

P.K. Das Architect – Activist

A Brief Biography

Since 1972, 36 years of dedicated and consistent work by P.K. Das for the cause of the urban poor and their struggles for housing is noteworthy. Today he is engaged in some of the worlds largest slums rehabilitation projects – over 20,000 families of the Borivali National Park slums and over 80,000 families living in the slums within Mumbai Airport, and also the planning for housing for over 27,000 conservancy staff – the lowest paid municipal employees in Mumbai.

His capacity to not only plan and design but also as an activist to mobilize the affected people and his contribution to the struggles for housing rights is commendable. Das sees housing rights of the poor and their struggles essentially as a part of a larger struggle for democratic rights and this is particularly an important part of his work and his thoughts.

In the second year of his architectural studies at the Sir J.J. College of Architecture in Mumbai, Das informally got associated with the self-help redevelopment project of ‘Jaffar Baba’ slums in Bandra, Mumbai which was planned and designed by Planner D.G.Parab (then with CIDCO) and led by ‘BUILD’ – an NGO. It involved the reconstruction of about 200 houses and a community center including restructuring the overall layout.

Das was inspired and moved by the plight of the poor in the city and particularly the living conditions of over 2.5 million slum-dwellers in the city then.

About a year later he closely followed the plight of the poor living in the slums where houses were demolished and the people were evicted to a new low-lying marginal area – called Chitah camp. A well known, Mogsasey awardee Mr.Jokim lived in that slum who led the movement against forced evictions. Das was thus, exposed to the brutality of forced evictions, and the social and political economy of it. The question of a comprehensive rehabilitation prior to eviction was Das’ concern then. Thus, this was the beginning of a long journey of engagements and activism in the struggle of the urban poor in the city for Housing Rights.

At the J.J. College of Architecture Das began to highlight the need for a deeper understanding of social, cultural and political conditions and how they greatly influenced Architecture. That time was an interesting period in Indian architecture and architectural practice. It had influences by Le-Corbusier, Louis Khan and others and was carried forward by Charles Correa, B.V. Doshi, Anant Raje and others. Forms, colours, climate etc. - various physical conditions were central concerns in the design of buildings. Soon of course Correa had begun to address broader issues and the impact of Indian social & cultural history and an effort to evolving a distinct Indian architectural language.

Das was simultaneously following-up on movements and efforts across the world on ideas about self-help housing, being formalized in some ways by John F Turner at that time.

In 1975, emergency was imposed in the country by the then P.M. Mrs. Indra Gandhi. Das was completing his 4th year studies in Architecture. He turned to the housing programs for the poor under the emergency – ‘House to the homeless’ project under which the government pretended to build houses for the rural poor in particular. Das along with two other colleagues actively intervened. They got drawn to the fact that the government was actually demolishing self-built village houses and then providing G.I. Sheet shelters at alternate sites under the guise of providing houses to the homeless.

Then with Arjun Makhijani – an activist working with 3-R Society – an NGO, Das undertook the responsibility of designing and supporting the tribals of Saral Village (100 kms from Mumbai) in protest against the tin-sheet houses being provided by the government and building alternatives using local materials – mud, bamboo etc. Das and the team actually organized the tribals and built their village – nearly 50 houses with community centre etc. This engagement also formed then his thesis in the final year of Architectural studies. Das began to critically evaluate through his experience here, the principles of self-help housing particularly, how it substituted the duties of the government and in many ways undermined the democratic rights of communities.

Das completed his school tenure and understood by then well how political decisions affected and influenced architecture. His commitment to working as an Architect – Activist for enabling and contributing to social and environmental change and the housing rights of the poor including the re-development of slums was to be the centre stage of his engagements ahead.

Nine months later Das set-up P.K. Das & Associates and began his independent practice. Simultaneously he was drawn to the demolition and forced evictions of 300 hutments known as Sanjay Gandhi Nagar situated at Nariman Point and the protest by the slum-dwellers. He together with Actor Shabana Azmi, Filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, Journalist Gurbir Singh and social activist Anna Kurian led the protest demanding Rehabilitation first. Government conceded to the demands and allocated an alternate site – an exhausted quarry for rehabilitation in Goregaon. Das planned the rehabilitation and evolved design and development ideas. It was decided that activists connected with the NHSS and the elected representatives of Sangharsh Nagar take the lead in these matters and monitor the housing programme. Institutional loans and donations to the society were not to be accepted, as these tend to become a burden and a tool for further oppression, exploitation and interference. It was also decided that they build their own houses like they built their slum with individual, financial arrangements. We prepared a layout plan outlining the position of common toilets, water taps, community centre, society office, accesses and open spaces.

This project drew a lot of attention and provided a model for rehabilitation of slums at alternate sites upon eviction. The designs and a model prepared to explain to the people and engage them in the design process was exhibited at an architectural exhibition in Tokyo by 'ROOTS' in 1996 – Innovation and Tradition in Asian Architecture Today, Environmental Roots, Cultural Roots, Multiple Roots.

Soon after Das with his colleagues and other slum-dwellers and Housing Rights organizations came together to oppose mass demolition and evictions by the then C.M. – Antulay. This movement led to the constitution of a new Housing Rights Organization in 1981 called the 'Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti.' (NHSS - An organization for the protection of Housing Rights) Since then Das has been the Jt. Convenor of this organization. NHSS is one of the largest housing rights and slum-dwellers organization in the city in terms of its networks and rehabilitation successes. Till date Das has been involved in carrying out along with NHSS, rehabilitation of over 25000 families. Presently he is engaged in the rehabilitation of over 12,000 families evicted from the Borivali National Park slums, at a site in Chandivali – again an exhausted quarry site. Over 6000 families have already moved to their new houses designed by Das.

The planning and designs of the Chandivali project drew the attention of all – the C.M., the administration, the developers and many housing rights organization in the city.

The ongoing project involves the rehabilitation of slum-dwellers evicted from the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. The rehabilitation site at Chandivali, measuring about 34 hectares, will constitute a comprehensive and all-inclusive new town. The town, with 20000 houses, includes a large, 1.6-hectare maidan as its central, social space. Two more playgrounds and over 60 community open spaces enliven its outdoors. More than 14 schools, medical facilities, including two hospitals, two large community halls and religious institutions, constitute its social infrastructure. Schools and community halls are annexed to these open spaces and playgrounds.

Each 22.5 sq. m., well lit and adequately ventilated house comprises a room and a kitchen with a balcony and a toilet.

Each pada (cluster) comprises two societies with 550 houses and 16 common units for balwadis, society offices, crèches, a women's centre and other common facilities. A central court provides openness, light and ventilation. The common units abut this court. The entrance to each building is marked by a baithak, a meeting place alongside the central open space. Every three clusters form a wadi (sector), which is serviced by a marketplace that houses shops, banks, post offices and other commercial establishments. The two primary schools are alongside such marketplaces, and their playgrounds provide relief to the crowds that tend to gather there.

Low-rise (ground plus four stories) clusters evolve into small, familiar neighbourhoods and involve the people in the control, management and maintenance of their township. A network of internal pedestrian streets connects the groups of houses to their markets, facilities and common recreation spaces and the gateways to the houses are on these

streets. Walk-across pathways, shaded by pergolas intersperse the clusters. These promote a sense of unity between the different parts of the development.

Das has thus been appointed to plan and design the rehabilitation of over 80,000 families now living in slums within the Mumbai airport land.

These are examples of some of the largest Rehabilitation projects in the world. Slum-dwellers participation in planning, designs and rehabilitation modalities and setting higher housing standards for the poor has been primary to Das' scheme and projects.

Das argues that housing, particularly for the poor is not merely an issue of construction and real-estate, as the market and the developers including governments believe but it is a process and instrument to mobilize social movements for organizing better community and environmental conditions for higher quality of living in the cities. Housing and the struggles of the poor for housing rights is a part of a larger struggle for democratic and human rights. Thus Das' work as an architect is outstanding – that crosses all orthodox barriers that an architect is trained and most often restricted within. He is thus and rightly referred to as an Architect-Activist, contributing to mobilizing social change, particularly the upliftment of the urban poor and their integration into the mainstream development.

In recognition of the long history and success of Das' work for the city's poor and his concerns for the working class, the Mumbai Municipal Corporation has appointed Das as the architect to plan and design 'ASHRAY,' housing for over 27000 conservancy staff who keep the city clean and maintain its services and are the lowest paid employees of the Corporation. Each house is 30M² in area.

As an active member of the Nivara Hakk Welfare Centre (NHWC), he also contributed to the Earthquake Victims' Rehabilitation in Latur, Maharashtra. He visited Latur repeatedly in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake. Being close to the victims in such difficult times enabled him to evolve houses that met their needs, matched their lifestyles and responded to the contextual environment.

While the materials and construction technique had to be modern and earthquake-resistant, house design needed to be relevant to the lifestyle of the people of the village. The plan, therefore, derives from local, traditional house layouts and the cultural ethos of the place. Here, verandahs and open spaces are considered assets.

The rooms develop around the open-to-sky *angans* and face opposite directions but are held together by a verandah. The inner *angan* relates to the kitchen and houses the toilet. Two separate rooms ensure privacy and keep away the kitchen smoke from the living area. The outer *angan* constitutes the baithak and a space for storing farm produce.

He also visited the affected villages of the Gujarat earthquake in 2001 many times and even stayed at the relief camps, which helped him establish a close relationship with the people. He thus evolved a relevant and acceptable model for the emergency shelter.

Immediately after the 2001 earthquake in Kutch, thousands of people chose to live in the open fields and on the roadside, afraid that the roofs and walls would fall on them. With the extreme temperatures, ranging from 8° C at night to 38° C during the day, a quick assembly of several earthquake-resistant, emergency shelters became a pressing need.

Another important social project Das is involved in is the reclaiming of public space in Mumbai. One of Mumbai's greatest assets is its coastline, which forms a series of unique and picturesque waterfronts. Unfortunately, these have become the backyard of the city and degenerated into its biggest dumping ground. Reclamation, sewage disposal and encroachment have ravaged the waterfronts.

People from all sections of society, from the city and its suburbs and tourists flock to these places to relax. Unplanned commercialization has destroyed the natural environment considerably. The absence of a master plan for development of the waterfronts has encouraged the rich and the powerful to manipulate and grab land along the coast, thus gradually depleting the city of its most vital open spaces.

Das' objective is to restore and preserve their natural beauty. He had to offer simple, modest and pragmatic design solutions that work within the existing realities to solve key problems. This, he expects, will generate a momentum for positive change. There can be no grandiose ideas here. In fact, no major construction should be allowed on these waterfronts. Secondly, he proposes a selective reallocation of spaces and activities, and thirdly, very minimal restructuring. Most importantly, these waterfronts must remain the collective asset of the city and all its citizens, and a vibrant element in its environmental and social fabric.

He believes in protecting and developing public spaces, which are disappearing due to rapid real-estate development. He believes in promoting unbarricaded and unrestricted public space with access to one and all. Since the poor and the working class in our city lack opportunity for leisure, relaxation in open-spaces is their only relief. His projects along the western waterfronts of Mumbai have won several awards including the Deutsche Bank Urban Age Award 2007, the Clearwater Citizens' Award by Waterfront Centre, USA, 2001 and Urban Heritage Award in 2003. These projects have provided enormous opportunity to the neighbourhood people and to the city at large to participate in city planning.

After witnessing the incredible socio-political changes brought by the development of the Bandra Waterfronts, Das targeted the entire neighbourhood. In consultation with active Juhu residents, architectural school (KRVI) and the Mumbai Waterfronts Centre, he has now devised 'Vision Juhu,' an area redevelopment plan. The crux of the plan is to expand public space, free reserved green spaces and the beach from encroachments, integrate public transport, create walking and cycling space and create new open spaces near the abused water bodies. It's a first of its kind neighbourhood development plan in Mumbai and hopes to set a precedent for other areas in Mumbai.

Das firmly believes that the integration of the poor and the working class with the development of the city is extremely important for the city's growth and prosperity. In his architectural practice spanning for over 30 years, he has consistently and committedly devoted more than 50% of his time to larger social cause and the various issues that confronts housing struggle of the poor. He says 'my city is my workshop'. He sees the city as not an opportunity for competition but for co-operation and co-operative efforts. Hence in all his works and engagements in public life he has worked with several organizations, social movements, NGOs and Citizen Associations.

Das is contributing to academics too. He is on the visiting faculty in Academy of Architecture, Mumbai, Kamala Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute for Architecture and Environment Studies, Mumbai and CEPT, Ahmedabad. In recognition of his work, the Mumbai University has appointed him as an adjunct professor in the department of sociology. He has also given lectures in the School of the Built Environment; University of Nottingham, UK, SRM University, Chennai, Tata Institute of Social Sciences and many more.

