

ARC•PEACE

International Architects Designers Planners for Social Responsibility

NGO in consultative status (Category II) with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations

Press release from ARC•PEACE

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Architects and planners must take the global slum problem seriously

International Architects Designers Planners for Social Responsibility, ARC•PEACE, held its 15th biannual meeting in Barcelona 17 April 2008. In connection with the meeting a seminar was arranged with the title "Are architects and planners obstacles to enabling housing strategies in low-income countries?" Presentations were made by the international housing expert Geoffrey Payne (UK), Prof. Bijayanand Misra (Delhi and Kyoto), Co-chair of ARC•PEACE; Dr Branislava Saveljic-Balac, ARC•PEACE representative to the United Nation in New York, and Prof. Dick Urban Vestbro, Stockholm, Secretary of ARC•PEACE. After the seminar the Board of ARC•PEACE adopted the following statement:

The United Nations Habitat organization estimates that more than one billion people today live in slums, i.e. in urban settlements without security of tenure, sanitary facilities or infrastructural services such as drainage, clean water and roads. This figure is estimated to increase to two billion in the year 2030. So far efforts to address the slum problem have yielded very limited results. This is particularly true in low-income countries in Africa, South Asia and Latin America.

One reason why efforts have been unsuccessful is that decision-makers continue to apply outdated methods to address the growing slum problem. Most often housing policies are based on assumptions about ample public resources, a well organized public sector, a consolidated construction industry, and the existence of a cadre of professionals, which are committed to improve the situation of the urban poor – assumptions that are very distant from reality. Conventional approaches to the slum problem often include demands for space standards, procedures for land regulation and building permits that are impossible for the poor to meet. Unfortunately architects and planners in many cases have exacerbated the problem instead of playing a creative role to meet the needs of the poor.

To meet the needs of the urban poor it is necessary to replace outdated inflexible planning regulations with enabling procedures, which support people's own efforts. Instead of thinking in terms of providing ready-made housing units at one moment in time we must regard housing as a continuous process, where existing informal settlements are gradually upgraded and provided with various types of security of tenure in an incremental process based on the active participation of the poor themselves. Space standards must be adapted to the reality of housing needs of the poor. Conventional ideas about overcrowding, plot coverage and road widths must be abandoned. The important role of multiple-use, semi-private and communal outdoor space must be recognized. The use of houses and plots for Home-Based Enterprise must be promoted. These factors are integral parts of enabling housing strategies.

The idea of the enabling housing strategy is not new. Innovative such strategies have been applied in some countries during the 80s and 90s. However, these efforts remain isolated and ad hoc, and they are not sensitive enough to the reality the poor face. International organizations and governments often pay lip-service to the enabling housing strategy, but in practice very little is being done to implement it. Sadly enough architects and planners are often reluctant to learn about the enabling strategy. Therefore most of them continue to defend outdated planning legislation and unrealistic space standards. Such attitudes contribute to the growth of slums.

We appeal to architects and planners to take the enabling housing strategy seriously. By understanding how to meet the needs of the poor our professions can make a valuable contribution to reduce the slum problem in the world. We must be part of the solution, and not part of the problem.

Further information:

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