

Abstract

Re-inhabiting Earth. A reflection on the housing problem in developing countries

The high percentage of the world population living in slums, without access to the basic standards of hygiene, education, comfort or safety, keeps growing alarmingly. In such a context, architecture has a decisive role to play in facing the challenges arisen by the world housing deficit.

Several efforts are already being made worldwide, in order to minimize not only the unfortunate contrasts of peoples and regions on the planet, but also the impact of the exploitation of natural resources. Nevertheless, the ideas of sustainability seem to exist side by side with arrogance, permanently refusing to consider the so rich and so quickly forgotten architectural legacy and the ways in which it has always been related to climate, to culture or geography. Still, throughout the past years, some architects have devoted themselves to searching solutions for these problems, in very different contexts and with very scarce resources.

This work makes an approach mainly on Hassan Fathy's project for New Gournah, in the 1950s, and on Anna Heringer's and her team's projects in Bangladesh, almost 60 years later. The common ground of these two experiments is the conviction that there is no other way to provide housing for the growing world population, but to use the resources in peoples' own lands, and restore the idea of a "constructive culture", the so-called *know-how*. Earth, considered in the last decades as a material of the past, has been recently brought back to discussion, as it appears to have an enormous potential also as a material for the future. However, some necessary changes need to be made to adequate the traditional models and techniques to the exigencies of today.

This dissertation aims to reflect on the architect's role in the 21st century, as well as on the contribution architects can offer to teach poorer people how to make use again of the resources they have at hand, be it labour force, construction materials, vernacular architecture or the climate itself, thus achieving more self-sufficiency.

Keywords: earth architecture, sustainability, social housing, self-construction, low-cost architecture, low-tech architecture