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OBSERVE!

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The Observe program amplifies the voices of the youth by guiding them to pay attention to their cities, understand its functioning and effectively communicate the changes they desire based on their observations.

What is the project about?

Have you ever wondered if your child wants the same thing as you? Most possibly not.

Now ask yourself if children experience their neighbourhood and cities exactly like adults?

No again.

However, cities are currently planned and built by adults with little to no input from children and youth, which means the places we are making are most likely not responding to their needs and wants.

Engaging with children and youth as key stakeholders in the city-making process is crucial as they will be its primary users in the future. They approach things from a different perspective and with a nudge, are more likely to have ingenious solutions to everyday

urban challenges. And because their needs and thought processes are different, they may not respond effectively to conventional methods of community engagement. And thus, out of a need for a different kind of ‘nudge’, an immersive program that speaks to them was born – ‘Observe’.

The Observe program was established by the **Center for the Living City** – an organisation launched by a group of activists, practitioners, and academics in collaboration with Jane Jacobs, the urbanist and activist most renowned for her view that – cities belong to its people.

In 2018, The Observe program was launched in Tamil Nadu by **Urban Design Collective (UDC)** – an organisation comprising architects and urban designers working towards creating liveable cities.

The Observe program is developed with a multi-level approach that focuses on informing youth about their cities, helping them discover their neighbourhood, consulting with them about their aspirations for their places, and finally empowering them to take action. Through the 2 years, Observe has been adapted into various editions to cater to diverse communities and changing conditions including the Covid-19 pandemic.

About Observe! Workshops:

This edition is structured as a one day workshop – broadly divided into 3 segments – **Discover, Connect, Take Action**.

Segment 01: Discover

This segment commences with a short interactive presentation where participants are probed to think about what makes up a city, and then narrow all the way down to what makes up their streets. Participants are also informed about the challenges faced by urban centres around the world and are encouraged to share some examples of it they may face in their everyday lives. Global and local best practices are presented to showcase how some towns and cities have overcome these challenges, and essentially highlight that change is possible.

With this renewed sense of purpose, participants are taken on a neighbourhood walk and are urged to observe their surroundings with all their **5 senses** – *sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste*. During the walk, students discover and note down aspects of

their neighbourhood that they like, don't like and want to change.

Segment 02: Connect

Upon returning from the walk, participants are asked to **draw a mental map** of the neighbourhood walk while focusing on some of the things that stood out for them. A discussion on the mapping exercise highlights the different perspectives and observations made by participants on the walk.

In order to help them understand how the city is experienced by other people in their communities, participants are given **individual cards with personas** on them ranging from an elderly citizen, a vendor with a heavy cart traversing streets to sell his produce, a physically challenged girl in a wheelchair to a cow that lives in the area.

Each participant assumes one persona for this exercise, and they talk about how they would have experienced the neighbourhood walk as that person. They are also urged to talk about the associated urban challenges that a person would encounter in the neighbourhood, and participants collectively brainstorm ideas to solve them.

Segment 03: Take Action

For the closing segment, participants are encouraged to write postcards to the local governing bodies or the ward councillors highlighting the urban issues they identified on their walk while also touching upon solutions that were collectively arrived at.

COVID19 Response:

As a response to the limitations brought forth by the pandemic, an alternative structure for the Observe program was developed during the lockdown period- one that could engage with youth virtually.

Observe Home Edition is a way to engage students and prompt them to complete simple tasks and activities centered around their city, right from their own homes. This edition is conducted through short videos with instructions on carrying out a specific activity and the pilot was launched in Hope School at Kannagi Nagar in Chennai. Every other week, videos and posters are sent to students of the 6th grade through Whatsapp. By the end of the week, students send in their responses and their completed task through the same platform.

What is the impact?

UDC has conducted the Observe workshop edition in 3 private schools and 7 public schools with over 100 participants.

Following are some of the observations made by students in the past workshops:

“I would fight to preserve the trees, parks and water bodies in my neighbourhood.”}

“This open rainwater drain smells like faeces, maybe the people here don’t have public toilets. That is something for us to think about.”

As a means to further this initiative in developing and strengthening the voices of the youth, in 2019, Observe was developed into a full-fledged one-year program with the workshop format remodelled as an orientation session.

Around the world, the pandemic has magnified the importance of public spaces and the way cities are built to facilitate healthy and happy living. Children and youth of today will be engineers, architects, planners and politicians of tomorrow and our experiences through ‘Observe’ has further cemented our belief in effectively informing this impressionable segment of our community. Through the course of Observe, listening to over 150 younglings across all editions wanting to transform our cities and helping them with avenues to do so gives us a renewed sense of hope that our cities and country will be in good hands.

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Stakeholders Involved

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Hope School, Kannagi Nagar

About Urban Design Collective:

Urban Design Collective (UDC) is a collaborative platform for architects, urban designers and planners to create livable cities through participatory planning.

UDC was founded in 2011 as a platform to mobilize those who want to change the way our cities are built. By providing an open platform for young design professionals, who otherwise as individuals are excluded in the city building process, to create and disseminate content, we give them a chance to voice themselves as change-makers for better cities. As a result, UDC has come to be a global community of architects, designers, engineers, artists, writers, photographers and many others who are passionate about cities.

Within the broader agenda of creating livable cities, specific issues that we focus on include:

Improving walkability

Improving the livability of neighbourhoods

Improving the quality of the public realm and built environment

Improving awareness on sustainable development

Improving community engagement.

Links to read more:

[Observe Program](#)