

WORKSHOP ON UNIVERSAL DESIGN THINKING BY AR. KAVITA MURUGKAR

MM School of Architecture organized a two days workshop on ‘Opening minds to Universal Design Thinking’ by Ar. Kavita Murugkar, Accessibility Expert, Architect and Associate Professor at Dr B N college of Architecture, Pune, who is today a passionate educator and an active researcher. Ar. Kavita is a strong proponent of Universal Design (formerly identified as Barrier free architecture) and has set up a Research and Training Centre for Universal Design at BNCA for promoting people centric and inclusive design education and practice. The workshop was conducted to create awareness among the students and faculty towards designing inclusive spaces for the disabled people. The workshop was attended by all the students and faculty of MM School of Architecture along with some students and faculty from other colleges as well.

Chakshika Verma, a student extended a warm welcome to the honourable guest Ar. Kavita Murugkar, talking about her crowning achievements, after which was conducted the customary Lamp lighting ceremony by Ar. Kavita Murugkar, Prof. Aradhana Jindal, Principal, Ar. Deepashree, Ar. A.P. Singh, Ar. Vipin Jindal, Ar. Mekhala Saha, Ar. Shaluza Mittal as a tribute to mother Saraswati, the embodiment of knowledge. A token of gratitude was then awarded to Ar. Kavita by Ar. A.P. Singh and the workshop was declared open by Prof. Aradhana Jindal, Principal.

Ar. Kavita Murugkar started by sharing her journey as an accessibility expert and her passion for inclusive design followed by giving emphasis to the need of universal design thinking in today’s era as human beings by nature are made differently. People are different physically, mentally and in sexual orientations. These may range from being left-handed to transgender. The abilities of people also differ as the age advances. Body and mind, being living entities constantly undergo changes, i.e., thin, fat, pregnant, hunch-backed or just aged. Abilities also differ when there is an impairment of an organ or a sense.

Modern Design emerged as a people centric profession that shapes the physical and cognitive environments around. Yet, most designs prevailing in the world today ignore this reality of people with different abilities and address only the so called “Normal” people. Due to modern life pressures, the number of the people with different abilities is steadily increasing worldwide and more so in the populated countries such as India. An estimated 125 million elderly (2014) and 63 million visually impaired are in India, not counting the other different abilities. Needs of these enormous number of people is a global issue that cannot be ignored by the designers and architects any more.

Universal design is, providing a design solution, a product or a service, which can be used by a variety of people, those with “normal” abilities, as well as those with different abilities or special needs, without any discrimination and create an inclusive society. Universal Design is an effort to address this issue and redress the situation to bring equity among all kinds of people and integrate the human society with all differences intact, i.e., “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”. The Universal Design is not, as often mistaken, designing for the people with disabilities.

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Each presentation delivered by Ar. Kavita Murugkar was followed by a thought provoking film clip related to people with different forms of disabilities. These film clips were meticulously selected from commercial films from India and Hollywood. They acted as punctuation marks to the workshop proceedings.

In the workshop, a wide range of activities and efforts had been undertaken successfully under the leadership of Prof. Kavita Murugka. On first day, the students and faculty were encouraged to try 'simulation exercise' such as going to toilet using wheel chair, walking around blind folded or try using crutches and so on. This was done to make the 'normal people' feel empathy towards visually impaired person. The another exercise was of 'mind mapping', which is basically a tool for creative thinking, i.e., a diagram used to visually organize information. In the exercise, the students and faculty divided themselves in group and each group created a mind map around a single concept such as physical impairment, ageing, hearing and speech impairment and so on. The exercise helped students to structure information, helping them to better analyse, comprehend, synthesize, recall and generate new ideas. Just as in every great idea, its power lies in its simplicity.

In the end, Ar. Kavita Murugkar and Prof. Aradhana Jindal, Principal, discussed all the presentations on mind mapping created by different groups and applauded their efforts and guided them by relating these concepts to architecture.

On day two, Ar. Kavita began the workshop with various other thought provoking film clips related to people with various different abilities followed by presenting her own inspiration behind the journey. After which, another exercise, i.e., 'anthropometrical exercise' was conducted so as to let the students and faculty understand the actual anthropometric data needed to design inclusive spaces as 'inclusive architecture' is a paradigm shift from the conventional design approach which generally satisfies the need of only the able-bodied, leaving behind many sections of the society such as PWDs, elderly, pregnant women, temporary impaired, children etc. Inclusive architecture addresses and incorporates needs of all and refers to broad-spectrum ideas - called universal design, meant to produce buildings, products and environments that are inherently accessible to older people, PWDs, and people with disabilities. Students are poorly sensitised and largely unaware of the technical know-how as the curriculum does not incorporate this parameter in depth and detail. Therefore, the exercise was to create awareness among the students regarding this sensitive issue of designing spaces for normal and disabled people.

Ar. Kavita Murugkar then explained in detail the concept of Universal Design, which is basically an inclusive concept in design of products, services & built environment. It is all about ability rather than disability. After which the laid emphasis on the 'National Building Codes' for designing inclusive spaces and another exercise was introduced to perform in groups in which based upon the personal experiences, students had to find ideas for accessibility, i.e., how can the spaces be improved so as to provide easy accessibility to the disabled people. This was followed by the group presentation by the different groups that took part in the workshop who discussed about the design goals, principles, strategies based upon the types of users.

Ar. Sangeet Sharma, then graced us with his presence on the occasion who awarded the token of gratitude to the honourable guest Ar. Kavita Murugkar along with Prof. Aradhana Jindal, Principal. The Principal then extended a very hearty thanks to the honourable speaker for taking time from her

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respective schedule and inspiring all of us about such sensitive issue. She thanked everyone for their involvement and their willingness to take part on the completion of tasks because an event like this cannot happen overnight. The wheels start rolling weeks ago. It requires planning and a bird's eye for detailing.

Announcing next was the names of the students who stood 2nd in a national competition, INSDAG 2018 and the certificates were awarded. Following this, these students were felicitated by the esteemed guests and Principal, MM School of Architecture. In the end the certificates were awarded to all the students for their active participation in the two days workshop on Universal Design Thinking.

With this initiative, the sensitivity of students towards Universal Design has grown immensely and a rigorous effort is being made at all levels – from 1st to final year to create universally accessible and people friendly designs, and not merely visually appealing designs. The students and everyone present had a lot to take away from this workshop and the experience will be cherished forever. The Universal Design workshop had carved a path to create more responsible and socially inclined architects and designers for tomorrow!



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