Claiming the City

Civil Society Mobilisation by the Urban Poor
Securing local ownership, and the architect’s dilemma

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The problem of the poor inhabitants of the Code Riverside was evidently not architecture, but... the common feelings of people that were rejected and abandoned; the everyday feelings of people that lived with permanent fear of being swept away one day by the capitalistic policies of development and modernization (YB Mangunwijaya, in accepting the Ruth and Ralph Erskine Award, 1995).

Architects and community

There are new forms of urban governance emerging in Asian cities. Ongoing slum upgrading projects and disaster rehabilitation work is currently driven by community needs and initiated by grassroots groups. Over time, community upgrading has evolved in scale from small individual projects to providing city-wide solutions, leading in some cases to systemic change in urban development, an inclusive practice which involves local governments and civil society groups. Unlike commonly perceived development work, these projects and communities are globally connected through transnational networks of community activists and architects. This is evident in the networks of the Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA) and the Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) which operate across the global South (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2012).

The urban poor have shown their ability to drive change in their own communities. They were able to share lessons amongst themselves and learn from each other. The ongoing process demands stronger support from professionals, including planners and architects. What can we contribute to this movement? There are no instant answers. One of the reasons is that today’s architects belong to the group of professionals which are...
not well-equipped to work with communities. Architecture education is more accustomed to a top-down delivery system; such is the character of the industry. Planners are trained to work with formal institutions or with the authorities. However, firsthand experience in unconventional situations – such as in the aftermath of a disaster, at evictions, or other instances of housing crisis – may provide hints on the ways of working with the community. From his early career working with poor communities in Peru, John FC Turner reflects on a process called deschooling and re-education (Turner and Fichter 1972). Such personal experience often had long-term impacts on the architect’s career path.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest among architecture schools and firms to respond to the three areas of today’s housing crisis: proliferation of slums in urban areas; communities affected by disaster; and the energy or resource crisis. Many from Europe put Asia in their itinerary. Their peers in the region have also used their technical expertise to work in communities, diverse in scale and context, covering issues from heritage conservation, appropriate technologies, participatory planning, to urban upgrading (ACHR 2010), even going further to contribute to community-driven change in cities (Luansang et al 2012). A regional platform for exchange and collaboration between community architects, builders, artisans and other professionals is the Community Architects Network (CAN), which for the last three years has been actively organising exchanges, workshops, documenting processes, and publishing practical guides.

Indeed, recent attention to community and towards a more democratic architecture and urban planning is perhaps the highest since the debates started almost four decades ago, in the context of third-world development and post-colonialism. Down to fundamentals, the debates were mostly around two things: ‘which architecture’ will work for the poor (Fathy 1976)? And how to let the poor have ‘their own’ house and architecture (Turner 1976)? Nearly four decades later, architecture has barely gotten any closer to the poor, while the main context has shifted from post-colonial development to globalisation and the expansion of the neo-liberal economy.
A common goal among architects, if there is such a thing, is that we want the work to be grounded in the local community, that the built environment will function as intended, that it will be taken care of, that the building will last, and that it will be appreciated and loved. A sense of belonging in the community would ensure the best future for the built structure – which has led to the very question: how to sow and nurture ownership? The loftiest towers rise from the ground, says a Chinese proverb. Therefore, the following illustrations were drawn from early processes of intervention, with focus on the aspects of community and social capital.

Critical needs in Aceh after the tsunami

In the Aceh province of Indonesia, on the morning of December 26, 2004, a tsunami wiped coastal cities and fishing villages to a level of ground zero. In the worst hit areas, such as in Banda Aceh and its periphery, less than 40 percent of the population survived. Many survivors lost the entirety of their family and were left solitary. Weeks after the catastrophe, many of them still lived in refugee camps away from their home village.

In March 2005, the national government promulgated a ban that prohibits reconstruction within a 2 km strip along the shore. The policy created insecurity among survivors about whether they could go back to their village or not. Suspicion grew amongst them that the policy was driven by the private sector’s lobby. Indeed, land that is near the sandy beach of Banda Aceh is vulnerable to become prey to commercial speculation (Klein 2007). The survivor’s sense of tenure security was aggravated.

The non-governmental organisation of Urban Poor Linkage³ (UPLINK) accompanied survivors to return to their village to secure their land. A far-sighted objective materialised through cleaning, enumerating, and mapping all that was spared from the tsunami; they collected demographic and spatial data together, and built a database. Unlike most NGO officers, UPLINK community organisers were casual in their dress and familiar with the lifestyle of the community they served. Instead of riding SUVs, big four-wheels that sometimes intimidate, they would go by motorcycle. Together, they shared meals, pitched tents, opened common kitchens, and built temporary shelters from materials scavenged from tsunami debris. While the work fulfilled the basic needs, the time spent together created trust amongst each other.
Although tsunamis in coastal Aceh is a periodical event with a three to four centuries cycle, fisher-folk communities are settled, cultivate economic networks and social life. It is also common for them to bury deceased family members within their family compound. Sense of belonging to the place is strong. Thus, it is unthinkable to expect these fisher-folk communities to follow the new regulation and willingly relocate to a higher area. Not to mention that it would be ridiculous to see fishermen commute every day to go fishing. Due to lack of support from the other areas, the policy was then revoked.

After the tsunami in Aceh, the common critical need is clear: a replacement house for each family. It is human nature to survive, but these fisher-folk communities wanted to regain their life just as before the catastrophe and as soon as possible. To let this happen, UPLINK helped the 23 villages to create Jaringan Udeep Beusaree (JUB), or the ‘living together network,’ within which in two years more than 3,500 houses and village infrastructures were built (Fitrianto 2011). When external organisations were able to provide support for these goals, reconstruction and rehabilitation could happen fast, debunking the myth which says that participation is a slow and painstaking process.

Participatory sessions with UPLINK architects, among others, were community mapping, house design, and village planning. House reconstruction was conducted by owners or village construction committees. Thinking ahead, the group decided to provide the construction material themselves. The stabilised soil-cement block is an alternative to the traditional red brick; it is produced with a manual press machine, thus making burning unnecessary. The production thus largely avoided pitfalls caused by material scarcity, which occurred during the construction boom in the following year. Self-provision of blocks was a smart solution, locally based and labour intensive. It effectively addressed social, environmental and practical needs.

Among the key factors to the success in Aceh was the sense of trust that grew between and amongst community members and leaders. Decision-making was decentralised to the lowest level, while inter-coordination was maintained through JUB. JUB managed to establish self-control mechanisms and strengthen ownership of the overall project. The community
process respected and capitalised on existing social institutions, both religious and secular: mosque councils, fisher guilds, women’s groups, youth groups etc. In Aceh, with a sense of ownership sowed and nurtured since the beginning, there was no ‘exit strategy’ required.

De-mystifying the ridge in Davao City

The Matina community is an informal settlement on a riparian enclave in Davao City, the Philippines. The community was in need of upgrading their access bridge, a makeshift bamboo bridge. They filed a request at the local government unit, known as the barangay. However, after a year there was still no clear answer from the barangay. It seemed that their proposal was lost in the maze of bureaucracy. In November 2009, the community therefore turned to a people’s organisation, the Homeless People’s Federation Philippines, Inc (HPFPI). The community became a member of the Federation through its local chapter in Davao City, and started their community savings project.

On a weekend in February 2010, a workshop on participatory design was held in the Matina community, organised by the HPFPI and as part of the ACCA program. Aside from community representatives from across the country, participants included local students, professors, and technical professionals. There were also community architects from Cambodia and Indonesia, who were made available through CAN, the Community Architects Network. After a brief introduction, there were presentations on topics of community savings and finance, structural basics of footbridges, and recent developments in bamboo technologies. It provided an extended approach to the community project. Afterwards, participants were divided into groups and requested to design a bridge. A scale model and posters were the media, without any restriction of materials to be used. The groups worked throughout the evening.

On Sunday, the second day of the workshop, we were surprised by the diverse materials used for the bridge models; plastic cups for the bridge’s foundation, popsicle sticks for the balustrades, banana leaves for the roof, barbecue sticks for the trusses, and so on. In the afternoon, six designs were ready and presented and vigorously scrutinised by their peers, the community members. The discussion spanned technicalities such as
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materials and construction methods, but also costing and budgeting. Every aspect of planning and design was practically covered within that weekend workshop.

At the bridge design workshop in the Matina community, engineers and architects took a step back to provide space for freedom to design. Two things emerged: firstly, the norm of a bridge as solely an engineering product under authorship of professionals was challenged; secondly, creativity was expressed through freedom in using methods and media that were familiar to the participants. After the workshop, a small team of local architects was formed to carry out technical support. Together with the HPFPI savings promoters, this group maintained the relationship with the Matina community. A sense of belonging to the project was created during the workshop, paving the way for the actual work which began with the construction of the bridge’s foundation in November 2010. The bridge was completed in April-May 2011 and became the first modern bamboo bridge in the Philippines (Fitrianto 2013).

Planting seeds in Yogyakarta

The city of Yogyakarta is the cultural capital of the Javanese, an ethnic group making up the majority of Indonesians. The tourism industry and educational institutions have been the main features of Yogyakarta, constantly attracting visitors and migrants to the city and increasing land prices. There are informal settlements, kampungs, predominantly at the banks of the three main rivers of the city.

In late 2010, Arkomjogja was founded by some community architects and social workers. The group believes that the best way for the kampungs to secure their land is that residents themselves invest upon it through building physical facilities. A momentum to start the groundwork was shared with the ongoing ACCA (Asian Coalition for Community Action) phase-one that began the same year. Since then, kampung upgrading has been ongoing, including activities such as surveying and mapping, house repair, building a walking path, drainage improvement, provision of community latrines and the construction of community centers. The programme has been implemented irrespective of the residents’ tenure
status, but with a vision that improved physical conditions would eventually lead to the regularisation of the community. Thus, it deliberately neglects ongoing legal uncertainties.4

To ensure and strengthen participation within the programme, we assisted 31 communities along River Gajah Wong and River Winongo to establish Kalijawi, a city-wide federation of savings groups driven by women in the communities. Indeed, the concept was adopted from the Federation in the Philippines, as well as from Baan Mankong or ‘secure housing,’ a successful national upgrading programme in Thailand (Boonyabancha 2009; Fitrianto 2008). The regular activities of Kalijawi include daily saving, community mapping and house design exercises. Occasionally, Kalijawi interacts with municipal agencies, is invited by universities, visited by international researchers and students (Hersh 2013) and engages in public activities, from the Yogyakarta Art Biennales to post-volcanic eruption cleaning campaigns and street demonstrations.

Among the architectural work completed within Kalijawi’s first year are the renovation of 75 houses and the construction of three community centres made out of bamboo (Alperovich 2013; Arkomjogja 2013). The community centres were constructed through community work carried out by 7-10 volunteers, with support from the women who prepared food for the workers in group shifts. During construction activities, whether it was a drainage repair, path walk improvement or construction of a community centre, the rest of the community members witnessed the work and became convinced that they can be providers for their own development when they work collectively.

Concluding thoughts

Early processes of the intervention were about efforts to recapitalise local resources, including existing social capital, for fruitful interaction between and amongst civil society organisations, local government units, local academic groups and professional communities. Obviously, skills and knowledge of how to engage in the process are not within the default property of someone trained in architecture. But, it may well be conducted by anyone through on-the-ground experience. However, it is imperative for every architect who goes to communities to acknowledge
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whatever work has been done earlier in the process. In that way, one may work seamlessly and ingrain in the collective process until the time one has to leave.

The case of Aceh shows how important it is to show support and solidarity with the community, especially when the current policy climate does not support the community’s critical needs. In Aceh, the group strengthened the sense of togetherness that was already innate among the community members in the aftermath of the catastrophe. In urban slums, however, the risk of eviction is often an invisible threat in the daily lives of the residents. There, the presence of an active and functioning community platform is essential in order to bring about togetherness, and to let solutions emerge on how to overcome problems. In the two cases of Davao City and Yogyakarta, it has been the women’s savings federation that has served as a platform for participation.

The unfortunate part of participatory planning begins when professionals, having collected data from the community, return to their studio to process, analyse and synthesise. This process often becomes poor, lacking perspectives and potentials that may appear off-studio. When the professionals return to the community with some kind of solution, they often arrive so late that the community has managed to solve their problem in their own ways. Therefore, on-site and real-time barefoot-styled decision-making, both at events like workshops and during the construction phase, has proven to be an effective forum for participatory design and planning.

To enhance their services, architects have to equip themselves with community-friendly technical solutions, such as expertise on alternative construction materials and technologies, as well as vocabularies and an aptitude to design methods and media that are familiar to the community. The dilemma remains with the architects themselves: are we willing to change our habits and at the same time gradually reform the profession, so that graduate architects are more familiar with working with communities? That exposes us to another challenge: who will pay the community architects? And it leads us to question the current limited access to local public funding – but that merits another discussion.
Notes
1. Architecture and planning schools and firms come and work in the South. To mention a few, some of them are focused on research and studio works, such as HDM Lund which brought its students for field work in Manila in early 2011. Others are confident enough to carry on an intervention, such as the architecture firm TYIN from Norway which works in Thailand and Indonesia; DPU-UCL from London, which is in cooperation with ACHR and have post-graduate planner interns in local organisations in Cambodia, Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia; and the Swedish chapter of Architects without Borders, in cooperation with SDI allow architects to work in slums in India as well as other SDI countries.
3. Through coordination by its Jakarta chapter called Urban Poor Consortium (UPC), UPC-UPLINK works with communities in Indonesian main cities to address the poor's basic rights as de facto citizens.
4. A legal perspective on the urban poor's tenure situation in Indonesia can be found in Reerink 2011.

References


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Community Architects Network