Social Strategies Building the City: A Re-conceptualization of Social Housing

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ABSTRACT

Social housing in Latin America can become a model for housing solutions and inclusion for refugees in the current European context, especially in Germany with the massive influx of displaced people.

Social housing from the Latin American experience, could be seen as complex system integrated by social, economic, political and city making processes. Practices in the social production of the habitat process provide clues for an alternative way of approaching housing solutions for the disadvantaged in which several dimensions coexist. The social dimensions ensure the creation and strengthening of social capital through self-management and mutual-aid. Social capital at the same time is the platform for the development of a social economy based on collective effort and collective benefit. These social dimensions are encouraged by social organizations that have achieved access to adequate housing, social mobility and the right to the city through their social activism.

On the contrary, wrong approaches resulting in homogenization, lack of participation in the process and disconnection from urban life are the fundamental causes for exclusion, decline of neighborhoods and stigmatization of the inhabitants impairing their opportunities to integrate both
socially and culturally into their environment. The cost of recovering ghettos and marginalized communities is even higher in the long term than investing in comprehensive urban strategies to build cohesive communities today.

In Europe, especially in Germany the wrong approaches could mistakenly be repeated with the refugee crisis. Nevertheless, housing for refugees could be instead a comprehensive and collaborative process of development, capitalizing in the social resources for community building, neighborhood regeneration and integration of migrants into society.

KEYWORDS: Social Housing, self-management, cooperation, inclusion, right to the city

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INTRODUCTION

Social action is fueled by personal expectations, dreams and of course needs that have to be fulfilled. Collective action combines the capacity of recognition of the personal and collective achievements, the self-esteem expressed in the capacity for change and the potential to overcome difficulties along with the capacity of organization and management of resources, with the main purpose to achieve collective objectives. Housing on the other hand is not only a roof or the place to live, but also the place to reproduce labor force and the construction of emotional and identity ties. Housing is one of the most important human needs and rights which provides the conditions for de facto access to citizenship. Consequently, “social” “housing” should be understood with all the complexities and the relationship between both terms, “social” the collective and human capital behind self-produced processes and community building (which are most of the time overlooked) and “housing” as the platform to enable urban, social and economic change.

Social Housing the re-conceptualization

Regarding these considerations, the traditional understanding of social housing must be revised and a new narrative re-introduced to be adjusted to current realities. Thus, social housing should be conceived as a mechanism to build community and empower citizens in socially disadvantaged situations, enable them to evolve in a healthy environment to overcome social segregation and poverty. Social housing in a new perspective, encircles the construction of dynamics and the environment beyond the house, which includes several human conditions such as culture, traditions, and other collectively learned values. Furthermore, habitat would be a more appropriate term referring to Enrique Ortiz’ “Social Production of the Habitat” concept, where housing is part of a broader environment in which human physical and personal needs are in balance with the context. Habitat is a cultural product in which history and culture articulates with the social context and its environment. It involves a cultural and even an emotional relationship between the dweller and its habitat leaving traces in the urban fabric. It is a living entity that is constantly evolving through time, adapting to the necessities of their occupants and the transformation of the neighboring environment.

In current times the discussion surrounding the sustainable character of cities should not be so much about technologies, but about how social strategies are shaping the urban and social fabric. In this
sense cooperation and self-management represent potential tools for the society and the economy of the future. Self-organized social groups with the aim of transforming and building their habitat, their economy and their quality of life are the ones paving the way towards a new city making methodology.

In this sense, references in Latin America are again experimenting grounds for the conception and construction of social housing. The successful experiences of housing cooperatives with self-management and mutual-aid values could serve as alternative models of housing encouraging collective appropriation, redefinition of ownership and sense of belonging. By adjusting policy frameworks to the new realities of cities, these policies could enable the organized population to not only access decent housing, but also to access urban land and centralities.

**Cooperative housing**

One relevant example is the cooperative movement that emerged after the economic crisis in Argentina in 2000. Cooperatives in the context of Buenos Aires were established as a channel for social and economic transformation. The cooperatives are conceiving social housing as the medium to reach a level of citizenship allowing its members access to jobs through training and education, legal guarantees through a legal framework and of course adequate housing through self-management and mutual-aid or cooperation.

The creation of a legal framework to enable self-management process for the construction of housing represented an innovative step in public policy from the year 2000 in Buenos Aires. The Law 341 is the result from the consensus from several social movements, legislators advocating for housing and officials from the Institute of Housing of the City of Buenos Aires. The Law 341 is a mechanism that enables social organizations to access served urban land for the production of housing while ensuring legal tenure. The scope of the Law includes loans for the construction or purchase of affordable single- or multi-family dwellings, loans for the renovation or expansion of affordable dwellings, or the purchase and construction work in case of rehabilitation of existing buildings.

Within the cooperative movement there is a particular case study, which was implemented thanks to the effort of one important socio-political actor in Argentina the ‘Movimiento Territorial de Liberación’ (MTL) National Liberation Movement. The MTL conceived a housing complex through the figure of the cooperative and supported by the framework of the Law 341. The housing complex ‘Monteagudo’ is an unconventional operation in which a social movement capitalized on its problems to transform their collective effort into social capital in order to satisfy their needs, in this case their struggle for work and housing. The cooperative trained 700 workers and provided job opportunities for them. In addition, it allowed socially disadvantaged people to access served urban land along with quality of design housing inside the city of Buenos Aires. In sum was a process of development of social economy and restitution to the right to the city.

**What is failing**

Even though there are successful experiences like the one in Argentina, not all the social collectives trying to access decent housing though cooperation has had positive results. The policy framework supporting these processes is essential to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of the projects. In May 2015 was completed the eviction and relocation of the occupants who had appropriated the infamous Torre de David in the city center of Caracas, Venezuela. Their self-organization system was based in a housing cooperative. Through this structure - with self-management as the main strategy - from 2007 the residents of the tower achieved to provide basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation, safety and maintenance to almost every floor of the tower. At the same time the self-produced environment provided the space for the development and reproduction of micro-entrepreneurships while enjoying centrality. There was a micro cosmos of decision-making power
based on direct democracy and self-determination.

However, in a process that lasted only few months, the 3,000 residents of the tower had to leave their dreams and investment behind. Although there was a Law of Cooperatives enacted by Hugo Chavez in 2001, there was no clear legal framework to ensure the ownership of the individual dwellings in the squatted tower. The solution wasn’t much better either. The tower residents were moved to the typical barrack style social housing layout in the outskirts of the city with no centrality, lacking the same social control of the tower since they are mixed with other communities and under government control which denies their decision-making power.

Not only the physical context is defining housing problems and solutions, but a range of political, socio-cultural and economic aspects, which are essential components linked to the question of habitat. Depending on the approach, the production of housing would unfold its benefits as a city-making asset with NO economic and social COST, or on the contrary it could become very expensive to cover its consequences over time.

Homogenization (lack of roots and identity), lack of participation in the process (no decision-making) and disconnection from urban life are the fundamental causes for stigmatization of neighborhoods and its inhabitants, impairing their opportunities to integrate both into their environment and the economy. Building social housing in the periphery of cities has proven detrimental for social and economic development, and the main cause of segregation. When social housing is disconnected from the city fabric creates also a condition of social fragmentation, which immediately stigmatized its residents as a minority group. It constrains the social interaction with the rest of the society resulting in the loss of quality of life. Consequently, the cost of recovering ghettos and marginalized communities is even higher in the long term than investing in comprehensive urban strategies to build cohesive communities in the present.

The trend is the same, the response to poverty consequence to uneven social and urban development is a number of housing projects or programs to conceal the image of the urban poor. The programs are based on the premise to re-locate, house or eradicate the poor, but not to address the causes of poverty.

Furthermore, different social housing approaches in the last decades have deeply affected low-income communities due to mass construction, either high-rise buildings such as 23 de Enero in Caracas or standardized housing such the problem of the “people with roof” in Chile or México where millions of houses were built in cheap land far away from the centers of employment, education, recreation, etc. (better said centralities). These construction "packages" rarely respond to the social needs of the population or to the territorial fabric in which they are inserted. For Fernando Murillo these interventions respond to their own logic of city making defined by individual desires and private interests (architects/governments/developers) than a response to the collective rationality. Often the housing typology is not only disconnected from the urban fabric, but it also doesn’t correspond to the identity of the population. In any case the urban poor and the migrant communities are always the ones affected by the negative implications of wrong housing approaches. Some social housing typologies are more an emergency response for a need than the action of development of a comprehensive city making strategy.

The German context

Far from the successful social production of habitat processes, the mentioned negative approaches in Latin America from the last century could mistakenly being repeated in Europe with the recent influx of refugees. A total of 1.1 million people were registered as asylum-seekers in 2015 in Germany only.

There have been different reactions from city administration, regional governments and local residents to face the crisis. However, the overwhelming situation has resulted in the improvisation
of camps not only in the inner cities neighborhoods, but most worrying in the periphery of cities. What seems more critical is the consolidation of the trend to house the “undesirable” where they can’t be seen. Poverty has been always uncomfortable to governments as well as citizens, resulting on radical approaches with the aim to eradicate the poor from cities and consolidate the invisibility of poverty.

On behalf of the City of Essen, located in the German dense region of the Ruhr, 35.183 Million Euros were invested in 2015 for the construction of barrack style buildings for a “multifunctional temporary shelter”. These reception center was built in an isolated former industrial site located in a protected green area in the southern region of the city. The nearest urban center – Fischlaken - is in a distance of 2km and the shelter can’t be easily reached by foot or public transportation. The refugees arriving to this center will not have the same opportunities to exchange with the local population, being included in the activities planned for the refugees, or have the freedom to get acquaintance with the city or its residents. This is not the only example, several of these typologies are repeated in other German cities.

Furthermore, the consequences of this separation could be inferred from existing case studies in the city of Essen. Even though they have different characteristics in terms of typologies, the “multifunctional temporary shelter” in Fischlaken, could be compared with the tent camp located in Essen Karnap. Last year with the massive influx of refugees, the city of Essen accommodated 4.721 refugees. The city made available 32 refugee accommodations distributed in re-habilitated buildings and tent camps in the city sports fields. From the research seminar “Inclusive Neighborhoods” co-organized in the framework of the Master of Urban Systems- several conclusions were made based on the students’ findings.

The students analyzed four tent camps in neighborhoods close to the city center, one in a more isolated district (Essen Karnap), and one study was made in one of re-habilitated building. The results showed that the conditions and location of the refugee camps affected the behavior and relationship of refugees within the refugee camp, the relationship of the refugees with the local residents and the neighborhood, and the attitude of the local residents towards the refugees.

Essen Karnap is a semi-urban district of Essen located in the northern part of the city with a clear division marked by the river Emscher. The refugee camp is located in the Mathias Stinnes Stadium approximately one kilometer away from daily life facilities. The immediate surroundings are characterized by industrial buildings, highways and railroads. In consequence, the conditions of fragmented urban fabric, separation from the dense central areas and disconnection from the social actors, produced several negative effects (fear, distrust, and feeling of being punished). The surrounding context aggravates a feeling of unsafety, which in many cases discouraged walking to daily facilities or mothers leaving their children alone in the camp.

In contrast the refugee camps located in dense served urban areas offered both the possibility to be in direct contact with the city facilities and an array of different social actors. The effect was the opposite; the refugees that were interviewed in the tent camp in Bamberstrasse expressed their gratitude and their desire to become part of the German society. They felt free to walk in the neighborhood, get involved in activities with local actors and had the desire to look for their own housing in the neighborhood.

Although these central neighborhoods are also socially problematic, due to the segregation of already settled migrant communities, they offer a very valuable regeneration potential. The capitalization of efforts in both existing and new migrant communities for the renovation of buildings for new social housing and the reconstruction of urban shared spaces. Through training, capacity building and empowerment the existing numerous vacant houses and unused infrastructure could become the mean for integration in the society, not only socially, but also economically becoming part of the productive system.
In these lines, Kitev (an urban laboratory created by Atelier Stark and Tank FX) under the premise of Co-creation, took the initiative to begin the process of changing the narrative of a social housing tower in the city of Oberhausen. The building located in the city center has already a good connection with city facilities, the main train station and other urban advantages. However, with a neglected population that hardly can afford its own rent (the rent is paid directly from the Job Center to the building owner) the tower is currently in a state of disrepair, decay and abandonment reflecting the status of its residents in the society.

Stark and Wnuczak, affirm that the way to change the negative narrative is first changing the perception of the people who are stigmatized and excluded from the society. With the help of the new comers (the new refugees) their goal is to show from the insight out – “in a stereotyped and capitalistic system” - that with small steps you can influence social, economic and urban transformation. “This people think they have nothing productive to offer to the society, so the try out would be to repair things together”, in their point of view the new refugees are offering a big potential and an opportunity to create small models for social integration. “Working together in the renovation of the apartments, transforming them into nice places to live would develop a sense of pride. They are not only repairing a building, but repairing a defect in the society”, the collective effort and qualification is one step towards the transformation of the destructive energy in the place into a productive model that could enable positive social processes. The idea is to recover the self-made and the values of cooperation and solidarity. The individual character of the current society according to them has destroyed the capacity of this disadvantaged group of people to do things by themselves. “Eventually we will not be only repairing the apartments, but the hallways, the neighborhood and the city”.

Nevertheless, for a deeper impact on the residents and even in the immediate context, is important to accompany this process with alternative legal and economic tools to protect the residents of the tower once the building is transformed. The new crisis needs new creative policies, more flexible, sustainable and resilient. The potential to transform these type of initiatives into feasible models will depend on the understanding capacity of governments, private companies, and civil society about the effects of social investment and its relation with the construction of habitat.

**Conclusion**

To conclude is important to highlight the importance of the recognition of people’s individual capacities and the potential of these capacities of being capitalized in a collective way. Masses of immigrants will be continuing coming to cities looking for safety or simply for better opportunities. The right concept, definition or narrative of social housing is an essential piece to enable social, economic and urban transformation, breaking the trend of social segregation and stigmatization of socially disadvantaged groups.

If the right approaches are not implemented on time, the housing solution for the refugees will be only expenses in the present with high costs in the future. Therefore, it is critical to understand the consequences of segregating migrant and low-income communities. The experiences being documented about the different effects of integration and its relationship with city life, should be taken as models to follow. Housing when integrated into the dense compact urban fabric facilitates access to jobs and economic opportunities, access to services, recreation and social facilities. Thus, when housing in general is integrated in the city systems including policy frameworks ensure the right to the city. The self-produced, self-managed housing projects like the housing cooperatives in Buenos Aires are available models to deconstruct and transfer the most relevant principles to the European context.

It doesn’t mean solutions should come from top down mechanisms, anyways the rigid bureaucratic system never moves at the same pace of transformations. Furthermore, it is common for
government authorities to have no understanding of how deficient interventions affect people’s lives defining the future problems of cities. In this sense, building social housing is no longer the sole responsibility of governments, architects or even only by the dwellers; it is instead a comprehensive and collaborative process. Social housing should be part of a process of collective development; it must capitalize in the social resources for the construction of community, citizens and individual capacities. The social dimension of housing contributes directly in the construction of the city, neighborhoods and the corresponding economies. Inclusion is having equal opportunities to be citizens, having the same opportunities for housing, jobs, education and recreation. Sharing the same urban space is relevant for their share and contribution to city making. Thus, cities must be designed, built and managed to include everyone.

In sum, it is not a matter of just providing a roof, but developing people’s capacities through the production of social housing for the future urban and social development.

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Monteagudo Housing Project in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Photo © Marielly Casanova

Social Housing tower in Oberhausen, Germany. Photo © Marielly Casanova