



ARCHITECTS WITHOUT IMPERATIVES

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What role in the design of mass housing is there for Western architects, locked up in a world governed by industrialists, in which the user is almost absent? Being inspired by informal settlements to design low-cost housing means inverting the participatory processes and putting the occupants back into the centre of any approach. Apart from benefiting them, the profession could find a valid role here.

Informal settlements are hot. With over a billion inhabitants, spontaneous dwellings, squatter areas and unplanned cities are drawing the attention of architects, urbanists and urban developers. This increasing interest may have its origin in the resemblance of informal settlements with today's creative freedom on the Internet, and its typical low degree of formality. Probably the personal initiative and creativity that radiate from the not-designed world of informal construction make it a welcome refuge for creative people from highly formalized Western countries.

To some professionals, informal settlements are just another opportunity to produce design. They suffer from the "when your tool is a

hammer, everything looks like a nail" syndrome, which means the only solutions they can think of are built structures. Their architectural and urban designs inevitably end up in the recycling bin as soon as the problems they claim to solve don't exist. Such contributions are as appropriate as fighting famine by sending cookery books.

Fortunately, many architects know the multidisciplinary of the profession and have focused on reinventing the role of the architect. Coming from a master builder's position in the early 20th century, then demoted to guardian of aesthetics in the high-tech construction process, the architect can today be found as coach in a team of equal players.

The success of these low-intervention strategies compared to industrialized production brings forward an alarming extrapolation: might informal settlement be a solution rather than a problem?

This repositioning of the architect has its roots in the industrialization of mass housing. In order to produce large amounts of low-cost housing, engineers had to come up with highly standardized dwellings for which they had to invent standard dwellers. Once it turned out that few people are identical, let alone match standards, it became clear that user participation was required in order to create habitable housing. This, however, raised a clear economic problem. In order to keep costs low, the building industry's processes prevail over the design, which is typical for a supply-driven market. In order to meet the real needs of inhabitants and their inherent diversity, the interaction of the user with the building should be predominant, which makes it demand-driven. The latter is incompatible with mass production and its low costs. User participation is therefore fundamentally at odds with the economics of mass housing, just like diversity and standardization don't fit together. Moreover, the term user participation implicitly states that the user is an outsider participating in the developer's projects, which after all are dominated by the interests of the construction industry.

A natural way of dealing with diversity is creativity. It allows us to respond to an infinite range of phenomena, and creativity generates a sense of control and a feeling of accomplishment. Dealing with diversity puts us in contact with the world; it helps us feel who we are. On the contrary, diversity's counterpart standardization alienates us from ourselves. This feeling of alienation is what brought the call for user participation into building design. The attempts to create a built environment that makes people feel at home form a Sisyphean-labour-like history in which architects have successively gotten involved in participatory planning, urban action, design action, architect as curator, mediator and more. After all, a fundamental issue remained unsolved: participation can be seen as part of systemization itself in the sense that it aims at having users participate in the system. If a contribution to the life of the user were the aim, participation should work the other way. Experts would participate in the life of users, and focus on users' interaction with the habitat. For architects, it then comes down to the question: on whose side are we playing; the user's or the industry's?

The enigmatic name New Vernacular Architecture was coined by Pierre Frey for a movement in architecture marked by professionals with an education in architecture or engineering, who deliberately work without being subordinate to the imperatives of the global market of construction materials (steel, glass, concrete). Vernacular is often thought of as traditional, folk, something of the past, whereas today we can use it to draw a very different borderline. Ivan Illich's defini-

tion is used here to distinguish vernacular from design architecture: "[Vernacular] designates the inverse of a commodity. 'Vernacular' means those things that are homemade, homespun, home-grown, not destined for the market, but that are for home use only." Often these New Vernacular architects play both sides, meaning they do vernacular projects while earning their livelihood in regular commercial projects. The New Vernacular architect is thus allowed freedom alongside a strict life in the highly systemized economy.

In the highly institutionalized Western world, nearly everybody works and lives in a non-vernacular "commodity" setting. This institutionalization is so pervasive, it is hard to imagine a society without it, whereas the difference between developing and developed countries is mainly about the degree of institutionalization. Informal settlement is all about not being part of this systemized world, hence the term "informal".

Similarly, the mismatch of user participation and mass housing becomes clear: the first is vernacular, the latter a commodity, which brings about the fundamental problem of mass housing. To make a dwelling a home, the user has to experience a high degree of autonomy (that he himself decides). A vernacular setting supports that sense of autonomy. Things outside the home are subject to heteronomy (decided by others), and one could say that Yvan Illich's market and commodity coincide with heteronomy. Thus mass housing is typically heteronomous as it is designed, built and financed by others. To feel at home in a rented serial concrete high-rise is therefore a challenge, to say the least. The home should respect the autonomy of the dwellers, but in mass housing many things inside the home are determined by anonymous others. For example, the number of family members is limited to a standard by first cutting the extended family into nuclear families (a couple with children) and then dividing the home into compartments with designated functions (living room, kitchen, bedrooms). Such restrictions are felt daily.

In addition, Yvan Illich's definition helps us understand what informal settlement is: it is vernacular, not built for the real estate market, but built for dwelling, for being a home. Thus squatters and informal dwellers experience a great deal of autonomy, which they are not eager to give up for heteronomous "rehabilitation schemes". Perhaps this is the basic problem in many slum eradication programs. For those developers, authorities and architects who are all participating in the system of heteronomy, it is difficult to understand that moving to a new home in which autonomy is drastically reduced is barely an option for

people who are used to a high degree of autonomy. John F. C. Turner explained the value of autonomy by stating: "Deficiencies and imperfections in your housing are infinitely more tolerable if they are your responsibility than if they are somebody else's."

The idea of users being in charge of construction is part of several successful strategies. Studies in the US have shown that owner-builders are quite capable of producing satisfactory housing on tight budgets by bringing in their own initiative, ingenuity and energy and thus avoiding the financial burden that comes with outsourcing. Moreover, it appears that when development is left in the hands of personal initiative, improvements can be achieved at 50% or less of the costs an institutionalized approach would require. Another strategy, sparked by John F. C. Turner, is the scheme of "Site and services" in which plots are sold within the financial reach of the poor, including the utility services that require neighbourhood-scale investments. The new owners can develop their home according to their own ideas and resources. "Site and services" is based on the recognition that most poor families built their own shelter. Several factors contribute to its success. First, full room is given to user initiative, which helps to avoid the misfits resulting from industrialized production. Second, the actions involved in creating, operating and using the building contribute to the user's feeling of accomplishment, sense of belonging, attachment and ultimately establishing a dwelling that is a reflection of the self. The success of these low-intervention strategies compared to industrialized production brings forward an alarming extrapolation: might informal settlement be a solution rather than a problem?

Systemization being the main development tool in the West, it may be the hammer that makes everything look like a nail. Participation is thought of as affording systemization, whereas the user has no direct interest in being systemized. On the contrary, from a humanitarian interest, technology and systemization should be no more than a servant to people, meaning that experts offer their services so that they can participate in the lives of dwellers.

Then again, what is it that attracts architects to informal settlement? Clearly, "design" cannot help people who already know best how to create housing. Professionals in the informality field talk about "user-generated cities", "acupuncture intervention", "contemporary popular habitat", "necessary architecture", "participative urban design", "action urbanism" and other terms which have in common the modesty of the architect's position. Perhaps "acupuncture intervention" is the ultimate

opposite of the classic master builder. By making a small but precise intervention, the architect sets in motion a development, a flow of energy, in the right direction. The new role of the architect is one of observing and coaching, of helping people by giving shape to their own ideas with the available means. It goes with awareness of how people have a bond with their homes, with sensitivity for autonomy and the potentials of individual initiative combined with social networks. Above all, it requires empathy and respect for the way people interact with their building and their environment.

It is suggested that a New Vernacular approach in housing the poor would benefit from a focus on user-building interaction as it taps directly into people's most powerful resource: creativity. Moreover, it helps avoid the inevitable mediocrity and inadequacy of mass production solutions. It may require moving in unconventional directions, away from functionalism and efficiency, towards an architecture of use, of the home, leading to building as a life form in symbiosis with the user.

The most powerful tool an architect can bring to informal settlement is certainly "the architect's eye". The eye that sees, touches and feels the built environment in a way others apparently don't. Sharing the architect's eye helps people to reflect on needs and achievements, on opportunities and ideas, and to find the motivation and inspiration to invest with their own initiative and ingenuity. By sharing what he sees, the architect can operate relatively easily in an environment that is otherwise very sensitive to intruders, to heteronomy.

Although an architect is not likely to ever design an informal settlement, and informal settlers are not likely to have their housing designed by an architect, apparently both worlds meet for a profoundly human reason: curiosity. For architects, informal settlement offers an escape from the all too familiar systemized world into a mesmerizing realm of informality with the most unlikely creations. Settlers are curious to see with the help of the architect's eye. Reinventing the role of the architect is about rediscovering the user as the focus of the work. ●

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