



The Community Architect Program: Implementing participation-in-design to improve housing conditions in Cuba

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A B S T R A C T

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The Community Architect Program was created in Cuba in 1994 to support self-help housing construction. Since the creation of the program, the community architects have used participatory techniques to provide technical advice to residents who wish to build, expand or renovate their homes. The article documents the codification and implementation of a new participatory design method, and its use by more than a thousand professional community architects on the island. The research looks at the institutional features characterizing the Community Architect Program and examines how these institutional features facilitate the practice of participatory design within the context of existing land use and building regulations. The paper analyzes the Cuban experience within the context of ongoing debates about participation in urban and housing processes.

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Introduction

This paper examines the creation of a participatory design method in Cuba for assisting residents in the construction of their homes. This new participatory design method was developed by the architect Rodolfo Livingston and has been extensively used by the Community Architect Program since the early 1990s. Today, more than a thousand architects working across the island make systematic use of the method to advise residents on the building, expansion and repair of their houses.

In order to provide a complete picture, and with the hope of illustrating how participation can be implemented within the context of existing urban planning regulations and policies, this article includes both a description of the participatory design method that has appeared and evolved in Cuba, as well as a review and analysis of the institutional framework characterizing the program. Also, the paper situates the Cuban experience within the context of ongoing debates about citizen participation in housing processes in the developing world.

The use of participatory design techniques to assist the development of self-help housing was introduced in Cuba by the NGO Habitat Cuba in the context of a generalized economic crisis known as the Special Period. As was the case in some other urban policies and programs from the 1990s, the new housing strategy represented a shift in the decision-making models used by Cuban

institutions in providing services (Evenson, 2009; Ramirez, 2005; Sergre, Scarpaci, & Coyula, 2002). Since the 1960s, Cuba has followed a socialist development model where institutions and policies are usually characterized by a top-down approach. In this top-down model, decisions are taken by government officials in council with a handful of experts, while the population is not directly consulted; in fact, tight governmental control was one of the main pillars of Cuban social policy (Coyula & Hamberd, 2003). In the context of housing, the top-down approach translated into the extensive use of prefabrication techniques where large reinforced concrete panels manufactured in factories were later assembled in the building sites. This approach to housing often involved the development of large housing complexes, sometimes designed for up to 100,000 people. Alamar, a housing development in East-Havana is a prime example of the use of prefabrication techniques in Cuba for the mass-production of housing (Sergre, Scarpaci, & Coyula, 2002). This mass-production approach has been found to systematically neglect the sociocultural dimensions of housing (El-Masri & Kellett, 2001), often alienating low-income users (Eldemery, 2002). In the case of Cuba, it became abundantly clear that the use of imported prefabrication technologies was also at odds with local conditions (Sergre et al., 2002).

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union abruptly ended the era of mass-production of housing in Cuba. Since 1989, all sectors of Cuba's economy have faced crisis. The housing construction industry is no exception; the loss of trade with Eastern Europe meant that factories dedicated to the production of prefabricated house-components closed due to the shortages of prime materials and fuel. During this period, the total number of housing

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units built by the state fell from 29,000 units in 1988 to 21,000 in 1992 (NIH, 2010). Demand was increasing quickly, and by 1993 it was clear that a new approach to housing construction was required.

In this context, the NGO Habitat Cuba was created in 1993, with support from the Cuban government. Habitat Cuba played an important role in generating alternative models to foster housing solutions, creating demonstration housing projects, providing training to architects and engineers promoting citizen participation in solving housing issues, and contributing to the changes required within the institutions dealing with shelter in Cuba. Some of the NGO's immediate solutions were to create local factories for the production of bricks and to promote the use of earth and other alternative construction materials like bamboo. However, Habitat Cuba's most important contribution to housing production was the development of the Community Architect Program, which provided technical assistance and guidance to people building their own homes.

The Community Architect Program broke with the traditional top-down policy model and recognized the need to support citizens' efforts in building their own houses. The program's objective was to enable residents' participation in the design of their houses. Instead of simply requiring residents to provide labour as sweat equity in the completion of housing projects, the new approach entailed facilitation of interactions between architects and residents to help residents articulate their spatial needs and help them make informed decisions about the building processes they are about to undertake.

It is difficult to assess to what degree this breakthrough forms part of a larger movement in the politics of the island. In 2001, Habitat Cuba was dissolved, shortly after a change in the direction of the National Institute of Housing (NIH). The Community Architect Program was then absorbed by NIH and kept on growing, from an initial group of no more than twenty practitioners working in the province of Holguin to more than 1000 employees now working all across Cuba. This impressive growth rate signals a major transition within the housing field. In fact, the proportion of units being built through self-help went up from 25% in 1988 to 38% in 2002 (NIH, 2010).

In this transition, the conventional approach to housing was replaced with an unconventional approach (Keivani & Werna, 2001). This shift seems to be in line with the international recognition that, in the context of developing countries, self-help housing strategies are the most viable alternatives because of their affordability and flexibility (Gilbert, 2004, 2009; UN-Habitat, 2005). However, while the cost-effectiveness of the strategy is the central factor in explaining the success of the Community Architect Program, the transition that occurred in Cuba touched many aspects of the architectural practice in the island.

In the new housing approach, a myriad of small-scale interventions made by residents became the dominant mode of building homes. These small-scale interventions, where users have control over design and building, often involve the use of indigenous building techniques and materials and also increase the diversity of the built environment (Alexander & Center for Environmental Structure, 2002a) and allow people to participate in the creation of a cultural landscape (Carmon, 2002). The creation of the Community Architect Program responded to the need to support these myriad small-scale efforts. As a former director of Habitat International explained in an interview, the idea was to find a way to support residents in building housing. In addition, the new framework acknowledged the capacity and imagination of regular people to make decisions about their built environment, and reflected a view that the expert designer should not dictate solutions to them. An interviewee commented that one of the objectives of

the program was to move away from a traditional authoritarian approach in architectural practice, towards recognizing that residents are knowledgeable of their spatial needs. The idea behind the program was precisely to incorporate the resident's knowledge in the design process. This program changed the role of residents in the housing production model. Prior to the creation of the Community Architect Program, residents were conceived merely as final end-users; in the new approach, residents became an active force in the production of housing.

The director of the Community Architect Program commented that there had been a change in the focus of architectural practice across the island. Until the 1990s, there had been an emphasis on the production and design of 'great' buildings or 'grandiose' architecture. With the establishment of the Community Architect Program, the construction of simple buildings used by people in their daily lives became the new focus of state-supported architecture.

This new direction in the housing field in Cuba came with new orientations in architectural practice and education. One of the founding members of the Community Architect Program mentioned that not only is it important for a community architect to have a full command of design techniques and theory, but also, the architect must have the ability to approach clients and help them in understanding their needs. Furthermore, the design process is taken outside the traditional architectural studio and directly involves families. Community architects must enjoy working with people and have good communication skills. In these respects, the way Cuban community architects approach design corresponds to the 'enabling' role prescribed by authors such as Alexander and Center for Environmental Structure (2002a, 2002b, 2005), Alexander, Davis, Martinez, and Corner (1985) and Paul Oliver (1987).

The importance of the Cuban experience rests not only on the creation of this innovative approach to design. During the past four decades, in both developed and developing countries, there has been a growing movement of practitioners advocating for residents' participation-in-design. Rather, the importance of the Community Architect Program lays in the impressive growth in the number of architects working in the program and in the level of services it has provided to Cuban families since its creation. According to a professor from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Las Villas in Santa Clara, in the past two decades, the Community Architect Program has extended its presence to all the provinces of Cuba, and there is a Community Architect Office in almost all of the municipalities of the country. According to the current director, Community Architect has more than 1000 architects working across Cuba.

Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative research conducted in Havana, Cuba during the summers of 2011 and 2012. The research was made possible by a travel award from McGill University.

The research revolved around the following questions: How is participation-in-design implemented in a large scale in Cuba? What participatory design methods are being implemented? What kind of institutional context is required to support participation-in-design? The objectives of the research were: (a) to document the participatory method used by the community architects of Cuba, (b) to identify the institutional characteristics of the Community Architect Program, and (c) to document the evolution of the implementation of participatory design methods in Cuba.

During the fieldwork, data regarding the Community Architect Program were collected through in-depth interviews. In total, 23 interviews were carried out. Interviewees included the director of

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