

# Community Participation

For Better or Worse



*Sofia Didrik*

## Factors Shaping Urban Shelter Design Today

Urban shelter design is one part of the process in low-income housing/social housing projects. The project could be about informal settlers being moved to a newly built area in the city – the case of relocation – or improvements being made to an existing informal area in attempt to make it more formal: the case of slum-upgrading. Urban shelter design could also be carried out by a family building their house without permission on a part of vacant land within the city. Yet this essay is going to focus on the two former examples – of relocation and slum-upgrading – starting out with a broader discussion about what factors and conditions are shaping these two types of urban shelter design in the Third World today.

### New Mayors

A three week long study trip to the Philippines (with the course Urban Shelter at the architecture master programme at Lund University, 2013) became an eye-opener for me about the great influence of politics in the housing sector for the urban poor. In the Philippines and in many other developing countries the aims and values in the politics may change quite drastically when a new local government or mayor is being elected (Choguill, 1996). For the low-income housing industry this often means a change of priorities concerning what kind of

actions should be taken for the urban poor as well as which type of urban shelter designs should be carried out. This affects both governmental institutions and NGOs in their work with social housing.

### More Informal Settlers Every Day

Another condition shaping the urban shelter design – in the way that the demand for it is increasing – is the rapid urbanisation together with the fast natural population growth taking place in Third World cities of today. With the number of informal settlers constantly growing the governments seem to have been forced to think about how to solve the housing situations of the urban poor.

When visiting National Housing Authority (NHA) – a governmental institution managing the housing section for the urban poor in the Philippines – in Metro Manila it even felt like the resettlements of informal settlers was a matter of hurry. It was about evacuating people from dangerous zones, but also to make room for new development in the city such as new railway systems (Valenciano, 2007). This hurry could almost show in some of the illustrations plans shown to us from the NHA-office where many standardised solutions were implemented in the plans instead of more site specific designs.

The increasing number of informal settlers may also have influenced NGOs into being active in the housing domain for the urban poor, which in its turn has affected much of the urban shelter design results that is to be found around the world today.

### Other Factors and Conditions

There are many other factors shaping urban shelter design such as: economy (the economy of the country and the priorities of the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank), legislation in the housing sector and more physical conditions such as climate and the prerequisites of the landscape.

After having been to Metro Manila and seen some good and bad examples of urban shelter design made by NHA and NGOs I concluded to myself that local culture and way of life, possibilities of livelihood, the connections to the surrounding areas and the density are factors that should be taken more into consideration than they are today in the design of low-income housing projects

considering that these factors could have a good impact on both neighborhood and city level. The risk for disasters should play a bigger role than it does too; a factor that also seems to be very ‘up and coming’ in this particular field of design.

The last factor up for discussion in this paragraph is something shaping the urban shelter design if it is being used; community participation. The rest of the essay will focus on this specific design/planning approach in terms of developing countries and will amongst other things be discussing its strengths and weaknesses and what it means in practice. Finally it will say something about the role of the architects, landscape architects and planners in community-based development.

## Does Community Participation Equal Sustainability?

“It is often argued that users’ participation is crucial for the performance of low-cost housing projects. It is also believed that users make the most appropriate decisions about their own housing solutions and that they know what is ‘best’ for them.” (Lizarralde and Massyn, p. 1, 2008). The article *Unexpected negative outcomes of community participation in low-cost housing in housing projects in South Africa* opens with these two sentences and then goes on scrutinizing the value of community participation.

The authors claim that there is a consensus in today’s society that community participation is something good –a guarantee for a good result– but that “the overall performance of a low-cost housing project does not depend on community participation.” (Lizarralde and Massyn, p. 1, 2008). Furthermore they say that the term community participation is being randomly used when, in reality, it composes many different types of involvement of the community in the field of housing (Lizarralde and Massyn, 2008).

This essay uses these statements as a starting point and sets out to nuance the notion ‘community participation’ as well as to investigate the value of community participation, in the case of housing for the urban poor, through a SWOT-analysis and two case studies.

## What Does Community Participation Mean?

As mentioned in the last paragraph community participation in terms of low-income housing projects in the developing world isn't just one thing but it occurs in many different forms. This part of the essay will try to go deeper into what the commonly used notion 'community participation' actually could mean in reality in the developing world by taking up two different perspectives on community-based development. But before this follows brief discussion about why the notion 'community participation' itself can be a bit misleading...

To participate means to be actively involved in a process (The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, 2007) and take an active part in the decision-making process (Potter, 1985). A problem with today's definition 'community participation' is that it could mean involvement of the community (or other stake-holders) of any sort, even such involvement where the community is not actually participating (see definition above). In other words: just informing or consulting the community e.g. is also counted as participation, which it isn't in reality.

In the planning guide by The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (2007) participation is one type of communication beside dissemination of information, consultation and mobilisation. Maybe community involvement is a more suited expression than community participation and should be used when talking about community participation in housing projects instead of community participation.

However the other part of community participation, 'the community' also contributes to the problems of the term community participation. Emmet discusses in his article *Beyond community participation: alternative roles to civil engagement and development in South Africa* (2000) that there are many definitions of what a community is. Even though it is often interpreted out of a geographical perspective "Members of communities, however we might define them, are as much part of larger structures [such as districts, provinces, racial or ethnical groups, political parties, etc.] as they are of communities" (Emmet, p. 503, 2000). The term 'community participation' is despite its problems used as it is commonly used today also in the rest of this paper.

## Perspective 1. How to Involve of the Community in the Process

Community participation, as everything else, can be seen from many perspectives. Maybe the most common one is from the side of the governmental institutions and other organisations looking at when the community can come into the process: how, what, where, and when the community can be involved in the development (Vipulaguna, 2009). The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality makes a scheme in their *Sustainable Community Planning Guide* (2007) about when – at what stages within the programming, planning and implementation phase – the community could be involved by marking those stages in the process with two small people on the side. The aim of the guide seems to be to work as a tool for other municipalities and NGOs to learn how to carry out community participation.

## Perspective 2. Level of Government Involvement in the Process

Choguill on the other hand presents in his article *A ladder of Community Participation for Underdeveloped Countries* (1996) a way of looking at community participation from another angle: making a ranking in relation to the amount of involvement of external institutions in community-based development project (in terms of them facilitating or carrying out the projects). In the example from South Africa mentioned above it was the other way around: with the amount of the involvement of the community measured and discussed instead.

The ranking consists of a ladder of participation for developing countries and it is “[...] based on the degree of governmental willingness in carrying out mutual-help projects.” (Choguill, p. 435, 1996) This categorisation is inspired by Arnstein’s *A ladder of citizen participation* written in 1969. The ladder made by Choguill has eight steps with the highest level of participation first: empowerment, partnership, conciliation, dissimulation, diplomacy, informing, conspiracy and self-management. (Choguill, 1996). The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality planning guide is aiming at achieving the partnership, containing the second highest level of participation of the community in the ladder as well a fairly high degree of willingness from the government to facilitate participation.



The ladder of community participation for developing countries made by Choguill (1996) showing how the government can support, manipulate, reject or neglect the community.

The aim of Choguill’s ladder of participation is to show that the level of participation that can be achieved by the community is very much depending on the level of support it gets from external sources, such as the government or an NGO for example, and people’s self-determination. But the examples in the article show as well that basic result can be reached at any stage of the ladder both with and without support from the government. The author thinks this fact is something that should be known and taken into considerations by governments, other organisations (NGOs) as well as communities when evaluating the performance of a community participation process (Choguill, 1996).

### SWOT: Strengths

Community participation enables communities to “[...] express their needs, aspirations, priorities and preferences” (Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, p. 125, 2007). It is also a way for the government of getting information about local conditions and the real needs of people (Potter, 1985) contributing to a state that works in the interest of its people.

If the participatory process has been successful then the acceptance of the plans that will occur make it easier to implement the plans (The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, 2007). This might just be one of the major strengths of community-based development. Community participation can also help create work opportunities for the people in the community, lower total costs of the project if the community helps in the building process and makes the informal sector into a part of the regional development (Vipulaguna, 2009).

Another strength is that participatory planning/design can be a good way to create a “community feeling” that will contribute to a better neighbourhood. It could also change the mind sets of the participants for example to not always think on an individual level, but also pay interest to common interests such as maintenance of public spaces. (Varona, word of mouth, 2013)

The subject of maintenance is also brought up by Valenciano in the article *Railway resettlements in the Philippines* where she claims that “When people are involved in their community’s development, they develop a sense of ownership and would manage the upkeep of their open spaces” (Valenciano, p.161, 2007). An addition to this discussion is that the maintenance of public environments often is a big problem in many developing countries where there is no system of up keeping the public places in the same way as in most western countries where the municipalities are in charge of this.

### SWOT: Opportunities

Community participation holds the opportunity of “[...] incorporating the informal sector and the householders to the national development” (Vipulaguna, p.22, 2009). Another opportunity of community participation brought up by The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (2007) is the chance of the participants learning something from the process. It could both be building up a capacity of doing something practical or getting more understanding of the development process that could “[...] encourage the community to meet challenges and use opportunities for active involvement in local initiatives” (The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, p. 125, 2007) in the future. Tao Pilipinas, an NGO active in the Philippines, is on the same track claiming that community participation can help people gaining confidence and growing as persons (Varona, word of mouth, 2013).

### SWOT: Weaknesses

Communities are not very often unified or homogeneous. If there are conflicts in the community already and the level of trust between different groups is low then the possibility of obtaining consensus might be out of reach. (Emmet, 2000) There

could also be conflicts between the community and the organisation involved (Vipulaguna, 2009).

Communities can also take decisions that affect the neighbouring community or the city as a large in a bad way (Lizarralde and Massyn, 2008). Another question connected to this mentioned earlier in this essay too –and also listed as one of the problems with community participation in *Urbanisation and planning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world* written by Potter in 1985– is whether the people really “(...) know what they want and what is likely to be good for them.” (Potter, p.153, 1985). Another issue still relevant from the same book from 1985 is if the general public always can grasp all possibilities that lie before them in a housing project. And at last: a processes including community participation might take long time and it could result in bad quality of the houses if the community helps building the houses and if aren't good enough at it (Viapulaguna, 2009).

### SWOT: Threats

One major threat is if the community even wants to participate (Potter, 1985) and another is that people could participate in a project because of the desire to capture the recourses that are presented to them for their families rather than with the aim to benefit the community as a whole. After the process in development project is over they could also sometimes want some kind of compensations for their investments of time and effort (Emmet, 2000). Another threat mentioned by Emmet is that “Enthusiasm for the project might wane and active community members might gradually withdraw from the project (Emmet, p. 505, 2000).

If a participation project goes badly, e.g. that the community is not satisfied by the collaboration or the result, there is a risk that future participation projects could be affected badly and suffer from this bad rumour. Also “[...] governmental willingness to support the people may be very temporary. As governmental leadership changes, the governmental approach and philosophy/ideology may change too.” (Choguill, p. 443, 1996). Other risks are the occurrence of financial, technical and motivational constraints (Choguill, 1996).



## The case of Sri Lanka: community participation as a solution

Mihiri S.V.Vipulaguna, an architect from Sri Lanka writes (2009) about how community participation could be an answer to an issue they have with medium rise apartments in the country. Because of improper built environments people are unsatisfied with their situations and are doing unsafe extensions that are affecting the neighbourhood in a bad way and are costly to society. Her answer of how to avoid this in the future is involving the communities in the planning and design of new housing projects (Vipulaguna, 2009).

This is an example of where participation is used as a tool to improve a problematic situation: something in particular that is not working today. It might not guarantee success but there is a good chance that the new walk-up apartment neighbourhoods might work better than the existing ones if involving the community in the process. Some of the many strengths and opportunities that she mentions in a SWOT-analysis in the end of the article is that it could reduce costs both for society in maintenance and running costs and for the householders themselves if the modifications of the houses ceased. The weaknesses are mostly about that it would take more time and that conflicts could occur. The biggest threat is that it could be hard getting the approval of the community as well as the agreements. (Vipulaguna, 2009)

## The Case of South Africa: Unexpected Negative Outcomes of Community Participation

Lizarralde and Massyn have looked at three examples of new development projects where community participation has been performed in South Africa and they have focused on the weaknesses that came out of the projects: “Limited integration of economic activities, low densities, urban fragmentation, limited possibilities for progressive construction and limited variety and multiplicity [...]” (Lizarralde and Massyn, p. 11, 2008).

They are stating the fact that the result is affected by how the participation was carried out, but also that successful planning and design in low-cost housing projects is not dependent on doing community participation. The authors believe that it is problematic that many authors, as they put it, seem to see the

participation process as an end itself while they rather like to think the ultimate end of development of cities in the Third World should be to improve the quality of life of the people involved and to create sustainable environments. (Lizarralde and Massyn, 2008)

## Conclusions

In attempt to answer the question: *Does community participation equal sustainability?* The answer is: Yes, it does, sometimes but not always. When the circumstances have been the right ones this assertion may well be true. In the end the chances of a community to improve their own conditions are all about: the governmental attitude to the community and their willingness to participate, people's self-determination (Choguill, 1996), the presence of an NGO at the right time at the right place and the character and conditions of the community (Emmet, 2008).

From this the conclusion could be drawn that community-based development can be good in some cases and in others not (ibid) and it might gain urban development in the third world to see this design/planning approach as a tool to be used when suitable rather than something that automatically will lead to a successful project. The importance of involving the people in housing projects should however not be overlooked – the people are always the most important component of any housing area. In general it might be more crucial to involve the community in slum-upgrading, where the changes are taken place in people's own homes or neighborhoods and might be a quite sensitive matter, than in the case of new development.

Finally, also to consider is that there are alternative ways to community participation, of taking the people into the process. One other way of understanding the need of people is through site visits and field trips where observations in some cases could serve as a complement or even substitute to community participation.

# The Role of the Architect/Landscape Architect/Planner in Community Participation in Developing Countries

All three professions written above could work in community participation in planning and designing housing projects in Third World cities, doing similar tasks. To make it easier I will only write ‘architect’ in this paragraph, although that person might as well be a landscape architect or a planner. Or maybe even an architect or landscape architect working as a planner.

## In Which Contexts are Architects Working With Community Participation in Developing Countries?

TAO-Pilipinas, an NGO from the Philippines, is working with community-based development letting the people come to them and thereby making sure that the community wants to achieve something with the project (Varona, word of moth, 2013). Faith Varona, an architect working at this NGO, says at a lecture (2013) that they are merely supporting and helping the community in their aim of changing their housing situation, may it be relocation or slum-upgrading. Working as a facilitating architect in an NGO – a so called community architect – is one role to take as an architect in a community participation process.

Governmental institutions, such as NHA in the Philippines, are another forum where community participation could be carried out by architects. Then it is often the government itself taking the initiative to do it, a so called top-down initiative, unlike the case of the projects of TAO-Pilipinas which are built on bottom-up initiatives. I have the feeling that the hurry of producing social housing because of the increasing informal settlers in cities (mentioned as a factor shaping urban shelter design in the beginning of the paper) contributes to making community participation a matter of low prioritization by governments and municipalities in the Third World. But it does happen: *Sustainable Community Planning Guide* (2007) from South Africa referred to in this paper and the paper of the Sri Lankan architect Vipulaguna (2009) are only two examples of when the government is willing to make the community a part of the planning process.

As this paper has discussed earlier on there are many ways of involving the community and performing community participation and even though every situation requires a different approach Choguill writes (1996) that the examples of community participation that have been the most successful (based on a larger study involving both case studies and theoretical proposals) are projects where there has been a combination of collaboration within the community and support and resources (a facilitating role) of NGO or government.

### What Competence do the Architect Possess That Could Help Contributing to a Successful Community Participation Process?

Social workers, and not architects, are the ones educated in working *with people* e.g. in the form of community participation processes. Therefore a housing community participation project could gain from having social workers taking the first steps in the process; to get people interested and motivated through workshops for example. The competence social workers do not have that architects do is the knowledge of technical legislations, spatial relations, aesthetics and use of the physical environment. Having architects in the process of community participation in housing projects shortens the process because they can be a direct link between the needs and aspirations of the people and the spatial solutions that the project will result in.

Another important role of the architects in a community participation process maybe to reach a result in the end. The architect, with the knowledge of projecting how the site could turn out in the end, could therefore almost work like a symbol for the community of the end of the process, the ready result.

And a final competence of the architect that could be valuable in a community participation process in developing countries is the way of thinking of a project as a processes/in several steps. It is the role of the architect to organise the participation process. But the role also includes transmitting the fact that the changes can't happen all at once, but rather in several phases, to the community. This is the way that development is performed, or even the only way it is often possible, in developing countries.

## To Consider as an Architect Working with Community Participation

The aim of the architect taking part of a community participation project maybe shouldn't be primarily about making all the wishes from the community to come true. First of all because that would be to neglect the architect's professional knowledge and not value the role that the architect plays in this kind of process, which is sharing his/her competence to profit the project. Secondly, as mentioned by Lizarralde and Massyn in their article from 2008, the goal of community participation should insted be to work for a creating sustainable environments and a life of as high quality as possible under the current circumstances.

A question asked to Varona at TAO-Pilipinas about what to do if the community wanted to build unsustainable alternatives (such as low density housing areas at a central point in the city) was answered with that they then usually tried to get the community in the direction they preferred. In the case of the low density they could e.g. present how many people that would not get a unit if they were to build one-story row-houses and how much bigger their unit could be and how much more open space it could be in the neighbourhood if they were to build multi-story houses instead. This had always made the community agreeing with TAO-Pilipinas (Varona, word by mouth 2013) but this is really a matter that could be problematic for an architect working with community participation and something that could be good to be aware of possibly happening.

Another thing to consider is that people in a community might only bring up matters that they want to change that are not physical, e.g. to increase the health of the residents in an area. There are a couple of things about this subject (having in mind that the architect in question does never have more experiences and knowledge than he/she has):

1. Maybe this could be helped through changes of the physical environment.
2. There are things that cannot be fixed through changes of the physical environment and rightly should be taken care about by another domain.
3. And thirdly: there are things that the architect, with his/her competence, can discover that could be improved that the community can't see themselves.

A last factor that should be taken into consideration is concerning architects going to another country to work with community participation (maybe mostly architects from the western world coming to work in a developing country). These people should, in the ideal world, preferably get to know the culture and country and other relevant factors before getting into any housing project.

## References

### Electronic Sources

Vipulaguna, Mihiri S. V., Housing Development and Management LTH

2009 *Community participation of walk-up apartments, formal sector lower-middle income housing in Sri Lanka*

[http://www.hdm.lth.se/fileadmin/hdm/alumni/papers/SDD\\_2009\\_242a/Mihiri\\_S.V.\\_Vipulaguna\\_-\\_Sri\\_Lanka.pdf](http://www.hdm.lth.se/fileadmin/hdm/alumni/papers/SDD_2009_242a/Mihiri_S.V._Vipulaguna_-_Sri_Lanka.pdf)

[2013-04-21]

### Word of Mouth

Varona, Faith. Architect at Tao-pilipinas.

Lecture at the office of Tao-Pilipinas. Metro Manila.

2013- 03- 04

### Published Sources

Choguill, M. B.G.

1996 Ladder of community participation for underdeveloped countries *Habitat International*, 20(3), 431-444.

Emmet, T.

2000 Beyond community participation: alternative roles to civil engagement and development in South Africa. *Development South Africa*, 17(4), 501-518.

Lizzarralde. G. and Massyn M.

2008 Unexpected negative outcomes if community participation in low-cost housing projects in South Africa. *Habitat International*, 32.

Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality

2007 Sustainable community planning guide, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality: Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality.

Potter, R.B.

1985 *Urbanisation and planning in the 3rd world*. Kent : Croom Helm London & Sydney.

ISBN 0-7-99-2055-5

Valenciano, M. A. T.

2007 Railway and resettlement in the Philippines, framework for design of housing for resettled squatters of Metro Manila in : Grundström K. and Jere A. W. (eds.) *Shelter for the urban poor*. Lund : Granhns Tryckeri AB

ISBN 978-9187866-29-6