

Project Report

Khirkee Ki Kahani

"Hum ekkathe rehet hain" - Ganesh (local resident)

Over a period of ten days, the immediate vicinity of KHOJ has been explored in order to make friends with our neighbors, and connect KHOJ with local people. This project intends to demonstrate an initial mapping of this community/ies that live and work in this vicinity through a series of interviews, photographs and drawings.

A focus is on friendships that people have within the neighborhood, as a way of exploring common ground and experiences that have shaped this contemporary community. Through this process we wish to create an accessible space within KHOJ, that will generate dialogue and interaction with our neighbors, through collaborative art projects that are meaningful to the local community.

KHOJ had been based in an area called Khirkee Extension for about 8 years and yet had no meaningful relationship with its immediate environment, local people regarded the organization with suspicion and distrust. It was an open slate where members of KHOJ gave us license to initiate a process to introduce their organization to the local community and set up a CCD model of community engagement that they could build upon all within the time frame of about 3 weeks!!! At our first planning meeting with the three arts (sculpture) graduates; Aastha Chauhan, Sanhita Banerjee and Sakshi Gupta, we discussed the feasibility and parameters of this project which was essentially to be an exercise in community mapping.

Strategies for this were to:

- Examine existing documentation statistics, historical material, information collected by other NGOs in the area etc.
- Community based information that we would generate through oral histories/ photographs/ recorded interviews/video etc.
- Creative workshops with the local children to determine sites of significance and ideas for future art projects e.g. public art .Our initial investigations revealed that KHOJ is located in a neighborhood that represents an extraordinary microcosm of Indian society.

It became very clear from venturing out on the first day that we needed to hook the project on something which was meaningful to the local people in order to build their trust. I felt that the idea of friendship allowed the way in to firstly suggest that KHOJ wanted to be friends with its neighbors, and then to talk to people about their own definition of friendship, to tell us about their friends in the area and lastly to offer them a photo of them together with their best friend. This proved to be a more very apt starting point less threatening and inquisitory and generated some beautiful stories and images, as well as many insights into the community

and intra-communal relationships and values as well as gender issues. Essential to our negotiating into the community was the assistance of Lakshmi, a wonderfully responsive and confident young 13-year-old girl who just knew everybody in the neighborhood. We met with about 25 local residents, talking and taking photographs over a ten-day period with village elders, day laborers, the local Sai Baba temple priests and shopkeepers.

We also ran a children's arts workshop on a Saturday morning. I also took images of the street and other meeting places, as well as observing the way the streetscape evolved throughout the day. (Different businesses/stalls would appear at different times of the day) We decided to pull the images and stories together into a small publication with a limited print run 50 copies, essentially to give back to the community members (along with a large colour photo of them with their friend) and as a lasting document of the project. The three arts graduates also designed a series of posters utilizing the images and text generated from the project. The community was invited to the project launch (over 80 people in attendance) at KHOJ, as a demonstration of the bona fide intent of KHOJ to be more inclusive. The launch/exhibition entitled "Khirkee Ki Kahani" Stories of Neighbors and Friendship was genuinely well received local shopkeepers calling it first class and even being approved by the local priests. The project allowed us to begin to understand the cultural landscape of the neighbourhood its complexity also means that there are multiple agendas, and space needs to be created at KHOJ for dialogue, debate and multiple interactions. The overwhelmingly positive response to the exhibition demonstrated that local people were interested in being involved if given the opportunity. By reaching out to people and giving them the opportunity to tell their stories we were also acknowledging and respecting local knowledge.

Following the exhibition, we organized to meet with Chairperson of KHOJ and evaluate the process she has expressed great interest in investigating opportunities for funding in order to develop further collaborations. In the short term I have been keeping in touch with KHOJ to hear about the next stage of the project namely that the three students have been meeting with local shopkeepers to look at involving them in the design and painting of their shutters. She was happy to provide a short-term injection of funds to make these initiatives possible as a way of keeping the momentum of our initial project going. Other ideas discussed included an ongoing program of kids workshops, public art projects to demonstrate the KHOJ artists skills e.g. the design of entry points into the street/ signage etc, as well as plantings and the potential for the design of water pumps for the community. "

Vandana Ram & Tim Carroll