

City And Basic Habitability. PARADIGM IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA.

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Abstract

The following communication is an approach to the issues comprehending basic habitability in African sub-Saharan cities, perceived in the experiences of urban planning, which may point out the prospective path of these developing territories.

The subsequent synopsis – focused on the urban African experiences, from the post independence period up to today – consists in a brief reflection on the process which has led to the current context of *survival* and *rupture*, which defines the habitational compound of sub-Saharan Africa.

Thusly, we will try to comment on the possible routes which may lead to a sustainable – and more effective – operational pattern, concerning the urban solutions apprehended as corner stones for a basic and more adequate habitability for this part of the African continent.

Considering that the majority of the population who lives in peripheral neighbourhoods, lacking the basic infra-structures and urban services, organizes itself in spontaneous occupations, we can conclude that one of the contemporaneous African urban spaces' characteristics is, in fact, its rapid mutability that reports to an imprecise and gradually informal dynamism.

If we regard the «shelter» factor as one of the main functions of the complex system formed by any urban African agglomerate, we will soon acknowledge the quite long list of problems caused by the disabilities concerning the housing in sub-Saharan Africa.

If the current cultural paradigm does not evolve in a steadfast beat, and if we take under consideration the African regional urban developing, there is an obvious risk of increasing the territorial, social and cultural fragmentation, which will then cause an image of anachronism, asymmetry and lack of structure of the African landscape.

More than merely a debate about the civilization archetype, these issues are about reflecting on experiences of urban planning that lead to the pondering on the possible responses to be given to the current issue, against the ill use of investment means and the wasting of synergies that the occupation models of the suburban frontiers imply nowadays, by the melting of the different communities.

1. Preliminary notations

1.1. Basic habitability and Africa

The following communication is an approach to the issues comprehending basic habitability in African sub-Saharan cities, perceived in the experiences of urban planning, which may point out the prospective path of these developing territories.

The subsequent synopsis – focused on the urban African experiences, from the post-independence period up to today – consists in brief reflection on the process which has led to the present context of *survival* and *rupture*, which defines the habitational compound of sub-Saharan Africa.

In many of great African cities, the housing scheme is confined to a context of generalized poverty, translated into the absence of capability in operating and maintaining the necessary infrastructures and services in urban life, dealing daily with issues regarding environmental management and local natural resources. The majority of population that lives in the periurban neighbourhoods – most of which are destitute of the more basic infrastructures and urban services – «organizes» itself in spontaneous forms of occupation, usually in areas ill prepared for habitation and without any sort of space planning and use, whatsoever.

1.2. Basic habitability and migration movements

This scenery has been augmented by the migration wave's phenomenon – frequently brought upon by bellical conflicts, droughts and their consequential starvation problems –, which was almost always unexpected and translated itself in refugee's and homeless' movements, led to the urban centres, where the populations felt more protected and sought for a more regular alimentary sustenance. Under these circumstances, cities and their suburban areas witnessed their habitational blots' growth, which became increasingly more scattered, escaping any municipal planning measure.

In only a two generation span, the ways of production and consumption, and rural life – the traditional ground for sub-Saharan society in Africa – were replaced by an economy centred in the city, in which only a small percentage of the urban inhabitants were integrated in a formal economy, although, on the other hand, the majority of them were unemployed. Such socially «unarticulated» scenery has promoted the seeking for survival in the so-called «informal» activity centre or in the urban subsistence agriculture.

1.3. Basic habitability and self-construction

As a response to the operative incapability felt by many of the entities responsible for these cities, some strategies of incitement to self-construction were designed, in specific and especially selected areas of the city. However, if the availability of funding for the acquisition of basic constructing materials constituted an advantage for the admittance into a minimum picture of basic habitability conditions, shelter-wise, the same was not to be found – not with the same level of intensity – when regarding the necessary planned preparation which the assigned spaces for the self-construction initiatives should have had, in terms of infrastructure, small support equipment and services, accessibility and mobility.

There was, thusly, created a certain unbalance between the habitational construction and its respective morphological supporting structure. On the other hand, however, as a result of the individual course of action in self-construction, the apparition of *renewed* habitational typologies was incited. One can, therefore, state that “(...) *we are standing before an extremely dynamic process of*

growth and birth of new special and aesthetical values (...). Such a strong, reaffirmed and long process is, without question, a sign that a process of adequacy of the typology, form of house and city is in course (...)^[1]. The predictability margin for this metamorphosis is a narrow one, as it is individual, developed according to private whim – consequently, a deterioration of social relationships has been reported, making some of these realities unconnected and somewhat strut. Some forms of habitational sociabilities have been unbalanced, giving way to the dismantling of certain forms of appropriation and habitability.

This transformation is now structured in the typification of a (renewed) housing typology, not only with a different image and symbolical language, but also with a capacity to determine the elements of a new urban *aesthetics*, related to a collective imagery which acknowledges, assimilates and accepts it, José Forjaz states that “(...) *we find ourselves between technocracy and folklore, adobe and inox steel, urban farmers and ambitious executives, economic housing and monuments, mother language, colonial and technocratic (...)*”^[2].

1.4. Basic habitability and culture

One can therefore point out that, amongst numerous issues, habitational production in developing countries may struggle mainly against cultural obstacles, not only in the aspect of urban development, but also regarding the needs felt towards basic habitability conditions.

This is an issue of vertical implementation, i.e., it covers almost every cultural, social, political and economical status and levels, from the highest governing positions, to the anonymous citizen. Borrowing the words of John Naisbitt, used throughout his work during the 80's (*Megatrends*), Africa is living a parenthetical time, an era among eras, as if someone had separated the present from the past and from the future, because Africa isn't neither here nor there.

A whole world has been left behind, but another one is yet to be achieved. This hiatus, this moment of suspense is a time for change, for reflection and for evaluation of the renewed sensitivities, aiming to proceed with new opportunities and new paths for the habitational issue.

As the production of housing in sub-Saharan Africa is struggling with new challenges – be they of typology and its scales, or of infrastructure and social interaction relationships –, one can assert that it is also necessary to make way to a different political and civic culture, considering the construction of a discourse which will provide legitimacy and coherence to the local governments and citizen movements.

1.5. Basic habitability and urban development

Considering sub-Saharan Africa's specific reality, the fields of human development, and, consequently, the resolving of the difficulties perceived in housing and security, are not yet seen as urgent issues, where investment seems completely worthwhile: they are looked down in distrust, in a context of difficult economical return. As such, the precious investment capital needed for the undertaking of the necessary changes, which will allow a new perspective on the said issue, is often clearly insufficient.

Despite all difficulties, however, it is vital to establish a stratification of a habitational development, supported by the regional accordance of the economical context, in its operative performance, as well as in the deepening and consolidation of a technical structure, capable of leading the process, obtaining new statistical data and proceeding with monitoring of the results *in situ*.

2. Outlines of development

Considering the import of the «shelter» action as one of the most relevant functions of the complex system formed by any urban African compound, the list of factors related and restrained by the problems inherent to the difficulties felt in sub-Saharan Africa's housing issues is too extended and even impossible to elaborate at a high degree of precision. In this matter, issues related to housing deprivation are intimately connected with urban development topics.

2.1. Housing «peripheralization»

Many of the housing groupings of sub-Saharan Africa no longer constitute a “(...) *stable [place] nor a specific form, nor even an unique evolutional state, or a coherent movement, but only the multiplying of several states, actions and experiences, both simultaneous and contradictory (...)*”^[3]. In fact, one of the grounds for contemporary African habitational space is precisely that of its speedy development, which is imprecise and also gradually «informal». The increasing habitational blurbs emerge in peripheral sceneries, both multiple and melanged, subject to confrontation and change, unstable and permissive.

The majority of sub-Saharan housing groups of today still lack places which are completely adjusted and shaped to the communities which will use them, as well as there are yet to be organized the basic and necessary means of basic habitability. This phenomenon is referred to as *Peripheralization Process of Basic Housing Conditions in the Developing Countries in sub-Saharan Africa*.

The problematic on habitational phenomenologies in today's sub-Saharan Africa cannot, thusly, “*ignore the complexities of the economic, social or cultural issue of the city or believe that architecture can, on its own, construct the space of the city, but only acknowledge the visible dimension of the urban space, the materiality of its construction (...)*”^[4]. The issues regarding the basic habitability in sub-Saharan Africa are placed in several levels, from the notion of place and infrastructure, to the dialectics between the operative need of a typological, formal and material renewal of the housing compound, its infrastructures and the debate on the relationships with the current systems of living and habitat generated by the current context.

2.2. Survival and rupture

It is in the dichotomy between survival and rupture that the housing problematic in sub-Saharan Africa lies. We say survival, because that is exactly where the issue stands – surviving daily – and rupture, because “*we need a new strategy to resolve the inevitable rupture, with technical and formal traditions, and with the colonial legacy, due to the fact that both systems are no unresponsive to the new cultural and material ambitions of the peoples in our territory.*”^[5]

The quality indexes for basic habitability to create in accordance to the sub-Saharan African city should be able to provide for the establishment of a society in which each and everyone would have access health, security, work and justice, thusly consolidating a culturally and socially more adequate life, consequently better cherished by the community.

In that sense, it should take under clean consideration the established habitational, social, environmental, political, cultural, economical and physical goals, simultaneously, either by the entities which are responsible for the habitational methodologies to be implemented, or by the community itself. Here, the habitational structure should stand in multifaceted and intra-structural places.

2.3. Prospective paths

The road to be followed cannot stand on totalizing and hermetic strategies. Quite on the contrary, it will be necessary to consolidate the guidelines for basic habitability, supported by base patterns, open to interaction, combining them, in favour of its acknowledgment, assimilation and actual *in situ* applicability.

Consequently, the restructuring of urban strategies for housing issues should consider the necessity for the altering of the paradigm of these two driving forces. That is to say, that one should face the basic habitability context in a systemic and contextualized way.

Any suggestion for the redefinition of operative guidelines, of requalification of housing spaces and the basic habitability in this geographic context, must be necessarily pro-active, integrated, participative and inclusive; conceived for spaces in the city, structured in habitational systems, progressively diverse, produced by stratified realities, which are continuously undergoing changes.

One should be able to alter the current scheme of production and urban housing – very much engraved by the so-called «informal» schemes of daily survival, apparently unorganized, untaxed and unregulated by governmental entities, of some active and passive corruption, for example – for a different one, which will defend the «right to work» for all, which will fight back the «poverty stigma» and establish the «principle of hope».

In order to re-establish the quality standards of basic habitability in sub-Saharan Africa, entering a path of sustainable development, one will have to restructure it, so that it can be reset as the ideal habitat for a society based in community, seeking to create a flexible structure for a strong grouping, inside a healthy and clean environment.

It is, thus, defended a *minimalist* production of the basic habitability conditions for the sub-Saharan African cities; *minimalist*, not in the sense of the typological, technological or material sophistication, of the casual, specific, circumscribed and balanced intervention, at a low scale, low resources, compromised not only with the forms of use and the typologies to implement, but also with those which already exist, and, using upgrade actions, they also contribute to a better basic habitability in the cities of developing African countries. Only in this way will one be able to ensure a gradual increase of basic habitability quality, regarding its countless constraints. *Minimalist*, also, in the sense of its urban and environmental adequacy, as well as in the management and consumption of the available financial resources.

Generally speaking, it is now foreseen the production of a basic habitability for sub-Saharan Africa, amidst a more aware scale of the specificities and restrictions – “(...) *the city is not only constructed for an individual, but also for great quantities of people, with highly diversified backgrounds, different temperaments, different occupations (...)*”^[6] – which originate a substantial diversification in the manner in which these same individuals live in the city, which elements they most depend on, of what forms and types of housing are more coherent with their preferences and ways of habitability, among others.

2.4. City and basic habitability - new paradigms

The primal object should be that of the acquisition of a new and dynamic equilibrium between society, housing and nature, supported by active civic participation, by innovation, translating itself in the mechanism which will generate a more consistent basic habitability, with the aspirations and solicitations of the current urban population. With this system, housing – «shelter for mankind» – would again be more connected with the «cycle of nature». All of this would take place in a diversity process, of heterogeneity and relationships between different individuals and collective people.

City and basic habitability would then be structures in a systemic dynamics and mutually inclusive, but also minimalist (as said before), conformed by methodological and operative mechanisms, which global and inter-sectorial vision of the housing picture would allow, at long term.

- a) To identify trends;
- b) To anticipate opportunities;
- c) To determine primary goals;
- d) To concentrate limited resources in critical subjects, such as housing;
- e) To stimulate dialogue and internal debate;
- f) To generate the communitarian consensus and commitment towards the measures to be taken;
- g) To strengthen the social fabric;
- h) To engage civic mobilization;
- i) To promote coordination among the different intervenients;
- j) To extend the political and social perspectives for the housing sector.

If the altering of the current cultural paradigm regarding the development of sub-Saharan Africa's basic habitability conditions is not perceived, one can risk accentuating the urban habitational, social and cultural fragmentation, creating an image, at times anachronistic, asymmetric and without infrastructure, of the housing compound, in Africa's developing landscape. The real dimension of the issues regarding the physical and habitational planning, as well as its architecture and typology, in parallel with the acknowledgment of the importance of the energetic resources in a context where the needs are flagrant, should conduct to a scenery in which the notion of housing and its insertion in the cultural and physical mean is an aprioristic condition.

Only then would a structured city/society be produced, supported by certain advantages for citizens, in what it regards to their safety, self-esteem, education and access to work and minimum habitability conditions. On the other hand, the cities themselves would then have more financial counterparts, born from taxation of the growing residential sector, as well as of urban activities, which could be reinvested in the cities. Through measures of a more integrated planning of the housing compound, one would reach the constraint of its expansion over the rural area.

This system obviously implies different aspects and relative and specific relevancies, according to whether it is analysed in a rural context or an urban area, influenced by different climatic or regional constraints, and subject to the different economic, political, social and cultural structures, in which it might be placed. It will always be necessary, however, to understand not only which connection must be established between the so-called «vernacular» architecture and the «erudite» one, but also to think in the type of role and relevance to convey to the local or autochthonous tradition, when related to influences from other cultures in Africa.

In this sense, it will be important to define the path through which one can make an operative model, structured in a traditional *connaissance*, supported on local and often unskilled labour, cohabitate with a methodology for basic habitability, grounded in contemporaneous sustainability systems, adapted to this reality, with vigorous vitality, control and applicability efficacy.

The approach to the seeking of new paradigms will be that of complement and of support, in search for a larger urban appetite for basic habitability, by investing in basic infrastructure and small equipments, which will make possible a more sustainable and diversified use by the community.

3. Final notations

More than simply inciting a debate on aesthetical trends in architecture, we're trying to equate the experiences on urban planning which may lead to a reflection on which sense to give – be that in ethical term or at a more pragmatic level – to the current squandering of means and waste of energies an synergies, which the actual models predict. The updating of habitational planning methodologies in the developing countries, more than providing a simplistic technological modernization – based in an acritical import of standards from more developed countries – implies a change of mentality and a

thorough observation of the specific idiosyncrasies of these African cultures, structured in the various systems.

The «informal» establishment of communities is not only an inseparable reality for most of the population groupings in sub-Saharan Africa, but, in many a case, they organize themselves in their biggest and more important component, in what it regards to its demographic density and extension. Characterized by a multifaceted richness, the vitality and complexity of the social fabric in these spontaneous habitational formations help do predict their evolution and permanence as urban structures of great interest, be that in an economical, morphological or even aesthetical point of view.

These events, often of urban definition, formalize as an alternative to an important habitational group, which sees itself separated from the standard and formal housing markets. All of this is due to the fact that, in those communities which have suffered a rapid demographic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, thanks to the strong migratory currents, the governmental entities and the private sector have found themselves unable to respond to the strong need for shelter and housing, felt by the newly-arrived communities. The habitational structures known as «informal», which were then formed, represent the basis of a particular way of living and a complex, multi-ethnic, multi-functional social system of great typological diversity, in which architecture adapts itself to the growing of the family group.

Thusly, the urban fabric gains a mixture of uses and diversity within unity, resulting in habitational formulas, more connected to the cultural inheritance and a strong sense of identity and belonging amongst residents and their social and urban context. We do not mean to say that these formalizations are perfect, quite on the contrary: they are unfinished and problematic urban structures, their worst characteristic being their spatial and functional confinement, regarding the colonial and formal city, stratified in predominantly pedestrian routes and presenting serious deprivation to the most basic level of infrastructure and services.

In the centre of the urbanism debate related to the habitational reality is the creation, treatment and management of basic habitability, supported in the organization and management of the infrastructures and services, as well as in ruling mechanisms. The suggestions brought forward for a new paradigm for city and basic habitability in sub-Saharan Africa's developing landscape must be formalized with flexibility and «honesty» with a strong sense of reality, scale and resources, making way to a communitarian life, prepared for the inevitable and continuous process of transformation in the cities.

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