

Crossing Barriers in Rural India: Opportunities and Challenges in Engaging Marginalized Divided Publics

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Home to the majority of the country's population, rural India is a land of acute scarcity and socio-cultural complexity. Issues with water and waste management abound and public spaces are limited while complex hierarchies dictate exclusive use and access to resources and amenities. To explore possible contributions of designers in this context, an interdisciplinary design team undertook an experimental action research project in Dharmori village in central India. The project was unique not only because of the underexplored context, and the critical issues it sought to address, but also because of the participatory methods employed in the design process. Public participation in architectural practice is not a commonplace in India. Through the documentation of community engagement in Dhamori, this paper describes the many opportunities and challenges embedded in such work and argues that the defining aspect of stakeholder engagement in such contexts is the constant endeavor to test design limitations in bridging various kinds of socio-cultural divides.

The design team conducted engagement exercises such as interviews, surveys, transect walks, design charrettes, and co-construction, involving diverse stakeholders with varying success. Interviews with stakeholder groups at the conclusion of the project revealed that after the engagement process, there was more consensus on communal issues, and interest in working together with the leadership towards addressing problems and an empowerment about one's ability to envision change. One of the most significant contributions that the design team was able to deliver with the time at hand was the crossing of boundaries and establishing spatial and non-spatial relations between socio-culturally disparate rural publics divided on lines of gender and electoral/bureaucratic power, even as it fell short of bridging the divide experienced by the economically weakest caste group. The lessons from this project provides helpful insights into working with marginalized communities in rural communities of developing and underdeveloped countries.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the landscape architecture profession has shifted its focus entirely to the urban environment. However, in developing and underdeveloped countries, the majority of human population still reside in the countryside where the built environment is poorly designed and basic amenities are lacking. Rural India, for example, faces many issues in the physical built and ecological environment. Critical civic services such as water and waste management and public space design are either non-existent or basic. Other intangible social divisions on the lines of gender, caste, religion, position, and class are also deeply-rooted in segregating the agrarian communities. Although the landscape architecture profession recognizes the need to expand its influence in developing countries, there are not as many rural planning and design projects led by landscape architects in such contexts, resulting in insufficient academic discourse and critical reflection on real-life projects that provide insights to undertaking such work. The Dhamori project initiative is one such endeavor which aims to fill this gap in which an interdisciplinary team of landscape architects, architects and engineer (henceforth referred to as the design team) collaborated with stakeholder communities to better understand what contributions could be made by landscape architects in a typical agrarian settlement in rural India.

Today, many institutions, designers, and planners have recognized the importance of community participation as a crucial part of the planning and design process to achieve equity and social resiliency. For landscape architects or other designers from outside of the community to propose design solutions that can sustain over time, community participation is an indispensable part of the process. Not only for the communities served and design of places, it also helps bridge the divide between the distant professional class and the daily lives of communities. A designer's professional role in part should provide critical awareness about transforming the existing social structures that lead to injustices through effective dialogue with communities during the design process. Although participatory design and co-construction are established methods for designing multi-functional and inclusive spaces, a systematic community engagement approach in landscape architectural practice is still unprecedented in rural India. The Dhamori project initiative identified a series of

stakeholder engagement activities for knowledge development and exchange of ideas in each step of the process – project definition, design proposals, and construction, to varying degrees of success. However, marginalized communities are themselves hierarchical and complex and come with many nuanced issues. This article describes the opportunities and challenges in bridging socio-cultural divides in marginalized publics during the implementation of the public engagement exercises undertaken in the Dhamori project initiative.

THE DHAMORI DESIGN INITIATIVE

The Dhamori projective initiative used an action research method to collectively investigate what contributions the landscape architecture discipline could have in a typical Indian village. Dhamori village, located in Amravati District in Maharashtra State, India, was chosen as the design site for this project because it has been selected for development by the Indian Government for development through the Member of Parliament’s Model Village Scheme. Further, the design team had access to all stakeholders invested in the development of this village. The findings discussed in this article are based on design team discussions, critical reflection journals kept by the design team, and interviews with the community stakeholders made while undertaking the Dhamori project initiative. Design team discussions focused on the challenges, limitations and lessons learned at the completion of each public participation exercise and critical reflection journals along with photographs were used to record the changed use of the newly constructed public

play-space. Interviews from the residents and written testimonials from elected leaders helped gain a complete understanding of the non-spatial transformations at the conclusion of the public engagement exercises. The main stakeholders for this project were the village community, village community sub-groups’ leaders, village council and head, department officials, and the Parliamentarian who had adopted the village for development.

The village has 610 hectares with a centralized settlement and surrounding farmland. The community constitutes 480 families with a total population of 2,085 people. The overall project duration was about an year and the design team contributed to the project through two specific design deliverables: a proposed Village Development Masterplan and a built Public Play-space. The village development masterplan proposal is a blueprint for village development and likely to be implemented as funds are made available from the Government. It consists of a conceptual village development plan and design strategies for three specific sites in the village, based on input from the project stakeholders. The design team also co-designed and co-constructed a simple public play-space with the project stakeholders. Even though the problems and solutions proposed in the masterplan are a direct reflection on and response to Dhamori village, they are not limited to Dhamori village. The development of a project definition, design approach, and design strategies proposed are applicable and easily replicable in other similar villages in rural India.

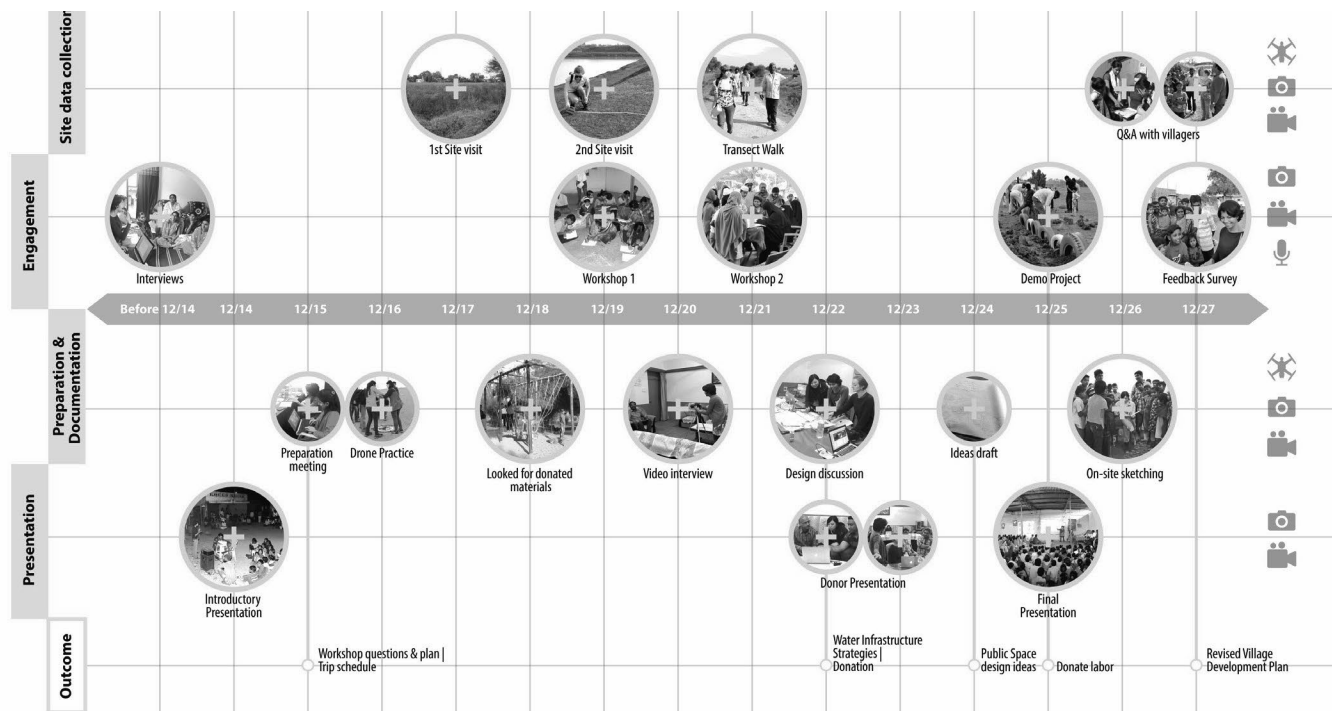


Figure 1. Site investigation timeline and engagement methods. Author.

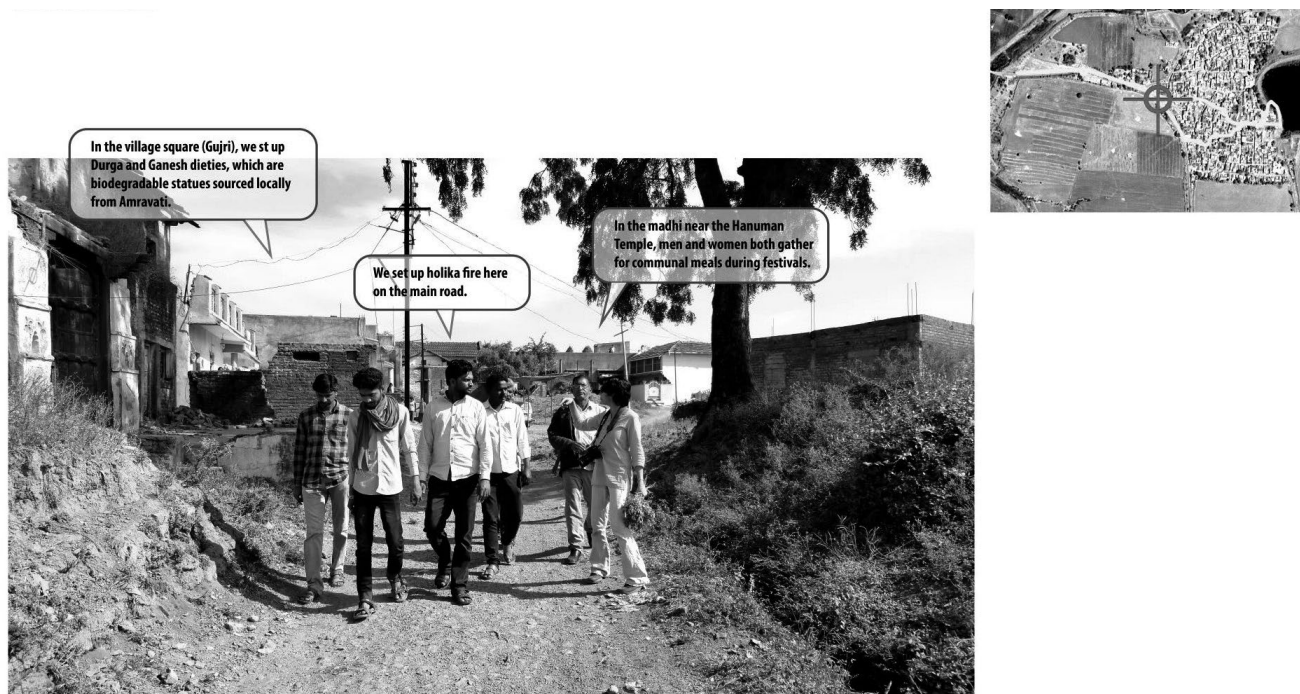


Figure 2. Interviewing local villagers during a transect walk across Dhamori Village. Author.

The planning of the Dhamori project was based on secondary studies ranging from case studies on rural development in India to interviewing designers who have had design experience on similar context. The precedents of the successful transformation of villages Ralegan Siddhi and Hiware Bazar shed light on the effectiveness of localized community engagement in developing rural India as long as four key components are at play: visionary leadership, community participation, communication and education, and scientific schemes adapted to local conditions. In the context of other developing countries, for example through Kounkuey Design Initiative's Productive Public Space project, the designers selected potential interested communities to provide design expertise. Their design process and final outcomes demonstrated that design and planning projects can change the utilitarian nature of a designed solution into a multi-purpose one. This article builds on the lessons from previous work in rural contexts or participatory design and argues that in the Dhamori project, while professional contributions are clear to recognize, it is the process of bridging of different publics through the design process and co-construction that was most unique, challenging and enlightening.

ENGAGING WITH DHAMORI'S PEOPLE AND PLACES

Different context, design intent and research questions call for different participatory methods and techniques to construct the knowledge base from the community. It is important to take culture, target participants, and location where the engagement is implemented into account. In Dhamori divisions based on religion and caste were clear in how different portions of the village were occupied by different groups. Designers should

be fully aware of and respect existing social structures, so as to propose engagement activities and transformation that can embrace justice in the design process and outcome. For example, in Dhamori, different locations had an impact on the type of participants. Therefore, the design team intentionally conducted events at a variety of different neighborhoods, times and settings in the village. The design team conducted three different kinds of exercises – design workshops, presentations and interviews. The interviews with the community helped the design team gain an understanding of the site and design issues while design presentations helped the design team share their synthesized findings and design strategies with the stakeholder community. Two design workshops were conducted to understand what improvements villagers would like to see in the village.

The design team conducted two presentations. The initial presentation introduced the team, intention of the initiative, and findings from the work. The second and final presentation, coinciding with the inauguration of the public play-space, focused on reporting to all the stakeholders about design strategies, opening up dialogues between officials and villagers. Three kinds of interviews were conducted: targeted interview, group conversations, and transect walk. One-on-one or group interviews were conducted with key stakeholders. Group conversations targeted interested voluntary participants in Dhamori to understand the usage and perception of spaces. These were supplemented with conversations on streets in different parts of the village and house visits where people from adjacent homes gathered. The design team gathered a group of interested voluntary participants to walk from one end of the village to another to conduct

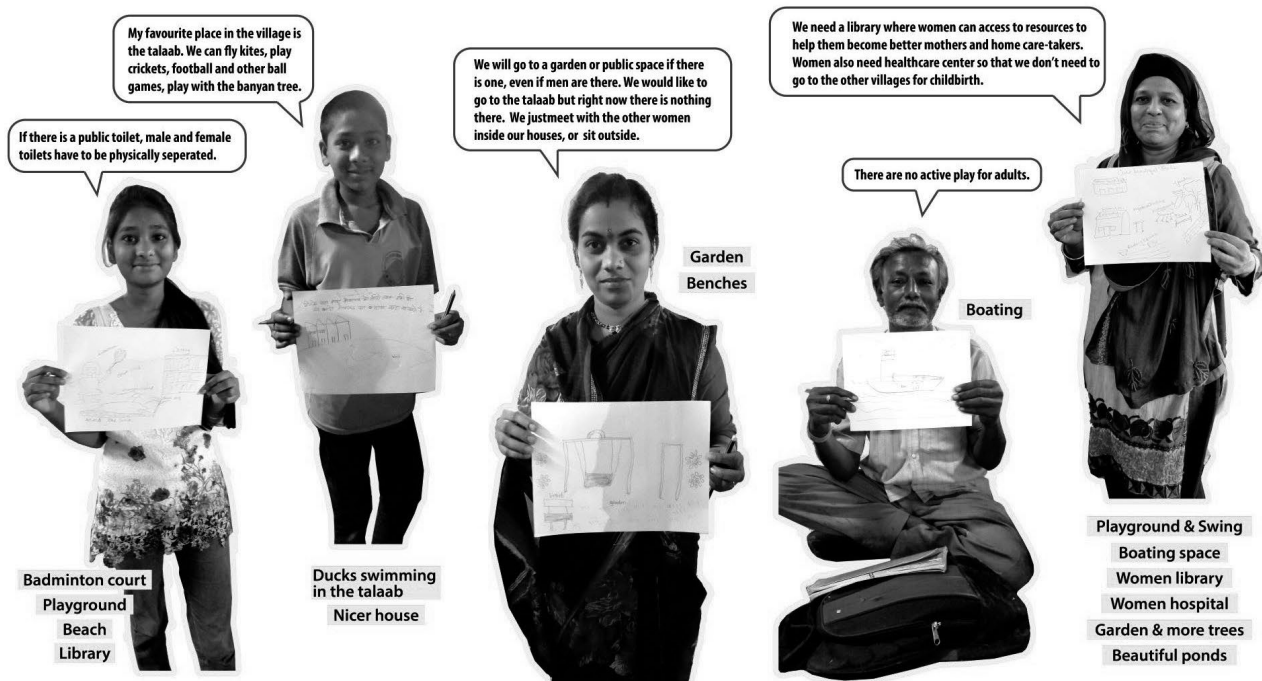


Figure 3. Workshop participants showcasing their drawings about ideas and dreams of a better village environment. Author.

a transect walk. The design team asked questions inspired by the changing scenes during the walk and stopped by several spots, attracting other groups of people and engaging in more conversations about the specific places.

Due to many situated factors such as the nature of the target groups, cultural and language barriers, educational level of participants, limited access to technology, weather conditions, the limitation of time, and similar issues, a high degree of flexibility and contingency in participatory planning is necessary for undertaking work in such unexplored territories. The following sections describe how different aspects of the project were shaped by stakeholder engagement, arguing that for landscape architects, the participatory planning process is as critical as the physical intervention.

Project Definition

The initial project goal for the design team before visiting the village was to create better water management through multi-functional landscape infrastructure. Once the community was involved, the design team found that water issues in the village were not as grim as the design team anticipated. Conversations with stakeholders expanded when stakeholders shared other issues of the built environment that were equally if not more pressing. About 300 people were involved in these initial conversations that were key to identifying other issues of solid-waste management, waste-water management, open defecation and lack of public places/amenities. In order to respond to the issues raised by the residents, the design team presented synthesized findings to the entire village as a collective problem statement

through a village presentation. During conversations with villagers design team also found that another team from outside the community had visited the village and nothing had changed in the village. Immediately, the design team resolved to include a built intervention component to the project scope. Thus, based on community feedback, the project evolved to consist of a redefined scope addressing issues other than water, expanded site analysis, design, and planning, and fund-raising, design and implementation of a built intervention.

Design Proposals

The design team combined input from interviews with government officials to propose design strategies in the masterplan that could be funded through current governmental funding schemes. A participatory drawing workshop was also conducted in which participants were asked what one improvement they would like to see in their village as an effective non-verbal means of communication. While the ideas drawn by the villagers might not show nuanced design solutions, the drawings expressed common themes such as having a swing set or a gym equipment. This interpretation led to the decision to construct a public play-space. The design team also conducted feedback survey after the final presentation to receive villagers' comments on the proposed strategies and design presented in the masterplan. Similar questions were asked to three different groups of people in different neighborhoods of the village. Based on the input, the masterplan strategies were refined. While villagers had an opportunity to respond to designs proposed, they were not co-generating solutions. The design team was also hesitant about getting villagers emotionally invested in developing a

masterplan as with more time, a more robust design process could be implemented.

Construction

Considering the time and funds available, a public play-space seemed the most feasible built intervention to construct. The design team was able to collect material and funds from all stakeholders to purchase several exercise and play equipment, and a volleyball set. Men and children helped with cleaning, drying, cutting, and painting of tires. Faced with the issue of how to quickly dry the paint on tires, villagers figured out a solution of placing the tires on the metal sheet roof of the temple. The village team made a decision to start the construction a day in advance and notified the design team that they had started the construction taking complete ownership of the construction and making key design decisions, such as the placement of the tire seating and balance-walk. The villagers knew where the old steps were buried under the embankment and used that as the foundation of the new steps. The construction took a day with about 20 men working late till night. After the final presentation, the village leaders officially inaugurated the play-space and everyone contributed in painting the mural. The construction of the public play-space was a critical place-making component since the entire project, from conception to design and contribution of funds, labor and material, was co-generated with stakeholders.

REFLECTIONS ON ENGAGING DIVIDED, MARGINALIZED PUBLICS

It is critical that a design team from outside a community do not assume what the issues of the built environment in a community are but enter with an open mind. For example, the design team did not plan to address waste management issues nor building the play-space but both of these responses enabled the community to trust the design team enough to continue to engage and become partners in the endeavors. The design team's response



Figure 4. Villagers of all ages and genders enjoy the new play-space. Author.

and ability to truly listen to the concerns of the residents was critical to establishing trust. The workshops, transect walk, and numerous chats empowered the villagers be the experts. At the same time, design expertise and skills of analyzing spatial data and synthesizing it into design decisions is also a valuable contribution that designers should not shy away from in co-generating ideas. A balance of shared expertise is necessary. For example, while the design team was able to propose multifunctional solution of using chicken waste as aquaculture feed in irrigation ponds, through a feedback survey, villagers were able to comment on the design by pointing out that the chicken coop would need shade, leading to a design solution that combined expertise by both the design team and the villagers. Thus, the process of participation in Dhamori was not only critical to developing foundational knowledge about the sites, systems and funding schemes in place but also to refine proposed design interventions.

In contexts such as India, where many plans are made and seldom realized, the public play-space was a tangible contribution that immediately impacted the quality of life of many villagers. The process of generating ideas for it involved women who were asked if they would visit it once constructed. Approval to do so was publicly sought from women and men both and finally, the co-construction of the art mural with women, allowed many women to use the public space along with the men of their families. In rural India, including in Dhamori, it is not culturally appropriate for women to use public spaces and thus this was a major transformation in the use of public place. Gender differences were also apparent in group activities. When the male member of the design team conducted group conversations, only the male Dhamori residents participated. The female members of the design team were able to enter the Islamic school for a workshop for Muslim females and homes of Muslim families to speak with the elderly womenfolk of the families. More women were allowed and inspired to participate in the project activities because they were organized by professional women design team members. Had the design team been composed of entirely men, none of this would be possible because of the cultural norms that forbid women in rural Indian communities to speak to strange men. The more diverse the design team is the more there is to offer in both being able to reach different community members and more ways to perceive problems that can lead to diverse design and process solutions.

One of the most important results in developing non-spatial relationships was the development of trust between officials and villagers. Prior to the project, interviews with the governmental officers revealed that they held a very low opinion of the villagers "Don't waste your time working with these villagers. They just want everything done for them and will never change their ways". Villagers on the other hand were wary of the officials, "They don't care about us". A general feeling of apathy and mistrust between these different groups clouded all conversations. During the construction of the public play-space, everyone was

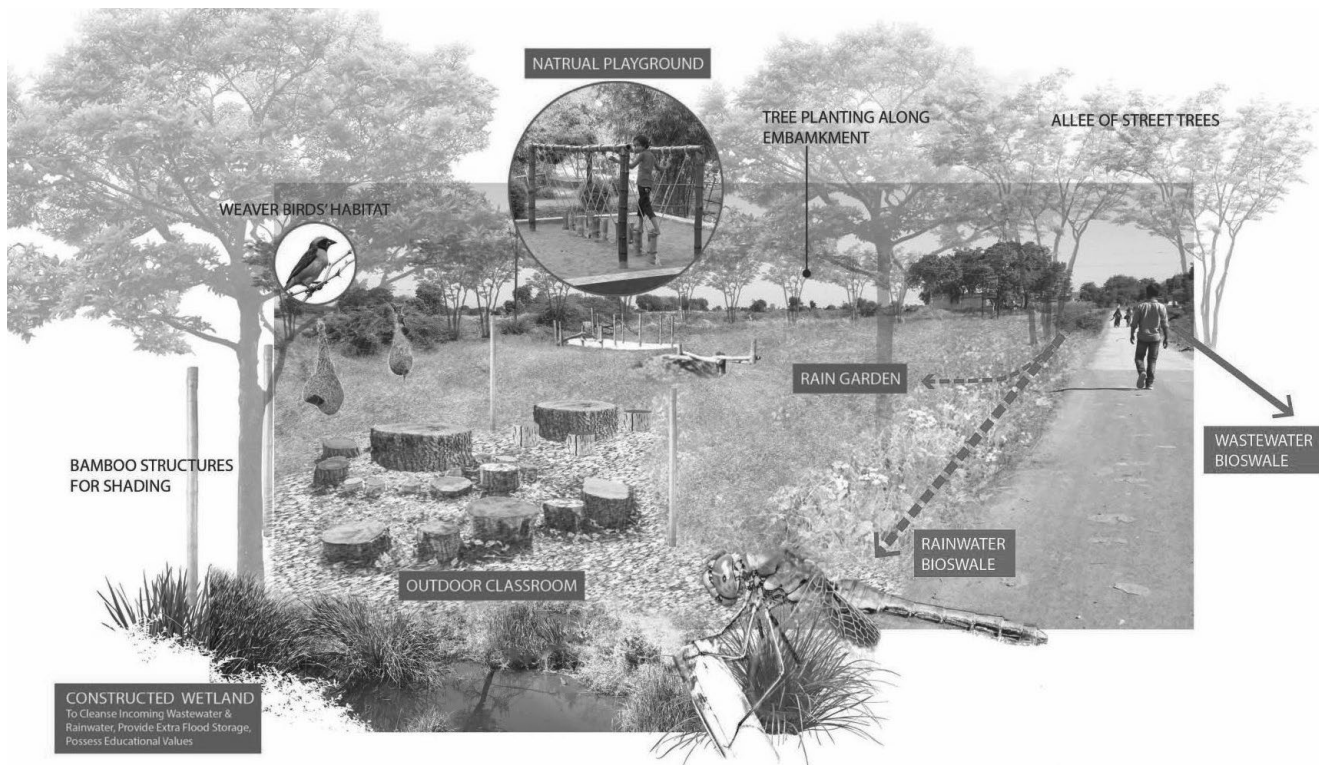


Figure 5. Montage demonstrating place-making ideas to transform an under-utilized open space into a community place in Dhamori. Author.

happily surprised that all stakeholders had donated personal funds. The co-construction of the public art mural in the play-space allowed all stakeholders groups to experience shared joy and the camaraderie of co-creating. Unsurprisingly, during interviews after the construction of the public play-space, villagers commented on how connected they now felt with the leadership. The officials on their part were surprised to see the villagers galvanized into empowered action in creating the public play-space. The elected and official leaders of the community commented on the remarkable change in the mood of the village. "The team led by (name redacted) has done a "Himalayeen Task" of bringing together people from all age groups of diverse socio economic backgrounds" wrote the parliamentary leader when sharing that in all of his previous visits to the village, he would be met with complaints and resentment but after the Dhamori project, villagers were looking forward to having a discussion with him about future possibilities.

The design deliverables in the Dhamori initiative focus on serving the maximum number of residents. While rural contexts are underserved and marginalized as a whole, even within these contexts there are multiple socio-cultural layers and sub-groups. When there are multiple hierarchies in marginalized communities, each sub-community or sub-group has different priorities. In such contexts, the designer's role and a project definitions and scope can become very complex and nuanced. For example, the Dhamori project envisioned a masterplan that would serve all sub-groups, however, the public play-space was accessible only

to a few sub-groups. The lowest caste and class group would likewise benefit from appropriate waste and water infrastructure for the entire village but their very basic need of housing was unmet as the families were living in makeshift homes made of mud and sticks. A project that would seek to approach and meet the needs of this particular class would have very different project definition and design deliverables.

Factions within communities is another important aspect to consider when working in communities that design team members are not a part of. For example, most of the Dhamori resident community took active part in the engagement exercises but a few families could not be involved with similar neutrality. This was so because the village council and other villagers had warned the design team about the factious nature of these families and requested not to engage with them. This placed the design team members in a difficult position because while all families were invited to all public presentations the design team could not extend themselves much to reach these non-participating families as that action would come at the risk of losing the support from the overwhelming majority of the residents. There is no way for outsider design teams to establish the veracity of such allegations or even attempt to bridge such issues because much is unspoken. In such conditions, design teams from outside the community may also be used by local leadership to further their aims and establish socio-cultural power. Therefore, while divides based on class, caste, gender are obvious to recognize,

other divisions based on local power, politics and other issues are much harder to recognize, or negotiate.

While public discussions and co-construction allowed some sub-groups of women to be able to use the public play-space, other sub-groups of women, such as young Muslim women were untouched by the activities. The project activities were not able to bring together communities divided at the marginalized intersectionality of caste and class – nor to attend the public workshops and nor in the use of the newly created public space. It is likely that centuries of caste-base oppression makes such communities wary of sending their children to play in places where they could be harassed. The goal of the Dhamori project was to investigate the contribution of a landscape architect's professional skills in the underexplored context of rural India. In doing so, the project activities were able to fortunately succeed at bridging some divides but not all. Had the project's research objectives been geared towards social goals, such as bridging caste or class and gender divides, the project could have been structured differently. The use of spatial development to drive socio-cultural change presents exciting opportunities for designers to further explore and investigate the agency of design process and of space as a socio-cultural element of negotiation.

CONCLUSION

Like any other project in such challenging contexts, the public engagement process in Dhamori came with its successes and limitations. Even as it bridged some divides, it could not include all sections of society. But what it establishes is the deep connection of the development and transformation of non-spatial relationships through the design process. The public engagement in the Dhamori initiative was crucial to develop an understanding of design issues in a typical rural Indian settlement. The design contributions made by the design team will help address basic infrastructural issues of the Dhamori village, such as already demonstrated by the constructed public play-space. But the impact on non-spatial relationships and the changed behaviors in the use and maintenance of space is equally remarkable. All of the findings and reflections shared in this article are dependent on the time spent in the village – with more or less time and a difference in design team composition or the nature of how activities were conducted, the non-spatial result could be markedly different. This study provides many lessons on engaging divided communities to address issues such as water, waste and public space management while simultaneously raising questions about the lack of disciplinary knowledge on the practice of engaged public interest design that strikes at the heart of basic issues for billions who live in villages in the developing and underdeveloped world. The lessons shared in this article are just the tip of the iceberg and many such projects need to be undertaken that can shed light on working with divided, marginalized communities in rural contexts of non-industrialized nations.

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