

CITIZEN SCIENCE FOR PEOPLE-CENTRIC CITIES

Creating an online portal for public engagement

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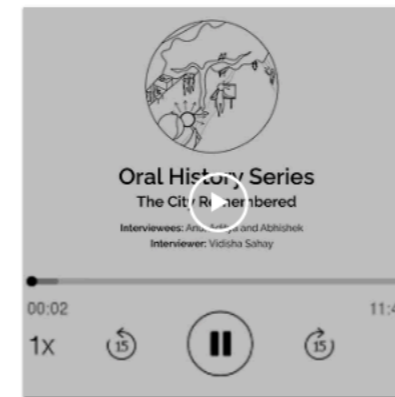
In the context of the Indian city, 'street and public space design' manifests as a wicked problem. There are two reasons for this: one, these spaces are negotiated in dynamic ways on an everyday basis and two, there are interdependencies between the multiple stakeholders that result in a layered complexity. This generates challenges in the planning of the Indian city because the static master plan for a 10-15-year period that the present system supports does not work for a city that is changing on the ground every day, besides being governed by a regime that thrives on informality and ambiguity (Roy, 2009). The Master plan in some ways operates at the meta level and does not specify programmes and projects that can be implemented on the ground.

Currently, most cities in India do not have street design guidelines. The guidelines that do exist focus more on issues such as street hierarchies, transport networks, road safety and parking facilities that are based more on traffic engineering principles and less on the relationship between streets and the everyday life of people (Mandhan, 2018). Today, the thinking on cities across India, their planning and implementation seems to focus on developing streets that are car-centric and an urban landscape that will build a globally acceptable image. However, in India, the street is not just a 'connector' for people and cars to move, it is also a 'container' that holds the social, cultural, religious, economic and political practices of its citizens. One

The City Remembered

In this section, we hope to dialogue with people from different backgrounds about their thoughts on public spaces – their memories of a neighbourhood space from their childhood, their own usage and experiences of a park, a marketplace, a maidan and so on as well as any ideas they may have on places for social interaction in the public realm.

If you'd like to be interviewed or if you have a new topic for conducting oral histories, reach out to us via mail.



Listen to the 'Ask Your Grandparents' Series

In the first part of this Oral history series, we share conversations with grandparents who were kind enough to agree to talk to us. We asked them about the public places they go to, how they reach there, and how public life has changed over the years. We invite you to listen to their stories!

The oral history or City Remembered section on the DE portal
Source: Author - www.decodingeveryday.com

Dadi of Kirti

11/26/2021 | 4 min

Kirti's Dadi (76) is a nature lover and likes to visit near by parks in the morning. She is also very fond of shopping from her favourite places like, palika market or quila road etc. in the city. (Rohtak). Interviewee: Dadi of Kirti Interviewer: Kirti

Nanaji of Kirti

11/26/2021 | 3 min

Kirti's Nanaji is a simple person who belongs to a small village in (Hasanpur) Samastipur, Bihar. He likes to go for walks in the local college ground and here he has talked about his experience there. Interviewee: Nanaji of Kirti Interviewer: Kirti Kumari

Nani of Ayushi

11/26/2021 | 8 min

finds that the ways in which we use our streets differ from one neighbourhood to another, from one city to another. These differences on the ground level need to be recorded and analysed, if we are to understand how our cities work. We believe that every citizen can be an active participant in the production of knowledge about how streets and public spaces work, in their design and planning, and in their maintenance and governance. Hence, the need for active citizenship is felt in cities across the country.

Active citizenship for city-making

We, at the Everyday City Lab are in the process of developing an ONLINE REPOSITORY on streets and public spaces established under creative commons for a continual engagement with the public and to CREATE A NETWORK of people who would like to commit to making a change on the ground in their own neighbourhoods. In the DECODING EVERYDAY portal (<https://www.decodingeveryday.com/>), citizen participation is envisaged to help citizens to understand for themselves how spaces are being used in their neighbourhoods and to suggest ways in which the quality of life can be improved in simple ways.

Small acts of engagement on the portal by those who become members of the online community could bring them close to each other and their ability to be active citizens is likely to go up. The main endeavour of the project is to look at how to bring active citizenship into city-making.

The citizen science approach - where citizens collectively build knowledge on a subject, would allow us to record observations from neighbourhoods across different Indian cities. This would help understand how our urban spaces are shaped by social, cultural & economic practices in the public realm. In addition to this, we'd like to collaborate with professionals who like to work across interdisciplinary boundaries because city design in the Indian context needs inputs from diverse areas.

Pilot project: Decoding Everyday

In June 2021, when we started work on the pilot project, we decided to begin by sharing some work we had been doing on neighbourhood community spaces in Bangalore. We had studied the ashwath kattes (peepul tree shrines) as a sustainable urban space and have shared the data from this research on the



About Contribute Cities Data Bulletins Urban Themes 100 Katte Mapping Competitions Volunteer Everyday Community

Contribute your Experiences

We invite each one of you to share stories from your neighbourhood so that we may collectively work towards people-centric cities. In this sharing and collective sense-making, there can be new learning for all of us. How to contribute? You can use one of the ten options below to contribute easily.

Share What You Know



Experiences

Ashwath Katte



Observations

Everyday Stories



One-min videos

The City Remembered



Interviews

Discussion Forum



Reflections

Be a Citizen Scientist

Make Your Own Map



Maps

Life in the Streets



Photographs

Urban Sketching



Sketches

Project or Research



Reports

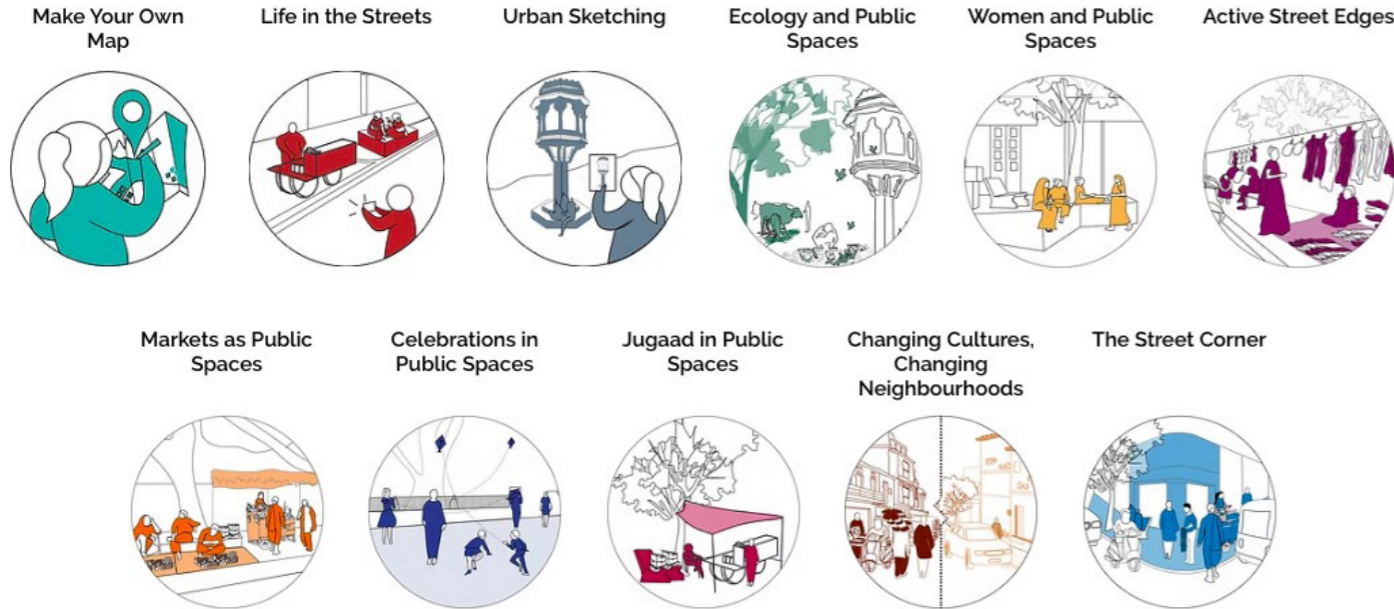
Best Practices



Success Stories

Competitions

You could look at the featured entries from our PAST competitions here.



The 'Competitions' section on the portal that helped enhance citizen engagement
Source: Author - www.decodingeveryday.com

portal. A map of Bangalore is uploaded which allows one to locate and visit 100 ashwath kattes across the city of Bangalore. These are elements of the Everyday City that are made accessible to the people through the portal.

For the section 'City Remembered' interviews were conducted with people from different user groups such as the elderly, women and children to know how they use the small, public spaces in their neighbourhood. The first set of interviews under the 'Ask your grandparents' series shares conversations with elderly to reveal the public places they go to, how they reach there and how public life has changed over the years.

In another section, 'Everyday Stories' a set of one-minute films are shared which depict simple observations about public spaces. The initial content for each of these sections was created by our internal team at the Everyday City Lab. These are shared on the portal as sample content for those interested to contribute stories from their own neighbourhoods, own cities. In addition to this, the portal has sections such

as 'Share what you know' with google forms to gather data on Women and public space; Social life in the public space; Shade and public space and so on. In Feb-Mar 2022, we ran a series of six weekly competitions on themes such as Ecology and Public spaces, Active Street Edges, Markets as Public Spaces and so on (Fig.3). These competitions helped improve citizen engagement and were made possible through a small grant from the Citizen Innovation Lab (CIL) at CIIE.CO where we were participating at that time in a citizen innovation hackathon.

In the 'Discussion Forum', the topic 'Safety in Public spaces' got a large number of responses with readers sharing a story from a street or public space where their experience was either enjoyable or where they felt unsafe. In another section, architecture & urban design students contributed personal geography maps and sketches.

Why the CITIZEN contribution matters

The portal is seen as a database built BY the people and FOR the people. If each of us contributes stories

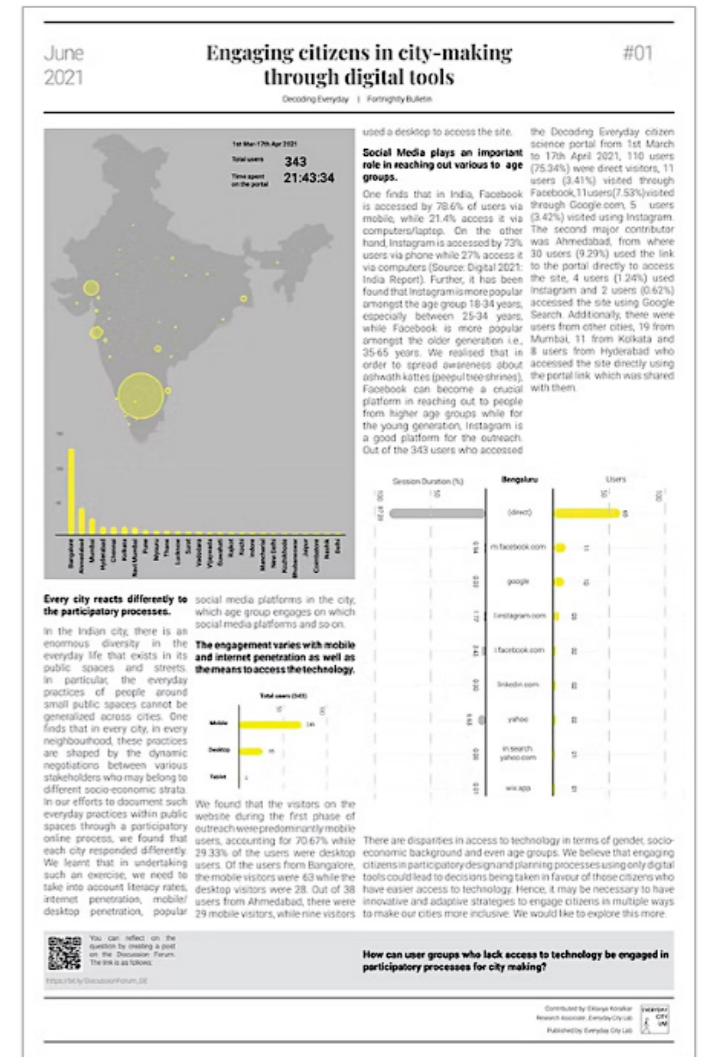
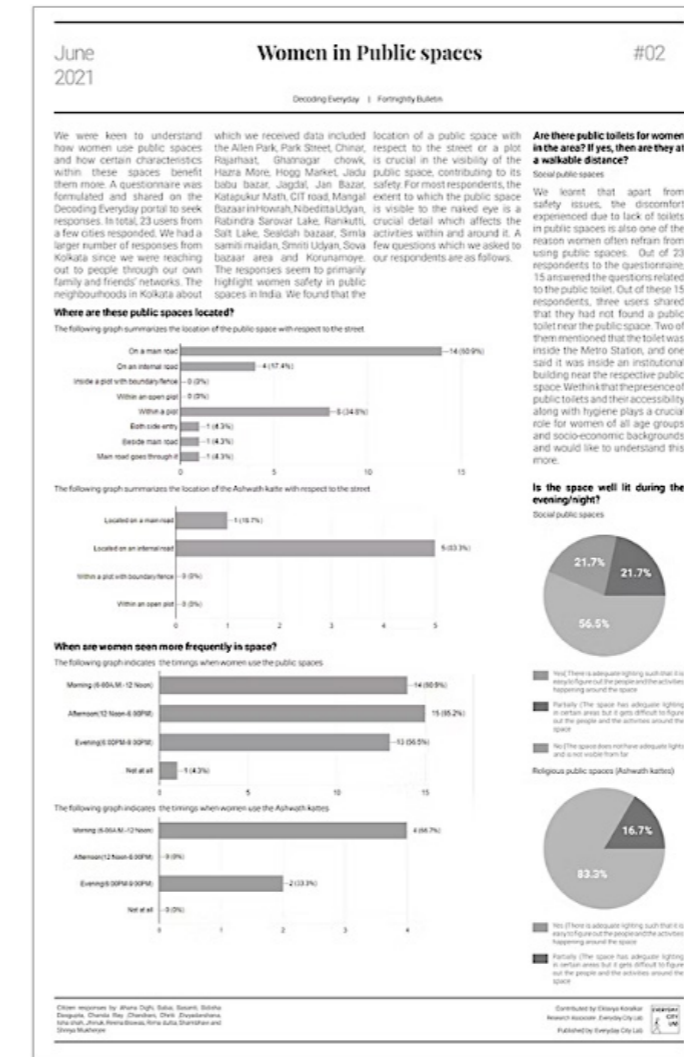
and observations from our own neighbourhoods, it would generate enough data that can then be made available city-wise and ward-wise for use by local residents, RWAs, NGOs working on civic issues and interest groups who are working to solve civic issues. The contributions that come into the different sections are analysed and shared back again on the portal in the form of bi-weekly 'data bulletins'

We think that each component of the portal could be taken forward into an action plan at the neighbourhood level by citizens – either as an individual or collective effort. It could help generate street design guidelines for each city that takes into account how people use the spaces on a day-to-day basis. It can also be useful to policy-makers. For instance, the Urban Street Vendor Policy can be made context-specific for each neighbourhood if the locational choices of the informal vendors are understood better.

Pedagogical and research implications of a citizen science portal

In the long-term, this citizen science portal can potentially lead to developing programs for high school students where they could learn about how their marketplaces, parks, maidans or temple precincts work; why they are the way they are; and, how they can contribute in small ways to make them better. There is cognitive capability amongst college students and early graduates who could be engaged in both identifying and solving some of the problems at the neighbourhood level.

Today, the architecture schools across the country are conducting design studios that focus on imagined projects, often seeking inspiration from the buildings and public spaces of Singapore and New York. This citizen science project has the potential to move towards people-centric



The biweekly 'Data Bulletins' that share insights and analysis from the citizen data
Source: Author - www.decodingeveryday.com

approaches, perhaps changing the mindset of young architects and urban designers. It might bring a new focus to their imagination and a redefined purpose that is more relevant to Indian cities.

Conversations with users of this repository

We have had conversations with a few different user groups of this repository to validate the idea of the portal and to understand who would be interested in using the data generated and what form this data should take. In an interview with a Delhi-based Urban Planner who has been a Consultant in Participatory Planning for projects across the country, we learnt that it would be good to share this data with MLAs and Municipal Councillors who have a budget for their jurisdiction and may be interested in making small changes on the ground. She also suggested that the neighbourhood data be made available on the portal ward-wise so as to make it easier for Councillors, RWAs and NGOs working there to use it. Another Urban Planner who has been a Consultant for the Master Plans for Bangalore for 1995, 2015 and 2031, pointed out that while it is important to map everyday spaces at the neighbourhood level, the findings may need to be framed in a manner that can be consumed by both public and private organisations working in this domain.

A member of an RWA in Ahmedabad told us “This portal is definitely great as it has information available readymade. The insights from the ‘Share What you Know’ section in the form of Data Bulletins are what can help us with the first stage of the process i.e. discussing amongst our team members about concerns or experiences in the neighbourhoods to bring about a change. It serves as an evidence for us to make a case in front

of the Deputy Commissioner.” Another suggestion from the RWA was that it was important to publicize or advertise the portal in the offline mode as well. If a few events could be held on ground, it could help build traction. One could devise a participatory game in which people could situate their everyday spaces so as to bring up other relevant information.

One resident shared: “I know the hotspots in my neighbourhood through exploring on my own. This portal already has that information which can be very beneficial for a new person visiting the city for a few days or for someone who has moved to the city and would like to explore & know their way around.” Another insight from a resident was as follows: “As an avid reader, I would also use this portal to just engage with the different conversations going around in the discussion forum. The Data Bulletins are good-reads as articles. This portal can be used by common people to know the everyday stories and insights of cities unlike the news that they read in newspapers.”

An architect and urban designer with a practice in Panaji, Ahmedabad and Bangalore shared that it would be good to see the data repository evolve into a combination of what the people contribute, the analysis and a design kit. Another urban designer who is also a member of an NGO shared that he had come across a similar platform, Safetipin, which discusses the usage of spaces for a specific user group. As feedback for the Decoding Everyday portal, he had this to say: “I really like the videos section, it is unique. Because people from different socio-economic backgrounds give insights into various contexts one gets to know different perspectives. It is an interactive tool and a good way to learn about new spaces, that

too they are 2-3 minutes so I can go through 3-4 videos in one go. Also, the data bulletins really worked for me as in just 1-2 pages, they give us both quantitative and qualitative data.”

A student researcher who has been working in both Ahmedabad and Mumbai had the following to say: “The Data Bulletins are quite useful because they have already analysed people’s responses and come up with a set of patterns. So, I would definitely like to use such an open portal for research and even contribute my own work, because we are always looking to get our work published and this is a good give-and-take.” An architect and urban designer based in Bangalore shared that it was great to have these insights as an urban design practitioner or researcher, to have information in the form of excerpts, images, to understand how users occupy the space and to use it as evidences to make a case. However, he added: “Currently, it seems a little design centric. A person from the government or an RWA member may not get the hang of it in the first go while people from the design field might. So, you need to curate it from a larger audience’s point of view as well.” A member of the Bangalore Political Action Committee (BPAC), shared with us: “Citizens who are not from a design

background would definitely engage with something related to their city, like my mother would like to read about ashwath kattes (tree shrine spaces) as it is interesting for her. Even the interactive maps that have been put up would definitely be very useful. It will be great to have more of those so that anyone can look at them to understand different contexts. This is a much-needed portal for understanding and designing public places across India.”

Going forward

We hope that Urban designers, Planners, Researchers, MLAs, Municipal Councillors and others will be able to put some of the learnings from this citizen science portal into planning neighbourhoods to function better. In working closely with a local neighbourhood RWA or NGO, we think it would be possible for them to interact extensively with the different stakeholders in a given area and to evolve a neighbourhood plan that works sufficiently well for each user group. We believe that the success of the portal will depend on an ongoing engagement from citizens who are keen to make a difference to the places where they live and from RWAs, Government officials and Civic groups who believe technology can be paired with on-the-ground work to take this initiative forward.

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Kiran Keswani is Co-founder, Everyday City Lab (<https://www.everydaycitylab.com/>), an urban design lab in Bangalore that focuses on understanding the everyday life in streets and public spaces in order to develop a people-centric approach to urban design and planning.