TUDelft Delft University of Technology
Faculty of Architecture
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BK Bouwkunde

Architecture & Dwelling

REFLECTION
Master of Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences

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B - Studio
a) Name / theme of the studio:

Global Housing Graduation Studio:
Mixing Mumbai
Affordable Housing for Inclusive Development

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The aim of this text is to reflect upon my experience in the Global Housing Graduation Studio. It has been certainly a very challenging, as well as fulfilling, experience. The process involved many discussions, especially regarding the role of architecture as a tool for social integration and the role of architects designing in a foreign environment. In these discussions, the relationship between research and design, as well as the understanding of architecture in terms of social and ethical aspects were highly relevant.

On a first stage, I would like to draw the attention to the relationship between research and design in this process. The task, to design dwelling architecture in Nalasopara, involved getting familiarised with a context that, one year ago, was completely unknown by me and most of my fellow students. As a result, the role that the research component played was crucial to the development of the project. A careful investigation of the general context of India and Mumbai, as well as the social and dwelling practices in Nalasopara, would lead to a design that could provide better answers and opportunities to the local population.

For this matter, the Chair of Architecture and Dwelling proposed a combined approach: as a first stage, a solid investigation of demography, history (and architectural history), climate and economy in Mumbai. However, a statistic-based research would never be enough to comprehend the social practices and the way in which the local population dwells in Nalasopara. As a result, the Chair proposed to combine the statistic approach with an ethnographic method, which has its roots in the social sciences. The aim of this research method was to incorporate and communicate the 'patterns of inhabitation' of the local population. Parameters such as social practices, the domestic environment, income generation activities and building techniques were addressed. To introduce the students in this method, the teachers showed examples of previous experiences in which ethnography was used by architects to learn the social and intimate practices of a social group, in order to develop a careful and suitable design for the studied community. Furthermore, students were asked to practice this method on a first instance in The Netherlands, in order to be sharper and more critical when carrying the research in Nalasopara.

In my opinion, this dual approach towards the research component is strongly related to the designs that arose after the research. Once we set a collective database of information regarding both statistic data and the study of the patterns of inhabitation, we had material to ground our projects. Moreover, the statistic data (e.g. related to the current economic situation of Mumbai and the relocation of slum dwellers) could only work in combination with the observation of the patterns of inhabitation (e.g. how the inhabitants make a living in the informal economy), and vice versa. The design projects had to give answers both to the general conditions and the most intimate urban and dwelling practices. As an example, the issues of land ownership, feasibility, density and affordability had to be carefully considered in the design process. For those aspects, the gathering of statistical data was the main source of information. Meanwhile, the designs had to cater for social integration, for achieving a strong sense of belonging within a population mainly consisting of newcomers, and for the creation of places where the users could interact with one another, feel safe, and generate income. All these aspects could only be addressed consulting the book of 'patterns of inhabitation', the outcome of the ethnographic research held in site.

To finalise with the relationship between research and design, I would like to mention an aspect was particularly influential in my design process: the research and design do not need to be conceived as different stages. In fact, after my first design hypothesis, not only I went back many times to consult the database of information, but I also used my own project as an element of research and experimentation that, in combination with the results of the field research, helped me to be critical and re-elaborate many of the features of my design. For example, the experimentation with the proportions of the courtyards in my own project (the core of the project, spaces for social integration) became a source of information that complimented the observations made on-site.

Regarding the relationship between the topic of my graduation project and the studio topic, I believe that the investigation I carried out in my project was only possible within the frame of the studio, and it was also highly influenced by it. Of course, in programmatic terms, the studio clearly focuses on the matter of affordable housing in the Global South, and all the

projects held within the scope of the studio are mainly about the architecture of dwelling. However, I would like to address the relationship between my project and the studio in a deeper way. The studio provides an optimal space to discuss the issue of affordable housing, which in my opinion is one of the key issues in architecture, with teachers and fellow students from different parts of the world. This international atmosphere not only permits exchange of opinion and references, but is also a place in which each student can reflect upon their own context. In my case, being from Buenos Aires, I took my graduation project as a means to discuss issues that are very relevant in my city of origin. The title of my graduation project, 'Community in the time of the market economy', states the challenge of thriving for architecture of integration in a context where the decisions on how to build are mainly in the hands of the private sector. This happens both in Mumbai and in Buenos Aires, and my project, instead of critiquing this phenomena, aims to find an answer that can be both affordable and integrative for the inhabitants and also profitable for developers, so that the projects can have a wider impact and the participation of governments (which has proven to be, at least, complicated in both countries) can be reduced. Furthermore, the main goal of my urban and architectural proposal, which is the linking of two dissimilar neighbourhoods nowadays separated by the railway, is a reality that I have seen in many spots of Buenos Aires. As a result, in my project I intended to make use of an international, challenging and stimulating atmosphere to reflect upon matters that, because of my background, are particularly sensitive to me.

This, in my opinion, is also valid to address the relationship between my project and the master track. The most inspiring feature of the MSc in Architecture at TU Delft is the exchange between professionals and students from distinct origins that have completely different formations in the same subject. Architecture, as a result, becomes a discipline that is understood in open terms, and having many perspectives leads to a more critical vision of the discipline overall.

Having stated the relationship between my project and the scope of the studio and the MSc in Architecture, I would like to address now the relationship with the professional framework. As I mentioned, the issue of affordable housing is the most urgent, if not the most critical mission that architecture has yet to respond to. Naturally, this matter involves not only architects as professionals but also governments, policy makers, social scientists and the private sector, to name a few. The complexity of actors involved in carrying a mass housing proposal is the reason why it is very relevant to analyze the project in relation to the professional framework. In my opinion, the project as a result has less validity, in this subject, than the knowledge and experience attached to its process. The proposal itself, since it will not be constructed, will not be able to house the weakest sector of the Indian society. However, along the process, several discussions and reflections were held, regarding to what extent a housing scheme proposal can influence the opportunities of its dwellers. As a group of students, we thoroughly investigated issues such as the connectivity and infrastructure of suburban areas in the Global South, the sustainable density of the buildings and the quality that architecture can give, using scarce resources. In the design of my project, I reflected, on each different scale, how architecture can create places for people to feel safe, and at the same time boost their opportunities in the city, using limited resources.

Even though I think these discussions are crucial, I believe there is a disconnection between the academic circles of investigation and the groups who actually build mass housing projects. I think that if we can build stronger relations between us, who are dedicated to understand the reality of the inhabitants of Nalasopara, and the developers who construct housing for them, the influence of our research could be much wider. I am positive that with very few modifications, result of a thorough investigation and that would not alter the profitability of developers; the issue of affordable housing could be faced in a more successful way.

This leads to another crucial aspect of this reflection, which is the appearance of ethical dilemmas along the process. I believe that the first dilemma is intrinsic in the task: we are a group of foreigners designing a housing project in India. Even though we were committed to understand the reality of the area, and we did a wide research to gather tools for our design, the first question that arises is why we think that, as foreigners, we can provide better answers than the locals. After going through the design process, I can state that the best way in which we can address this issue is by fostering international collaboration. As foreigners educated in different parts of the world, we can provide innovative, fresh ways to undertake

the tasks. If we combine our visions with the local professionals, knowledgeable in terms of history and skilled regarding the local way of thinking architecture, probably innovative, better answers can be reached.

To conclude, I can state that the development of this project, even if it was only conceived in an abstract way, helped me understand the complexity, as well as the urgency, of mass housing projects around the world. Being such a complex topic, involving many stakeholders and dealing with the necessities of millions of people, it calls for an open discussion in which dwellers, academics, designers, scientists and investors should find a common solution. I am aware that my project would probably not provide an absolute solution to the housing shortage in Mumbai. However, I am positive that it brings a valuable contribution to the discussion of affordable housing, worldwide. I sincerely expect to keep working on this field, since I find it not only fascinating and challenging, but mostly, necessary.