

Overseas Filipino Workers

Influence of income on a family's everyday life



Helena Nothofer

1 Irene's family life



Pictures: Irene; Irene with family; source:facebook.com

This is Irene. She lives together with her husband, her daughter Maria and her grandson. Together they share one unit at HURA Homes II Vasra. This housing area in Quezon City was planned for low to middle income families and especially for families of governmental workers, like her husband. Even if their apartment in the forth floor is quite small it is noticeable that Irene's family has a lot of electronic equipment. They have their own washing machine, one laptop another desktop computer and one iPad. Beside a big TV screen for

karaoke nights and fans for good air circulation. Irene's and her daughter's hobbies are gaming preferable online and in Irene's case preferable on Facebook. Moreover they love to go to the shopping mall what they smiling call "mallng". A normal average day starts with hanging out in the virtual internet. They avoid to go out or take part in any neighbourhood activities. They do not have many connections to their neighbours and they prefer to be on their own, all windows and doors were¹ closed. The electronic fans care for the right circulation. When Maria's son comes home from school she interrupts gaming to help him with his homework. Afterwards they continue gaming. Irene spends a lot of time on Facebook, she is a very active Facebook user and shares a lot of informations with other users. While Irene and her daughter live this "easy" life Maria's husband works in Japan as an engineer to earn the money for his family to sponsor this, for the Philippine situation, quite luxury life style. The distance between the Philippines and Japan is far, so it is not possible for him to visit his family regularly. Both Irene and Maria do not work to get some extra income. But how feels Maria's husband in Japan? Probably living in a very small accommodation far away from home, missing his family. Or what about Irene's grandson growing up without his father?

Irene's family is not an exception. In the Philippines it is common, that a lot of children grow up without their parents or at least one part of the their parents. Abroad working Filipinos are generally known as overseas Filipino workers (OFS).

But Irene's family could change the situation if Irene and Maria would start to work to improve the family income. They additionally could renounce to some of their "luxury" devices and the family could be together more often. And why do they never go out to became part of a community? Why do they chose to live like that? What are the longterm effects of this way of family life not only on Filipino families but also for the Philippines itself?

The following paper deals with these questions. At first a short overview shows the typical change of a families life after increasing income. The next sections light up the consequences of these development on the Philippine economy and gives possible solutions, what could be done on an architectural level.

¹ Interview from February 20th, 2014

2 Urban Shelter for families in change

Close to the Poverty line in Costa Rica

„Dona Julia wonders if men got used to the fact that women do everything“ (Karin Grundström 2005: 52) this statement is totally different to what is described above. Karin Grundströms thesis is about the everyday life of women and men living in a low-income housing area in Costa Rica. Therefore the author walked through the neighbourhood, called Lindora to interview the people. Her thesis points out, that women and men have different expectations for public spaces. But her interviews also clarify, that especially women have to work very hard to care for their families. While the man are normally working outside the community as a constructor or cab driver, focus women on the community. Often they combine their domestic activities with additional income-generating work. Beside they are responsible to take care for the children, that means, bring them to school, prepare food for them, help them with their homework,...

The women in the investigated community claimed about all days are the same, working with domestic work (Karin Grundström 2005: 38). So far Grundstöms interviews demonstrate that the women are the main part responsible for the communities life. But while the women of Lindora participate active at the support of the families income Irene and Maria do not. But why?

Poverty and Vulnerability

Observations that have been made of families who live under the poverty line prove that the first step of getting out of poverty is women start to work which will help to improve their family's income. If the money is still not enough even the children get mobilised to help to support the income. This statement is the first finding anthropologist Caroline Moser describes as one method to create an asset against vulnerability (Caroline Moser 1996: 1,2).

But culturally it is not common in the Philippines that women have to do additional work beside domestic activities and the care about children. When children have to participate at the family income they usually interrupt or stop going to school at all. Because of this lack of education the family gets more and more vulnerable for further crises. But during this phase of development the family still lives together. As side effect this “strategy imposes unequal

burdens on household members“, especially on women because of their multi responsibilities (Caroline Moser 1996: 12). But men do not participate at domestic work.

Assets vs. Quality of life

Irene's family has nothing in common with these families. They are already on another level, you could say above the poverty line, since they managed their way out of “acute“ poverty. Responsible for that is her son-in-law, who helped the family out of poverty. He works in Japan and receives a much better salary than it would be possible in the Philippines. This regular income allows to pay for running costs and beside they still have some extra money left in the end of a month. At the moment the economic situation of Irene's family is quite good, which makes working for Irene and her daughter unnecessary. But nevertheless Irene's family is still vulnerable if it is effected by crises. For example what might happen if her son-in-law loses his job? The family would not be able to keep the living standard and be affected by this crisis very hardly. The money Irene's husband earns would be not enough to feed the family. Moreover they do not dispose on a good network in their community, which could help in such a crises.

Irene's family symbolises only the micro scale. By zooming out the consequences of whole generations growing up without the presence of their parents for the Philippines can be recognised. Generations of children do not learn from their parents, thus a huge part of Philippine knowledge and culture will get lost. As Irene's case shows, her grandson grows up in a well-protected home without real connections to the community. He gets everything from his family, the financial conditions are very good. Also he supposedly has no understanding where the money comes from, he enjoys very good education and probably will, when he is grown up, choose the same way like his father did, working abroad. This is kind of a “brain drain“. All well educated people move to other places, which makes it very difficult for the Philippines to create their own sustainable economy in the future.

In the end every family must decide themselves how they want to live their life, but it is important to offer different options to them. But what can be done to minimise this negative effect to the Philippine economy? The next section focuses on design criteria for urban shelter.

3 Family friendly Urban Shelter Design

Model Unit Smokey Mountains



Picture: Helena Nothofer; model unit Smokey Mountains, Manila

Sketch: Helena Nothofer; model unit

Form experience many architects never visited an informal settlement before but give proposals how to build housing areas for informal settler families. Thus proposed designs are often not suitable for the individual needs of families living close to the poverty line.

One example that demonstrates this fact is the new model unit at Smokey Mountains in Manila.²

In 1996 on a former dumping site nine five-story high buildings were built. The qualities of these houses are, units with a size of 18 sqm³, which can be expanded with a loft to 32 sqm. These units are organised in two rows standing in a opposite and are connected by an open atrium corridor. On the one hand this open atrium improves the air flow and on the other hand this space is used efficiently by different kind of functions, for instance commercial spaces or as playgrounds for children.

At the moment twelve more, of these type of building, are under construction. Despite the design of the nine existing buildings works quite well the planners made some changes, which

² Visited on February 18th, 2014 during Field Trip in Metro Manila from February 16th, 2014 to March 07th, 2014

³ minimum size for units in the Philippines

influence the quality of living for the dwellers in a negative way. The new model unit (see sketch) should encourage interested people to buy - it is about 18 sqm big and placed on a building's corner. Thus it is not a representative for all units as the lighting conditions are much better than in an ordinary unit. Ordinary units only have two windows, one in the small laundry room and one to the common corridor, where all entrances for the units are arranged. For usual people cover their windows orientated to public areas with curtains to protect their privacy. Additionally dwellers put grids out of metal in front of the windows to feel safe. These kind of arrangements affect either the lighting conditions but also the circulation conditions negatively. The model unit is furnished in a fashioned way. Everything is kept in the same colour field- brown (see picture). In the centre is a table with four chairs, in the opposite a big flat screen on the wall. The kitchen takes the biggest part of the apartment, with a big fridge. In the Philippines it is common to have two kitchens one dirty kitchen to clean the ingredients and one kitchen to prepare the food, but the planners did not provide the right design for costumes like that. Furthermore this model unit does not present any sleeping areas. Only a small sofa is placed next to the entrance. The problems about incest are public but the planners did not try to find a solution for that problem. The ground floor measurements are quite small even though the regular height does not offer any possibility to create additional room by a loft. There is also no possibility for inhabitants to expand their unit. When you look at the model units it is clear that they were not designed with the residents in mind. Consequently the unit consists of only one big room not allowing a separation between public and private spaces. It only characterises a nice living room but not a home for an average Philippine family, consisting out of five persons.

To sum up this gives a negative example of the housing situation in the Philippines. While the design for the houses which were already build in 1996 was, comparable to other housing areas, quite good the planners forgot about these qualities and only thought about quantity. Instead of planning for families, the new houses were planned for investors and figures. Moreover it is important to evaluate already built housing projects to improve the quality of housing areas constantly. Well designed units are the base for a lively community and a lively community is the base for a active neighbourhood to give families a home.

Urban Shelter for families

To find a concept to minimise the negative effect caused by overseas Filipino workers to the Philippine economy a family friendly urban shelter design plays an important role.

Overseas Filipinos should have in mind, that is a big value for families, not being separated, but spending their life together [in the Philippines]. Thus also well educated people will stay and live in their home countries. What can be done?

Families have to be involved on every level. That means both in the planning and in the building process, that strengthen the feeling for an active community life but also the sense for responsibility for maintenance. Furthermore planners have the challenge to convince families about new and unconventional but affordable housing typologies, for example vertical living, and explain to families the advantages of this kind of living. Many Filipinos dream of single houses with gardens. A lot of these type of houses were built in the Philippines during the last decades. A huge waste of land, masses of unique houses and lack of green and public spaces are some consequences of these developments.

One architect who managed to convince with innovative, modern building architecture and climate smart solutions is Charles Correa. The high rise building in Kanchanjunga in Bombay built 1970 to 1983 accommodates 32 luxury apartments which are arranged around a central core. To protect the apartments from the sun a buffer zone, consisting out of verandas, bathrooms and huge lifted up terrace gardens, is created. The perfect orientation of the tower guarantees permanent cross ventilation and provides a good micro climate, electronic air conditions are not necessary (Charles Correa 2000: 36-42). This tower gives evidence that it is possible to offer comparable living qualities in a high rise building to single houses with gardens thus living in high rise building becomes attractive even for rich people.

The described model unit at Smokey Mountains points out that it is difficult for architects to make good urban shelter designs for families without knowing their living conditions. The lack of communication and cooperation must be overcome. Therefore urban shelter should become a bigger part in the education of architects at universities, especially in developing countries. Architectural students have to be faced with the challenges of countries like in the Philippines. Social housing is a big issue and can be as attractive as designing skyscrapers and shopping malls, should be the message. To rise the quality of housing areas it is more important than ever that communication networks in between the communities mediate

between planning authorities and families. Only if the communication between planners and communities works, is instead of a bad planning like the model unit, a family friendly urban shelter design is possible - a home for women, men, elderly and of course children. So urban shelter design has to provide different kind of spaces. Children should be safe when they play on the streets of a neighbourhood. While men love to play basket ball women often stay at home because they feel there is no place to go. As mentioned in section 2 women, like Irene and Maria, spent most of their time in their neighbourhood. Urban shelter designs should take this fact as chance and use women's force as a catalyst to create better neighbourhoods. Finally the concept has to be creating "better homes and better cities"⁴ for better living conditions in the Philippines.

4 Architects for families

In order to realise better homes and better cities, architects have to plan for families and not for investors. Therefore architects must study family's everyday life, their composition, their way of life, their habits, their culture...

Only if architects work together with families and know their backgrounds best results for adequate houses can be received. At the same time architects can collect arguments to perform convincingly to different authorities. Section 3 talks about the challenge of convincing families to be open for new housing solutions but moreover architects also must learn to struggle with clients and superiors from different organisations. So far an Architect is not only responsible for a good design but also has to be well prepared in negotiating with authorities. To sum up this paper should give cause to think about different values. It begins with the key moment I had when we interviewed Irene. In this paper I tried to find answers to understand the way they act. In general it is all about money. But what is from higher value - a running income from Japan or a father who educates and plays with his children?

Separated families are not only a challenge of the Philippines but a consequence of globalisation. It is generally known that people from poor countries look for a better living conditions in richer countries and richer countries profit from these circumstances. While in

⁴ Housing Development Management (HDM)

former times people from all over Europe emigrated together with their families, mainly to the U.S.A. and Canada, had the possibility to settle down and stay there, “*overseas Filipino Workers [] are expected to return permanently either upon the expiration of a work contract or upon retirement*” (14/04/23: wikipedia.de).

Thus it is more important than ever to help as an architect that Philippine neighbourhoods become a place, which are worth to come back.

References

Literature:

Grundström, Karin

2005 *Space, Activities and Gender. Everyday life in Lindora, Costa Rica*. Lund:
ISBN 91-87866-26-9.

Moser, Caroline

1996 *Confronting Crisis. A summary of household responses to poverty and vulnerability in four poor urban communities*. ESD.
ISBN 0-8213-3562-6.

Davis, Mike

2006 *Planet der Slums. (original titel: planet of slums)*.
Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik

Greve, Jana

2010 *Mega Cities: Leben in getrennten Welten (original titel: failing cities)*.
Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik

Documentaries:

2013 *For Good: Stories of Return to the Philippines*. UN Women

Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXO_Pc8-AHg (14/04/24)