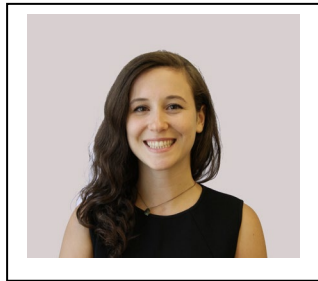


Exploring housing the urban poor as a participatory process to address disconnections in centralised decision-making

How can participatory processes in the design, construction and management of housing the urban poor address issues of disconnection in centralised institutions and decision-making?

Isabella Moran, Lund University, Sweden



1 Introduction

It is becoming increasingly apparent that rapid urbanization and densification of our cities across the world is creating unprecedented demand for housing. With more than 881 million people (UN-Habitat, 2016) living in slums and informal settlements, often without access to basic standards of living. It is important to reflect on how pressure on government to address this issue with centralised decision-making often adds mounting complications of distrust, displacement and disconnect within the most vulnerable and marginalised urban poor communities.

There exists surmounting disconnection between the diverse needs of individual families and the process of facilitating housing to the urban poor. In some cases, families are provided with housing that they may never live in, maybe never even visit, whether without adequate services or purely because these houses are located far away from family, friends and income generating opportunities. Such issues are of great importance as they make explicit the shortcomings and incompetence of our centralised systems, education and profession when addressing the surmounting inability to house the urban poor.

For 3 weeks between February and March of 2019, students of Lund University partaking in the course 'Urban Shelter' participated in field studies in Metro Manila, the Philippines. The field studies focused on housing for urban poor, involving numerous housing project visits, various institution lectures and household and professional interviews. In any reference to such interviews real names have been changed to respect the anonymity of those interviewed and any following references will be referred to as 'field studies.' (Manila, 2019)

One strong theme that was taken away from these field studies was of disconnection with centralised decision-making institutions such as the National Housing Authority (NHA) and urban poor communities. Various interviewed individuals/households expressed how they had been provided with housing by NHA that they felt incredibly lucky to receive, while others were not able to repay their amortization, or their units were far too small for their growing families. Such encounters revealed undertones of distrust in the government and housing authorities with dominant feedback of a failure to account for or meet their requirements. This distrust is perhaps most visibly illustrated by a case study of Elisa, a 32 year old woman who was relocated in 2012 from her informal settlement by the NHA. The home she was provided with was located 4 hours

from Metro Manila and her previous job and was also left without electricity or water connection for the first 4 years. Unable to occupy her new home, unable to have any future access to any other NHA housing scheme and located too far from any income generating opportunities, Elisa was left with little choice but subletting within another informal settlement back in the city, close to her job to maintain her livelihood. In the sections that follow this notion of disconnection will be explored with a focus on housing challenges facing urban poor communities between centralised decision-making, education and professionals.



In Metro Manila, Philippines, a contrasting background of middle income high-rise and foreground of informal settlements that often encroach along waterways, vulnerable to flooding. Photograph: Isabella Moran 2019.

2 Literature Review

Global perspective

The report ‘Urbanization and Development’ by UN Habitat recognises that ‘enabling the market has failed to provide affordable, adequate housing for the predominant low-income households in the rapidly urbanizing parts of the world.’ (UN-Habitat, 2016) By acknowledging that centralised decision-making is failing to provide sufficient housing it is even more imperative that authoritative institutions learn from participatory concepts and self-help initiatives.

Historically, self-help and participatory approaches to housing have been met with criticism and misunderstanding. Commonly a product of centralised decision making, homogenous housing schemes are often favoured as they are perceived as more cost effective, less labour intensive and less time consuming. Affordable housing is too often seen as a means of accommodating a maximised homogenous mass of people to the minimum required standards and lowest costs.

Housing projects were designed by state architects or engineers on the ‘basis of producing the lowest cost structures that could meet the standards set by the bylaws, and the professionals’ view of ‘how the urban poor should live. (Wakely, 1988)

Freedom

Freedom: absence of subjection to foreign domination or despotic government.

Synonyms: independence, self-government, **self-determination**, self-rule, home rule, sovereignty, autonomy, democracy; (Murray, 2019)

The concept of freedom is an interesting perspective from which to start analysis of participatory processes. When understood from the viewpoint of ‘self-determination’ there are obvious correlations to literature from John Turner.

Turner advocates for freedom to utilise a ‘self-help’ system to self-determine housing outcomes across planning, construction and management. It can be argued that the most defining advantage of ‘self-help’ initiatives is the **freedom** of the ability to choose for one’s self and participate in the planning, construction and management processes.

Early interpretations of ‘self-help’ housing have been widely criticised as they were mistakenly interpreted as synonymous with ‘self-build’. Thus, taking such a pluralist and diverse concept as ‘self-help’ and misinterpreting freedom with obligation. On this Turner clarifies:

The obligation to build your own house could be as oppressive as being forbidden to do so – the corollary of the freedom to literally build your own house is the freedom *not* to have to. (Turner, 1976)

Self-help initiatives

It is important to acknowledge that ‘self-help’ can take many diverse forms and an infinite array of outcomes that can range from providing sites and services, public infrastructure, access to technical assistance, construction training, roof loans, core homes through to providing construction manuals.

However, it is equally important to acknowledge where self-help schemes haven’t been as successfully implemented. Often due to rigid systems that require many hours of labour, potentially causing financial burden on an otherwise busy family. One critic of ‘self-help’ housing is that the ‘self-help formula improves affordability in the broad sense only marginally, and only for certain families with abundant time free of work’. (R.J Skinner, M.J Rodell, 1983) Still, this critic fails to recognise the fact that whether permitted to or not, many of the urban poor of our cities are building their own homes regardless. Therefore, technical assistance gains worth when productively utilising the resource of labour since self-builds are so often an inevitable outcome.

Urban poor family requirements

Correa addresses disconnections in relation to requirements of intended beneficiaries by drawing parallel to the concept of ‘hardware’

Many attempts at low-cost housing perceive it only as a simplistic question of trying to pile up as many boxes as possible on a given site, without any concern for the other spaces involved in the system. Result: the desperate effort of the poor trying to live in hardware totally unrelated to their needs (Correa, 2000)

‘Housing by People’ by John Turner seeks to understand the consequences of post-industrialism centralised systems that have been creating mass produced housing misaligned to the requirements of the urban poor. Often missing the mark when addressing housing shortages these centralised systems frequently fail to adequately engage in research, interviews and observational measures to best understand the everyday requirements of future occupants.

Their requirements are not measured only by arrangements of rooms and windows, but by the degree of accessibility that they have to their friends and relatives, to their sources of income and to the places where they spend it – all of which demand ‘loose-fit’. Large scale systems have created the most segregated cities the world has ever known. (Turner, 1976)

The degree of accessibility to income opportunities plays a vital role in the success of housing projects. Lack of livelihood opportunities, poor transport options and insufficient services are creating inadequate housing, with occupants such as Elisa then unable to be granted another NHA home, some are ending up back in informal homes closer to income generating opportunities.

Incrementality

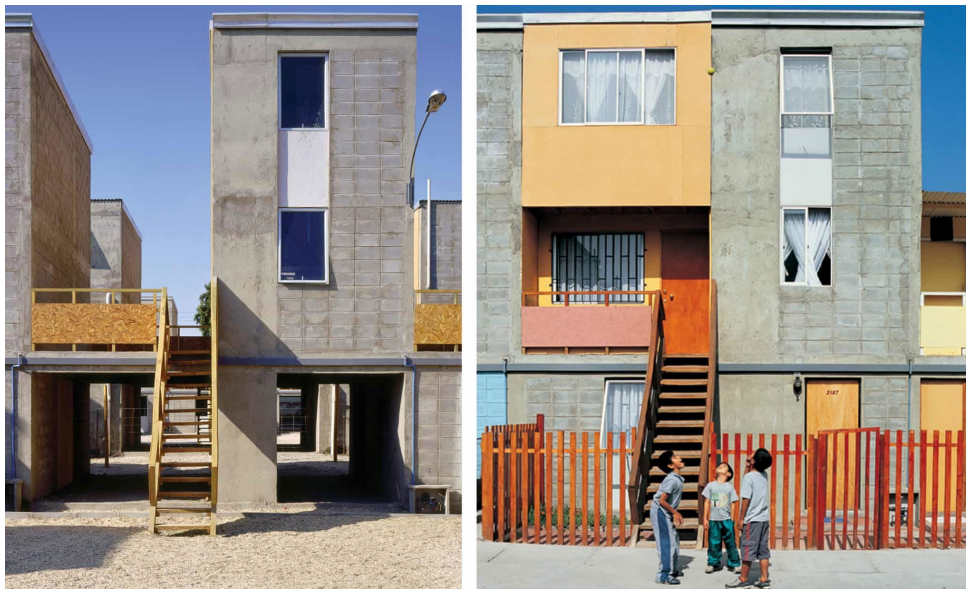
Incremental: housing unit can grow with the family requirements and earning capacity. Thus, even if they start with only one room, there is the possibility of growth – a political imperative in most of the Developing World. (Correa, 2000)

Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena of Architectural practice Elemental is best known for his pioneering social housing projects in Latin America. Elemental aims to alleviate poverty and eliminate slums using a participatory approach that engages local communities in all stages of the design process.

Aravena advocates for architecture that promotes progressive housing ‘So that expansion happens thanks to the design, not despite it.’ (Aravena, 2016)

In podcast 99% invisible, episode ‘Half a House’ Roman Mars focuses on an urban poor community, located in Iquique, Chile, that threatened with a hunger strike when proposed with block-style apartments. The apartments were viewed as ‘limiting expansion possibilities’ thus necessitating an alternative approach from Elemental. Creating ‘half a house’ and leaving empty space alongside homes allowed for incremental growth by future occupants. (Mars, 2016)

Elemental’s terraced houses provided a basic concrete frame, complete with kitchen, bathroom and a roof, allowing families to fill in the gaps, and stamp their own identity on their homes in the process. The result was a far cry from the identikit slabs of nearby social housing blocks. (Wainwright, 2016)



In Iquique, Chile, Aravena provided a concrete frame, with kitchen, bathroom and a roof (left), which were designed to allow families to fill in the gaps (right). Photograph: Cristobal Palma (Wainwright, 2016)

Employing incremental, progressive developments has trickle down effects to income generation, empowerment through participation, personal investment and as demonstrated in Elemental’s work, a sense of ownership. Engaging at a more personal human scale better utilises local resources, encouraging autonomy whether by providing complimentary infrastructure or access to services in numerous technical assistance arrangements.

Housing as a process and human value

In 1972 Turner coined the concept of the ‘house as a verb’ in an effort to bring attention to the discrepancies between two opposed interpretations of ‘housing’. Firstly, that housing refers to a noun - the stock of dwelling units, but secondly as a verb - the process by which that stock is created and maintained. In this

interpretation housing is not a static unit handed over to occupants but rather conceived as an ongoing project, where residents are co-creators in a process.

As the cases show, the performance of housing, ie. what it *does* for people is not described by housing standards, ie. what it *is*, materially speaking. Yet this linguistic inability to separate process from product and social value from market value is evident in both commercial and bureaucratic language. (Turner, 1976)

In this excerpt Turner explains there are significant differences between market value and human value. Houses are too often analysed in quantifiable measures by centralised decision-makers, creating a disconnect with the complex human and social aspects within communities. The on-site relocation of informal settlements that was observed during our field studies, with such projects as Hannibal, highlighted the importance of avoiding displacement by maintaining communities throughout the resettlement process for greater individual participation in post-occupancy management. (Manila, 2019) Jane Jacobs has also described the importance of maintaining social cohesion in the form of social capital with the avoidance of community displacement.

If self-government in the place is to work, underlying any float of population must be a continuity of people who have forged neighbourhood networks. These networks are a city's irreplaceable social capital. Whenever the capital is lost, from whatever cause, the income from it disappears, never to return until and unless new capital is slowly and chancily accumulated. (Jacobs, 1961)

Whole process perspective

Viewing housing as a process while acknowledging the complex human value of housing it is equally imperative to observe participation in the whole process from planning, construction through to management. In 'Organised self-help housing' Ivette Arroyo Baquero focuses on the importance of dweller-control and dweller-involvement from the initial stages through the entire process. Highlighting the comradeship and empowerment that is nurtured within communities in such processes Baquero maintains:

A hierarchical and/or paternalistic approach to any organized self-help housing process where the poor families are not considered partners for the whole process leads to low degree of dweller-control; and this limits the possibilities of the families to enhance their capabilities. (Baquero, 2013)

Community engagement in varying contexts

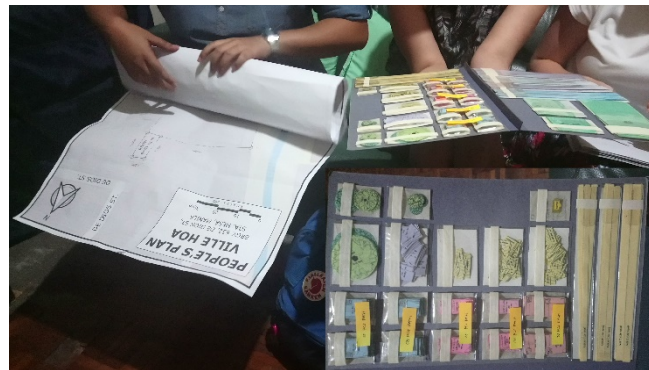
Achieving community engagement is a challenge faced by architects across varied contexts. Shifting to a Scandinavian experience of participatory design, there is 'Arki_Lab' based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Inspired by the works of Jan Gehl, Arki_Lab aim to go beyond designing *for* the occupants to designing *with* these user groups.

Urban design stands on the founding mantra of designing cities for people, which entails the designer creating spaces with a specific user group in mind. This is an important first step in good design practise. We advocate for taking a step further into what we call the new paradigm of 'designing **with** people.' This means citizens directly in the design process through tailor-made engagement processes. (Arki_Lab, 2016)

Here one can draw parallels between the tools utilised to encourage community engagement in the planning, construction and management processes between TAO Pilipinas of the Philippines and Arki_Lab of Denmark. Both practices make use of tools such as 'the kit' by TAO Pilipinas, a series of laminated road network elements and scale model building elements, through to 'Arki_nopoly', an interactive monopoly inspired game by Arki_Lab.

Co-creating spaces with the end users not only helps establish more democratic and inclusive societies but also builds a strong sense of ownership over these spaces. (Arki_lab, 2019)

By employing these tools in community consultation these two practices can better bridge the disconnect between those facilitating professions and the intended benefiting communities.



In Greater Copenhagen, Arki_Lab engage with local youth regarding the redesign of their school with 'Arki_nopoly' (left), Photograph: Arki_Lab;

TAO Pilipinas 'the kit' utilised for community participation in planning (right). Photograph: Isabella Moran 2019

3 Discussion

Disseminating the previously discussed literature there are evident correlations between incremental and participatory approaches in achieving sustainable housing outcomes for urban poor. There are more apparent disconnections evident in centralised decision making that can fail to engage with and over-simplify urban poor requirements when produced on a mass scale. Correa addresses such disconnections by referring to urban poor who frequently make a desperate attempt to live in housing not related to their needs.

Justification for a participatory approach to housing draws on a plethora of case studies that analyse correlations between occupant involvement, occupant investment and occupant satisfaction. During our field studies one interview of a young man who stayed with a family over 2 months at Hannibal reflects:

What is important to them is to have a good relationship with everyone else living there. So they tried help one another even in a little way. That's what I have witnessed. People enjoy every moment of their life because they are content with what they have now. I think the St Hannibal Empowerment Center was able to empower the people living there by keeping the community together and seeking harmony from the very beginning. (Manila, 2019)

This correlation of whole-process involvement helps in achieving long term sustainability as urban poor communities are far more likely to maintain and engage in management when empowered through participatory processes from initial planning phase. From the Philippines to Denmark participatory practices are advocating for co-creating spaces to build a sense of ownership and personal investment.

The participatory approach to housing benefits the urban poor most when participation is facilitated from initial planning phases through to construction and eventual management. Both Baquero and Jacobs stress the importance of maintaining communities throughout the resettlement process either from the perspective of enhancing empowerment and capabilities as well as preserving social capital. These enhanced capabilities from participation also create livelihood opportunities in such forms as individual participation in post-occupancy management.

By engaging in incremental resettlement initiatives with urban poor communities participatory approaches can facilitate reaching a wider number of

families and be better adapted to their needs. This is notably evident in the incremental projects of Elemental who create houses that facilitate gradual expansion. Initially provided with an affordable basic standard of living, each household has the possibility to progressively expand their home over time as their needs evolve.

As exemplified in countless informal settlements urban poor families are markedly more adept to living with any shortcomings in their homes when it is their own doing than if there is a centralised system dictating their limited housing options. Turner clarifies that deficiencies and imperfections in one's own housing are enormously more tolerable if they are your own responsibility than if they are somebody else's. (Turner, 1976)

All aforementioned aspects of participatory processes illustrate the importance of community engagement throughout the whole resettlement process. In order to address disconnections with centralised decision-making, houses need to be analysed less through their market value and quantifiable measures and more by the complex human values and family requirements within communities.

4 The Role of Architects

The disconnections of centralised decision-making extend to both education and professionalism. Consistently we see such disconnections in the form of challenges facing professionals that they are not equipped for, be that from the perspective of competence of prior education or restrictive professional roles. These challenges mandate a shift in traditional roles of an architect through the acquiring of new skills and adopting new roles in facilitating and mediating. The role of architects continues to evolve from a typically traditional sense of providing into more supportive and mediating roles. This such notion means a rethink of the role of an architect in ever diversifying conditions and complex situations. It is argued that in order for architects to effectively meet the needs of urban poor communities and face the challenges of informal settlements a 'new professionalism is required.' (Tovovich, 2009) Thus, the impetus is on us as architects to adapt, and quickly.

Centralised decision-making

At times it can be too easy to criticise the role of western architects in developing countries. To paint each western architect with the same brush and simplify a

complex network of interactions. Just as self-help solutions are pluralistic and diverse are the roles of architect's complex and numerous in the forms they take. One can draw a parallel between governing authorities and Swedish architects when tackling a shortage of affordable housing in Tunisia. (Rodriguez & Åstrand, 1996) In this case, Tunisian authorities sought to adopt a social housing model like that of the rapidly urbanizing modern world, to build as quick as possible as many homes as possible. Such a model is observed across countless bureaucratic and centralised systems all over the world. This can be observed when a 'one size fits all' mass produced social housing is taken from such countries as Great Britain and implemented Global South countries such as the Philippines, Tunisia, South America, and so on. Put by Correa that 'architects... forgot all about the organic and pluralistic nature of our traditional habitat – and went in for cloning.' (Correa, 2000)

The case in Tunisia can be seen an ironic shift in the 'paint all western architects with same brush mentality' where local authorities were attempting to adopt mass-production western ideologies to solve complex local housing problems. When compared this is a contrast to western, Swedish architects who were engaging in community informed planning, participatory self-help initiatives by providing technical assistance that was perceptibly more effective. (Åstrand, 2019) Here we can learn that often an architect's role extends to challenging bureaucratic hegemony that in many cases fails to engage with local communities or represent the often marginalised and most vulnerable as the urban poor.

The role of the architect as a mediator between intended beneficiaries and the centralised decision-makers challenges us to diversify in our ability to create more equitable access to resources for the urban poor. On this point, Turner advocates that we:

demand that those in power help us do what we can do locally for ourselves – by guaranteeing our access to a fair shares of available resources – and where essential by providing complementary infrastructure that cannot be installed locally and that can be provided for all. (Turner, 1976)

Education

Architectural education, alike to numerous other institutionalised fields commonly caters to the wealthy elite of society, namely in this instance, those who can afford architectural services. Unfortunately, this creates a disconnection of competence

of newly graduated architects who must further their skills outside of traditional education whether in managerial, social, negotiating and communication aspects.

New knowledge and skills concerning participatory design and its challenges could be integrated in architectural education in order to prepare architects to be more capable of working with poor urban communities. (Tovivich, 2009)

The above quote relates to this paper's overarching focus on disconnections whereby architects are not better equipped from their education to handle self-help and participatory design challenges. Such a disconnection was witnessed first-hand during our field studies lecture at the University of the Philippines campus whereby no architecture program focused on housing for the urban poor. By not facilitating any program with a focus on the urban poor, a limited architectural education is further perpetuating the disconnect between the requirements of the role of the architect and an architect's skills and competence to perform such roles. There is an obvious disconnect between the intensifying demand for adequate housing in rapidly urbanizing cities and the architects who are being educated in them.

Professionalism

As already mentioned, the professional role of the architect is under pressure to adapt and diversify with the complex and pluralistic nature of housing demands. The future will, as I believe, see increasing pressure away from centralised decision making that capitalism favours, back to grass-roots, community-driven and co-operative initiatives. This is a common ideology exemplified in:

Housing must be supplied not through a few centralised agencies (whether government or big developer), but through hundreds of different delivery systems. (Correa, 2000)

The shifting role of the architect and utilising mediating tools is increasingly important in engaging communities both in the Global South and in a Scandinavian context such as multidisciplinary Arki_Lab of Copenhagen:

We look at ourselves as facilitators of collaborative processes, both in the development of strategies and analysis, and in concrete physical design. We act as the link between citizens and various professional groups...Seeing ourselves as mediators of creative processes and advocates for the common people. (Arki_Lab, 2016)

The role of the architect from the perspective of professionalism can be analysed further in the evolving roles of those trained as architects in the Philippines. Namely, with a focus on the professionals employed at the National Housing Authority (NHA) there lies a problematic disconnection between facilitated housing and livelihood opportunities for those receiving NHA housing. This disconnection is quantifiable between the architecture department employees who exist in the hundreds when compared to just a handful of employees in the livelihood department. (Manila, 2019) This calls for a rethink on the requirements of the real-world scenario demands versus the number of professions employed in each specialisation.

Where Turner focuses his attention to the central issue of 'Who decides?' we are confronted with the reality of the architect's inability to know best the needs of the urban poor without adequately engaging with communities through participatory processes. 'Professionals are confronted with a rapidly rising consciousness of their incompetence to decide for others what is best for them' (Turner, 1976) points out the architect's inability to know best another's needs without sufficient consultation, observation and engagement.

Our job as planners and architects is to understand just what is malfunctioning and then set it right. Instead we start to design the houses ourselves. It is indeed an absurd situation – as if in times of famine housewives needed to run around writing cookbooks so that people could start eating. People starve not because they don't know how to cook – but because they are denied the necessary ingredients. (Correa, 2000)

Correa's above analogy helps to put into perspective the work ahead of architects in the need for diversifying the profession, mediating between centralised decision-makers and facilitating technical assistance to urban poor communities. When we are able to educate architects in line with the real-world demands, mediate bureaucratic processes of centralised decision making faced by urban poor communities and facilitate fairer access to resources is when we will begin to utilise the role of the architect for collective betterment of housing in our rapidly urbanizing cities.

Bibliography

Arki_Lab, 2016. *Arki_Lab Designing Cities With People*. Copenhagen: Arki_books.

Arki_lab, 2019. *Arki_lab Profile*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.arkilab.dk/profile-2/>

Åstrand, J., 2019. *Self Help Lecture with focus on Tunisia*. Lund, Lecture.

Baquero, I. A., 2013. *Organized self-help housing as an enabling shelter & development strategy*, Lund: Housing Development & Management.

Correa, C., 2000. *Housing and Urbanization*. s.l.:Thames and Hudson.

Jacobs, J., 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

Manila, 2019. *Philippines* [Interview] (February 2019).

Mars, R., 2016. *Half a House*. [Sound Recording] (99% invisible).

Murray, D. W. C. M. & P. J., 2019. *Oxford Dictionary*. [Online].

R.J Skinner, M.J Rodell, 1983. *People, Poverty and Shelter: Problems of Self-Help Housing in the Third World*. s.l.:s.n.

Rodriguez, M. a. Å. J., 1996. *Organized Small-scale Self-help Housing*, Building Issues 8:4: LCHS.

Tovovich, S., 2009. Learning from Informal Settlements: the New 'Professionalism' for the Architecture Practice. 6(1), pp. 66-85.

Turner, J. F., 1972. *Community Planning; Housing as a Verb*. [Online]

Available at:

<http://www.communityplanning.net/JohnTurnerArchive/pdfs/FreedomtoBuildCh7.pdf>

[Accessed 2019].

Turner, J. F., 1976. *Housing by people, Towards Autonomy in Building Environments*. s.l.:Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd.

UN-Habitat, 2016. *Urbanization and Development, World Cities Report 2016*, s.l.:

UN-Habitat.

Wainwright, O., 2016. *Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena wins 2016 Pritzker prize*.

[Online]

Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jan/13/chilean-architect-alejandro-aravena-wins-2016-pritzker-prize>

Wakely, P., 1988. The development of housing through the withdrawal from construction. In: Great Britan: s.n., p. p. 122.