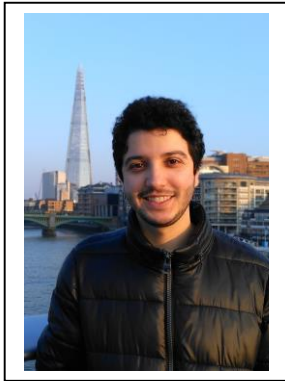


# Social Quality in Low-Income Housing Areas

How to facilitate a strong community environment in social housing projects



*Magno Rizzi*

*Lund University*

## 1 Introduction

The main goal within this paper is to discuss the social aspects that bring better living conditions to low-income housing areas and analyse how to achieve these qualities. The term *social quality* is here understood as the benefits, self-development, and wealth of a community in terms of connections, economy, social meetings, celebrations or any other spontaneous expressions that each citizen might have.

When implementing a housing project, the urban context and design aspects must be considered in order to avoid creating isolated communities from the society, provided only with one house typology, small units and no possibilities to expand. Moreover, the public and community common areas often lack of planning to provide people good installations for the various uses that can exist such as community centres, sports practices, cultural activities or crafts. Without these and other social aspects, a neighbourhood might not bring people enough conditions to arouse job opportunities or informal income generating activities, as well as social interactions that could guarantee a successful development of the neighbourhood.

Therefore, it is responsibility of the urban planner to ensure the designed area to provide not only shelter for people, but moreover possibility for them to grow and ascend, to express artistic and cultural habits and also to give training for self-management and maintenance over the years. It is vital, thus, to study and understand for whom the house unit is designated for, considering the local traditions and bringing people to participate in different stages of the project in order to reduce design mistakes and achieve a stronger community.

## 2 Quality of Housing

In order to discuss the quality of housing for low income families and neighbourhoods, some factors must be taken in observance, such as affordability, connection with greenery and the housing and neighbourhood design itself. Social aspects, for instance participatory programs, implementation of income generating activities and mixed-income communities are equally crucial for the project's success and they are not always taken into consideration. In this section, there are different and common points of view from certain authors and organizations. The topics discussed, however, are in fact a parcel of possible ways to deliberate on social housing issues and its potentialities.

From the perspective of the group *Community Tool Box*, University of Kansas, affordability depends on the income and they state that to achieve it, housing should not represent more than 30% of a household's earnings. Additionally, the poorer the families are, the higher percentage is spent on housing prices, which means that these numbers can reach 60% or more of a family's income and consequently the buildings become poorly maintained, unhealthy and unsafe. In addition, according to them, "affordable housing should not be assigned specifically to areas where no one particularly wants to live – next door to a chemical plant, or in a dangerous neighbourhood".

Regarding the design of houses and neighbourhoods, it should understand and respond to its context, enhance its neighbourhood and meet the needs of its users. It is significant to consider the historical, social and physical characteristics of the community so it might connect better with the new and might be more likely to create the feeling of belonging. By physical connections, the place should be near or permit access to basic services, such as transportation, education, shopping and leisure.

The project should also be able to bring qualities that will enhance the neighbourhood. According to the *Community Tool Box* analysis, the public areas “should be outdoor space where kids can play safely and/or places to sit for adults in sun and shade”. In addition, hallways and walkways should be maintained well preserved and accessible. The project can add life to the streets throughout activities that “draw people out to shop and socialize help to create a neighbourhood community. The more people recognize and talk to one another on the street, the safer and more pleasant the street becomes”.

The success on the design process also depends on how involved the architect is with the citizens, the local customs and traditions. It is also essential to bring them to collaborate with the process, as in the design itself or in the construction. If this step of a housing program is made with careful planning, it can represent an increase of its lifetime since will better fit the families throughout the years.

## **2.1- Participatory programs**

When it comes to implementing good quality low-income housing projects, especially for the least privileged families, who cannot afford decent shelter, it is crucial to bring the communities to be part of the process, whether in the design process, the construction or the management and maintenance of buildings and neighbourhoods. According to Rodríguez and Åstrand (1996), an organised self-help housing would be an answer to respond the worldwide increasing need for better housing, particularly in developing countries, where the demands are the highest. They also state that “most authorities responsible for housing have concluded that it is impossible to solve housing problems through programmes within the formal sector alone”. Regarding the necessity for housing, Åstrand (2016) also affirms that around 2 billion people will require new shelter in 2030, which means that “every country will need more options for affordable, adequate, and safe housing”. This statistic illustrates that besides some actions and efforts to reduce the number of people living in poor conditions, it was not enough to solve or mitigate the issue.

In the organised self-help housing, it can be identified “a facilitating organization that both assists the households that have chosen self-help housing and that bears a responsibility to authorities and financial agencies” (Rodríguez and Åstrand 1996). One important consideration is that the reduced costs in construction will depend on “how the project is organised, the amount of time that the households can spend

on construction, and the capacity and efficiency of the facilitating organisation”. In addition, the authors experienced good examples when it comes to the building’s technical quality, which led them to discuss that the dwellers would be able to achieve a higher construction quality, since they are able to learn and have access to accurate information. Furthermore, there would be a lower “risk of cheating in construction or corruption”, since they are building their own houses. Those experiences show how relevant is the cooperating work to be an alternative to the centralized housing programmes that many developing countries’ governments present. On the face of the increasing necessity for shelter, self-help policies must be part of the governments decisions and thus, there might be a better chance to provide good housing for everyone.

## **2.2- Mixed income**

According to the *Community Tool Box* group (2016), a mixed income housing area includes families with different financial levels, “where cross-cultural and cross-class socializing are possible”. Ideally, they argue that this diversity might remove the “stigma and isolation of poverty that often goes with subsidized housing”. By their understanding, placing housing for low-income people in remote areas of the city may provoke that people “remain low-income – and ignored – indefinitely”. One possible solution would be to mix two or more income levels and people would have access to quality services, such as public transportation, schools or supermarket. Other mixtures, for instance mixed-use development or housing for seniors and/or people with disabilities, may stimulate street life and create “a ‘village’ feel to the development, making the area safer and more pleasant”. Understood as a successful project, the extinct site Atlantic Steelworks, in the city of Atlanta, USA, has been passing through considerable changes that implemented mixed-income housing, as well as mixed uses and commercial development. The design transformed a degraded industrial area into an appealing neighbourhood, incorporating affordable housing with “healthy and pedestrian-friendly environment, and easy access to downtown”.

Cheshire (2007) analyses mixed income neighbourhoods from a different angle and challenges the effectiveness of mixing communities when it comes to reducing social exclusion. He argues that mixed neighbourhoods do not provide solution to the inequality but to its symptom. According to the author, housing market imposes poor families to the “most deprived neighbourhoods with the worst schools, highest

crime rates and lowest levels of both public and private amenities”. Therefore, low-income families cannot afford to live in a nicer neighbourhood and thus, he debates that “poor people are made poorer by the character of the neighbourhood in which they live”, since information and jobs offers, for instance, might be less accessible. Cheshire also suggests that putting “efforts to improve social equity would be more effective if they were directed towards people themselves rather than moving people around to mix neighbourhoods”. This argument shows the importance of creating strong communities that are able to grow and improve their quality of life by creating better knowledge, jobs, services and places to live. For that reason, the income generating activities must be considered as an essential part of the quality of living both in the short and long terms.

### **2.3- Income generating activities**

As already stated in this paper, an affordable house should not cost more than 30% of a household’s earnings. In some cases, by managing to reduce the unit costs as much as possible this percentage might be reached. In other situations, however, it can be very challenging to achieve this goal, since the families might have a very low income or even no income at a certain moment. This means that even if these families get a new house through subsidies, it might be difficult for them to maintain it and to deal with the costs related with the new house.

According to the Cities Ministry of Brazil (Ministério das Cidades do Brasil 2011), it is necessary to create condition for people to have income and jobs opportunities, with the aim of ensuring the community’s development along the years. An important key to consider is education as the pillar for maintaining a constant programme for generating income. It is explained that low income families have an extensive history of social exclusion and vulnerability in the society. Some people are not even registered in the system, so they cannot be part of the society. Moreover, since many people might have low educational level as a consequence of this lack of opportunities, they would also have troubles to find a position at the formal sector or even to participate of self-management initiatives.

Education is considered the key for the success as it provides tools for the community to develop. However, the Ministry points out that there is not a right rule or a recipe to follow so it is essential to recognise groups’ diversity and their different demands. In order to make sure that education can reach most people who need it, immediate actions should be taken, for example, creating day cares or

kindergartens as the earliest moment in the project so parents might be able to study and capacitate themselves.

As some good example of practices that can be quickly demonstrated in courses and workshops, it is cited the fabrication of ecological soap and how to commercialize it, as well as furniture restoration. In order to certify the success of those practices, the ideal is to invest on communication and information by establishing a monthly bulletin, informative walls or other media vehicles. The Cities' Ministry also invests in technological training as part of a digital inclusion concept and the purpose of qualifying young and adults. Some successful examples inspired people to continue with the project and improve it during the years. It is mentioned that from 120 students trained in 2010, 30 of them in the year of 2011 were already technical consultants and coordinators on neighbour companies. Situations like these reinforce the necessity of giving people the same rights to information, education and, therefore, they might be able to compete equally for jobs opportunities and start to be truly part of the society.

### 3 Social Issues Analysis

Improving the quality of housing may have an important and positive effect on people's behaviour, increasing, for instance, their pride in the neighbourhood, which might lead them to be more careful with their property. A higher quality building can also reduce operational costs, reducing energy and resources consumption, and also provides dwellers with a healthier and safer place to live.

The design of a new housing area, especially for low-income families, requires particular attention not only at the unit, individually, but in the context where these houses are inserted. The design process may affect positively or negatively the living quality, and goes beyond the drawing and technical information. It is important to considerer the social aspects of a community in order to provide the physical spaces for people to express their habits, social and professional lives. Poor communities, in general, have the commercial activity as a strong and important practice in order to generate income and many people depend on it. In addition, the place in the city where a neighbourhood is located can directly affect the social quality of a householder.

In many cases of low-income housing projects, the plot chosen for the construction is often away from the urban tissue, disconnected from the city, and barely has the basic infrastructure such as a sewage, communication systems or

electricity. It is also necessary to provide urban transportation and connections with the city. However, in order to keep the costs of each unit as low as possible, private companies, governments and organizations may opt for a lower land price, which in general will occur far from urban centralities.

If from one point of view the price of land is lower at these places, on the other hand the costs to provide the basic services might also indicate a high initial investment and an economic impact in a short term. Sometimes these services are not entirely provided and the community will feel the consequences on it. Moreover, the impacts of this isolation may be more evident for the inhabitants of the area, since they might lose professional connections, employment opportunities and commercial potentialities to explore. There may also be lack of health, education, cultural, sports and other services. These and other factors might affect directly the success of a social housing project. Unhappiness on where you live can affect people's behaviour at their neighbourhood and they might have less care with their own houses and even more with common spaces. The tendency in this scenario is to occur a considerably fast and generalized degradation.

In order to create a socially secure society, there are different solutions that might enhance the quality for the inhabitants in a long term. Early in the project, by bringing people to participate actively to the design and construction processes it is possible to reduce labour costs and to achieve more suitable design projects. That means a better chance to meet expectations and necessities of a family or community according to their needs and financial conditions. Therefore, this participation process may affect the sizes of the units or the number of bedrooms, depending on the necessity. This versatility might be essential for a householder that has intention to put up a commercial activity at his/her home. In that scenario, when predicted before, a home unit divided with commerce might be able to give acceptable levels of indoor quality, for instance with good thermal comfort or with enough space that can guarantee privacy between the members of the family. In addition to the commercial practices, the presence of other services in the area might also contribute to generate income in the formal sector or informally. Consequently, besides creating spaces for the dwellers to run businesses, it is crucial to diversify the activities and services so each person can work on their best. One possibility is to create workshops for children, young people and adults to teach basic handwork for maintenance or artistic practice, such as painting, pottery, weaving, craftwork, music and other practices. Other option is to invest on people with the goal of

introducing informatics training, so people who did not have opportunity to deal with it, can learn and be part of the digital world, each day more present in everyone's life. Moreover, as analysed before in this paper, this might be a strong way to create jobs opportunities and careers.

It is also essential to provide the community conditions to maintain and preserve itself. Self-management training might help to produce management and maintenance jobs for people who live inside the neighbourhood and to give the dweller enough knowledge to keep the house conserved. Both situations lead to a more satisfying environment, normally cleaner and commonly considered more beautiful, which emphasizes the feeling of security. Although the actions here are considered for their long-term results, they must in fact be born at the first stages of the design and conceptualization of the project. Those aspects analysed can be a starting point for a wealthy community that will grow each day by giving people an alternative to acquire knowledge, generate income and add some perspective of accession on life. The more part of the process these gestures are, the better are the chances that they perpetuate among the community.

## 4 Conclusions

In order for the initiatives mentioned in this paper to become reality, the different sectors involved in a housing design project must collaborate with the aim to provide quality of life for people, especially for those who cannot afford to choose such benefits. The architect must exercise a centralizing role to regulate all the steps and guarantee the success of the design and, furthermore, monitor initiatives that should occur after implementing the social housing, as in workshops, maintenance and management training, among others. In other words, since the architect has the knowledge regarding the design, associated with urban planning experience and the knowledge of the city context, it is his/her responsibility to coordinate neighbours, investors, public officials and other specialists involved in the process.

In the face of the increasing necessity for housing, the tendency is to adopt standard solutions in order to decrease as much as possible the costs of the project. The urban planner and the architect must challenge this reality, searching for alternative solutions that might be key points to provide people with good living environment. It is important to highlight the importance of connecting physically the area within the city, as well as to understand the human network of those future



citizens that might lose their income if far from the job or the farming production, for instance.

As long as the architects and urban planners think further the housing units, buildings or neighbourhoods, and reflect about people's lives and their social interactions, their potential of production, there is a higher chance to reach success on the project. That means providing not only good quality shelter for people, but homes and social inclusion.

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