Future Users, Future Cities: Dwellers as Designers

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ABSTRACT

As technology advances, users become more detached from the way things work and are produced. Users end up being pure consumers and leave their positions as decision makers behind. Before the architectural and building processes were industrialized, most practitioners of so-called vernacular architecture were in fact the inhabitants of what they built, which easily met their specific personal needs because they were in total control of the building process. This paper will focus on the possibility of non-architect users of architecture as decision-makers in order to establish designs that satisfy their individual needs.

KEYWORDS: user-driven architecture; architecture without architects; architecture as interface; sustainability; user involvement.

Figs. 1 and 2. VA 325 student work. "The cube" Students: Bike Kefeli, Sinan Tuncay, Erhan Arik; fall 2008
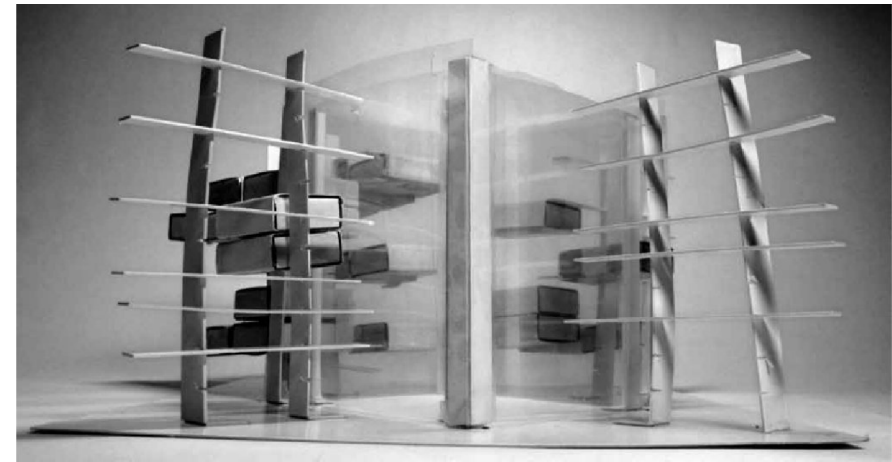
Architecture without Architects

"*Architecture Without Architects* is a book by Bernard Rudofsky originally published in 1964. It provides a demonstration of the artistic, functional, and cultural richness of vernacular architecture." (Wikipedia, 2010). Rudofsky "discusses spaces and buildings made without the involvement of architects. Rudofsky is interested in buildings produced through 'communal enterprise' before architecture 'became an expert's art'. [...] Some of his examples are buildings made by builders without the direct involvement of users; others are a collaborative effort between builders and users" (Hill, 2003, p. 58). The participation of the dweller in the design and construction processes requires a leeway, and this [...] "flexibility by technical means suggests two further types of user creativity: constructional, a fabrication of a new space or a physical modification of an existing form, space or object, such as removing the lock from a door; conceptual, a use, form, space or object intended to be constructed, such as a door." (Hill, 2003, p. 58) The conceptual user creativity encourages the user to be creative mentally and provide practical data to be used in a more responsive architecture. Concerning this Rudofsky says, "vernacular architecture does not go through fashion cycles. It is nearly immutable, indeed unimprovable, since it serves its purpose to perfection." (Rudofsky, 1964, p. 2)

Bernard Rudofsky was neither an architect nor a theorist in the usual sense. At the start of his career he completed a number of houses in Italy and Brazil, where he employed the formal language of the Modernists although his writings appear to indicate that Rudofsky was primarily engaged as a critic and culture theorist from the 1940s. The common element behind all of these activities, though, was the human body, and his lamentation of the loss of sensual awareness. No lifestyle should be preformed, preordained or preconceived. The interaction of the human being with the environment he has shaped has to be characterized by an individual attitude towards the life of a responsible citizen. (Platzer & Wit, 2007, n. p.).

It is obvious that not everybody has the ability to build and design; not everybody can become an architect. Yet this fact should not lead to the conception that the architect should be in full control of the entire process. There is more potential for a truer localization of architectural design if users are involved in the design process. If the architect takes control of everything, local design trends to be introduced by him / her face the danger having to be global since there are governing fashionable styles dictated by "high architecture" of the elite bourgeois or hegemonic macro trends that directly / indirectly force architects to follow:

*Historically, in professional practice, many architects retained their position by servicing powerful clients and accepting their values. When the powerful ignored, misunderstood, or repressed the needs of others in the society, the views of the less powerful did not play a role in the definition of architectural knowledge or practice. Insofar as the traditional perspective is followed, it excludes the powerless, or the "other", and has proved unable to effectively encompass social justice, the politics of diversity, or the politics of empowerment. [...] Involving the user, the ordinary citizen, the public, not only would require more time and energy but would demand substantial changes to existing practices. [...] Clearly a culturally critical position is needed. (Piotrowski & Robinson, 2001, p. 76)*

As a contrast:

[...] in vernacular architecture from the primitive age or even in several parts of the world nowadays, there is no segregation between the architect and the community because normally the architect is indeed a member of the community. [...] The result is usually that every part of vernacular architecture, be it its technology, connections with nature or with the social system is all culturally related. Although the typology of the building is merely simple and less dramatic, its immense level of ingenuity is beyond belief. (Paramita, 2009, p. 3)

Arif Hasan and Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi, Pakistan

A unique and rare example of a socio-politically aware architect who involves user participation in the architectural design
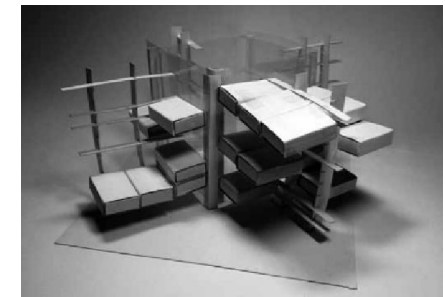
process is Arif Hasan, a Pakistani architect, who managed to organize local people in improving the slums of Karachi. In the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) approach he conceived, emphasized the management of the improvement plan by the dwellers themselves, where the local community is fully involved in the process of planning, implementation and maintenance of the plan. Arif Hasan taught local people how to build simple precast structural elements by designing uncomplicated moulds and how to put various precast elements together in order to construct sound and relatively decent looking houses. In doing so local residents take ownership of the entire process and increase their involvement in the future and help promote the sustainability of the project. "Doing this establishes social and political continuity and gives the people of the city an identity and a pride in its history" (Husain, 2009):