

Housing the Poor: The Unsuccessful Search for a Philosophy of Development

Because of a growing discontent in the younger generation of designers, at the impersonal approach of bureaucracy and “establishment” architects to housing, we thought it a good idea to have three young professionals articulate their views on the recent Consultation on Low Cost Housing, held in Delhi. We suggested they also set down a criteria for mass housing. Both their contributions are published here. Their criteria comes as a response to this unanswered question : if middle class needs and preferences are given every consideration why isn't a similar concern shown while designing for the poor? Why this class distinction? The view of M. N. Ganju, Romi Khosla and Vinod Gupta is that unless a badly needed sense of excitement and involvement is generated in those who are being designed for, our housing schemes have little chance of revolutionising the housing situation in the country.

Editor

The National Building Organisation together with the U.N. Regional Housing Centre organised a National Consultation on Low Cost Housing in November, The participants included representatives of State Housing Boards, HUDCO, CBRI, SERC, ISI, TCPO, DDA and Rural Housing Wings, as well as a few private architects and planners. As might have been expected of such a gathering, there was a great diversity of views expressed. One got the impression that the speakers outnumbered the listeners.

For the benefit of the delegates, an exhibition of some 36 low cost houses was also organised where one could see the solutions presented by various private and government organisations to solve the problem of mass housing. Rumours were afloat that many of the houses actu-

ally cost far more than the official figures.

Most of the houses demonstrated little more than superficial technical solutions for reducing the amount of materials used, and that mainly by omission of what normal people would consider necessary finishes. There were a few structural innovations which would have been far more appropriate for large engineering works than for small houses. One failed to understand why so much importance was given to reducing the quantity of cement and steel in these small houses when they could have been built without using these materials in the first place.

The most striking feature of the exhibition was the poor site layout potential. This aspect was highlighted in the discussions where it

was stressed that housing layouts need to be organised so that the open spaces adjoining the houses become meaningfully integrated with the indoor spaces. Sadly, the problem of mass housing for the poor seems to have been restricted to providing badly finished boxes which have nothing to do with the life-style of the inhabitants. A pessimistic note was struck by most of the official delegates who felt that housing has not been given the priority it deserves in the 5th Five Year Plan and therefore adequate financial resources are not available to solve the problem. However, there was an optimistic minority which saw the solution inherent in the resource of the efforts of the people to be housed. They stressed that processes must be evolved to tap this abundant resource.

**...one failed
to understand
why so
much importance
was given
to reducing
the quantity of
cement and
steel in
these small houses
when they
could have been
built without
these materials
in the
first place ...**

It became clear that the normal practice of constructing complete houses by the official agencies has failed to produce the desired results because of high overhead expenses (as much as one third of the cost of the house) which have become endemic in the functioning of these agencies. There is therefore an urgent need to review the role of these agencies so that there is a change in attitude towards development. Housing should not be viewed as a product, but as a continuing and evolving process.

Given the poor standard of the design of public housing put up by the Housing Boards, what one had always suspected was at last acknowledged by architects and planners at the consultation that they have no idea as to how the poor really live and what is it that

makes their home. And yet, some persisted that a committee should be formed to prepare a few -typical house designs that could be used by Housing Boards all over the country.

The role of technology and research was also discussed. As usual lengthy papers were presented on economy of materials through lower specifications and higher technology. There was a surprisingly large number which felt that this research has not been need-based. The poor who build their houses with easily and cheaply available local materials can never hope to really benefit from a technology inappropriate to their life-styles. Very little attention has been paid to making better use of humble materials like mud and thatch, which even today are most commonly used building materials.

One area of thinking which was conspicuous by neglect was the problem of providing infrastructural facilities for housing developments. Delegates did mention the high costs incurred at present in providing water, power and sewage disposal systems. But there were no suggestions from the engineers on how to bring down these costs and how to evolve new systems of energy management which could recycle the sewage and wastes to generate power and water. The reason for this may be that engineers and planners have dissociated themselves from the wider environmental issues.

In retrospect the Consultation was divided into two camps, one that thought the answer lay in promoting more sophisticated technology and the other which felt that technological solutions should be subordinate to a philosophy of development which was sympathetic

to the cultural and real economic needs of the people.

The only issue on which there was unanimity was the need to establish a socially-just policy. It was agreed that many of the problems of housing the poor are a result of the exploitation of land resources by unrestrained commercial forces.

In the final analysis the most hopeful approach seemed to be in finding effective methods for ensuring the people's participation in the housing process and thus generating a kind of housing revolution.

Vinod Gupta
Romi Khosla
M.N. Ganju

**... as much
as one
third the cost
of a house
goes towards
supporting
the high overhead
expenses of
official agencies
... there
is an urgent
need to
review the role
of these
agencies and
for a change
in attitude towards
the entire Process
of development ...**