



## *Shifting the Paradigm on Housing:* **Regenerating Slums Where People Can Thrive**

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Wide corridors facilitate the communal living style of the residents in the Sanjaynagar Slum Redevelopment Project (Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, India)  
Photo credit: Rajesh Vora

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# CASE STUDY

*Shifting the Paradigm on Housing:*  
Regenerating Slums Where People Can Thrive

## AT A GLANCE

<b>Company</b>	Community Design Agency
<b>Social theme(s)</b>	Civic Participation/Arts & Culture; Homelessness & Housing; Architecture & Design Services
<b>Geography</b>	India
<b>Year founded</b>	2017
<b>Revenues</b>	<€1 million annually
<b>Legal structure</b>	Two entities, a private limited company for business activities and a Section 8 company for non-profit work
<b>Clients</b>	Slum communities; Municipal governments; NGOs
<b>Business model</b>	Philanthropic grants for non-profit work; Service contracts for business activities
<b>Product/services</b>	CDA provides participatory design and architecture services that meaningfully involve low-income communities in the process of creating regenerative neighbourhoods
<b>Impact reach</b>	CDA has reached 27K+ people across 4 cities and leveraged about 1M USD in public subsidies to-date through its initiatives in slum redevelopment and neighbourhood regeneration

## Background

Approximately 1.1 billion people live in slums worldwide, and this number is expected to grow to 2 billion over the next 30 years<sup>1</sup>. Nearly one-third of slum dwellers live in Central and Southern Asia. Inadequate housing and working conditions contribute to poor health outcomes, including physical and mental health. They also negatively impact access to livelihoods and education and exacerbate the exclusion of marginalised communities along gender, ability, and class lines.

Low-income communities rarely have the opportunity to contribute to the design of their own built environment. Architecture and design services are generally seen as elite services for a small percentage of society. Government-designed housing often meets statutory requirements but fails to contribute value to the everyday lives of residents.

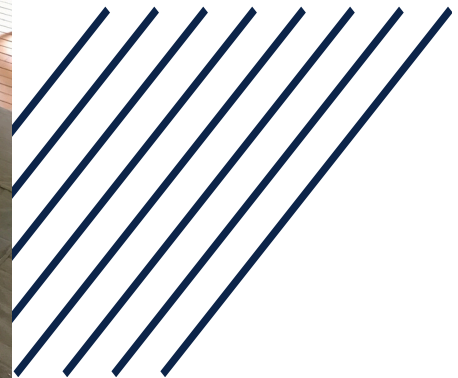
<sup>1</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/goal-11/>

## About the Company

Community Design Agency (CDA) was founded by **Sandhya Naidu Janardhan**, an architect who began her career in the USA and Singapore. Naidu Janardhan conceived the idea for an architecture and design firm to develop and implement participatory planning processes, working alongside residents to design human-centered housing and work spaces. The idea was then seeded by US based Curry Stone Foundation. CDA is contracted by governments, philanthropic organisations, and communities to transform existing public housing and design housing communities and workplaces. CDA also creates blended financing solutions that promote ownership and investment by residents in climate-resilient communities.



Participatory planning exercise with residents of Sanjaynagar, in Ahmednagar city  
Community Design Agency



## Sources of Impact

### **Customers: Who is served?**

CDA serves **residents and communities** through projects commissioned by governments, philanthropic organisations, and communities themselves

### **Workforce: Who is employed?**

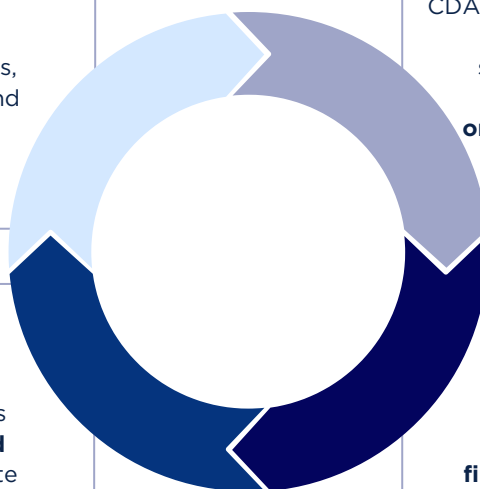
CDA has **13 staff members** including architects, designers, social scientists & engineers. CDA also trains and employs **community organisers** from the communities where they operate

### **Product/Service: What is delivered?**

CDA develops and implements **participatory architecture and design processes** to regenerate and build new public and low-income housing communities

### **Eco-System: What relationships are developed?**

CDA builds relationships with **contractors, policymakers and financiers** to exhibit and quantify the benefits of community-centred design



## Innovation Activities

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CDA engages in several activities that drive innovation, both in the communities where they serve as well as the larger eco-system:

### INNOVATION ACTIVITIES



**Research and experimental development (R&D):** CDA develops and tests participatory processes, while learning and documenting along the way. CDA also has aspirations to codify these processes and share these through open-source for other firms to use

**Climate and culturally sensitive design and architecture:** CDA has cultivated a design and architecture practice that is sensitive to local contexts and the needs of the communities. Using this approach, they are developing climate intelligent building and construction techniques to create maximum impact

**Exploring blended financing options for public housing:** CDA is collaborating with local and international partners to investigate the viability of blended financing models that can empower residents to improve their homes and communities

### Key Innovation Challenges & Learnings

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CDA operates in an industry and policy environment where architecture and design services are seen as 'luxuries' rather than essentials. To change this paradigm, CDA has overcome challenges and generated learnings:

- **'Unlearning' the professional strategies of architecture and design:** CDA has had to create new tactics to work with their clientele. Managing Director Sandhya Naidu Janardhan describes this: *"The amount of unlearning for us is incredible--the learning curve is so steep. For example, when you do a design workshop, you would typically have crayons, sketch pens, art supplies, etc. I went to meet with the female sex workers [residents] in this community. These are amazing, independent women who are very confident, with street smarts off the charts. But they all just froze. And it struck me that a majority of them had never held a pen or a pencil in their lives. And I had to immediately change the full strategy."*
- **Valuing lived experience as well as professional expertise:** Learning is two-way, with architects and designers learning from the lived experience of residents. As Partnerships Lead Shashank Mittal describes: *"We constantly have to hold ourselves back, making sure we first engage with the community and understand their challenges, what their priorities are, and [only] then develop our plans for interventions."*

## Featured Project: *Sanjaynagar Slum Redevelopment Project*

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Sanjaynagar is a slum comprising 22 different communities and is home to 298 families. In 2018, CDA worked alongside the community to redevelop a two-acre site into formal housing with the residents as decision-makers. CDA facilitated a participatory process of consensus-building and committee formation. By organising into groups, the residents were able to preserve the existing social fabric of the neighbourhood. The new climate-friendly construction provides adequate cooling and ventilation, while enhancing intergenerational interactions and social cohesion.



The first completed building of the Sanjaynagar Slum Redevelopment Project houses 33 families, and the residents chose to call it Swapnapurti- Dreams fulfilled  
Photo credit: Rajesh Vora