

Being a part of something

Organized Self-help building for the urban poor



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1 Introduction

In February 2020 me and my classmates in the course *Urban shelter* went to Manila, Philippines to do research. This trip gave us understanding and knowledge about a culture and housing situation that we are not that familiar to. During the trip we visited both areas where the people now living in the area had been a part of building it up and we areas visited where an organization built the whole area ready for people to move in. From my point of view, it was a clear difference between housing areas where people living there had been a part of the building process and areas where people moved into an already completed house. People who had been a part of the project since the start and with their own hands had built part of the area talked about their neighborhood with pride and how they still today together take care of the area. This made me interested in the importance of being a part of something and how it affects the attitude to the area you live in. That made me take an interest in the concept of self-help housing.

Knowing that millions of people in the Philippines live in slum areas we all understand that the need of housing is huge. You can find different organizations working with upgrading as well as building new areas for the informal settlers. Different organizations work in different ways and believe in different strategies. One strategy is letting people be a part of the process of building new areas. People have built their own houses since time began. So what is special with the concept self- help housing? In this paper we will discuss *organized self-help housing*.

2.1 Literature Review

Since Manila is the most density-populated city in the world the land where it is possible to build new housing areas is very limited (UN-Habitat, 2016:129). The lack of space and the poverty often leads to de-humanising living conditions. In many cities it is a brutal mismatch between how planners and architect once wanted the city to be used and how it actually is used today (Correa, 1973:106). Therefore, it is important that new development takes place in consensus between planners, organizations and inhabitants. When planning a new area in cities like Manila informal settlers often already live in the area. Planners need to see these people and not ignore them. UN-Habitat (2016) means that new areas often are planned regardless of informal settlers. The Philippines Homeless People's Federation have pointed out where informal settlers live. With mapped information like this stakeholders get information they often disregard. Urban plans, deliberately or not, affect everyone who lives in a city especially informal settlers (UN-Habitat, 2016:132). One way of involving people in the process of building new areas is the concept of organized self-help housing. Self-help housing is nothing new. As early as 1918 the Scottish planner Patrick Geddes mentioned values with self-help housing (Harris, 2003:253). Projects can no doubt be found all over the world. A well known example of organized self-help housing is in eastern Canada from 1938 where coal miners were sponsored by St. Francis Xavier University to build a neighborhood where they could live. The process was similar to what we today mean by self-help housing (Yard, 2012:286).

When the need for housing in the late 1950s made people to house themselves they started to believe in self-help housing really began. The eyes turned to early projects that had seemed to succeed "spontaneous houses" in Latin America was one of the earliest examples (Ward, 1982:21). Some of the self-help housing project in South America was western financed something that Harris (2003) have pointed out as critical (Harris, 2003:254). The critic from Harris is relevant and easier for us to understand. Western financial could easily put people in a dependency and be an extension of the colonial. During times of crises where there was a lack of investment as well as manpower people in collaboration with governments and organizations used the power of self-help housing (Jenkins, Smith & Wang, 2007:158). During the 1970s self-help housing became an official

alternative to traditional housing. Although the self-help concept was accepted and well used it could not keep pace with the growing need for housing for informal settlers all over the world. It is hard to build affordable housing areas when the government as well as companies can earn much more money when building other kinds of areas. Neither is self-help building the fastest way of building new areas (Jenkins, Smith & Wang, 2007:162).

The British architect John F. C. Turner is one of the most eminent when it comes to self-help housing. In the book *Freedom to build* Turner states that the word *housing* can be a noun as well as a verb. Turner means that when using the word as a noun it describes a product, a house. While using it as a verb *to house* it is more of an activity or a process (Turner, 1972:151). The way Turner talks about *to house* gives the word a wider meaning. In the discussion of self-help housing it is relevant to think of the word as a noun as well as a verb.

Turner is a popular architect, especially known for his thought about self-help housing. In this paper focus will try to be on the side of Turner's thoughts. However, we need to understand where the greatness connecting to Turner comes from. Turner is the author of more books *Housing by people* is one of them. In the preface Colin Ward describes the greatness of John F. C. Turner. Ward means that Turner is something more than a housing expert. What makes he special is the fact that he deep in to questions so fundamental that they never get asked. Ward (1976) means that is something unique. Compare to other experts that comes out as fast as a problem is defined Turner have for many years collect information about self-help housing (Turner, 1976:4).

When building an organized self-help neighborhood land, services, technical assistance and finance is provided by the government. With this kind of assistance people can be a part of the building process (Jenkins, Smith & Wang. 2007:124). Except from the economic part organized self-help housing differ from spontaneous self-help housing is the aspect of time. The financial and technical support means that an area can be completed in a few years. For a spontaneous self-help housing area the progressive improvement takes around 30-35 years (Arroyo, 2013:28).

2.2 Housing situation in the Philippines

Housing situation in the Philippines is strained. Four out of ten families don't have a decent housing situation (Habitat for Humanity, 2017). This problem goes for the whole country but the biggest issues can be found in Metro Manila and the surroundings. There are many reasons for that. Jep Semana, the officer for Habitat for Humanity in the Philippines means that people come from all over the county and build a home where they can find a better livelihood. Semana continues saying that when people gather at the same place it gets crowded. The facilities in the slum areas are not made for the number of people actually living there and cannot handle the need. Also important to mention is the situation caused by various disaster; typhoons, earthquakes and flooding are recurrent problems for people living in the Philippines and those who are worst affected are the ones living in the slum areas. The nature disasters force millions of people all over the world to rebuild their homes every year (Habitat for Humanity, 2017). Different organizations talk about decent housing in different ways. According to Habitat for Humanity four out of ten families in the Philippines live in decent housing situation which would mean a population of around six million people. On the other hand UN Habitat says that 2.5 million people live in slum areas in Metro Manila (UN-Habitat, 2003:215). The definitions are not exactly the same. In this paper the area where the informal settlers live will be mentioned as a slum.

The slum areas are located on both private and government own land. They are often located next to rivers, in garbage dumps, along rail tracks or under bridges. The average age of people living in the slum areas is 19. Since the common size of a family is five persons, the average age is that low. Considering the fact that the housing situation started as a temporary shelter, 75% of the informal settlers still live in the slum areas after five years. Half of the population that lives in informal settlements either work from home or are self-employed. Some, especially women, do housework as their job and many of the men do domestic help for living or work as a tricycle driver. The other half of the population in the slums work in the formal sector (UN-Habitat, 2003:215). That means that there are often many people at home during daytime as well as nighttime. In an urban design point of view that means that the conditions for living neighborhood promising.

3.1 Argument and Critique

After interviewing people in Manila we could clearly see that people that have been active when building their house take care of their home in a more responsible way. There was also another approach to maintenance in areas where the inhabitants together were responsible for it. This made me understand that the importance of being a part of something applies also when it comes to building a home. As an example we visited the area called *Ernestville*. It is an area with 212 families where the families organized themselves in building the neighborhood. When interviewed people in this area told us how proud they were and how they still today take care of the area together. They also told us that they to some extent had the possibility to influence how their apartment would look like. That aspect is something that John F. C. Turner pointed out as something particular for self-help housing. Families know their needs and can therefore optimize their houses. Turner means that the possibility of influencing people's future living situation get lost in mass production (Jenkins, Smith & Wang. 2007:161). The aspect that the way houses are designed to fit e.g. families or individuals the best, could be the most significant difference between self-help housing and the traditional way of housebuilding (Ward, 1982:61).

Critique

There are a lot of positive voices when it comes to self-help housing. But as always some people are questioning. The American planner Jacob Crane lifts problems connected with lack of knowledge. Crane is afraid that professionals had too much trust in people's ability to build houses by their own (Harris, 2003:252). However, he does not mind self-help building, in later works he talks about it as something necessary but that we all need to be cautious and always use professional knowledge (Harris, 2003:253). Saying that organized self-help is a way of getting the whole community involved when a new neighborhood is built sounds good. But how can it be ensured that everyone has the possibility of being a part of the process? According to a report from UN-Habitat women often are left out of the planning process. Historically they have often been under-represented among decision-makers and this is also the case when it comes to constructing housing. This is not only valued for women. Also age, origin and economical background have affected the power of inhabitants taking decision (UN-Habitat,

2016:127). This is something that organizations as well as planners and architects need to have in mind when planning for a new neighborhood.

3.2 Urban Shelter Design

One of the biggest challenges in building a house is to combine material and construction techniques with social impact. Regarding self-help housing the choice of material and technique has an important impact on costs but also maintenance (Tunas & Peresthu, 2010:321). In Manila we visited Ernestville, a housing area where people living in the area had been a part of the project from the beginning and therefore also are responsible for the maintenance. It was clear that the states of Ernestville on another level than for example in Smokey Mountains, another social housing area where people are not a part of the maintenance. From these two examples it is evident that people take care of things they have invested in, be it money or manpower. Tunas and Peresthu (2010) mention another aspect that impacts the degree to which people are able to take care of their neighborhood. They mean that it is important that the organization that leads the project promotes and facilitates the transfer of traditional knowledge instead of only using new building techniques (Tunas & Peresthu, 2010:321). This aspect that Tunas and Peresthu mention is important for architects and planners to have in mind while designing for new areas.

Advocates for self-help housing strongly believe in the power of building your own house. On the other hand there is a group of professionals that have been studying and working with housing and outdoor environment design for many years. How can these groups collaborate? One way of doing it is by working with manuals. The manual can be a design criteria or strategies for reaching sustainability in the area. By having clear criteria and strategies for how to work, people would be helped with building their own house in a sustainable and safe way. In collaboration between people and professionals knowledge can be spread, work can be optimized and neighborhoods with urban as well as social values can be created.

When working as an architect or planner the goal is often to reach ecological, social and economic sustainability. These three substances contain many smaller categories and values. The ecological and economical aspects are often easier to

measure. When using organized self-help housing as building strategy, results within ecological sustainability can be seen in terms of reusing building materials. Also in economic sustainability it is easy to measure results by using manpower from the people costs remains low. Harris (2003) lifts the economic aspect and states that as early as in the 1940s the American planner Jacob Crane pointed out that building your own is a cheap way of getting a home. Crane also establishes that self-helping with assistance from professionals is a cheap way of developing also for the government. This fact is something that Turner also stated 30 years later (Harris, 2003:252). However, success is not equality easy to measure when it comes to the third field, social sustainability.

However, social sustainability is what interests me the most. In this paper and in the project in the Urban Shelter course I will prioritize values connected to social sustainability. While building self-help housing many values connected with social sustainability will be fulfilled by the building process and people's opportunity to affect the result during the construction process. That gives people the possibility to be a part of the project and build a house that fits their needs. Another aspect is that organized self-help housing hopefully gives people the feeling of being a part of something.

I think social values inside the family and for each and every person are relatively easy to fulfill. On the contrary, social values in public areas are hard to achieve since the area of responsibility is not clear at all times. Ray Oldenburgh means that building a house and building a neighborhood require different qualities. When building a neighborhood the different values of public space are added, for example the third space. Oldenburgh defined the third space as *"a place of refuge other than the home or workplace where people can regularly visit and commune with friends, neighbors, coworkers and even strangers."* (Mehta and Bosson, 2010:780). Public spaces will arise even though no one is responsible for them. UN-Habitat means that the public space is becoming increasingly important. In many cities public space are the beating heart. That is where people meet each other (UN-Habitat, 2016:131). That way of looking at the public space makes it even more important and it is clear that someone needs to be responsible for it. In order to optimize public space both knowledge from the professionals and personal opinions from the people are needed. Metha and Bosson (2010) discuss

the importance of personalizing a space. While personalizing a public space people can modify it and make the environment meet their needs. In that way people create a territory and feel more safe, secure and especially more at home in a public space (Metha & Bosson, 2010:781).

4 The Role of Planners and Architects

In the developing countries there is, according to Arroyo (2013), a lack of knowledge on the practice of organized self-help housing (Arroyo, 2013:5). That means that planners and architects have the possibility to develop the concept self-help housing and spread knowledge. I agree with Turner and believe that people are knowledgeable enough to be a part of the building process. But we also need to have Crane's opinions about placing too much responsibility on the inhabitants in mind (Harris, 2003:252). With support from texts, impressions from our field trip and learning from my time in school I thought about how the collaboration between people and professional can look like. From this paper we have learned that people can be an asset in the building process. So where do we need the planners and architects? I pointed out three fields where I think planners and architects still have an important role in organized self-help housing.

- *Safety*

A new neighborhood needs to be safety. The building construction should last for many years and also live up to each and every aspect of sustainability. The buildings also need to be safe from fire. Material and constructor wise. In areas like Manila the construction also need to manage natural disaster such as typhoons, earthquake and flooding.

- *Micro climate*

Designing a neighborhood means that you have to think about weather conditions. Wind directions, solar radiation and shelter are things that planners and architects need to have in mind. In what way various from of location, in Manila shelter from the sun need to be prioritize. Using atrium for promote natural ventilation is another tool that need a bit more of consideration. The architect and planner Charles Correa describes atrium as a lung ventilating the house (Correa, 1973:58).

- *Design*

When planners and architects design neighborhood design is an important element. This is not the most important field but when talking to people in Manila it was clear that proud often was linked to beauty. However, Turner means that self-help housing, as it is focused on individualized houses and families need, often have better architecture solutions (Jenkins, Smith & Wang. 2007:161). That is something that planners and architects need to keep in mind.

Beyond these three categories a planner needs to be a part of the process to optimize the use of land. The professionals also need to be, as earlier mentioned, responsible for the public space. At least in the planning process. As earlier discussed in this paper the collaboration between professionals, organizations and inhabitants can work with design manuals. In that way the work can be optimized and achieve social sustainability.

5. Conclusion

Hopes that self-help building can lead to further cooperation within the neighborhood seems reasonable. Arroyo writes that a self-builder told in 1984 that after being a part of organized self-help housing he started to help his brother with building a living room. He continues telling that he and his brothers bought a tractor together. Something that they would not have done before the self-help project (Arroyo, 2013:128).

To find a manual or a workflow that is possible to use in every country is not something to strive for since the conditions differ for every country. Being a planner or architect in Sweden is different from being one in the Philippines. Hopefully we all can meet in the wish of designing places where people can live a life they enjoy in all sequences of life.

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