Self-Help in Building:
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Summary

Self-help housing in Argentina is extensive, yet it lacks any official recognition as an alternative among building policies. The lower income families, moving from rural regions to poor urban areas, have to adapt to overcrowded living conditions with a very poor level of comfort. Yet, families create habits that they will carry with them, even when they are confronted with improved living conditions. Thus, a housing unit built by the Research Centre of Economical Housing turns out to be occupied quite differently from what was originally intended by the planners. The lack of matching between planned spaces and their actual use suggests that users should also be involved in the planning process during which their habitat is being restructured.

Résumé

L'autoconstruction joue un rôle important en Argentine; mais les autorités ne tiennent pas compte de ce phénomène, alors même qu'il pourrait représenter une alternative aux politiques officielles de construction. Les familles à bas revenus qui quittent les régions rurales pour se rendre dans des zones urbaines pauvres doivent s'adapter à la surpopulation de ces zones et au manque total de confort qu'elles impliquent. Et pourtant toute famille adopte certaines habitudes et les conserve, même lorsque ses conditions résidentielles s'améliorent. Par exemple, les unités d'habitation créées par le Centre de recherche pour un habitat économique sont occupées de manière bien différente de ce qui avait été prévu par les planificateurs. Le fait que les espaces ne sont pas utilisés dans le sens où ils avaient été conçus suggère que les utilisateurs devraient participer au processus au cours duquel leur habitat est restructuré.

1. Introduction

In the large cities of Argentina many people build their own housing. This self-help system may be seen from different angles, but it should certainly be viewed within the perspective of the growth and impoverishment of the Third World Cities. According to some observers it should not be encouraged, since it results in additional injustice towards these disadvantaged social groups whose problems should be solved by governmental means. Others believe that it is possible to reorientate individualist efforts towards more collective and organized practices, in order to create pressure fronts within the system. Attention would thus be brought to those matters which are not dealt with by decision-makers. Finally, there are those who see it as an unquestionable

reality that must be officially recognized and accepted, instead of being controlled and submitted to pressure from above.

Meanwhile, the dwellers build, administer, live in their houses without caring about whether what they are doing is accepted by planners, architects, public officials and politicians. Self-help building (autoconstruction) does produce resistances, as well as feelings of impotence and indifference. Yet, it is important to take into account what has been done in other countries, i.e., the potentials implied in autoconstruction. Self-help resources can be seen as an inexhaustible, although non-conventional, force that springs from its main actors - the dwellers. In this sense, they do not only express the working force of a specific social sector; they are a process and a product generated by groups who have their own survival system and their own dwelling culture.

This non-conventional system has its own rules, mechanisms and shortcomings. When we talk about "this system" we are not only referring to the dweller's participation in the building of his house (Turner & Fichter, 1976), but to a so-called self-promoted system that includes a series of more global aspects with regard to the occupation of urban areas, to the dwelling culture, to production and property systems, etc.

2 . Self-Help Building as a Process

In Argentina, there are three main house-building systems. Public housing built by the State, private sector housing implemented by building contractors and real-estate agencies, and self-promoted housing built by the people administering their own resources. It is estimated that self-promoted housing fluctuates between 50 and 60% of the total annual construction in the country. This percentage includes luxurious houses whose owners do not need any economic support; it also includes middle-class houses. But the greatest number of dwellings in this category are those of the disadvantaged who have to face the problem by themselves.

Within the most impoverished sectors of the Argentine demographic pyramid, a difference must be made between self-promoted houses (autoconstruction) sited on 'urbanized' land and the extralegal[1] self-promoted houses sited on non-urbanized fiscal or private land, where dwellers are intruders on someone else's property. We are discussing these lower sectors of the demographic pyramid below. They definitely affect the urban growth characterizing Argentine, Latin American and Third World cities. Furthermore, they are an expression of the gap between the poor and the rich.

2.1. Self-Help Housing in Córdoba

In a study carried out by the Research Centre of Economical Housing (CEVE) (Ortecho et al., 1986, 1989), we collected information concerning the self-promotion system practiced by a large sample within the biggest neighbourhoods of the city of Córdoba. We may summarize our findings :

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[1]   We are using the term extralegal instead of illegal to refer to something that does not go against the law but which is a response from the dweller who is outside the law.

2.1.1. The Plot

- The occupying families, mostly coming from rural areas, had bought their plot some 10 to 15 years before the date of the interview.
- After buying their plot, they had begun a housing construction and improvement process that was still on-going when we visited them. This process had been undertaken because the families had land tenure security.
- They had bought a plot with basic infrastructure; later on other services were added.
- They had decided where to live themselves, i.e., selected their neighbours and neighbourhood themselves.
- In most of the cases, the plot was bought in monthly instalments. After an average 1 to 2 years, the dwellers had or would receive the deed, thus becoming the owners.

2.1.2. The House

One or two years after buying the plot of land, the dwellers had built a small room without official plans. Later, they had "legalized" their situation by getting, not so much the professional's technical assistance, but his authorized signature to comply with the official regulations. Although around half of the people interviewed said that the houses were finished, our survey indicated that a very high percentage of them were unfinished. The construction system that was used in most cases was a traditional one - brick and sometimes cement blocks. The dwellers said (and we noted) that they had had difficulties in building the roofs and in solving sanitation problems. At the time of the survey, the houses had an average of 4 rooms; some had a garage (but no car) and shop. Dwellers had not resorted to official loans and were not interested in this type of compromise. Most of them had not registered in official housing programmes and some said that they did not deem it possible due to the instability of their income. Almost all of the people interviewed had built their house with the help of relatives or friends.

The houses had grown in size over the years, alongside with the growth of the families. Most of the houses were equipped with cookers, fridges, TV-sets and washing machines; a small number also had heaters. When asked how they would invest an "imaginary loan" of 10 to 15 million *australes,* the dwellers answered that they would invest it in housing. They added that the building of their own houses had given them security, self-esteem, pride and tranquillity.

2.2. Self-Help Building as a Resource

The satisfaction expressed by the dwellers brings us back to the theme of self-help building as a resource. Max-Neef (1986), a Chilean economist, says that the difference between conventional resources and non-conventional ones is that

> "while the former wear out as they are used, the latter are lost as they are not used. For instance, the power that is given means power that is lost; the money that is given means money no longer possessed, whereas the solidarity given means solidarity that grows; the knowledge given means expanding knowledge."

We may also say that, while conventional housing solutions wear out official or private resources, non-conventional housing proposals prove to be contagious and are picked up and expanded through informal networks that mobilize energies and material resources to unbelievable magnitudes.

We are now coming to a crucial point which may be formulated in the following questions. Should these resources be assimilated into our ideas on housing production, or should they be respected as such? Should they be seen as aiming only at increasing themselves?

Should we aim at accelerating the rhythm of the self-building process? Should we respect its spontaneous rhythm in accordance with the possibilities of the self-promoter?

Should we incorporate new and adequate technology? Should we respect the inclination towards traditional ones?

Would it be more convenient to keep the rationalization of a centralized administration? Should we preserve the administrative freedom taken by self-builders?

These are but a few questions and many more could be raised. However, the main point is to try and clarify which characteristics of the system should be maintained and which ones need to be modified or eliminated. In Argentina, unlike other Latin American countries, autoconstruction has not been absorbed as an alternative within the existing building policies. There has been a tendency in this direction over the last few years. However, the national and traditional housing policy supported by the State has fostered ambivalent expectations in the population. Dwellers are left oscillating between the hope of receiving a house as a gift (a perspective which is becoming more and more remote) and the hard reality of having to count only on their own efforts.

Today, in a country facing a crisis and where the State's resources are extremely limited, the decision-makers are bound to recognize self-building as a non-conventional resource that is to be encouraged without distorting its essence (Berretta & Ortecho, 1982; Hardoy & Satterthwaito, 1987).

3. Self-Building as a Product

In a slum school of Córdoba, the school canteen system was imposed by the government; food-portions were distributed in the peripheric settlements by the provincial government according to a nutritional plan.

The teachers were very surprised to notice that a few days after the canteen system was implemented, some children were absent from school without obvious reason. On visiting them at home, the teachers discovered that the children were suffering from indigestion, due to the size of the food portions. Having overcome their indigestion, the children went back to school. Some of them showed an improvement in scholastic performance. During the summer vacation, when the school was closed, the teacher visited some of the families and realized that many parents had serious difficulty in satisfying the nutritional level that the children had become accustomed to through the school canteen system.

This anecdote relates to food, but it can also be applied to housing. In the same way as malnutrition generates abnormalies and deficiencies in the organism, while creating nutritional habits, so the individuals and their families have become accustomed

to certain habits and levels of consumption with regard to the use of spaces. This is clearly seen when a family moves from a precarious house to a dwelling unit designed by architects whose models refer to higher levels of consumption.

Within a project sponsored by the Research Centre of Economical Housing, we built housing units designed for a higher social sector in a neighbourhood of Córdoba. We later went back to see what had happened to them.

The good relationship that existed between us, the technicians, and the families that had participated in the construction of the houses, made it possible for us to inspect the house in detail. At first sight there was nothing to be surprised about. The houses had been modestly equipped and, in some cases, improvement work of masonry had been done. Eventually, furniture and electrical domestic appliances such as TV-sets, blenders, fans, etc., had been bought. Everything seemed 'normal'. The way the families commented on their residential change was flattering for the planners. Some families pointed to the fact that they now had more time for work, since they had water inside their houses and did not have to carry it from outside. Others said that they did not know any more whether it had rained during the night, as their previous zinc roofs had been exchanged for solid concrete ones. We then prepared questions that would allow us to detect whether the spaces that we had designed to fulfil certain functions served their purpose or not. We wanted to check how activities such as sleeping, relaxing and evacuating fitted in the spaces allocated them on the plan.

We were startled by our discoveries. Having reconstructed the daily use of space, we found out that kitchens were not being used; that bathrooms had been replaced by precarious privies at the back of the lot; that preparation of meals was being performed outside, etc. These findings were quite frequent.

When moving from rural regions to poor urban areas, marginal dwellers certainly have to adapt to different living conditions with respect to the quality and quantity of square metres available. This is, at first, a cultural shock. They are forced to live in a place where intimate, private, familiar and social spaces are overlapping and confused. The dwellers we were working with had now undergone a second shock: our 'architectural' proposals imposed on them a spatial structure based on a different social class standard (mainly our own). Would it be possible for us to become aware of our professional limitations? Could we have avoided them this second shock? We do think so.

4. To Go Back to the Sources...

This experience made us aware of the necessity of learning more about the inhabitants' "dwelling manners". In order to achieve that aim, we returned to the houses they had built themselves in the first hand. We thus learned that their average size of 14.59 m^2, compared to their occupation rate, gave each person 2.58 m^2. This figure is very different from international standards that fluctuate between 14 and 20 covered square metres per person.

In the old houses, rooms were mainly for shelter. These 2.58 m^2 per person are difficult to imagine when you have to live in them. As the saying goes, "when we cover our heads with a small blanket, the feet remain uncovered, and the other way round". The same happens in self-built houses, since their dwellers carry out activities under cover only when the climate is very severe, or when they go to sleep or when they want to protect tings; the rest of the activities are always performed outside, even

physiological evacuation which is done in roofless and aseptic privies slightly isolated from other people's curiosity. This intensive use of open space is fully justified in the summer. It is better to have lunch under the shade of a tree rather than under a zinc roof. But it is not quite as justifiable in the winter. Yet, open spaces are being used in very low temperatures.

These examples are intended to show how, for the dwellers, acquired habits and the new spatial structure proposed by our programme were clashing. The lack of correspondence between the spaces we planned and their actual use thus becomes obvious. We would therefore recommend a progressive programme, designed to satisfy dwelling needs, and in which the users would participate. Within the programme, dwellers would take part in the elaboration of priorities and in the restructuring of their basic habitat.

To sum up, our experience with self-help products and self-help processes leads us to ask the following questions:

Do we really think that we are capable of understanding people's needs and motivations?

Are we ready to listen to them? Are we trying to speak for them or are we trying to enable them to speak for themselves?

Are we able to follow the dynamics of cultural behaviour in our changing societies? How are such dynamics affected by the process of increasing poverty in Third World countries?

How can we, as technicians, realize that we ought to teach people how to improve their residential conditions? But also that we ought to learn from them in order to acknowledge their community identity?

Answers are being sought by testing different solutions. This process is bound to develop and expand. In the words of a homeless dweller, "3'000'000 houses are lacking in Argentina. We are the number, we are the hope".

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