Paper Radio

Issue #1: Says who? | March 2012
This is the first issue of Paper Radio, a periodic paper version of CoLab Radio blog posts that fit together around a theme. The first theme is “Says who?”

Who gets to speak for whom, and how does the speaker impact the story we hear?

In so many arenas – city planning and journalism among them – the powerful speak for the powerless. CoLab Radio strives to be a place where all people, powerful and powerless, can speak for themselves – for the sweeping policies and systems that mark their lives. But often those whose stories say most about the state of humanity are least likely to be heard on a far-reaching platform.

Journalist Katherine Boo has been an inspiration to this blog because her articles feel like vessels through which the underdogs can speak. To acknowledge the release of Boo’s first book, “Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity,” CoLab assembled this collection of articles in which each writer has a unique and personal relationship to her topic.

-Alexa Mills, CoLab Radio

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AN ADAPTABLE UPGRADING FOR LEPROSY IN BANGALORE

JOHANNA BRATEL & STINA HELGQVIST are Landscape Architecture students at the Swedish University of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Leprósy Colony has some clear problems to address in order to be called a sustainable neighborhood. Many of its residents live their lives segregated from the rest of the city. They suffer poor sanitary services, low tenure security and limited access to public spaces and greenery.

The settlement has, however, a wide range of very fine and valuable qualities that should be taken into account as the redevelopment of this area is planned. Leprósy Colony’s buildings are inviting – at a human-oriented scale. The people who live there enjoy an active and social street life.

With no help from experts, the residents of Leprósy Colony employ many of the core
‘sustainable community’ practices that planners tout (such as mixed-use buildings, local construction materials, a comprehensive recycling system, and a pedestrian-oriented layout).

The problems, combined with the potential and the existing qualities in the slum, have inspired our proposal for an upgrading process in Leprosy Colony. The concept for the proposed upgrading, named IN_SITU (lat. “in place”) is built on two major concepts.

The first is connection, linkage, integration – these are the qualities necessary for opening up Leprosy Colony to the rest of the city. The second is flexibility, adaptation, elasticity – these qualities will promote a settlement that can evolve over time.
In our thesis (available for download on colabradio.mit.edu) we divided these main concepts further into strategies, which together form an inclusive and site-specific slum upgrading proposal focusing on connectivity and the public realm; and social, economic, as well as environmental sustainability.

**IMPROVED CONNECTIVITY AND THE PUBLIC REALM**

Connectivity plays a vital role in the life of a city. In a well-linked city people constantly cross paths and spontaneous meetings occur in the public realm. Today Leprosy Colony is, just like its surrounding slums, extremely isolated from the rest of the city grid.

The settlement has grown organically into a network of winding paths. It often takes a long time to get from one place to another – a house, for example, might intrude upon an important connecting path. It is thus important to increase connectivity between and within the area to simplify the connections. The IN_SITU concept aims to open existing paths so that they become more direct in order to increase accessibility. This means creating connections between different nodes in the area.
Despite the fact that residents make tremendous use of open spaces in Leprosy Colony and its surrounding slum area, there are few open spaces to be found. The ones that do exist are small in size but fill many important functions for the slum dwellers, which is precisely why they are kept open. The IN_SITU concept suggests enhancing these existing open spaces and their qualities while also introducing new ones. In some cases, well-selected houses need to be torn down to make this possible. In other cases, vertical extension of a few houses may pave the way for more public space. The open spaces in Leprosy Colony host a wide variety of activities all day long, and it’s important to maintain that multi-functionality in newer and bigger spaces. By preserving their simplicity and not limiting the areas to specific activities, the public spaces can continue to fulfill many needs as activity flows.
**STEP 1:**
Identification of Impermanent Structures

**STEP 2:**
Identification of houses to be removed for connectivity and accessibility

**STEP 3:**
NGO lead + Community performed demolition of impermanent houses

**STEP 4:**
Govermentally sterilised upgradation of sewage system and construction of new open storm water channels

**STEP 5:**
NGO lead + Community performed house foundation construction on the empty plots

**STEP 6:**
The community build new houses on the new stable foundations, or upgrade their already permanent houses. The process is slow or fast depending on every individual family's ability and time.
FLEXIBLE ANTI-FLOOD SYSTEM AND GREENERY

Every monsoon season, Leprosy Colony suffers major flooding. An underground drainage system currently handles storm water runoff in the slum, but the system is not equipped to handle the amount of rain that falls during the monsoon months. The result is flooded streets and houses.

Leprosy Colony, however, presents simple and sustainable possibilities for an open storm water drainage system. An existing *naala* (open channel) stretches along the northern edge of the slum, and the whole settlement slopes down towards this channel. By creating five new open storm water drains perpendicular to the *naala*, water could be channeled out from the settlement. This could be achieved by building up the paths leading down to the main drains to a 2% fall.

As the distances are quite short, the ground has to be raised a maximum of 0.5 m in some locations within the settlement to generate the fall. These five new open paths could also serve as green corridors. IN_SITU proposes greenery on the south and north sides of Leprosy Colony to increase connectivity with tree plantations along the storm water channels, creating green spines in the new north-south links. The trees easily receive water in the hard urban environment, even during the dry season, since they are connected to the storm water swales. As these spines are also connected to the slum’s major public open spaces, they offer great possibilities for community-oriented, small-scale urban farming.

UPGRADING OF HOUSING STOCK

The concept proposes an incremental housing upgrade process, changing the settlement over time by gradually
improving already existing urban structures, IN_SITU. The advantage of this approach is that it’s flexible and changeable depending on social and economic conditions, and also takes local natural conditions into account. At the same time, it is a humble way of taking care of established social structures and communities that play an extremely important role in a sustainable future development.

AN ALTERNATIVE USE OF GOVERNMENTAL FUNDING

The traditional procedure for slum rehabilitation in India starts with government money, set aside specifically for slum rehabilitation, in form of the JNNURM/RAY scheme. This modernization scheme has been launched by the Indian government under Ministry of Urban Development to improve the quality of life and infrastructure primarily in the cities with a total investment of over $200 billion. Generally, the amount of capital put into the different projects is around RS 300,000 ($6,800) per household. A comparable amount is put into the Leprosy Colony development. Often, this money is spent on low-quality multi-storey buildings on the location of the former slum, or on a relocation site. IN_SITU proposes an alternative use of the JNNURM/RAY money, and an unconventional development procedure.
By supporting the slum community in a resident-steered upgrading process, less money would fall between the cracks (to developers and under-consultants) and more capital would reach the actual slum dwellers. Consultants (such as site-wide plumbing and electricity work) could do some of the work, but slum dwellers would rebuild their own homes, with support and education by an NGO if necessary.

**FRAMEWORK FOR NEIGHBORHOOD EXPANSION**

India has set a goal to become a slum-free nation in the near future, but the country’s focus is mainly on slum rehabilitation rather than preventing slums in the first place. One of the major problems associated with slum formation is poor people’s inability to step into the formal housing market. A solution to this problem could be to add a framework for selling small plots in under-utilized areas of the city. By preparing these areas with water, sewer and electrical connections and creating a mixture of plot sizes (but all small), poor people, as well as people from slightly higher social strata, could enter the housing ladder.

Around Leprosy Colony there are a number of poorly utilized areas that could be used for such development. A possible scenario could be that the first area to be developed into these new plots are the ones immediately south of the slum, partly by those who had their houses demolished in the up-
People often evoke the historical tradition of immigration to the U.S. Usually, though, this hollow memory is detached from reality, referring to old stories of Europeans arriving on the Mayflower. Today, however, we live in a globalized world where the phenomenon of immigration is more alive than ever as immigrants flow between different countries and regions. Immigrants often take great risks to enter a new country, and many must cross borders without proper documentation. In the U.S. there are an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living without a real pathway to come out of the shadows.

Until recently, I too was one of those undocumented immigrants in this country. I arrived with my family in July of 1999 to Southern California with the hope and dream of obtaining a better life. My dad had been laid off after working more than 25 years for a major Mexican bank. After the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed, competition increased, and my dad lost his job. The economic situation in our family was dire and the only choice to survive was to immigrate to the U.S. Moving to this country seemed like a dream. We were going to have the American lifestyle that everyone in Mexico imagines as a distant fantasy. It did not take long after coming to the states for reality to hit.
In the summer of 1999, before I entered high school, my mother worked at a factory, manufacturing hangers. The machines were too fast for her to keep up, so she would take me and my siblings with her to help. I was in charge of helping my mother pick up and pack hangers during the graveyard shift. I remember being surrounded by pallets full of boxes in a hot room with high ceilings. There were between 10 and 15 immigrant women working non-stop as every machine was running at full capacity. The smell of burned plastic would seep into our clothes and calluses would develop on our palms from the constant grabbing and fixing of hot hangers. This was my first experience as an undocumented worker in the United States.

I graduated from high school in 2002 and hoped to attend college and become a professional. However, due to my undocumented status, I was uncertain whether college would be within my reach. Today, in most states undocumented immigrant students must pay international tuition and fees at public universities. Some states pass even harsher policies which ban undocumented students from attending public colleges and universities at all. I had the fortune to graduate from high school right after California Assembly Bill 540 passed, which allowed students who attended and graduated from California high schools to pay in-state tuition. I soon began attending classes at a community college and believing once again in my potential.

However, finances still stood in my way. Though this law allowed me to pay tuition as any other Californian, it did not allow me to apply for state and institutional financial aid. To support myself, I cleaned warehouses and homes, and served food at restaurants. Facing the ever increasing tuition fees was like a race against time. On the one hand, if I left school to work and make money, I would come back to a higher tuition fee. On the other hand, if I scrambled to pay the tuition, quarter after quarter I would end up with no money for transportation or even food.

As an undocumented college student, I hovered between the labels of “criminal” and “non-criminal.” When I was in the classroom, engaging in discussions of pressing issues in American society, I felt as if my classmates and professors valued and respected my thoughts and opinions. Whenever I left the university, though, that artificial sense of belonging diminished. I ran the risk of police stopping and detaining me for driving without a license or working without proper documentation. I lived under the dehumanizing label of “illegal.” I felt as if my dreams had been cut short.

The toughest time I had in my whole educational experience was during my first quarter of graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles. There, tuition was much higher and much less flexible. I could not attend part-time and the courses and requirements were more demanding.
Attending an academic program where I was the only undocumented student was also difficult because no one else could relate to my experience.

Little by little, though, I started to meet other undocumented students who were in my same situation. I started to feel a genuine sense of community and belonging both on and off campus. Together we created new student organizations and began to learn about a rising national movement to fight for the rights of immigrant students. This gave me great hope. I worked my way out of isolation and built a support network in my program as I shared my story and educated classmates on the issues undocumented students face.

Storytelling is the most powerful tool that undocumented immigrants have in the fight for a better way of life. Every time I shared my story as an undocumented student, I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. Our stories become a voice of dissent against unjust system that dehumanizes and exploits individuals.

Recently, I fell in love, got married, and gained legal status through my wife. This is not an option available to everyone in my situation, and I feel fortunate and privileged. Now, more doors have opened and the country is finally accepting and welcoming me.
WE NEED PROBLEM SOLVERS NOT TEST Takers

NANCY BLOOM is a special education teacher in a Boston Public School.

We have a problem and, I believe, our future depends on solving it.

Just finished a week devoted almost entirely to MCAS preparation at the urban charter school where I am a special education teacher. The MCAS is the high stakes test students take in Massachusetts in compliance with the federal legislation known as No Child Left Behind.

Practicing the test is a ritual we repeat four times a year. That means four times each year the school shuts down for the first half of Monday and Tuesday as students silently grind through faux high stakes tests. Monday math. Tuesday reading comprehension. Wednesday the tests are scored. Thursday and Friday we teachers spend hours out of the classroom, examining tons of data generated by the tests and developing elaborate, individualized plans to increase scores for the real deal in March. That leaves very little time for actual learning or exchanging ideas. Last week teachers speculated that the full moon was having a bad effect on our students’ behavior. Certainly the kids were mad wack, which is how our mostly black student population would describe their behavior. Did the teachers really think the moon was to blame?

Photo Boston Public School students by Anonymous
I realized while watching my own students go, well...mad wack, that their approach to testing almost guaranteed failure. I begged them to complete their tests. Bribed them with gum and promises of free time on the computer. I even gave them the answers and they still crumbled. They threw test booklets. Cried. Stormed around. Sulked. I wondered how they would ever be able to solve the problems of their violent neighborhoods and the poverty that eats many of them up, if they couldn’t just suck it up and finish a test. Every one of my students has experienced street violence, either personally or through a relative, friend or neighbor.

My co-teacher and I decided to spend Tuesday afternoon learning how our urban fourth graders solve problems. We put the desks in a circle, presented the kids with a series of real life situations and then asked them how they would react. Here is a sample of the students’ responses.

**Scenario One:** It is time to go out but you can only find one shoe. What would you do?
- I would get mad and wish the shoe would just come back to me.
- I would build airplane wings so I could fly around and find it.

**Scenario Two:** You forgot your lunch money. What would you do?
- Starve.
- I would scrounge around on the floor until I found money. If no one was looking, I would take it. People don’t even care about money these days.

**Scenario Three:** An old lady has dropped her groceries. What would you do?
- I would pick up the groceries, give her money and trip the robber who tried to steal the money.
- Yeah and I’d break his neck.

**Scenario Four:** You missed your bus. What would you do?
- I would run after it and pop the tire.
- I would get a ladder and put it in front of the bus so the driver would think it broke down.
- I get on at the first stop so I would run as fast as I could to get to the last stop.

**Scenario Five:** Your teacher has directed you to color with an orange crayon but you don’t have one. What would you do?
- I would mix yellow and red.
- I would go to the crayon factory.

At the beginning of this school year, we teachers were regaled with last year’s grim test scores. Once again, the
school failed to make Annual Yearly Progress as prescribed by No Child Left Behind. A list of student scores and their teachers’ names from the lowest performing classroom projected on the auditorium’s big screen made the backdrop for our meeting. When I asked if the four weeks we spent taking faux high stakes tests had any bearing on the MCAS scores, our principal said, “No,” without hesitation. Yet here we are, doing it all over again.

Scenario 6: Your students consistently fail to perform well on high stakes tests. What would you do?
• Shame the teachers.
• Take four weeks out of the school year to practice taking faux high stakes tests. Again.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recently announced that poverty is more toxic to children’s academic success than even guns. Indeed, their report states, poverty will “disrupt the architecture of the developing brain, thereby influencing behavioral, educational, economic and health outcomes decades and generations later.”

So why take a month out of the school year to torture children on testing that doesn’t even improve their high stakes scores? Wouldn’t it make more sense to give students time to practice solving real problems like what to do when you lose a shoe? After four weeks of practice, my students would surely be able to take a test without freaking out. I believe they would even be ready to examine solutions for the bigger pictures, like how to mend their broken neighborhoods.

This article is part of the series, First Person Policy. Use the QR code to access the full series.
I am a self-identifying email junkie. I have 5 accounts that I keep separate and check regularly, if not obsessively. For many folks this level of information intake is normal, especially when you add in the more nuanced forms of social media. And I am positive that I am among the masses in my use of these communications to satiate a voyeurism more so than to actually communicate. But I categorize and collect, I collage and combine so that I can see patterns in all these messages, even when there may be none. Here at MIT, the email traffic never disappoints.

So when I received an email with the catchy subject line “Re: Paper Competition on Urban Poverty for graduate students. Grand prize winner presents at WUF in Italy!” I naturally took notice. I mean, Italy, right? And all I have to do is write the best paper on poverty.

To those who know me, you know where this is going. To those who don’t: I am currently fixated on the idea of language as an institutional form that necessarily affects, if not dictates and directs, our ability to negotiate complexity. Language impacts the work we do, supposedly in solidarity with (or on behalf) of other communities – foreign or domestic.

Before I go on, I want to make it clear that I am not necessarily suggesting an insidious or even conscious motivation behind the senders of the email; I am only highlighting a larger construct in media, and in academia in general – particularly the social silen… sciences. My broader concern with these types of emails, asking us to use the pain associated with poverty as an incentive to prove our academic prowess, is that they are a literal demonstration of a passive cannibalization of parts of human populations in the name of research.

JUSTICE CASTAÑEDA is a masters student in the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning.
The message of the email, of course, is more subtle and when read carefully it becomes clear that the authors intended the message to be focused around solutions to poverty. Yet still, I take issue with these types of competitions aimed at finding the best paper on poverty because they are symbolic and representative of the larger trend in academic and research environments to glamorize the pain of poverty in order to sustain or advance an academic career. I emphasize that I am not suggesting this is necessarily deliberate on the part of either the sponsors or the contributors, just that such practices exist, and are prevalent enough in our daily email traffic for an email junkie to take notice of them as a category unto themselves.

The competition description offered in the email does not give any of the criteria for selection, which allows for a degree of flex on the part of the parties sponsoring the contest. One might argue that the metrics for a successful – a best – poverty paper would be sensitive to the lens through which the paper was written, thereby screening the selection for liberating or desire-based narratives. Yet the existence of the competition encourages people to find ways to make their poverty paper sexy so as to separate their research from the others.

This email reminded me of an article I read in the Wisconsin State Journal. I keep up with the news there because Madison is my hometown. The article covered a decision made by a juvenile judge to waive a 16 year old child into the adult penal system. Unlike the email, the text in the newspaper article was not what grabbed my attention, but the presentation and formatting of the medium of communication. Skirting the edges of the article, ads for banks, social media outlets, music events, drink specials, pottery lessons, mattress replacement options and online dating formed a colorful periphery to the otherwise somber image of a young
child in jailhouse blues. I guess if he wasn’t getting waived, we would be devoid of necessary space for mattress advertising anyway.

However, the point is not to go to deep into the article or the mattress ads, but to showcase how our reliance on stories of pain translate from theory (academia) to practice. Although the article was much different from the email in terms of delivery, both encourage an author to use a source of excruciating pain as a type of incentive. In the email, the message is much more about the initial sales pitch than it is woven into other parts of the delivery. In the newspaper article, the article itself is not the focus, but the entire economy feeding off of the moral decay of our prison system. The point is not to insinuate intent or motive, but to highlight the ease with which these types of dependencies are sustained.

I am an email junkie. I collect and collage, and every now and then I see patterns even when there are none.
BOOK REVIEW: BEHIND THE BEAUTIFUL FOREVERS

ALPITA MASURKAR is a masters student in the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Mumbaiker, and former journalist at the Times of India.

“... better arguments, maybe even better policies, get formulated when we know more about the ordinary lives.”

The above quote is from Katherine Boo’s recently published book, “Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity”. Boo is an acclaimed journalist, known for her works on people struggling to escape poverty, mostly in the United States.

Her marriage to an Indian and the ‘India Shining’ image that she finds hard to digest takes her on a four-year long, intense investigation of the lives of slum dwellers in Annawadi in Mumbai.

Mumbai is a land of dreams for millions of Indians who come to the city hoping to escape the hardships in their villages and seeking an opportunity to better their lives. But a place like Annawadi is often the reality. Tamil migrants from the southern part of India founded Annawadi. A closer-by Marathi-speaking population occupied another section of

the slum and gave it a more regional name, Gautam Nagar. And the third, unnamed section was occupied by extremely poor ragpickers and scavengers.

The book gets its title from the tagline on an advertisement for Italian tiles that reads Behind the Beautiful Forevers. The wall on which the ad appears forms an ironic separation between Annawadi and the glamorous, towering elite hotels of the other Mumbai – the overcity. Contradictions like this one are sprinkled across the city and tell an important truth: Mumbai is two cities. In his 2008 novel “The White Tiger” Aravind Adiga described it as two Indias. Adiga’s central character came from the Darkness; likewise, Boo’s subjects live in the Undercity.

Boo draws you in to the people of Annawadi. Abdul, an almost invisible but smart garbage sorter who seems to have struck gold by establishing a successful enterprise yet fears losing what he has gained thus far for his family; Asha, a lady slum boss and an aspiring political leader of the neighborhood ward; her daughter Manju, the first girl in the slum
to have gone to college; Asha’s son Rahul, who has seen the overcity, worn smart uniforms and worked as a staff in the elite hotels – a life every waste-picker boy in Annawadi wants to emulate; Sunil, a waste-picker (who also appears in Boo’s 2009 New Yorker article Opening Night); and Kalu, a garbage thief.

The plot of the book emerges when Fatima – who wants to be loved and appreciated for her beauty but is instead ridiculed for her extravagant make-up and her crippled walk – sets herself on fire and blames Abdul’s family, who are then prosecuted.

As Abdul metamorphoses from entrepreneur to prisoner to philosopher, other stories of crime and tragedy surface: stories of drug peddlers, corrupt police officials, police raping a minor girl, charities seeking donations from foreigners that are seldom used for the cause, supply chains between politicians and administration seeking funds from the budget to run fake schools that are ultimately pocketed. Two teenagers commit suicide by eating rat poison – a boy ends his life after finding the brutalized corpse of a fellow waste-picker, and a girl ends hers after the last beating she can handle at her family’s hands.

Boo offers no story simply for the sake of a story. Each one comes in broader social and political context. For example, she writes about a woman who loses her job when a local dance bar is shut down. The closure of dance bars all across the city was big news at the time. The state was closing dance bars in Mumbai because they were allegedly promoting prostitution in the city. Many struggling women lost their only source of income.

If there is one thing that separates Boo’s work from that of a local journalist, it is this: A local journalist would have been more careful when writing about the crime, corruption and political nexus in the slums of Mumbai because such stories would pose a threat to his life in the city. On January 28, the Times of India office in Mumbai was ransacked after its regional language publication carried a sensitive report on a local politician belonging to Shiv Sena, a prominent regional party in Mumbai.

The people of Annawadi are often trapped – surrounded by four walls of oppression that are too high to climb over, too strong to break through, and so thoroughly soundproof that those stuck inside wouldn’t be heard if they kicked and shouted. A reader is bound to suffer moments of unmitigated hopelessness.

Yet Boo’s central characters, no matter whether she’s writing about Annawadi or the Texas border, always keep kick-
ing and trying to better their lives. When one empathizes with their stories, one realizes that the emotions, desires and fear they experience are certainly not restricted to the socio-economic class or geography, but are universal.

But is empathy enough? Whose job is it to translate empathy into action? Despite her incredible knowledge of a dire circumstance, Boo never writes strongly about any current policy and makes no recommendations for future ones.

It would be interesting to know if and how the real decision makers and activists would respond on reading Boo’s book. “Beautiful Forevers” leaves a reader with a deeper knowledge of the lives of strugglers in a Mumbai slum, but it also leaves one with many questions and thoughts.

These are some of the questions that Boo’s book raises:

• Boo writes about people who have no chance to tell their own stories on a far-reaching platform. How would Boo’s stories be different if the people were able to tell them on their own?

• Do her subjects ever get access to the stories she writes about them? If so, what do they think?

• City planners and architects are good at planning and designing, but very few of them interact at the human scale and talk to the people who live the realities designed/influenced by them. What does Boo’s fieldwork tell her about the importance of interaction at the human scale for planning a better society?

• Boo mentions that one of the children in her book is good at video recording. When she writes about these people, does she feel like doing something for them? Does it ever happen that she stops being an observer and participates?

• In her interviews, she emphasizes that she hopes to help people with intensely different daily lives to understand one another better – for the powerful to understand the powerless and see their shared humanity. Does she aim for any other outcomes? What led her into writing about people who are struggling to get out of poverty and better their lives?

This article is part of the series, Book Reviews. Use the QR code to access the full series.
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CoLab Radio's (colabradio.mit.edu) mission is to encourage the open sharing of ideas that serve a better future for all communities. CoLab Radio is a city and regional planning publication where people who are doing the daily work of improving communities can document their projects and express their ideas.

The MIT Community Innovators Lab (colab.mit.edu) founded the blog in January of 2009. CoLab does not endorse every idea and project featured on CoLab Radio. Rather, CoLab endorses unfettered sharing of ideas, stories, and perspectives related to all aspects of city and regional planning.

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