

Realistic Planning and Qualitative Research

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It is common to find in planning — both by government and via private consultants — ideologically-loaded abstractions dressed up as practicality. There are plans for the year 2000, to which no channels of implementation exist; 'New Cities' of monumental character; 'policies' which bear a strong resemblance to the joint communiqués of governments which disagree and which are not willing to declare their disagreement. This is particularly true of planning in the developing countries or less-developed countries (LDCs), and nowhere more so than in the field of housing. Here calculations of 'deficit' based on bad data relating to poor categories may be joined with 'programmes' constituting at best very partial solutions to the existing problems and at worst exacerbating them *via* slum clearance.

There is a tendency to interpret such 'paper plans' and 'show projects' as representing a lack of sophistication. But surely there is more behind it than that. Unrealistic planning has behind it a huge weight of institutional interests of groups which benefit from the expensive projects, and by governments which need to appear as committed to progress, and to present a set of actions benefiting the few as a commitment to high standards for everyone.

Thus to press for realism in housing and urban planning in LDCs requires not merely an intellectual grasp of the working of cities, but energy, tenacity, and moral commitment. It is not surprising, therefore, that Otto Koenigsberger has been one of the important figures in a slow movement towards greater realism in the way that housing and urban planning are thought about in the developing countries. Realism is grounded in a concern for the lives of people, as well as in common sense; for many years Koenigsberger has exemplified both.

I want here to call attention to some particular developments in planning for the cities of the Third World — developments with which Koenigsberger has had a good deal to do — and to suggest their relationship to research. This is the development of approaches to housing and settlement policy which are less building programmes than intervention programmes. I will briefly indicate the types of research which have supported these programmatic approaches, and then discuss the way a commitment to these newer approaches requires a new approach to research as well — one which relies much more heavily on qualitative methods than in the past.

NEW APPROACHES TO HOUSING

For a substantial period of time, the typical government housing programmes of the LDCs centred around the production of houses. A 'project' was a given number of dwellings, located on a specific site, and furnished with the appropriate infrastructure — water lines, sewers, roads, electric lines.

Under these circumstances, it seemed natural for housing research to centre around the concept of dwelling units, and the basic mode of information processing to be counting. Housing programmes were programmes to build multiples of some standardised building; abstracting this way of working into the realm of ideas led to calculating dwelling units required, counting dwelling units produced, and describing necessary action in terms of housing deficit, calculated as the difference between the two totals. (Calculations of housing deficit, it turns out, entered into policy only obliquely, since rare or nonexistent was the government prepared to 'fill the gap' — *i.e.* construct houses in numbers which were other than token compared to the calculations; nevertheless, the calculations served to legitimise government efforts and were thus indispensable to operations.) At the more programmatic level, there were calculations as to cost and of 'affordability' by the 'target populations'. The language is revealing; the 'units' were to be 'delivered' from on high like so many bombs.

Of course, the building of 'dwelling units' still plays an important role in housing policies of governments. But in recent years a number of programmatic ideas of a different character have come to hold respectable standing in the world of housing policy analysis and programme. The international agencies — United Nations and World Bank — have been especially active in pushing the 'new approaches'. The programmatic ideas are various, but they have in common a shifting focus from the programming of groups of complete 'dwelling units', with the understanding that government will execute the project from ground-breaking to rent-up, to a conception of limited government interventions into processes of housing production in which a very substantial role is played by private individuals.

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN SHAPING THE NEW APPROACH

It would be naive to say that social research and expert advice brought about this change of approach. Governments were learning by experience that they could not prevent the formation of irregular settlements but had to find ways to deal with them. The international agencies came to see most of their projects as hopelessly peripheral to the major trends of development.

But social research, largely of a descriptive or qualitative nature, did play an important role in shaping the change of orientation. Intellectuals concerned with the problems of the rapidly-growing cities of the developing world, led especially by John Turner, began to argue against the demolition of shantytowns. The idea that *favelas* and *barrios* were 'unsightly slums', 'creeping cancers'¹ on the cities were rejected; rather they were interpreted as 'slums of hope',² communities in formation (or as the Peruvians eventually re-titled theirs, 'young towns'), as 'not the problem but the solution'³ to the problem of low-income housing in the rapidly-urbanising Third World.

By treating shanties not as substandard dwellings, but as dwellings-in-process, this re-interpretation at once called into question all the old calculations of the housing deficit.

"The arithmetical approach starts by establishing an unrealistic minimum standard for housing. This standard then creates a severe housing shortage

¹ For one example, Juppenlatz, M., *Cities in Transformation: the Urban Squatter Problem in the Developing World*. University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland, 1970.

² Stokes, C.J., "A Theory of Slums", *Land Economics* Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 187–197, 1962.

³ Mangin, W., "Latin American Squatter Settlements: a Problem and a Solution", *Latin American Research Review* Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 65–98, 1967; Turner, J.F.C., "Barriers and Channels for Housing Development in Modernizing Countries", *American Institute of Planners Journal* Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 167–181, 1967.

because most of the existing kinds of low-income housing do not meet this standard. The arithmetical way to overcome this housing shortage is to construct new housing units in sufficient numbers . . .”⁴

This body of literature involved not only a change of description but one of prescription. The standard housing/deficits calculation approach

“relies too much on the government’s limited resources, to the extent of obscuring society’s actual resources, by establishing too high a standard of housing — one which illegitimizes most, if not all, of the existing low-income housing stock”.⁵

The authors of this statement go on to show where, in fact, people were living in Bangkok. “Everybody in this city is housed in one way or another, and there are not people sleeping in the streets.”⁶ They go on to generalise this observation in terms of a “complex low-income housing delivery system . . . The majority of its components rely little on planners, engineers and other professionals, receiving little attention from government housing agencies”.⁷

A moment’s reflection will suggest why no government could readily take over this mode of analysis directly as a basis for policy. To announce, at one extreme, that the housing problem does not exist — after all, even the pavement dwellers have their accustomed locations — would certainly appear excessively callous. To take the other extreme, and announce a government responsibility for the total operations of the real estate market would be too radical for most.

But a more positive view of popular efforts in the field of housing, and a recognition that government cannot, after all, do everything, did come to be incorporated into thinking about housing policy and in one version or another of more interactive kinds of housing programmes.

PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES

The various kinds of housing programmes being carried out in developing countries bring to the fore a set of typical problems which, in many cases, cannot be solved by counting things, but rather require a qualitative approach.

(1) For many years, there have been attempts to lower the cost of housing by having the future owners contribute their labour through various kinds of guided self-help programmes. These have not always worked out as well as hoped, but the very problems of the approach have forced attention to the economics of popular housing, including an attention to such factors as opportunity costs.

(2) Core dwellings and serviced sites have been recently the recommended solution for lowering costs to a level which could serve lower-income groups. These programmes clearly depend on the willingness and capacity of users to invest their own resources to complete the project. Cases where the complementary investments have not been forthcoming — and equally, the cases in which investment has been at a much higher level than that expected — have again made it clear that the success of such programmes depends on understanding the investment decisions of users who are also owner-builders.

(3) Coupling the continuing problem of costs and standards with the continued appearance of irregular, unplanned low-income settlements, agencies came to put emphasis on the value of ‘upgrading projects’ in existing settlements. New sorts of issues came to light in these projects. There were conflicts of

⁴ Angel, S., Stan, B. and DeGoede, K.H., “The Low-income Housing System in Bangkok”, *Ekistics* Vol. 44, No. 261, pp. 78–84, 1977.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

interest between owners and tenants; there were neighbourhood organisations, sometimes hostile to intervention. The problems of upgrading projects turn out to be in many ways more complex than starting from scratch, for they do not lie so much in the area of engineering as in the realm of politics and social organisation.

(4) Another kind of event which has forced us to enlarge our understanding is the recurrent phenomenon of government projects which have failed to develop in the way they were programmed. The most conspicuous examples are government projects in certain countries which have remained unused or been under-utilised. An empty or near-empty project is an embarrassingly conspicuous example of a failure to look at a proposed governmental intervention in its whole market context. But there are examples as well of projects which have fallen into deterioration, through failure to attract residents who would be committed to their upkeep, and there are the reverse instances of projects which have been taken up by higher income people than those for whom they were programmed. Finally, there are instances of projects which have been drastically altered and rebuilt by their residents. We need to understand these processes.

(5) Another phenomenon which has attracted attention is the substantial existence, alongside government urban programmes, of very large informal housing markets. For example, despite the extraordinary efforts of the Egyptian Ministry of Housing, it now appears that 70% of additions to the Egyptian housing stock have been produced by the private/informal sector. Other LDCs present similar situations. To provide the structure of incentives and regulations which can derive maximum social benefit from all this non-governmental activity, we need to understand its functioning. What are the sources of capital? What are the incentives for building? Who does the building? How do materials' markets function?

(6) A final issue which contributes to our broader understanding of housing and urban policy is that of the management of what is already built. While the management of a new development is always an attractive focus for policy, the call to deal with problems in the already-built cities have made it evident that there can be no net gain if we allow housing and services to deteriorate in the existing stock. There are issues around management and maintenance of the existing cities. What factors keep a neighbourhood viable? What makes a neighbourhood secure?

HOUSING AS A PROCESS: INVISIBLE STRUCTURES

One way of thinking about the informational requirements suggested by these issues is to say that they require us to conceive of housing as a *process*. It is a process in which various individuals and institutions continually invest or disinvest, maintain or fail to maintain. The focus is not so much on the housing stock, as on the flows of resources which continuously produce it.

Housing seen 'as a verb', as Turner would have it,⁸ consists of people doing things. It is people building walls, clearing ditches, breaking windows, putting up graffiti, remodelling their kitchens. It is also people setting interest rates, enforcing contracts, putting in sewer lines and paving streets.

Another way of thinking about the informational requirements of the newer approaches to housing is to consider that we need to understand the *invisible structures* which govern the flow of resources into and out of housing and control the way in which people and institutionalised groups use the housing which is produced. These invisible structures are in part legal and official: urban

⁸ Turner, J.F.C., *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process*. Macmillan, New York, 1972.

development plans, the rules of legal tenure, building codes, and the like. In part, they are constituted by unofficial and sometimes quite unformalised arrangements, such as the organisation of building materials suppliers, labour unions, neighbourhood organisations.

THE NEED FOR QUALITATIVE DATA

Information about processes and about the invisible structures is not readily derived from counting things. Of course, we will always need to count things: when we know what to look out for we need to find indicators which enable us, by counting, to know how prevalent a phenomenon is, and we will need to have measures of output and measures of input. But counting is not very useful when we need to get a picture of the way the World works, of the linkages between phenomena.

Planners often fail to recognise that at the bottom they depend on *stories* of how the World works. They need not notice their dependence on stories of how the World works because they take them for granted — until for some reason events prove them wrong, as when it turns out that people enlarge their core house not to make a larger family residence, but so as to rent the rooms to others. To understand the *processes* of housing and the invisible structures which shape those processes we need stories which correctly represent the World out there into which housing programmes intervene. We need, in other words, correct stories about process, about connections, and about the working rules of the housing system or real estate market.

HOW TO DO IT

The way to get such stories is to ask knowledgeable people, that is to say, people who are involved in the processes, who either make or are subject to the rules or 'invisible structures' which one wants to comprehend. This means that in this kind of research, we deal not with 'subjects' or 'respondents' but with *informants*. The interviewer is asking people to tell us about the way things work. They probably will find it most appropriate to tell about what has happened or is happening to them as a way of explaining how things work. Thus this kind of research centres around collecting *stories* of people's experience.

For example, if we want to understand how a sites-and-services project is working out, a qualitative researcher will ask people involved in the project how they came to hear about it, why they decided to get involved, what the difficulties have been, what the alternative courses of action would have been for them. This contrasts with (although should not of course preclude) such alternative research strategies as: collecting data on the social characteristics of participants, and on the rate of building in the project, or surveying participants as to their opinions of the programme. In the kind of qualitative research I am proposing, we will collect social data and opinions, but as it were, by the way; we are most interested in *stories*. The interviewer directs the interview towards the theme of interest, but he or she lets the informant tell the story in his or her own way, and to bring up what he or she sees as relevant to the general issue. The interviewer tries to record what was said — it need not be word for word, but as much as possible with the same general order and emphases.

The process of analysis looks absurdly simple. The researcher takes a set of interviews on a topic and reads them through several times, identifying the major themes, and marking on the margins of the typed interviews where material relevant to these themes appears. The researcher then takes a set of marked

interviews, cuts them up according to themes, arranges the pieces in thematic piles, and writes up a report summarising, with a few quotations, what people had to say about this or that.

The result should be a research report which in some ways resembles good journalism more than it does the traditional report of survey results. It should be problem-focused and interesting to read — not a minor consideration, when one considers the issue of use by policy-makers.

Inevitably, those who present such a report will be asked something like: how do we know these people are typical? Thus, it is important to be clear as to the logic of credibility and of generalisation animating this research process. ‘Typicality’ is not the issue. Remember, these are informants, not respondents, not a sample. The particular experience, the special stories of the informants tell us about how the system works because we know where the informants are placed in the system and their experience of it. We generalise from the particular in much the same way that the historian takes the story of a very particular individual as a way of understanding the politics or social history of his time. In the same way that the historian, according to Barbara Tuchman, uses ‘corroborative detail’ to make historical accounts vivid and believable, it is the richness and imageability of the stories which in the end makes these qualitative stories credible. We then move to generalise as to the approximate frequency of experiences like those of our informants by using *other* data, quantitative data, to estimate how many people are likely to find themselves in the same or similar positions as those people we have interviewed.

WHAT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS GOOD FOR

Qualitative research is particularly useful for understanding issues in which processes and connections are important: institutions, sub-markets, programmes. Some examples of such issues follow.

How programmes work

Every time we try to evaluate public programmes we re-discover the simple but often forgotten fact that between the programme design and the outcome there intervenes a complicated history of institutional evolution; it is silly to evaluate the result of the programme by looking at its outcome when we do not know what the programme really was in practice. About the only way to find this out is by interviewing people involved. A ‘self-help’ building programme, a public housing programme, and an upgrading programme are examples of enterprises which we would like to look at in this way.

Housing markets

The work of Anthony Leeds,⁹ Shlomo Angel,¹⁰ and Tomasz Sudra¹¹ has given us examples of how qualitative research can be used to understand low-income housing markets. All of these researchers have thought of the city as presenting a set of diverse but inter-linked sub-markets of housing, structured by both economic and political forces, within which low-income people move. In part, the sub-markets are physically differentiated and visible to inspection — central-

⁹ Leeds, A., “Housing Settlement Types, Arrangements for Living, Proletarianization and the Social Structure of the City”, *Latin American Urban Research* Vol. 4, pp. 67–99, 1974.

¹⁰ Angel, S., Stan, B. and DeGoede, K.H., *op. cit.*

¹¹ Sudra, T., “Housing as a Support System: a Case Study of Mexico City”, *Architectural Design* Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 222–226, 1976.

city slums, shantytowns, rooming-houses, and the like. But who they serve, how they are controlled, what forces their owners respond to, is probably most easily discovered by interviews.

Subdividing and building

The easiest way to understand how an industry works — the market in which it operates, the kinds of people who are active in it, the interconnections between firms, the difficulties of its operation, its connection to the political process — is through qualitative interviewing. We are just beginning, I think, to understand the usefulness of this approach in the field of low-income housing. We are beginning to get studies of the low-income irregular urbanisation business,¹² as well as the management of squatting. We are also beginning to get studies of the building process. We are learning that people rarely construct in permanent materials exclusively or mainly *via* their own labour (the old misunderstanding of 'self help') although they do have to spend a good deal of time and attention supervising the work of the petty contractors who do the basic construction.¹³ We see that people tend to invest incrementally, in steps or lumps, rather than in a single consumption decision or, as was once thought, brick by brick. We find that the sums involved may be substantial. We do not have good information on where the money comes from. It is surely not banks, and almost surely not informal money-lenders either; personal cash savings, rural land, bonuses and termination payments from employers, transfers from kin, provided for motives which are not well studied, have been found to be of importance.¹⁴ But all this is just at the beginning.

How cities work

Madhu Sarin's study of the 'informal sector' in Chandigarh¹⁵ is developed out of a very strategic use of interview 'stories' of the kind discussed here, and succeeds splendidly in showing the relationship between physical plan and economic functioning. For example, the interview story of an illegal ('squatted') market, exposes elegantly both the locational factors in small-scale vending and the politics of commercial site allocation in the city.

ADVANTAGES AND DIFFICULTIES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research of the kind discussed here is extraordinarily cheap, compared to survey work. It also can be done very fast; if there are researchers ready to work, they can go out and get information on some policy issue in time for the next staff meeting. It is a way of researching which can also be targeted directly on the questions of interest to policy-makers or programme managers; the output may well not be so much a research report, as a programme memorandum.

On the other hand, it has problems, and these are not negligible ones.

In the first place, it looks fuzzy, personalistic, and non-authoritative. There

¹² Doebele, W.A., "The Private Market and Low Income Urbanization: the 'Pirate' Subdivisions of Bogota", *American Journal of Comparative Law* Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 513-564, 1977; Gilbert, A., "Pirates and Invaders: Land Acquisition in Urban Colombia and Venezuela", *World Development* Vol. 9, No. 7, pp. 657-678, 1981.

¹³ Soni, P., "Self Help Planning Construction and Management in a Site and Service Project in Nairobi, Kenya", *Ekistics* No. 266, January/February 1981; Mourad, M., "The Need for a New Approach: Analysis of the Built Environment of Informal Settlements and Public Housing Policy in Egypt" (unpublished thesis), MIT, 1983.

¹⁴ Mourad, M., *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Sarin, M., *Urban Planning in the Third World: a History of Chandigarh*, Mansell, New York, 1982.

are many biases and preconceptions built into surveys, but they are incorporated into the original categories and the way the questions are asked; what comes out at the end may be waved at the meeting as *facts*.

It is not easy to find the right people to do qualitative research. It is relatively easy to train students or social workers to carry out a survey; it is much harder to train people to do work which involves as much interviewer initiative as do qualitative interviews. The interviews not only take more skill and energy input to do; they are many times more laborious to record. (Tape-recording does not solve this problem, but merely defers it to the stage where the interviews are transcribed and analysed.)

Finally, this kind of work may produce political problems which cause the whole enterprise to self-destruct at a fairly early stage. This is especially true when the work focuses on the monitoring or evaluation of programmes. Consider the situation. The person doing the interviewing must be someone without much power or importance in the organisation — otherwise, they will not be either willing or able to do the work. But this person will be collecting stories which deal with problems with the programme from the point of view of its clientèle. It is said that in ancient times the bearer of bad news might be killed; we do not do that nowadays, but we often fire the bearer of bad news, and, in addition, may well terminate the research programme which generated the bad news. Thus the very success of qualitative studies in bringing in new and relevant information may cause the programme to have a short half-life.

In the end, we have to have the Otto Koenigsbergers who are willing to listen.