

## Outline: LOW/NO COST HOUSING – Conference

*“The architecture of the large city depends essentially on the solution given to two factors: the elementary cell and the urban organism as a whole. The single room as the constituent element of the habitation will determine the aspect of the habitation, and since the habitations in turn form blocks, the room will become a factor of urban configuration, which is architecture's true goal. Reciprocal, the planimetric structure of the city will have a substantial influence on the design of the habitation and the room.”*

Ludwig Hilberseimer, Grossstadtarchitektur, 1927

This capacity to reduce problems to their essentials and find solutions was exemplary for a certain period, and the varied production and creation of possible housing solutions in architecture and urban design is still today a source of inspiration. As the world urbanizes, city populations grow and rising housing costs make it harder for low-income people to afford homes. Congestion and long commutes have become the accepted reality in cities that separate wealthy and poor neighborhoods, a phenomenon that produces fragmented environments and asymmetric societies. The costs of materials, resources, creative energy, and time necessary to realize low-cost housing solutions differ around the world, and have changed over time; it is clear that all expenses are costs, but not all costs are expenses. The challenges and social stresses that often lead to unrest are well documented, but too often ignored.

Cities have always been places where contradictions and conflicts are most visible, and where forces of development and potential solutions converge. Influential ideas concerning architecture, urban design, and town planning that developed during the inter-war and post-war period—shaped by extreme political, social, and economic transformations—still dominate the way much of the academy thinks about housing today. But it is also clear that over time many alternative views have entered the debate, often from local or vernacular sources, concerning issues of quality standards, norms, and other dimensions that affect the way practitioners understand and design living quarters in low-income areas. All of these developments demand reassessment under the pressures of the large influx of people in cities in developing regions, as they do in developed cities, where refugees and other migrants strain the built environment and the design profession's capacity to deliver solutions that promise a real impact.

Our urban age, and the glaring need for housing development at unprecedented speeds that it demands, has become a global challenge for society at large. Further, urbanization has too often proven to provide only hopeless congestion and anti-urban responses. Concentrations of deprivation and isolation from the rest of the city have condemned generations of low-income areas to entrenched poverty. This great challenge remains largely unsolved. Regardless of the architecturally successful cases of new housing that do exist, worldwide the most vulnerable groups of citizens remain in constant conflict with ballooning land values and developers' short term interests.

Despite the best intentions of those struggling to build inclusive cities that can integrate and empower citizens, the reality in many urban areas remains unequal. Social housing is not being delivered on a sufficient scale, and so other forms of organizing for the provision of affordable dwellings must provide solutions that will make slums and ghettos an exception, rather than the rule of urban development in

the 21st century. This conference seeks to identify and present practical solutions, so that we can start a debate on how best to deliver on the promise of inclusive cities that serve as places of opportunity for all their citizens.

By offering new and innovative ideas and designs for low-cost housing, and distinguishing between the varied local factors and conditions of housing, land tenure, and living standards around the world, this conference will provide an opportunity to present, discuss, and share what it means to live and work in cities across the globe today. It will provide an important platform for the voices of makers, architects, urban designers, and researchers, and offer a forum to bring together their knowledge. The fact that both wealthy and poor urban areas have been denied the positive aspects of urbanity is a fact. We must establish some understanding of what it might mean to escape the intolerable condition of living in cities where residents cannot enjoy the advantages of dwelling in the center nor the periphery.

The necessity for improving urban quality is real. The coming expansion in emerging economies from 2 billion to 4 billion people, accompanied by a tripling of the physical footprint of urban areas from 200,000 to 600,000 square kilometers makes an aggressive rethinking of quality standards indispensable. In many of our cities, from Paris to Caracas, the demand for reconstructing an entire cityscape of social housing, amplified open spaces, and communal facilities—parks, kindergartens, schools, and workplaces—will drive the success of our contemporary, inclusive model of urbanization.

Innovations and solutions in formal urban environments allow for relatively informal urban layouts and a corresponding freedom of architectural expression. Sometimes, it is the presence of certain archetypes of housing which act as an architectural base element, while in other cases land and site constraints, limited resources, and building materials (all of which we are interested to identify) demand adaptation. We must imagine a wider taxonomy of what housing can be in an increasingly urban world; a taxonomy that responds not only to conditions resulting from organic growth, but also to the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees in recent years. This contemporary challenge and others raise serious doubts about our capacity to provide appropriate housing solutions under the standards that we set for building for citizens in need. In light of all this, an idea of informalizing the formal and formalizing the informal has become a credo that we deeply believe can help our profession do just that.

The Low/No Cost Housing Conference is hosted and organized by the ETH Wohnforum—ETH CASE at the ONA Building of ETH Zurich in Zurich-Oerlikon. The two-day conference is developed in collaboration with the Hub on Informal Urbanism of UNI (UN-Habitat's Partnership with Universities Worldwide). It is supported by the ISTP (Institute of Science, Technology and Policy), D-ARCH (Faculty of Architecture of ETH Zurich, Chair of Architecture and Urban Design, Profs. Alfredo Brillembourg & Hubert Klumpner) and NSL (Network City and Landscape). Its results and insights will lead to a joint statement, submitted to the executive office in preparation of Habitat III in Quito (17.–20. October).

Prof. Alfredo Brillembourg & Prof. Hubert Klumpner  
(Zurich & Capetown, December 2015)

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