



# SIGUS

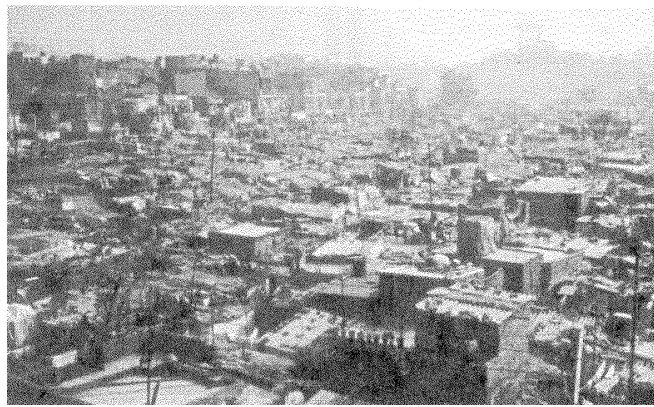
## *A Two-Way Learning Adventure*

**S**uppose that your daughter announces that she will study architecture at MIT. You'd be enthusiastic—entertaining visions of serene seaside houses, state-of-the-art health centers, even a glitzy sky-scraper. Some months into her studies, she announces that she is about to spend two weeks in a workshop in India. She explains that her destination is Dakshinpuri, near New Delhi, arguably one of the most squalid and poorest of the developing world's many squatter slums.

It may not be what either of you originally had in mind, but it is a significant option for a number of MIT students.

As a student enrolled in architecture, planning, engineering, or the social sciences at MIT, she would have been able to apply for a place on an interdisciplinary team assembled annually by SIGUS—the Special Interest Group in Urban Settlements formed by the Departments of Architecture and Urban Studies and Planning. Members of the 1994 team went to India, where they joined students from Oxford Brookes University in Britain and Delhi's TVB School of Habitat Studies, the host. Their stated objectives were to explore “the new professionalism emerging for architects and planners” and to “learn the participatory method in promoting affordable and equitable housing.”

Architecture and planning are in the midst of a significant and rapid transition, explains Reinhard Goethert, SIGUS director and a lecturer and principal research associate in architecture. The traditional arena, in which architects design houses, offices, and other facilities for owners and users, is shrinking; more and more U.S. buildings are constructed with little or no input from architects. Now, says Goethert, the action for many architects and planners depends on their ability to work in unconventional places and with new social units—neighborhood associations, owner



*Dakshinpuri, the sprawling slum near New Delhi, was the IAP '94 destination for a student team from MIT's multidisciplinary Special Interest Group*

cooperatives, and government and private agencies whose goal is to help the underprivileged and disenfranchised.

Since its founding in 1984, SIGUS has given MIT students a chance to experience how these trends play out in low-income communities around the globe—including Thailand, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, Poland, Jamaica, Belarus (where people still live in houses contaminated by the Chernobyl nuclear accident in neighboring Ukraine), and, most recently, India. SIGUS teams are made up of MIT students, their Oxford Brookes counterparts, and students from an institution near the year's chosen site. The two-week workshops coincide with MIT's Independent Activities Period in January. Their next destination, during IAP '95, will be Lima, Peru.

The team visits the target community, learns its history, and talks to residents and government officials. Based on that information-gathering exercise, they propose and evaluate possible interventions to improve the local quality of life. The finale is a summary presentation at a meeting of all participants—including faculty from

*in Urban Settlements (SIGUS). Their proposals for modest but feasible improvements inspired a detailed report in the Economic Times of New Delhi.*

three institutions, officials, and community representatives. Upon returning to their home campuses, Goethert reports, many students continue work on problems identified through the workshop, sometimes going on to full-time summer research and even graduate theses.

In Dakshinpuri, for example, the students found the residents to be people who have run out of alternatives. But even in the face of overwhelming poverty, the children still want to learn, and their parents long for dignity even more than human comforts. Though government responses (if any) tend to be unimaginative and tradition-bound, Goethert believes that the reputations of MIT and Oxford helped to open doors and arouse official interest in—even acceptance of—some of the team's recommendations.

The educational name brands also attracted local media attention; the concluding presentation by the SIGUS students in the Dakshinpuri meeting hall last January was reported in the *Economic Times* of New Delhi. Among the measures recommended:

collecting garbage and converting it to bio-gas; encouraging residents to form their own community organizations that could press for minimal urban services and help define and make use of public spaces; and the introduction of simple materials and methods that residents can produce and use to build or improve their homes.

Though they are less than revolutionary, recommendations such as these have led to noticeable improvements at the sites of previous SIGUS workshops, says Goethert.

Equally important to the MIT participants have been the insights—personal and professional—that they have gained. “The vast majority of the world's clients are its poor,” wrote graduate student Kevin Sullivan (urban studies and planning) when he returned from Dakshinpuri last January. “They are ill-sheltered and ill-served by a profession that has chosen, by and large, to build for the rich. . . . We are challenged to rethink and redefine our roles in the context of an environment in which blueprints are drawn with sticks in the sand and change is the only constant.”

Adnan Morshed, a graduate student in architecture, expressed similar sentiments. “Given the cities where millions lie on the pavements and in the filthy hovels of shanty towns,” he wrote, “architectural education cannot any more be seen as merely a skill transmission. . . . What is enlightening about the experience of the urban ghetto of Dakshinpuri is a renewed search for self identity.” He and his SIGUS colleagues had been transformed by their Dakshinpuri experiences “from egocentric image-builders to socio-political activists,” suggested Morshed.

It is by no means a given, or even desirable, that every SIGUS participant will make a career in service to the world's poor. But Goethert is confident that all the participants will gain important new ways of thinking about themselves and the nature of their chosen profession. □ —JOHN I. MATTILL