

Workshop: „Ageing in the city and age-friendly culture in India and Germany“
University of Heidelberg, Jawaharlal Nehru University and
the School of Planning and Architecture
27th-30th September 2019 New Delhi

A report by Stephanie Böttner, University of Heidelberg

Fieldwork and experiences in Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi

Introduction

The workshop, held at the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi by Prof. Brosius, dealt with the theme "Aging in the city and age-friendly culture in India and Germany". After an interesting introduction and lively discussion, the students found themselves in groups and planned their field trips for the next day. Our group consisted of students coming from different fields: Gerontology (two state examination students), architecture/urban design (two bachelor students) and social psychology (one PhD student). Our various backgrounds made the planning very interesting and enriching from the beginning, as each member was coming up with different ideas from the morning discussions and had a different view on the topic.

Our fieldtrip for the next two days was going to be at Chittaranjan Park, a neighbourhood in South Delhi and



home to a large Bengali community. We decided to explore C.R. Park and to “feel the place” first and then to speak to the people living there. We were mainly interested in the questions:

- Are older people integrated in the society?
- Are there any events by the council, so that younger and older generations can come together? And if yes, are these places accessible for senior people?
- Can elderly people experience participation despite their vulnerability?

Fieldwork – Day 1 & 2

After we arrived at C.R. Park and got a first impression of the neighbourhood, we went to the community centre, which was only opened 1,5 years ago. They had a big public room for the residents with the possibility to sit and have a tea together or play board games, learning languages, etc. People had also the opportunity to get a health check at the community centre as they had doctors working there. The community



centre was mostly used by elderly people. There, we had the opportunity to talk with an urban designer, who knew C.R. Park, its infrastructure and demographic changes very well as he had been working there for more than ten years.

We were told that renting had become really expensive and that a significant portion of young people had moved away in the last couple of years. The younger generation and young families couldn't afford the rents anymore and had moved out of the district or even moved abroad for jobs while their families had stayed behind at home. Due to these demographic changes young and old people call C.R. Park a *geriatric*. Furthermore, we were told by the architect, that lots of activities are offered on the community grounds for young and old people. C.R. Park hosts many festivities and cultural events e.g. food festivals and festivals called art in the park or music in the park, street theatre, community walks, community watch et cetera. In addition, there are many volunteers who engage with the elderly. But the problem that comes up in C.R. Park: There is space and there are activities for the community, but mobility is necessary to participate otherwise these festivities are not accessible. In other words, with restricted mobility it's not possible to take part in special occasions.

In addition, we found out that an organization called "Green Community" improves the quality of life in the district and makes C.R. Park green and sustainable. They created a long-term plan that includes improving walkability, safety, lighting on the streets and better access for elderly people to encourage more activities.

Next we talked to an architect (72 years old), who moved to C.R. Park in 1985 and so belonged to the second generation of Bengalis in Delhi. By telling us her story, she confirmed a lot of the information we had heard before. She told us, that she was sad about the changes affecting the family structures. The population is ageing in C.R. Park, while the younger generation goes abroad. But she told us, how these changes also have a positive effect on the elderly as they are in very close contact and that they take care of each other.

The residents are in regular contact via WhatsApp, which gives them the feeling of a very strong community and participation. Our interviewee also informed us about the *Durga Puja celebrations* in the district. The Durga Puja celebrations, which originally started as a religious festival, have now become a social spectacle, but often referred to as chaos by the local elderly residents.



Although there is a "senior passport" which gives elderly people the permission to take part in the celebrations without queuing, they do not attend the festival as it is too crowded and exhausting for them.

On the second day, we were very pleased to see a political meeting of interested residents and politicians in C.R. Park. Here, the residents could voice their concerns to the politicians first-hand. In particular, concerns such as the improvement of pavements, street lighting and wastewater supply were addressed. It was very impressive to see the high level of engagement by the residents, who felt the need to help shape the neighbourhood and were willing to put a lot of effort into exchanging ideas. It also showed that the needs of the residents have changed since they moved to C.R. Park. In the past, they were able to get from A to B without much difficulty, while now they consider it as very important that the paths are accessible for old people as well. After the stimulating discussion we took another walk through C.R. park and discovered many doctors, a kindergarten, many small parks where people could meet



or even use an outdoor gym. We had a really positive impression of the infrastructure in C.R. Park.

Discussion

In our observation, Chittaranjan Park appeared as a special district of Delhi with a very unique history and demographic background. This strong Bengali community, founded in the 1960s, has faced huge changes in their family structures in recent years. Young adults are moving away or go abroad for their careers and young families hadn't been able to afford the high rents in C.R. Park anymore. These demographic changes have pushed authorities to become caretakers of the elderly residents. At the same time this civic engagement of the people makes a significant contribution to the maintenance of a society oriented to humanitarian ideals. The senior residents stay in daily contact e.g. via WhatsApp. Even a police officer comes to the houses monthly to check on the older residents. This service is free for old people living alone and is also of great importance as it shows how the concept of a so-called *caring community* can work in reality. The concept of caring communities in the sense how Prof. Kruse describes it in his book "Lebensphase hohes Alter", is a fitting way of dividing responsibilities in a community when the family can't handle the care on their own. It addresses the possibility of actively helping to shape the social environment, exchanging thoughts and actions with other people, taking on responsibility.¹ A caring community enables, despite vulnerability, participation in society. This concept of participation also suggests the creation of social spaces in which vulnerable people, on one hand, feel protected, on the other hand, find sufficient opportunities to be creative, to pursue their own chosen activities, to interact with other people. This requires social networks that support and accompany this and that is what the Bengali community has created in C.R. Park. The people there rely on the help and support of their neighbours, which gives many an important sense of that they are needed. Despite the good infrastructure and many Doctor's practices, temples etc., there was no nursing home in close proximity. The interviewees told us that their children moved abroad for the job, but they cannot see themselves leaving C.R. Park and following their family members. However, if suddenly a need in care comes up, there is currently no plan beyond the neighbourhood helping out, except if you can afford someone to take care of you at home.

Still, it was very impressive to see how a caring community can work and how committed people were to improve their neighbourhood and their district to improve the quality of life for the whole community.

I'd like to close this report with a quote from Erich Erikson:

"A sense of identity means a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and evelops; and it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community sense of being at one with its future as well as is history or myth."²

¹ Kruse (2016), p. 343

² Erikson (1975), p. 27

Literature

- Erikson, E. H. (1975). *Dimensions of a New Identity*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Kruse, Andreas (2016). *Lebensphase hohes Alter*. Springer Verlag.
- Schweda, M. (2013). Ethik für eine alternde Gesellschaft? Die Diskussion um die Würde des alten Menschen zwischen Autonomie und Fürsorge. In H. Baranzke & G. Duttge (Hrsg.), *Autonomie und Würde. Leitprinzipien in Bioethik und Medizinrecht*.



“Ageing in the City“ – Chittaranjan Park in New Dehli



Chittaranjan Park in New Dehli

In September 2019 we had the unique opportunity to engage in a fieldtrip to Chittaranjan Park¹ in New Dehli as part of the workshop “Ageing in the City”. The participants of the workshop all came from different fields and backgrounds, which led to an active exchange and stimulating conversations. Social psychologists, urban designers, medical doctors, gerontologists and anthropologists all look at the same object, but each one of them observes the subject from a different angle and focuses on a particular aspect.

Four fieldtrips were planned in New Dehli. Group 1 went to Madanpur Khadar, a low-income neighborhood, Group 2 to Shahjahanabad and Nizamuddin, the Old City neighborhood, Group 3 to the middle-income neighborhood of C.R. Park and Group 4 to Gurgaon, an old age home/gated community. I was assigned to the C.R. Park fieldtrip and was able to take a closer look at the elderly people living in this community. I was accompanied by another gerontologist from Germany, a social psychologist from New Dehli and two urban designers, one from Kerala and one from West Bengal. I personally found that a significant advantage. Since we had three native speakers as well as two of them speaking the local language, we had immediate access to the community of C. R. Park, which was resulting in very interesting, long and deep conversation with various residents.

Originally founded by a migrated Bengali community, C. R. Park has observed the increasing presence of non-Bengali families over the years. We were lucky enough

¹ in the following abbreviated with C. R. Park.

to undertake our fieldtrip at a time of the Durga Puja religious festival, which over time has become an ever-increasing social spectacle.

The aim of the excursion was to throw light on the elderly generations and how they interact and participate in the community of C. R. Park. In light of the urban designer influence, we first looked at the surrounding and environment. It rather quickly became apparent that the older generation was facing great and significant challenges of space. The mobility is limited to the historical background. The colony was built and designed for a specific population with specific needs. With vertical expansion of buildings, increasing number of cars and busier markets, the comfort and mobility of the residents (especially the elderly) is affected. This is intensified by the narrow, crowded vehicle lanes and streets that allow only agile citizens to cross. The pedestrian paths are not better. They are non-existent on some roads; in others they are blocked or are scarred by severe damage. The fact that sidewalks and traffic are not suitable or even inaccessible for older people restricts people with reduced mobility from engaging in public life. Space for senior citizens certainly exists, but mobility is necessary to participate as there is no subway station, metro station or bus station nearby. This forced exclusion can lead to loneliness.





To counteract, the community creates spaces for older people to meet and promote intergenerational interaction. This creates spaces for the community to emerge, which organically emerge into society. A possible explanation for the possibly necessary emergence of such spaces can be found in a more detailed investigation of demographic change. Both the young and the old, who we encountered and interviewed, called C. R. Park a geriatrics. A significant part of the young population has moved out for i.e. jobs while their families have stayed behind at home. The changed family structure may also derive from overpriced rents. The young generation cannot afford the rents, so they move away.

Another level of community is created through organizations like RWA and Puja Committees. Although the underlying nature of these communities is not heterogenous. While being silent observers, we noticed that the RWA meetings are mostly attended by the upper middle class and Puja Committees are formed by mobile, socially engaged elderly. It is very rare to see an elderly with reduced mobility.



The festival extends over the entire district and has taken on dimensions that are often described as chaos by local, mostly older residents. This results in them staying away

from this festivity instead of being able to join the religious preparations. There is a considerable number of older people, but it seems that their lives take place behind closed door. This may also indicate the sense of community among local residents. The loss of the younger generations living in C.R. Park and loss of the opportunity to take care of their older family member when needed has led the authorities to become (regular) carers for the aged residents. Police officers come in and check on the elderly once a month. Which leads us to another interesting observation. Although we walked for two days in C. R. Park, we weren't able to detect any Old Age Homes. Even if most residents recognize the need for retirement homes, the feeling was conveyed that, compared to Germany, there is a different awareness for nursing homes and (presumably) an own dependence on others in a very old age.

This has skewed the demographic profile of the area. But how does the community cope with it? In an impressive way: Caring Communities seem to have come to light and established themselves. In our observation, there is a strong sense of community among the residents of a block or adjacent blocks. Although there is a mix of ethnicities due to the increase in rental population, the community is inclusive. Newcomers are welcomed and cohesion is guaranteed. There is a strong community participation (voicing opinions and taking actions) and willingness to be engaged in cultural activities. The new era of technology has also found its way to C. R. Park. Society is changing and becoming visible when you look at the tool of communication. The residents stay in touch with the neighbours, e.g. through WhatsApp Groups. This WhatsApp Group serves a very special purpose: the feeling of being connected. It serves as a tool for interaction, networking, communication, and community engagement. The cycle of community strength can also be seen in projects such as the 'Green Community': many activities are offered on the community grounds, such as art in the park, music in the park, food festival, community walks, etc. The community area is also a place where people can enjoy the activities of the "Green Community". The majority of the attendees reflect the geriatric society. Since a large percentage of the residents live separated from children and other immediate family members, the residents basically built up a new social network themselves.



In summary, it can be said that the excursion was a very enriching experience. The interdisciplinary work offered the opportunity to think outside the box. You can also feel the reach of the new experience outside the field of investigation; the environment is encountered more openly as well as a deeper, holistic view and understanding has been developed.