# Shelter Redefined

### S K Das



*Photos S K Das*

*Both in terms of physical form and organization every city looks like two cities. The 'formal city' built with legal sanction, official patronage, complete with health care, education and community facilities and a 'parallel city' which is much larger, built 'illegally' through dwellers' own initiatives and characterized by deficient but gradually improving housing and service facilities. When the two confront each other, the image is almost surrealistic.(Based on a description of Third World cities by Jorge Hardoy and David Satterthwaite).*

The glaring housing shortages and degraded living environments of the shelterless in the so-called Third World can safely be ascribed to an imbalanced global economy where the scales are tilted in favour of the rich. Excessive consumption, waste of scarce resources and concentration of wealth in the hands of a few have resulted in inhuman living conditions for the majority of the world's population. This deprived section of society is a continuous source of cheap labour and it appears to be in the interests of the privileged to keep it in a state of poverty. It is not surprising, therefore, that governments of 'poor' countries have succumbed to the pressure tactics of the powerful, and even in the sphere of housing have not been able to meet the demands of the homeless.

The problem is further aggravated due to speculation and even monopoly of land by private interests, and sometimes even by the government. And so, in spite of the deep-rooted building traditions which exist in all these countries people are being denied the opportunity to build for themselves and are being made to join the long queues for housing being allotted by the government. There continues, however, to be a shortfall in the supply of shelter and, in fact, this deficit has steadily increased over the years.

### Governmental Failure

In India, the failure of the government is evident on all fronts — in matters of policy planning, building design and technology. Apart from the weaknesses of the

economic system, a misguided perception of people's needs on the one hand, and governmental inability to provide housing on the other, contribute to the dismal situation prevalent today.

At the time of Independence, the new rulers took upon themselves the role of being the sole providers of housing. They set up ambitious targets and standards with the conviction that in independent India no one should live below the defined minimum standard — the parameters of which they set themselves. Initial attempts of the government focused on building new housing and resettling displaced families on the peripheries of cities. They also decided to remove slums — the implication being that what the people had themselves constructed in these slums was of unacceptable quality

and hence, a liability. Thus were sown the first seeds of a mis-match between governmental perceptions and people's priorities. Rather than being an asset, people found the new settlements to be a burden. A central locaton being their first priority they found the distances at where they were settled highly impractical. House costs were unaffordable and the 'product' itself (created by the public works departments accustomed to building primarily roads or irrigation schemes under British rule) offended their social and cultural sensibilities. Apparently, the people's own skills and ingenuities were neither recognized, nor were they given a legal and institutional context in which they could prosper.

By the early seventies, between one-third and one-half of the population in cities was living in grossly substandard accommodation, much of which, by virtue of its informality, was illegal. Till today, access to employment opportunities which ensures stable incomes and a chance of building or paying for reasonable quality accommodation has not kept pace with the growth in population. Therefore, since in most cities, a very high proportion of households or individuals lack sufficient incomes to pay for adequate accommodation, they either go beyond the law in securing shelter (by building a house or a shack on illegally occupied or subdivided land), or they rent very inadequate housing (in the form of a room or perhaps only a bed in an over-crowded slum). In many cities, even a bed rental is too expensive for thousands of people, so they are forced to sleep on pavements, open land or even in the recesses of public buildings.

Some of the obvious weaknesses and misconceptions in the housing situation are worth examining. At the policy level, the government has promoted, for political gains, its role as the sole provider. But it has neither the means nor the ability to generate sufficient resources to build on its own. Meanwhile land, which is a key resource for housing, has been freely traded as a commodity. It has subsequently become difficult to acquire adequate land in reasonable locations for housing, and even when under government control, it is rationed in such a manner that poor people cannot have access to it. Again, indigenous building materials have been diverted for subsidized use by industries who are guilty of depleting forests and exploiting the natural resources, making these materials inaccessible to the common man. The public works departments and housing boards have specialized in the use of high energy intensive, locally unavailable and expensive cement and concrete for building, which has more or less replaced all other forms of building materials within the legal/formal sector. Ironically, subsidies or soft loans were made available if cement

was used for building, and planning laws and regulations were framed in such a manner that they discouraged the use of energy efficient, locally available building materials and technologies. People, therefore, have been made perforce to bury traditional skills of house building and to rely on new 'agents' to provide them with homes.

In terms of planning and design, public agencies ignored the cardinal fact that individuals or households have their own particular life styles and priorities for location within the city. The former is particularly

relevant in terms of design which is influenced by trade-offs among cost, size of dwelling and access to services. The latter bears directly on accessibility to sources of income. With regard to design, one has to keep in mind not only the uniqueness of the individual but also the uniqueness of the place. The making of buildings and settlements is by definition a local affair — an act that cannot and should not repeat itself. It is intimately connected with local customs, climate and resources. If this is a valid premise as has been reflected in traditional architec-



*Kalbibushan Jan*
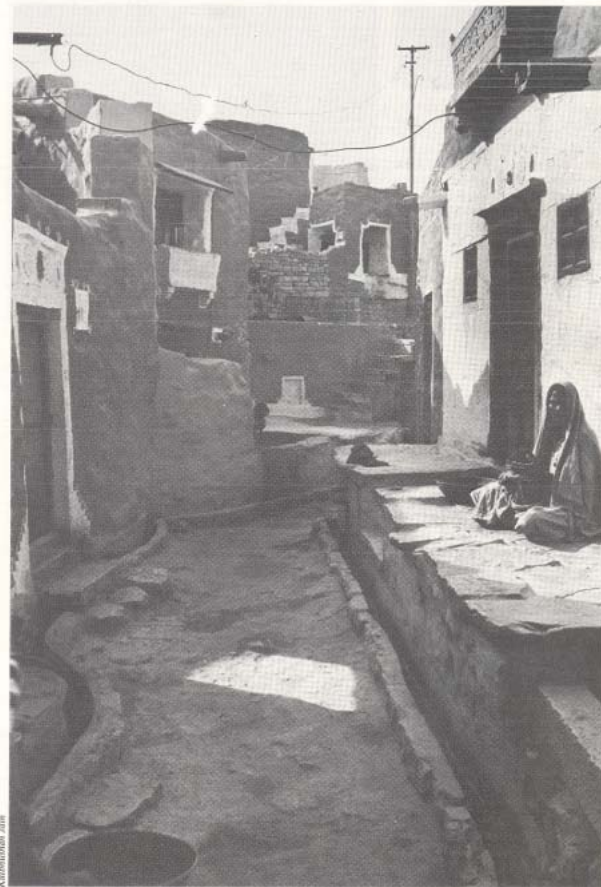
*Street houses adjust to the geometry of the Fort corner at Jaiselmer*

*A contradictory perception of security. Miles of hutment under high tension wires represents a highly dangerous housing location as perceived by the planners, city fathers and the casual observer. But, for those who have chosen to live here, this constitutes the most secure location — perhaps the last one to face a demolition threat as it has no real estate value.*



*Illegal makeshift homes on prime land in Bhopal*
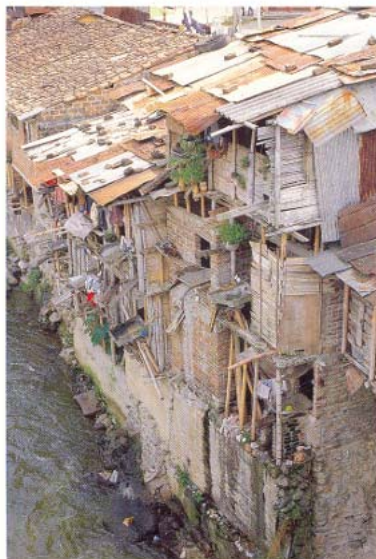
*An example of illegally built inner city rental housing alongside a river, precariously standing and defying structural logic. Materials used range from mud, bamboo, recycled timber planks, tin, asbestos, tiles and concrete (Colombia)*

ture created with or without architects, then it has unfortunately been completely disregarded in the 'type designs' touted by public agencies for all situations and sites, however dissimilar. Such stereotyped buildings are inappropriate and insensitive to their users' lifestyles and understandably lack the care they deserve from their apathetic inhabitants. Their decay is rapid and often they are in need of repair within 5 – 10 years.

### Self-Help Initiatives

This scenario has given rise to the view that housing designed and built by people themselves is, therefore, more suitable, even superior to that provided by the government for the poor. The argument follows that government should not be in the business of building houses but rather, should engage in 'supporting' people's own initiatives through a combination of regulatory measures and direct actions. 'Support policies' and 'enabling strategies' are now used as universal catchwords by all political parties and by multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank which is aggressively encouraging policy changes in this direction, and advocating the adoption of 'universal solutions' through two types of housing programmes, namely the sites and services

projects and slum upgrading schemes.

The government's motives for gradually adopting these strategies may be differently interpreted. Is it because of a strong sense of ideological belief in this particular pattern of overall development, or is it simply owing to economic expediency and its own failure to adequately deal with housing? The latter reason appears to carry more weight for although the government has begun to advocate self-help for the poor, this is being half-heartedly done within the constraint of marginal resources. It is clear that the government does not advocate self-help in housing on the basis of an ideological principle but rather, out of a sense of opportunism, as the same principle is not applicable to the not-so-poor or the rich who, in fact, are the ones who have the material means and access to resources to undertake self-help housing in a meaningful manner. Even if self-help is encouraged within the sites and services and slum upgradation projects, the simultaneous demolition of self-built slum houses and the eviction of their occupants is consistently on the increase.

Sites and services projects on a turnkey basis with a package of associated services are usually located in outlying areas of the

city. However, they have low locational priority for the poor and are rapidly turning out to be unaffordable. Distant locations mean extra cost in time and bus fares. Eligibility criteria for loans and the conditions attached to their repayment, building schedules and restrictions on the use of houses for work purposes, make it almost impossible for the urban poor to participate in such programmes. Moreover, it has become impossible to acquire good sites at cheap prices. In this context, the packaged upgrading programmes, with a thrust on provision of water supply, sanitation and other services, offer a relatively more reasonable option which is meant to complement the efforts of the poor. Most of the upgrading, however, is undertaken by government agencies as turnkey projects eliminating the possibility of dweller participation in planning, design and execution. As a result, wrong priorities have been established and unsuitable products delivered.

The fundamental issue related to both sites and services and upgrading schemes is the kind of settlements they generate in the long run. Sites and services layouts and plots are usually based on the economy of water supply and sewer pipes than the kind of interactive place which the neighbour-

*Tissue form expressing design informality (project in Indore by B V Doshi)*
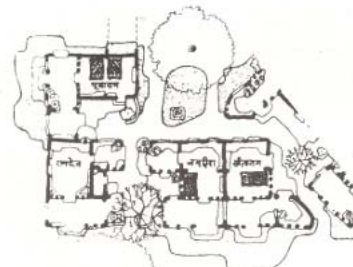


*Design reflecting close consultation between architect and client (Anandgram project by Vasant and Revathi Kamath)*

hood requires to make it functionally viable and promote a sense of community. At best, therefore, sites and services projects may represent a financial success but they are equally an environmental failure. On the other hand, slum upgrading puts a permanent stigma on the neighbourhood as being, or having been a 'slum,' thus creating a sense of 'second class citizenship' among the residents.

In the opportunistic adoption of selective self-help sites and services and slum upgrading projects, the government is guided by its own affordability rather than that of the people. Consequently, the emphasis has shifted to cutting down on the much needed welfare funds for housing, on reducing government spending, on ensuring full cost recovery from 'beneficiaries' and on promoting self-financing mechanisms, and consequently, on further lowering norms and standards. Support programmes are advocated without the necessary supportive regulations concerning access to land and material, and they instead propose counter regulations or the removal of existing laws, such as the Urban Land Ceiling Act and Rent Control Act which are protective measures for the poor. A more active role for the private sector, which by definition works for profit, is ironically encouraged. In all types of housing programmes the government is guided by the view that these have to be centrally designed by bureaucractic organizations. Centralization, by definition, requires standardization of programmes for wider application. Inherent in this approach is the belief that national policies should lead to strategies, then to programmes and eventually to projects. Coming from a bureaucracy, such a hierarchical approach already contains the seeds of its own failure.

### Voluntary Organizations

In contrast, there are many examples of locally specific projects and actions that can have positive implications for policy making, if only the government would allow it-

self to be influenced by 'small innovations'. The last decade has seen the emergence of voluntary organizations active in the field of housing. These organizations have worked along two broad lines: the first concerns the issue of housing as a fundamental human right, and the second derives from concrete physical experiences of a positive nature realized through housing projects. At the basis of this is the fact that the number of people threatened directly by eviction or displacement, or indirectly by various urban development projects is increasing significantly. Forced eviction is an intolerable breach of human rights, most especially when those who are subjected to it are already steeped in poverty with low levels of incomes and inadequate access to social services. The factors leading to eviction and displacement are also many: land speculation and property developments of a speculative nature, routine development projects with misplaced emphasis on modernization of transport and housing, beautification programmes geared at creating a 'better image' often for tourists, as well as the simple rejection of the 'popular' neighbourhood as being of an unacceptable standard.

The undertaking of housing projects is sometimes challenged by those who feel that this process must follow only when structural changes in society have come about. This may have an element of truth in it but it does not automatically follow that housing rights be indefinitely postponed until this happens. A house for a family is much more than a mere roof over the head. It is a basic necessity for physical and emotional satisfaction as well as for social well being. It is not the house *per se* but the sense of neighbourhood — *the social context of a house* — that is crucial to a sense of security. Place making can thus be seen as an integral and complementary effort to community building. The home and neighbourhood is a realm where people can concretely utilize their traditional skills and experience, an

opportunity which is denied them in the official housing development process. On the other hand, this does not necessarily imply that people must build with their own hands. The point is that people must be encouraged to take crucial decisions about location, design, choice of material, technology and construction, in a way which they know to be environmentally sound and socially appropriate. The process of participatory design and development is as important as the ultimate product namely, houses and the neighbourhood.

It follows, therefore, that the government should allow for an increased role by voluntary organizations and communities in housing, even while the production of mass housing remains a governmental responsibility. Voluntary organizations have shown the advantage of the participatory approach in housing design over the bureaucratic approach, for it establishes a democratic basis for planning and design. Another lesson of general implication is that for human beings and communities, housing is a long drawn out process of struggle and realizations which cannot be compressed into short time-span turnkey projects. The initial intervention by governments must create the basis for people to further build and improve upon homes and neighbourhoods. In design terms, such a process must create a 'public frame' for popular initiatives in spatial and physical dimensions. I repeat that community building and place making are inseparable elements that influence each other.

### Role of Architects

For architects and design professionals this approach implies conceptual and institutional adjustments to conventional design practice. At the outset, the designer's task is to interact directly and through the abstraction of an identified community as much as possible. Preconceived images are thus confronted and counterbalanced by the actual needs of the dwellers who come from
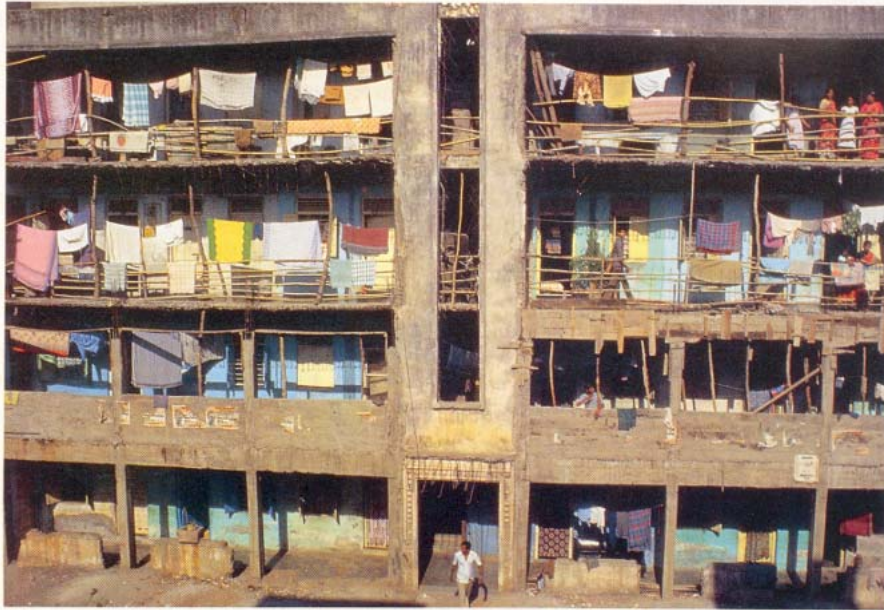
*Housing Board flats that are already under extensive structural repair within 10 years of construction.*



*An example of not so old public housing by the Housing Board in Bombay. The design of such buildings reflects a singular concern for meeting cost ceilings at the initial stage beyond which it is a case of wasted resources. A poor and unresponsive agency fails in maintenance and repair of such indifferent buildings, as also do the users.*



*The elitist perception of a solution is to decorate and beautify a building. The external facade of a squatter settlement along the western express highway that connects the airport to Bombay city is painted through voluntary mobilization of human resources which includes the business community as well as artists with social standing. Also, there is soft advertising on 'concrete lollipops' at submarket rates by industries, the proceeds of which are supposed to benefit slum children (whose eviction is imminent). The question is: who is being subsidized?*

a different social class. This demands a change in the manner of communication in order to ensure effective interaction. Design will have to take note of the process of gradual appropriation of space for building growth and physical transformations, both at the level of the individual dwellings as well as at the level of collective social facilities. The resulting housing environment will have to incorporate the possibility of varying courses of action by the dwellers as the housing process unfolds; yet the process must remain subject to certain ground rules which accommodate a degree of decision making by dwellers in an overall design framework. It is thus a case of 'designing for variations' resulting in the outcome of gradual neighbourhood consolidation.

If land and material supplies are well regulated by the government then these, along with people's skills, initiatives and organization will reduce the dependence on finance which is currently perceived by the government as the key resource in housing, and of which there is always going to be a shortage. In that case, perhaps, housing design for, and with the people will have a chance. ❖

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## SHELTER FOR THE HOMELESS