

METTE LANGE ARCHITECTS

IF THE KIDS CAN'T COME TO SCHOOL, THE SCHOOL WILL COME TO THEM

INTERVIEW BY SIGNE KIERKEGAARD CAIN

IN GOA, INDIA, DANISH ARCHITECT METTE LANGE AND LOCAL COLLABORATORS BRING SCHOOLS TO KIDS WHO OTHERWISE WOULD NOT HAVE ACCESS TO AN EDUCATION. THE SOLUTION IS EASY-TO-BUILD PROTOTYPES OF ROLLING AND FLOATING SCHOOLS.

When architect Mette Lange and her husband first came to Goa in India, they quickly registered a dilemma: Migrant workers who came to the region from their native state, Karnataka, brought their kids. But because they didn't speak the local language, they weren't able to attend school in Goa. "The authorities weren't taking care of the children's schooling and it was difficult for us to rent the land to start a school", says Mette Lange and explains how this gave her and her husband the idea of creating moveable schools. Their concept MovingSchool was established in 2001.

"Using mostly local materials and local building traditions, we have built two floating schools and a rolling school. The floating unit is a bamboo construction with palm leaves – and some plastic foil. The bamboo provides shade, while the kids are able to look out onto the river", says Mette Lange. The floating class room is attended by children of sand diggers, who work at different locations along the river, making it important that the school can move with them. The rolling unit provides schooling for the kids of migrant workers who build roads and work the mines. On its roof is a solar panel, which provides electricity for a fan or light in the evenings. The schools are easy to build for any local craftsman. "This is a non-profit project and we depend completely on local collaborators. It is also important to us that others decide which kids get to attend the schools, and we have a couple from Karnataka who are well educated themselves running the project", explains Mette Lange, who earns a living working on other projects in both India and Denmark.

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SIMPLE BUT FUNCTIONAL

The architect's footprint on the schools is a strong sense of function as well as considerations of their appearance. "But it was important to me that they looked natural in their local context and didn't end up as flashy design projects", says Mette Lange, who believes that the schools are an expression of Danish building culture in the sense that she has tried to make them as simple as possible. "I would say that that is very typical for a Danish architect: We simplify rather than add extra features", she says.

"As architects we create the physical setting for people's lives and this gives us the opportunity to act directly to improve living conditions. The moving schools are humble structures, but the rooms are pleasant and functional", says Mette Lange and continues: "They solve a very tangible problem: The kids who attend can't go to school anywhere else. Here they receive primary education until the age of 12, and it is our experience that 60% of the kids who attend the moving schools continue their education in their home state afterwards". With this kind of involvement in a project that changes people's lives comes a great responsibility. As expressed by Mette Lange: "My 12-year-old son doesn't know what he wants to do yet, but he has promised that whatever he does, he will run MovingSchool when we aren't able to anymore".