



02. Community Creations.

Conversation with **Ar.Nipun Prabhakar**, Community Architect and Designer, Founder of Dhammada Collective.

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Intent :

Architect Nipun Prabhakar, the mind behind Dhammada, is acclaimed for his transformative vision in sustainable architecture and community engagement. His commitment to duty and sustainability, showcased through the Dhammada collective, aligns with Kalpa's focus on eco-conscious endeavours. Ar. Prabhakar's innovative use of natural and reclaimed materials, collaborative initiatives with tourism boards, and advocacy for community-centric decision-making make his insights invaluable. His holistic approach to architecture, blending environmental consciousness with community welfare, aligns with Kalpa's mission to explore and promote responsible design practices, making his interview a compelling feature for readers who are passionate about sustainable living and thoughtful architectural solutions.

A series of written inquiries were addressed by the Dhammada team, focusing on community well-being and their perspectives regarding eco-conscious architecture on a collective level.

What does the term Dhammada mean? Could you give us a deeper understanding of the phrase "participatory design collective."

Dhammada Collective derives its essence from the word Dhamm-ada, which embodies the idea of performing one's 'Dhamma' or duties. My introduction to the term "Dhammada" occurred while collaborating with Designer Rajeev Sethi on a project in Jharkhand. At that juncture, I substituted 'Dharma' with Buddhist Dhamma to emphasise our duty to work sustainably, benefiting the earth, local communities, craftsmen, and artisans. Sustainability is no longer a choice; it's our obligation, thus the name - Dhammada.

We constitute a collective of architects, town planners and artists situated in Bhopal, Indore, and Delhi. Our practice is dedicated to socially relevant and environmentally conscious projects rooted in grassroots engagement. We specialise in community-based architecture, exhibition design, natural building, and craft-based product designs. Furthermore, we have formed a broader collective, comprising of like-minded individuals and experts from around the world, all committed to grassroots work.

What led you to specialise in community architecture? What inspired you to work with local materials and artisans?

My journey into community architecture was shaped by a desire to avoid conventional commercial architecture firms, even during my education. In 2015, I embarked on an internship with Hunnarshala, an organisation based in Bhuj. This group emerged after the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, focusing on community and artisan empowerment. During my tenure there, I spent four to five months in Muzaffarnagar, rebuilding houses for those affected and displaced by the 2013 riots. Conventional architectural education often instills the notion that architects possess god-like design authority.

We tend to dictate even the minutiae, such as anchoring furniture to building surfaces. However, my time at Hunnarshala taught me a different approach, where communities take centre stage in decision-making. We architects support them in designing their homes and provide technical guidance, but the ultimate power to build and shape their environment rests with them.



Image 1: Dhammada's Studio space in Bhopal. (Photo: Nipun Prabhakar)

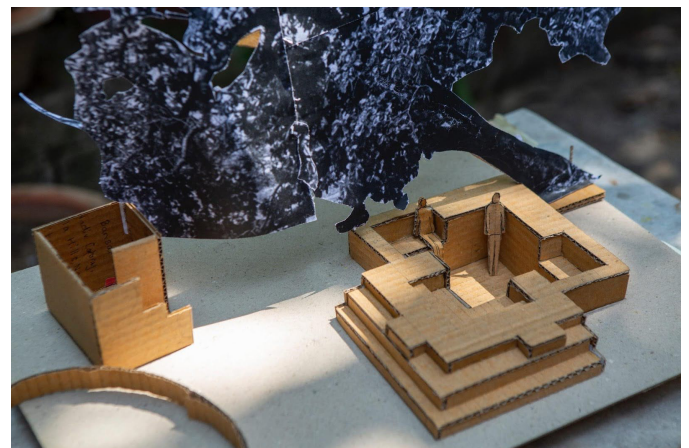


Image 2: Model of a stepwell like plunge pool near Bhopal. Design team - Nipun Prabhakar, Simran Channa, Nilesh Suman, Sanika Kedar. (Photo: Nipun Prabhakar)

An influential chapter in my life was living in Hardoi, a small Uttar Pradesh town where my parents were transferred. This experience, spanning nine years, provided insight into small-town life, contrasting with the upbringing of my friends in larger cities like Delhi.

My innate shyness and reluctance to engage with people pushed me towards community engagement. I aspired to be in the field, conversing with people rather than being confined to an office, drafting plans. My aversion to “othering” individuals and my curiosity about people enhanced my ability to work effectively with diverse communities.

What properties of these materials inspire you to work with them, and how do these compare to more modern materials?

Working with natural and reclaimed materials brings a unique sense of connection with the earth. These materials have a lower environmental impact than their modern counterparts due to reduced energy requirements for extraction and manufacturing. Additionally, they echo the local character, preserving a region’s culture, traditions, and craftsmanship, infusing a deeper sense of meaning into the built environment. Their aesthetic appeal lies in their timeless beauty, the irregularities, and the unique textures they offer, creating visually captivating spaces. They are also impermanent. Impermanence is an innate natural character. I remember

a nice line from Christopher Alexander’s ‘Timeless Way of building’. It said something like, ‘if you want a building to be timeless, build it with materials that eventually die.’ Modern materials work on the idea of permanence.

What challenges do you typically encounter when working with materials like kulhads¹ and earthen pots, especially on a large-scale project?

While we haven’t employed kulhads extensively in large-scale projects, working with local and natural materials presents specific challenges. One recurring issue is the disruption of supply chains by industrial materials, like cement and steel. People often find it more convenient to purchase these industrial materials from a nearby shop rather than seeking quality mud from their neighbour’s land or farm.



Image 4 : During the construction of Kulhad Cat house. (Photo : Nipun Prabhakar)



Image 3: From Kesh Kala - The Art of Hair in India. An exhibition we recently designed for Bihar Museum, in collaboration with Ghent University, Belgium. We tried to collaborate with local craftsmen in the region to prepare installations. Photo: Nipun Prabhakar

¹Kulhad : traditional earthen handleless pottery cup from South Asia that is typically undecorated and unglazed

Could you provide us with an overview of the Homestays built in Madhya Pradesh and run us through your process of design and construction.

We are collaborating with approximately ten villages in three districts of Madhya Pradesh to develop homestays in partnership with the local communities. This initiative, conducted in conjunction with the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board and in collaboration with Hunnarshala Foundation, embodies a profoundly community-centric approach. Together with the locals, we craft designs based on regional traditions, utilising locally sourced materials.

These homestays serve the dual purpose of providing comfortable lodging for travellers in Madhya Pradesh's villages, while generating additional income for the property owners. They are strategically located around tourism hotspots in the state, promoting both tourism and community participation.



Image 5 :Nilesh Suman during community discussions about design



Image 6: Nipun Prabhakar in discussion about homestay designs with the village community. Photo by Sejal Selwadiya.

How did the project's locale and climatic nuances influence the selection of the chosen materials?

Our design process unfolds in three stages. Initially, we immerse ourselves in the villages, comprehending the local climate, spatial utilisation, native materials, and artisanal expertise. We document traditional structures, engage with local craftsmen, and gain a holistic understanding of building practices. We identify challenges in traditional architecture and brainstorm solutions.

Returning to our studio, we synthesise our insights into designs that consider both tourists' needs and homeowners' concerns. Subsequently, we return to the villages with design proposals, involving the community in a selection process.

Materials are chosen based on local wisdom and suitability. We place a high level of trust in locally sourced materials, which have evolved through centuries of trial and error.

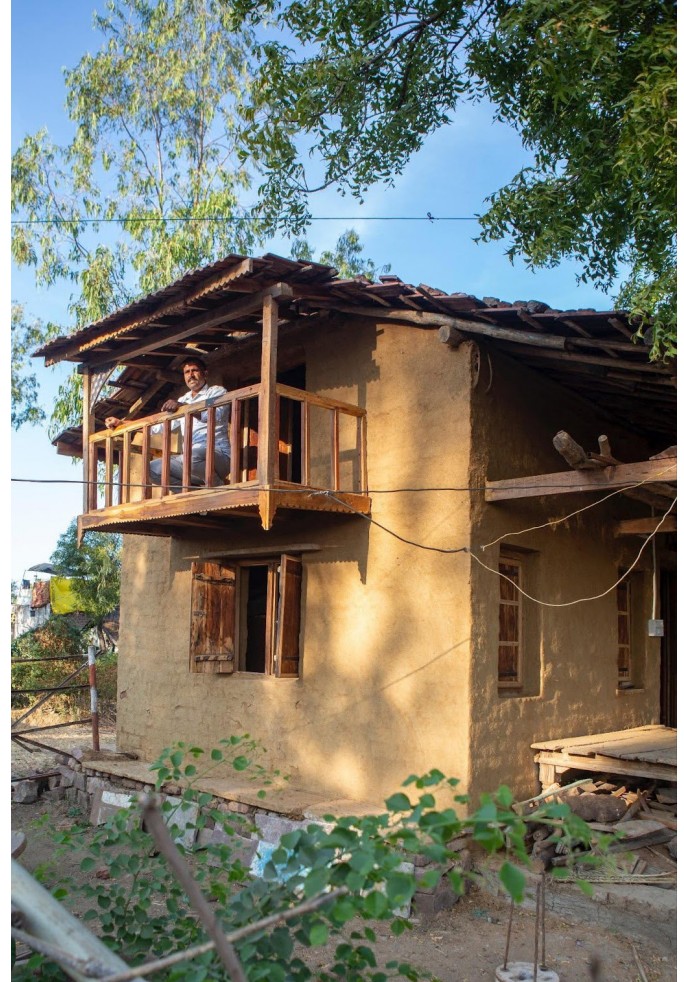


Image 7: A resident enjoying his newly built homestay. Photo: Nipun Prabhakar.

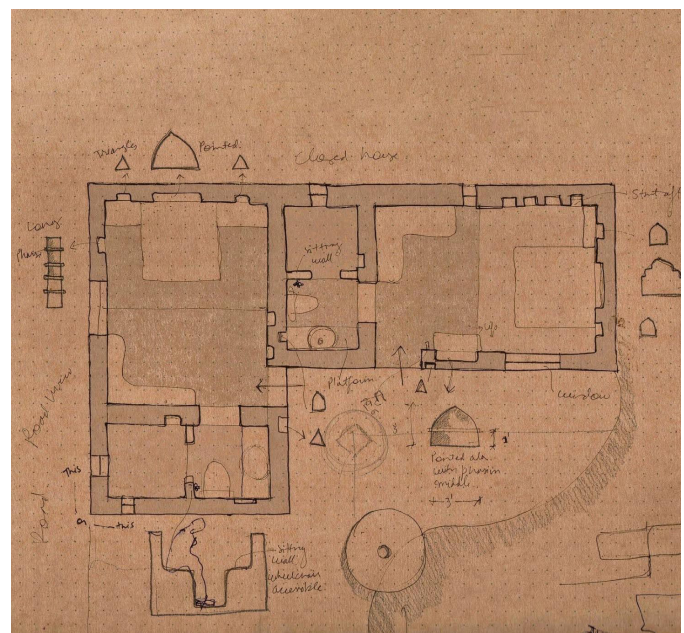


Image 8: Sketch of Homestay design by Nipun Prabhakar.

What role did the owner's comfort, vision, and finances play in the selection of materials for interior spaces?

In most cases, the villagers we work with are comfortable with earth-based materials for interiors, such as mud plaster and exposed wood. These choices also align with the project's objectives and demands.

What engineering methods did you utilize to ensure the structural stability of the Homestays, given that the bricks used were almost 50 years old?

We didn't employ complex engineering methods. Instead, we relied on the wisdom of local artisans. The bricks, even though nearly half a century old, had previously been part of a standing structure. We conducted on-site testing to confirm their strength. Additionally, the new structures were single-story, reducing structural demands.

Today, sustainability is an indisputable precept of any discipline. How would you define sustainability and its applicability?

Sustainability has become a buzzword, often losing its core meaning. It's a concept that varies for each person, rooted in their morality and boundaries. At its extreme, I question whether constructing anything on the ground is sustainable, as it displaces countless living beings and disrupts ecosystems, even when merely digging foundations. Therefore, our initial step in any design project is to question the necessity of construction.

True, sustainability, in my view, involves using local materials, trusting local wisdom, and considering the well-being of the earth at every design and construction stage. It's about making choices that benefit both the environment and our clients.

Lastly, what would be your advice to young architects in creating and energizing one's design through material choices and resource management?

Architectural education often neglects materials, focusing primarily on design. My advice to young architects is to observe, touch, and feel materials in their surroundings. Sometimes, materials' limitations and qualities guide the design. Stay curious and stay informed about material innovations to become better designers.

In today's rapidly evolving construction industry, new material innovations emerge constantly. Despite this influx of new options, some vernacular materials still persist as relevant construction materials. Why do you think these materials continue to find their place, despite the constant emergence of new materials and technological advancements in the building industry?

Embracing technology is crucial, and we shouldn't shy away from it. We should leverage technology to create advanced eco-friendly materials and develop innovative sustainable practices. This shift should reorient technology from being solely economically driven to being sustainability-centric.

Interviewee's profile :



Ar. Nipun Prabhakar

Nipun Prabhakar is an Architect, designer and photojournalist based in Bhopal and Delhi. He works closely with communities in South Asia where he designs built structures and documents stories at the intersections of ideas, artefacts, culture, transformation, and the built environment. He is the Founder of Dhammada, a community architecture collective.

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