Communities and Social Infrastructure

Developing Sustainable Neighbourhoods in Poor Urban Areas

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Factors Shaping Urban Shelter Design

Introduction

The broader context for this essay is Urban Shelter Design. There is a rapid urbanisation in many developing countries and a lack of an adequate place to live, an Urban Shelter, for a large part of the urban poor.

Designing in an urban context is what my education mostly have been about and during my four years of architecture studies, when I start a new project in school the main thing for me to consider has been the physical context. What is the topography like? How does the surrounding buildings look like? Where is the afternoon sun? These factors are however not what I am going to discuss in this essay.

I am not saying the physical context is not a factor shaping Urban Shelter Design, because it certainly is. The favelas in Rio would not be at all look or function the same on a big flat field and of course a main issues for the urban poor in Manila are hazards like typhoons and earthquakes.

What I am going to look into are the less tangible factors shaping Urban Shelter Design, political and social factors.

I will discuss what impact a community has and can have on a neighbourhood, the importance of social infrastructure and what role architects can have in Urban Shelter Design.

Building Communities

During a three week long study trip to Manila we visited several housing projects. Initiators to these projects were the state organization NHA (the National Housing Authority), commercial companies like DMCI and NGOs like Habitat for Humanity and TAO Pilipinas.

The housing projects were not only about constructing the buildings, but not the least about building communities.

The following is from the webpage Future Communities, created by the UK organisation Yuong Foundation:

"Creating new communities involves far more than building homes and roads. It is the residents of a community that bring a place to life and help it to gain its own particular identity. However, much more is known about the physical and environmental challenges involved in building new settlements, than about how to plan, design and develop services and supports that can help new residents come together, share common interests, agree on local priorities and work together to create a sense of community." (Future Communities)

What I think is important in the quotation above are two things. Point one, when developing an housing area, there is a lack of attention to the aspects that are not "building homes and roads". Point two, a sense of community in a neighbourhood is something to strive for.

Design of Sustainable Shelter and Neighbourhoods

Social Infrastructure

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In order to develop sustainable shelter and neighbourhoods *social infrastructure* must be part of the design.

In this essay I use a wide definition of social infrastructure that include community facilities, services and local networks. Example of this is basic facilities such as education, social services, open space and community meeting places. (Smart Growth 2009)

In short social infrastructure is what is needed in neighbourhoods more than "homes and roads", referring to the quotation by Future Communities in the chapter above. And if adequate social infrastructure is not provided when new neighbourhoods are established there are long term consequences and costs. (Future Communities).

Social infrastructure is relevant for all kinds of neighbourhoods, both in high-income areas and low-income areas. What makes it even more important in low-income areas is that these people in a less extent are able to pay to compensate for a lack of communal facilities, such as sending a child to private school and hire a nurse if there is no communal school or childcare.

Continuing with the example above, childcare, this is a communal facility that is lacking in low-income housing areas in developing countries.

Women generally have the responsibility for the reproductive work in the family, but in most cases they also have responsibilities for production and community management. (Moser 1994).

If a mother do not know anyone who is able to watch her children, and she has to leave the home to support the family, this task is in many cases transferred to older daughters, and therefore preventing girls from attending school.

Another option is for the mothers to set up businesses inside the home to be able to take care of the children and at the same time earn an income, something that reduces the chances to lift oneself out of poverty. If none of these options are possible children are locked up in the house when left alone. (Moser 1996)

Community

Can a strong community play a part in building social infrastructure?

When the municipality does not plan for the social infrastructure a community can take action. In the field study conducted by Karin Grundström the housing

area Lindora was built without a plan for a school. The community fought for getting a school, and succeeded. This is still the only social infrastructure in the neighbourhood, although the inhabitants have ideas about what is missing. One priority for many women include a childcare centre, as discussed above. There are women working with taking care of other people's children, but they do so in their homes. (Grundström, 2005)

A lack of social infrastructure is not a problem solely in the developing world.

In a radio program, *Svenskarna som jobbar gratis[1]*, the reporters visit two rural villages in Sweden, Agunnaryd and Trönö. In both cases the inhabitants have established an Economic Associations for the village in order to enable more social infrastructure, necessary facilities like a fire station and even businesses like the food store that is not self-sustaining. These voluntary commitments also strengthen the social network in the areas, the sense of community and are crucial for the areas survival according to the inhabitants. (Burén and Börjesson, 2012)

The reasons behind the problems and the dynamics are of course different in rural areas in developed countries (struggling with a migration) and poor urban areas in developing countries (struggling with immigration). All the same both areas struggle with a municipality unable to provide adequate facilities and social infrastructure, where the civic society have to take action to enable a better life.

In the radio program an interviewee makes the connection that for Sweden, the development in the rural area with a civic society taking over tasks previously provided by the municipality looks a lot like Sweden in the 1920's and 30's. During this period non-profit organizations like the temperance movement provided libraries and even pension funds. (Burén and Börjesson, 2012)

Think Global, Act Local

Is a stronger civic society the solution when the municipality does not take responsibility for social infrastructure? It can be one solution but hardly solve all questions connected to urban development.

I recently had a discussion on this topic with a friend who is a spatial planner.

She described how proposals by architect students in the competition *UngBo 12* (UngBo12) provoked her. The topic of the competition was to address the tuff

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[1] Witch can be translated with "the Swedes who work for free".

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housing market for young people in Malmö. The exhibited proposals gave examples like how containers could be transformed into apartments. (UngBo12)

Her view was that it was more or less ridiculous to think these kind of proposals would solve the underlying structural issues. Instead these kind of competitions could make a damage by directing the public debate from political solutions towards mere design solutions.

As an architect I am trained in thinking of design solutions. All the same I agree with my friend that competition proposals for competitions such asUngBo12 many times are lacking in complexity.

The question UngBo12 asked in the competition brief was to come up with design solutions for how affordable housing for young people can be built. In this case smart design is important, but factors connected with political decisions, financing and the aims of developers are far more important if affordable housing for young people are to be achieved on a larger scale.

This discussion is very relevant for developing countries. On what level; local, national or global, can issues that enable developing sustainable neighbourhoods with adequate social infrastructure, be tackled? One answer is simply: On all levels.

There is room for working on a local community level without loosing the bigger picture, something the familiar phrase *think global, act local* represents.

According to Chris Renwick[2] the phrase *think global, act local* originates from pioneering town planner Patrick Geddes. Patrick Geddes did not use the phrase himself, but his work from the late 19th century and the early 20th century captures the notion.

Geddes "never lost sight of the big picture whilst tackling more specialized concern" (Renwick 2006:1). Geddes' work on different levels: He worked with improving the slums of Edinburgh's old town by moving there and working with the community. And he took part in founding the Edinburgh Social Union, which bought houses, improved them and then leased the houses to the poor to a low cost. (Renwick 2006)

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[2] Lecturer in modern history at York University

Design Criteria

Returning to the topic of communities and social infrastructure, what conclusions can be made about design criteria supporting community empowerment and social infrastructure?

The guidelines Karin Grundström proposes for a more sustainable neighbourhood in the conclusions of her study are general advice that for me correspond with a good built environment and society anywhere in the world, such as the need of subsidized childcare, a mix of housing and workplaces, recreational areas and functioning public transport.(Grundström 2005)

Her conclusions also correspond with my ideas, but not so much with the reality that I met in Manila. So my conclusion is that the question is not WHAT should be built but rather HOW it can be built and implemented.

The Role of Architects

Creative Solutions

The role of architects is to see creative solutions. But in order to solve a problem you need to know what the problem is. You need to start asking the right kind of questions.

The field for this essay is Urban Shelter Design. For a start I think we as architect students need a bigger knowledge of political and social context connecting to urban development.

I began this essay by stating that during my four years in architecture school I have started my projects with considering the physical context, then I start drawing on a site plan. But is this always the role of the architect, sketching on paper or modelling in CAD software? All architectural problems can not be solved in drawings and renders.

A Different Kind of Architect

Going back again to the 1920's, this time to Germany, this was a period of rapid urbanisation and a lack of housing especially for people with low income.

In these difficult times the union owned building company GEHAG, under the leadership of socialist architect Martin Wagner, was a driving force in Berlin's

building sector. Wagner did not design the buildings, but made the choice of contracting Bruno Taut.

The building cost and the rents were being kept low by effective construction methods, methods which derived inspiration from the car-industry.

One of the Wagner/Taut projects is Hufeisensiedlung in Britz, considered to be a functionalistic masterpiece and classified as a World Heritage Site. (Svedenberg, 2003)

Wagner addressed the need for Urban Shelter in 1920's Germany and I think he is a role model for architects. To be an architect and, like Wagner, work as a developer should be something to aspire towards and something to encourage as well as becoming a great architect like Taut. Something that, for example, in my experience is not the case in architecture schools today.

In most cases developers set the framework for what architects can achieve, in the developed as well as in the developing world. This makes it crucial to have people with a strong sense of what good architecture is on decision-making position. Assuming a good built environment is the aim.

A place for an architect who want to influence what are build in the area of Urban Shelter Design could for example be the Asian Developing Bank.

Changing perspective to Sweden, an architect who has played a key part in the development of Malmö is Ilmar Reepalu, who for two decades has been the leading politician in Malmö municipality. Like everywhere, decisions about development are made in politics. Politics being an other career an architect could pursues in order to influence planning and development.

My challenge to you is: Architect, think outside the architecture-office-box!

And on the other hand, people educated in social science employed at architect offices probably would enable us architects to ask important questions we miss within our profession.

In order to make more architects pursue a broader spectrum of career paths I think we need to see and hear more from these professionals crossing traditional borders. We need to have more lectures by architects who does not work as architects in the traditional sense. Magazines like *Arkitekten* could also feature these architects more.

Architects Working on a Community Level

I will now go back to the topic of the role of a community has in creating a sustainable neighbourhood. How can architects work with communities more specifically?

The NGO TAO Pilipinas has an approach were they provide communities with technical support and knowledge. TAO Pilipinas is a women led organisation consisting of architects, engineers and planners, providing communities with technical knowledge. (TAO Pilipinas)

I think TAO Pilipinas is a good example of architects working on a local level with helping communities develop. And in the same time TAO Pilipinas do research, and train young professionals. This is a way of working I think Patrick Geddes would approve of!

Conclusions

I finish this essay with some conclusions.

To be able to develop sustainable neighbourhoods the social infrastructure is as important as the technical infrastructure, in the developing countries as well as in the developed countries.

To achieve this we have to work on all levels, from the global level to the community level.

Architect's knowledge is needed in all companies and institutions making decisions about the built environment, not only in the architect's office. And examples of architects in un-traditional professions should get more attention and recognition, within the architect community and not the least in this establishment.

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