

Keynote Talk: Community-based Development - Getting the City Back to the People

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The personality and character of a city are not formed in a day or even in a decade. These in fact are the result of centuries of growth in the course of which new elements are juxtaposed with older ones. Old buildings and older areas represent the history of communities, their tradition, heritage and culture through architecture and urban form, which give the city a distinct identity and lifestyle. In today's pace of economic development, such historic sources are often perceived as merely inconvenient and are quickly replaced with buildings that appear contemporary. Citizens also get accustomed with their environment and gradually become less aware of it. Familiarity breeds contempt and city becomes a habit. This ignorance about Heritage together with the depressed economic conditions leads to radical change and destruction of the old city centres. Although, change in surrounding is inevitable, it is our combined responsibility to manage the change in a way that it is not detrimental to our heritage.

Conservation is a means to ensure that the change in the surroundings is managed appropriately for present and future generations to enjoy the benefits of heritage. In India, the heritage conservation measures taken by various Government authorities are found to be inadequate. The situation has made Non-Government institutions and Individuals to initiate efforts in saving our heritage. The goal of heritage conservation at urban level can be realized through empowerment, capacity building of community besides a proactive role of the concerned governing bodies. The process involves a number of people from different professions with a varying degree of understanding regarding conservation. A Non-Government Organization can act as an interface between the local authorities and the community addressing their particular interest and concern towards the revitalization of their city.

There are various efforts being undertaken in India (with a specific case study of the Walled city of Ahmedabad) to revive and revitalize the old city centers, mainly through community building and participation. Conservation at urban level requires an appropriate understanding of the old city centers and issues related to it and then calls for means of utilizing community resources and initiatives through community participation. At the same time it is also important to spread among the community that Heritage is never opposed to development. In contrast, heritage has a much wider power to inspire and move people towards the progress and development of their community. Heritage also provides landmarks; the community can identify with and give them a sense of belonging and a sense of its place in space and time. It carries connotation of pride, tradition, identity and quality and has the power to stir the emotions and build up group identities. An NGO or individual involved in conservation practice can reinforce this growing passion within the community in many different ways and ensure that once a community has learned it has the power to revive the city; it will be tempted to use it again and again.

