

Self-help housing

The situation today and the case study in Finland during the developing periods



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1 Factors Shaping Urban Shelter Design

Keywords

Organized self-help housing, assisted self-help housing, self-help housing in Finland, self-help housing in the developing countries.



(Study visit in 2013 to Habitat for Humanity, Saint Hannibal in Metro Manila in The Philippines, built by the community using organized self-help building)

Background

Self-help housing has been the most common way of building in the rural areas in the past. The knowledge of building has passed from generation to the other and has created the so called vernacular architecture. However, in urban planned areas, self-help housing how we understand it today has been recognised less than one hundred years.

Self-help housing is a wide abstract. There are many different types of self-help building. The types could be characterised as organised, aided and spontaneous self-help housing. "By organized self-help housing is meant that there is a facilitating organization that both assists the households that have chosen self-help housing and that bears a responsibility to authorities and financial agencies". (Habitat II, building issues; Rodriguez, Åstrand pp. 5) The phrase 'aided self-help housing' is commonly used and usually means projects where the land, urban services and technical assistance are provided. Spontaneous self-help housing means projects where families build their houses using only their own hands and skills for the building process. (Bredenoord, 2009).

Self-help housing is usually related to developing countries especially in Latin America but the building practice exists all over the world. It is recognised that self-help housing began in Nordic countries at the beginning of 20th century. One of the first projects took place in Stockholm in year 1927 (Johansson, 1976). At the same time similar projects started in France, Germany, Greece, Soviet Union and Finland. The main motive for starting self-help housing in the urban areas at the time was to enable people for affordable housing in the cities while population growth caused inadequate housing circumstances. Building by self-help decreased the costs of the projects.

The factors making self-help housing highly used

"Assisted self-help housing is the most affordable and intelligent way of providing sustainable shelter. It is based on minimum standards and incorporates a substantive amount of sweat equity it can be cost-reducing. It can also be useful for individuals and communities to get precious skills that can be used in the future. It can also be flexible since the dwelling units can be design to be expanded" (UN-Habitat, 2005 quoted in Bredenoord)

Self-help housing has been the most common and suitable way of building in many developing countries. The table below is to show housing realised through self-help housing in couple of different countries in percentages.

Table 1: Percentages of housing realised through self-help housing, compared to Gross national per capita

Country	Estimated percentage of housing realised through sel-help.	Gross national income per capita	Source
Nicaragua	85 %	2720	Nicaragua government (2005)
Indonesia	90 - 95%	3310	Un-Habitat/ Indonesia (1993)
Peru	70 %	6490	De Soot (2000)
Mexico	50 %	11990	Potter and Lloyd-Evans (1991)

The table: ('The people's straggle for affordable living space. The role of self-help housing from 1950 - 2010 and beyond', Jan Bredenoord, pp. 6)

It is clear that self-help housing has economic value. The other values can be social values and the knowledge people accumulate while building. Better community cohesion is reached in the projects where the community builds together. They get to know each other and the people get better attached to the place. (E.g. Habitat for Humanity, Saint Hannibal, Manila, The Philippines, Study trip; observations and interviews 2013). The third value is the knowledge people gain in the process. The skills they learn can be used for maintaining the buildings but also using them for income generating activities. To be part of the building process and understand the phases of it creates a sense of belonging as well (Rodriguez, Åstrand, 1996). So the technical and material housing functions are important in the housing project but it is important to understand the vitality of the human and no quantifiable functions and meanings that the building processes have (Turner 1972).

Self-help housing in Finland

Self-help housing started in Finland in the late 1920's. In the rural areas self-help housing was the main way of building but after the industrialization the need for housing increased in urban areas, even though the country was not really urbanised at that time. In Finland self-help housing was more 'guarded support' by the state as the practice is characterised by Hannu Ruanavaara. (Ruanavaara, 1999). The state made the projects possible for providing families cheap loans and leasing land for long periods. The development in Finland was quite

concurrent with Sweden and both countries were starting to promote the so called welfare society, especially Sweden.

Organised or aided self-help housing was not as typical way of building in urban areas in Nordic countries as one might assume. For instance in Sweden until today 15 000 units have been produced through organised self-help since 1927. (Lecture 23 April 2013, Åstrand). The situation in Finland is really similar. However, self-help housing has occurred in periods and has been important part of the housing production during the times of shortage. One of the examples is the reconstruction periods in Finland after the Second World War.

2 Design of Sustainable Shelter and Neighbourhoods

Adequate and affordable housing

As mentioned before self-help housing is one of the most suitable ways to offer affordable houses for low-income people in developing countries and make the people better attached to the place where they live. The knowledge the residents get from the self-building process make them to learn how to maintain and respect the building and neighbourhood as well.

Case study 1: The state in Finland in the 20's to 50's.

After the Second World War there was a housing shortage in the big cities in Finland which was worsen by the shortage of building materials, skilful labour force and capital. (Ruanavaara 1999). Many people were asked to build their houses themselves or to help in the housing project as much as possible. That happened especially in the subdivisions of the cities. During the time the economic interest was the most important to self-help build the house. The houses were quite simple using the same standards of building all over the country so starting the building process was not an issue for many families. That was also encouraged by the municipalities and cities by offering the land for a lease for fifty years which made the starting costs relatively low.

The example taken to study is one-family house in the Southern Finnish industrial city. Like many cases in this case as well the economic reasons set out the need for self-help building. However, later has emerged that the building process itself has increased skills and knowledge of housing. The maintenance has quite surely been easier after building the house

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and knowing 'the anatomy' of it and the possibility for extending the house has appeared more realistic. In this case the builder has also encouraged using his skills in other projects after doing success and gaining skills by self-help building.

The house is still owned by the same family and since the economic issues are not as crucial as they were at the time of the building the knowledge gained and passed to the next generation has emerged to play an important role. Even though the skills have to always learn by an individual, the awareness of the fact that a father or a grandfather has been able to go through such a project gives the next generation a good example when thinking of building an own project.

Case study 2: Habitat for humanity, St. Hannibal

The similar standards of activities appear in developing countries where the cases and need for housing is in much bigger scales. The example to this case is from Metro Manila in The Philippines where four different communities were relocated from the squatters to the new area. A government quasi-financing institution provided community mortgage program that made the building possible. The people took actively part of the building process and in the end 300 families were located in the area. The observations and interviews from the area prove that people were really engaged to the neighbourhood and felt strong sense of belonging. (Study visit February 2013)



Case 1. Tampere, Finland



Case 2. St. Hannibal, Metro Manila, The Philippines

3 The Role of Architects

The role of architects in the self-help housing process

The world is urbanising rapidly and already over half of the population is living in the cities (United Nations department of economic and social affairs) while the housing problem is getting worse day by day. Most of the self-help housing has happened in the rural areas and that has kept the building traditions authentic and alive and not to let them get too much influences from the global world. Now when the traditions should be removed to the cities where the climate, space and surroundings are different it also changes the architecture and can make it more homogenous and global. Self-help housing has an important role to preserve the building tradition and generating more of them since it usually gets personal character if it is not organised too much. On the other hand architects have responsibility to lead the trends and styles to right direction if it is needed.

The concern of losing the culture or tradition of building is subordinated to the fact that building safe and adequate buildings is more important and a bigger concern: ” In many cases ordinary people practising self-help housing do not have the appropriate knowledge of building techniques and other aspects of durability, sometimes with low quality as a consequence.” (Bredenoord, 2009 pp. 21) The need for professionals to assist and aid in the projects is increasing due to the increasing houses to be implemented.

Architects, as having a holistic understanding of the building process are useful help when thinking building by organized self-help. As suitable as self-help housing is in the rapidly urbanising developing countries, without any guiding it can increase the sprawl of the city.

Conclusion

Even though self-help housing has got several critiques during the academic debate, it is still acknowledged very suitable and effective building practice since in many cases it is still the only possible way of having a shelter for low-income people. Professionals are playing an important role while trying to find more suitable, affordable and durable materials and ways of building for self-builders in developing countries. The organising of the projects becomes more crucial when the need for housing is increasing. The housing problem that really was an issue in Nordic countries still 1970's has been solved but not using self-help housing as a main building practice. In developing countries self-help building is playing bigger part since the governments do not have enough resources to solve to the housing problems themselves.

The house is not only shelter but among other important things it is usually the biggest property the family has. In Finland during the self-help housing periods the housing projects were easy and workable way of gaining property. It is that still today. There were also other important impacts; by building a house, learning new skills, reaching higher living standards people had better possibilities to rise in the social class. Since the family had an own property they were able to get new loan for make possible to start their own business or rent one of the house's room out. That could have been one of the reasons for people to be able to be social mobile. "The improvement of housing conditions often means better physical and psychological opportunities to raise one's income. The impact of improved self-confidence (and access to electricity) should not be ignored as important contributions to new initiatives such as starting a new business." (Rodriguez, Åstrand, 1996, pp.5-6)

Still have to be emphasised that self-help housing was not the main building practice in the urban areas in Finland. Still in the history of Finnish and Nordic countries' self-help housing can be found many factories and similarities that repeat it in the developing countries nowadays. The time, the scale and the context is different but the need is same; adequate and affordable housing.

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Study Visit Metro Manila, The Philippines

28th February 2013

Johnny Åstrand

Spring 2013

Lectures; course Urban Shelter