

Slums as a Model for Future Projects

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Abstract

While the mainstream view on the slums describes them as places to escape from and to destroy as soon as possible, more and more people look at slums in a different way. What if we analyze the slum and approach it as a self organized system that contains both flexible participatory input and a defined structure? Research on relocation of occupants of slums to housing projects shows that most of them are not satisfied with the move and would have preferred to have stayed in their homes. This means that people actually like to live in slums and there must be a reason for it. The squatter cities can teach us much about future urban living. (Brand 2010) An urban slum could be reviewed as an example of a structure that could be used while developing future projects. The purpose of this paper is to explore the positive aspects of slums and the lessons that can be learned from them. Is it worth it? Are there any real perspectives for slum structures?

1 What is a slum?

Slum is almost a universal phenomenon in every city of the world. No country can deny this reality as all metropolitan cities in the world are most affected by this problem. (Das 2000) It is generally considered that slums are bad so the governments are always trying to get rid of slums usually without understanding how slums work and what advantage we could get from their experience. Maybe we should get a closer look at how urban slums are formed and structured. First, we need to understand what exactly is a slum. According to UN-HABITAT, a slum is defined as a run-down area of a city characterized by substandard housing and squalor and lacking in tenure security. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Khoda slum cluster in Ghaziabad district. www.indiatalkies.com

Slums have their own structure. Some of the main features of them are:

- narrow courtyards and alleys
- division of the building into small blocks
- use of different colors and materials within the same building.

Slums also have their own social structure. Most slum dwellers are people struggling to make an honest living, within the context of extensive urban poverty and formal unemployment. (UN-Habitat 2003) They are one of the most efficient urban settlements: people live very close to each other, and possibility to meet randomly is very high. Social organization emerges naturally.

2 What can we learn from slums?

In 1983 architect Peter Calthorpe moved to a houseboat in Sausalito, a town on the San Francisco Bay. It was a community of 400 houseboats and a place with the densest housing in California. Without any intentions it became an intense, proud community in which no one locked their doors. Calthorpe looked for the element of design magic that made it work and concluded it was the dock itself and the density. All the residents knew each other every day and knew everything about everybody in the community.

Based on these observations Calthorpe developed New Urbanism, also called Neotraditionalism, along with Andrés Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and others. In 1985 he introduced the concept of walkability in “Redefining Cities,” an article in the Whole Earth Review. Since then new urbanism has become an important idea in city planning encouraging high density, mixed use, walkability, mass transit, eclectic design and regionalism. It drew one of its main ideas from the houseboat community.

There are more ideas that to be discovered the squatter cities and slums. People there are not restricted by laws or traditions and can try any new ideas. For example, small shops and street trading could be used as a model for organizing shopping areas. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Retail and services in Dhaka slum. Andrina Schwartz 2011

The advantage of slums is that they are constantly improved by their residents themselves. They are high density residences that use only a little amount of supplies and produce less waste. In most slums recycling is literally a way of life. For example, the Dharavi slum in Mumbai has 400 recycling units and 30,000 ragpickers. (Brand 2010) There is a book "The World's Scavengers" (2007) by Martin Medina that examines the historical evolution of scavenging in developing countries.

Slums obviously attract immigrants because they are cheap and the only affordable accommodation so they are also places where the mixture of different cultures can results in new forms of artistic expression. Out of unhealthy, crowded and often dangerous environments can emerge cultural movements and levels of solidarity unknown in the suburbs of the rich. (UN-Habitat 2003) Slums can actually be perfect examples of vernacular architecture.

3 Projects

The slum phenomenon is so widespread that we may speak of a trend in architecture. (de Maat 2009) There are several project that resemble the structure of slums in some way. One of the most famous is probably Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 (1967) in Montreal, Canada. (Figure 3) The architect provided inhabitants with affordable housing with its own private space and a small garden, in spite of being optically squeezed in with other inhabitants' apartments. The complex resembles slums in developing countries, but offers comfortable living with all the benefits of modern architecture.



Figure 3. Habitat 67. Moshe Safdie. 1967. photo by Peter van den Hamer

One of the essential features of a slum is that it is produced and developed by the inhabitants themselves. This idea was successfully embodied in the project Quinta Monroy by Elemental (2003) in Iquique, Chile. It lets people modify and expand their house and provides collective space while maintaining the high density without overcrowding. (Figure 4)



Figure 4. Quinta Monroy. Elemental. 2003

Another related project is Sarugaku by Akihisa Hirata in Tokyo, Japan (2006-2007). The task was to fit several small volumes in a narrow site so Hirata decided to build several volumes in different levels and directions creating a labyrinth. (Figure 5) This project can be connected to slums because it also has a similar chaotic structure and a lot of different small spaces squeezed together resembling shops mentioned in Chapter 2.



Figure 5. Sarugaku. Akihisa Hirata. 2007

An interesting point is that slums are usually built without any use of technological devices but their imitations require advanced design tools and a lot of analysis. Today we have all the possible tools at our service so we can do that.

4 Conclusions

Slums may seem chaotic but they actually have certain logic and are organic structures that constantly develop themselves. They provide a lot of interesting aspects and ideas that can be used and actually are used in new projects. If we pay enough attention to the general features and little details of slums, we can get amazing results. And with all the analysis and design tools that we can use today we can create interesting and sufficient modern residential areas.

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