architects and construction workers, the ratio of architects to construction workers is 1:8, which is a relatively small ratio compared to the average social network of a human being. So, if each architect was to support eight construction workers, then our fraternity could be more socially aware and definitely more responsible.

As young architects or fresh interns, we always feared that we would be assigned the task of toilet design for months. While it does sound boring to keep working on the design of a toilet for months of training, no one other than architects knows how daunting this task can get. Yet with all this knowledge, experience and expertise very few architects actively engage themselves in missions similar to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Referring back to 'Goal-6' of the SDG: This goal mentions the importance of clean sanitation. In India, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is a key mission that addresses the requirement for construction of toilets.

Under this mission, sanitation and related infrastructure was developed in many Indian villages. According to the Public information Bureau, 2019, there are over 9.5 Crore toilets built in India since the inception of the Swachh Bharat mission. However, getting these toilets constructed has been a real struggle.

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Photo 4: On the Walk for Arcause campaign
(Photo courtesy Ethos Foundation)

A large part of the Walk for Arcause journey involved passing through highways and rural areas, and toilets were a big challenge in both scenarios. While highways often lack this facility, bringing this concept to rural areas is another challenge altogether. A glimpse of this struggle was expressed by Sunita Devi, a lady Ar. Gita met in a village on the journey. Popularly known as 'Rani Mistry', translated to 'Queen Mason', Sunita Devi is a woman of might. A non-architect, leader by example, who learnt from male masons in the village how to construct toilets and then worked to empower women by teaching them how to construct toilets. She taught them how to get the slope right, how to make sure that the soak pit is correctly located, etc. The conversation of Ar. Gita Balakrishnan with Rani Mistry, made me think hard, "If common people can work so hard to learn how one designs toilets, why can't we as architects, take a step, go ahead and reach out to people?"

Working for monetary benefits is definitely a need for survival, but I believe that working for social causes elevates your life. Personally, working for the Walk for Arcause has been an eye-opener for me and hopefully for many other architects and others in the architecture and design fraternity. I sincerely hope that moving ahead, we as young architects, the future nation-builders, take ahead the intent of this mission and do not leave it buried in history. I hope that we strive to be a little more socially responsible and in this way, more sustainable.



Photo 5: Ar. Gita in conversation with Rani Mistry
(Photo courtesy Ethos Foundation)