

# Suhailey Farzana: 'Community architecture' as an emerging role for design professionals

In this blog to mark South Asian Heritage Month, community architect in Bangladesh, Suhailey Farzana, discusses her process of 'co-creation' with local communities, and what architects can learn from Bangladesh's recent protest movement.

29 August 2024

As architects, we often work for only a small percentage of the communities in our immediate society. This leads me to the question: how can we serve the rest of the population with our skills and expertise?

It is the year 2024 and it's a different kind of time. It's a time to rethink whether we have prepared ourselves as design professionals to meet the needs of today's world. Do we need new kinds of skills? Do we need to play a different kind of role? Isn't the scope of what we do bigger than us? I think we can do more than we are doing now.

I call myself a community architect, and belong to a bigger platform, **Community Architects Network (CAN)**, part of the **Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR)**. It's a network of similar-minded professionals, who are searching for creative ways to support community-led processes in Asia.

When we call ourselves community architects, we consider our roles beyond just being an architect. We are more like an enabler in the process. We call it a 'co-creation process', a more meaningful version of a 'participatory process'.



Is it impossible to trust people to measure, map and plan their own community and city and facilitate the process? (Credit: Co.CreationArchitects)

## Can co-creation with communities change the role of the design professional?

We are still exploring this. In our network of CAN, not everyone is an architect by profession, yet all can be called community architects. The scope of 'community architect' is kept intentionally broad, so to include any person in the community who would like to co-create the project and share their unique knowledge and understanding of the local context. In this way, community architecture doesn't function within a traditional hierarchy where qualified designers sit at the top and the community at the bottom – it is a flatter, more equitable structure. To build a community, we need all sorts of professionals working with people. Whoever is involved in the process can claim themselves as community architects. Therefore, everyone has an equal and important role to play.

Once I started working with people, I realised our conventional education and practice in architecture doesn't equip us much for working with communities. One has to acquire a mindset of co-creation to work with people. The mindset of co-creation starts with acknowledging, as a designer or architect, that we don't know everything, and we certainly don't have all the answers. It is a mindset that values the specific understanding and knowledge that community members have about their context – both their built environment, and importantly, their social one.

In our work, the community has often surprised us with their responses to local challenges and our suggested solutions. For example, there has been a breakthrough in material technology which allows for the easy, safe and cost-effective building of homes from a new type of technology with mud material. We were excited to share this with the community as it could simplify the process and save them considerable costs. However, we had failed to understand the social context of the community initially: mud-houses were associated with poverty and therefore stigmatising. The community rejected our solution. As architects, we were biased about the vernacular material, and it was only once we worked with the community that we could find a viable solution – a solution the community needed and aspired for social reasons.

Peoples' dream for Jhenaidah city in CAN Co-Create Jhenaidah workshop in 2019 (Credit: Co.CreationArchitects)



Peoples' dream for Jhenaidah city in CAN Co-Create Jhenaidah workshop in 2019 (Credit: Co.CreationArchitects)

## Co-creating 'Urban River Spaces' in Jhenaidah city, Bangladesh

We learnt mostly from the engagement with people while solving real challenges. In 2015 I shifted from capital city Dhaka to a smaller town in the southwest of Bangladesh named Jhenaidah. Here, I explored my role as a community architect, and the co-creation process. At the beginning it was not easy to figure out an appropriate role that we design professionals could play. We waited to understand where we could contribute our skills in a meaningful way. The city and people had their own rhythm of city and habitat creation. At first, people didn't feel the need for an architect, but eventually the two came together and formed a city-wide people's network, and over time, many other groups joined. It all started from the dream of a better, more livable city. We started with the most aspired dream of having a public place along the river Naboganga, which is the heart of the city.

'Urban river spaces' is a self-initiated project by the citizens of Jhenaidah city, Bangladesh, to co-create their city better. It is a reflection of their collective aspirations. Many public spaces were co-designed primarily along the river. To date, there are two implemented projects; an incrementally-built public ghat (river steps) in the confluence of the river, with an adjacent walkway, and a community ghat in a low-income community.

Low-income communities joined the process to design their communal space and link it with the central public space. Many wanted to co-create proper accessibility on the road. The city authority hosted this co-creation process with its own resources and power. Civil society, youth groups, swimmer groups, citywide community network, an older peoples' group, teacher's group, activist groups, photography group, cultural group, and businesspeople all came together on the same platform to work for their own city. All started to sing in the same rhythm. As community architects, we took on our role by organising these dreams and aspirations.



Urban River Spaces, Jhenaidah was recognised by the 2022 Aga Khan Award for Architecture and the UIA 2030 Award (Credit: Co.CreationArchitects)

The Jhenaidah co-creation process started with a direction, without anticipating the end destination. With time, we have seen it flourish in different exciting destinations. This process is slower at the beginning, but holds enormous energy that connects all the dots at some point. At present, the Jhenaidah citizen network has become the host of different hands-on workshops and courses for young design professionals and students. We recently collaborated with Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden, to facilitate workshops in which we all became community architects through continuous mutual learning and sharing.

A project that emerged from this collaboration involved a community in Jhenaidah city, who, specifically the women, wanted to develop safe production of agriculture in their community. Students helped them to plan and share information they had on the project and area. They could also connect the women in the community to the agricultural authorities. Ultimately, the students and the women co-created and co-designed a hub with local building techniques. A booklet was produced on these techniques and now the community can carry on the building processes independently. In this way, both the students and the community members learn and develop. The community is still continuing the work at their pace.

What can Bangladesh's recent movement teach us about co-creation?

I think co-creation is not only bound within building design. It can be replicated at different scales and professions. The focus should be doing things collectively and bringing everyone together on the same platform.

Bangladesh has recently experienced the historic student movement against the quota system in government employment. Gradually, a mass population joined them. After some time, the simple student movement turned into a protest against the fascist regime, and eventually, to remove the government.

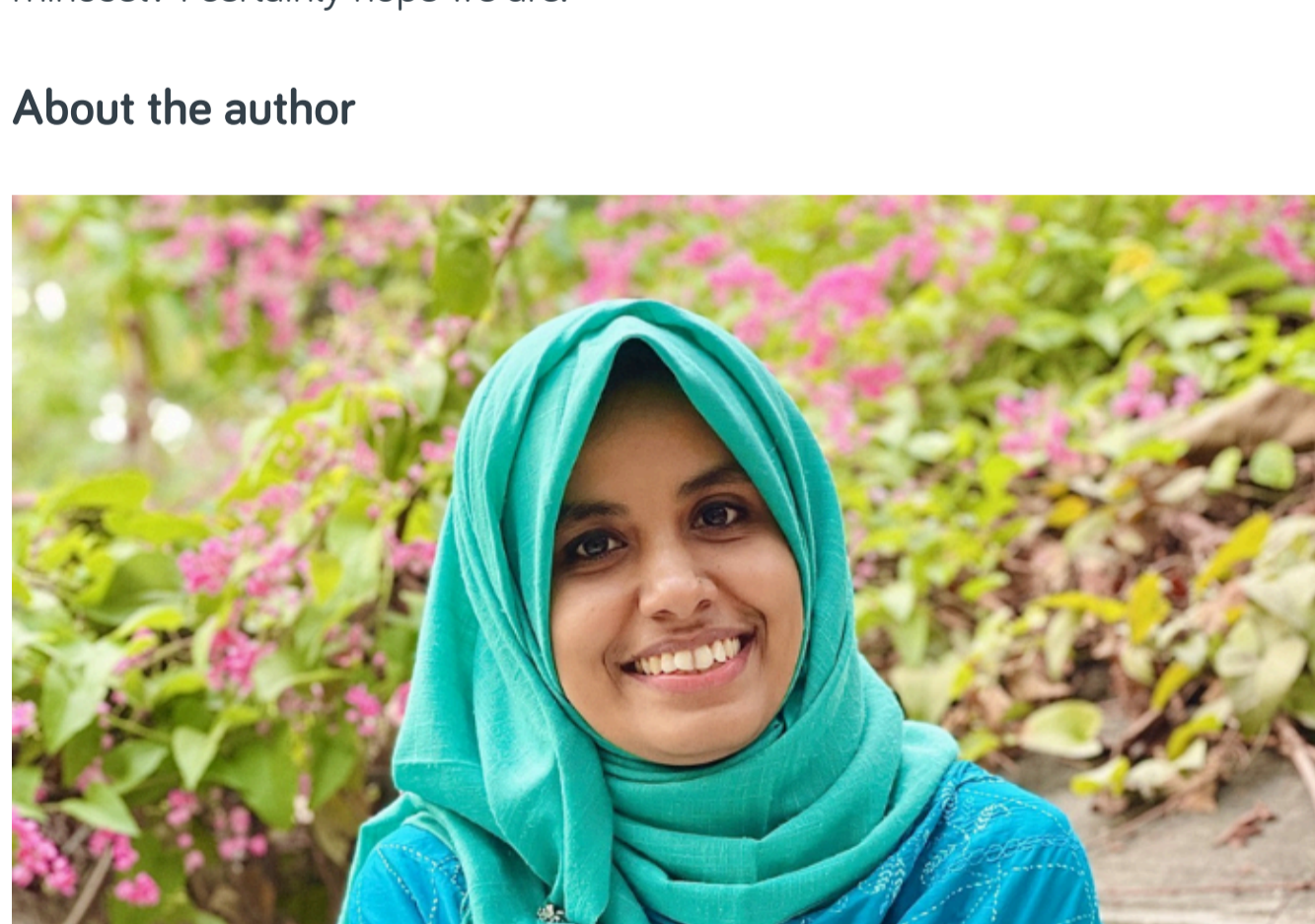
I see this as a people's process of co-creation; where everyone plays an equally important role for the same cause. Students, artists, teachers, businessmen, lawyers, rickshaw pullers, vendors, mothers, fathers, children - all worked collectively to bring about the change we wanted.

This is exactly what happens in co-creation. At the beginning it's slow, and then, when all are connected and aspire for the same thing and work for it, there is a boom of action. The energy and spirit of togetherness is so powerful that it never fails.

This power of togetherness shows that community architects must not act in isolation but walk to the rhythm of the people. Otherwise, architects will get separated from society and will not address the needs of that society.

When something needs to be built, people don't always wait for an architect to get involved. But when we do get involved, we must make our presence meaningful by playing a collaborative role. After the movement in Bangladesh, it feels like time for change, more than ever before. Are we as design professionals ready to embrace this new era with a new co-creation mindset? I certainly hope we are.

About the author

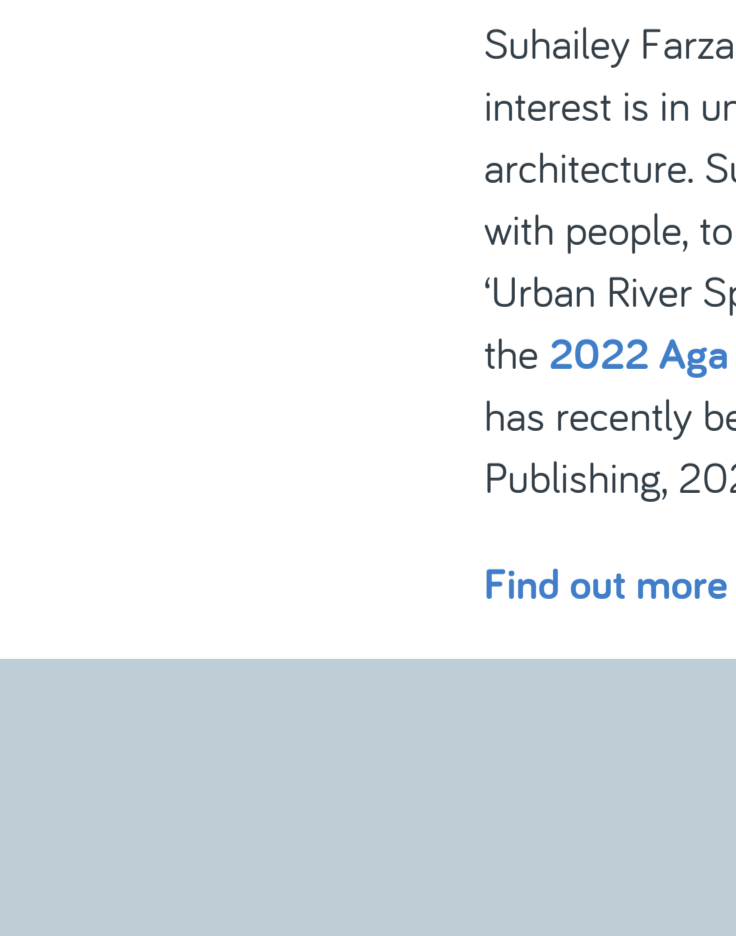
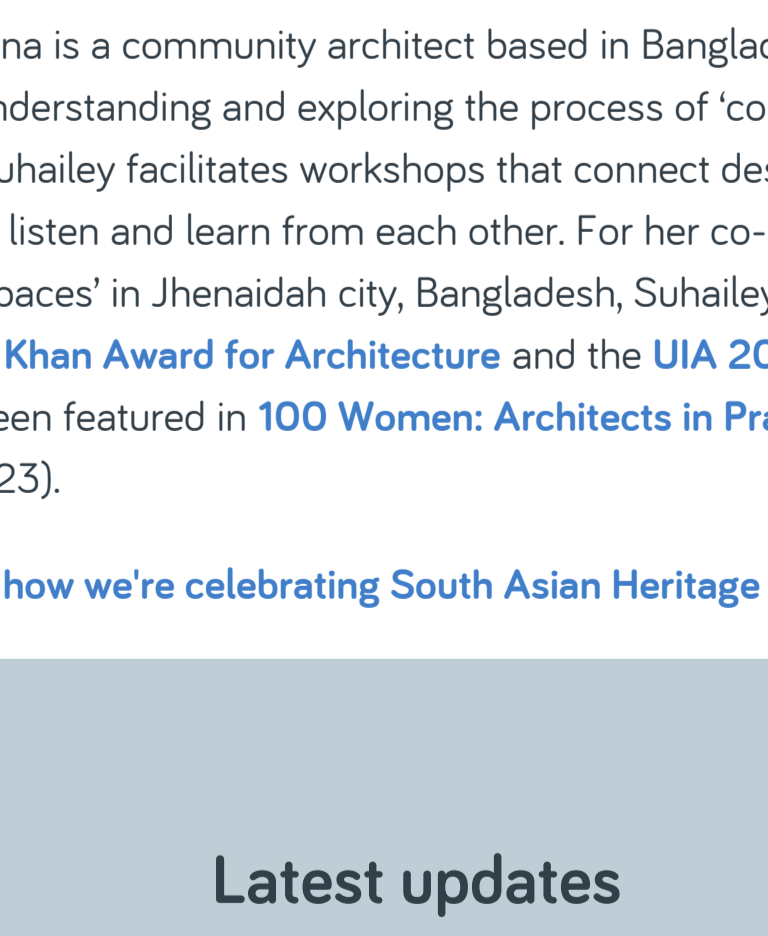
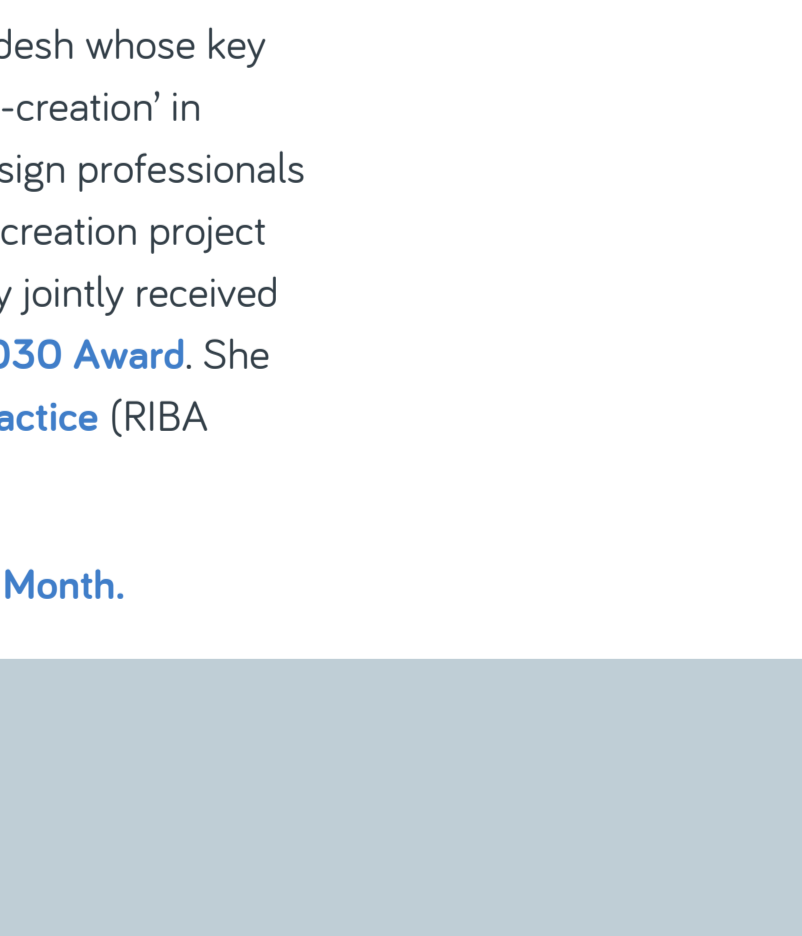


Suhailey Farzana

Suhailey Farzana is a community architect based in Bangladesh whose key interest is in understanding and exploring the process of 'co-creation' in architecture. Suhailey facilitates workshops that connect design professionals with people, to listen and learn from each other. For her co-creation project 'Urban River Spaces' in Jhenaidah city, Bangladesh, Suhailey jointly received the **2022 Aga Khan Award for Architecture** and the **UIA 2030 Award**. She has recently been featured in **100 Women: Architects in Practice** (RIBA Publishing, 2023).

[Find out more how we're celebrating South Asian Heritage Month.](#)

## Latest updates

 <p><b>News</b></p> <p><b>LGBT+ History Month 2025: student exhibition open call</b></p> <p>Architecture students from across the UK are invited to submit a project relating to LGBT+ history for an exhibition to be displayed in the RIBA Library for LGBT+ History Month (February 2025). The project should be in response to the theme of 'activism and social change' through architecture and place-making.</p>	 <p><b>Press release</b></p> <p><b>Built environment Level 7 apprenticeships call for exemptions to Level 7 apprenticeships changes</b></p> <p>Built environment Level 7 apprenticeships - such as architecture - are vital to help address skills shortages and meet the Government's growth commitments. In a joint statement with RTPI, CIOB and RICS, we call for them to be exempt from funding reforms.</p>	 <p><b>Blog</b></p> <p><b>What does 30 years of inclusive design look like in architectural practice?</b></p> <p>In this blog, we look at how the architectural profession has developed since the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 came into effect. Marking the upcoming anniversary of this legislative change, David Bonnett Associates highlight how their practice has evolved and how they are helping to create an environment that is accessible and inclusive for everyone.</p>
--	--	---

To top