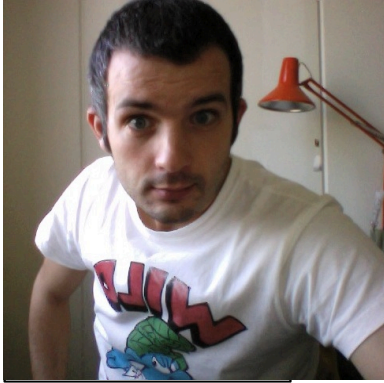# Common spaces in high density contexts.

How public spaces are able to improve quality of life of low-income people.

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1 Urban Shelter Design Development

In the last ten years, in the Philippines, like in the rest of the world, the number of population is rising quickly, with an enlargement of the cities as a primary consequence. The world unfortunately, is becoming a big city, and every city is like a small world. We live in a repetitive system.

The growing of the cities is in fact the first signal of this phenomena, cities are expanding with their boundaries quickly, them are like a cancer, they are destroying all their surroundings and are incorporating all the small cities around, becoming a megalopolis of millions of inhabitants. It happens especially in Asian countries, where, like in Shanghai the population is grown of five millions people, in the last five years. People needs more space for live and the city must give to them the services like infrastructures, the schools, the hospitals and malls, that it means consume of land. We speak of metropolitan areas always more frequently.

Philippines are the 12th most populated country in the world and Manila is the 11th most populous metropolitan area in the world, with a population a 88 million of inhabitants, a growth rate of 2.36% and a birth rate of 3 children per minute[1].

«Big cities are define, first of all, for their capacity to import and to export humans, products, the image and the messages. Spatially, their importance is calculated on the quality, and bigness of their motorways or railways that connect it to the airport[2]».

The way of live and the way of see the places where we live is changing. Nowadays we usually describe cities with numbers, quantities, the heights of skyscrapers or the dimension of boundaries, forgetting the meaning that the cities had since their origins.

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[1] Johnny Åstrand, 2010, lecture 18 Jan. 2010

[2] Marc Augé, 2009, p. 7

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Their natures, often in unknown to the majority of population who live in the city, their being multi-ethnicity, multi religiosity and multi-cultural, the society generated citizens of the world but not citizens of the city. This is a problem of lost of identity.

The dimension of our cities grows so fast that we lost the feeling of quantities of the numbers we use to describe it. Metropolitan Manila, National Capital Region (NCR), could be describe by numbers:

• Area of 636 km2, 0,2% of Philippines area;

• 10.5 million inhabitants, 14% of national population, 16,661 person/km2, 5 members/ household;

• For the period 2005-2010, the total housing need in the country is estimated at 3.7 million housing units;

• Urban sprawl has reached the adjacent provinces[3];

Can we control these numbers? The city is not more at human dimension.

With this trend the landscape around cities is disappearing. We can speak about landscape when it is a container, not when it is content, in this case we have only green land, what we call parks and gardens, or in a wrong way: urban landscape.

However, with the expectancy of a better life, people is moving from the country side to the city, attracted by the myth of the powerful city, but often with a decrement of their life style. This migration, lead to a loss of identity and traditions, with a contribute to the proliferation of slums and ghettos, because the city run faster then people, and if you are able to stay in pair with it, you can have a dignified life, otherwise you became the new urban poor.

Slums have arisen, also because the city grew too fast.

In the urban population exist a big gap between rich and poor, the former are frightened by the second, and the second, for this reason, are unable to improve their life style. But the city, for live, needs of both, because the rich have the money, while he poor do all those activities that otherwise would be performed by anyone.

Despite everything inside the city there are gate communities, where to enter you need to be registered and slums, where pollution, garbages and starvation, are the only things you can see. One relate to the world, others try to survive.

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[3] Johnny Åstrand, 2010, lecture 18 Jan. 2010

2 Factors Shaping Urban Shelter Design

The high density into the cities cause a reduction of house's dimension, especially the houses of low-income people. They have always less space for live. First of all because the price of land increase, they cannot afford a big house, and second because the families are numerous and have to share the space, especially during the evening and the night, when the family meets. The number of poor in the city is increasing, like we said before, and this generate a sort of competition between them, a competition for surviving. Many, cannot afford a house and are forced to live in a informal settlement. In Metro Manila, about 21% of the 2.1 million households live in informal settlements and 19% are living in danger areas such as riverbanks, under bridges, railways, roadways or sidewalks and aqueducts. Homeless are 8.298, and people who live in substandard (upgrading) are 186.334. In Metro Manila 727.000 families live in a slum area[4].

Houses we build in our cities are empty for mostly of the day, because people spend the all day at work, and nobody uses them. These spaces have all the characteristics to become negative spaces, if they are in the suburbs, they become no man land, empty, dirty, dangerous, a perfect place for the grow of illegality. Anyone feel it like their space, and have no care of it, they just use it, everybody are afraid of their neighbours, often different to us and this contribute to have a society based on individualism and consumerist. There is a problem of space, linked to architecture, and a problem in the society, linked to spaces.

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[4] Johnny Åstrand, 2010, lecture 18 Jan. 2010

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Few spaces, then, for a qualitative architecture able to solve the problems of society, continuously quickly growing. These unlucky spaces, spread all around in the city, tend to disappear or to be forgotten, under the always more frequent and always bigger towers that are growing in our cities, one solution found, to density problem.

« The ideal is the density. The issue of housing is not a problem. It was completely resolved or completely left to chance; the former is legal, 'illegal' in the second; in the first case they are towers or, usually sticks (deep 15 metres), in the second, with perfect complementarity, of a crust of makeshift huts. One solution consumes the sky, the other the land. It is interesting that who have less money living the most expensive resources (land), and instead; who pays, living the one free: the air[5] ».

This is one clare contradiction that we have in our society, like Rem Koolhaas said, but is not the only one, in fact he goes on to say: «not only the world's population doubles every number of years, but also, given the loss of incisiveness of religion, the average number of occupants per unit is reduced by half through divorce or other phenomena of family breakdown, with the same frequency with which the urban population doubles[6] ».

This phenomena of family breakdown, happens specially into the rich families, where people have economically means to face a divorce, with the problem that when they leave the old house, they need a house big as one they had before, increasing the problem of lack of space.

The richest people of society have a life-style enormously bigger of the low-income people, leading the society to grow faster of its natural trend, and deny to poor people to increase their income and improve their life. The house is the place of the relationship, between inhabitant and space, that could generate a link between them, if it doesn't happen I think that architecture didn't do his primary mission, create a place where man can feed his desires, even about his relationship with the city. Everyone is entitled to have a house. The city should be the place of relationship and communication. More the city is big, and more is difficult carry out it, because the elements that we have to put in system are numerous, and complicated. What architects and planners have to do, is rethink to the role of the city, starting from the bottom, from the neighbourhood and the different social classes that live this spaces, which together form the city , and must do it in terms of architecture, livelihood and relationship.

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[5] Rem Koolhaas, 2001, p.39

[6] Rem Koolhaas, 2001, p.39

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3The Role of Architects

Architects must design buildings that help people to create new communities, experimenting with courage, new housing types suited to contemporary need of low-income people, a difficult challenge but compelling. How architects, planners and designers can do it?

Two important and indispensable rules: low-cost housing and minimum space on a human scale, that the residents can control. For low-income people, who work all day and who leave the house empty, are enough minimum spaces, dignified, able to adapt to the different needs of the inhabitants, different during the time. Space should be flexible, to adapting to the different number of people who in that moment live the house, customisable, so that each house can adapt to every one according to his own needs, giving colour and personality to the building, functional, architects must be able to reduce and delete what is unnecessary but defining clearly spaces and at the end , architecture must be low-cost. The house should not be consumerism, but must endure over the years and thus designed so that it can adapt to different individual needs, because inherent in the idea of home is the concept of happiness and hope and a place or a house that didn't do that, it's a big damage for the all society. Cities, hole from the centre, should be coloured so they can convey positive feelings. The construction of low-cost building, can be done trough the use of precast, to reduce production cost and time of laying, also there is less consume of materials and equipment. Simultaneously with this, the architects have the role to find new construction materials cheap and sustainable, maybe that come from a recycling process, for example, like some lightweight concrete that contain within themselves plastic flakes otherwise no longer recyclable or some plastic panels or reinforced cardboards. Plastic aggregates often have superior proprieties of the virgin one, thanks to the combination of polymers blends with different densities and different elastic modules. One example is FONOBETON® produce by an Italian company: *S.C. TRADE*.

Then an opportunity to rethink the issue of urban quality, also with new materials, and a new way of think housing, singular or collective. Minimum space in a collective housing system, allow to think some common functions and facilities, like the laundry, workshops, kitchen gardens, playgrounds, small housing kindergarten, centres for waste collection and Community-supported agriculture groups. This allows a reduction in cost and therefore a better standard of living over time, sharing service that allows you to have more opportunities for socialisation among the people who inhabit the same neighbourhood.

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Socialisation and sharing helped to create a sense of community, which is then able to create an identity into the people, in relation to the place where they live. Feel part of a community means to care for himself, others and the space around us, because we feel our. In these way the quality of the spaces, and the life standard of low-income people can increase. Added many small communities have the potential to create more liveable city.

Summing up, the houses that form a communities, should be within certain rules, customisable, flexible, participatory, with common services and cheap, so that it can respond as possible, the needs of its residents and donate to the city, part of the personality of its inhabitants.

4 Design of Sustainable Shelter and Neighbourhoods

Living is the primary action of a link with the city and this my happen more as the project's work is mindful to social and urban dynamics, that regarding each project. As taught to us a great Italian architect, died a few years ago: «The sings we make on the sheet should be consistent with our architectural idea. This may seem obvious, but you will learn that seeking simplicity and expressive clarity are hard to pursue and difficult to achieve» *(Ugo Rivolta)*. Economics, social and political problems that afflict the cities are a big obstruction for that and live with them it's not easy. A good project is one that is able to grant inside space with a clear function, that are functional and that respond to people's needs. Nowadays more than in the past is necessary that architects propose common space and facilities that make the everyday life and the city more liveable. The aim is to think at a city, not in continuos expansion, but a quality city, where people can contribute to create an identity, where there is a link between the citizens, and between citizens and the city. «The physical and psychological link with the site, is the central principle of the meaning and deeper, of dwelling[7]».

Governments should consider polices for birth control, because the planet is unable to meet all our needs, and cities can not expand indefinitely, but this is an other argument.

«For good or ill, then, the home will play a stronger role in our lives than ever[8]».

William J. Mitchell, *E-Topia: Urban Life, Jim-But Not as We Know It*, 1999

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[7] Fabrizio Forti, 2009, p.57

[8] William J. Mitchel, 1999

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