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Publication date

2021

Document Version

Final published version

Citation (APA)

Varma, R. (2021). *Housing Design as Urban Design: From CIAM's 'Charte de l'Habitat' to Charles Correa's 'Bill of Rights for Housing in the Third World'*. 16. Abstract from *Histories of Urban Design*, Zurich, Switzerland.

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
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histories of urban design

global trajectories
and local realities

conference
15-17 November 2021
Zürich, Switzerland

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Cross-Cultural Exchange
15 November 2021
Room J43.1

Housing Design as Urban Design: From CIAM's 'Charte de l'Habitat' to Charles Correa's 'Bill of Rights for Housing in the Third World'

Rohan Varma

In 1956, the same year when José Luis Sert organised the landmark conference on urban design at Harvard, the international organisation CIAM met in Dubrovnik with the aim to draft a 'Charte de l'Habitat'. But while no such charter was ever formally drawn up, over the next two decades, architecture and planning discourse would come to be dominated by members of Team X and their largely Euro-American affiliates who proposed an ecological notion of 'Habitat' with varying "scales of association" as an antithesis to the 'Functional City' propagated by the 'Charte d'Athènes' of 1933. This paper intends to expand the debate on habitat beyond this limited geography and timeframe by throwing light on its development – and transformation – through two understudied manifestos written from the context of the Developing World. The first is the 1976 'Habitat Bill of Rights' prepared on behalf of the Iranian government and co-authored by Sert, George Candilis, Nader Ardalan, Moshe Safdie and Balkrishna Doshi that found its most direct translation in the design of a 'sites and services' scheme prepared by Doshi in the mid-1980s in Indore. The second case is Charles Correa's 1985 'Bill of Rights for Housing' that described seven principles and a hierarchical "system of spaces" that he believed to be essential ingredients for building affordable cities best demonstrated in his incremental housing project built in New Bombay. In both cases, it is not architecture – which, in fact, was programmed to be morphed by dwellers over time – but urban design that prevails and generates community. Through a spatial reading of these two cases that draws on both archival and contemporary material, this paper seeks to position housing design – especially in today's context of the Global South – as primarily an urban design challenge of curating thresholds: from the private courtyard to the public commons.

Rohan Varma graduated as an architect from the KRVIA in Mumbai and worked for Charles Correa before receiving his masters at TU Delft as a Tata Scholar. Currently a doctoral candidate at TU Delft, Varma's research and teaching activities focus on housing design, architectural ethnography and participatory planning in India.