Self-help Resilience

Standing up with your own hands

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1 Introduction

Natural disasters affect our planet every year leaving nothing but devastation and death behind. However, for every person who dies around 3000 are left facing terrible risks and, of course, a very high percentage of these victims left behind on the disaster live in developing countries (Aquilino 2010) and have no further opportunities but to wait for help from the wealthy nations.

Along the past decade we have witnessed how earthquakes have made buildings collapse burying people with them; we have seen how tsunamis have completely shattered the coasts along the Indian Ocean leaving thousands of deaths and forcing victims to start a new life from scratches; we have realized that we still have no good answer on how to perform in the aftermath of a disaster.

It is an undeniable truth that when disaster happens developed countries always respond to this ‘call of duty’ not only providing the affected zones with basic needs but also arranging funds to rebuild the cities and restart people’s routine as soon as possible. However, this seems to not be sufficient; these policies don’t always work because, very often, the projects are led by NGOs that don’t have the expertise and knowledge to cope with the needs of post-disaster communities. As professor Marie J. Aquilino advocates “the best intentions are rarely good enough, especially if they are not scrutinized in light of their outcomes”, which, in other words, means that even though these NGOs have very good intentions, they don’t always succeed on improving the life of the victims of a natural disaster and they just waste large amounts of money on very useless outcomes.

This paper aims to discuss about self-help housing possibilities and how this, in partnership with community driven approaches, helps to build resilient communities that will be able to withstand unpredictable situations.

Are the approaches being used the successful ones? What is the role of us, as architects, in post-disaster designing? Are we a key factor or are we just playing a very small role on disaster risk management?

2 Urban Shelter Development

Self-help housing

The self-help housing paradigm had a turning point when John Turner published in the 1970s *Housing for people* (1974) and widespread this very controverted topic. In his publication, Turner argued that squatter areas were not a form of social malaise, but triumphs of self-help effort which needed more dweller control and autonomy (Jenkins, Smith and Wang 2007).

However, it was not John Turner the first to discuss this paradigm about self-help housing. It was Charles Abrams in 1964 with the publication *Man's struggle for shelter in an urbanizing world* that "had suggested the progressive provision of housing, based on 'sites and utilities', extendible core housing and roof-loan schemes, though he remained sceptical of using self-help to provide fully conventional housing" (Jenkins, Smith and Wang 2007).

Before Abrams, self-help housing was understood in a very practical sense, it only meant houses that low-income families would construct themselves and, in an idealized model, families in villages organized the whole process – plotted land, collected materials, fabricated building components, prepared the site and assembled the components into a house (Skinner and Rodell 1983).

Abrams was more doubtful about using self-help as a enabling system to provide housing for the poor whereas Turner always advocated that households would know their own needs better than the housing agencies and hence they were able to build their own houses in a more efficient way, regarding costs and use of materials, all this reflected in a better affordability.

These ideals were discussed and influenced the first United Nations Habitat Conference on Human Settlements (Vancouver 1976) which also influenced the World Bank policies that started promoting self-help housing developments all over the globe. The Habitat resolution stressed the need for 'policy to focus on the central role of human resources as an agent for development' (Skinner and Rodell 1983). By the mid-1970s the 'self-help' approach to housing had become accepted by all the major international agencies and was firmly established as the official alternative to conventional housing supply for lower income groups (Burgess 1992). The rapidly urbanising world found itself buried in self-help housing

projects during 1970s and 1980s and hence criticisms of this approach were highly discussed during these decades and mainly in the 80s. It became apparent since the Habitat that the general orientation embodied in these policies was not everywhere practical (Skinner and Rodell 1983).

The main critiques on self-help housing policies came on the hand of Rod Burgess in the late 1970s, arguing that self-help housing was effectively a form of double exploitation (Jenkins, Smith and Wang 2007). Burgess argued that governments adopted self-help to avoid redistributional and structural changes needed to house people decently. Self-help policies asked people to work long hours, either in construction or to earn money to pay for construction, and thus to take the burden of housing on their own shoulders. In this view, self-help programmes reinforced inequities that lied at the root of low-income families' poverty and consequent housing problems (Skinner and Rodell 1983).

Over 50 years have passed since Abrams and Turner marked a transition on self-help housing paradigm and advocated for this method to be implemented in the rapidly urbanizing world as a solution to the lack of efficient response of the governmental policies to provide adequate housing for the poor. And despite this, more urban residents live in informal settlements now than three decades ago, when the approach was first widely promoted. The fact that residents of these areas predominantly rely on (non-state-aided) self-help is still a key issue for housing policies and practice that still needs more specific attention (Jenkins, Smith and Wang 2007).

Collective Owner-Driven Reconstruction

There is a tendency nowadays to privilege a practice known as ODR (Owner-Driven Reconstruction), a post-disaster method of recovery that involves people in rebuilding their own homes (Venkatachalam 2010)[1]. In an ODR program, people who lost their shelter are given some combination of cash, vouchers, and in-kind and technical assistance (TA) to repair or rebuild their houses. They may undertake the construction or repair work by themselves, by employing family labour, a local contractor or local labourers, or by using some combination of these options. ODR is similar to the *aided self-help* approach that has been used

[1] Report "When People Are Involved" available in "Beyond Shelter" (Aquilino 2010) that talks about the experiences in the ODR project in Gujarat, India.

extensively to provide housing assistance to the urban poor, particularly in Latin America (Barakat 2003)[2].

Whether we call them owner-driven, community-based or assisted self-help projects, there is evidence of growing interest in the use of participatory approaches for post-disaster recovery and reconstruction in both urban and rural areas (IFRC 2010). ODR is the most empowering and dignified approach for households (World Bank 2010) and not only empowers communities to build back better but it is also a way of dealing and recovering from a post-disaster trauma.

However, the risks of ODR need to be understood and addressed. ODR requires good oversight and governance, that is, a government capable of establishing and enforcing standards, and some agency (governmental or nongovernmental) to ensure the quality of construction (World Bank 2010).

The programmes used on ODRs should always integrate responses for the community to withstand natural disasters and attend livelihood needs and this is where the resilience comes as a key factor concept, leading communities to a better future.

The Concept of Resilience

Resilience is a term very related to psychology, we often talk about psychological resilience, as an individual's ability to properly adapt to stress and adversity. Research has shown that resilience is a very common ability, averagely found in every human being and it can actually be taught and developed (APA 2014).

However, is not only psychogical resilience the one that should taught to the people. It is also about material resilience, community resilience. The Rockefeller Foundation defines resilience as "the ability of a system, entity, community or person to withstand shocks while still maintaining its essential functions and to recover quickly and effectively." Simply put, resilience is what enables people to

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[2] Sultan Barakat, 2003, Housing Reconstruction after Conflict and Disaster, Humanitarian Policy Network Paper 43 (London: Overseas Development Institute), http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2577.
Extract taken from: *World Bank 2010, Safer Homes, Stronger Communities: A Handbook for Reconstructing after Natural Disasters.*

survive, adapt and thrive in the face of acute shocks and chronic stresses (The Rockefeller Foundation 2014).

Communities have to learn to be resistant and, not only that, they also need to be resilient. These resilient systems have proved to be working both in good and bad situations, empowering communities to stand up in the aftermath of natural disasters or even making progress step by step in a daily based routine.

Resilience is a cross cutting theme that, if approached in a coherent and holistic manner, can address and reduce social, economic, and environmental inequalities in urban areas. In this way, resilience is both a protector of development gains, as well as a conduit for future sustainable development. (WUF7 2014).

3 Urban Shelter Design

Along the past decades, self-help housing methods have tried to improve the life of the urban poor implementing projects with affordable and quality housing on the developing world. But in many occasions, these projects haven't helped on building strong communities, able to stand on their own feet and fight for a better life with more opportunities for those who are left behind in this capitalized world.

A human being, as an individual, is a very weak link in this very huge world chain of housing developments. You cannot achieve any major changes as an individual, but you can as a community. The strength of individuals to join and form communities and active groups that can fight for their rights and changes on the system is what marks the progress; a progress that moves forward to equality and equity, where weaker social groups are also represented on government policies.

However, communities in developing countries, and why not say it, also in developed countries, always need the expertise and advice of architects and urban planners to implement sustainable and resilient housing. ODR is not an easy process and needs the help of several fields of expertise to work with community leaders and decide what is best for the community, in terms of housing, infrastructure, social and cultural needs. To help people build their own homes, first and foremost, external NGOs must have real expertise in reconstruction and be willing to stay on hand for an extended period of time. Part of their brief is to build the capacity of the affected people and to reinforce civil society (Venkatachalam 2010).

Housing institutions – governmental, non-governmental, banks, national societies, etc. – have implemented ODR methods that have proved to be successful. The experiences got on the study cases from Gujarat (2001) and North Pakistan (2005)[3], for instance, tell us that ODR approaches have enabled households to mobilize and take an active role in rebuilding, which speeds recovery from psychological trauma expected in the aftermath of a disaster. It can

[3] *More information of the study cases on references World Bank 2010 and Aquilino 2010*

also foster social cohesion when people from different communities work together to organize relocation and reconstruction.

Where does the resilience lay, hence? What makes a community worth the title of “resilient”?

Inadequate urban planning, unregulated urban density, inadequate infrastructure and basic services, poor local capacities and systemic economic marginalization all contribute to increasing vulnerability to crises. Rapid urbanization, poor quality construction, unregulated expansion of urban settlements, weak governance capacities and climate change impacts are increasing cities’ exposure to hazards (UN Habitat 2010).

Resilience is not only an attitude towards an unpredictable situation. Resilience lays in the knowledge and wisdom of the affected people and in their capacity to build up forces as a community; communities that are capable of learning and internalize past experiences providing foresight and allowing new solutions; communities that can rapidly recover; communities with the ability to change, evolve and adapt to alternative strategies in the face of the disaster.

But then, how can we achieve a resilient community?

Housing institutions (NGOs, housing agencies, etc.) have the expertise and the adequate resources and the affected communities have the forces. NGOs and communities should work together to reach a common sense together meeting the needs of the people and the technical aspects needed in an adequate, resilient house. It all starts with a good education; teaching not only the inhabitants of those communities how to adopt resilient systems but also teaching the architects, thus, providing the communities the expertise they need to implement ODR. One of the biggest challenges in adopting ODR is in educating people about the importance of disaster-resilient construction, particularly when building codes are neither regulated nor enforced. Unless people are educated before a disaster they will rebuild using the same old vulnerable method, thus missing the opportunity to mitigate future risks (Venkatachalam 2010). Rebuilding means much more than putting houses back together and repaving the streets. We have to build back stronger and in a way that minimizes the impact of future stresses and shocks — encouraging some people who lost their homes not to rebuild in the same way and others, not in the same places (Judith Rodin 2013).

We should therefore empower inhabitants to achieve a resilient attitude towards not only the bad times but also the good ones. A house is the most valuable asset a family can have, either you live in the North or South hemisphere, and hence this asset should reflect your interests and needs not only as an individual but also as a community. Projects done not only for the people but also with the people, and by the people.

4 The Role of the Architect

Urgent questions about the role and responsibility of architects have been circulating since the Indian Ocean tsunami killed more than 200,000 people in 2004. Although architects and urban planners have been very active in other areas of public interest – for instance, they have investigated a range of creative strategies to improve social, environmental and economic equity – yet they don't offer any coherent response in the aftermath of a disaster (Aquilino 2010).

Nevertheless, there are several architects that nowadays are providing resilient solutions that ensure the safety of new homes and bring coherence to land-use planning.

What can we offer to the rapidly urbanizing world that does not take us into account when building? Professor Marie J. Aquilino advocates for the architects to take a more active role in offering and sharing our skills and knowledge to communities in times of crisis.

Architects, and urban planners, have a lot to offer to the rapidly urbanizing world. They have the capacity and expertise; there are well trained architects that have been recently developing projects with durable structures, securing land tenure and have achieved an ability to calculate and, more importantly, advocate for the people's needs, resources and budgets. Experts that relate to the communities and represent them; architects that collaborate with the poor and help them to act on their own behalf; technicians that are able to represent community consensus on viable projects and hence promote local independence and resilience. Architects are not only skilled technicians but also creative artists, able to create visions and hopes for recovery creating resilient cities. Nonetheless, all this needs to be done in hand with other fields of expertise on engineering, economy, public health, etc. There has to be an open conversations among different experts if we really want to meet the people's needs.

"Fresh approaches that lessen the vulnerability of fragile populations and strengthen their resilience and potential will only comefrom the combined resources and experience of these groups working collaboratively. Simply put, we must start speaking to others" (Aquilino 2010).

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