

Organized Self-Help Housing

The Role of the Facilitating Organization



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Introduction

According to Turner's theory on self-help housing, it has to be seen as a process. The term of housing has to be taken as a verb and not as a noun or a product anymore. He argues that this process and the environment produced stimulate individual and social well-being of the dwellers. (Turner, 1972) Arroyo and Åstrand mean by organized self-help housing a development “that involves the community's active participation and decision-making in planning, design, self-construction, and post-project activities with the technical assistance of a facilitating organization.” (Arroyo & Åstrand, 2013)

“The economic desirability of local citizen's participation in housing (design, construction and management [...]) depends on two open questions: (1) the relative efficacy of the centrally administered systems of housing provision and (2) the effects of local participation on the productivity of such systems.” (Turner, 1976) In consonance with Turner, it is important to consider the involvement of an organization who will provide assistance to the target community. On these terms self-help housing seems to be a good method of construction applicable in poor urban areas all around the world.

The ambition of this paper is first to present different facilitating organizations and their aims. I will also expose some examples of projects they have realized. Then I will try to understand their role in the process of an organized self-help housing project and the importance of their involvement. I will continue by proposing some ideas in term of urban shelter design and end by explaining what is the role of the architects this kind of process.

1 Facilitating Organizations

In this chapter I chose to introduce three organizations which act in the field of self-help housing. I will begin with exposing who they are and then what they do by taking as an example one of their projects. I selected two Asian organizations and one in South America.

TAO-Pilipinas

TAO-Pilipinas is a non-governmental organization led by professional women in the field of architecture, planning, engineering, and community development. They provide “technical assistance to urban and rural poor in the planning and development of settlements.” (TAO-Pilipinas, 2011) In their projects they draw and conceptualize development plans to upgrade informal settlements which have been affected “by the rehabilitation or clearing of the water/railway easements and government road widening projects; capability-building on disaster risk management, solid waste management and production of micro-concrete roof tiles as alternative building material; [...]” (TAO-Pilipinas, 2011)

During the Urban Shelter course field trip in 2015 to Metro Manila in the Philippines, we had the chance to conduct some interviews with the employees of TAO-Pilipinas. Education and training program director, Geraldine R. Matabang kindly offered us some of her time for an interview, on March 3rd 2015.

Geraldine studied architecture in University of the Philippines and did an urban planning master degree. She has been working for TAO for the past nine years. According to her, the most important element TAO takes into account while planning with the communities is to emphasize the social housing part. Their approach is a participatory planning. Depending on the project, sometimes it is the community who asks TAO's help or sometimes it is the contractor. They need the technical assistance of TAO for their project.

In terms of community involvement:

-In the planning: the beneficiaries are able to express their ideas, but TAO gives them their input, they present them the standards so that the people know what they have to take into account while planning. TAO orients them in the design features (ventilation, orientation of the buildings, wind forces, etc.). They transfer them their knowledge. Once the people have designed their neighbourhood, TAO makes a critique and explains them what is lacking. People will make the changes and then this will be an input for TAO to do the final design which they will present to the community before starting the construction.

-In the construction: they always try to involve the people in the construction. If it is a big project it is harder to make them participate. For most of the projects they use concrete blocks. If they use different ways of construction, TAO provides them the tools and machines.

TAO doesn't do community organising, this is other NGO's job.

If the project needs sweat equity, sometimes one member of the family or more works on the construction site. They don't always work in the construction of their own house. If someone is not able to work (disabled or old) there are some exceptions, other inhabitants of the community will do some extra hours for them.

Fundación Promotora de Vivienda

Fundación Promotora de Vivienda (FUPROVI) is a private organization founded in Costa Rica in 1987, with the aim of helping low income families to solve their needs in terms of housing and neighbourhood development. They have been developing housing projects using the method of organized self-help housing, with the active participation of the families involved in the management and the construction of their housing project. FUPROVI offers technical infrastructure for the design, development, the fulfilment and administration of housing projects with or without the participation of the municipality. Those services are also proposed to clients who would like to build or upgrade their dwelling individually.

Sol del Caribe is a FUPROVI project finalized in 2013 and situated in the province of Limón (Eastern part of Costa Rica). 137 families participated in all training processes, cleaning activities, as well as in the maintenance of the existing infrastructure. In this project they developed four types of housing units which are in harmony with the surroundings but also are respectful with an efficient architectural distribution. Regarding the construction, they used floating slabs for the foundation, breeze blocks for the walls and metallic structures for the ceilings. We also find two playgrounds, one basketball court and a community center. The streets are in concrete with pathways, there is electricity and a well with drinkable water.

<http://www.fuprovi.org/inicio>

Community Architects Network

At the Asian scale, Community Architects Network, supported by Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, assists communities willing to develop their housing project, to upgrade existing houses or in their initiatives. They support communities in many ways including: upgrading of settlements, site-planning, training of community-builders, etc. The CAN tries to involve young professional architects to participate in this kind of projects and make them sensitive about how to work with communities. (<http://www.achr.net/activities-can.php>)

Community architect May Domingo comments a workshop that the Community Architects Network (CAN), implemented in the city of Valenzuela. He argues that they “involve settlements that belong to different networks and they help them look at the whole picture of their barangay.” After that they will “produce a comprehensive plan for the whole barangay, in which everyone's housing problems are solved”. (Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, 2014)

2 Configuration of an Organized Self-help Housing Project

In order to understand the functioning of an organized self-help housing process we can analyze it through phases.

Preparation:

The very beginning of this phase starts with determining who will be the beneficiary of the housing project. The chosen community is composed of low income families and usually families living in danger prone areas as for example along the railways, rivers, garbage dump sites, etc. Once the target community has been identified, some information should be gathered about it in order to identify its potentials, as for example if someone has already knowledge in the construction field.

At that point the first contacts between the community and the facilitating organization will be done. Those first contacts are very important as both parties get to know each other and the families are aware of what will be expected from them. This is also the point when the facilitating organization must be sure that the people are prepared to participate in an organized self-help housing project as well as what their financial budget is.

Regarding the planning part, the organization should ideally give the maximum freedom to the people when it comes to deciding the layout of their neighbourhood and houses. With the help of skilled planners and architects the design will be adapted to the specific situation, as regards to financial and legal aspects for example. This process is a continuous back and forward to find the solution which will fit better. However, as suggested by Rodríguez and Åstrand in their publication *Organized Small-scale Self-help Housing*: “the final decisions should be made by the community”. (Rodríguez and Åstrand, 1996)

The preparation phase should also include what we can call a training part. This is when the families will be informed about the legal aspects regarding the property's conditions to avoid future issues. The people will also learn how to maintain their houses once built, for example what kind of painting they should use or how often should they paint their buildings. In some cases for instance in Gawad Kalinga or in Saint Hannibal Empowerment Center, inhabitants will be taught how to recycle their garbage, separating the waste from the compost which can be used as fertilizer for urban gardening. Besides they are also encouraged to reuse some materials as for example plastic bottles to make other objects out of them and then be able to sell what they produced. It is important to link the recycling and the reusing processes with some kind of income generation, in order to motivate the people to do it.

Process:

The building process should be well organized in order to avoid confusions and delays. Thus the community should be coordinated into different groups in order to facilitate the tasks. The facilitating organization will also provide some skilled workers who will help the people in the building phase. They should guide them through the building techniques and materials, and teach them for example what kind of material is used for the roof, for the walls or for the ground. The inhabitants will also learn how to make those materials themselves so they can save money instead of buying already made concrete blocks for instance.

The building phase is not always evident for the people, it implies a lot of motivation as well as trust for the facilitating organization. During a visit of a Gawad Kalinga project in Manila the neighborhood named Jack'n'Jill, we had the chance to interview a family who participated in the building of their house. This is what the mother thinks about this process: “It is not always easy when we build our house ourselves. We need to have some motivations which keep us going on. When I was building my house, carrying the heavy concrete blocks to make the walls, I was thinking about how much money I was saving and about all the good things and food that I will be able to buy afterwards with this money.”

It is also interesting to see how people collaborate during the procedure. If for example one person is less able to work, the others will help him in the construction.

Post-project:

The preparation and the process phases don't define by themselves the success of a project. Indeed analyzing the consequences on the community is a crucial part in an organized self-help housing process. “If at the end of an organized self-help housing project, the community has not become more self-reliant, the project has not achieved the goal to increase democracy and people's participation.” (Rodríguez and Åstrand, 1996)

Moreover this type of project should also bind the community together, as people learn to know each other, collaborate in order to build a common neighborhood. It will create links and people will be more trusting in their neighbors.

The inhabitants will also be more respectful regarding their houses and the public spaces. They will have learned how to maintain them (e.g. repainting the buildings, taking care of the plants, recycling the garbage, etc.). The difference at the maintenance level is clearly visible between an organized self-help housing project and a classical way of building where the dweller just buys the unit he will live in.

Besides we can see that the people acquire new skills in terms of planning and design, construction techniques, but also creativity as the final design comes from them and they are also able to decide the colours of the houses etc.

It is also interesting to see how the facilitating organization could act after the accomplishment of the project, proposing for instance some activities which will enhance the livelihood of the area. “The building of neighborhood identity must then be promoted through workshops (e.g. on livelihood development, road safety, family planning, parenting, etc.) and social activities (raffles, dances, sports fests, food fairs, job fairs, etc.). These projects would ensure a sense of belonging, leading to a culture of social citizenship and self-reliance.” (Santos-Delgado, 2009)

3 Urban Shelter Design

The idea for an urban shelter design when it comes to self-help housing is to find simple and efficient solutions that can be applied by the community. “Housing users can access and utilise resources in more effective ways than conventional housing solutions and mass production permit, [...]” (Jenkins, Smith and Wang, 2007)

As observed in Manila, the typologies that we can find in organized self-help housing projects are often either row houses of one story or housing blocks of two loftable apartments superimposed (which is a little bit higher than a two story building). Thus, when thinking that kind of projects it is difficult to build middle-rise buildings.

“Self-help housing also produces better architectural solutions as it focuses on individualised household use values and not abstract market exchange values.” (Jenkins, Smith and Wang, 2007) According to this, TAO-Pilipinas proposes some alternative building materials which can be used for socialized housing in the Philippines.

We find for example the compressed earth blocks which “are a mixture of water, cement and soil compressed using a manual block press.” (TAO-Pilipinas, 2011) This kind of material is good for acoustics, against fire and insects as well. Other advantages in using the compressed earth blocks are that the components can be easily found, the form of the blocks are uniform which makes the construction simpler and the production is accessible as the equipment needed is not sophisticated. They must be protected though against potential flooding.

Another building material which can be easily produced by the community itself are the micro concrete roof tiles “made from a mixture of water, coarse sand and cement.” (TAO-Pilipinas, 2011) They are light and long-lasting and act as a good insulator against heat. They are also easy to install, cheaper than other classic tiles, simple to remove and to reuse, and regarding the aesthetics, they can be painted by the user according to his preferences.

At a more detailed scaled and as mentioned earlier, the dwellers learn how to reuse some materials to make new objects out of it. They transform plastic bottles or tires into pots for plants, with other kinds of plastic waist they can make wallets or pencil cases, etc.

4 The Role of Architects

When we talk about self-help housing, the implication of the architect might be a particular one. In fact as it is the dwellers themselves who are going to design and build their houses, the architects should act as facilitators. They should understand the capacities of the people and adapt the construction type to them. They should not only think for the people, but also with them.

But in another way, can't we see in this case the people of the community themselves as being architects in a sense? Aren't they the architects and the planners of their own communities? By saying this it is not meant to say that architects will lose their role or their creativity, they will simply adapt it to a different situation. Indeed it will be new challenges for them, a way of re-thinking the architecture.

As we can see, with the support of a facilitating organization, self-help housing is a good method of construction applicable in poor urban areas all around the world. When the process functions well, it will lead to an empowerment of the community and make the dwellers more resilient and proud of their new homes.

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