Right to habitat and housing, social initiatives and civic platforms in cities and slums

Text by Xavi Codina
Editor of Newsletter

Over the last decades the understanding of international co-operation has evolved and / or changed several times. Nowadays, we must also redefine the strategies adopted as well as the role of the different participants and promoters of them, and their level of importance and involvement in the processes.

At the same time, at ASF-Int, while the role of an architect or planner involved in cooperation is based on their expertise, other aspects, such as the strength of the social relations between the participants, or the ability to understand and develop, or to just accompany, new participatory practices to promote social habitat production, become essential qualities.

The social demand for habitat generates unexpected movements and dynamics in the occupancy of unused buildings and public and private spaces in the city, which often demonstrate the ineffectiveness of current dialogue forums, or strategies. On the other hand, the informal city also shows that sometimes good organization and sustainability can be achieved in other ways.

Torre David, a 45-story office tower in Caracas which was abandoned following the death of its developer in 1993 and the subsequent crisis of the Venezuelan economy, is today the makeshift home of an organized community of more than 750 families that nevertheless are living illegally in a precarious situation as if it were a vertical slum. Such examples are references that force us to reconsider the formal channels of communication between the participants: government, technicians, developers, and citizens, including their current platform for dialogue and their commitment; to a new way of understanding and making social habitat production a real alternative from this point on.

In this issue, the motto or slogan, “Right to habitat and housing. social initiatives and civic platforms in cities and slums” inspired some of our collaborators to write about this reality and suggest some new ideas to reconsider and reflect upon, for all the people who read the ASF-Int Newsletter, including architects.

Participatory Spatial Practices: The Case of Movimento dos Sem Teto da Bahia, Brazil

Text and photos by Alexandre Apsan Frediani,
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When we think about participation in cities of the global South to address urban injustices, we often associate it to spaces of dialogue through community planning sessions or city-wide forums and councils. Such institutional spaces do offer great opportunity to influence public and private actors, advocating for a more accountability, transparency and just distribution of investments in cities. However, many groups have recently demonstrated increasing dissatisfaction with such formal, institutionalized and invited avenues of dialogue, as they have not led to fundamental changes on the way cities are being produced, therefore reinforcing inequalities. It has been argued that such conventional spaces of participation cannot restructure the relations of power governing decision-making in cities. As an alternative, housing social movements internationally have been redefining the concept and practice of participation by engaging in the direct production of spaces in cities. Such movements are occupying unused buildings and areas with the objective to give them new meanings and contest on-going market-led trends of urban development. One of these examples of spatially oriented participation is the Movimento dos Sem Teto da Bahia (MSTB), with whom ASF-UK collaborated for two workshops on participatory design in 2009 and 2010, both undertaken in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil.

MSTB was formed in 2003 out of the sentiment that existing well-established urban social movements were not engaging critically in their relationship with public actors, and therefore compromising the possibility to achieve significant change in urban development trends of the city of Salvador. It was felt that participation in the invited spaces of dialogue managed by public institutions (i.e. city councils and master planning consultation events) was not impacting on a change of direction, but rather providing institutional legitimacy to continue to not prioritize urban poor’s needs over market interests. As a result, MSTB decided to facilitate a series of strategic occupations in urban voids or unused buildings. The movement is now present in about 24 occupations where more than 5,000 people live. Under the motto “Organize, Occupy and Resist”, MSTB principles are “Autonomy, Fighting Spirit, Horizontality and Solidarity”.

The strategic outcomes of MSTB have been pursued through a series of different practices, including mechanisms to identify and manage occupations, as well as techniques to...
facilitate debates and foster critical thinking among members. For ASF-UK, the workshop was a great opportunity to learn about such spatial participatory practices and the way in which built-environment practitioners can support such groups in their on-going struggles. At the same time, the workshop’s methodology contributed to the movement’s interest to use design as a strategy to simultaneously address immediate needs, and enable discussion about underlying trends conditioning the realization of housing rights for all in Salvador da Bahia.

New professional skills needed to upgrade informal settlements and address urban sprawl

Text and photos by Dick Urban Vestbro

In many cities in the global South houses in informal settlements most often consist of one-storey buildings. This contributes to low densities. It is a challenge for architects and planners to address the problem of low densities and still provide for affordable housing. Informal settlements are often said to be overcrowded and dense. It is true that houses in slums and squatter areas are overcrowded in the sense that many persons live in the same room. The main reason is poverty. It is not true, however, that informal settlements in the global South are characterized by high density, measured in the number of rooms per hectare. In East African cities the floor area ratio (FAR) is often as low as 0.1 to 0.4, i.e. 1/20 to 1/5 as low as old cities in Europe. In old, consolidated informal settlements – where the process of densification has been going on for a long time – the FAR is 0.4 to 0.6. This is still far lower than necessary. The low densities contribute to urban sprawl. To some extent the consequences of urban sprawl are the same as in industrial countries, for instance appropriation of valuable agricultural land and high infrastructural costs per unit. In other respects there are considerable differences. While sprawl generally leads to longer distances to work, this factor is more severe in low-income cities, because poor people cannot afford costs for transport to job opportunities. For survival the urban poor need to be present where small-scale business may meet customers, or where temporary jobs are offered. An interesting study of urban sprawl has been carried out by architect Assumpta Nnaggenda-Musana, who studied the situation of informal settlements in Kampala, the capitol of Uganda. The researcher found that FAR in informal settlements are as low as 0.1 to 0.3. The fact that only 10 to 30 per cent of urban land is covered by buildings means that there is a great potential for densification. Such processes take place continuously, but no professional guidance is given.

Nnaggenda-Musana found that some of the existing house types are more appropriate for densification than others. She concludes that densification can be combined with incremental and participative house upgrading, following the enabling model of planning. Houses of the lowest quality are to be replaced by new ones.

She suggests that some of the new houses are designed to allow vertical extensions when residents can afford to build a second floor. The author shows how urban agriculture and Home-Based Enterprise can be maintained – or added – during the densification process, even when FAR are trebled.

Conclusions

In Sub-Saharan cities 60-85 per cent of the population live in informal settlements. Virtually all buildings in these areas are detached one-storey houses. The land coverage usually range from 10 to 40 per cent. The informal settlements are continuously being densified, a process without any type of professional guidance. If professionals would better understand the need for incremental upgrading and the possibility to promote compact house and neighbourhood types, then densification processes can take place while maintaining basic spatial qualities such as functional outdoor spaces, air circulation inside and outside buildings, and daylight in rooms.

It is desirable to promote house developments that are more land efficient. Plot dimensions should allow deeper blocks with few but more accessible roads. One should promote house types with wall-to-wall design and constructions that permit vertical extensions while still using local skills and simple building techniques. Nnaggenda-Musana’s model shows that it is possible to increase densities 3 to 5 times and still maintain ample space between buildings for household chores, and agriculture. If her model would be applied in all of Kampala’s informal settlements the city could double or treble in population without encroaching upon agricultural land around the city. Alternatively households may extend houses to reduce overcrowding (when incomes increase). Even after such densification FAR would be less than 1/3 or 1/4 of normal inner city densities in Europe.

References

By Colectivo Calafou

Calafou, a postcapitalist ecoindustrial village at the riverside of Río Anoia in Barcelona, started in July 2011 as a project within the organization Cooperativa Integral Catalana (CIC). The objective with the initiative is to convert an old industrial town into a space where the use of sustainable technologies can be implemented and developed. Calafou combines a housing collective in the old industrial spaces with informal education through courses and events. The project has been focusing on permaculture, degrowth, technological sovereignty, free software and assembly run processes. Inspired by experiences of self-organization in other cities, Calafou now face the challenge of bringing these principles beyond domesticity, towards implementation also in the community management such as lighting, sewerage, energy and waste management. Most persons in the diverse group of people involved with the project come from urban areas. These areas are often characterized by a service economy and culture of consumption - the very opposite of agriculture and the practice of self-construction. This transition becomes visible both in the design and development of Calafou.

People from various backgrounds who want to increase their knowledge in this field continuously join the project. Therefore, it’s necessary to clearly define the different spaces, enhance communication and ensure accurate and accessible documentation. The last-mentioned practice makes it possible for us to develop tools that can bring Calafou forward, for instance by reinforce the CTIT project. By sharing know-how in non-profit social networks this practice has also strengthened the social and political value of the project.

Working together with other projects, e.g. the one with ASF, gives us the opportunity to contrast the experiences from everyday life in the colony with more specific knowledge. We would therefore like to invite you to participate in the process of converting Calafou into a crossing between city and countryside. A Calafou that is a resilient transition space where the principle of self-management is being taken one step further and where we develop a model of living not only alongside the Río Anoia but also in the online community.

We’re especially interested in rehabilitation and reconstruction processes that would let us:

- Mitigate the degradation of places that are currently uninhabited
- Find cost-efficient ways of recycling;
- Increase the use of locally produced materials;
- Remake spaces that were originally made for working families so that they’re more comfortable, ergonomic and useful;
- Reconstruct the old infrastructure in order to become more resilient, efficient and sustainable.


By Beatrice De Carli

Challenging Practice, ASF-International independent learning programme, connected to ASF-UK’s action learning workshop Change by Design 2013 in Ecuador. Participants of Challenging Practice joined the workshop in Quito to undertake Stage 3 of the programme, which consists of a reflective field experience.

Promoted by ASF-UK, Change by Design is a series of international workshops exploring participatory design as a tool for advocacy and socio-spatial transformation in informal settlements in the urban South. This year’s edition of Change by Design took place in Quito, Ecuador, from the 10th to the 24th of August, and it was developed in collaboration with a wide coalition of local organisations, academics, activists and community groups working on issues of informal settlements upgrading and inclusive city planning. The workshop’s partners included IAEN Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales, Universidad Politecnica Salesiana, along with the Ecuadorian National Confederation of Barrios CONBADE, Comite de Desarrollo Los Pinos and the Gobierno Barrial de Atucucho.

Change by Design 2013 specifically aimed to support the work being carried out by local communities in two different neighborhoods: Atucucho, located on the northwestern slopes of the city, and Los Pinos, an emerging settlement situated in the city’s southern periphery. At the same time, the workshop also aimed to investigate the implications of the Buen Vivir (Good Living) national development plan on ongoing housing struggles in Quito.

While focusing on the development of a community plan for the neighbourhood of Los Pinos and of public space interventions in Atucucho, the workshop also offered the opportunity to pilot the third stage of ASF-International’s learning programme Challenging Practice. Three of the workshop’s thirty-five international participants had previously undertaken Stage 1 and 2 of Challenging Practice – the first consisting of an online theoretical introduction, the second of a live weekend seminar designed to enable participants to reflect on their knowledge from Stage 1 through case studies, facilitated discussions and interactive scenario building. Throughout the workshop, Challenging Practice participants were asked to develop a reflective journal, as a way to record and critically examine their own learning process, and to map the impacts of the ongoing work in Quito on their personal and professional development. Outcomes from the process will be collected and discussed with learners in the course of September 2013.
Representatives of the Colombian Government and the city of Medellin proclaim that “after many decades of being depicted as a place of violence and non-growth, Medellin had turned a new chapter” which it want to reveal to the world. 1

According to the UN-Habitat’s website “The City of Medellin is awarded for the successful implementation of three programmes: to reduce urban poverty, provide health care for children and give citizens a say in urban services” 2

We can even see how this effort is accomplished through several news headlines, a practical approach in promoting the city:
- The construction of a Metrocable and other infrastructure to the “comunas” 3
- The construction of a public library that allows the “comunas” battered and struggling youth to find a safe place to study, as an engine for social change. 4
- Outdoor escalators in the “comunas” to combat poverty and isolation. 5

However Medellin, the birthplace of personalities like the painter Fernando Botero, is still quite a paradox: on one side is a lush green city, vibrant, modern architecture, and the other is a place strong affected by violence and poverty with areas in absolute misery. At December 31, 2006, according to the Draft Development Plan 2008-2011 Municipality of Medellín, is estimated 602 168 households, of which 564 039 (94%) are urban, but 467 056 (77.56%) are in levels 1, 2 and 3 (“Comunas”), the residence of 85.14% of the population. 6

The right to housing is codified as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), article 25.1. Perhaps there is an intention, according to the UDHR principles, pointing in this direction by the local government. A hope for the good-hearted people of this convulsed and fascinating country. 8

“We hope that such projects can generate new settlements enhanced by friendly and environmentally practices, procreating employment and possibly, become an attractive place for visitors that strive for a genuine scientific knowledge about biodiversity and ecosystem”.9

Glossary: “Comunas” - apart from the general definition, township, is also used by the local population with a particular connotation for the slums, e.g. the “Comuna 13”, a neighbourhood with a historical dangerous reputation.


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WUF7 Seventh session of the World Urban Forum 2014, City of Medellin (Colombia):
ASF-Int is going to participate (Beatrice De Carli coordinator of ASF-Int participation)

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