Neighborhoods By Us

This toolkit is designed for community architects and designers who want to work with residents to design and develop their neighborhoods together. Using participatory planning methods, community mapping, and hands-on model-making, this toolkit guides you through a workshop process that empowers residents to envision, design, and implement solutions that reflect their needs, values, and local environment.

About the workshop

The "আমাদের বসতি, আমরা গড়ি" (Let's co-create our Neighborhood) workshop, designed by POCAA, empowers local communities, particularly women and youth, to actively participate in shaping their living spaces. The workshop provides participants with an in-depth understanding of their surrounding environment and working alongside it. They will explore various participatory planning methods for housing and spatial development of neighborhood, including community mapping, cost-effective design, and placemaking through models. It requires participants to engage in intensive teamwork over multiple days, nurturing hands-on collaboration and shared learning experiences.

What can you expect?

- Step-by-step workshop structure to guide communities through the co-design process**
- Case study insights from POCAA workshops demonstrating real-world applications of participatory planning
- Practical tools and exercises, such as community mapping, model-making, and planning local resources
- Strategies to engage communities in identifying issues and co-creating solutions
- Guidelines for advocacy and implementation to ensure the long-term sustainability of community-led projects

** When we say step-by-step, it is important to understand that these steps might not always be linear. Since the process is organic, a community architect or designer can return to a previous step and create organic loops in the process as they find or feel necessary. The more time a community architect spends in a community, the more they will discover the process. Sometimes, a hunch or the community itself might guide the architect!

আমাদের বসতি, আমরা গড়ি

Let's co–create our Neighborhood
Korail, Dhaka, Bangladesh

In the heart of Korail, the largest informal settlement in Dhaka, Bangladesh, a group of young community members, local builders, and architects gathered in February 2024 to rethink and redesign their neighborhoods.

The workshop, guided by POCAA, sought to empower local youth and builders with the skills needed to analyze, map, and co-design their surroundings. From the very first day, participants engaged in a process of learning and collaboration. They began with an ice-breaking session, where they drew each other and exchanged handmade paper gifts, building trust and a sense of community. Over the next several days, participants ventured into Korail, conducting transect walks, observing challenges, and taking notes on their surroundings. They worked in small teams to map roads, homes, and shared spaces, learning to measure and create scaled drawings. This exercise helped them grasp essential architectural techniques while identifying obstacles and opportunities within their own community.

Community elders and local builders shared their lived experiences, while guest architects from Bangladesh and abroad introduced low-cost, sustainable building techniques.

Participants also visited neighborhood development projects in Gabtoli and the offices of renowned architects to see how simple, locally sourced materials could be used to construct efficient and sustainable living spaces.

During the model-making phase, participants used paper, styrofoam, and other materials to transform their design ideas into miniature models. These models provided a powerful visual representation of their aspirations, showing what their neighborhood could become. The process wasn't just about building structures—it was about rethinking how spaces could be more inclusive, women-friendly, and environmentally sustainable.

On the final day, the workshop concluded with an exhibition where participants presented their work to local stakeholders. The discussions that followed emphasized the importance of continued community leadership in driving these changes forward.

By the end of the workshop, every participant had gained hands-on experience in neighborhood design, mapping, and advocacy. More importantly, they left with a renewed sense of ownership over their neighborhood, realizing that they had the power to shape its future.

Step 1: Building trust

Before any meaningful co-design work can begin, it's essential to cultivate genuine relationships within the community. This step lays the foundation for collaboration by creating a sense of safety, mutual respect, and inclusion.

Key Steps

- Spend time in the community to build relationships and trust.
- Identify and study existing community networks, social groups, and informal gatherings.
- Make connections through stories, shared meals, and interactive activities. (Time to practice good listening skills!)
- Identify a core group to conduct this process with, including women, youth, and kids to gain diverse perspectives.
- Once the core group is identified, gather them in a shared space to begin the community workshop process.
- Begin the workshop with ice-breaking or team-building exercises.

Case Study Insight

In Korail, the workshop began with an ice-breaking session where participants drew each other and exchanged handmade gifts to build a sense of community. This exercise helped ease tensions and encourage collaboration.

Step 2: Community mapping and profiling

Community mapping is a powerful tool for bringing people together. As the workshop begins with the core group, the mapping process will naturally spark curiosity among residents, drawing them in and encouraging broader participation in the co-design process.

Key Steps

- Conduct a *transect walk* where participants observe their surroundings, noting what they like and dislike. Encourage them to take photos and record their observations to capture key insights about the community.
  - This process falls under observation, like the previous step, building trust, and also under mental mapping.
- Form small groups for participatory mapping. Have participants locate key places on the map, such as their homes, toilets, roads, landmarks, and community spaces to make information more visible.
  - On a layer, participants can add their likes and dislikes from the transect walk to the map.
- Add layers to the map by including details about the community's demographic, historical, and cultural elements. This makes challenges and opportunities in the community easier to understand.
- Leave the map with the community so they can use it as a resource for future planning and advocacy.

Case Study Insight

In Korail, four teams were formed to measure and map different sections of the neighborhood, including markets, schools, mosques, and public spaces. This exercise not only provided valuable spatial data but also helped participants see their neighborhood from a planning perspective.

Step 3: Setting goals and prioritizing needs

With trust built and community connections forming, this step invites participants to share their hopes for the neighborhood and work together to define clear goals. By identifying and prioritizing shared needs, the community can begin shaping a vision that reflects everyone's aspirations and lays the groundwork for practical, collective action.

Key Steps

- Gather participants and form small groups to discuss their vision for the neighborhood.
- Facilitate an interactive discussion on how they can achieve their aspirations as residents. Have participants write down or draw their vision and the necessary steps as residents to reach them.
- Define clear objectives for redesigning spaces based on community aspirations.
- Identify key community needs through group discussion. Prioritize the most pressing needs and determine what can be addressed within your scope.
- Focus on collective and community-wide needs rather than individual issues.

Case Study Insight

In Korail, when asked, "Apnar shopner shohor kemon?" (What does your dream neighborhood look like?), community members shared their aspirations for their neighborhood (which is safer, comfortable for women, children), setting the stage for meaningful engagement.

Step 4: Designing community immersion and exchange

This step gives participants a chance to learn from real-life examples and local experts. By visiting similar projects, hearing from community leaders, and exploring local building practices, the group gains new ideas and practical knowledge to guide their own design process.

Key Steps

- If there are similar examples of community-led development projects in the region, design an immersion for the participants to visit and learn firsthand about the application of such design processes.
- Arrange sessions with experts in low-cost, natural building, and sustainable housing, such as architects, community builders, and designers, to provide participants with insights into affordable and effective building solutions.
- Host community dialogues to listen to long-term residents and community leaders discuss historical and current challenges and offer valuable perspectives.
- Explore with the participants the use of natural and locally available materials and how these materials can be used to create functional spaces with minimal funds.

Case Study Insight

Participants from the Korail workshop visited the Gabtoli community, where POCAA had previously worked on a housing project. Seeing real-life examples of successful community-led neighborhood development project helped participants understand what was achievable within their own spaces.

Step 5: Co-designing solutions through model making

Participants bring their ideas to life by turning shared goals into visual and physical designs. Using simple, local, or recycled materials, the community works together to create models that show what their neighborhood could look like.

Key Steps

- Use the feedback from the community to design potential solutions to the prioritized needs.
- Encourage participants to incorporate what they have found interesting from the experts/ community visits in their neighborhood development projects design, be it techniques for cost minimization, or previously unknown techniques of known/alternative materials, etc.
- Facilitate participants in building physical models of design ideas using materials like paper, styrofoam, and clay. Explore materials that are available in very local markets.
  - POCAA has used buttons and threads, straws and leaves, found or recycled materials (whatever could be found) to make beautiful models! Good to keep color and paper at hand though!
- Use a "before and after" approach to visualize the impact of proposed changes.
- Encourage children and young people to contribute their visions through art and model-making.

Case Study Insight

Participants in Korail developed proposals for women-friendly spaces, improved drainage systems, and safer pedestrian pathways. Each group sketched their design ideas and then built scaled models of redesigned spaces. These models were instrumental in visualizing community proposals and helped convey ideas to local stakeholders.

Step 6: Estimating costs

Once ideas take shape, it's time to understand what they will cost. This step is for the community to estimate expenses for materials, labor, and other needs.

Key Steps

- Estimate costs for proposed solutions, including material, labor, and other relevant costs.
  - Very important: include local mason/carpenter/artisan in your cost estimation process, even if they are not part of the workshop, invite them particularly for this step.
- Once a budget is identified, explore funding sources, including grants, community crowdfunding, possibilities from friendly networks, and local partnerships.

Case Study Insight

Participants in Korail explored ways to reduce construction costs by incorporating locally available materials and labor. They drew on insights gained from their visits and interactions with experts and other communities to estimate the costs of their proposed designs.

Step 7: Exhibiting, demonstrating, and telling the story

Through exhibitions and simple on-site demonstrations, participants can gather feedback, build support, and inspire action. It's also a chance to tell the story behind the designs—why they matter and how they can shape a better neighborhood.

Key Steps

- Host an exhibition within the community to present the proposed designs. Showcase all the materials from the multi-day workshop to help residents and stakeholders understand the whole process.
- Invite residents, local builders, and community leaders to share their thoughts and reactions to the designs.
- If resources allow, create physical demonstrations (1:1 demonstration on the very site, using found materials, ropes, strings, etc.) of the designs to visualize their potential impact and feasibility.
- Engage local stakeholders at the exhibition to source funding and advocate for the implementation of the design solutions.
- Continue telling the story of the neighborhood, using the exhibition to advocate for the designs and their potential benefits.

Case Study Insight

The final day of the Korail workshop featured a public exhibition, where community members, local architects, and local stakeholders reviewed the models and discussed implementation strategies.

Step 8: Documenting the process

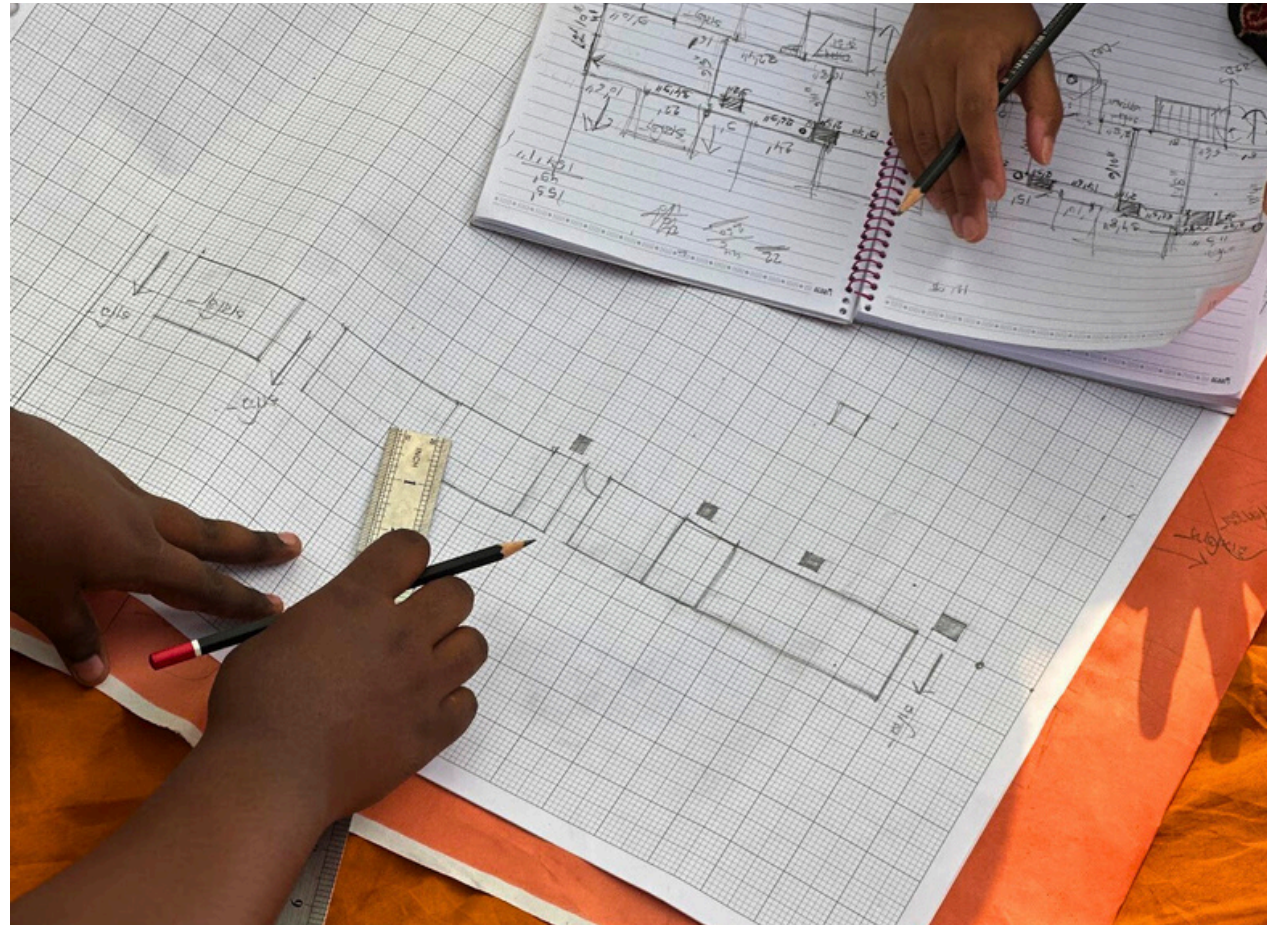Capturing the journey is key to learning and sharing.

Key Steps

- Keep a detailed record of each phase of the workshop, including design iterations, community engagement methods, materials used, and feedback received. Compile the findings into a clear, accessible format- such as toolkit, case study- that other community architects and designers can adapt and apply in different contexts.
- Share lessons learned, challenges faced, and successes to help build a shared knowledge base among practitioners, inspire others, and promote peer learning across regions and sectors.

Case Study Insight

POCAA documented the workshop process through newsletters, and articles and shared it in social channels for the broader community architects network. This toolkit is also a part of the documentation process.

- POCAA's poster introducing the workshop in Korail
- Social media post for the exhibition
- POCAA's newsletter about the workshop in Korail

Pro tips

- Assign simple homework, like drawing or model-building, to keep participants engaged and encourage new ideas. Homework can be given between any of the steps before this or after, to keep the participants engaged in the process!
- For more resources on community mapping:
  - Settlement profiling in Jhenaidah
  - Collective housing in Asia

If you're inspired by what you've learned from this toolkit and want to bring these ideas to your community, we offer tailored support for individuals passionate about community design and development!

Get in touch with us at info@inserviceofearth.org