

*What follows is the result of an e-mail exchange between Anthony Graves of C\_M\_L and Meena Natarajan of My Piece of Chennai, in December 2009. The purpose of this first set of exchanges is to introduce the reader to the project in Chennai, India, and to begin a discussion about collaborative design-based community organizing. [AG]*



## My Piece Of Chennai

*My Piece of Chennai is a citizen run initiative to help communities leverage their collective intelligence and solve issues of civic infrastructure in local neighborhoods in Chennai.*

My Piece of Chennai' intends to create opportunities for community-led development of urban spaces in Chennai, India. We wish to bring about a paradigm shift, where systems mired in corruption and inefficiency, and spaces in disrepair, instead of being problems to live with, become opportunities to create stronger local networks of concerned neighbourhood. We believe the answers lie within local communities. We are committed to helping them tap this knowledge, and generate a set of alternatives, for a more inclusive and sustainable path to urban development. Our website-driven tool will help people identify issues on a map, discover and collaborate with those interested in working with them, and document their group's collective efforts to contribute to a community driven knowledge base of experiences, obstacles, and strategies.

### How does your collective/group organize itself internally? How are responsibilities and competencies distributed?

The initiative started out with a few individuals, fed up with complacency and the pervasive sense of inertia and disempowerment in our communities. We identified attitudes, systems, and issues of information access that hinder public engagement. Our goal is to design and build virtual spaces that enable communities to experiment, both online and offline, with new ways to negotiate these obstacles, and generate a set of locally informed best practices. The internet offers an opportunity to connect people across Chennai and the world who may not otherwise meet, and a vehicle through which the diaspora can contribute. It also offers a platform to collect and make accessible valuable information about citizen realities, as a complement to many current efforts to inform the public about the government's perspective on urban development in India.

Our efforts to come together and build this technology, has been an experiment in the kind of collective organizing and action we ask of our community. We experience similar challenges everyday. We have learned that providing scaffolding and a structure through which individual participants can grow in an area of their interest, is key to sustaining motivation and momentum. We are now a group of 15 students, entrepreneurs, activists, designers and engineers. We are organized into four streams of responsibility: Volunteer Engagement, Development, Outreach and Sustainability. This structure helps us generate and offer opportunities to volunteers in a more focused manner. We prioritize learning interests over background and expertise. The streams identify tasks and make contributions that meet the learning goals of its members, and are relevant to the project as a whole.

### What role do you think design plays in community organizing?

Design helps us articulate and communicate our vision both within our group and externally. Most importantly, design makes apparent possibilities for change, and new ways of experiencing the environments we live and work in. Within our group, simple wireframes and prototypes have inspired and kick-started our development efforts. They have acted as starting points for discussion and decision-making. We derive from design processes that embrace play, open-endedness, mistakes, disagreements, and experiential learning, in how we connect with each other as a group. We are working to apply this learning to design similar interactions and experiences that foster creative confidence in individual citizens, and collective problem solving, in environments of overwhelming complexity and pessimism, such as ours in India.

## What is the role of the artist/designer in relation to organizing? (What works? what doesn't?)

It is our role as artist/designer to advocate for a socio-cultural understanding of how people uptake information and appropriate technology. It is also our responsibility to create awareness of larger social, political and environmental implications of urban and technology design. At My Piece of Chennai, we work to bring to the forefront, issues of equal access to spaces that women, certain castes, and sexual minorities face due to a fear of harassment; the disabilities that differently-abled people are required to negotiate due to inaccessible spaces, and the environmental impact of various solutions to civic infrastructure issues.

This is a difficult process. It is not easily apparent what kinds of technological design features will spark an inclusive and empathetic awareness of the city. We are inspired by techniques offered by reflective design and critical design to create spaces for exploration and new kinds of awareness. However, our tool will not exist just as a prototype. It needs to be efficient, functional, and convenient as well as engaging. Its success will also depend on the accuracy of information and user driven content and the way that information is presented. Techniques such as ambiguity and provocation are tricky to get just right in this context. We are currently experimenting with narratives, gaming models for community driven content and visual mapping of demographic data that can put civic infrastructure development in a social, political and spatial context. We would love to hear from others working in this domain about their ideas and experiences.

## How is your specific project using visibility to connect with or support a particular community? Is this a matter of making something invisible, visible? How is this done?

We derive our aesthetics from the visual environment we see around us. Our logo, for example, is based on the culture of kolam drawing. Kolams are simple designs drawn with rice powder outside homes around the city. They are natural decorations, symbols of ownership and expressions of pride in looking after a space.

Our mapping strategy is to make visible urban issues around the city and their various states of development. This information is currently inaccessible to the public. We also use maps to identify and locate individuals interested in participating and solving issues, in order to make it easier for groups to develop. We hope to use the data we will build over time to make apparent visually the disparities that exist in how different neighborhoods are treated, or as is often the case in India, how just around the corner from you is a community living in environments of poverty and serious health hazards. Although, we are not advocates for any specific community, it is important to our members to make our tool as accessible as possible. This means designing for assistive devices and the most dominant forms of technology access in India; shared computing, inconsistent access, intermediaries and relatively high penetration of mobile technology.