

TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

THE NANO CITY SUPER STUDIO, INDIA

BY NEZAR ALSAYYAD

Innovative projects often have unusual beginnings.

In Fall 2006, I received an e-mail from an individual who informed me that he was planning a new city in India. He wanted to meet me to discuss what ideas I may have for such a project. A new city that would be privately built—indeed, the idea made me wonder! Fortunately, my initial instinct to delete the e-mail and to dismiss the idea altogether did not prevail and I agreed to a short meeting with its sender in my office the following week. On the day of the meeting and after a brief Google search, I discovered that I was about to meet Sabeer Bhatia—the co-founder of Hotmail, and one of India's, if not the world's, most recognized young entrepreneurs.

Bhatia, a graduate of Stanford University, had come to us in Berkeley seeking our expertise to realize his vision for Nano City—a new, sustainable, eco-friendly, and high-tech city in north India. The 11,000 acre site earmarked for the project is nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas and within close proximity of the city of Chandigarh in the state of Haryana. By all measure, Bhatia is a dream client: a young visionary whose education and ambition are matched with a social conscience. Having co-founded Hotmail in the 1990s and subsequently selling the corporation





for \$400 million to Microsoft, he went on to establish other IT companies and develop social ventures beyond technology. Although he came to us mainly for advice about how to pursue his new project, it quickly became clear that his engagement with us was not going to be a passing one.

Stemming from my conviction that successful projects are a product of a close collaboration between an educated client, a competent designer, and an informed public, I convinced Bhatia that we should pursue the project as a college-wide graduate urban design studio, involving a group of faculty from different specialties. Having now become our client, Bhatia also generously funded the studio which included a site visit by 16 students and 6 faculty members for a 9-day trip to India. While in India, the design team also met with government officials in the state of Haryana and other developers collaborating on the project.

The CED has had a long tradition of conducting Super Studios, which are intense design collaborations for a semester-long project and involving several faculty as supervisors. The tradition harks back to studios conducted by Lars Lerup and Stanley Saitowitz in the

1980s as well as those by Mark Mack, Richard Fernau, and myself in the 1990s. It was indeed time to revive this tradition with the Nano City Super Studio. My enthusiasm for the project as well as that of the students was shared by committed CED faculty such as my colleague Professor Susan Ubbelhode—an expert on the architecture of Chandigarh and frequent visitor to India—who agreed to co-teach this studio. Richard Fernau cut his sabbatical short and participated as a studio critic. Robert Cervero, Chair of the DCRP; Chris Benton, former Chair of Architecture; and Ananya Roy, Professor of City Planning and Associate Dean of International and Area Studies, all agreed to serve as studio consultants by delivering lectures on design and planning policy and by participating in all studio reviews.

When we advertised the studio in late Fall as a joint Architecture, City Planning, and Urban Design course we were inundated with applications from students. Since this was a truly interdisciplinary studio, open to students from the whole college, we selected 16 applicants from the M. Arch, M.C.P., M.L.A., M.U.D., and the PhD programs in Architecture, City Planning, and Landscape Architecture.

Left: Students, faculty, and the Bhatia entourage in the home of the Minister of Haryana.

Right: Cris Benton's kite photography of mealtime.

Our visit to India was an intense experience yet memorable too. We traveled between Chandigarh, the foothills of the Himalayas, and the urban outskirts of Delhi. On a visit to the proposed project site, Berkeley students demonstrated what it means to immerse oneself in the context that they design for. Refusing to simply travel in the confines of an air-conditioned bus or meet government officials, the group visited a few of the villages on the site and spent a session meeting with and interviewing villagers whose fate would be impacted by the project.

From its onset, the studio emphasized both collaborative effort as well as teamwork in the design process. On our return to Berkeley, students were assigned to teams who then delegated individual tasks to each member. Interdisciplinary methodologies were pursued by addressing the multiple scales of design involved in a project of this nature. The studio started with a week-long intense charette where each student produced a master plan.



Left to right:
The bazaar of urban life in Old Delhi's Chandinichoke.
Students immersed in the crowd of Chandinichoke.
Students and professors talking and site-seeing.
Students getting ready to cross the road, with the red Volvo bus in the background.
Students and professors immersed in the crowd of Chandinichoke.



Following the charette the students were broken down into 8 teams and continued to work in pairs for 3 weeks to produce land-use and master plan solutions. This was followed by an intense 5 week session where 4 teams—each made up of 4 students—focused solely on urban design. Finally, the students were divided into 2 teams, each pursuing alternative master plans and also articulating an architectural strategy of which one was selected as a final master plan.

The final design solution for Nano City proposes a three-phase development model which will ultimately include a small educational sector with campuses of major U.S. universities; a business development sector with headquarters of several technology firms (providing biotechnology, informational technology, and nano services); a major housing development of up to 50,000 small, medium, and large size units; and appropriate commercial and recreational services in order to generate a vibrant mixed-use development.

The end of the semester may have been an ending to the Nano City Super Studio but today the project continues. Nano City Inc. has accepted the general master plan generated by the studio and has officially hired 10 other



Berkeley students to further develop it into a more detailed urban design, under the supervision of a few faculty members. The final master plan of Nano City designed by what is now called B-GAP—the Berkeley Group for Architecture and Planning—will be formally unveiled early in the Fall. It stands as a testament not only to the possibilities of collaboration between the different disciplines

within the CED but also to the successful collaboration between clients and designers. Indeed, the Nano City Super Studio attests to the creative potential of a paradigm that believes that political position and social responsibility can deliver design excellence. As we continue with design and development, we look forward to the moment when Nano City will break ground in 2009. ^{Fw}

For additional information about the Nano City Super Studio please visit: www2.arch.ced.berkeley.edu/courses/arch201_nanocity

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