Research Article

HOUSING FOR INFORMAL SETTLERS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Understanding informal settlements remains a challenge for designers and policymakers as they seek appropriate responses to the needs of the informal settlers. Unless professionals engage with the real world experiences of informal living, their designs and decisions are marginally an outcome of a relevant design process that addresses limitations, preferences, and skills of informal dwellers. Also, lack of set definitions for various expression of informality such as squatters, slum, and informal settlements makes it difficult for policymakers to devise an operational framework for addressing housing issues. This paper presents the review of existing state of literature about how various researchers identify informality and issues with recent approaches for providing housing for informal dwellers of India.

INTRODUCTION

In Indian cities, the population living in informal settlements is increasing at an alarming rate (Tiwari & Hingorani, 2012). As per UN-Habitat Slum Almanac 2016, with around one billion people living in slums, more than 30% of the global urban population live in slums in developing countries (UN-Habitat, 2016). Due to growth within the urban population as well as continued migration from rural to urban areas in search of employment or access to amenities of so-called modern living, the number of informal dwellers is also increasing. Local municipal corporations also failed to provide the social and physical infrastructure needed to accommodate immigrants, which coupled with the population growth of existing urban area, results into increase in informal developments within the cites. For most of the migrants, living and working within the formal system controlled by property rights, municipal taxes and various laws and development rules is not always affordable. As a result, we find squatters scattered in all parts of the cities. Some of these squatters consolidate into slums with high people density, with lack of water supply, electricity and sewage services, unhealthy living conditions, poverty and high crime rate. Most of the dwellings are completely or partially built by dwellers using available resources as they manage the conditions of informal living.

Defining Informality

There are several names often used to identify informal settlements. Marginal settlements, urban Blights, Ghettos, Shanti towns, shack towns, Jhuggi, Basti, Patra, and so on are commonly associated names in different regions of India (Agnihotri, 1994). Although there is a range of names associated, three terms Squatter, Slums, and Informal settlements are mostly cited in literature to discuss issues and activities outside the formal control (Dovey, 2012). Mike Davis recalls the first ever published attempt to define slums. Since 1812, when the notions of a "racket' or "criminal trade' were used to define slums, more reformers agree to the classical definition which identifies slum with conditions of overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water (Dovey & King, 2011)and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure (Davis, 2006). According to De Soto and Davis, the process of informal settlement is synonymous to the land invasion with informal tenure, where informal housing starts with an unauthorized occupation of land. In this sense, squatters are synonymous to informal settlements. (Davis, 2006) (De Soto, 2000). Therefore, to take the dialogue further, the clear definitions and differences among the words slums, squatter, and informal settlements are also necessary. Raharjo asserts that the use of such words often interchanges while describing the non-state or non-formal approach for the development of settlements (Raharjo, 2010). UN-Habitat

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acknowledges the lack of a clear definition for slum. But it enlists six indicators- Improved water, Improved sanitation, Sufficient living area, Durable housing, Secure tenure, for identifying slum as those settlements indicating the absence of one or more. (UN-Habitat, 2010). Raharjo suggests that the squatters be considered a subset of the informal settlement because squatters are initial expressions of the unauthorized dwelling which may later be incorporated into the formal system. He shows a continuum of formal and informal settlements with slum spanning the whole range and squatter as the initial stage of informal living. His model eloquently explains not only the distinction but also purposive use of the three terms. Slums may not be associated with any one category, formal or informal, as they denote the absence of any of the six indicators mentioned by UN-Habitat (UN-Habitat, 2010). Whereas, squatters are primarily informal settlements with slum-like conditions. Dovey warns that the concept of informality should not be limited to places of poverty. Just as in every economy, we see formal and informal coexistence, even with the abundance of access to resources and services; one may be associated with informality if same is not accounted for in national accounts (Dovey & King, 2011). Dovey and Ross present a clear definition to facilitate suitable use of the terms Squatter, Slum and informal settlements in very few words-

"The terms 'squatter', 'slum' and 'informal' are problematic and negative words, defined in terms of a lack: a squatter lacks land tenure; a slum variously lacks space, durability, water, and sanitation; informality implies a lack of formal control over planning, design, and construction"

A Grey Patch in Urban Fabric

Informal pockets are associated with planning and management issues. While most of such development occurs in or around the paths of urban physical infrastructure, they hamper the efficiency of service networks, thereby degrading environmental quality. The mixed urban fabric hence evolves into an unmanageable collage where formal infrastructural setup fails to feed the intermittent unplanned growth. Often considered as the grey patch, informal settlements are often discarded by city planners for their chaotic, unsightly visuals and deteriorated environmental health due to lack of amenities and services (Jellinek, 1991).

Informal settlements work in an integrated manner with the formally developed parts of urban areas. Such an integration and coexistence ensures sustainability as the two complementary sectors provide mutual support for services and employment. Unfortunately, there is a desire to eradicate informal from the urban compositions which disregard informality for urban imagery and place identity (Dovey & King, 2011)

While emphasizing that informality is deeply embedded within the formal city, Sheela Patel deplores the current approach where the informal city is seen as an aberration with the underprivileged population living in an unhealthy environment (Patel, 2013). Mostly due to physical appearance, such spontaneous but chaotic settlements tend to define them as separate from the formally legitimized urban fabric (Opalach, 1997). Instead, informal settlements must be taken into account while planning for infrastructural needs of urban areas. Unfortunately, development policies give due consideration for

the financially capable while others manage to survive in marginal pockets of urban areas. Such an imbalance creates instability and both formal and informal developments suffer as the cities become unlivable (UN-Habitat, 2010). On One hand where we related notions of squatting, poverty, and corruption with informality, on the other hand, it may be linked to growth, productivity and creativity (Dovey, 2012) Most of the approaches for improving urban imagery seek to eradicate informal from the urban fabric by disregarding informality for urban imagery and place identity (Dovey & King, 2011). Understanding urban informal morphology will remain a challenging task unless we shift from the visual aesthetic criteria for such study (Chaterjee, 2014). Informality is often confused with poverty, rather than seeing informality as the source to handle various issues related to poverty (Dovey, 2013).

Formal attempt for housing since independence

Efforts done by the government to address the need for sufficient and suitable housing date back to 1950s, when the first five-year plan(1951-1956) included the constitution of Ministry for Works and Housing and establishment of National building Organization to encourage construction of houses for weaker sections (CREDAI, 2008). With the establishment of Housing and Urban Development Corporation in Fourth Five Year Plan, Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act in Fifth Five Year plan, Launch of Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns (IDSMT) in Sixth Five Year Plan for integrated provision of services along with shelter, launch of Urban Poverty Alleviation Scheme commonly identified as Urban Basic Services for the Poor (UBSP) in Seventh five year plan till more recent efforts outlined in Ray under JNNURM which itself has been replaced by "Housing for All by 2022" Mission – National Mission for Urban Housing launched in June 2015, With number of housing projects implemented every 5-10 years, The Government of India has shown perseverance to address the needs for housing for weaker sections of the society (Tiwari,2016). In spite of all these efforts, it appears to be a distant goal with an estimated approximately164 million houses, with necessary minimum amenities and services, needed to answer the housing shortage in India (Tiwari & Parikh, 2012).

Issues with current approaches

Many researchers have shared matching observations on various urban renewal projects by the government of India. The idea of high rising apartment blocks as a solution to low rise slum housing, as portrayed by Rajiv Awas Yojana(RAY), a plan under Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission(JNNURM) seems to raise more question than it answers (Chaterjee, 2014). The government has often adopted a top-down approach, with policy formulation at the national level and feedback from the states without much involvement of operational agencies, who are closer to the user and ground realities (Tiwari & Rao, 2016). As a result, the housing programs were motivated by political and administrative objectives rather than being informed by on-ground situations and affordability scenario.

Dovey calls for a shift in roles of design professionals. He argues that design may be unnecessary in such cases where

actual task is to find possibilities from actual circumstances (Dovey & King, 2011)

Lack of Literature documenting morphology of Informal Settlements

Researchers acknowledge that there is a little theoretical resource for professional for understanding the complex phenomena related to urban informal morphologies (Chaterjee, 2014). Various efforts to understand the complexities of slums have resulted into a large body of documentation, but most of such works deal with demographic details, provision or lack of services/amenities, tenure-related studies, the impact of various government-run programs (Raharjo, 2010).

There is the need for rather detail research on the morphology of informality. All cities represent a mosaic of formal and informal where urbanity requires informality (Dovey & King, 2011). Bethany Opalach Shares similar sentiments by mentioning that contribution of informal sector toward economy and demands of formal is well discussed in the existing body of research, but established scholarly work fail to include documentation of built form of spontaneous informal settlements (Opalach, 1997). She further raises the need for a framework for analyzing the built form and structural limitations of the built form of dwellings.

Learning from Informal settlements

Designers can learn from aspirations as well as from the distress of people who manage their living in conditions of poverty. Many researchers argue in favor of learning from informality as a resource for managing the issue in such settlements (Chaterjee, 2014). She asserts the consideration for spatial forms and adaptive processes in existing informal settlements is fundamental as we seek suitable solutions for urban informal settlements. Different expressions of informality appear and grow within the urban fabric through self-organization and incremental adaptation (Kamalipour, 2016). In her Pulitzer Prize-winning work 'Behind The Beautiful Forevers', Katherine Boo acknowledges the suppressing conditions of slums and how sheer ingenuity of the people finds ways to overcome the difficulties with unique solutions. (Boo, 2012) Dwellers in such settlements create their own provisions and services, markets and social goods in multiple ways. A change in 'way of seeing' the informal self-controlled organization in needed where people themselves are recognized as the infrastructure (Goldman, 2016). Tovivich goes a step further by demanding a new professionalism where designers not only acknowledge the value of learning from informality but also shift their role from a provider to a catalyst of a design process in which users also have the opportunity to not only provide design inputs but are also involved in building (Tovivich, 2009).

CONCLUSION

An appropriate response to issues related to housing for informal dweller still remains a far-reaching goal. Various reasons may be associated with the failures of previous attempts. As discussed earlier, the framework for providing housing demands that the informality is documented and measured for identifying the appropriate solution, but the involved complexity in social, economic and political conditions questions the traditional one-size-fits-all approach.

Furthermore, researchers have argued in favor of seeing informal settlements as a solution rather than a grey patch in the urban fabric. Unless we learn from informality and engage informal settlers in the process from design to execution, the suitability of solution will always be questioned.

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