DESIGNING FROM "HERE" FOR "THERE"

Master Plan rendering.

BY YAEL PEREZ, STUDENT, PHD ARCHITECTURE

I joined the Nano City Super Studio as a result of my background and interest in development issues in India, as well as the desire to learn about the design process.

As a PhD student my research interests focus specifically on the current trends in architectural practice where architects around the globe often design for sites that they have never been to or have had minimal contact with. As a practicing architect I have lived and worked in Northern India, where I was involved with several development projects that stress local building traditions. The Nano City Super Studio was thus a unique opportunity that helped me develop my research focus and fine tune my thesis topic, which is now framed as: "Bridging the gap between architect and site through technological tools to enhance place-sensitive design."

So how did a group of Berkeley students bridge the architect-site gap in Northern India? A trip to India seemed to be the logical first step, but a week's visit there left us with more questions than answers. For example, the most prominent features appearing on our site maps, two rivers delimiting the site, were found to be dry most of the year and flowing with muddy water during the monsoon season. Predominantly, the buildings in the area were concrete structures of poor quality or shabby vernacular dwellings. In contrast the most beautiful visually seductive aspect of the site—a mosaic of agricultural plots of land—was precisely what we were required to change.

Back in the studio in Berkeley, we found ourselves using virtual tools such as Google Earth and aerial photos. The high-resolution images highlighted features that we had failed to notice during our site visit. These included a water

source, irrigation tunnels, an avenue of trees along a road, and several other elements which could be combined into a contextualized, practical, and place-sensitive urban environment. And while virtual tools cannot replace the tactile and sensory knowledge gained from a site visit, they definitely complemented it and kept us connected to the site despite the distance.

Beyond my own interests, a project like Nano City, which combined both theoretical and practical questions, was a perfect fit for an advanced graduate-level studio and influenced all of us considerably. The challenges of designing a new city and the inherent difficulties of bridging geographical and cultural distances were augmented by the fact this was a concrete project executed together with our client. Working on a real project forced us to deal not only with subjects we are enthusiastic about, but also with those that are usually overlooked in studio-courses such as government regulations, financial feasibility, attractiveness of the solution to potential investors, and of course producing high quality deliverables for our client.

Our experience was further enhanced by the professors who not only taught the design studios but also acted as consultants to the studio team and arbiters with the client. Their expertise in various relevant fields such as transportation, energy, and international development contributed greatly to the design and learning process. The close interactions between the students, professors, and the client resulted in a mutually productive learning process which in turn helped us devise better design solutions. It will probably be several years before we get a chance to take part again in such a complex design process–particularly one where designers, clients and developers benefit from fruitful interactions with one another. FW

The ancient trees on the Nano City site that serve as inspiration for the design of the Master Plan.

The close interactions between the students, professors, and the client resulted in a mutually productive learning process which in turn helped us devise better design solutions.