



FARMER INNOVATION CENTRE

Written and Contributed by

Uday Goswami and Jayesh
Ganesh
[Better Life Foundation](#)
Angangba, Nagaland

Contact

-

Designed for Better Life Foundation (BLF), this is a space for the identification, promotion, development and dissemination of grassroots innovations by farmers and inventors of the region. It is envisaged as a collaborative space for the local community with access to a global resource network. BLF's mission is to improve productivity and standard of living by involving cross-community dialogue in a safe and non-judgemental democratic space encourages sharing of thoughts & actions.

What is the project about?

Farmer's Innovation Centre (FIC) is located in Angangba, a village in Tuensang district of rural Nagaland in Northeast India, one of India's most remote and marginalised districts.

Designed as an abstraction of the traditional Naga *Morung*, the centre is an expression of the community's rootedness in tradition with a view towards a global future! The building is a composite structure with the plinth and foundation in concrete and the entire

superstructure built out of Bamboo. The face of the building looks out into the expansive valley.

At the FIC, the sheer diversity of activities proposed within a handful of fluid spaces contributes towards realizing this mission. It is built in two levels on a plinth measuring 14 Ft by 50 Ft. The lower level is enclosed while the semi-open upper platform (or *machang*) offers sweeping panoramic views of the valley and surrounding hills. The ideation lounge is an enclosed space with expansive views of the valley. It contains a library, reading area, innovations gallery & demonstration area and can hold up to 50 individuals at a time. The *machang* is a versatile semi-open public space holding up to 40 adults in various interactive configurations.

One of the key highlights of the centre is the innovations gallery. Here, a number of locally sourced technological innovations are displayed. Prof. Anil Gupta's Honey Bee Network has also graciously supported the gallery by contributing a few highly successful innovations from around India. The aim of this space is to open the visitors' minds to the possibility of simple, yet ingenious ways of simplifying complex tasks, improving speed and efficiency of work and ultimately improving productivity.

The Centre is an inclusive and welcoming space for villagers as visitors of all ages, gender & professions – it thus enshrines the value of an inclusive 'habitat' as a product of social communication. Space has also achieved much of the desired impact at a human level in the following ways. First, the centre establishes familiarity through contextual design for the community to engage with it in an uninhibited manner. Second, FIC inspires the confidence and trust of problem solvers and offers them an unprejudiced platform to engage in conversation. Third, FIC offers the community a utility that would extend beyond its mandate (exactly the way your local tea shop is more than just a space to drink tea). The *machang* is a vibrant social space from where a sweeping view of the landscape could be had over the foliage of the growing apple orchard. The landscape on the site is productive and diverse with an aim to battle deforestation and establish an ecologically sustainable alternative to the built environment.

The centre caters to the ever-growing BLF community which comprises of over 700 farmers and their families, offering a diverse mix of spaces which host exhibitions, demonstrations,

lectures, workshops, council meetings and social celebrations. Built by and for the local community in response to a pertinent social need and in celebration of the local culture and using locally available materials with traditional bamboo construction techniques, the design is a celebration of the context.

While the design incorporates bamboo joinery details at which the local community are masters, the assemblage of the structure by itself is very different from the traditional Naga structures. Further, the language of the architects (drawings) is not necessarily the language of the local craftsmen. Therefore, the first and most important task was the capacity building workshop. This was a two-way learning program; where we explained architectural drawings and how to read them to the community and they taught us about bamboo working, joinery and fixing.

We diagrammed the structure in a step by step construction much like a Lego or Ikea instruction manual. The bamboo structural members were sorted by their length and nature (beam or column) and colour coded. This made the diagrams easily understandable. The joinery details for these members was sketched, understood and detailed out on site with the master craftsmen. Uday spent a few days at the site and using this very instruction manual the team constructed a 1:4 scale model. This model served as the reference point throughout the construction phase (and even as a cradle for Sethrichem's youngest daughter, Ztisa)!

In order to prevent the wind load from shearing the building, the design was modified to include a one-brick thick masonry wall on the shorter side while leaving the face open to the valley view!

What is the impact?

The Better Life Foundation caters to the betterment and needs of up to 700 families. The organization sought to create a place which imbued this large family with a sense of identity and rooted them in space. Various activities of the NGO needed dedicated spaces and as the organization grew, the need arose for engaging with a wider global audience in a physical space.

Upon completion, Sethrichem, his wife and three children have moved from Dimapur and fully settled in the centre. A sign of commitment to the project and its success, this has rallied the community with new vigour.

Since its inception, the activities at FIC have inspired widespread local transformation. In under a year, the increased productivity from farmers has led to the construction of a rural marketplace (funded by NABARD) for the sale of BLF produce in the local and regional market. This market place has no-electricity cold storage for seasonal produce as well as two shop fronts for local entrepreneurs and BLF's own retail store. This space was designed by us as well and built-in much the same manner; through community participation and capacity building initiatives.

Not On Map – selected as World's Top 10 Innovative Social Start-up by Booking.com Booster and founded by a friend of BLF, Kumar Anubhav – chose the Farmer's Innovation Centre as a destination for sustainable eco & agro-tourism. Researchers and travellers from India and around the world have visited to engage in the social initiatives at FIC. There is now a requirement to design for these visiting scholars and change agents, a hostel facility with a few rooms. FIC is a pioneer site for the permaculture revolution in the region.

In Feb 2020, Better Life Foundation hosted the first national-level permaculture workshop over 14 days at the Farmer Innovation Centre. It was well attended by over 28 participants from around India and lead by veteran permaculture experts. The event was well attended by government officials from Nagaland and this is a sign of the success and future potential for BLF's visions for sustainable farming.

For months now, the resident community has also used the FIC as the cultural heart of their social activities. Weddings, school excursions and large family events have found a home here. A powerful sign that the community has embraced the centre as their own!

Project Funded by

Jayesh and Uday initiated a crowdfunding campaign.

54 donors from around the globe came together to support the cause and, in the end, we raised INR 2,10,000 (Rupees two lakhs and ten thousand). At just under one-third of the desired amount.

Pastor Kijung from the church at Chungtor graciously stepped forward and arranged for the transportation of building materials from Dimapur to the site (a difficult and long journey through the

hills and forests). High quality bamboo was sourced from Nagaland Bamboo Mission at Dimapur for the project and INR 10,000 worth of bamboo was donated for the project by the commissioner.

Sethrichem put in the rest of the funding from his personal savings.

Members of the community came together to help in the construction. Most residents of the region have a vocation that complements their farming background and helps them earn during the non-farming seasons. Many of them are builders; masons, bamboo artisans, welders, glass workers, etc.

Stakeholders Involved

The foremost stakeholders of this project are the many hundreds of rural farmers that belong to the BLF family. The project is envisioned and constructed on the foundation of their desire to own a dedicated space for their activities. Sethrichem Sangtam who represents these families and is the promoter of BLF helped us develop the vision for this project over four months of detailed and long conversations.

Dipayan Bhowmik created the initial 3D visualization for the campaign.

Anuj Kale of [Leewardists](#) created an amazing and impactful [short animation](#) describing the cause and our effort.

An early publication of the project and its details by Changfang Luo and Rob Breed on [Architecture in Development](#) also gave immense global viewership to this project.

We were also exposed to strategies for regional and global collaboration by a number of professionals who guided us on the organizational processes that could be set in motion for the activities to be held in the centre. This was a time of intense thought exercises and continuous dialogue with people of diverse professional and cultural backgrounds.

About BLF and the architects:

Better Life Foundation is an NGO based in Nagaland which works in the fields of agriculture, rural empowerment and grassroots innovation through the unique and successful format of communal

storytelling. Founded by Sethrichem Sangtam in 2009, BLF designs community initiatives which are specifically targeted at bridging distances and improving communication.

The Designers: This endeavour of architecture for social impact is the product of years of thought and months of shared working between two close friends, Uday Goswami and Jayesh Ganesh. The nameless 'studio' started one Saturday in December 2016 as a weekend exercise between two friends and has grown in confidence and impact since then. Uday and Jayesh's work is based on the premise that communities inherently believe in architecture as an essential intervention to facilitate positive social impact through the production and appropriation of spaces. Uday studied architecture at Chandigarh College of Architecture and pursued masters from Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia: IAAC, Barcelona. He has currently been accepted as a fellow for the upcoming batch of ILSS (Indian Leaders for Social Sector). Jayesh studied architecture at VNIT, Nagpur and then pursued Masters in Urban Design from CEPT University, Ahmedabad. He was awarded the Young India Fellowship in 2013.

Uday and Jayesh continue to work with grassroots organizations and teach at various institutes as guest/visiting faculty. Currently, they continue to promote BLF's cause by serving as Honorary Advisors to the Board of Directors for Better Life Foundation.

Links to read more:

[A link to the project.](#)