

IS AN INCREMENTAL CORE HOUSING STRATEGY THE WAY TO
RE-ESTABLISH COMMUNITIES IN HAITI?

THE HOUSING PERSPECTIVE

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Questions about emergency rebuilding are not new, and answers regarding the best technical approach have been provided for many decades already. So the fact that we are asking this question now might mean something. And I think what that means is that old answers are no longer valid. And they are no longer valid because of a series of changes that have been going on for the past two decades.

We have seen environmental changes (the magnitude of natural disasters and other humanitarian crises has increased). Second changes in policy that reflect new sensibilities: sustainability, social development, cultural appropriateness... Third a global economic order that just as it has created inequality it has also created people with power to put fabulous amounts of money into helping the poor, from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation to the Diaspora organizations willing to send money home for aid. Fourth, communication technologies like the cell phone and the Internet mean that there is more awareness of the world's problems and tremendous willingness among younger generations to get involved and help. And last (but not least) in my list, a renewed faith among architectural designers that we architects can actually help, after past failures in architects intervention in the areas of social housing.

So things have changed, at an environmental, social, economic, technological, professional level. And this invites an alternative way to think about the question about core housing and Haiti, which is: Have all these changes, led, or will they lead, to the great invention in emergency and social housing practice, something that will render obsolete our old incremental core housing? I don't think that will necessarily happen, but I do think that an incremental core housing approach strategy in Haiti or Chile will benefit from taking into consideration those changes. So the best housing approach for Haiti or Chile would be a different incremental core housing approach. It wouldn't be the same 1970s classic one.

Among the aspects to consider there is the fact that incremental housing is a slow process. And the survivors of natural disasters of the magnitude we are seeing today need a faster and more complete starting solution. So the core should be more complete; perhaps bigger, perhaps several spaces: perhaps it would be a multi-core starting unit. Yet it shouldn't lose that spirit of incremental core housing, which is allowing for people to expand and improve the house as time passes. To

personalize the house. To not only own the house, not only be a proprietor of the house but also to appropriate it.

And these are criteria that of course the new generation of architectural designers, newcomers in this practice, should ideally keep in mind when engaging in the exercise of designing solutions for community re-building. They should also consider the possibility that their architectural art pieces should allow for modifications and expandability. To move past the fascination by the technological possibilities of modeling and render software and the fascination by new building technologies and materials.

But that's not enough because execution also matters. By execution I mean, adoption of the idea by the individual or the organization that is funding the project, and then the adoption by the beneficiaries themselves, especially if they are going to do auto-construction.

On the one hand, we need to convince these new players, the new NGOs and wealthy individuals and expatriate organizations willing to fund reconstruction projects that incremental core housing is an approach that works. For new players in the funding arena full housing sounds more compelling as an approach. Full housing might be more expensive, but it is less demanding in terms of execution. The organization hires the works, contractors build quickly and then everybody moves on and gets ready for the next project. And the completed full-housing project provides an image of uniformity that looks good in self-promotional material. In terms of image then, an incremental housing project might not be as sexy as full housing.

But there is another critical aspect, which is that of the community. And here we are talking about a community-specific intervention as opposed to a vertical approach in which you impose the project. And you know what I'm talking about: participation, sustainability, cultural appropriateness as opposed to imposing a fully finished housing development that has been pre-planned in a government office or a designer's desk. However, there is still the risk of falling into that trap of verticality, of the top-down approach even when you think you are contesting it through an alternative approach.

There are issues with the participatory approach. A big percentage of housing projects that are presented as participatory are hardly participatory since the participation of the community is limited to the extreme of for example saying yes or no to the project, and in some cases to saying yes or yes. So in the end the participatory project is a vertical one. Also there are issues with the sustainable approach, because sustainability is such a vague concept that in the end it seems like anything can be presented as sustainable. And there are issues with the culturally appropriate approach. Issues that arise when the community resists the culturally sensitive project and demand a modern one and then

the practitioner thinks that's crazy and imposes the culturally sensitive approach on them. So that's cultural sensitivity by imposition.

So yes, incremental core housing is a feasible approach for the rebuilding, but only if it is a modified, re-thought, redefined, re-designed core housing approach. And in redefining it we have to give priority to the local, case by case, customized solution over the vertical, top-down one, yet we have to be aware that there exists a risk that we are just engaging in standard practices that are just being re-labeled as participatory, sustainable or culturally appropriate. So a new core housing project should go past the discourse and really engage those elements in the process of design and execution.

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