Housing as a tool for social mobility

In what ways can housing help upward social mobility?

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1 Introduction

In a world were almost 3 billion of people are poor, it is necessary to facilitate as much as possible people to climb up to a better social class. Since it seems to be the goal for almost every government to even the inequalities, it is always discussed what are the things that the policy makers should do to improve this developing conditions. While some criteria is unanimously accepted as an important factor, such as education and gender equality, some others are still not a consensus.

This paper will reflect on the potentiality of the housing aspect as a tool for social mobility, not going deeply on what bad housing conditions or urban planning can hinder, but see if the architecture can support people to have an upward social mobility.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Mobility

According to The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, social mobility can be described as "The ability of individuals or groups to move upward or downward in a status based on wealth, occupation, education or some other social variable" (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005). It is a complex field of studies for sociologists and many other professionals and it is seen as fundamental for fighting poverty. This paper will not range all the important topics of social mobility because it is too much to fit in and it is not the main aim of it. Therefore, for a better understanding of the relation between housing and social mobility, there are some important points that shall be clarified.

First of all, for the possibility of changing classes exist, the society must be open. An open society is that one that the social status depends on something that can be changed or improved, like income, education, etc. A society where the social stratification is defined since the person is born and does not allow change of status is called closed society. It is important to take into account that there is no society that is totally open neither totally closed (Sorokin, 1937-1941).

The changes can be vertical (with one going upward in the social ladder by getting a better income, for example; or downward, with one losing his job or going bankrupt) and horizontal (when the changes occur within the social class).If the change occurs between one generation and another it is called inter-generation mobility. If it is in the same generation, it is an intra-generation mobility.

There are different factors that contribute to a better social mobility. Moreover, according to Richard Breen, "Education is considered to be the major factor mediating social fluidity" (Breen, 2004). The relation is simple, since the industrialization, the job positions and incomes are (mostly) based on the knowledge and abilities of the employee, so one can move upward in the social ladder since the social status is mostly based on his/her occupation and income. Even though the education is the main driver of social mobility, it is not enough to even the inequalities to the wealthy people. The gender, religion, ethnic group, health, being raised by both parents or not, and other factors have obvious

relations to the condition of one person to have a better social conditions when adult (United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development, 2013).

2.2 Social mobility and housing

Housing is usually seen as a durable consumption good, a final product of an industry planned to stand for decades and be used for living, renting and sometimes just speculate. While some economists discuss if a house is an economic asset or a liability, in the sociology it is considered as what could be called a social asset, and can be used as a driver for decreasing inequality and allowing better chances to develop.

The housing aspect though has been very little discussed within the social mobility topic, even though it may have important role on it. In the book "Pathways to Social Class", Daniel Bertaux and Paul Thompson state that "Housing has also been surprisingly little studied by sociologists of social mobility, despite the fact that the need to take account of the crucial relevance of housing in the construction of social class has long been argued by a number of important sociological theorists [...]". (Bertaux & Thompson, 2007)

Said that, it is important for policy makers, sociologists and professionals related to housing to investigate in what ways they can help families in this situations and up to what point can a house help them. As Thompson and Bertaux state: "house can be a strategy in itself" (Bertaux & Thompson, 2007).

3 Argument and Discussion

Within the housing category, there are some specific topics that can be taken care of in order to help the poor on getting the same opportunities as the others. Housing goes much beyond a shelter.

In the Urban Shelter course, there was a study trip to Metro Manila, Philippines. During three weeks, some of the different agents that modify the urban space, like National Housing Authority, NGOs, private developers and (former) informal settlers, were visited and in some cases interviewed. Because of the dense urban context and the fact that the Philippines is a developing country, the social problems related to housing were highlighted and some of the observations made there served as basis for some of the following arguments for enhancing the social aspect to the poor.

First, the urbanization is an important factor for social mobility, even though in this context the social problems tend to be intensified. The reason for that is the character of the big cities, where the bigger amount of specialized and high-knowledge-needed jobs, tend to make a much more open society. These jobs carry a higher status and conditions than the ones in small cities and rural areas. Immigrants from the rural areas though tend not to have the necessary qualifications, staying marginalized from the professional market. According to Seymour Martin Limpset, "The cycle in which immigrants or migrants into large cities take over the lower-status positions while native urbanities move up the occupational structure has been one of the more important processes underlying social mobility ever since cities began to expand rapidly" (Limpset, 1956).

Part of the people from the lower socio-economic levels tend to live on areas far away from city centres, usually with a bad offer of public transport and then commuting takes a lot of effort and sometimes a lot of money too. In Metro Manila, for example, some people would take about four hours commuting every day from one city of the metropolitan region to another. This time lost also interferes on productivity and consequently the professional life of the individual. Low-income neighbourhoods usually have a bad access to amenities, such as good hospitals, schools and public spaces. It results in kids growing up in a place where they will not have big aspirations (sometimes neither the sense of belonging) and

not even knowing that it is possible for them to get professional qualification and/or study and change the situation they are in. These communities also usually lack of 'social capital', term discussed by sociologists like Boudier and Putnam, which can be roughly explained as the social network that one has. These relations, Boudier says, together with cultural capital (for example, education or having cultural goods) and physical capital will define the socioeconomic status of the individual. (Bourdieu, 1986)

Looking it in a smaller scale, the house itself implies into a sense of security. Moreover, it may change according to the conditions of the house, the tenure, neighbourhood, etc. For a low income family, owning a house means stability for not having to worry about eviction or how much of the income is going to be designated to serve as rental payment (and consequently may be able to go after getting a job, improving the house or taking care of the family). During the study trip in Manila, many of the dwellers of the socialized housing that were former informal settlers claimed that since they had the house on their name and the fear of eviction and flooding was gone, they could work on the improvement of their houses because they knew it would last.

4 Urban Shelter Design

Since the concept of housing is very wide, there are many different fronts on where improving social mobility can act. The planning, the typology of the building, the tenure, subsidies, they are a lot of ways that can affect or not the upward social-economic mobility.

4.1 Mixed income neighbourhoods

One solution that has been used a lot is the mixed-income housing projects. It is the idea to avoid spatial segregation between different social classes. People from different economic status share same public spaces, safe environment, the rich and poor kids go to the same schools, and the neighbours get to know each other. It is claimed that this aggregates social capital and aspiration for the lower income families.

However, it is not only putting different income groups in the same neighbourhood that will make them interact and sometimes promoting this better network does not result in an upward mobility for the poor.

The responsible for the management and the planner need to create possibilities for these different groups to see themselves as equal. "The lack of an effective development-wide organization for residents can impede resident interactions and community building efforts" (Levy, et al., 2010). The design must encourage encounters and share of spaces, the units from the lower income should not differ much from the others, there must be no distinction between owners and tenants in the residents association meetings, and the mix of income groups should be between groups that are more alike (low income with low-middle income, for example).

4.2 Social housing

To analyse the effectivity of a social housing program it depends on the quality of life the dwellers had before and after moving. Many social housing programs in developing countries make a lot of houses that were better than the formers ones of the beneficiaries, but located much further away from the city, sometimes with

bad access to public transport and amenities. It may cause problems to the neighbourhood and it is common that people refuse to move to such kind of communities.

During the trip to Manila, one of the sites visited was called Smokey Mountain, a social housing program that was settled on a former landfill and the informal settlers who used to live there moved to the buildings. The interviewed dwellers said they lived in a much better place now and the ones that lived for more time and already had created a community feeling on the surroundings and said the place felt safe even for the children. Some of them claimed that now they could both mother and father have a job and help on the house income. This is just one example of how the social housing can help on enhancing the life quality and may help on the social status. When the beneficiaries lived in unhealthy places, with no shelter at all or illegal settlement the changes are obviously much more drastic. The architect must aim for a socialized housing project that will not segregate the dwellers from the city life and in the house scale, provide a unit with salubrity, safety, and privacy.

4.3 Slum upgrade

Programs of slum upgrade like Favela Bairro in Rio de Janeiro or the famous "urban acupunctures" made in Medellin try to solve the problem on the site. With the regularization of plots and upgrade of the public space and facilities, it not only improves everyone's life, but also creates a sense of belonging and a good self-esteem for the users once they are not informal anymore. These kind of projects also corroborates with the idea that it is not necessary to remove people from the place to change their stigma of slum dweller.

4.4 Tenure

One fact that is important but is beyond the design is the tenure. The ownership over the land or the housing unit. The possession can affect the ratio of the monthly income that is spent, the feeling of security and the tendency of one family moving or staying at the place. About special mobility on housing, Bertaux and Thompson state: "Strong attachments to particular homes and places can

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prevent mobility, or shape its goals; while at the opposite extreme, full freedom in physical mobility can often imply a social rootlessness which, in the long run, may prove a handicap to family rather than an asset". (Bertaux & Thompson, 2007).

Cooperative of housing are a good alternative for the ones that cannot afford buying a house and do not want to pay rent. The members of the cooperative can join and buy a better space and share some facilities if needed. Since the cooperative is not supposed to have profit (unlike the landlord) and therefore it is supposed to be cheaper to maintain the living conditions and have a property in a more accessible way.

5 The Role of Architects

Within a debate with Jacques Derrida, Roberto Mangabeira Unger held a small lecture called "The better futures of architectures". In one of the lectures he stated the following sentence, which illustrates well what could be the role of the architect in the context of this paper: "The architect at his best must make forms enabling people as individuals and groups to express themselves by changing their situations" (Unger, 1991).

People have struggle in changing upward their social class because the way society is structured do not facilitate it (even though it has become more and more open since the industrial revolution). It is an important role to reduce the inequity in a way that the conditions of having a brighter future do not depend on your parent's income. As an architect, the focus must be on designing for create interaction between social classes, be sure that the poor have the right to the city and make their house work as an social asset for them.

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