

BasicShit: An Urban Sanitation intervention for Indian Cities

Interview with a member of the Basic Shit collective

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In the global south - and in developing countries like India, particularly in cities - public art forms and especially design interventions have become a way of responding to the many social issues that one witnesses. While in the past, public art was largely sculptural or advertising related paintings about films and consumer products, increasingly art in the streets has taken on a critical as well as a social aspect.

BasicShit is a project that has quite literally been transforming Delhi's urban landscape for the better, ever since it began projects in 2014. It operates as a collective, a mix of scientists and artists running a social enterprise for projects in public spaces.

1. Who are you guys: tell me a bit about yourselves and how this started?

"We are a group called BasicShit - an initiative started back in 2014, by Ashwani Aggarwal who worked on a college project about sanitation. He was installing self designed or DIY urinals near a hospital, made from large water discarded bottles, when he realized he had stumbled upon a big issue with a simple solution: upcycling waste to deal with social issues while also being an artistic intervention.

In a country like India, public urination by men is a very common sight - and these bottles installed in places that lacked bathrooms were a perfect way to solve a social issue with infrastructure. What began as a public sanitation platform developed into new and different models including new designs for waterless sanitation projects such as waterless urinals and dry toilets.

While working in public space we found that we were losing a lot of expensive materials like metals, which were being stolen overnight and resold. We found however that the scrappers didn't value recycled materials that were shredded and recycled - so, from 2018 we began to

function as more of a Research and Development group and organized into a non-profit organization.

Then after sometime, we discovered newer, different models and prototypes to solve what seemed to be looming issue at the street level, concerning public utilities and space. Now, we are at a scaling up stage and are trying to get funding. We have a company and we create designs - but we apply them to public and socially-oriented issues, because the impact and the positive response to this is what keeps us going."

2. How does your project promote recycling practices?

"Essentially, one of our motivations is to develop a circular economy that offers sanitation solutions which are waterless, given the growing resource scarcity. Locally, we teach people how you can collect and create a recycling component, such as for example transforming single-use plastics into a new, useful and usable thing. We are now making products out of 50 kg and 200 kg of single-use plastics. We are also working on how this can be incorporated in housing designs as bits for building walls. Sturdy house-building components is something that we are working on now. We realize that the aesthetic of trash isn't always appealing, but the idea that trash can become a component that is reused - that is useful not just as the material but the greater function it serves - and valued in some way - keeps us going."

3. Do you consider yourselves street artists?

"We are street artists, but we are not just that. It is an aspect of our creative selves and our practice, but we have evolved over time, given the context of the city. My colleague for example used to paint murals before becoming motivated to do the work that he does now. We each have our own practices and insights. I used to write graffiti and one of our

teammates made documentaries. We have worked on the street. We are all street artists working at a street level.

And as for this project, it began as one focused mainly on public sanitation, but has evolved to respond to a need in society in a way that is useful beyond just for Indian cities. With the global recession, and the aftermath of the pandemic, there is a lot of rethinking of the use of resources, hygiene, and construction processes across the world."

4. Why is street art that is socially-oriented so important for Indian cities?

"We work in two parts – sort of like a social enterprise but those don't yet exist in India. We are a part NGO and part for profit organisation both support each other. So, essentially we have two companies and through the NGO we work only on public spaces.

We also have urinals we placed across the streets of Delhi. We are now making ashtrays for collecting cigarette butts. Mostly we work in public space. To support the NGO we have the for profit organization – which gives us a livelihood. We can't always depend upon funding."

5. The reaction to your work:

"Our group is, I think, one of its kind in the world. I have never seen a waterless sanitation system made of recycled plastic. When we go and do installations and surveys people are always kind of genuinely in awe and also interested. These aren't just Indian concerns – water, plastic-use and sanitation are global issues.

And if we go into lower income communities, they love it. We provide them with a facility, which they can use. We have installed urinals at auto rickshaw stands; people can now eat their food where as before they had to go far away to avoid the smell of the urine. So the response has always been very positive and that keeps us going. The concept is so large in itself: – 'this is made of waste and it doesn't require much'.

As a developing nation I think we definitely need this...so that people can come and learn to install their own toilets and urinals it's a specific response to the needs in India. In India sewage gets released into water; it is untreated and it's a huge failure. Given the large population the

government fails to serve everyone but this is something people can strive to support.

In Delhi, one study indicates that there is one public toilet seat per 5000 males and 1 per 10,000 females. It's just a huge shortfall that needs to be overcome, and we need more BasicShit-like companies to fill this or governments to take action to cover this – connecting real world research with solutions that are low-cost."

6. Tell me what inspired you to take action using creativity in public / in the streets.

"Our founder, was a student of art and always interested in murals and graffiti, he got wonderful responses from the urinal installations and this motivated him. He found he was doing something concrete no one else was and it was different, off the page; the praise really motivated him. We do not lack any of this kind of community support for the work we do.

We go to random communities, and then people get involved to help maintain it as well. So the motivation is not a doubt for us. And we do different things and bring different insight. In Delhi we have three trash mountains and one is as big as two titanic ships. Its all just mixed trash... in 40 years we have built an entire mountain. So we are motivated by the idea and the impact of our work. We have not even touched the surface but we can bring about a lot of change. All four of us live in Delhi. And we have a network across India working with us: material scientists, architects, students etc. people that share all kinds of knowledge."

7. Do you believe in civic street art – are you trying to engage and have an impact in public?

"We work on a public-oriented model, but it's mainly a civic project. Everything is open source and we want people to take it and do it. We don't want to restrict anything. We share most information and how things are made...we do workshops in schools so that children and people can learn. We work with art communities. We have built our own recycling machinery. We try and instill small habits for behavior change and it is just not a limited thing by geography. It is across the world. Plastic is a global problem, water scarcity is a global problem. Public sanitation is a problem. Maybe not in developed countries, but still

recently we are seeing resources and waste management is an issue in the context of climate change."

8. Who are some artists whose work inspire your own / your projects?

"When our founder started there was nothing of this kind happening – no college students wer doing a project like this and certainly not in the context of the arts. I only joined a year ago and even I was surprised! So this may be a unique work given its emergence in the Indian context. There is a man named Paul McCarthy – who had a project called Ecosan in Kerala, where he designed dry toilets in India we have referred to his book and learned from his work. I personally find his work with dry toilets extremely inspiring."

This interview was conducted on September 19th, 2022. Since then the collective's members have changed.

Learn more: www.basicshit.com



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