

# Housing Urban Poor: Tenement-block, as contemporary house-form

DR. IFTEKHAR MAZHAR KHAN\*

1987 has been declared as the 'year for shelter for the homeless' by the United Nations within the larger decadal programme of 'Shelter for All' by the year 2000. The motive is laudable except for the 'semantic disorder' inherent in the slogan. For professionals architects, engineers or planners such rhetorical ambiguity distract them from their primary task of providing housing, be it *shelter* or *home* for the urban poor and underprivileged. While improvement may be sought everywhere there is little justification in inventing a problem where it does not exist or by redefinition make the problem insoluble. Housing for the urban poor will constitute the major task for planning bodies and institutions, on which will depend stability and continuity of our social fabric.

## 1. Defining the problem

*Shelter* is a 'minimal' physical concept and except in periods of calamity one is reasonably sheltered. Here no aspersion is cast on the physical state or attribute of the shelter except that it offers a minimum protection against the elements. *Home* is personalisation of space evoking very intimate sensations of comfort, security, privacy etc. Thus one can be 'homeless' even when he is 'sheltered', and 'shelter for the homeless' is more appropriate in draught -stricken Ethiopia where a large, dispossessed rural population find succour in refugee camps. But it would be erroneous to view these refugee camps (rehabilitation centers) as the permanent home.

Conspicuous by its absence in the slogan is house or the larger concept of *housing* with its definite body of theories and practises. If *housing* the urban poor, in our large metropolies is seen as problem of *shelter* it is perhaps wise to induct the services of foreign

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\* Professor, Dept. of Architecture, King Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia.



charitable organisations. If however, it is seen as construction, distribution, supply and delivery of cheap rental residential accommodation, then only it can be of legitimate interest to professionals. In today's Dhaka, this *house* means a residential accommodation for a family of six at a monthly rent of Tk. 500/- or less, located in accessible areas of the city, enjoying the minimum amenities and facilities.

If this definition is acceptable then housing solution is devising the support system, the mechanism for production and delivery of such house-types. Whether these houses are *homes* or mere *shelter* can best left to the genius of individual dweller or the mechanism of the marketplace.

#### House-type for Urban poor

House-types for the above target population is present in all major Third World Cities and typologically identified as 'tenement blocks'. They have developed over the last century, in the wake of industrialisation, as a response to the housing need of a vast pool of migrant labour.

They were built by private developer motivated by profit, on private land with a wide variety of 'house solutions'. In each city, they acquired a definite name if not a definite architectural form. In Bombay they are called the *chawl*, (1) Mexico-City is famous for her '*vicendades*', (2) Cairo for '*rabaas*' and '*aimaraas*' (3). They are usually 2 to 4 storied single roomed tenement blocks, built around a court with communal toilets and spaces.

Esoterically they are termed 'Compensatory Housing Types' implying perhaps the inappropriateness and adhoc nature of the product, marketed in the absence of a certified commodity.

In any case, it was never seen as legitimate house-form because of its sub-standard (esp. sharing of services) environment and overcrowding. In origin they are little different from the 'bustees', 'favelas', 'kutcha adadies', 'jughee jhonpress', 'kampongs' of today except that they evolved in a period of lesser strain and pressure. But from its humble origin of tenement huts arranged in row on a common access, sharing common toilets placed at a distance, transformed to a harder, vertically arranged, consolidated form. Today, in these cities, they offer the bulk of in-city, low-rent residential floorspace.

The hardening of the rural form occurred either in direct response to rising land value (and the consequent need to hold more units) or as a result of Rent Control Acts which forced a depreciation in large upper class mansions. Also, rent control drove developers out of upper-class residential market making tenement blocks a reasonable business proposition. Tenements grew in leaps and bounds, either by commission or by conversion much to the Chagrin of city fathers. Only now has the realisation dawned on the extent and worth of this building type in supplying an affordable house for the urban poor.

### 3. Tenements in Dhaka

In Dhaka, until very recently, single-roomed tenements for menial workers, vendors and day-labours was profusely present within the city. They were in private and public land, huddled behind high walls. In larger concentration they were termed 'colonies' (eg. Ganaktuli Sweeper's Colony).

With rising land-value and competition from other lucrative uses they have been evicted from city proper to distant peripheries- across the river to Kamrangir Char or the flood plains in the edge of the city.

The process of eviction is inevitable as long as the physical form stays loose and horizontally distributed. The necessary physical transformation to a better organised, vertically arranged urban typology has yet to occur in Dhaka. But the development of such urban typology, is crucial in providing the urban poor with an address within the city.

Dhaka, by the year 2000 will have a population in the region of 6 million and a large portion of this population will be the beneficiary of this house-type.

### 4. Housing policy-objectives

This brings us back to the slogan and the pious intention of U.N. and our seemingly native faith that 'Shelter for All' by year 2000 is an attainable goal. It will only blur the finer distinction, variety, complexity of our urban housing situation by proposing a flat, one-dimensional house-type and setting unrealistic targets.

The parallel effort of U.N. of 'Health for All' by the year 2000, is already being translated to number of doctors, hospital beds, medical services and pharmaceutical products at the expense of health education, family nutrition, personal hygiene, food habit, mother and child-care etc. The drive will follow the beaten track already traversed in affluent societies of the West where 'health care' is manipulated by vested interest into 'hospital care'. (4)

By analogy, similar scenario can be drawn in housing sector. Housing concepts have developed in the West viewing house as a self-sufficient package for a nuclear family. This fixation grew out of middle-class values and has a narrow application in our culture. There, esp. in Western Europe, it developed as a historical necessity, when conscious political decisions were taken to create a 'home-owning democracy'. The remarkable resilience of her liberal and democratic institutions attest to the political wisdom of creating a large middle-class, home-owning constituency. (5)

We, by propagating the concept of home in effect proposing the above arrangement as a natural state in our urban society. Not only such goal is unrealistic but in such scheme of things the only means available to broaden the entrypoint is by reducing the area (floorspace /lotsize). The great variety of income differentiation and house demand is fitted against a linear scale of area (floorspace /plot size). The houses for low-income groups are then produced by making the house (flat or lot) smaller. At the lower end of the scale it produces obsolete or redundant house-forms. The single dimension of 'area' cannot



discriminate control over service packaging . Standard (or high) service infrastructure acts as an affective barrier against low-income groups and conversely sub-standard packaging can create low-income preserves. Varied service packaging is not a novel concept and is present, at least in delivery, even where the service infrastructure is standardised . Tenements, by its specific mix of 'house' and 'service' will create a wide range of residential unit exclusively targeted to the urban poor.

## 5. Conclusion

Architects and planners are often blamed for their inability to notice the obvious or accept the inevitable . 'Tenement-blocks', in whatever nomenclature, whatever built-form will appear in Dhaka, with or without the knowledge or support of the professionals. Only, if convinced of its vital role in the complex and myriad world urban housing systems we may try to accomodate it in our formal structures .

The housing situation in Dhaka appear propitious for the above house-type. As mentioned earlier, rent control acts by default, helped the development of this building type. Similar situation will also result from the escalation of municipal and utility rates, property and personal taxes etc. reducing the bussiness edge enjoyed by high-class residentials. With little incentive, financial support tax moratorium .

Tenements can be made a profitable proposition . The by-law and other urban laws pertaining to building may be adjusted to encourage tenement blocks. Relaxation in set-back regulations, allowing central courtyard, greater build-up and coverage etc. may also be considered. But more important is to understand and accomodate the role played by the private developer, for unlike other housing types here his position is pre-eminent, for only he can make it happen. Planning goals are in essence, offering him a favourable terms of trade.

## References :

1. 'Chawls grew as cheap tenements, as lucrative investment by property developers..... with the industrialisation in the east and beginning of this century'.  
Gillian TINDALL  
'City of gold'-The Biography of Bombay.  
Temple Smith, London 1982
2. 'Vicendades' - the name for low-cost tenements, are usually organised around a central courtyard with communal services. Usually one or two floors, were built for profit in the areas between the turn of the century and 1940'.  
Tomasz SUDRA, "Low-income housing system in Mexico-City" Unpublished Ph.D. disertation, M.I.T. 1976 .
3. 'Rabaas' - tenements for low-income group usually single storied .  
'Aimeras' - tenements in multi-storied arrangement, usually for low to middle income groups.

Geoff PAYNE - 'HOUSING analysis of Ismailia' Lectures in K.U.L. (Leuven) may 25, 1979

4. Ivan ILLICH - 'Medical Nemesis' 1975.

The author argues that the high life - expectancy in the west owe little to doctors or medicines, more to efficient waste disposal, supply of portable water, ample protein in daily diet etc. He claims that with the expansion of medical facilities and services life expectancy if falling in Western affluent societies.

5. The British proletariat proved petit-bourgeois by not obliging Karl Marx . Throughout the 19th century they were indeed in the avantgarde of proletarian movement. Similar shift is also noticeable in other West European Societies.

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