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The aim of this seminar is to formulate guidelines to be pursued by architects and physical planners for the design of dwellings that harmonise living space and enhance the quality of life.

We hope to demonstrate how architects and housing specialists by amplifying their knowledge of the architectural design process can conceive a culturally relevant architecture.

We shall also discuss the cultural aspects of design or, in other words, the development of appropriate styles and forms which are the expression of indigenous cultures in harmony with residents' life-styles, and which are not mere replicas of forms, methodologies, and techniques imported from abroad and arbitrarily imposed by official housing authorities.

Hitherto, governments in the Third World have been content with improving the built environment by purely technical methods primarily aimed at securing a high volume of construction without particular regard to cultural and social factors. Their housing programmes have been determined, not by a thorough analysis of real housing needs, but by the meagre financial resources at their disposal and by the productive capacity of their construction industries.

The dwelling areas that have in consequence arisen in our countries tend to be lifeless settlements, drawn up by professionals who are often lacking in design sensitivity and in consciousness of the cultural identity and social habits of the residents for whom these dwellings have been built.

But design is only one facet of a much more complex problem, and for the majority of the fast growing populations of the Third World, it is not the crux of the matter. Consequently, the focus of this seminar on the design aspect of housing must not lead us to overlook the global dimension of the housing phenomenon. In the Third World this phenomenon is characterised by chronic shortages in housing and by deplorable conditions in much of the existing stock.

Housing and food are the two basic necessities of life. Major efforts have been made in recent years in Third World countries to overcome hunger and malnutrition. In the field of housing however, the situation can only be resumed as

alarming. Accelerating population increases and uncontrolled urban migration far outstrip the provision of new dwellings: this has resulted in an escalation in homelessness and overcrowding and a constant deterioration of the quality of life for the majority of the populations of the Third World.

A glance at the statistics is hardly reassuring: It is frightening. There are at present more than 1,000 million people who live — or rather subsist — in substandard and overcrowded housing conditions. As the gap between population growth and urban migration, on the one hand, and the supply of dwellings, on the other, continues to widen the situation in the cities of the Third World worsens further to the point that developing countries will have to build an additional 10 million dwellings each year, just to keep pace with present substandard conditions. Even this theoretical target is far from being reached. In 1950, Cairo was the only city in Africa with a population of more than 1 million. In eleven years' time, by the end of this century there will be sixty such cities in Africa alone. In 1983, the total urban population of the Third World was estimated at 1,200 million. By the end of the century, this figure will have reached 2,100 million or double the figure four years ago. If present growth rates continue unabated, the urban population of the Third World will double again by the year 2025 to reach the horrific figure of 4,100 million people living just in the cities of the Third World. Consequently planners must not only concern themselves with the present billion people who are inadequately housed, but must simultaneously cater for the hundreds of millions of homeless individuals who will be added to this number in the next few years.

Yet the situation, grim as it appears, is not totally hopeless. Admittedly, governments have so far been bound by other priorities essential for survival, such as food, energy and economic growth. In the field of housing there has been, on the part of most governments, a lack of firm commitment to undertake large scale remedial action.

As the acuteness of the housing shortage becomes more dramatic, governments are beginning to realise the magnitude of the housing situation in their respective countries. Indeed

the problem of housing is likely to become the prime issue confronting most countries in the Third World.

Awareness that the problem exists, is only one part of the question albeit an essential part of that question. The next step is a firm political will to tackle the consistently deteriorating situation. Political will implies giving a higher priority to housing on the list of governmental concerns. It implies recognising the crucial role of housing in the promotion of overall economic and social development. As government strategies will have to integrate housing policies and physical planning programmes into economic and social development planning, political will must above all be exercised with imagination. If we are to come up with new formulas, with new advice, housing strategies have to be practical, affordable for weak economies and replicable within the cultural and social context of each region. As the philosopher Albert Einstein so rightly said “in times of crisis, imagination is more important than knowledge”.

There are no clear-cut, ready-made, uniform solutions to the housing crisis, but there are imaginative ways of seeking the rational and efficient use of scarce resources and of mobilising individual initiatives and potentials such as self-help, self-reliance, communal participation.

It is now quite evident that government controlled mass housing programmes have not been able to eliminate the chronic housing shortages that afflict our countries. After all, between one-half and three quarters of all the dwellings that are being built are built by the people themselves, without any government support. It is our contention, as some of the case studies to be presented in the seminar will demonstrate that individuals and people — when they are organised on a community basis — can significantly reduce the housing shortage. This is provided the situation or the environment in which they live is conducive to individual and communal initiatives aimed at improving or constructing their own dwellings. That is if people are allowed free access to essential resources such as land tenure, building materials and credit facilities to build. Where this condition has been fulfilled, in

some few cases, people, either individually or on a communal basis, have succeeded in building five times more dwellings than the governments have with the same amount of funds and, what is more, they have done so according to standards better adapted to their needs and to their lifestyles.

Regretfully, however, these initiatives and policies — one might call them enabling policies — have been thwarted by prevailing vested interests, administrative planning regulations and by bureaucratic red-tape.

In the few cases where these restraints have been eliminated there is ample proof that local initiatives undertaken by individuals, or by community groups and by non-governmental organisations have been able to put into practice housing alternatives that the beneficiaries can afford and which correspond to their real needs.

This under-estimated and under-used potential which is inherent in private communal organisations, can considerably relieve pressure on government housing programmes. However local community endeavours can only be successful if institutional and infrastructural support is provided by governments, the reason being that individuals and local community groups are not financially or technically capable of providing infrastructures, utilities or services on their sites.

If this premise becomes the accepted norm in housing policy, governments, in order to be more cost-effective, should reduce expenditure on centrally organised turn-key housing projects and spend more on the installation of infrastructures and services. At the same time they should introduce institutional reforms enabling easy access to resources such as land, materials, and credits.

The role of governments in housing should thus change from being the provider of dwellings or the supplier of dwellings, to that of being the supporter of local community-based housing programmes. Governments would therefore complement what the community is not able to provide.

Finally, this premise implies that we have to have more faith in the capacity and ingenuity of local communities in controlling their own destinies, as they know best what their

needs are. We must avoid arbitrarily imposed solutions that are considered replicable anywhere in the world, irrespective of each country's specific problems.

Each community must seek out viable and practical solutions that are relevant to its particular cultural and ecological context.

If this seminar is able to incite reflection and exchange of ideas on housing design; if it is able to demonstrate the common factors governing the housing crisis in the Third World and make realistic guidelines regarding possible solutions that are neither arbitrary nor uncritically imported from abroad, then this seminar will have contributed significantly to the debate on the subject.