

BMW Guggenheim Lab Mumbai Presents a New Kind of Bridge

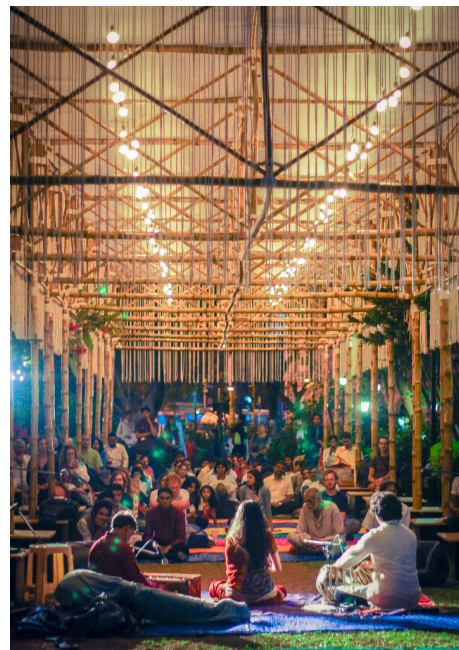
By Aisha Dasgupta, Stephanie Kwai, and Jairaj Mashru in consultation with David van der Leer

“Co-creation” is the process of collaborative learning and creation whereby peers are placed together in a situation to learn from each other and work together to achieve a goal. Many people, organizations, and even a few governments around the world have adopted this process, as it offers a way to include more voices, ideas, and knowledge to build something new and better. As the sharing of knowledge is inherent to the process, it enriches the learning experience and benefits everyone involved. Embracing such a process opens us up to new thoughts, perspectives, and considerations that offer fresh insights and spark original ways of thinking.

However, we have noticed that we are frequently relegated to specific planes of interchange: collaborative learning groups often include only people from particular social circles, age brackets, and levels of education, due to the socio-economic realities and lack of opportunity for more interaction across backgrounds. Imagine the possibilities that could grow from an expanded and more inclusive platform for knowledge exchange and creation!

A city as eclectic and vibrant as Mumbai clearly possesses an abundance of wide-ranging knowledge rooted in the diversity of its citizens. For these reasons, the BMW Guggenheim Lab, a mobile laboratory that has traveled to cities worldwide, became interested in the potential for collaborative learning across the city within a variety of fields. What could elite architecture students learn from a self-taught slum contractor, and vice versa? If an Indian classical vocalist, a Western classical violinist, a Kabir rock guitarist, and a Marathi folk musician found middle ground, what would the fusion music they made sound like, and how would their creative process unfold? What would a new dance routine look like when a group of professional dancers from utterly different disciplines and styles choreographed together and engaged with onlookers interested in learning? And what could visitors and audiences learn from observing or participating in the interchange?

These were some of the many questions that led to the conception of the Bridging program series, which was spearheaded by Lab Team member Aisha Dasgupta, Bridging series documentarian and research analyst Jairaj Mashru, and Bridging Public Program Consultant Pooja Warier, and hosted by the Lab in Mumbai from December 9, 2012 to January 20, 2013. Through a number of participatory city projects and free programs presented to the Mumbai public, the Lab addressed issues of contemporary urban life with the goal of exploring new ideas and forward-thinking visions for city life. As part of the Lab, the Bridging series aimed to encourage collaboration among people with an interest in the same field (in football, music, dance, and architecture/construction), from professional experts trained by the best in their field to autodidacts who have never received formal training and yet enjoy a status similar to experts, based on their practice and experiences. Through Bridging, these



people from varied backgrounds shared knowledge and interacted with each other in four playful workshops.

The series was not an experiment in multidisciplinary work. Rather, the collaborators in each of the four sessions at the Lab came from the same discipline but from starkly different backgrounds. Although there was some confusion, discomfort, and frustration along the way, the ultimate outcomes of working through the process were ones of positive exchange, confidence, trust, new ideas, and improved sensitivities. In the end, Mashru, along with Lab Dasgupta, made some keen observations about how people from different backgrounds establish a dialogue; work, learn, and create something new together; and ultimately infer what this could mean for Mumbai and what kind of change can come about through an exercise of codesigning and inclusive engagement.

The observations and takeaways from the Bridging series reveal ways of creating a stronger platform to support multi-level learning that promotes open-mindedness, challenges existing beliefs and attitudes, and possibly even addresses personal prejudices. These methods could be used to create a more equitable plane for new and different types of collaboration and knowledge exchange.

The outcomes from the Bridging series may also be applicable on a larger scale. What forms could multi- and cross-community collaborative learning take to bridge gaps that impact larger decision-making processes and future plans in such realms as urban design and policy?

Bridging Invisible Gaps

The Bridging series was comprised of four programs that occurred at different locations around Mumbai. The programs were focused in the following areas: music/composition, football, architecture/construction, and dance. Besides the visible gaps in the skills, knowledge, and resources that exist between people of different backgrounds, each program proved an education in bridging the invisible gaps created by differences in participant approach and mindset. At the Mumbai Lab, we defined the differences in approach that frame these gaps: complexity versus simplicity, structure versus disorder, and perception versus reality. The following examples from the Bridging programs illustrate how each pair of opposing approaches came together and produced opportunities for mutual learning, creativity, and respect.

Complexity versus Simplicity:

Many of the self-taught participants employed simple techniques to achieve their goals, while the formally trained participants resorted to complex techniques for finding innovative solutions. The Bridging exercises demonstrated that the strongest outcomes, however, do not always come from applying an overly complicated solution. Sometimes clear, simple solutions that allow users more flexibility constitute a more effective approach.

The Design Challenge held at Sambhaji Park exemplified this. The workshop brought together two small teams of students from the Rachna Sansad Architecture University program and Navjibhai (Navji) Vagadia, a slum contractor, to codesign a low-cost housing unit in a Mumbai slum. The brief challenged participants to design a two-story, fifteen-by-eight-foot slum unit,

situated between two existing units in an average slum development, for a fictional, typical lower-income family of seven.

Not only did the students and Vagadia exchange opinions, knowledge, and skills to address this task, but the group also visited Vagadia's own home in the slum to get a better and more comprehensive picture of how such tight quarters are used and lived in. Eventually, the two student teams were able to develop creative solutions such as embedding all the storage in the stairs, or building storage drawers under the beds that can be joined to form another bed.

Vagadia only studied until the fourth grade, and has been working in various capacities in construction for thirty-five years. His design was innovative, and, based on the reactions of architects present in the audience, his approach would likely serve the fictional-family situation better in the long-term. Although he did not have any formal instructor to mentor or teach him about proper construction techniques and new technologies—and despite the fact that he never had the chance to experiment due to the necessity for pragmatism in guaranteeing security for his livelihood—Vagadia had the advantage of experience, having lived in a slum for most of his life and having built dozens of slum units over the years.

The major difference in approach between the student groups and Vagadia was spatial allocation and planning. The student teams thought of innovative ideas in their designs specifically to allow the same space to be used by different people at different times of the day, such as women in the morning, children in the afternoon, men in the evenings, and the whole family at night. In contrast, Vagadia preferred to leave the lower level largely open so that the family has the flexibility to use the space as they please, while ensuring that guests could be accommodated at any time. His design was utterly simple at first glance, but, on closer inspection, it proved to be superbly practical.



Design Challenge: December 30, 2012 at Sambhaji Park (Mulund East)
Students from the Rachna Sansad architecture program presenting their design



Design Challenge: December 30, 2012 at Sambhaji Park (Mulund East)
Slum contractor Navjibhai (Navji) Vagadia presenting his design

Structure versus Disorder

Many self-taught participants approached the challenges in what appeared, to some, to be a disorderly way, due to the fluid jumps made from one end of the creative spectrum to the other to showcase their creativity. On the other hand, those with formal training believed that staying within loose boundaries or following fundamental rules aids in the creative process and supports the production of an outcome with some uniformity and the possibility of creating an easily recognizable signature.

The Mumbai Jamming program displayed examples of this disparity in approach by bringing together professional musicians from distinct schools of thought: those who have trained for more than ten years in classical Indian tradition and those who practice new music, created by combining various genres. Five musicians—a Western classical violinist, two Indian classical vocalists, a Kabir rock guitarist/vocalist, and a Marathi folk musician—jammed in front of an audience of more than 100 people in Horniman Circle. Before the performance, the musicians met for two sessions to co-compose a new tune they would perform together at the event.

There was some initial frustration, fear of overstepping, and lack of consensus on selecting a tune or *raga*, as everyone wanted their idea to be chosen. Eventually, the formally trained, classical musicians gave way to the self-taught folk musicians to take the lead in beginning to compose a song and lyrics. The classical musicians felt that formal training gave them more adaptability and confidence in their ability to find their own place in the fusion piece being composed by the folk artists. At the same time, the informally trained musicians realized that very creative things can be done even by staying within the *raga*. Showing an ability to play at extremes is not always necessary to be creative.



Mumbai Jamming: December 13, 2012 at Horniman Circle (Fort)
Musicians from the National Street for Performing Arts performing their final collaborative raga

Perception versus Reality

Perceptions and judgements are typically developed based on our personal experiences. Figure 1 shows how the audiences' preconceived notions and perceptions of the formally trained and the self-taught changed after each presentation/performance/showcase. These findings illuminate how the audiences' initial opinions of the self-taught performers improved after the group performance, gaining share over their initial opinions of the formally trained musicians.

In Dance Mumbai Dance, the final workshop of the Bridging series, held at Mahim Beach, a group of dancers taught the participants a new dance routine, choreographed to accompany the [BMW Guggenheim Lab song](#). The group of dancers were comprised of professionals from different styles—including Bharat Natyam, Odissi, Kathak, contemporary/modern jazz, Bollywood, hip-hop, and even martial arts—who had come together to quickly choreograph a new routine that incorporated dance steps from each of their styles.

Dancers from various disciplines met each other for the first time at a two-day workshop to choreograph a mixed dance, which would be taught to a flash mob at the Lab event. Initially, the dancers had contentious debates about various issues in dance, such as which form was best suited for choreographing dance steps to the Lab song and whether or not “Bollywood” was even a legitimate form of dance. Similar to the music exercise, the Bridging process started by first overcoming the gap between the dancers and then eventually the forms of dance. Many dancers learned that dance can connect strangers, and can get people to open up and come together as a group. Some dancers also had a shift in perception and learned how to not only negotiate personal space with large crowds in a public environment, but also how to trust strangers.

By successfully completing the choreography of a flash mob, the dancers learned the importance of first breaking the ice, then building momentum, as well as the necessity of constant dialogue with the audience. Interaction between learners provides significant opportunities for greater learning and more positive relationships. Most of all, the dancers experienced a new way that dance can increase psychological well-being and bring joy to people of all backgrounds.



Dance Mumbai Dance: January 11, 2013 at Mahim Beach
Dance Dialogues in Bombay teaching their choreographed dance to Lab visitors and audiences

Audience polls demonstrated shifts in the audience's perspective during the Mumbai Jamming program. Before the new piece was performed by the collaborative group, each musician had the opportunity to demonstrate the full depth and breadth of his or her individual talent. Audience polls showed that the formally trained musicians and their self-taught counterparts were appreciated in nearly equal amounts during their individual performances. However, when the musicians played together, the self-taught artists were clearly the crowd favorites.

The combination of genres resulted in unique musical entertainment that was greatly enjoyed by both performers and the audience; the performance proved to be a learning experience for musicians and audience members alike.

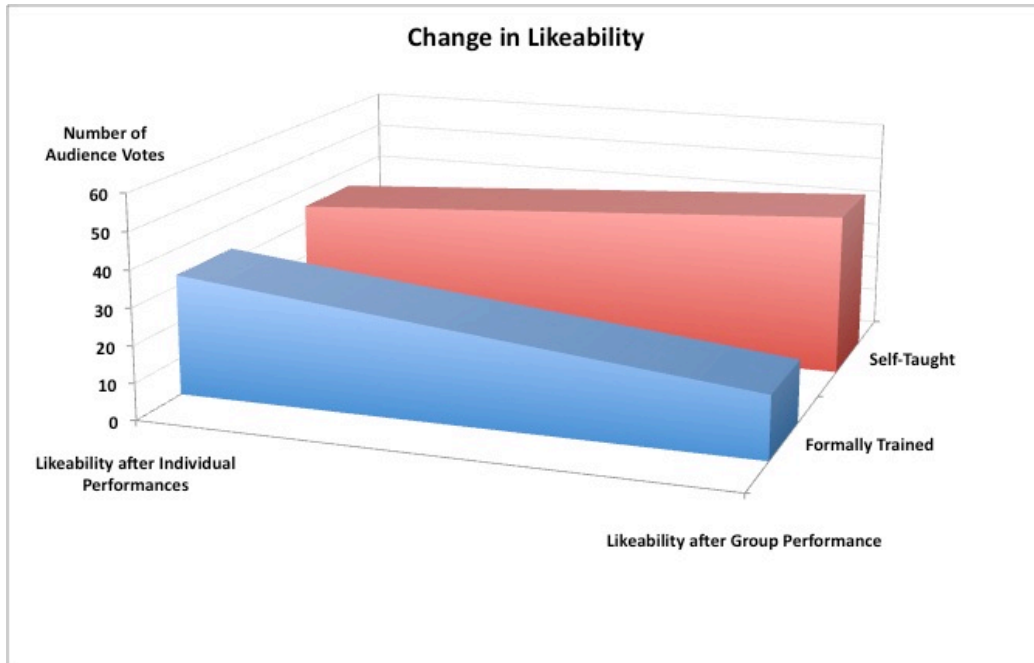


Figure 1: Audiences' change in reaction to formally trained and self-taught participants

Building a Bridge That Works

Through these four workshops, we have identified some overarching lessons to be learned. Summarized below are our recommendations for building effective bridges that allow for positive collaborative learning and exchange.

1. Multi-Way Learning

Everyone has something unique to teach and share. Those with more official training may know methodologies to plan and execute, while those who are predominantly self-taught may bring a greater sense of practical experience, are better at anticipating problems, and can solve those issues with frugal creativity (*jugaad*). Effective bridges must always offer people a way to share knowledge with and learn from each other.

2. Inclusiveness, Mutual Trust, and Respect

Mutual trust and respect enables the exchange of knowledge and skills between participants and prevents breakdown of processes and communication. A good Bridging activity can build mutual trust and respect by encouraging communication among participants through constructive dialogues that maintain focus on current issues even when provocative ideas are discussed.

3. Seeking Collaborative Opportunities

Bridging is not just about learning new things from one another. The greatest opportunity in Bridging is long-lasting collaboration—coming together to build something new and resolve important issues. When strangers from different backgrounds work together, the experience can be more rewarding and the outcomes more innovative.

4. Community Support

No bridge can stand on its own for long without the support of the community. Endorsement by key individuals, financial support, and time are all crucial. When difficulties arise, the community must show tolerance, encourage learning, and allow experimentation to bridge differences. Often, certain existing infrastructures, platforms, or entities enable this: for instance, in the Football with a Kick event at Batliboy Compound, a football academy brought two coaches and two professional football players together with a group of more than fifty children from low-income families to practice their football skills and play a friendly match.



Football with a Kick: January 5, 2013 at Batliboy Compound Football Players Association of India, Imperial International Sports Association, and Oscar Foundation giving an orientation about the day's workshop and event to participants.

5. Rinse and Repeat

“Doing” together—simply experimenting, playing, and practicing as a group—is important for Bridging, and needs to be done with more people, more often, and over a longer period of time.

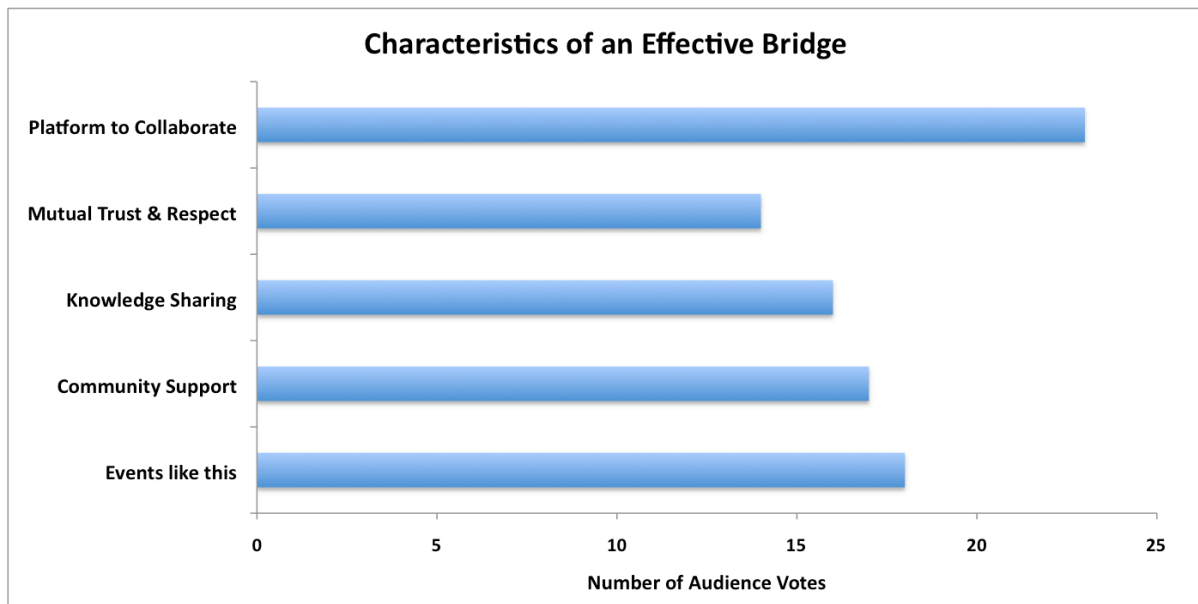


Figure 2: Requirements for an effective bridge, as expressed by the audiences at the workshops.

Impact on Design and Public Policy

Despite an extremely concentrated population density, limited space, and potential for inconveniences and conflicts, Mumbai's citizens are adept at accommodating each other spatially. We posit that conditions in Mumbai that require cooperation and accommodation in supporting city operations also foster ability for individuals from different backgrounds to learn, create, and work together. The eagerness of citizens to participate is clearly evidenced by the number of people that attended the Lab in Mumbai.

The need for healthy, supportive bridges in India seems most urgent in relation to the design and planning of new public policies, spaces, and urban systems. The Lab's Bridging series demonstrated effective ways to build platforms for many different voices to come together and produce better outcomes for everyone in this city. The applications for such collaborative platforms are numerous and span from public affairs to private enterprise. Public-private partnerships and non-profit organizations could leverage such platforms to amass community support and engagement towards their cause. Creating such opportunities and platforms could reengage and reactivate disengaged and dissident citizens to contribute to social change, collapse differences, and drive progress in a collaborative way, tackling problems together, and solving issues faced by communities, cities, and nations. Experiential learning and collaboration through bridging interpersonal interactions creates an environment where deep and lasting learning and change can occur. If inclusiveness and collaboration became the core of design and planning processes in the public sector, the possibilities could be limitless.