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Housing the urban poor in the poor countries

Author(s): Colin Rosser

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However, many African countries can only afford one industrial center.

3. Infrastructure planning. It is important to focus on one thing at a time and not to try to plan everything.
4. External aid tendencies.

◆ This list must be tempered with the understanding that the developing countries are very diverse. Most of them would not share this view of priorities.

◆ The conventional solutions to the housing dilemma have been a failure everywhere. They have been concerned with an attempt to apply the housing policies of the developed countries, firstly by building public housing projects designed to be politically visible rather than solutions at the scale of the problem; secondly there has been a quite pointless research for technological solutions to the problem of shelter. The cheapest form of house or shell has already been discovered by the people who have their backs to the wall of harsh economic reality. One of the biggest crimes is the failure to recognize that there is no alternative to self-constructed shelter.

◆ Undoubtedly self-service housing can best serve human needs in many countries. But, despite all efforts from the United Nations, most governments — for prestige reasons — reject the idea of providing their people with serviced lots, and prefer to promise to deliver the whole works.

◆ Kenya has done well with site and service plans, but has had to face the opposition of local government officials, who hate the «tacka-tacka» housing which results.

◆ The effect of moving people into core houses in Ghana has been good. They have been able to get accustomed to the site and to become better aware of what additional facilities they really need before they take decisions to build them.

◆ The notion of a grid of basic facilities provided by

## Housing the urban poor in the poor countries

### The familiar problem

Failure to grasp the facts of scale and rate of population growth — in situations of chronic poverty — is the best prescription for irrelevance in the cities of the developing countries. The facts are readily available, but commonly ignored in public housing policy. Calcutta, for example (with 8 million) is now growing at the rate of an additional million people every five years: Cairo (with 7 million) is adding 250,000 a year or a million more people every four years. Most of the cities in the poor countries — particularly in Africa —

### DESIRABILITY

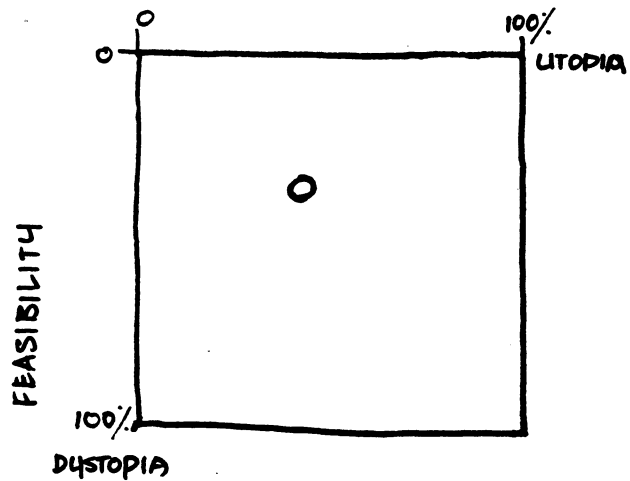


Fig. 1: Doxiadis' «Desfeas» diagram

the municipality, with the people erecting their own housing forms a framework that ties in with Doxiadis' diagram of the «desirable» and the «feasible» (Fig. 1). Self-help is desirable as a way of enabling a human being to determine his own environment, but self-help on a large scale requires major renovations in our administrative, bureaucratic and political structures. We have «high-rise» bureaucratic structures that are designed precisely to inhibit the kind of flexibility that is called for.

◆ It may be better to create long-life systems of urban infrastructure, and short-life buildings which can be more adaptable, flexible and easily changed according to contemporary demand. The physical existence of buildings is becoming less important, and their life shorter. Man and buildings are mortal.

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will double in size within the present decade. In all these, the urban poor form the great majority of the population. The housing problem of these urban centres is fundamentally, but not exclusively — one of finding satisfactory solutions to the provision of housing for the lowest-income groups.

The urban environment of these cities is now deteriorating faster through the sheer inadequacy of housing than through any other single cause. This is a by-product of poverty. This deterioration is of two types: the increasing over-crowding of existing structures, and the rapid proliferation of shanty-towns in condi-

tions of extreme environmental squalor. Both are a product of the ever-increasing gap between need and provision.

The basic dilemma is that, on the one hand, the community as a whole cannot allocate to housing the resources commensurate with the scale of the need: and, on the other, the great majority of the urban population is too poor to build or send, without public assistance, housing of standards of construction, space or utility considered adequate by the ruling elite (the politicians, administrators, planners, and the middle class generally).

### **The futility of the conventional approach**

With some reservations in the special conditions of individual countries, the conventional and elitist public housing policies have been a failure everywhere. These have been based on an attempt to apply the housing policies of developed countries in situations where these policies are irrelevant. They have led to:

- public housing projects, small in scale because costly in public subsidy, designed to be politically visible rather than socially relevant. Nowhere have these «monumental» projects more than a marginal effect on the housing situation of the urban poor.
- the ubiquitous but fruitless search for new technological solutions in housing concerned to cut costs and thus to reduce the gap between need and effective demand. The cheapest house has already been discovered — by the people themselves.

### **The search for realistic housing policy**

The search for a more relevant alternative to the conventional wisdom in this field has to begin with a recognition that in these conditions of scale and poverty there is no feasible alternative to the «self-help» construction of shelter by the urban poor. Spontaneous settlements of the shanty-town type are inevitable: they need not be unorganised (as presently) or characterised by conditions of environmental squalor. But a new approach — by planners and administrators — is required.

There are two aspects of this problem:

- the treatment of existing slums and squatter settlements.
- the provision for new population growth.

Two approaches, with at least the merits of realism, that are clearly gaining momentum are: *first*, the increasing emphasis on environmental improvement of these existing settlements rather than on clearance and rehousing; *secondly*, on the provision of areas for «site and service» settlement for new population growth rather than on formal public housing projects.

There is still, however, a basic and entrenched prejudice in the minds of planners and administrators against «self-help» housing in urban areas — and a deep unwillingness to recognize that this must form a major element in housing policy. Where these new approaches are being tried, they are usually little more than minimal efforts at the «pilot project» level — half-hearted attempts to be realistic without the full commitment of administrative resources that are required. And with, in the case of «site and service» settlements, only minimal effort in settlement design and in the provision of community facilities — and of supporting programmes of social and economic development.

### **The Mark II shanty-town**

The unresolved questions — given the recognition that self-constructed shelter must form a *major* element in housing policy for these cities — would seem to be:

- a. Can the skills of many disciplines be assembled to assist the urban poor to construct complete and satisfactory «urban villages» (the Mark II shanty-town) which will be an organized and acceptable addition to the urban form of these cities?
- b. Can urban land policies (the key issue) be devised that will facilitate the construction of these settlements in locations acceptable to the urban poor (and not banished to the periphery as currently happens)?
- c. Can these settlements, with specially designed social and economic programmes, function not simply as «housing» but as incubators of social and economic change?