

Solidarity

UBI BONI TACENT, MALUM PROSPERAT

Vol. VI, No. 6

June, 1971

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Published monthly at Solidaridad Publishing House, 531 Padre Faura, Ermita, Manila, Philippines. Europe and the Americas \$9.95; Asia \$7.75. One year subscription including postage: Europe and the Americas \$10.00. Asia \$8.50. A stamped self-addressed envelope or international reply coupons should accompany manuscripts otherwise they cannot be returned. Solidarity is affiliated with the International Association for Cultural Freedom with Office at 104 Boulevard Haussmann Paris 8e. France.
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Entered as Second-Class Matter at the Manila Post Office on February 7, 1968.

Two Views: Roofing the Urban Squatters

I. The City Is Its People

Richard P. Poethig

ON THE OCCASION of its 400th anniversary, Manila is a city under siege. It began its history under attack from Spanish guns; today it faces battle from successive waves of migrants seeking a place in Manila's history. Manila, the center of the nation's wealth and development, has drawn countless peoples from the hinterlands into its orbit. People from all regions come to Manila in search of a better life. For some the dream is fulfilled; for others the vision outshines the reality.

The reality for many families is that living in the city becomes a "hand to mouth" existence. Where living is a matter of survival, there is little choice in housing. Families have to put down stakes on any piece of available land. Usually these are the most undesirable sites and are potentially dangerous for family well-being. Esteros and railroad

right-of-ways—the sites of many squatter houses—are also their graves.

Squatter Communities

The growth of squatter communities in the late 1940's pressured the government to evolve a squatter policy. In 1950, the Quirino administration organized a Slum Clearance Committee to resettle squatters outside the boundaries of Metropolitan Manila. By 1970, successive administrations had resettled over 20,000 families. During the same period, migration to Manila grew faster than relocations could be carried out. The first survey in 1948 counted 23,000 persons living under squatter conditions. By 1970, the squatter population had multiplied 35 times, or more than 800,000 people.

Since squatter communities continue to grow, it is apparent that an effective

urban squatter policy has yet to be devised for Manila. Nor is there any likelihood that one can be devised. As the proportion of squatters increases in relation to urban population, the measures necessary to meet the problem become prohibitive, both in terms of government finance and in the consequences which might result from precipitous action. Present relocations cannot keep abreast with new incursions into the city. Nor can a method of surveillance be devised to prevent people from entering the city, except perhaps under a strict authoritarian regime.

*Role of Low-Income
People in Development*

Since rapid urbanization through migration is a world-wide phenomenon, it is necessary to recognize the role which low-income people play in the development of urban regions. Urban growth has its own inner rationale which, if carefully assessed, would provide clues to the squatter problem.

Squatter areas are entrance points for low-income people into urban life. These areas provide a milieu familiar to the new migrants; coming to the city for the first time, they want to live near those who come from the same province. They often depend upon their province-mates to help them get work. Many groups related to the migrants' social needs spring up in squatter areas. Newcomers usually enter into regional mutual-aid associations. As they remain in an area longer, their groups become more sophisticated. In his study of Barrio Magsaysay on the Tondo Foreshoreland of Manila, Aprodicio Laquian found over 20 neighborhood organizations, six of which were incorporated under the Securities and Exchange Commission.

In her study of Vitas, Tondo, a low income area adjacent to Barrio Magsaysay, Mary Hollnsteiner found a strong sense of identity on the part of the residents with their area. Despite the criticism of outsiders, as Mrs. Hollnsteiner says,

to many a resident (Inner Tondo), can be a haven of primary,

*highly personalized relationships, a folk milieu not unlike the barrio. To the man who lives in such an environment, the security it brings may far out rank the clean, quiet streets... of economically better-off, but emotionally impersonal, neighborhoods.**

Out of this identification with their area, the people form block organizations for beautifying their street, or youth organizations to sponsor social activities or a *ronda* for protection of their area from outside trouble makers. Low-income people recognize their dependence upon their community for their friendships and security.

The middle class suburb, on the other hand, tends to be composed of independent family units with no immediate social unity. Middle class families can afford to be more individualistic. Their friendships and their income are generally related to their professional or technical skills. They are not as dependent upon their immediate community for social fulfillment or for economic assistance. They seek their friends among their business associates, their fellow cursillistas or the couples in their Christian Family Movement group. Their economic advancement is also related to associations with those outside their community—in their business or professional relationships.

Squatter communities are directly related to the migrants' economic livelihood. Squatter communities are generally located near job opportunities, particularly those of an unskilled or semi-skilled nature. Port areas, market places, bus depots, and construction sites attract new migrants who provide the manual labor in these areas. It is here that the most dense squatter and slum communities exist. It is also from these areas that families are evicted, cutting them off from their income and removing the services they perform on the docks, in the markets, and at the bus terminals.

*"Inner Tondo As A Way of Life," St. Louis Quarterly, Vol. 5; Nos. 1-2, p. 14.

*Location As A Factor in
Low-Income Housing*

From the stand point of urban development, closeness of residence to job opportunities is sound planning. Proximity to work saves money for low-income people and alleviates pressure on transportation facilities and road use. The shops and other customer-services which accompany this type of growth provide an integrated community life. Jane Jacobs, American urbanologist, points to this mix of commercial with residential use as essential to sound urban growth. It would seem sensible to provide housing adjacent to ports and markets for those providing labor in these areas. People concerned with Manila as a tourist attraction are horrified at the prospect of continued slum conditions in the port area. Port areas need not be congested and unsightly. The port area of Amsterdam in Holland has residences with neat gardens fronting the wharves. It exhibits a dimension of community life missing from most port areas.

Ideally, families should have the freedom to choose the place of their residence. In our society this choice is limited to high-income families who can purchase suburban properties, or pay the high rents required for downtown apartments. If they choose to live in the suburbs they can afford the private vehicle necessary to get them back and forth to work. This is not true for low-income groups. Since the major portion of their income must go into food, clothing and to meet other immediate needs, rent must be kept to a minimum. Location of housing near work becomes an essential factor in the urbanization of in-migrants. It would, therefore, seem practical in the process of planning the city that housing areas for low-income people be integrated into those districts where intensive service activity exists.

Government Multi-Story Housing

Governments have recognized the need for better housing for low-income people in urban areas. Out of this recognition has developed numerous

examples of government-sponsored multi-story housing. The multi-story projects have been built on the premise that heavily populated cities require housing schemes which make maximum use of valuable urban land. But governments have also discovered that while the high density living achieved in the multi-story projects may achieve maximum use of urban land, it often creates problems more difficult than those it ought to solve.

For example, for the past two decades slum clearance programs in the United States bulldozed sections of old tenement housing and replaced them with multi-story apartment houses. Planners saw in the slum areas the physical deterioration of the housing, but they failed to see the social cohesion which existed in many of the neighborhoods. Often the tenements could have been rehabilitated and the existing neighborhood strengthened through self-help community organization programs. The blocks of sterile public housing built to house those displaced never filled the vacuum left by the old communities.

Reports from other countries tell the same story. Multi-story housing projects soon show signs of social as well as physical deterioration. Poor families crammed into multi-story housing feel no responsibility for the building. Governments, pressed by limited finances, cannot provide adequate maintenance and surveillance. The end product is that community problems are compounded in the impersonal atmosphere of the projects.

*Multi-Story Tenements
in the Philippines*

Philippine experience with multi-storied low-income housing has also been negative. In response to the growing need for low-income housing, the Macapagal Administration erected three seven-story "tenements" in 1965, in Vitas, Tondo, Punta, Sta. Ana, and Ft. Bonifacio. The buildings were an experiment in social housing. The government wrote off the cost of the construction and property, but expected

the rents from the tenants to cover the cost of building maintenance. Five years of experience with the tenements* have dimmed any hope that multi-story low-income housing is a viable solution to the problem.

The tenements have been financial losses from the beginning. Besides writing off both the building costs and the land costs, the government had to provide a subsidy to the tenements in their initial stages. Since a majority of the tenants are perpetually in arrears, the rent money which was to be used for building and ground maintenance is not available. The tenements have become multi-story slums.

Part of the failure of the tenements can be laid to the initial planning of the buildings. They were erected on land available to the government, but no consideration was given to the physical setting and social environment. In the Vitas and Punta tenements, the buildings were hemmed in by industrial plants, older buildings, and squatter areas. In the Punta, Sta. Ana area there has been a continuous struggle between the tenement "insiders" and the squatter "outsiders" living around the tenement. Lack of adequate water service and spasmodic garbage collection have added to the squalor of the tenements.

The tenements do not serve those for whom they were built. Low-income housing has to face one major reality in Manila. Housing is so scarce that any public housing quickly falls into the hands of middle-income people. This happens by several routes. Some occupants buy their way into the govern-

*Tenement was an unfortunate term for the new housing. The word stigmatized the buildings before they were occupied. Drawn from Western usage, it signified crowded slum housing. One of the failures of low income housing around the world has been the image evoked by project-type housing. They are built for anonymity and for down-grading the poor, many of whom were living dignified, if not comfortable lives, in their former quarters. Ultimately the stratification of the poor in mass multi-story projects perpetuates their poverty-consciousness and reinforces their despair.

ment housing through political connections. Other occupants, after they have been in the housing for a while, sell their rights to others. Lack of supervision and accurate income information make illegal occupancy difficult to uncover and establish.

Behind the transfer of apartments lies one basic fact—the lack of adequate and reasonably priced housing for families with monthly incomes of ₱400 and below. The housing which is available is priced beyond the ability of those in the lower middle class to pay, without cutting into essential budget items.

Tenement housing does not effectively integrate people into city living. Multi-story housing has been introduced in developing countries without adequate concern for its effect upon the life-style of the people.

Some housing experts suggest that multi-story housing expedites the process of urbanization by requiring radical changes in living habits of the occupants. This may be true in urban centers such as Hong Kong and Singapore. Little formland surrounds these cities; therefore, there is no continuous rural immigration. In countries with large rural populations it is possible that the process can go in the opposite direction. Without adequate preparation and training for the new type of living environment, the rural immigrant can turn the housing into a facsimile of the rural area from which he came. Furthermore, the government is not prepared to carry the costs of maintaining and supervising the multi-story buildings. This results in a breakdown of water service, garbage collection, law, and order. Instead of preparing people for urban life, the multi-story apartments become an expense to the government, a distraction to sound urban growth, and a barrier to the integration of the occupants into the wider urban community.

Hong Kong and Singapore

In Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and Singapore have carried out ambitious public housing programs—the Hong Kong government out of necessity in

meeting its squatter problem and the Republic of Singapore from the social democratic tenets of its governing party. In both cases, however, questions can be raised as to the adequacy of multi-story housing in meeting the needs of low-income people.

After 15 years of extensive Resettlement bloc and Low Cost Housing Estate programs, the squatter problem still persists in the Crown colony. In 1969, the Hong Kong government estimated that there were still 610,000 squatters out of the four million residents of Hong Kong and the New Territories. The number of squatters is expected to level off at between 400,000 to 500,000. The squatter community is predicted to continue at this figure for years to come. The persistence of the squatter community in Hong Kong has its basis in four factors:

Preference for low rental. Low-income families everywhere prefer to pay as little for shelter as possible, so that they may have more disposable income. Some families occupying resettlement blocs sell their rights to others and return to squatting.

Distance from jobs. Some of the resettlement blocs were built too far away from job opportunities, so families have left them to live closer to their jobs.

Limited living space. The resettlement blocs, which were initially built as emergency measures, provide minimal living space. As families have grown, they have left the resettlement blocs, many to return to squatter quarters.

Too little government construction. The government has not kept pace with the need for low-income housing. The government built the first resettlement blocs in 1955. By 1963, it had shifted to building the Low Cost Housing Estates which provided housing for families in the \$500 (HK) monthly income bracket. The slackening of the resettlement bloc program has left many families still living in squatter conditions. The government has not pressed the squatter problem, but has allowed families to remain in areas which it is not

considering for development.

Inadequate way of life. Multi-story housing has not proven suitable for low income people. When families are crowded together in small rooms the children are forced out onto the streets. In the housing areas parental authority has weakened and juvenile delinquency increased. Young people have organized their own tried societies. These have become the basis for intramural fights between gangs from the different housing blocs.

In Singapore, over 700,000 of the Republic's two million citizens live in government-built housing estates. While the Singapore government has provided more attractive and community-centered housing for its people, critics are quick to point out that little is being done for the 20 per cent in Singapore's lowest income bracket. In the large housing estates of Bukit Ho Swee and Kallang-Tanyang Rhu a large number of families live close to the subsistence line—and often below minimum daily nutritional requirements. Having been resettled from slums and squatter communities, they have not increased their incomes, but now have to meet the regular maintenance and utility payments, in addition to rents.

Some urban planners have taken issue with the government's emphasis on tourism and its subsequent plans to tear down older housing areas which will be replaced by modern hotels and commercial buildings. They defend the right of occupants from the older shop-house areas to maintain their communities as reasonable alternatives to the impersonal living conditions of the multi-story estates. The government regards such views as "romanticism," and is pushing ahead to meet the target set by the United Nations Committee on Housing, Building, and Planning by constructing annually ten new dwelling units for each thousand of its population.

Social Housing—A Luxury For Developing Countries

In the Philippines, the government

has recognized the massive capitalization necessary for low-income housing and has put social housing at the bottom of its list. Past experience with tenements has made the government wary of the heavy subsidy needed for social housing. The housing program projected for 1971-1974 will finance housing for only 9,210 families out of the one million needing it. Out of the ₱719 million to be spent on housing from 1971-1974, only six per cent or ₱43.2 million will go to social housing of the tenement type. The wisdom of even this expenditure can be questioned in the light of the experience with the present tenements.

Low-income housing is a luxury for a developing country. In most cases the type of public housing built does not suit the immediate needs of low-income people. New migrants into the city need mobility. They need to be able to move where the jobs are available. Most low-income squatters have lived in houses they or their families have built in the rural areas. The type of housing they build in the city is temporary, providing them the leverage they need. Very few low-income people want to commit themselves to public housing, which requires monthly rent payments and which very often reinforces their lower class status. They desire the independence of building their own homes at the level and speed which their incomes allow.

Within any squatter or low-income area it is not surprising to see well-built homes. As families become established and increase their incomes, they are able to improve their living conditions. They build their homes at no cost to the government and would, with encouragement, plan their own communities. The encouragement low-income people need is the willingness of the government to provide tenure of residence and those facilities of which make an area liveable—water, roads, drainage, and sanitation.

Need For Employment Strategies

In place of multi-story low-income housing, available monies might better

be spent developing employment strategies. Government policy aimed at making urban areas more attractive to private capital investment will in itself stimulate job creation. Government allocations to developing port, transportation, communication and marketing facilities in urban areas are, in themselves, job producing and will, in turn, encourage a willingness on the part of private business to invest in the area. The expansion of urban facilities increases job opportunities in industry and in the supporting service sector where most low-income people are employed.

The willingness to forego immediate action on urban squatters and to work on the issue of employment is essential to the question of low-income housing. Once steady income is available, persons in the lower economic groups will improve their own housing. Complementary to an employment strategy is the development of areas close to the city in which low-income people can acquire title to land and build their own homes. These areas will require basic services in order to make them viable communities. Streets will need to be laid out, water and sewerage facilities provided, and arrangements made for electric service. Home construction becomes the business of the resident. Baguio City has provided examples of such areas in the five sites it has set aside within its city boundaries. The sites cover 105 hectares and will accommodate 2,000 families. The sites are already populated, but consideration still has to be given to streets, water-sewerage facilities.

Areas chosen for the settlement of low income people need to be close enough to the city to make jobs easily accessible. Infrequent and expansive transportation is one of the sources of discouragement of relocated families at the present resettlement sites at Sapang Palay, Bulacan and Carmona, Cavite. Both areas are over 35 kilometers from Manila. Crucial to the success of these resettlement sites is the presence of job-producing industries. The encouragement of industries within resettlement

ment areas or the establishment of housing areas near present industrial development, would be a step in meeting the squatter problem.

The New Century

No end is in sight to the pressures Greater Manila will face as new migrants continue to expand its boundaries. In the next century, Greater Manila will face a growing demand for better transportation, flood control, water and sewerage services, housing and community facilities, and industrial development. In the midst of physical development it is easy to forget that the city is its people. In setting the priorities for the next decades human development should be foremost in the minds of those who lead the city and the nation. History is strewn with the ruins of great cities, which were magnificent in their physical achievements, but whose destruction was in the decay of their people. The greatness of Manila will be determined by her humanity. If Manila is to become a city of human dimensions, those who lead will need the participation of the people in the planning and development of their city—this participation at all levels of the life of the city will insure their commitment as citizens and the city's future.