BAREFOOT ARCHITECTS
A Training Program for Building in the Third World

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During the past seven years, there has been considerable discussion about training “barefoot” architects. Much of it has been conducted by younger architects against the background of the enormous challenge of building for millions of people in rural and urban areas of the Third World, who, at present, are denied the benefit of professional services.

Building problems, particularly those associated with housing and community services, are basically linked with the process of urbanization-the steady shift of people from country to urban centers. Urbanization results in enormous growth of city population; overpopulation, in turn, results in urban poverty and unemployment and a shortage of urban services, such as water supply, waste disposal, and transport. These problems are compounded by inadequate shelter.

It has been estimated that within fifteen years, close to one-third of the population of the Third World will live in cities. Calcutta, for instance, has a population of more than 10 million people and is growing at the rate of an additional million people every four years. One-quarter of the people of Calcutta live in slums and squatter settlements in and around the city. One can find similar trends in other cities, such as Jakarta, Manila, Dakar, and Mexico City.

This process of urbanization, serious as it may seem, bypasses most people in the Third World, who still live in the rural areas, where they are trapped within stagnant economies and where they will continue to demand more jobs and better amenities and services. Indeed, many policymakers and bureaucrats believe that it may even be necessary to provide urban services in rural areas simply to keep the rural population from moving and thus to lower the pressures on the cities. The end result will be a greater demand for professional and sub-professional services tailored to meet the specific needs of communities who find themselves at the foot of the economic ladder.

Evolution of the concept

Against this bleak scenario of future growth in the Third World, a group of architects, social scientists, community workers, and other concerned people met at a workshop sponsored by Unesco in Bangkok in June 1983 to discuss what could be done to train people who would fall somewhere between the professional architects and the builders and tradesmen. These barefoot architects would not only draw on the basic knowledge of such specialists but also extend their work to include community development and planning at a level where they could have the most influence (*"Training of Barefoot Architects," Unesco Workshop, May 30- June 4,1983, Regional Office of Social Sciences in Asia and the Pacific, Unesco , Bangkok*).

The concept of barefoot architects is similar to that of the barefoot doctors developed and promoted in China. These doctors have, over

some years, provided basic health services to remote and rural areas in China. They receive rudimentary training in medicine and public health to enable them to deal with the most common health problems of rural communities. An important advantage of this scheme is that the training program is greatly simplified and relatively short, thus making it possible to train large numbers of these sub-professionals with limited resources.

Barefoot architects would perform a similar role by concentrating their energies on solving the important and complex problems of slums, squatter settlements, or villages. They would be able to deal with a variety of issues, including the provision of roadways, water supply, and drainage, as well as the construction of houses and community buildings, such as schools. Furthermore, they would be able to teach local people to use simple technologies to improve upon the existing local resources. Most important, they should be able to mobilize community support for the various construction projects that would be undertaken to improve or expand such settlements.

At present, much of the building in the Third World is done informally; construction, particularly of housing, is largely executed by the owners themselves. In doing this, they rely on the services of local small-scale contractors, carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, electricians, and village artisans. Although these tradesmen are efficient, they are generally ill-equipped to construct more complex buildings, where it is necessary to understand sophisticated materials and techniques and to apply basic principles of community development, land use planning, utility services, and elementary management expertise.

The role of a professional middleman

What is needed is a middleman, who not only specializes in at least one specific trade, but who also is able to provide various professional services to marshall all the available local resources of materials and workers. Because their background and familiarity with the local environment would be an advantage, these middlemen should come from the cultural environment in which they are likely to operate once their training is complete and should already possess some basic skill.

Architects currently practicing in the Third World are hardly qualified to fit this role of middleman. Until recently, they generally learned their profession from European and U.S. institutions. Their courses were tailored to meet the building needs of those countries, which were often in opposition to the building problems of developing societies. Therefore, most architects have tended to isolate themselves from the mainstream of handful of large buildings, such as high-rise hotels, office blocks, and the prestigious government structures normally located in the hearts of cities. Such buildings require highly sophisticated materials and techniques, which are invariably imported from the industrialized countries. The projects are expensive and constitute only a small fraction of the overall construction activity in those countries.

Architecture schools in the Third World also perpetuate this unhappy situation by offering sophisticated training programs, which fail to educate young graduates to deal with the more modest building programs associated with urban and rural projects. In addition,

most graduates hail from middle-class families of white-collar workers and have been reared in a well-serviced urban environment. The young architects therefore tend not to involve themselves in what to them seem to be less glamorous activities.

Concern with terminology

At the Bangkok meeting, the use of the term “architect,” barefoot or otherwise, presented some problems because in many European countries and in the United States, it has acquired a sort of sacred aura, and any suggestion that the term be used in the context of these programs was seen as debasing a somewhat exclusive profession.

In Europe or the United States, it is doubtful that the title of architect is appropriate today to describe someone whose activities combine elements of planning, design, building, and community development. The use of the term “architectural” to describe the training provided may be opposed not only by existing professional institutions, who might consider such training to be inferior to the present elite courses, but also by the students themselves, who might see their new role as being somewhat divorced from the grass-roots activities expected of them.

In some countries, the title of architect is given to a few outstanding tradesmen, although their role is limited to designing and constructing small buildings. In Japan, for instance, as with engineers, the term architect (kenchikushi) is used in a broad sense to indicate persons associated with the building industry. Even a well-trained carpenter, who has provided ample evidence of skill in design and

construction over a period of time, is able to apply to local municipalities for recognition as an architect.

After an exhaustive tour of slums of the city, the participants at the Bangkok meeting were not as concerned about terminology. They decided to accept the term barefoot architect in its generic sense to describe aperson who could be trained as a facilitator to accomplish a variety of tasks. They saw the barefoot architect as someone, such as a building technician, whose work combined the broad fields of planning, design, construction, community development, and management. The participants identified two basic types of people who could be trained as barefoot architects. The first type consists primarily of community workers who are able to mobilize community effort through leadership and example. Most of them understand enough about elementary technical problems to seek appropriate assistance from local and outside sources. The second type includes tradesmen, who are essentially technically oriented but who understand community or social problems enough to use whatever assistance they can get.

Whatever their bias, there are three common prerequisites for barefoot architects: they should be able to act as intermediaries between government authorities and the people, they must identify primarily with the community's interests; and they must believe firmly in the ability of the people to help themselves.

A flexible program

This whole concept is aimed at helping people in villages or in low-income urban slums and squatter settlements who cannot afford the conventional urban services taken for granted by those in better economic circumstances. Bearing these goals in mind, it was agreed to devise a flexible course of training, which would have at least three main streams relating to technology, management, and community development and planning. Candidates must be able to acquire some or all of these qualifications while continuing to work and support themselves and their families.

It is important to develop training programs that offer a broadly based technical education, including community organization, development, technical, and management skills. Such a program should be flexible, be based on self-contained modules, and be able to be disseminated through the distance learning techniquesused by open universities. Many of the existing formal programs to train intermediate-level technicians and community development workers could be modified for this purpose.

This proposal, however, does not necessarily negate the need to broaden the scope of undergraduate architecture courses to include programs to make future architects more aware of the housing and environmental needs of the poorer members of their communities. Architecture schools may not train barefoot architects, but even now their graduates sometimes work in villages or urban slums.

This challenge must be accepted by incorporating additional courses on management, planning, and community development, so as to open doors for those who wish to help solve some of the pressing problems faced by urban slums and rural communities. The need to expand professional services to help the poor should be given high priority in architectural training programs.

Note

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