

Traversing the City Through an Urban Design Research Practice

Kiran Keswani

Tekton Volume 7, Issue 2, September 2020, pp. 64-75



Kiran Keswani is a co-founder, Everyday City Lab (<https://www.everydaycitylab.com/>), an urban design and research collaborative in Bangalore that focuses on people-centric urban design and planning. She graduated in architecture from Mumbai in 1988. Subsequently, she worked with Balkrishna Doshi in Ahmedabad from 1992-94. Prior to setting up the lab, she has had an architectural and urban design practice for over 20 years. She holds a PhD in Urban design from the Faculty of Planning, CEPT University, Ahmedabad and is presently engaged in both research and teaching.

She is co-recipient of the Azim Premji Research Grant for 2018-19 under the theme: Urban sustainability and Governance. The design studios she has taught recently include a UD studio on *Informal marketplaces* in 2017 and on *The Future of Everyday Urban Spaces* in 2020 at CEPT University, Ahmedabad. Her publications include a co-authored chapter on 'Territoriality in Urban space' in the book *Informal Urban Street markets: International Perspectives* (2015); a paper titled 'Urban design studio pedagogy: Thinking about informality' in *New Design Ideas* (2019) and the paper 'The Logic of design: its role in understanding the antecedents of urban informality' published in the *Journal of Urban design* (2018). Her current interests include informal urbanism and public space design.

kiranmkeswani@gmail.com

In this practice essay, Kiran Keswani writes about her setting up of the 'Everyday City Lab' – an urban lab, in which she along with her research associates and interns has been investigating several everyday practices that make up our cities but have escaped attention of the planners and policymakers. It is generally believed that the aspects of informality that characterize our everyday spaces such as streets and bazaars are random and therefore outside the purview of design or policy. The Everyday City Lab is showing us it is otherwise. Shared here in this essay are some of their findings written in a narrative form. Here, we learn about an architect's journey from a design consultancy to a research-based practice that in turn has a potential to inform design.



Introduction

The Everyday City Lab was set up as an urban design and research collaborative in 2018. There is so much about this lab that has been unplanned and unpredictable, and yet, the journey has been replete with delightful discoveries. The research projects have made it possible for us to engage with others and to see something that we had missed seeing ourselves. The key focus of the Lab has been to understand the everyday practices of people such as the social, cultural, religious, economic and political practices in order to develop a people-centric approach to urban design and planning.

The Idea of a Research Agenda

The setting up of the lab in Bangalore has been a result of so many situations and circumstances, that it is now difficult to pin it down to any one happening. For about 20 years before, my effort had been to nurture a small architectural practice that had begun in Mumbai. The scale and nature of our projects differed from being a farmhouse project in Alibaug, a hospital project in Mumbai, a prototype for 22 schools to be built in different cities across Andhra Pradesh, a master plan for a Buddhist circuit in Orissa, a coastal tourism plan for the Konkan region, to a waterfront development project in Mauritius. From 1996 onwards, the base of the design practice moved through different cities – with the early years in Visakhapatnam, Hyderabad, Chennai and then later, in Bangalore. The moving of cities had meant setting up practice in a new place every few years and establishing new networks. That was also where an interest in bazaars had sprung up because every time we moved cities, it meant discovering a new set of bazaars.

For many years, I have been fascinated with the simultaneous vibrancy and complexity of the Indian Bazaar. It has meant going to marketplaces at early hours of the morning and just being there watching people. Life in the streets has been equally exciting and this led to a lot of walking and then, stopping to make conversation wherever possible. For instance, I would want to know what the *paan* vendor was thinking as he sat at the edge of the footpath day after day watching so many people pass him by. And, why was he here and not somewhere else on the street? Then, I would see a woman vendor holding an umbrella over her head as she sold flowers on the street and wonder, how long can she hold the umbrella like that? Why is she not sitting where the other vendor is under the shade of the tree?

It was later that I found out that spaces on the street are negotiated between various stakeholder groups on an everyday basis and that vendors need to mark and defend their territory.

Genesis of Doctoral Research

At some point, I realised that it made sense to do more structured research into urban informality that had been so intriguing for me. It became the topic of my doctoral research. The research setting was the Russell market precinct in Bangalore. The study looked at *everyday practices* as being the tactics and strategies of street vendors in the context of an informal marketplace in Bangalore. It was a definition of everyday practices drawn from the cultural anthropologist, Michel Certeau's book *'The Practice of Everyday Life'* where he explains tactics as being what walkers and consumers do and strategies as being what administrators and planners do. While it was important to read informality literature, it was the fieldwork that had been the key motivational force on the PhD. There were new aspects about streets that I learnt from interacting with the vendors. For instance, I saw the street vending as 'urban informality' - they saw it as "footpath business". One of the vendors had also shared that for him, the street was the place to shop because neither he nor his family had ever been inside a formal shop.

It led me to think about how many different worlds might be there in the city that we did not know about.



Figure 1: The Everyday City course output at the CEPT Winter School Exhibition 2015
(Photo credit: Mikkel Nicolajsen)

Everyday Practices as a Research Focus

While the doctoral research had looked at everyday practices from Certeau's definition, it seemed that there might be another way to see this for urban spaces in the Indian context. From the experience of walking through different cities, it seemed to me that everyday practices could also be defined as the collection of social, cultural, religious, economic and political practices of people on the streets. This seemed like a good time to initiate workshops that I titled 'The Everyday City' to explore this second definition. The first workshop was planned for architecture students in 2015 as a CEPT winter school in Ahmedabad.

The question we asked was: *How can we bring about small changes in our perception and that of others through documenting how people negotiate streets on an everyday basis?*

The two key modes of inquiry were photography and map-making. There were 15 architecture students from India, Denmark and Australia who worked in groups focusing on different user groups within the Bhadra plaza in Ahmedabad. For instance, one group observed and analysed the behaviour of children categorising them into four groups – children who were vendors; children of vendors; school-going children and homeless children. Another group looked at how the everyday practice of chai can become the starting point of social spaces while a third group studied how women find places to rest in a marketplace (**Figure 1**).

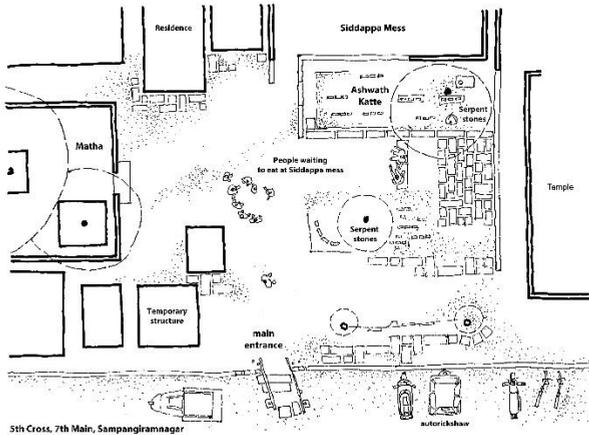


Figure 2: Plan of Siddappa mess katte at Sampangiramnagar in Bangalore

The Setting Up of an Urban Lab

In the meanwhile, another research idea had been taking root – to explore the intersection of religion, ecology and urban spaces. In February 2014, *Neralu*, a citizen-led tree festival was held in Bangalore. It was at a volunteer meeting there that I learnt about the *ashwath katte* or peepul tree shrines and started to do an in-depth study on them. In the early 1990s, Bangalore had grown substantially both economically and spatially due to the onset of economic liberalization. This had led to tremendous pressure on infrastructure and resources in the city. In trying to ease the congestion on roads, the felling of trees by the government had been rampant.

On visiting different *kattes* over the next year, I discovered that these tree shrines had over time become neighbourhood community spaces that included a temple, the *ashwath katte*, informal vending or sometimes, also a marriage hall as one cohesive public space. One realised that not all *kattes* were the same. Some were only religious spaces (inside temple complexes); some also worked as social spaces while others seemed to enable economic activities as we saw a clustering of vendors around the tree shrines. One of the *kattes* we visited outside the Siddappa mess in the Sampangiramnagar neighbourhood was a religious and social space with people coming here to pray but also gathering under the shade of the tree as they waited to eat at a popular eatery nearby or to simply interact with each other (Figure 2).

In 2018, we received a research grant from Azim Premji University in Bangalore to work further on the research of the *ashwath katte* as a sustainable urban space. We wanted to understand human interactions that occur at *ashwath kattes* and how they influence social capital. Social capital is understood as the sum of resources that are available to both individuals and collectives due to relationships. Suresh Bhagavatula, Professor of

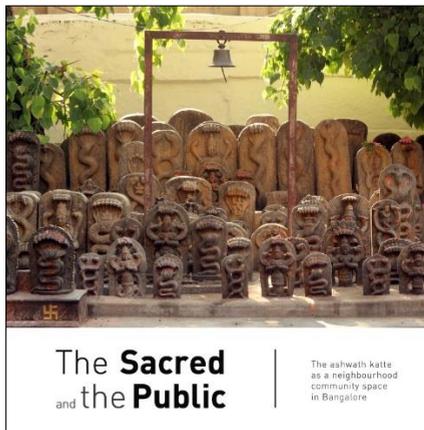


Figure 3: Book - *The Sacred and the Public*

Entrepreneurship at IIM Bangalore and I had jointly applied for the grant as we found this research interesting to pursue from two different perspectives – one, the urban design aspects and two, understanding the development of social capital at the *kattes*. The *kattes* were analysed on the basis of urban design parameters such as the spatial organisation at the *katte*; its relationship with the temple; the social and economic activities around it; the movement and circulation patterns; the maintenance of the *katte*; and so on.

The project looked at 20 *kattes* and at each *katte*, 20 people were interviewed. From the data we gathered from the 400 interviews, some inferences were made. It was found that people make both strong and weak relationships at the *katte*. Also, there are individuals who interact with one another without knowing too much about each other; and at times only know them by their face. While the importance of strong ties is known, research has shown that weak ties are quite important because they transmit new information that can be put to use. We also found that some of the people who meet at the *katte* also discuss matters related to business.

In a parallel exercise, we worked with a group of 7-8 volunteers in order to document additional *kattes* across the city. A short template had been shared with a set of instructions on how to document a *katte* where we had emphasised the need to have conversations with people at the *katte* to prepare the description note. We put together a basic documentation of 70 *ashwath kattes*. Our first publication funded by Azim Premji University was titled 'The Sacred and the Public' and it came out in Nov 2019. It included documentation from 20 *ashwath kattes* along with a list of 50 *kattes* with QR codes that gave the map location of the *katte* for anyone wanting to visit them (**Figure 3**).

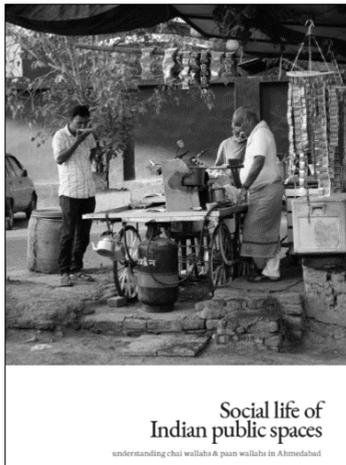


Figure 4: Book - *The Social life of Indian public spaces*

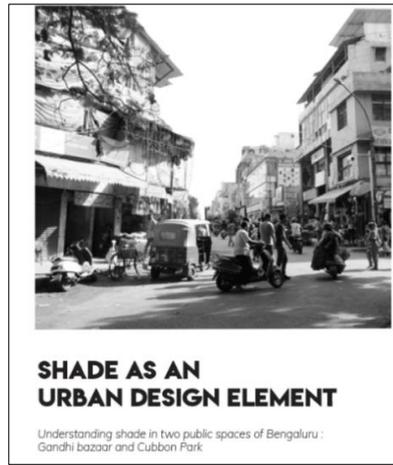


Figure 5: Book - *Shade as an Urban design element*

At the Everyday City Lab, we were working on two other ideas to probe into how public spaces work in the Indian city. One of the projects was a study on 'The social life of Indian public spaces' where the spaces occupied by *chai* vendors and *paan* vendors in the city of Ahmedabad were looked at. Each of these street spaces were analysed in terms of context, spatial organization, temporality of space, territoriality and movement patterns. The text was accompanied by maps, sketches and photographs. The publication included short essays on aspects found across all the 12 sites such as edge conditions, gendered nature of spaces and so on. The second research project was 'Shade as an urban design element'. Here, we focused on understanding shade in two public spaces of Bangalore – Gandhi Bazaar and Cubbon Park. The study found that in Gandhi Bazaar, some street vendors strategically hold their places on a patch of shade under a tree; others protect their goods from the sun and rains with colourful flimsy umbrellas; and a few use tarpaulin sheets. For some of the vendors, providing shade to their customers is a priority. At Cubbon Park, the shade comes from individual trees, clusters of trees and built structures such as gazebos. While the trees with large canopies attract families who come here for picnics, the gazebos attract nature groups who hold weekly meetings here. They also serve as places of rest for the security guards and the gardeners who are employees at the Park (Figure 4 & 5).

Documenting Everyday Life During the Pandemic

At the Everyday City Lab, it is both research and teaching that have helped in probing questions on how architecture works, how public spaces can be designed and how streets can be more people friendly. With every studio that I have taught, the lessons learnt have altered, in some way or the other, our approach to the next research project. And every research project we do influences the pedagogical approach for the next studio taught. We

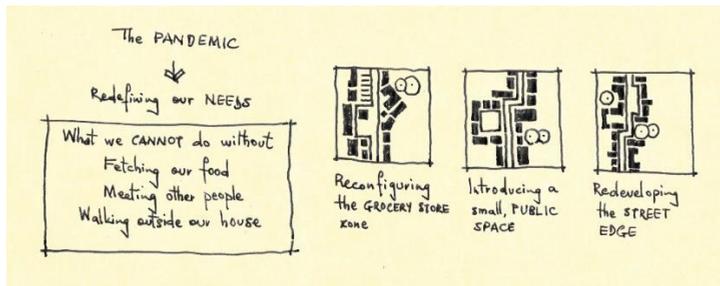


Figure 6: Course objective for UD studio on 'The Future of Everyday Urban spaces'

continue to assimilate learnings from our workshops and studios taught and reference it with prior research on Urban design pedagogy. In March 2020, after the pandemic began, we realised that the everyday life of the city had come to a standstill. It seemed then that there would be no reason for the Everyday City Lab to exist anymore. Our objective had been to understand how people used space in the public realm. However, no one was able to go out of their homes anymore, and our work lives had begun to enter our private spaces. It was a time of reflection for all of us. In June 2020, I had the opportunity to propose an Urban Design studio as part of the Faculty of Planning at CEPT University.

The focus of this studio titled, 'The Future of Everyday Urban Spaces', was to think about how the emerging behavioural and spatial patterns in the on-going pandemic situation could become the starting point for generating new design ideas to solve both old and new problems at the neighbourhood level.

The students were asked to identify sites within a kilometer radius of their homes, in their own cities. The initial studio exercises included creating an audio walk to reflect upon the everyday life of the city; preparing threshold maps showing either physical, social or environment thresholds and generating photomontages to show utopia or a real-life situation seen as the future of the city. Subsequently, they conducted a neighbourhood survey via email to understand the 'before' and 'after' pandemic situation. Overall, a total of 130 interviews were completed across 6 cities and 13 neighbourhoods with interviewees ranging from students, entrepreneurs, teachers, homemakers, doctors, engineers & government officials.

The key intent of the studio was to look at a street in one's neighbourhood and work towards: one, reconfiguring the grocery store zone (expanding the territory of the supermarket); two, introducing a small, public space (based on the assumption that everyone does not have easy access to a neighbourhood park), and three, redesigning the street edge (to address the flow of activities at the interface of the built and unbuilt space) **(Figure 6)**.

Why did we choose these three components? As the pandemic began, one realised that in terms of public space, 'the grocery store' was a necessity for us. In the first lockdown in March 2020, while we did not step out of our homes to go to work or engage in social

interaction, we did regularly go to the grocery store. The grocery store had always been the mundane, ordinary place that took care of our daily shopping, but nothing more. The question arose: Why was it that until now architects and urban designers had not given the grocery store much attention? One of our objectives was to expand the territory of the grocery store so that, like a *katte*, it could also become a place that enabled different kinds of everyday practices of people in the neighbourhood, a place where one activity (gathering/interacting) could benefit from the footfall of another (daily shopping).

The second realisation that also came from the pandemic was that that people who were accustomed to going to a neighbourhood park that was not in their immediate vicinity were now unable to find a place that they could frequent for their daily walk or for interacting with friends and neighbours. We decided that it could be useful to identify spaces on the street that were already working as anchors for social and economic activity and to propose how this could be the new, 'small public space' that would contribute towards a self-contained neighbourhood.

Lastly, the observation that the 'street edge' becomes a space of randomness and unpredictability as multiple stakeholders negotiate the same space on an everyday basis led us to take this up as the third design intervention. In most Indian cities, one finds people walking, buying, selling, praying, conversing or waiting on the street. In spite of it being an active street edge, it is seldom an ordered space that can be a spatial experience that works aesthetically and functionally. The students were asked to redefine this space so that it became a better experience for its different users. If the pandemic had not been there, the need for this studio might not have arisen nor the need to explore a scenario where the streets and public spaces could transform into a world of emptiness.

Street as a Container

With each teaching effort, each research endeavour, our understanding of the everyday life of the city has grown. The pandemic related studio taught us that while we knew earlier that streets are the predominant public space in the Indian context, spaces such as grocery stores could utilise high footfall to become social hubs. We have not had the concept of a 'designated public space' in India as much as it is prevalent in the west. Sometimes, one finds that the reading of the morning newspaper, the selling of flowers, the distribution of banana leaves and the parking of two-wheelers all take place within the same space on a street. Or, the space outside the temple and *ashwath katte* is also where informal vending happens or where a group of retired policemen gather every afternoon.

The maidan in Bangalore where youngsters play cricket in the evenings is also where the *ayudha pooja* (worship of instruments) is done for trucks and autorickshaws during the Navratri festival. We have seen that our streets perform multiple roles and could use this learning to rethink on how our planned public spaces may work effectively.

At the Everyday City Lab, we believe that while **the street is a connector** for people and cars to move, in the Indian context, **the street is a container** that holds the everyday



Figure 7: Online portal on Decoding Everyday - Homepage



Figure 8: Decoding Everyday – Links to the Book and Film

practices of people. It is important to walk the streets, to engage with users or the primary stakeholders (i.e. to read their TACTICS) and to simultaneously understand how planners and administrators think about the city (i.e. to read their STRATEGIES). Today, we are wondering how this engagement with streets in different neighbourhoods in Bangalore or neighbourhoods in different cities across the country can be expanded. There is a need for a collective sensemaking because we realise that our cities are dynamic in nature. It is a tremendous task to prepare plans that can reflect this continual change and further, to prepare street guidelines or policy regulations without knowing about the variance in different places. We think that a **citizen science approach towards urban design** might be a possible way to learn more about our cities.

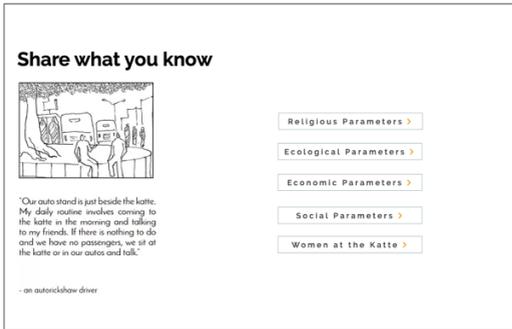


Figure 9: Decoding Everyday – Neighbourhood Survey section

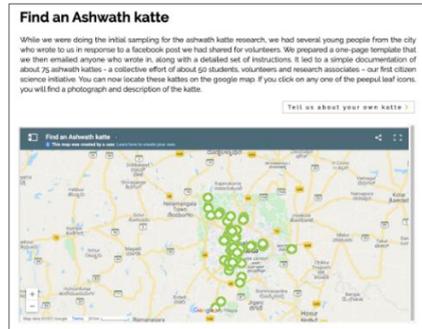


Figure 10: Decoding Everyday – Find an Ashwath katte



Figure 11: Decoding Everyday – Make your own Map



Figure 12: Decoding Everyday – Discussion Forum

Citizen Science for Urban Design

We have started to develop an online portal: **Decoding Everyday**

(<https://www.decodingeveryday.com/>) where we hope to use citizen science as a

methodological tool to understand our streets and public spaces better (Figure 7 to 14).

The online portal will attempt to facilitate dialogue amongst different people from different neighbourhoods across cities in India. To begin this dialogue, we have started sharing our findings from the ashwath katte project. Going forward, the data will include photographs, maps, audio clippings, videos and podcasts shared under a creative commons license. We hope to both gather and disseminate information about how neighbourhood community spaces are being used and how they might be designed. In the long-term, we hope to be able to elicit place-based narratives from citizens through online participatory workshops. We believe that decoding the everyday routines of people in the public realm can help us work towards **people-centric urban design and planning**. It is something we

enjoy doing, it is our way of participating in the collective understanding on how cities work. A small step towards reframing the ways in which city planning can enable the waxing and waning of usage in streets and public spaces. ■

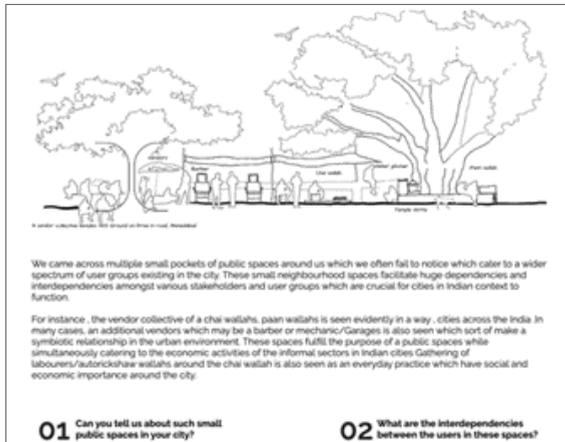


Figure 13: Decoding Everyday – Reflection Board - 1

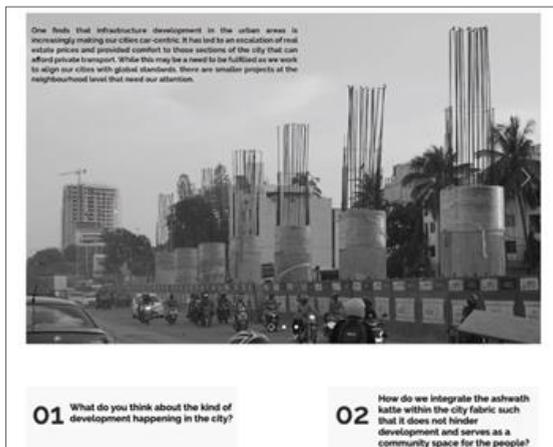


Figure 14: Decoding Everyday – Reflection Board - 2