Paper / Proposal Title:
Speculations on an urban design toolbox for postcolonial network cities

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Abstract (300 words):
What might cities of the Global south look like in the ecologically hazardous future? Who would get to live, work and thrive in these cities? This paper examines two undergraduate architecture studio learning projects, separated by two years, and four hundred kilometres in Southern India, that took the “teaching-as-research” approach, and offered speculations on these increasingly urgent questions. Both studios had forty students working with three faculty members, and lasted about two months. While one studio centred itself on the case of the fringe town of Vaniyambadi in Tamil Nadu state, that had at its core a tannery: a colonial relic that, with great tenacity, continued to reproduce the politics of extraction in its material and human practices. While discounted from contemporary global discourses on industrial pollution and humane work, this factory town is an active participant in the global networks of leather trade. The second studio located itself in Nedumangad, an old satellite town to the erstwhile royal capital of the Travancore state, Trivandrum – also the current capital of Kerala state. The studio sought to build on this historically liminal political identity, to explore ways in which an old urban fabric could be reimagined, through active negotiated practices into an inclusive city. Along with learning opportunities, both studios were conceptual speculations on imminent futures of the postcolonial city: (how) could these urban systems, born out of
exploitative and centralizing tendencies, be transformed into generative and empathetic habitats? What kinds of methodological strategies would such a conceptual commitment to ecological urbanism and ecosophic urbanism entail? What would an urban design project, that deliberately decentres the anthropocentric, and draws on networks between human and non-human actors, look like? This paper expands on the methodological, conceptual and strategic findings of such a radical shift, through the stories of two Indian towns.

References:


• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):
Sumitra Nair
Sumitra Nair is a trained as an ethnographic listener with an interest in cultural modes of meaning making. As Associate Professor at College of Architecture Trivandrum, Kerala, her research and pedagogical practice sits at the intersection of liberal arts and design education, where she works with learners in architecture as well as design. She brings expertise in qualitative research methods having done research with urban as well as rural communities, human-technology interfaces, and information management systems. She has an undergraduate degree in Sociology from Delhi University, a Masters degrees in Sociology (Delhi School of Economics) and Science and Technology Studies (Virginia Tech).
Ar. Soumini Raja Phd.
Soumini Raja brings a deep interest in complex human-nature relationships and their process of co-evolution. She is the founding partner at Studio Commune, a collaborative design studio in Trivandrum, Kerala, India, that engages in meaningful conversation between practice, research and activism. In her academic research as Associate Professor at College of Architecture Trivandrum, she attempts to see design beyond the linear narrative, and as an on-going process encompassing dialogue and negotiation between society, culture and built environment. She has an undergraduate degree in Architecture from College of Engineering Trivandrum and Masters degree in Urban and Regional Planning from CEPT University Ahmedabad, India. Her doctoral research at CEPT University was a socio-spatial investigation of human vulnerabilities to disasters in coastal areas.

Ar. Reshma Mathew
Reshma Mathew is an architect and urban designer with a deep interest in studying socio-cultural constructs of space and the ensuing urban paradigms. As part of her academic practice and research in the role of Assistant Professor at Avani Institute of Design, Kerala, India, she explores the conception of design as an architectural language informed by socio-cultural imprints and tectonics of the context. She holds an undergraduate degree from the University School of Design, Mysore and Masters degree in Architectural and Urban Design from the University of Edinburgh, UK. Her Masters` thesis, “Fluid Occupancies,” explored manifestations of Non-Figurative architecture in an urbanscape and the politics of space, questioning and reinventing an ‘Ecosophic Urbanism’, that are conceived as urban architectural interventions born out of a process of juxtaposition and adaptation.