Social Strategies Building the City: a Re-conceptualization of Social Housing

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ABSTRACT

Social housing in Latin America can become a model for housing solutions and inclusion for refugees in the current European context, especially in Germany with the massive influx of displaced people.

Social housing from the Latin American experience, could be seen as complex system integrated by social, economic, political and city making processes. Practices in the social production of the habitat process provide clues for an alternative way of approaching housing solutions for the disadvantaged in which several dimensions coexist. The social dimensions ensure the creation and strengthening of social capital through self-management and mutual-aid. Social capital at the same time is the platform for the development of a social economy based on collective effort and collective benefit. These social dimensions are encouraged by social organizations that have achieved access to adequate housing, social mobility and the right to the city through their social activism.
On the contrary, wrong approaches resulting in homogenization, lack of participation in the process and disconnection from urban life are the fundamental causes for exclusion, decline of neighborhoods and stigmatization of the inhabitants impairing their opportunities to integrate both socially and culturally into their environment. The cost of recovering ghettos and marginalized communities is even higher in the long term than investing in comprehensive urban strategies to build cohesive communities today.

In Europe, especially in Germany, the wrong approaches could mistakenly being repeated with the refugee crisis. Nevertheless, housing for refugees could be instead a comprehensive and collaborative process of development, capitalizing in the social resources for community building, neighborhood regeneration and integration of migrants into society.

KEYWORDS: Social Housing, self-management, cooperation, inclusion, right to the city

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Introduction

Social action is fueled by personal expectations, dreams and of course needs that has to be fulfilled. Collective action combines the capacity of recognition of the personal and collective achievements, the self-esteem expressed in the capacity for change and the potential to overcome difficulties along with the capacity of organization and management of resources, with the main purpose to achieve collective objectives. Housing on the other hand is not only a roof or the place to live, but also the place to reproduce labor force and the construction of emotional and identity ties. Housing is one of the most important human needs and rights which provides the conditions for de facto access to citizenship.

Consequently, “social” “housing” should be understood with all the complexities and the relationship between both terms, “social” the collective and human capital behind self-produced processes and community building (which are most of the time overlooked) and “housing” as the platform to enable urban, social and economic change.

Social Housing the re-conceptualization

‘Social’ housing in my approach is conceived as a mechanism to build community and empower citizens in disadvantaged situation to evolve in an environment that would enable them to overcome social segregation and poverty. Social housing encircles the construction of dynamics and the environment beyond the house, which includes several human conditions such as culture, traditions, and other collectively learned values. Thus, habitat would be a more appropriate term referring to Enrique Ortiz’ concept (within his theory of the “social production of the habitat”), where housing is part of a broader environment in which human physical and personal needs are in balance with the context. Habitat is a cultural product in which history and culture articulates with the social context and its environment. It involves a cultural and even an emotional relationship between the dweller and its habitat leaving traces in the urban fabric. It is a living entity that is constantly evolving through time, adapting to the necessities of their occupants and the transformation of the neighboring environment.

In current times the discussion surrounding the sustainable character of cities is not so much...
about technologies, but about how social strategies are shaping the urban and social fabric. In this sense cooperation and self-management represent potential tools for the society and the economy of the future. Self-organized social groups with the aim of transforming and building their habitat, their economy and their quality of life are the ones paving the way towards a new city making methodology.

In this sense, references in Latin America are again experimenting grounds for the conception and construction of social housing. The successful experiences of housing cooperatives with self-management and mutual-aid values could serve as alternative models of housing encouraging collective appropriation, redefinition of ownership and sense of belonging. By adjusting policy frameworks to the new realities of cities, these policies could enable the organized population to not only access decent housing, but also to access urban land and centralities.

One of my case studies, 'Monteagudo' housing project, was the result of the cooperative movement developed in Buenos Aires after the economic and political crisis from 2001. Cooperatives in the context of this research in Buenos Aires, are established as a channel to achieve social and economic transformation. The social organizations based in cooperatives are conceiving social housing as the medium to get included in the city and its systems.

The cooperative and the movement as a whole have achieved several goals. Supported by a legal framework, the production of social housing in 'Monteagudo' went beyond expectations. The cooperative trained workers and provided job opportunities to 700 workers, allowed socially disadvantaged people to access urban land along with quality of design housing inside the city of Buenos Aires, in sum was a process of development of social economy and restitution to the right to the city.

Cooperation is then an important instrument for accessing decent housing as well as gaining the right to the city.

Even though there are successful experiences like the one in Argentina or Uruguay, not all the social collectives trying to access decent housing though cooperation has had positive results. The policy framework supporting these processes is essential to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of the projects. In May 2015 was completed the eviction and relocation of the residents who had appropriated the infamous Torre de David in the city center in Caracas, Venezuela. Their self-organization system was based in a housing cooperative. Through this structure - with self-management as the main strategy - from 2007 the residents of the tower achieved to provide basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation, safety and maintenance to almost every floor of the tower. At the same time the self-produced environment provided the space for the development and reproduction of micro-entrepreneurships while enjoying centrality. There was a micro cosmos of decision-making power based on direct democracy and self-determination.

However, in a process that lasted only few months, the 3,000 residents of the tower had to leave their dreams and investment behind. Although there was a Law of Cooperatives enacted by Hugo Chavez in 2001, there was no clear legal framework to ensure the ownership of the individual dwellings in the squatted tower. The solution wasn’t much better either. The tower residents were moved to the typical barrack style social housing layout in the outskirts of the city with no centrality, lacking the same social control of the tower since there are mixed with other communities and under government control which denies their decision-making power.

Not only the physical context is defining housing problems and solutions, but a range of political, socio-cultural and economic aspects, which are essential components linked to the question of habitat. Depending on the approach, the production of housing would unfold its benefits as a city-making asset with NO economic and social COST, or on the contrary it could become very expensive to cover its consequences over time.
Homogenization (lack of roots and identity), lack of participation in the process (no decision-making) and disconnection from urban life are the fundamental causes for stigmatization of neighborhoods and its inhabitants, impairing their opportunities to integrate both into their environment and the economy. Building social housing in the periphery of cities has proven detrimental for social and economic development, and the main cause of segregation. When social housing is disconnected from the city fabric creates also a condition of social fragmentation, which immediately stigmatized its residents as a minority group. It constrains the social interaction with the rest of the society resulting in the loss of quality of life. Consequently, the cost of recovering ghettos and marginalized communities is even higher in the long term than investing in comprehensive urban strategies to build cohesive communities in the present.

Furthermore, different social housing approaches have deeply affected low-income communities due to mass construction, either high-rise buildings such as 23 de Enero in Caracas or standardized housing such the problem of the “people with roof” in Chile or México were millions of houses were built in cheap land far away from the centers of employment, education, recreation, etc. (better said centralities). These construction “packages” rarely respond to the social needs of the population or to the territorial fabric in which they are inserted. For Fernando Murillo these interventions respond to their own logic of city making defined by individual desires and private interests (architects/governments/developers) than a response to the collective rationality. Often the housing typology is not only disconnected from the urban fabric, but it also doesn’t correspond to the identity of the population. In any case the urban poor and the migrant communities are always the ones affected by the negative implications of wrong housing approaches.

Far from the successful social production of habitat processes, the mentioned negative approaches in Latin America from the last century could mistakenly being repeated in Europe with the recent influx of refugees. A total of 1.1 million people were registered as asylum-seekers in 2015 in Germany only. There have been different reactions from city administration, regional governments and local residents to face the crisis. However, the overwhelming situation has resulted in the improvisation of camps not only in the inner cities neighborhoods, but most worrying in the periphery of cities. What seems more critical is the consolidation of the trend to house the “undesirable” where they can’t be seen. Poverty has been always uncomfortable to governments as well as citizens, resulting on radical approaches with the aim to eradicate the poor (but not poverty) from cities and consolidate the invisibility of poverty.

From the research seminar “Inclusive Neighborhoods” – that I co-organized in the framework of the Master of Urban Systems- I was able to draw conclusions from the most relevant student’s findings. By the end of 2015 the city of Essen in the German dense region of the Ruhr, accommodated 4.721 refugees. The city made available 32 refugee accommodations distributed in re-habilitated buildings and tent camps in the city sports fields. The students analyzed four tent camps in neighborhoods close to the city center and in an isolated neighborhood, and one study was made in one of the re-habilitated buildings. The results showed that the conditions and location of the refugee camps affected the behavior and relationship of refugees within the refugee camp, the relationship of the refugees with the local residents and the neighborhood, and the attitude of the local residents towards the refugees.

The conditions of fragmented urban fabric, isolation from central areas and disconnection from the social actors, produced several negative effects (fear, distrust, and feeling of being punished). In contrast the refugee camps located in dense served urban areas offered both the possibility to be in direct contact with the city facilities and an array of different social
actors. The effect was the opposite; the refugees that were interviewed expressed their gratitude and their desire to become part of the German society.

Although these central neighborhoods are also socially problematic (due to the segregation of already settled migrant communities, they offer a very valuable regeneration potential. The capitalization of efforts in both existing and new migrant communities for the renovation of buildings for new social housing and the reconstruction of urban shared spaces. Through training, capacity building and empowerment the existing vacant houses and unused infrastructure could become the mean for integration in the society, not only socially, but also economically as being part of the productive system.

Unfortunately, the reality is different. Divorced from these principles the city of Essen invested 35.183 Million Euros in 2015 for the construction of barrack style buildings for a “multifunctional temporary shelter” in an isolated former industrial site located in a protected green area south of the city. The nearest urban center is in a distance of 2km and can’t be easily reached by foot or public transportation. The refugees arriving to this center will not have the same opportunities to exchange with the local population, being included in all the activities planned for the refugees, choose where to get their language courses, get familiar with the city or just have the freedom that being in the city provides.

If the right approaches are not implemented on time, the housing solution for the refugees will be only expenses in the present with high costs in the future. Therefore, it is critical to understand the consequences of segregating migrant and low-income communities. The experiences being documented about the different effects of integration and its relationship with city life, should be taken as models to follow. Housing when integrated into the dense compact urban fabric facilitates access to jobs and economic opportunities, access to services, recreation and social facilities. Thus, when housing in general is integrated in the city systems including policy frameworks ensure the right to the city. The self-produced, self-managed housing projects like the housing cooperatives in Buenos Aires are available models to deconstruct and transfer the most relevant principles to the European context.

England is already experimenting with such schemes. They have acknowledged how self-production of housing gives future residents a sense of ownership and influence that is rarely achieved in conventional social housing. Residents are involved every step of the process from the conception, design and construction (with the proper technical assistance). They get to interact with their neighbors before they move in, and ultimately undertake collective management and maintenance. The project also gives self-builders the opportunity to pick up new skills. This kind of approach not only provides housing opportunities, community building and social empowerment, but also capacity building base for their integration in the economy of cities.

Conclusion

As governments, professionals and society in general are falling behind numbers of the people in need for solutions, the urban poor and disadvantaged communities are taking into their hands the role of planning, building and managing their habitat. When a new approach or solution is in discussion within the professional groups, another wave of immigrants is arriving somewhere around the world overwhelming the system. In developing countries, it is easier to find gaps in the systems and live in the margins of the formal structures. But what about Europe and the new waves of refugees.

It doesn’t mean solutions should come from top down mechanisms, anyways the rigid bureaucratic system never moves at the same pace of transformations. Furthermore, it is common for government authorities to have no understanding of how deficient interventions affect people’s lives defining the future problems of cities. In this sense, building social housing is no longer the sole responsibility of governments, architects or even only by the
dwellers; it is instead a comprehensive and collaborative process. Social housing should be part of a process of collective development; it must capitalize in the social resources for the construction of community, citizens and individual capacities. The social dimension of housing contributes directly in the construction of the city, neighborhoods and the corresponding economies. Inclusion is having equal opportunities to be citizens, having the same opportunities for housing, jobs, education and recreation. Sharing the same urban space is relevant for their share and contribution to city making. Thus, cities must be designed, built and managed to include everyone.

In sum, it is not a matter of just providing a roof, but developing people’s capacities through the production of social housing for the future urban and social development.

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