

Interview with professor Geeta Mehta



Fonte: <http://www.arch.columbia.edu/about/people/gm2368columbiaedu>

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On September 26 at 10:30 am the Professional Master's Program in Production, Planning and Urban Space Management, FIAM-FAAM *Centro Universitário*, promoted the “*I Ciclo de Debates, Agenda de Pesquisa e Intervenção na Metrópole Contemporânea*” (First Debate Series, Research and Intervention agenda in Contemporary Metropolis) with the presence of the lecturer Prof. Dr. Geeta Mehta, Adjunct Professor of Urban Design Program at the Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, New York. The subject presented by Professor Geeta Mehta – Developing Social Housing for Social Equity – showed that the issue of housing in metropolises (or the right to housing) transcends the duty of the government as a mere political action and points out the moral responsibility of leaders. The issue of housing and the needs raised by the poor must become attitudes of urban pedagogy, extending to the entire population as ethical procedures for a more equitable city life.

Professor Geeta Mehta with her social concern and experience in project coordination in poor communities in Ghana, Kenya, India, Jamaica and Brazil, founded the Social Capital Credits (SoCCs) - participatory economics - virtual currency that encourages community action to participate to solve their problems. These are credits that can be redeemed for personal or community use such as a purchase of hours to cell phone use, school supplies, buying bus tickets, etc. And also, creator of the concept of cities built

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by people – because of participatory activities methodologies. The needs of the poor are identified through artistic expressions that show the social and symbolic values of sites, therefore, the importance of a site as an area of experiences and life, such as the recovery proposal for the Vaigai River in Madurai (the city of nectar), India. In an informal talk, Professor Geeta Mehta told us this is the river where was born the head of Shiva... From this important mythological fact, the recovery actions for the river were structured. Close to, the river stands the Meenakshi temple, Shiva's consort. The political importance to the historical, social, symbolic, mythological, etc., social needs should be lifted and these dimensions should be considered as the basis for urban intervention and design proposals.

The most important actions proposed by Professor Geeta Mehta in interventions for public awareness are in a conceptual and practical way linked to community experiences inserted in local of greater poverty and basic needs.

There arises the linking and the participation of Professor in URBZ initiatives as co-founder: User Generated Cities (2007) and the Asia Initiatives (1998) aimed at the development of participatory urban designs, projects for poverty reduction and the recognition rights of women in poor areas of South Asia.

Professional beliefs of the Professor allowed her to develop an "organic" urban planning concept, showing another way of thinking about urban planning, not traditional, with a participative action as a way of resolving issues and urban proposals. So then, the solution comes from the community and not from the government's proposals to be the best for everyone - city dwellers and the government can think together effectively the necessary changes to the cities.

The event - *“I Ciclo de Debates, Agenda de Pesquisa e Intervenção na Metrópole Contemporânea”* promoted by FIAM-FAAM *Centro Universitário* had the support of CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) and was broadcast by streaming with simultaneous translation allowing greater participation of the academic community and interested in the study of urban space.

InSitu - The proposal of the Social Capital Credits (SoCCs) employs the creative and work energy from stakeholders themselves seeking this possibility as a way to improve their personal and community life. How should be defined the criteria for selection of components that form the groups to help?

Geeta Mehta - We work with communities that express the desire to take on the SoCCs program. As the implementation of SoCCs requires an environment of trust and collaboration, existing partnerships and friendly relations within the community are

also helpful. For example, a community that already has microcredit or self-help groups in place makes them good candidates for doing SoCCs. We also identify and train local SoCC Managers. We often collaborate with good local NGOs that have deep knowledge of, and trust in the community.

We sign a memorandum of understanding with each community we work in, to ensure that the SoCC program will be freely available to every member of their community, irrespective of gender, caste and social hierarchy. Steps are taken to ensure that a fair number of men and women are represented.

InSitu - Thinking about your proposed schemes for acquisition of SoCCs – metro-tro; leveraging; triggering sustainable growth; growing canopies, and their reversion to individual or community benefits, how it could be applied to the reality of Brazil, a country considered as an emerging, and where there is a tight supply of basic needs for the poor – such as bolsa escola, bolsa família, gas aid, etc. - by the Federal Government, that helping takes the possibility of participation and of construction of people in need own lives?

Geeta Mehta - While the per capita income in Brazil is much higher than in India, the issues of poverty and income inequality are quite similar. While poor people in both countries are capable and eager to improve their lives, the governments are unable to provide them with the adequate social and economic infrastructure, or have the political will to tackle social inequity. This is not going to change any time soon. Meanwhile, if communities do not take action themselves, it results in loneliness, alienation and many social problems. Therefore a much more sustainable and healthy approach is to empower people to help themselves and their communities' in ways that they can, while the governments must become more accountable and responsive to provide inclusive infrastructure for all. This will result in top-down as well as bottom-up development effort, which is will lead to more sustainable results.

SoCCs also have a multiplier effect for every development dollar. For example, SoCCs earning menus include items such as getting vaccinations, sending children to school, waste management, providing childcare or senior care, ensuring streets are safe etc. SoCCs redemption menus include items such as telephone talk time, school fees, skill training, home repairs and improvements. While items on the SoCC Redemption Menu have to be paid for by a corporate or NGO partner, each dollar going into the community is also incentivizing people to do social good to “earn” them, so each dollar is doing the work of two or three dollars.

Using SoCCs, communities can also organize infrastructure projects, as was shown in

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the Metro-tro¹ project developed by my students at Columbia University. This concept is about organizing the existing informal tro-tros which is poor people's sole means of transportation, so that it becomes more efficient and reliable. Then people can do social good and use the SoCCs thus earned for tro-tro tickets.

InSitu - To earn SoCCs the population involved in the community and individual development must work towards the improvement of places where they live; thus, there is a participatory action that prioritizes the needs, discussing and seeking for the best way to resolve them or minimize them. You propose the use of the arts for a better understanding and knowledge of the problem to be solved – the example of the river Vaigai. How to raise and analyze the symbolic substrates of these demonstrations?

Geeta Mehta - Latin America is already a role model in terms of using arts for incentivizing social activism. Art is a fun and nonthreatening way to bring people together. The results are immediate, visible, and long term for people to see when the community comes together to create something positive.

There is a questionable trend now to measure everything in terms of money or empirical numbers. However, wonderful things like hope, creativity and social capital are difficult to measure in numbers within a period of 6 months or a year. As such, if the coming together of a community leads to further positive action that should be considered enough proof of its impact, and no further analysis should be necessary.

In case of the Vaigai River project, local people have traditions of celebrating religious festivals with dance, processions, art and music, in which they invest a lot of creativity, time and effort. Annual celebrations for Goddess Meenakshi's wedding to Lord Shiva are the biggest and longest celebration. The closest parallel in Brazil would be your annual Carnival. The objective of the Vaigai project is to harness the spirit of the festival for social good, which in this case is to bring people together to restore the Vaigai River, which people consider sacred, but do nothing to restore. SoCCs have been set up to incentivize people to become custodians of the River. The riverfront is being divided into segments that each community along the river becomes custodian of. They earn SoCCs for ensuring that no waste or raw sewage is dumped into the river, for planting trees and bio-swales, and for creating and maintaining riverside public spaces. They then use SoCCs for education, healthcare and skill enhancement to improve their job prospects. All this will be celebrated during the Vaigai River Restoration Pageant, which is planned for April each year, starting in 2015.

¹ Metro-tro é um sistema de transporte público urbano que utiliza veículos de médio porte com capacidade para transportar entre 10 a 15 passageiros.

InSitu - During the meetings of artistic workshops to raise awareness for the problem of river Vaigai, guest artists and craftsmen guided the actions of participants in their work production. The fact of creating gives us a great satisfaction; to avail this for a common purpose the individual feel integrated into the environment, feels effectively part of the cosmos.

Considering the contemporary cities as locations that separate people from the environment to their fellow man, how make this catharsis integrate the individual into the community life, giving back the right to the city?

Geeta Mehta - This is a problem not just for poor communities, but all communities because current forms of development favor individualism over community action, so that over a period of time, invaluable social capital is lost, and people become alienated from their communities, nature, and their own culture. They loose the feeling of responsibility for future generations.

When the age of information technology first started, people were convinced that this would be the death of cities, as technology would make physical interactions and economies of agglomeration redundant. On the contrary, urbanism intensified with technology. This is a good indicator that human interactions are essential to the development and success of communities. SoCCs reinforce the sense of community, and incentivize group action for social good.

InSitu - What do you propose to think about academic formation for future architects and city planners in emerging countries that have a major concern about economic development instead of human development?

Geeta Mehta - Architects and urban designers should be trained not just in form creation, but should also focus on being facilitators for human development. The long term detrimental impacts of new-liberal economic policies are becoming clear in most countries, as proven by the Gini co-efficient that measures income inequality. 15% of the people in United States are below the poverty line, and 50 million children are malnourished. We need to find ways to change the economic paradigm to focus on social capital instead of merely money. That is why concepts like “Gross Domestic Happiness” are being developed to challenge the single minded focus on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the sole measure of a country’s well being. We need to train young people to question laws that make slum housing is not illegal. If we create laws that sere every one, not just the rich, then people in slums will be able to get bank loans to improve their housing. One of the conditions can be to have an architect sign off on

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the housing plans before loans are given. In this way, the architect acts as an important facilitator in the development of that community. I am hoping that over time, banks will consider a family's SoCCs portfolio as collateral.

Understanding that half of the world's population is living in inadequate housing, with 1 billion in slums, its important that related topics be addressed in an architect's education. Whether learning about designing micro housing, incremental improvements in underserved communities, use of community processes and labor, and valuing traditional housing techniques, it is critical that these subjects be covered in architecture and urban design curriculums.