



Beyond Feedback Forms and Meetings: How CUDOS is helping communities shape their own locality

CUDOS started in the unlikely location of Birmingham City Football Club. One hundred Asian women were brought together by Ashram Housing Association– at the time, for a one-off conference that would be followed up by a report. The conference aimed to give Asian women the opportunity to have their say on housing in Birmingham. Yet it evolved into something that would give people not just a voice, but the skills and knowledge to potentially change housing for the better by themselves.

The Centre for Urban Design, Outreach and Skills offers training courses for Birmingham residents who've no previous experience in urban design, and who have in many cases minimal educational experience in *any* area. Birmingham City University provides the physical structure and Dr Noha Nasser is the Director. It's open to men and women of all ethnicities now, although women have always been more likely to participate. Community design workshops allow participants to become familiar with urban design principles, discuss the potential nature of future homes for local communities and ultimately design and model their ideal homes. Participants receive a formal qualification and the possibility of seeing their ideas developed into actual housing typologies.

For Jas Bains, Chief Executive of Ashram Housing Association, the skills development is the most important aspect. He points out that the people the project recruits have traditionally been marginalised from the urban design sector. These “disempowered” communities, he says, can now get involved in “shaping the future of the built environment.” Students gain, through their CUDOS qualification, the tools to shape their immediate locality. They explore principles such as: housing and a sense of community; spatial requirements and the extended family; cultural activity and local infrastructure. The challenge for students is to take these tools and ideas and do something tangible with them – be that get involved in local design projects or perhaps go on to further education or training. And the self-esteem that the project engenders will hopefully help them do this.

Not only does CUDOS aim to influence on a local level, it wants to change the national demography of urban design. 94% of urban architects are white and 82% are male. Most are likely middle-class with a higher education. Given the diverse mix of inner-cities, to what extent can communities realistically hope to be represented by these designers? How much can a working class black mother hope to shape the nature of the house in which she lives, sleeps, and brings up her family? This is where the training comes in. And Jas says that

from the beginning, he was “amazed” at the potential of the low-skilled, under-educated women who were taking part.

Participants in CUDOS are often returning to education or entering education for the first time. They range from young men looking for something different to fill their time with, to women who had effectively never been permitted to educate themselves. One wonders if it would be a challenge engaging with people who have never really had a decent education – yet Jas emphasises how dedicated the students are. The 30 hours of contact time can be spread out over however long is necessary – and people persevere over six months sometimes.

CUDOS has international links, with developing partnerships in India, South Africa and across Europe. Its commercial partner, Atkins, is the second largest engineering company in the world. This allows increased understanding of experiences from the subcontinent: students studied workshops on architectural housing models in this part of the world in order to consider how they could influence contemporary British housing templates. And the partnership between the private sector, social housing and academia reflects the intercultural expertise that characterises CUDOS and the principles and people behind it.

So CUDOS has a link into industry – potentially on a global scale. And it recruits admirably enthusiastic students who could go onto develop careers in urban design. But how else to translate what the Centre does into tangible changes in local development? Well, one CUDOS principle is a two-way transfer of knowledge: from local communities into the field of urban design as well as the other way around. The Centre offers upskilling in good urban design practice to regeneration professionals. These are bespoke courses designed for the staff. This is one way of getting around the potential reticence of industry to make an effort to incorporate residents’ opinion: which Jas does acknowledge is a challenge. Many from the construction or design industries might want to work with the project because of a genuine sense of social responsibility. But some, he thinks, might be patronising in their approach; other professionals might only acknowledge local input because they have to. The first challenge is to give disadvantaged communities the tools and confidence to speak out in the area of urban design: the second is to get their voices heard and their skills recognised.

That second challenge is a long-term ambition of CUDOS. What the project wants to see is examples of the CUDOS-trained students influencing and taking part in local development projects. After all, it started with women at a conference wondering how they could influence their neighbourhoods. And whilst CUDOS is as yet unique in the UK, Jas wants to see it rolled out with social landlords across the country.

After all, back in 2005 one hundred Asian women might not have anticipated taking part in a conference in Birmingham City Football Club. But Ashram

Housing Association changed that. And before Ashram's partnership with Atkins and Birmingham City University, a working-class man with minimal education would have assumed the world of architectural design was not for him. Yet by coming up with radical, creative approaches to inclusivity and education, CUDOS has changed that assumption, too.