The Role of Architects Working in Slums of the Developing World

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Introduction

The contemporary architectural profession has little to say about at least 1/3 of the world's population (UN-Habitat, xxv). These are the people who live in slums, favelas, gecekondus, squatter settlements, and shantytowns of the developing world. The names for these places vary, but their living conditions are similar around the world: slums – as we will call them in this paper – are housing settlements, typically in cities of the developing world, with inadequate access to safe water; inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure; poor structural quality of housing; overcrowding; and insecure residential status (UN-Habitat, 12). Why are architects unable, or perhaps uninterested, in helping to improve living conditions for this vast chunk of humanity? And should the architectural profession even be involved in slum improvement efforts in the first place? What can architects offer?

This paper addresses these questions. First, we will outline the architectural profession's social agenda in history, tracing the lineage from early Modern social reformists to the Postmodern obsession with form and style, through to the contemporary resurgent concern for social and humanitarian design. Next, we will look at the historical formation of actual on-the-ground slum improvement programs, as applied by international development agencies like the UN and the World Bank, nation states, politicians, and urban planners. In the final section, we will attempt to draw connections between the architectural profession's renewed interest in social issues and the already-established practice of slum improvement. This paper argues that architects currently have little place in institutionalized slum improvement practices, partly because planning and development discourses have advanced without the participation of architectural specialists. Their voice has been absent for a number of reasons – admittedly, often for good reason. However, there seems to be ample room for architects to reinvent and reapply their skills, alas contributing to the physical, environmental, and social improvement of slums in the developing world.

Architecture and the Social Agenda

A brief outline of architects' interest and involvement in social improvement efforts can help us understand the profession's predicament. The Modern movement, with its profound technological and social implications, allowed architects to define a social agenda to match the new age. Revolutionary forms of Modernist building and planning in the early to mid 20th

century emerged “as solutions to the social crises of industrial capitalism (Holston, 66).” Accordingly, buildings and urban plans were viewed as instruments of social change, able to dictate, and hopefully improve, social behavior amongst users. For better or for worse, design professionals were held in high regard during this era, and their status afforded architects and planners profound opportunities to engage in broad-scale social issues like affordable housing provision. For example, European architects looking for appropriate and effective shelter solutions were commissioned by the Deutscher Werkbund in 1927 to design “modern dwelling units suitable as prototypes for mass production (Moffett, et al, 518).” Their designs were often utopian in scope and envisioned a chaotic, dangerous, even unjust, world awaiting the orderly and efficient plans imposed by architects and planners. Le Corbusier famously wrote that we have a choice: “Architecture or Revolution,” and that “Revolution can be avoided (289).” The Modern movement in architecture and urban planning clearly engaged social issues, even if these efforts were too often misguided and even harmful.

As Modern architects’ social prescriptions began to unravel by the mid-20th century, the Postmodern response took shape within the profession, suppressing the social role of architecture and architects in favor of formal and stylistic preferences. The movement, roughly beginning in the 1960s, advocated for a multivalent architecture that appreciated “historicism, revivalism, the vernacular, contextualism, and ecological issues.” It intended to “move beyond Modernist reductivism (Moffett, et al., 544).” Robert Venturi, one of the movement’s chief proponents, sought architecture that would re-imagine the Modernist “prim dreams of pure order (104).” Whereas Modern architects strived to control and improve the social conditions of buildings and cities (again, regardless of the results), the Postmodern school seemingly surrendered design’s sense of social control to the “everyday landscape, vulgar and disdained (Venturi, 104).” The movement was overwhelmingly concerned with creating unique forms and images through architecture, and as a result, social concerns were suppressed in favor of architectural authorship and celebrity.

Amidst the recent hoopla over “Starchitects” and corporate architecture, however, there seems to be emerging a response within the profession – a return to social and environmental concerns, and the central role of designers in these concerns. Organizations like Architecture for Humanity, for example, seek to prove that “for every ‘celebrity architect’ there are hundreds of designers around the world, working under the ideal that it is not just how we build but what we

build that truly matters (31)." The proliferation of these kinds of organizations has proved architects' increasing concern and ability to work in disaster mitigation and community development all around the world (53). They embrace the "inherently social" qualities of architectural design and increasingly team up with different actors and the users themselves (Wilson, 30). This emerging form of "public-interest architecture" will become even more important in the future, Tom Fisher writes: "change is inevitable (9)." While there is a growing interest in these issues within the established architectural profession itself, the new public-interest -oriented design organizations are clearly carving their own niche. Perhaps this "new" breed of architects (of course, there has long been a strand of socially-conscious designers) is more engaged with underserved populations and places than ever before.

Slum Improvement Efforts in Perspective

For all the resurgent interest in these issues, however, it seems that the architectural profession remains largely dislocated from large-scale, on-the-ground slum upgrading practices. The international housing expert Geoffrey Payne makes this fact painfully clear: "As a qualified architect, it pains me to have to acknowledge that at present and in some key respects, the architectural profession tends to be the fly in the ointment (during these efforts)" (Payne, 13). There exists a vast body of literature concerning slums and improvement policies, but this literature is overwhelmingly produced and read within social science, international development, and urban planning circles – rarely by architects. By paying attention to this literature and working from the scholarship and on-the-ground efforts that have already been accomplished, architects can learn much about the social, political, and environmental problems, and potential solutions, of slums in the developing world.

Research on Third World urbanization and slums blossomed after the Second World War amidst the era of international development. Western models of urbanization (i.e., Modernization Theory, Industrialization, the Chicago School of urban sociology) indelibly marked this research, predicting industrial stages of growth similar to the developed countries. But the patterns of urbanization occurring in the developing world certainly deviated from these Western development models (Smith, 21). Instead, researchers found that cities were experiencing intense, unprecedented migration and population growth, resulting in ubiquitous "street sleeping, slums, overcrowding, and squatting (Abrams, 3)." Of course, there were also scant job

opportunities and little industrial growth. The lack of formal work in these cities spurred the rapid growth of urban informality, an unregulated and illegal parallel economy that developed around new urban migrants living in and working from slums. While theorists and policy makers initially thought the informal economy was marginal and eliminable – soon to be appropriated by governments and the regulated formal sector – the opposite has proven to be true (Tabak, 2-3). Urban informality still pervades cities of the developing world.

One key element of this informality has been the phenomenon of urban squatting. Davis reports that as many as 85 percent of urban residents in the developing world currently or once occupied land illegally (15). Writing back in the 1960s, Charles Abrams focused on this phenomenon of squatting – a process of land acquisition that has come to typify urbanity across the developing world. One of the first to research and write for an expanded audience on this emerging issue, he noted that squatting was prevalent, open and defiant, and resulted in political clientelism, lawlessness, and disorder (13). It was undocumented, unknown, and unforeseen in the West. Despite the chaos that squatting seemingly caused, however, Abrams recognized that it was inevitable (23), and that migrants appropriated land out of dire necessity, the "by-product of urban landlessness and housing famine (14)." He argued that it is not simply an issue of deviant lawbreakers, but of failed urban policy to provide land for the poor (24), and his advocacy helped bring the issue of slum and squatter-settlement improvement to the fore of development work. Charles Stokes, another earlier observer of slum patterns in the developing world, saw the development of these places as fundamentally social, and not merely physical. Instead of pursuing expensive and harmful slum clearance efforts, as Modern planning sought to accomplish, he insisted that we should build a "theory of slums" in order to understand and gradually improve conditions in these places (194). These earlier theorist-advocates sparked the interest of development agencies and initiated research on the vastly different social, political, and economic circumstances of slums in the developing world.

One key contributor to this new discourse was the English architect and planner John F.C. Turner – one of the principle early advocates of self-help building in squatter settlements, a process in which users themselves are the principle actors in the establishment and construction of housing (*Housing as a Verb*, 154). He argued that the formal private and public sector were unable to provide housing in rapidly growing urban areas of the developing world for various reasons. For instance, neither new migrants nor the state could afford formal housing that met

minimum standards of service provision and construction quality (150). Instead of seeing housing as a product meeting these material standards, Turner argued that policy-makers should think of housing as a human activity – a verb – that satisfies certain human needs and desires. In his comprehensive book Housing By People, he argued that we should not pursue centralized, heteronymous housing solutions, but rather, we should pursue self-determined, autonomous solutions (13). Only this restructuring can adequately provide "satisfactory goods and services" and create a "stable planet (14)," and at the same time combat the paternalism that characterizes Western development experts' professional views – which often prove destructive (22). Yet, he argued that some central authority is necessary for basic resource provision in slums (17), even if government's role is limited and focused on a few specific activities. Turner's argument was based in large part on enabling strategies that encourage users themselves to invest in and improve their own housing (51). His ideas caught on rapidly with development agencies like the World Bank, which embraced this inexpensive policy recommendation by the 1970s, when it enacted loan programs in Third World slums (Pugh, 403). Turner's ideas unmistakably shaped policy opinions towards slums, and left a legacy in development work that can still be seen today.

Although Turner and others were optimistic about the potentials of self-help housing and gradual slum improvement, there were certainly critics. Rod Burgess, for example, was among the neoMarxists and dependency theorists in the 1970s and 80s who criticized self-help housing for not fixing the inherently unequal capitalist mode of production and class relations that form slums in the first place (Pugh, 403). Essentially, he saw Turner's ideas as a convenient excuse for governments to minimize support to poor urban migrants. In an important article, Burgess methodically critiqued Turner's ideas: first, housing (no matter who builds or occupies it) always becomes a commodity that reestablishes unequal capitalist class relations (1109); second, user autonomy excuses the government of any responsibility for oversight and protection (1112); and third, self-help housing depoliticizes the issue in favor of technological solutions that offer no fundamental changes to the unequal political, economic, and social system (1118). While Burgess did acknowledge that Turner had some valid critiques of the Modern, heteronymous system of housing provision, he saw the ubiquitous implementation of Turner's theories among development institutions as deeply problematic. While self-help housing was clearly embraced by development agencies, it is important to note the critics that also contributed to the discourse.

Partially influenced by Turner, and even by his critics, early attempts to establish institutionalized housing policy in slums and squatter settlements focused around sites-and-services projects. During the 1970s and early 80s, these World Bank-initiated projects sought to provide "vacant tracts of urban and peri-urban land, which were divided into plots and provided with basic services, and then sold or leased to those who wished to build upon them (Kiddle, 884)." Clearly, this was an effort to formalize land acquisition and unleash legalized self-help building in the informal shantytowns that – in the eyes of governments, development officials, and the formal sector – were strangling Third World cities. But it soon became clear that sites-and-services projects could not meet the needs of squatters themselves – the poorest of the poor. Instead, they disproportionately assisted lower to middle income groups, those who could afford the serviced land that these projects provided (884). While sites-and-services were more cost effective (and debatably more socially effective) than comprehensive social housing efforts (like public housing high rises built in the West), the World Bank and other development agencies ran into problems with cost recovery and scalability (Pugh, 404). Sites-and-services efforts were too project-specific, and could not effect broad-scale institutional change.

In its updated and most current incarnation, slum improvement practices have focused around *participatory slum upgrading*, a process that mobilizes resources around key issues facing slum dwellers: infrastructure and basic resource improvement, land tenure security, and housing reinvestment. This policy is currently considered best practice among development agencies (UN-Habitat, 132). Essentially, participatory slum upgrading seeks to effect broader-scale change in cities of the developing world, rather than preoccupy itself with pre-identified sites-and-services projects that are limited in scope (Pugh 406). Pugh describes the approach as "wholesale-scale" development, as opposed to the previous "retail-scale" development (409). Slum upgrading does involve a comprehensive effort to incrementally provide improved basic services (i.e., piped water, electricity, paved roads and sidewalks, sewage, etc.) to neighborhoods, but the issue of land tenure security is also of central importance to this policy. One key actor in the land tenure debate is Hernando de Soto, a powerful Peruvian economist who holds sway in development agencies like the World Bank. He insists that Third World societies are "teeming with entrepreneurs" who need only to be granted legal access to their dead capital in order to turn it into liquid capital and increase their living standards (4). Without having adequate access to formal property systems (e.g., squatters' lack of legal land titles), the

poor cannot realize their potential. He calls this "legal apartheid," and advocates for a "capitalization process" that brings extralegal workers and property into a broader system of legal recognition (159). In legalizing the informal sector de Soto and others are hoping that poverty will be defeated through the enablement of formal markets. Like Turner, this policy emphasizes autonomous control of the development process along with slight government assistance – essentially *enablement*. Squatters and slum dwellers gradually receive basic services, formal land titles, and can eventually upgrade their own houses and land in order to make it profitable and more livable. Professionals (except for land title-granting officials and sometimes basic service providers) are largely absent from this housing policy.

Despite its status as best practice, *slum upgrading* has its fair share of critics as well. Alan Gilbert dismantles de Soto's populist idealization of full legal title-granting, arguing that his policy proposals conjure a myth too easily adopted by development agencies and governments. Legalization rarely hurts poor people, Gilbert admits, but he argues that the benefits are not as ideal as theorists like de Soto make them out to be. According to him, legalization and formalization of the informal sector deceptively provides an easy, cheap, and lucrative solution for politicians and the state (5), without fixing the true inequalities that form slums. In addition, Kiddle shows that the recent literature regarding slum upgrading suggests that *perceived security of tenure* is more important than full land title legalization (888). Like Gilbert, Kiddle does argue that secure tenure, and in some cases, legalization of tenure, is important in that it allows slum dwellers to reinvest in their housing and property without the fear of eviction. But he shows that development agencies, even the UN, are beginning to see the merits of incremental improvement and flexible security of tenure approaches that better protect squatters and slum dwellers, as opposed to de Soto's all-or-nothing approach. In another critique, Herbert Werlin, a practitioner that was highly involved with the World Bank during its early slum upgrading efforts in the 1970s and 80s, outlines the shortfalls of this policy and makes suggestions for more effective slum upgrading policies. He shows that many of the initial projects failed in the long-term: they have struggled with upgrading the difficult land on which slums develop; they are not able to disentangle already existing, complex tenure relationships; they have not provided sufficient maintenance and were initially upgraded cheaply; and most failed to adequately account for and harness community participation (1526-1530). He concludes that, instead of extensively limiting government, as Turner advocated, government

should be improved at all scales – combining "development from above with development from below (1533)" – in order to ensure the success of slum upgrading. These critiques indicate that slum improvement policies are far from fixed, and as of yet, seldom successful.

Clearly, there is already a dense infrastructure in place for carrying out slum improvement projects, even if these efforts are often controversial or not completely effective. Development agencies like the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and UN-Habitat are deeply involved in finding appropriate – and of course lucrative – solutions for improving slum conditions in the developing world. Any attempt to effect broad-scale change will probably emerge out of these institutions, or, at least, will need to be aware of the existing discourse and policy framework surrounding slum improvement practices.

Is There a Place for Architects in the Mix?

As architects seek to become more engaged in improving living conditions in the developing world, the profession will need to fully understand the existing discourse and current best practices before it asserts its "expertise." Again, Geoffrey Payne can offer us insight here:

> "The common claim by architects that they are the leaders of the built environment professions encourages them to see themselves as more influential in creating and managing the built environment. This in turn encourages an arrogance which, for instance, led to a senior World Bank staff member once refusing on principle to employ architects on international development projects involving housing and local development…The 'I know best' syndrome seems to sit particularly comfortably on the heads of architects and does their professional reputation no favours." (Payne, 13-14)

Despite the architectural profession's negative tendencies working in these contexts, however, there seems to be ample room to redefine and reapply the profession's skills.

A few examples of architects working in these contexts suggest a more appropriate role for the architect working on slum improvement projects. Hassan Fathy – one of the earliest architects to understand and account for self-help building techniques – sought sustainable, user-driven architecture, ideals most famously applied in his project at New Gourna, Egypt. While the project actually failed for a number of reasons, Fathy's role as an architectural professional working in this context can be instructive: "(He) saw the role of the architect as that of personal consultant yielding his or her training to the aspirations of the homeowner and to the demands of

local construction methods and materials (Architecture for Humanity, 43)." Like Fathy, the Indian architect Charles Correa became another early proponent of a more responsible, context-driven architectural practice. His Incremental Housing project in India created a loose, unfinished neighborhood environment in which growth and upgrading was to be determined by the residents themselves (Frampton and Correa, 152). This kind of project takes into account the patterns, needs, and desires of the poor, rather than imposing a particular architectural expertise or logic that neglects its context. We can see a more contemporary example in the work of Chilean firm Elemental, whose Quinta Monroy housing project significantly upgraded squatter settlements without actually moving the residents themselves. The architects' design consisted of a loose shell of concrete housing blocks, each house containing unoccupied space on either side where expansion and upgrading could occur as the users saw fit (Architecture for Humanity, 164-167). Teddy Cruz is, of course, another architect who seeks to understand the processes of slums and informal settlements in the developing world in his design interventions, rather than impose a finished product, as many architects would. His Manufactured Site in Tijuana proposes a "modest, flexible, prefabricated structural system of metal uprights, platforms, and stairs of vibrant colors (Feldman, 211)" that would help the inhabitants themselves continue to expand and reinvent their informal patterns of urbanization. Clearly, these are all modest design proposals that seek to complement – rather than replace – the local context.

The architects described above offer promising examples for the reeducation and redefinition of professionals working in slums of the developing world, but it remains unclear the effectiveness of working at this limited scale. Sure, these architects might suggest a fresh role for professionals working in these contexts, but do their designs really make a positive difference? And if so, to what extent? Large-scale social, economic, and environmental improvement in slums requires large-scale intervention on the level of international development agencies. Thus, architects need to become more involved in the development process, without over-asserting their "expertise," as Payne warns. On the other hand, we have to recognize that a cloud of suspicion surrounds these agencies and their "expert" consultants. Looking at Mumbai's National Slum Dweller's Federation, Arjun Appadurai shows that well-organized slum dwellers themselves are reconfiguring professional relationships by using the *knowledge of the poor* to leverage real, lasting change. It is a community-based, bottom-up approach that relies on global networking and slow, learning-by-doing practices (45-46).

If physical, environmental, and social conditions are really improving in this way (from the ground up), what does it mean for architects (essentially top-down practitioners) to work in these contexts? For one, I think it means that architects need to relinquish their "I Know Best" tendencies, and instead approach design and construction as a way to engage community participation. Architects, when they are able, should humbly join ranks with and learn from organizations like Mumbai's National Slum Dweller's Federation, rather than simply advise and instruct them. Yet, for all the optimism in bottom-up slum improvement, I think that there still remains a role for top-down developmental institutions, and architects can surely insert – responsibly and humbly, of course – their skills into these institutions by helping to design creative solutions to mounting problems.

Architects' increasing concern and engagement with these issues is a welcome change of mindset for the profession, but much work needs to be done before architects can be widely effective in slum improvement practices. In their essay "An Architecture of Change," Gamez and Rogers write:

> "What is needed is an architecture of change – an architecture that moves the field beyond the design of buildings and toward the design of new processes of engagement with the political forces that shape theories, practices, academies, policies, and communities (19)."

This paper supports this claim, but argues that an *architecture of change* must first internalize, and then build on, the research, scholarship, and policies already in place. In a lot of ways, architects are largely absent from the conversation surrounding slum improvement in the developing world. Before contributing to the conversation, the profession needs to understand the conversation. Along these lines, it is perhaps no coincidence that the architects mentioned above – those suggesting a potentially positive role for the profession – are all from developing countries in one way or another. Rather than assume expertise, architects from the West (where dominant discourses are established) should really look at these exemplars and study how they are producing an *architecture of change*.

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