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The Habitation of the Poor

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"I have been asked to speak about housing for the poor. That means discussing how half the population of the world lives and dwells. A poor man is a badly-fed and badly-dressed, illiterate or semi-illiterate human being, who lives in a rudimentary rural shelter or in a rundown city house, badly-serviced and surrounded by garbage. Many of the poor lack permanent employment; others receive a meagre income from agriculture, mining or working in a city. A poor man is exploited in the sense that the product of his labour enables other human beings to enjoy a standard of life which is inaccessible to him.

In these last ten years, the world has awakened to the need to search diligently for social justice. Our attention has been drawn to the contrast between the misery in which the majority of humanity lives, and the excessive material wellbeing of certain groups. Perhaps there is no better reflection of the difference between misery and wellbeing than the state of human habitations.

The great majority think of a house as a structure. However, the poor use that structure as a permanent or semi-permanent dwelling which is their lodging, their residence and even their place of work, a frame for their human

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life during the greater part of each day and each year. A dwelling, then, is something more than an individual or collective structure, isolated or grouped together, forming a conglomeration of diverse size and function. Defined as a dwelling that structure becomes a vital aspect of the life of man as a social being and of his way of life upon the earth. To the poor, a house means a way of living, of residing more or less constantly in one place or site.¹

I would estimate that in 1970 at least 60 per cent of the world's population was crammed into badly-built, badly-equipped houses, in unsatisfactory surroundings.² It is almost certain that the situation in Africa, Asia and Latin America is worse today than in 1970, and it goes on deteriorating. It isn't easy to prove these estimates. I don't assign greater importance to the available figures since government itself does so little in this matter and in my opinion much less than they should and could do.

It worries me on the other hand that governments officially consider a house as a structure while the people, who themselves build the great majority of the world's houses, think and build and try to use their houses as dwellings. They don't always manage it, often because of official dissuasion. This difference in focus, based on official and cultural standards is visible in the cities of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Everywhere in the world the poor are the worst-housed. Governments, business executives and technical staff offer various explanations. No government stops pointing out the importance of improving the people's living conditions and invariably declares that every family should have a decent place to live and access to acceptable health standards, privacy and security. But when the time comes to act, they "discover" that urban and suburban land is in the hands of speculators, that prices are already very high and that fragmentation pushes up the price of housing construction and services; that due to the disorder, the small scale and speculative character of the construction industry and of building materials, costs are very high and that the family income of the great majority of the urban population of Africa, Asia and Latin America is too low and irregular to rent or buy even the simplest housing on the market. In fact, they (governments) find that the majority of (their) national economies do not have the capacity (and, in much smaller countries, the resources) to generate the growth which is essential to provide the people with essential social services. Without

trying to improve deplorable living conditions, it is left to the population to find a solution to their (own) problems.

Given the rapid character of urbanisation, it is logical to expect that the gravest environmental situations are in the cities of Africa, Asia and Latin America. As an example I will explain the situation in one city. It is, in my experience, typical of many others.

A few months ago I visited for the first time a city in a Latin American country. Some official data I picked up is revealing. The population of the metropolitan area in 1975 reached 1,400,000 inhabitants. The population increased 90 per cent between 1960 and 1970. General density is low and around 96 per cent of the metropolitan area is not built up. In 1970 there were 295,100 jobs in the metropolitan area, which indicates considerable unemployment. Moreover, around 50 per cent of employees were receiving remuneration equivalent to the minimum wage which in that area scarcely allows a typical family to eat badly, cover their small expenses and travel. 64.32 per cent of the employed belonged to the tertiary sector; 22.80 per cent to the secondary sector and 12.88 to the primary sector.

Only 9 per cent of the population in 1976 is served by sewers and only 25 per cent with running water. As the city is in a region of very heavy, seasonal rains, the drainage problem is critical since the city has only 21 kilometers of run-off drains. Each year they officially construct 1,700 dwellings in accordance with official standards uniting the public endeavour with the private. Those of the population without resources, or very scanty resources, who make up the great majority, build their own dwellings.

Clearly, under these sanitary and environmental conditions the child mortality rate is very high indeed, sharpened by a lack of maternity care. Due to the dispersion and the type of industrial buildings there is so far no serious air pollution, but there does exist very serious water pollution, both on the surface and underground. Traffic congestion is minimal and the city is acceptably quiet. The deficiencies of the primary and secondary educational system are enormous in spite of recent improvements.

The big business of today in that metropolitan area is land speculation. New "urbanisations" constantly appear. They tell me that there are already three or four subdivided lots for each family. Among those most active in this speculation are some of the principal politicians, businessmen and industrialists, both provincial and local. A substantial percentage of public investment in paving, surrounding avenues, housing and public services for

middle incomes and even for public institutions of social security have been localised to enhance the value of the land in the hands of private speculators and to facilitate access to private subdivisions for high and middle income groups.

There is an attempt at a master plan for that metropolitan area. The technicians have done their work well. Their goals are correct but are not realistic. The technical staff has no power to modify the state of things described. They want to spur the regional economy but that depends on decisions by the distant central government; they want to concentrate investment in those areas of the city where the benefits will be greatest and protect the natural environment but they collide with those local and provincial interests already mentioned; they want to establish minimum services but recognise that the decapitalisation of those services of social and collective interest is growing.

This situation is very common in all the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Whoever lives in or knows these continents will immediately recognise many cities from my description - including, in all probability, the city in which he lives.

Do national institutions know how to face situations like the one described? Do they understand, those who retain economic and political power, the gravity of the situation? Are they conscious of the social injustice contained in this example? Do they acknowledge the manifestations that tacit acceptance of situations like this reveal? Are they disposed to condemn the immorality of the practices indicated? I don't believe that many governments of underdeveloped countries are willing to face up to such situations in spite of the fact that experienced approaches must indicate to them that they are moving from disaster to disaster. Almost none is able to show more than a few partial and sectoral accomplishments which do not encourage in-depth solutions.

I am sure that those who have national and international, economic and political power have not given much time to thinking about an urbanisation process which requires a radical, theoretical and practical reorientation to be able to come to grips with it.

In situations like this, even the best of technical staff are useless. Their proposals are timid and erroneous because they are not allowed to state the problems correctly. They are limited to elaborating and planning policies

in the success of which no serious researcher or technician with a social conscience can believe. These technicians are confined to the assembly of data and the preparation of reports that they will not be able to use. Their role is limited to a frustrating effort to persuade those who have the power to decide.

One would like to believe that those who have the economic and political power have not lost their sense of social reality, and that they would be willing to rearrange their interests if they saw a feasible solution. But there is no easy and quick exit from misery and injustice, and the first step has to be the giving up of positions of privilege by those who hold them. This applies equally to rich countries, rich social groups, wealthy business, wealthy institutions and the Church. If this attitude is not taken, I see as very difficult a peaceful solution to the social conflict of our time. Urbanisation is a spatial reflection of the society which occupies it. It is not then an urban crisis with which we are confronted but a social crisis which involves the rich and the poor equally.

The cities of Africa, Asia and Latin America are cities of young people. They are living and participating in an historic epoch of profound world change in social, political, psychological and technological spheres. This young generation and those who follow will incline towards those changes. It is difficult to foresee the result of that conflict, but I am sure that it will affect all aspects of life including the cities. The city of today includes the protests of the poor and of the young in rebellion against injustice and the exploitation of man by man, against systems of education, against hereditary privilege, against prevailing political practices and socioeconomic systems. The city will not be immune to these protests. I believe that these protests should be aimed at questioning segregation, at questioning the concept of property and speculation, as well as the technology and the norms that the dominant groups impose on the construction of cities. Not only will they assist in the construction of a more just society but also in better cities.

It is easier to understand the causes of that internal social explosion than to comprehend with integral vision in order to encourage them constructively. As the "tempo" of change accelerates it is easy to lose one's place. It is much simpler to resist these changes than to try to explain them. Therefore many people take refuge in the experience of the past without

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comprehending that some of the most vital groups of our society tend to reject it.

It isn't simple to explain the process of current change. It has unknown dimensions, involves magnitudes without precedent, has characteristics not foreseen, and presents symptoms not studied. It is concerned with an outburst of the poor and the young fed by their rejection of existing political and socioeconomic systems, and by their opposition to prevailing structures. The outbursts are not more frequent or more serious because they are curbed, but they are latent. Represented also is the conflict between generations.

It is as if there has broken out all at once forces dormant for generations, made lethargic by hunger, repression and segregation. Here is the key point. We must capitalize, on behalf of society and on behalf of the city, the commanding and pressing desire for social change.

But the doctrines that we are using have been inherited from a world much more inclined to preservation, to permanency, satisfied with "imperial success" and wealth, little inclined to agree or to give way. This is no use to us. What is happening in Africa, Asia and Latin America cannot remain confined in the experience and technical, paternal assistance of the industrialized and developed nations.

We must learn to build cities that permit almost continuous social change without losing some aspects of fundamental, functional structure. The city of the future must be re-made all the time. Please understand me. A city that doubles its population every ten or fifteen years is essentially a new city every ten or fifteen years.

I want to emphasise that we are trying to live in an urban age of accelerated social change with a static image of the city. We try to guide and control decapitalized and auto-constructed growth of these cities with static mechanics and unreal standards that separates those who have much from those who have little or nothing. In other words, the conflict presents itself between a traditional and detailed way of planning urban growth, based in the application of unrealistic, precise, official standards, and an experimental approach based on a wide and flexible strategy including the cultural norms of those who in reality are, through society's omission, the modern builders of cities.

The rural situation is different. The poverty of landless peasants and rural workers is almost animal. The essential problem is almost widespread

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under-employment and unconfined, seasonal unemployment. The growing demographic pressure on arable land limits to a continually increasing extent their self-sufficiency and imposes an over-cultivation which inevitably leads to erosion.

The great majority of African, Asian and Latin-American countries are predominantly rural not only because of the distribution of population but also through the importance of agricultural activities as a source of labour activity. In these three continents there are almost a thousand million rural workers without land. There are peasants who are badly-fed, without medical care, without education, without clean water and with bad dwellings. Their life expectation is of course very short. Their dwellings are dirty and lack toilets; some of the materials used in their construction have to be treated to control the spread of endemic illness.

In spite of all this, the techniques used and the design of the houses indicate that the inhabitants have a practical knowledge of the climate, that they know how to get the maximum out of materials that architects with years of practice would not know how to use, that they can construct roofs and walls that can be easily renovated if it is necessary to enlarge the house. By simple methods and extremely low cost, without having to bring in material and tools, understanding nature and discovering their own resources, millions upon millions of peasant families have built their own dwellings.

Study a geography book written at the beginning of the century and you will see that the requirements of the environment were met with a wisdom born of experience.

In Latin America only Cuba is able to display a programme of rural construction parallel to structural changes which in the last fifteen years have been introduced into the society and the economy of that country. I suggest that you study their solutions. There is a practical lesson here which conceals initial deficiencies in approach. It proves how much one can do for oneself without external credit or international technical assistance, with few resources and without pre-investment studies, with young technicians and without much previous research - but with will, dedication and vision.

In sum, the rural dwelling in Africa, Asia and Latin America appears as a picture of total abandonment. If one analyses the scanty national and international reports dealing with intentions to improve rural dwellings, one

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observes their almost total irrelevance. Notwithstanding, the rural dwelling is the habitat of 50 percent of the world's population and is an alternative to the concentration of population in little dots of each territory.

A long-term prediction on how the urban and rural situation in general, and that of the dwelling of the poor in particular, will evolve can only be based on a criticism of the present approach to the problem and in the adoption of a system of clear values. First of all, we must accept that the present and foreseeable urban and rural dwelling situation has no solution if it is attacked in the conventional manner of today. And then we must comprehend that the building of future urbanisation and of future dwellings and the satisfaction of present demands constitutes the highest sectoral investment that must be realized on a world scale in order to reach levels of satisfaction of the basic necessities - higher than the estimated investment for food and education.

If we limit ourselves to extrapolating the present position we would be accepting that world society lacks the capacity for change and in essence that the national societies of Africa, Asia and Latin-America have not the vitality to alter their aims and provoke change in world power relations. That is to say, it would be to accept that the nations of the least-developed continents have no recourse other than to submit to the orientation that is imposed by international and national minorities and live, for that reason, in a space modelled by immutable social determinants or that evolve very slowly. That space would be the inheritance of historical spaces.

At the world level, there are no material limits on the production of construction materials, nor a lack of capable labour; and only in certain countries are there such limits regionally. Throughout history the greater part of cities have been self-built, using local material and techniques. Satisfactory and economic practices, using materials placed by nature within the people's reach were developed and were developed and passed from generation to generation. The great majority of the world's rural dwellings continue to be built like this, following simple designs learned by practice, well adjusted to the climatic requirements and to the resources of their occupants and builders.

This approach can be substantially improved in its socio-economic and technological aspects. However, some national examples - certainly
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very few - show that the beginning of a possible solution to the problem of the rural dwelling is based upon:

- a) the transformation of the agrarian structure of a country;
- b) adequate land to carry out and administer that agrarian transformation and
- c) spatial distribution of the work force according to a socio-economic plan and in relation to a plan of agricultural development.

Concentration of rural population is essential, to bring to each rural family the basic services and to allow for communication, the interchange of ideas and experiences, and the development of the individual and of society. The object is to diminish the isolation of the rural population that limits participation and provokes resistance to change. New rural communities should be designed to maximize land protection and be endowed with necessary social institutions and basic equipment. The introduction of potable water, energy and accesses would rapidly alter the standard of living of those communities, eradicating endemic illness, fortifying the organization if its inhabitants prolonging expectation of life and ending social and economic isolation. Strengthening other infra-structural services, bringing in latrines and sanitary facilities would similarly improve the liveability. With adequate organization and technology these tasks are perfectly feasible.

The decade 1950 to 1960 witnessed great sociopolitical changes. African and many Asian countries reached political independence with great optimism. Various Latin American countries passed agrarian reform laws, and announced social reform with equal vision, full of promises of an economic expansion and social justice.

According to the usual economic indicators, that expansion indeed happened. But someone had to pay for that progress and absorb the heaviest load, and this was the peasants and the city workers, the people for whom the new constitutions and the agrarian reform laws were proclaimed. Twenty years later the intent of social reform has been diluted in almost all the countries, the gap has widened between high and low incomes, national states are losing any meaningful independence and governing without comprehension and popular support.

It is very hard for me to imagine how metropolitan areas of 15, 20 or 30 million people will function under these conditions. I went to Calcutta once.

I have been acquainted with the three metropolitan areas of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City for over twenty years. I visit them periodically and have good friends there with whom occasionally I discuss their problems. My first impression is that between each visit many things and many people are added. There is more of everything that should not be necessary, and less of that which should not be cut away. More people, more cars, higher buildings, more spectacular private housing, some new underground transportation, more dirt, mountain landscapes that disappear behind the smoke, contaminated beaches and lakes which cannot be used, more traffic congestion, more noise, the misery and the garbage being more apparent as soon as one leaves the tourist districts behind.

We must approach city construction in an experimental and flexible way. We must change to a process that permits consciously and with liberty the development of the potential of society and individual. If the essence of human beings is to live together - and that signifies participation - why not create the conditions that allow them to think about the integral construction of their city, to criticize the plans and projects both public and private, and then to participate in their implementation? After all, if the present cities of Africa, Asia and Latin America are in great part self-constructed - and there is no possibility that this situation will change in one or two generations - why not liberate and organize the constructive creativity of millions of men and women who, anyway, with or without support and counsel, will themselves build the district of the city in which they have chosen to live?

If we don't do this, we will continue to believe that through city master plans, international credit and technical assistance, we can start some solution to the so-called urban and housing "crisis".

In some cities, groups of people have been coming together to oppose this state of affairs. In the same way as agrarian groups, such urban groups of the city have an old and historic tradition. And one must not put aside the fact that in the past some historic cities of Latin America have been abandoned due to local and regional social revolt.

Usually, the motivation of such urban groups has been access to land; in many cases the objective was the legal possession of public or private land which the poor had invaded to construct their precarious dwellings. Holding freehold or leasehold title to this land is the guarantee that family

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investment in improving the dwelling, or the community effort to improve the district, shall not be lost.

Authority's answer has frequently been to threaten the ejection of the trespassers, in order to clean the streets of undesirables, and put the land to uses that had nothing to do with the peremptory necessities of its circumstantial occupants. And there have been cases in which the authorities promise urban land reform during a political crisis, partly provoked by urban groups, but without making any significant concessions. It is when they are confronted by threats of ejection and demolition that the occupants of squatter settlements mobilize, many times with the support of other political groups, to defend their positions.

The immediate objective of such mobilizations has been to put pressure on local or national authorities to concede concrete demands: right to title of land; basic public services like water, drains, electricity and public baths; schools and medical centers; better transportation; new employment; credit for dwellings; in other words, the acknowledgement of the self-constructed district as a definite element in the structure of the city.

But many mobilizations have gone no further than this. They have not transcended the solution of the most pressing physical and environmental problems. They have frequently lacked long-term political and socio-economic aims. They have not stopped to analyse other ways out of the system which keeps them where they are, to understand the struggle of the working class. The continual deferring of their most basic ambitions has at times forced them into a sort of conformity. They have often accepted minimal improvements as attainments, beyond which there exist neither alternatives nor possibilities. Yet at the same time they show a general vitality, a group solidarity, an ambition to attain for their children opportunities and a way of life that they did not have.

Up until not too long ago cities were constructed so that they would last for centuries and centuries. Their physical and demographic growth was very slow, and they employed building techniques that remained immutable for generation after generation. The technology and the resources of the time only permitted simple change. Their renovation was slow, as the changes in those societies were slow. A good part of the historic cities were self-built. The fact that only the ruins of temples, palaces, walls and aqueducts have remained must not allow us to forget that in each region and in each generation

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there existed a domestic urban and rural architecture built by its occupants.

After the nineteenth century, the rate of change accelerated. In the majority of countries, from about twenty or thirty years ago, the cities renewed themselves with growing speed. It seemed as if each generation wanted to leave its mark on the city, a sign of its presence. Physical characteristics, technologies, designs which until thirty or sixty years ago seemed destined to last for generations are seen today as unpredictable and unforeseen.

We have learned to produce the most useful and also the most useless gadgets with a surprising inventiveness and capacity for renovation. Through the imposition of its enormous cost and functional complexity we have learned to design and construct buildings which can be re-adapted for other functions.

But we have not learned, we have not even begun to think seriously, about how to renovate the human environment of urban man with the same flexibility. There is no solution, neither short-term or long-term, to the problem of housing the poor if it is stated in the terms used by the great majority of governments, and international agencies, and bilateral, technical and financial aid programs. It would be better to stop everything today and to re-state the problem - first with honesty, then with vision and, finally with generosity. These are not characteristics easy to find in the big business which the building of cities has become.

I have no recipe. There are no recipes for these problems. There is no universal model. I can only propose flexibility and experimentation in order to better understand the problems. I can only suggest we should first put aside irrelevant considerations which usually occupy the first plans in the analyses. But there is an urgency to initiate some action, now.

There are four pre-conditions that I consider both essential and feasible:

1. There seem to me to be two ways of financing the basic infra-structure of the future agglomerates. First, we should endeavour to get the added value which will make urbanisation grow in the interests of the community and a non-positive policy arranged to allow the access of all the population to indispensable services, by means of local and regional differential rates. In the less-developed countries there are millions and millions of very poor families. Their number seems to be rising. So that they can reach adequate levels of consumption and basic services, the only immediate possibility is to subsidise them. It is right that the privileged sectors provide the subsidy.

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2. The technology used in the building of cities and dwellings **must be** carefully chosen, taking into consideration regional and national labour policies, through a better use of regional natural resources and from the technical skills of the people. Let us remember that the building industry can become a source of employment second only to agriculture in importance - and working in it does not require great special knowledge.
3. The socialisation of urban and suburban land is an indispensable requisite. The suppression of unnecessary subdivision and speculation in land will permit the organizations responsible for building cities to improve the efficiency of services; develop the whole building program with the technology considered most appropriate; lower the costs of construction and of administration; and plan the future distribution of the population in each center.
4. The participation of the people in the decisions which will determine the future character of their cities is essential. Cities are now being built all over the world according to the urban "image" of politicians, financiers and technocrats completely ignorant of the aspirations, values and priorities of the great mass of the people.

In sum, human beings make up the most valuable existing resource. They are continually renewed. They show every day their inventiveness and their adaptability. They create and transform the agglomerations in which they live, according to their own aspirations and possibilities. To invest in their education, and improve the quality of the environment in which they live, are not only measures of strict justice. They are the only road towards economic development, social integration and the full participation of all population groups in reaching and executing the decisions which affect the future of each country."

NOTES

1. Read the short and stimulating essay of Martin Heidegger, "Building. Dwelling. Thinking" in "Poetry, Language, Thought", pp 145-161. Harper and Row, New York, 1975
2. "Latin-American World Model", Fundacion Bariloche. Will be published in July, 1976 by La Editorial Pados, Buenos Aires. Simultaneous editions in other languages.