

The United Nations and self-help housing in the tropics

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“Architecture is rediscovering its social conscience,” *New York Times* architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff commented in 2010 after viewing a groundbreaking exhibit on architectures of social engagement at MOMA.¹ By the early twenty-first century, social, economic, and environmental issues had become too pressing to ignore for many in the field; words and phrases like “collaboration,” “democratic design,” “humanitarian architecture,” and the “social good” became the new language of architects who subscribed to the art of “giving a damn.” In 2016, Tom Pritzker praised that year’s Architecture Prize winner Alejandro Aravena for “pioneer[ing] a collaborative practice that produces powerful works of architecture and also addresses key challenges of the 21st century,” for “show[ing] how architecture at its best can improve people’s lives.”² “Pioneer,” “rediscovery” – such words signaled a new moment had arrived, that architects had opened their eyes once more to the larger purpose and mission of their field.

This framing of past and present is compelling, to be sure. Unfortunately, however, it is also inaccurate.

The language of newfound social mission belies a longer, more continuous history of engaged architecture, particularly in intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations. Since at least the mid-twentieth century, UN administrators and itinerant advisers worked under the mantle of human rights broadly conceived, embracing “community development” and connecting their self-proclaimed expertise with homegrown efforts to improve the everyday lives of ordinary folk. No heroic architects rose to take the helm of these intergovernmental projects during the era of high modernism, and UN efforts experienced no turn to “radical aestheticism” or dramatic rupture during the postmodern moment. Rather, intergovernmental efforts at improving living conditions chugged along with little fanfare through the second half of the twentieth century, powered primarily by an army of obscure planners, architects, and administrators that few remember today.

Perhaps because of this lack of star power, some have chosen to depict the work of UN officials as outliers. Consider the preface to the aforementioned 2010 MOMA exhibit publication, for instance, which argued the population explosion in the Global South “added renewed urgency to the search for innovative solutions for the proliferation of slum-dwelling” – activities that had, up to now, been “confined largely to government agencies and the United Nations.”³ Now however, the author continued, the poor were expected to work as partners in solving problems of urban poverty. Past international and national

¹ Nicolai Ouroussoff, “Real-Life Design: Erecting Solutions to Social Problems,” *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 2010.

² “Alejandro Aravena of Chile receives the 2016 Pritzker Architecture Prize,” 2017, <http://www.pritzkerprize.com/2016/announcement>.

³ Barry Bergdoll, “Introduction” in Andres Lepik, *Small Scale: Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2011) p. 10.

efforts at installing self-help (in Latin America, *autoconstrucción*) were top-down, whereas current efforts were largely bottom-up strategies by activist architects and local officials.⁴

There are two parts to this framing that need consideration: first, did past international efforts actually take on a more top-down approach, while efforts in the more recent past moved from the grassroots up? And second, did the work of government agencies and the UN properly belong at the margins of a history of innovative, socially-engaged architecture? To take the first question first: certainly, UN efforts were organized – by definition – at the level of the international. This did not mean that the work was necessarily top-down, however. In most cases, UN representatives were simply not powerful enough to enact top-down urban design in the places they worked: they lacked the authority and political strength to force their ideas on others. Instead, technical assistance missions and advisers brought foreign ideas that sometimes took root and other times did not. UN workers struggled to make sense of very different cultural and material contexts, and they often failed to understand the local logics underpinning what they perceived as a uniform global housing crisis. National and local governments were much more powerful agents in this story of modernization and rapid transformation of the built environment, but even these officials could not dictate the terms of “engagement” – a rather strange term to capture the relationship between state and less powerful citizens, to be sure. Local populations, meanwhile, hardly possessed the weapons to realize their vision of property rights or community life in the face of overwhelming modernization campaigns.⁵ Instead, they built incrementally where old homes had been cleared, drew electricity from private power lines, fell behind on mortgage and rent payments, and generally failed to behave in ways that fit with official visions of a modern city. Put another way, everyday architecture was never wholly top-down or bottom-up.

Then, to consider the second question: even a cursory examination of the UN’s work makes clear the organization’s past is hardly marginal to global histories of architecture, despite the limited or even non-existent role of brand-name architects within many UN missions. Incremental architecture did not die out in 1932 with the exile of architects like Walter Gropius, Hugo Haring, and Egon Eiermann, but rather took on new forms with “land and utilities,” “installment,” “serial,” “progressive development,” “core housing,” and “sites and services” programs of the UN and of other key players like development banks.⁶ The present-day embrace of “slum upgrading” can find intellectual roots in Kampung Improvement Programs sponsored by the UN in the 1960s and 70s. Similarly, we might draw a line between the 1990s versions of “teaching by example” and the transnational experiments with demonstration and model communities decades earlier. And speaking to the relative impact of UN work as opposed to that of well-known architects, famous individuals like Frank Lloyd Wright may have worked briefly with rammed earth construction in the late 1930s, but it was really UN-sponsored projects in the 1950s and 60s

⁴ Samuel Medina, “The Future Was Latin America,” *Metropolis Magazine*, March 2015, <http://www.metropolismag.com/March-2015/The-Future-Was-Latin-America/>.

⁵ James C. Scott talks about this negotiation of power in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁶ Mark Napier, “The Origin and Spread of Core Housing,” <http://web.mit.edu/incrementalhousing/articlesPhotographs/pdfs/Origins-Spread-CoreHousing.pdf>.

that had much more significance, transporting compressed earth blockmakers around the world and stimulating global debates about ideal housing materials.⁷

It is important, then, to center histories of social engagement by the UN and by other intergovernmental bodies as well as by development banks and other unlikely architects of human settlements. Threaded through efforts past and present is an emphasis on self-help and aided self-help – an ideology that first took shape in the context of development assistance and postcolonial nation-building projects in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, and that eventually became part of the neoliberal vocabulary of the late twentieth century. In the evolving language of self-help, the obligations of the state changed but the role of the citizenry did not: architects' social engagement was expressed as the activation of a more durable system of self-help on the part of individuals and communities. Put another way, mid-twentieth century “social engagement” typically involved a program of aided self-help, wherein outsiders helped “locals” improve their own built environment through contributions like machinery or technical knowledge. Ultimately, effective social engagement would render “outside” state/IGO/NGO assistance unnecessary.

What, then, did these programs look like on the ground? And how did UN workers decide which places – specific people, circumstances, and locations – merited this sort of attention?

Choosing targets of social engagement

No matter how well intentioned or charitable, no organization could claim enough resources to assist with every crisis unfolding at the end of World War II. Certainly this was true of the newly birthed UN. In trying to decide where and how to help, UN workers joined with others to develop new rubrics of “public health”, “human rights”, and “community development” to structure their efforts.⁸ Perhaps one of the most remarkable changes in the world after 1945 was the emerging concept of a universal standard of decency – and with it, a burgeoning debate about what a basic standard of living might mean in terms of the built form. It was a radical concept, to declare every human deserving of an adequate house – but if the United Nations Charter unequivocally put forward this right, it also left open for discussion what adequate meant. It also left unanswered questions of other possible rights such as that of public or communal space. Architecture and design became sites of negotiation: between expert and local, rich and poor, urban and rural. “Self help” became the dominant ideological vehicle to achieve other postwar constructs of human rights, public health, and so on. Given the dominance of American funding, the US played an outsized role in UN programs as well.

⁷ David Easton, *The Rammed Earth House* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2007) p. 18; Leandro Benmergui, “The Transnationalization of The ‘Housing Problem’: Social Sciences and Developmentalism in Postwar Argentina,” in Edward Murphy and Najib B. Hourani, eds., *The Housing Question: Tensions, Continuities, and Contingencies in the Modern City* (London: Ashgate, 2013); Amy Offner, *Anti-Poverty Programs, Social Conflict, and Economic Thought in Colombia and the United States, 1948-1980*, Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2012; Nancy Kwak, *A World of Homeowners: American Power and the Politics of Housing Aid* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁸ Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (Norton, 2008).

In the midst of these political and national pressures, one of the first coordinated efforts at improving design and architecture took shape in 1950 as the start of what would become a series of “tropical housing” studies. In the roughly half century preceding the UN, researchers had already established tropical health and architecture as categories of study in the management of various European empires; by the postcolonial period, “tropical” denoted an “enduring imaginative geography” that juxtaposed temperate with tropical regions and that simultaneously exoticized and homogenized different climates and cultures in the latter category.⁹ There were simply no journals or research groups dedicated to the study of temperate architecture to match this interest in tropicality, no Departments of Temperate Architecture or Schools of Hygiene and Temperate Medicine.

UN advisers led the way in joining together a general concern for humane living conditions with an interest in the “tropics.” The first tropical mission chose to focus on living conditions in this climatic zone, members wrote in their summary report, because they wanted to “help toward the solution of a great human problem.”¹⁰ The UN team consisted of four members: Jacob L. Crane (American chairman), Jacobus P. Thijsse (Dutch member), Robert Gardner-Medwin (British member and rapporteur), and Antonio C. Kayanan (Filipino member and secretary). Each found their attention focused on lower-income living conditions in the tropics because “the magnitude of the Asian housing problem is far greater than that of any other part of the world.” The four men believed “more than 100,000,000 Asian families (perhaps as many as 150,000,000) at present live in crowded, unsanitary, sub-standard quarters, urban or rural,” with extreme overcrowding and problems with vermin, ventilation, and sanitation. They observed an “urgent need” for trained architects and planners, noting “good architecture must spring from the fulfillment of social and cultural needs, achieved through scientific application of building materials and systems. This is not to deny the power or the validity of creative design but to give point and purpose to it.”¹¹ In all the language generated in these reports, tropical housing experts emphasized their charitable intent and their interest in the general welfare of lower-income people around the world.

Without doubt, then, UN workers had genuinely humanitarian intentions in attempting to improve living conditions in the tropics. It is not the good intentions of UN workers that demands closer scrutiny, but rather the particular worldview expressed in the assessment of need, and in particular, in the selection process. While there were undoubtedly problems with disease eradication, clean water, and building maintenance in cities coping with explosive growth and waves of rural migration, Southeast and South Asia or even generalized hot, humid regions across the world did not hold a monopoly on these problems. How did officials choose where to engage, when? And what tools did these UN workers use to assess the condition of very different built environments? Here, other interests – perhaps less admirable but more powerful and certainly better funded – rose to

⁹ Jiat-Hwee Chang, *A Genealogy Of Tropical Architecture: Colonial Networks, Nature And Technoscience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Felix Driver and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Constructing The Tropics: Introduction,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21.1 (2000): 1-5; Vandana Baweja, *A Pre-history of Green Architecture: Otto Koenigsberger and Tropical Architecture, from Princely Mysore to Post-colonial London*, PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008.

¹⁰ “Low cost housing in South and South-East Asia,” Report of Mission of Experts, 22nd November–23rd January, 1951 (New York: Department of Social Affairs, UN Secretariat, 1951), United Nations Archives.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

the fore. Above all, questions of global political security drove UN workers to prioritize some sites over others, focusing in particular on strengthening local governments' ability to manage urban growth in ways that made sense to more powerful nation-states already dominant in a linked world economy.

Slum clearance efforts in the Philippines illustrate the ways in which architects' and planners' "social engagement" became a form of international political relations. In 1966, UN Physical Planning and Housing Adviser Morris Juppenlatz attempted to organize a Central Institute for the Training and Relocation of Urban Squatters, or CITRUS, in the Philippines. Rationales for CITRUS followed the usual formula, generated cooperatively by the UN and Philippine national representatives (including President Ferdinand Marcos as well as officials from the Department of National Defense and National Economic Council): CITRUS would remove slum and squatter families who presently "devalue[d] central area land values, [bred] communicable diseases, retard[ed] the normal economic development of the cities and frustrate[d] further investment."¹² Impoverished urban dwellers needed the expertise of those equipped to "economize in the provision of better human comfort" and "rais[e] the standards of human comfort conditions of dwellings for the hot humid climate."¹³ Without concerted efforts to eradicate the "phenomena of urban squatters... now visibly in evidence... throughout the developing countries in Latin America and the Afro-Asian countries," both UN and Philippine government representatives agreed, "the stability of organized economic urban life [would be] threatened."¹⁴

Rather than thinking of aid as charity, a better way to understand UN programs to improve the built environment is as a claim to authority in politically important parts of the world – a claim that UN workers chose to articulate through specialized, technical knowledge of "tropical architecture". While UN officials may not have taken positions in local or national politics, they did work to sustain a particular vision of world order and global security. This vision was capitalist, individualist, and free of class revolt. Two years after independence, for instance, UN workers urged the Ministry of Health and Housing in the Kenyan government to consider cooperative and aided self-help housing. "African ownership of houses" could help address the rapidly deteriorating housing situation, A.A. Carney, an adviser for regional and aided self-help housing suggested.¹⁵ While putting such housing programs into place, the Kenyan government along with others on the continent might benefit from the establishment of an African tropical institute similar to the one in London but devoted especially to French speakers, another UN advisor continued. Africans should also work to establish a system of regional advisors trained in professional methods, although at present,

¹² Report of the Social Welfare Administration, Office of the President, Government of the Philippines, to the UN Special Fund, August, 1966, p. 6, BOX-S-0175-1720-06, United Nations Archives.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ Preliminary Outline of the Proposal to Establish a CITRUS, Draft, March 1966, p. 1, BOX-S-0175-1720-06, United Nations Archives.

¹⁵ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa: Report on the Mission to the Ministry of Health and Housing to the Kenya Government, Nairobi Nov. 19-Dec. 4, 1965. Memo from A.A. Carney, Regional Adviser, Cooperative and Aided Self-Help Housing. (Addis Ababa: December 16, 1965), Folder Part B, Box S-0175-0079-02 Self-help housing - Africa AFR (240-1), United Nations Archives.

yet another UN worker lamented, there were too many governments that were poorly informed on the subject and that did not understand the benefits of foreign advisers.¹⁶

Even with the end of empire, former colonial officials continued to claim expertise with impunity. When the UN Industrial Development Organization held a meeting in Vienna in 1969, for instance, the Centre for Housing, Building, and Planning proposed a paper on tropical building, to be presented by experts like G. A. Atkinson, an architect and British Colonial Liaison Officer, who had “down to earth British empirical knowledge,” or Stanley Jewkes, an architect and former director of Public Works at the Federation of Malaya, or J. Dreyfus, a French bioclimatologist who had “spent years in Africa” and who consequently had “good experience both in hot humid and arid behaviour of materials.”¹⁷ Gardner-Medwin, one of the four architect-planners involved in the initial UN tropical housing study, continued “aiding and encouraging the continuation of British architects working in Colonial/post-colonial settings, with students operating as the ‘knowledge creators’, measuring and recording, defining what was important, worthy of preservation and dictating the method (measured drawing) by which this was to be done.”¹⁸ In observing the participants of social engagement, and in particular in seeing the continuities with colonial regimes, it becomes abundantly clear that the process of “social engagement” was all too often a way to impose a particular technocratic world order that placed former colonial regimes in positions of authority. This was hardly a subtle shift from the language of empire to a postcolonial internationalism: for instance, the 1956 *Architect & Building News* offered explicit suggestions for “conditions of engagement” abroad.¹⁹

Self-help as a source of state authority

Even a brief discussion of the emergent field of tropical architecture thus begins to unravel some of the complicated logic of social engagement on the part of architects and planners. Surprisingly, perhaps, their work then and now has striking parallels: with few exceptions, practitioners believed they should help others because of their superior technical know-how and professional training. (Even Bernard Rudofsky’s enticingly titled book, *Architecture without Architects*, only praised “communal” or “non-pedigreed architecture” during more exotic, largely “premodern” times, ignoring the large numbers of individuals and families building informal shelter for themselves in the past half century.)²⁰ Social engagement did not stimulate a radical re-envisioning of class relations or a broadening of the definition of “architect” or “planner”. And in a strange twist, local knowledge at times became a way for western-trained architects and planners to claim intellectual turf amongst peers.

¹⁶ Pierre Emery, “Du rôle du conseiller régional dans l’élaboration et l’application d’une politique de l’habitat,” n.d., Folder Part B, Box S-0175-0079-02 Self-help housing - Africa AFR (240-1), United Nations Archives.

¹⁷ Letter from Mr. A. Gonzalez-Gandolfi, Chief, Building Section, Centre for Housing, Building and Planning to Victor Olgyay, School of Architecture, Princeton, June 4, 1969, Folder SO 144(32), RG 3/9, Box 54, United Nations Archives.

¹⁸ Iain Jackson, “Tropical Architecture and the West Indies: from military advances and tropical medicine, to Robert Gardner-Medwin and the networks of tropical modernism,” *The Journal of Architecture*, 18:2, 187.

¹⁹ William Weymouth, “Opportunities Abroad for Architects,” *Architect and Building News* 210 (1956): 38-41 as cited in Jackson, 189.

²⁰ Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

What distinguishes mid-twentieth century efforts from those today, however, is the way UN workers like Crane, Thijsse, Kayanan, and Gardner-Medwin envisioned their task to be simultaneously the design of houses and communities, yes, but also the strengthening of *state* authority. International action should “help each government in tackling its problems of housing and community development,” the UN bulletin on *Housing in the Tropics* stated unambiguously.²¹ This contrasted sharply with, for instance, Cameron Sinclair’s depiction of his NGO, Architecture for Humanity’s experiences in Kosovo, where the then interim government became an obstacle to humanitarian design assistance. If Sinclair had moved forward in collaboration with the UNHCR, this next project would have also focused on refugees, or those living by definition at the edges of circuits of state power.²²

The reasons for this peculiarly midcentury connection between state and socially engaged architecture were simple. Unlike current-day humanitarian design, UN workers in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s had to show their unwavering support for postcolonial regimes. As experts hailing from North America or western European nations – countries that had once dominated large empires or that were feared to have global ambitions – UN workers needed to make clear their respect for new governments. At the same time, they also subscribed to a view of global security that required strong states to manage a developmentalist agenda. The promotion of self-help fit with this vision of state-managed development and self-sustaining growth. Only with development could citizens realize an improvement in their material circumstances and be deterred from participating in radical politics. Only with strong states could development be realized. “Social engagement” thus ended up requiring close cooperation with states, since western architectural techniques required bureaucratic and legal apparatuses to manage, for instance, land titling or enforcement of standards. It is on this foundation that non-governmental organizations, charities, and firms now build privately or IGO-funded programs today.

Conclusion

Current movements draw from deeper historical wells, then, and today’s socially engaged architecture and design emerges from a much longer trajectory of global work by professionals interested in a public good. Put simply, socially engaged architecture is not new. But why does this rootedness matter? What is the importance of such history?

There are a number of ways to think about the relevance of past efforts. On the one hand, they offer insight into some of the assumptions embedded in socially engaged architecture today: there is the lingering assumption, for instance, that “global” expertise brings together academic and technical knowledge with “local” best practices and that architects and planners can play a central role mediating between the two, or that good design accommodates cultural differences while ultimately upholding the rights of the individual and the principles of democratic governance. Whether in the mid-twentieth or early twenty-first centuries, socially engaged architects and planners present(ed) themselves as practical problem-solvers seeking pragmatic, affordable, and localized solutions to large-scale problems with global poverty. Across time, socially engaged architecture presumes a shared

²¹ UN Report of Mission of Experts; “Housing in the Tropics,” *UN Housing and Town and Country Planning Bulletin* 6 (May 1952): 96.

²² Cameron Sinclair, “Introduction,” in Architecture for Humanity, *Design Like You Give a Damn* (New York and Los Angeles: Metropolis Books, 2006).

definition of human rights and decency in much the same way it operates within the parameters of liberal political values. These practices continue to be espoused, not only as a part of basic human ethics and human rights, but as part of a larger system of global security: decent standards of living can diminish the appeal of radical Jihadist movements, for instance, much as they could lessen the appeal of global communism during the Cold War. And perhaps most obviously, engaged architects and planners posited then and now that members of their professions possess unique and necessary skills for addressing questions of inequality and for facilitating social change. A history of socially engaged architecture thus allows a more critical examination of the threads connecting past with present.

On the other hand, there are clear gaps between the efforts of the postwar decades and today, and it is important to observe change and evolution as much as continuity. For example, UN advisers unabashedly embraced a modernist, macro-level, professional planning approach at odds with the present-day emphasis by activist planners and architects on grassroots change and the vernacular. UN advisers also worked closely with political heads of state, pursuing larger development agendas that meshed more with Cold War agendas and with geopolitical strategy than with the sustainability and social justice principles that inspire now.

Overall, however, an historical examination of UN efforts allows us to more critically examine not only the larger impacts of social engagement but also the framing of the concept itself. The idea that “social engagement” entails an ethical, humanitarian engagement by professional architects and planners with an ostensibly non-professional, untrained, untechnical audience is a one-sided understanding of design, to be sure. In the end, social engagement is perhaps an inaccurate phrase to capture the sort of exchanges necessary to open up different form of spatial knowledge.

The United Nations (UN) is an international organization founded in 1945. It is currently made up of 193 Member States. It was established in June 1945 by the Charter of the United Nations and began work in April 1946. The ICJ is the successor of the Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ), which was established by the League of Nations in 1920. 6. Secretariat. 3rd United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) was held in 2016 in Quito, Ecuador. It elaborated on Goal-11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. A dire United Nations report, based on thousands of scientific studies, paints an urgent picture of biodiversity loss and finds that climate change is amplifying the danger to humanity. As a result, biodiversity loss is projected to accelerate through 2050, particularly in the tropics, unless countries drastically step up their conservation efforts. Image. Cattle grazing on a tract of illegally cleared Amazon forest in Pará State, Brazil. In most major land habitats, the average abundance of native plant and animal life has fallen by 20 percent or more, mainly over the past century. Credit...Lalo de Almeida for The New York Times. The report is not the first to paint a grim portrait of Earth's ecosystems. The United Nations have meetings where world leaders agree on what to do about global warming. If there is too much pollution in the air, some people have health problems. Ecologists looked for special spots on white pine trees to know if there are any high levels of ozone. Many types of air pollution are invisible, but some can be seen with the naked eye. The teacher asked the boys if they did the task. Satellite images proved that deforestation increased rapidly. The passage is so difficult that I cannot understand it. All Members shall give the United Nations every assistance in any action it takes in accordance with the present Charter, and shall refrain from giving assistance to any state against which the United Nations is taking preventive or enforcement action. Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter; but this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII. Section: UN Charter. Charter of the United Nations. The United Nations (UN) is an intergovernmental organization that aims to maintain international peace and security, develop friendly relations among nations, achieve international cooperation, and be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations. It is the largest, most familiar, most internationally represented and most powerful intergovernmental organization in the world. The UN is headquartered on international territory in New York City, with its other main offices in Geneva, Nairobi, Vienna