

# Urban communities : a hope against poverty?

How architects can improve the living conditions of the poor with urban communities design.



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## 1. Introduction : urban communities and shelters

In 2011, during my second semester as an Erasmus student at Lunds Tekniska Högskola in Sweden, I had the chance to participate within the Urban Shelter studio in a study tour of four weeks in the Philippines. The purpose of this trip was to collect a maximum of informations on the field and to understand by our own experience what could help to improve our current urban shelter design. Thereby we visited different neighbourhoods and communities, we interviewed inhabitants and took pictures. Through these visits we were able to make our own minds and note the different positive and negative approaches that have been presented to us. The current situation regarding the slums, and the resettlement of poor families affected by natural disasters in the Philippines seems to be improving these last three decades. The pattern of urban community has already led to poor families whole to recover their dignity and to improve their living conditions, although there is still much to do.

During EXPO Shangai 2010 entitled *Better City, Better Life*, several symposia were held on the theme of poverty in the world related to urban development. During a discussion around the topic *Remodeling of communities in the city* it was stated that “To create a harmonious and successful city, whose development is genuinely sustainable, the priority is to pay the utmost attention to health and needs of its citizens and welfare of its communities”. For who says urban poverty says lean political, human and financial heritage, leading to a lifestyle marked by instability. This poverty has a growing degradation on the environment, which the latter at the same time turns against it, causing an increase of insecurity. That's the whole development of the city that sees slow.

According to a report released by ONU Habitat, the number of people living in slums is about 830 million in 2010<sup>1</sup>. In Philippines, 33% of the population is below the poverty line<sup>2</sup>. We face an emergency situation where we must intervene quickly and effectively, in a sustainable way to help these urban populations to recover and emancipate in a society that has so far refused the dialogue with the urban poor communities. Evictions of informal settlements that have followed these last decades have demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the use of the force. But on the contrary, thanks to the willingness of several NGOs, government agencies, associations of architects and the willingness of the candidate community, significant improvements have been developed in recent years, delivering up to date the concept of designing urban communities.

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<sup>1</sup> ONU-Habitat, 18.03.2010, *L'état des villes dans le monde 2010/2011*.

<sup>2</sup> 77 International, 2011, <http://www.77international.fr/fr/fiches-pays/les-philippines/accueil>

## 2. Urban community : facts and design factors

Before going any further, what is a community ?

“Traditionally a community has been defined as a group of interacting people living in a common location. The word is often used to refer to a group that is organized around common values and is attributed with social cohesion within a shared geographical location, generally in social units larger than a household.” (Wikipedia, 2011) . So in the term « community » we have to retain interactions between different persons belonging within the same big family and located in a same place. All that social cohesion should enable members to evolve and improve their living conditions all together side by side within the same community.

So why did this pattern failed repeatedly in some countries? Yet all this was going on good intentions. Well, the answer to this question can be very simple : simply because the notion of interaction has not been followed during the community design. The authorities, the NGOs and architects didn't investigate on the community and its poverty, they have no idea of the real expectations and needs of its members. They don't really know what poverty is in these slums, because indeed some studies revealed that within these communities there were several types of poverty according to men, women and children. Instead, leaders were stubborn to design a place where families will be accommodated without having been consulted in advance. The opportunity to establish a dialogue with the community, to listen to it, to build confidence and to make it participate in the project to ascertain its real needs has been missed. So we should not be surprised to see relations between its members deteriorate and the logical repercussions on the environment when everyone can't access to a minimum comfort of living. Thus follows the following problems : overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, crime, social unrest and economic ineffectiveness<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Bureau International des Expositions, 2010, *Le remodelage des communautés dans la ville*

It is therefore vital to include the community since the initial phase of the project development. Several experiments were conducted these last 40 years, and some recent studies conducted around the world, particularly in Asia and Africa, show very encouraging results. « Organized communities have shown an impressive willingness and capacity to upgrade the housing and environmental conditions in their settlements »<sup>4</sup>. Access to housing is a first step towards empowerment within the community and it allows to strengthen bonds of solidarity among poor families. People need to pursue common challenges to maintain this feeling of belonging to a whole.

One of the other important aspects to take in consideration during the community design process is its mapping. The involvement of community members is important. Besides being able to better identify its infrastructure needs, this step enables community representatives to better deal with government agencies and NGOs about architectural characteristics of their homes.

In the 1980s, always with the aim to improve the development of urban communities, we experienced for the first time community contracts in Sri Lanka, Wanathamulla. These contracts enable the community to manage much of the construction of urban shelters and to allow its members, experienced or not to acquire a job by participating in the community construction, supervised and assisted by professionals from NGOs or government agencies. No profit is earned by anyone, all funds are invested in the development of the community.

Since the 1990s, some communities began to establish savings and loans groups to help the poorest families but also to strengthen the social links. In this way, the community would empower and could act on its own. The act of creating a kind

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<http://www.bie-paris.org/site/fr/communautes.html>

<sup>4</sup> Peter Swan, 2010, *Empowering the poor through community based development*

[http://www.housing-the-urban-poor.net/Docs/QG\\_origPapers/CommunityDev.pdf](http://www.housing-the-urban-poor.net/Docs/QG_origPapers/CommunityDev.pdf)

of solidarity fund and self-managing their budget allows community members to feel that they all act in a common goal : to get out of poverty. Thus, gradually, themembers go out of their isolation and acquire knowledges which they couldn't access before, and moreover, the community is carefully listened by government agencies and NGOs.

In the various interviews I had with inhabitants of different communities in Manila, each time the topic of security was discussed. Poor families living in informal settlements want tranquility, knowing that their children play outside in safety and that they are not exposed to delinquency. For residents, it is necessary to physically demarcate the boundaries of the community so that the members are protected as in a cocoon and could turn more towards the community. However it is important to not be cut off from the world behind a wall. By trying to be too isolated we finally lose any interaction with what surrounds us, and this would interfere with future expansions and restorations of the urban fabric. Another topic often discussed during the various interviews : privacy. One of their frequent requests is to have a place to itself in order to be alone with his family, growing fruits and plants.

Finally, one of the major factors to consider when designing a urban community is of course the climatic comfort. It is important to adapt to loacal climate and know how to get maximum benefit for the welfare of the community. In a country like Philippines, where the climate is very heavy, the sun is an "enemy" the day and people try to flee. However many times I have seen houses without any shading devices, in which the absence of air conditioner felt great. Outdoors spaces also require more attention in terms of climatic comfort. A rest area, a street, a playground , if not properly protected from the sun they become ghost places deserted days and nights.

### 3. The Role of Architects

We have outlined several factors to consider in urban community design for low-income families, thus the positive effects that could ensue. Now, let's devote to different aspects of the role of the architect through few examples of interventions in the urban community development.

#### 3.1. Ban Mankong project

In 2003 in Thailand, a program called “Ban Mankong” was launched by the government, to improve living conditions, security of tenure and enable communities to be more independent by building its projects itself with the help of a participatory process. On the banks of Bang Bua canal in Bangkok, accommodations are illegally installed throughout (see fig. 1). A local university, Sripatum University, was invited to participate to the project, not only as an technical and architectural aid, but also “... to create the atmosphere which the community working together with a third party instead of a development lead or planned by the authority”<sup>5</sup>.



Fig. 1 : Existing characteristics of Bang Bua community (Faculty of Architecture, Sripatum University, 2003)

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<sup>5</sup> Prayong Posriprasert and Nattawut Usavagovitwong, Faculty of Architecture, Sripatum University, 2006, *Journal of Architectural/Planning Research and Studies, Volume 4*.

The university was given the task to collect data, conduct surveys, organize and monitor projects. In other words, the role of the architects can be divided in three aspects :

- social aspect
- financial aspect
- physical aspect

(see fig. 2)

The first step was to organize meetings and discussions with representatives of the community members to better explain to them the current situation, the challenges and benefits of the project that they can take part. This initial contact establishes a relationship of trust between architects and inhabitants of the community and allows them to better understand how to improve their living conditions.

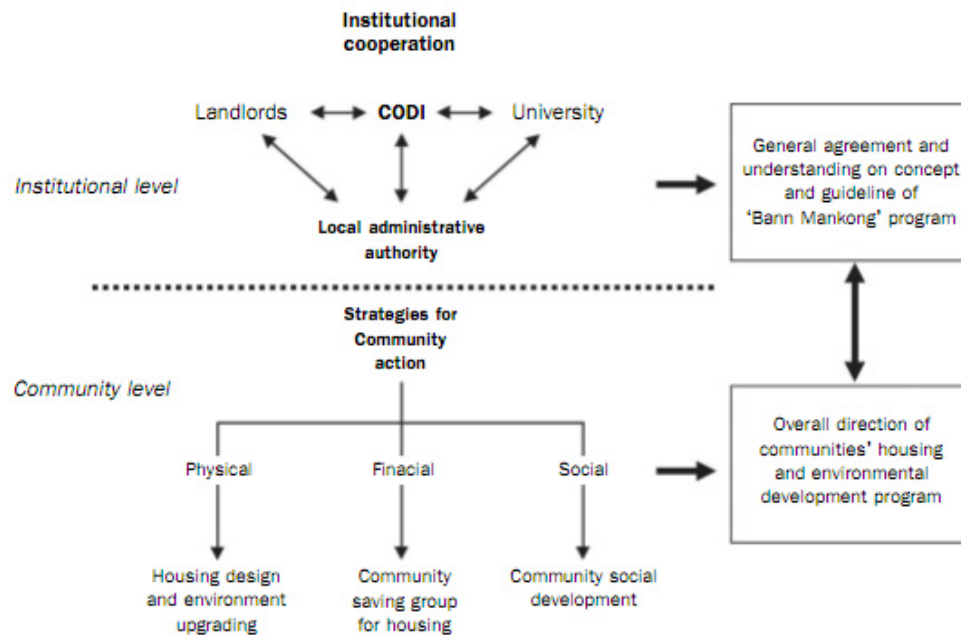


Fig. 2 : Strategy in Bang Boa community upgrading project (Faculty of Architecture, Sripatum University, 2003)



Subsequently, surveys and gatherings of informations are conducted within the community. Anything that refers to “households, housing security, land ownership, infrastructure problems community organizations, savings activities and existing development initiatives”<sup>6</sup>, is taken into account in the urban shelter design. Moreover, these surveys reinforce even further the ties that are forged between community members and the team of architecture students (see fig. 3).

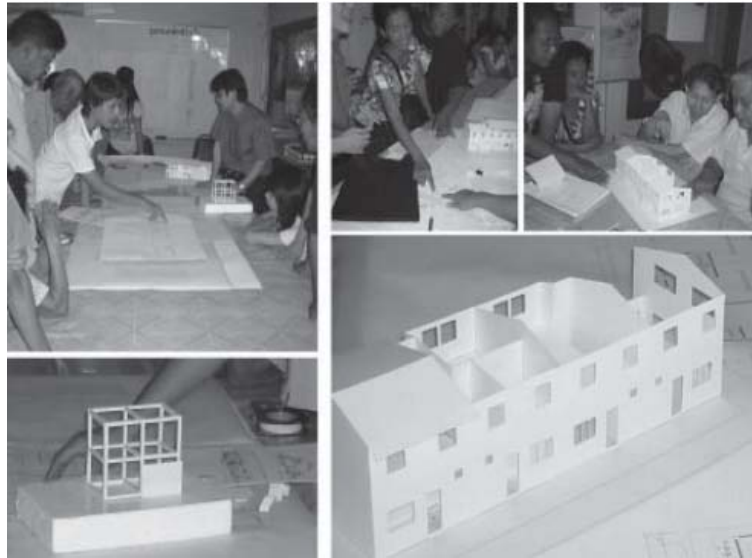


Fig. 3 : Design process with community participation (Faculty of Architecture, Sripatum University, 2003)

Once these studies done, we must reach a consensus with the majority of the community. Discussions were engaged concerning the neighbourhood design. Therefore, it was decided to provide three meters set-back line along the canal banks. To link all communities and allow public access to the canal, a pedestrian street is set up along the waterfront corridor. A sewage system and certain level of water treatment before draining into the canal will be constructed. Finally, the architects and the members of the community agree around workshops on the choice of a pilot project, taking into account the number of floors, design details, space, materials, ... Thus the first house was created with the participation of members, experienced or not, of the community. This first realization framed by

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<sup>6</sup> Prayong Posriprasert and Nattawut Usavagovitwong, Faculty of Architecture, Sripatum University, 2006, *Journal of Architectural/Planning Research and Studies, Volume 4.*

Sripatum University will not only bring a know-how in terms of construction, but will also enable to better manage in the program the time and the costs of construction.

### 3.2. Mc Gill University

Other examples illustrate the success of a participatory approach of urban communities in the development of the urban shelter design. The School of architecture Université McGill<sup>7</sup>, in Canada, collaborates with teams of targeted cities, Rosario (in Argentina), Colombo (in Sri Lanka) and Kampala (in Ouganda), on projects involving integration of urban agriculture in these cities by a process of participatory planning, development and design of neighbourhood gardens.

### 3.3 Quinta Monroy

Finally, an intervention by the Chilean architectural firm Elemental<sup>8</sup> in 2004 in Quinta Monroy in Chile, demonstrates how to relocate 100 families illegally occupying a plot of 5000 m<sup>2</sup> in the city center of Iquique. A grant of U.S.\$ 7,500 was intended to each family, which was intended to pay the land, infrastructure and architecture. In Chile, with U.S.\$ 7,500, it is possible to build only 30 m<sup>2</sup> (see fig. 4).

The purpose the architects gave to themselves was to house 100 families on the site with this budget, ie build a set of 100 apartments with a budget of U.S.

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<sup>7</sup> IDRC (International Development Research Center, Canada), 03.05.2011, *Pauvreté urbaine et environnement*, <http://www.idrc.ca>

<sup>8</sup> Archdaily, 31.08.2008, *Quinta Monroy / Elemental*,  
<http://www.archdaily.com/10775/quinta-monroy-elemental/>  
Elemental,  
<http://www.elementalchile.cl>

\$ 750,000, with the possibility to double the surface build later (see fig. 5) .  
Indeed, the housing grant aid given by the State is, by far the biggest help that can be expected. So, if this subsidy can go up in value over time, this could be an important milestone in the struggle against poverty. To solve this puzzle, the architects proceeded in this order :

-First, the profitability of the site is only possible by finding a sufficient density, but overcrowding must be avoided.

-Second, the provision of a collective space for this “big family” is a key issue for lifting families out of poverty. Between private and public space, a collective space for about 20 families has been created. This collective space allows social cohesion of the location and mutual helps between these fragile families.

-Thirdly, in order to double the built space, which will ultimately be in self-construction, the urban shape should be porous enough to allow each unit to develop within the same structure. The initial building should provide a framework to avoid any negative effects of self-construction on the urban environment, but also to facilitate the expansion process at lower cost.

-To finish, instead of providing small 30 m<sup>2</sup> houses where everything is small, the architects have provided houses where just the essential part is built : kitchens, bathrooms, staircases, partition walls for the final scenario of a 72 m<sup>2</sup> house.

In conclusion, with a budget to built half a house, the architects chose to build half of the house that the family will never be able to realize oneself. The other part, which allows expansion of the family while maintaining it on the site, is left free for self-construction whatever the budget, energy or time they spend. A real estate project or architectural design has overcome poverty and the perverse effects of the economic logic of social housing.

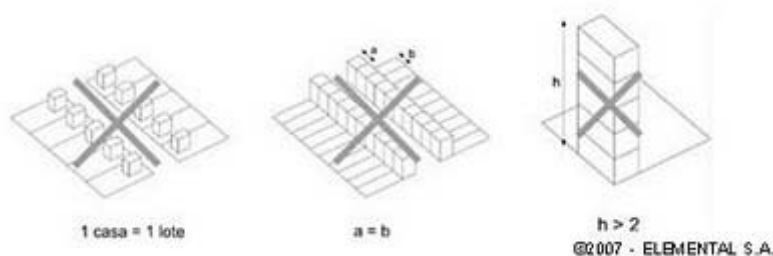


Fig. 4 : Density researchs( Elemental, 2005)

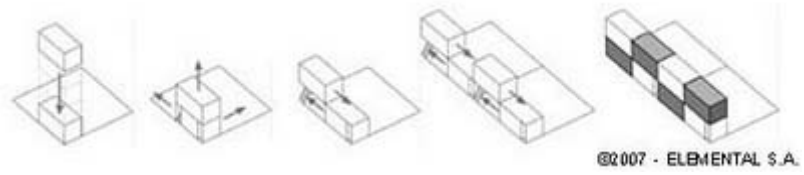


Fig. 5 : Principle of double surface ( Elemantal, 2005)



Fig. 6 : Plan of Quinta Monroy project( Elemantal, 2005)



Fig. 7 : View on original buildings( Elemantal, 2005)



Fig. 8 : Elevation with and without extension ( Elemantal, 2005)

## 4. Conclusion

Over the various visits I have made in communities of low-income families, during my study trip in Philippines, as well as through various researchs and documentations that I could consult later, it seems clear that many positive aspects arise from the participation process in a urban community design project. “It is important to recognize the survival strategies of the community that are based on mutual exchange and local resources”<sup>9</sup>. Over the last two decades or so, many governments have begun to reassess the role of informal settlements and to work with the communities that live in them. Governments of most developing countries now recognize that low-income housing projects and social development programmes prepared without the participation and support of the affected communities cannot succeed. The creation of community networks enables community members to learn and share know-hows. Inhabitants are thus encouraged to be involved in the community development and can subsequently act more independently to improve their living conditions.

Thereby we can conclude that despite the fact that an architectural intervention is needed to improve the welfare of the community, without the participation and involvement of the latter, the project will be a mid success to long term.

“The direction of urban poor housing development should be oriented on knowledgebased societal network. There are several differences in geographical and socio-economic conditions of low income communities, which cannot be adopted universally and effectively by one model.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sílvia Gomes de Almeida, Paulo Petersen, Adriana Galvão Freire et Luciano Silveira novembre 2008, *Mieux comprendre la pauvreté pour en sortir*

<sup>10</sup> Prayong Posriprasert and Nattawut Usavagovitwong, Faculty of Architecture, Sripatum University, 2006, *Journal of Architectural/Planning Research and Studies, Volume 4.*

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