

The Essential Questions  
for Us  
as Architects.

Volume 2





Formation of citywide people's network with diverse group of citizens  
Co.Creation.Architects

In our role as architects, we started posing some questions...

*What are we doing ?*

*Is it enough ?*

*Who is architecture for ?*

*If it is for all, then how can architects reach the remaining 90% of the population ?*

*How can we achieve the skills and understanding to reach them ?*

The existing system of our architectural practice hopelessly fails to provide satisfactory answers to the above questions. In turn, these questions helped us realise the need for a process or system to reach all people. As our society is part of nature and since nature exists and evolves through a complex interconnected system, it's wise to look at natural systems first to seek the answers we want. It is interesting to observe that nature's system does not just create something new: it actually co-creates. It's a collective process with multiple actors through various networks. Nature doesn't evolve only for survival; its goal is bigger, selfless and eternal. We believe that it is worth trying to understand this bigger connection in nature while being a part of it.

## Jhenaidah City:

Jhenaidah is a secondary city of 252 thousand people located in the Southwest of Bangladesh, with approximately 80 low-income communities which aspire to improve their living conditions. The city was established on both sides of the river Naboganga which was used for navigation, bathing, swimming, fishing, irrigation and other socio-cultural activities. However, as the drainage system developed in recent years without proper planning, the river is rapidly being polluted. Hundreds of ponds are also being polluted while waiting to be filled up and built over. The best characteristic in Jhenaidah city is that people feel very proud of their city – not just of the city's physical attributes but also its identity and emotional qualities. They inherently believe that it's possible to improve the city.



Map of Jhenaidah  
Google map



In this context, the following questions arise:

*Can't citizens take initiative to plan their own city ?*

*Can't professionals join them and facilitate the planning of a better city ?*

*Can't the process unlock the potential of people's dreams and abilities ?*

These questions have given rise to a people's network in the city.

## The Jhenaidah Citywide People's Network:

To understand and explore the above questions, the people of Jhenaidah Municipality have joined one another in groups from different backgrounds, with different names, eager to rethink their city. The emerging "Jhenaidah Citywide People's Network" is an apolitical, flexible and organic network based on trust and a desire to improve the city. By using a collective decision-making process, citizens unlock their potential and all groups achieve higher levels of satisfaction.



People have discovered how to gather age, gender and ability segregated data which are crucial in planning. Moreover, children, women and the elderly contribute immensely to this process by providing a great amount of details. This is the beauty of designing together with people: the collaboration and empowerment of all those involved. This is the seed of co-creation in Jhenaidah.

“  
Being *community architects*,  
we have tried to work within this  
*citizen action network*.  
”



## Co.Creation.Architects:

As in nature, the seed of co-creation needs an appropriate and enabling environment to grow, as well as passionate gardeners to nurture it. As architects, we placed ourselves in this situation and asked ourselves: what can we do and where do we fit in? We felt the need to start a humble architectural practice named Co.Creation.Architects with an intention to work with both human and non-human communities.



Being local helps our endeavour. Jhenaidah is our home town; we are more than just architects here. We have many other intersecting identities as human beings. Presence with our multiple identities can liberate us and others to build better and stronger relationships. Our starting point was connecting with people: local authorities, local facilitators and collaborators, and similar minded people. We shared our beliefs with them. Simultaneously, through direct action with low-income communities, we appropriated our skills and roles. Our chosen path is not always smooth and without challenges, but we have discovered that finding the right questions is more important than getting all the answers. Identifying what the real problems are is very important.

“ *This process is slower in the beginning*  
as it takes time to connect and build trust.  
*It is like nature: in the beginning, it is slow yet steady.* ”

Ground needs to be ready before sowing seeds  
Co.Creation.Architects

## Scaling up and Working with Nature:

Alongside this undertaking, our team was also striving to understand and explore nature. We experimented working with other living things by creating a series of small-scale ecological gardens. We were spontaneously making gardens around us to grow and get to know our food, as well as the aesthetics of wild flowers. Our gardens were a great source of knowledge on co-creation. It's always important to connect with nature physically and working with your hands, to know the soil, to know the smell of the garden, to understand the network that nature develops through time. This is the science of co-creation: it's an approach that focuses on the process as well as the results.



Aspiring the city through children's eyes  
Co.Creation.Architects

In Jhenaidah, we have explored a better system based on trust, dignity and co-creation. There is a sustained effort to share with different groups like education groups, local governments, policy makers, NGOs and young professionals. We are also connecting with the civil society to shelter this process. Meanwhile, we are always searching for more co-creation stories in other sectors, linking with locals already undertaking good small-scale work.

All these practices are linked and allow us to get inspired and connect on the same platform of co-creation. Interestingly, people who are traditionally hard to reach, like policy makers, have also shown an interest in the process. Now, the challenge for government and other organisations is to trust people and co-create with a community-led process using local resources.



Sowing the seeds of co-creation in children's heart  
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Citywide people's network, policy makers and different professionals find possibilities of the city together  
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### Looking to the Future:

Gradually, the city and its inhabitants have prepared themselves to connect with bigger or international networks. In 2019, Jhenaidah city hosted the CAN Co-Create City Workshop. The process of the workshop, coupled with deep listening, valuing the opinions of local communities, feeling their aspiration as well as hands-on actions has helped us understand the different identities and possibilities for the city. Slowly, the architects begin to understand their role and see what is essential.

“ *It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye* ”

- Antoine De Saint-Exupery

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