

## 1.0. Introduction

The definition of the word “housing” as a noun as compared to a verb, as presented by John F. C. Turner in his article, “Housing as a Verb,” explains the difference between two alternate approaches of meeting housing demands the world over where housing is either seen as a product or a process respectively. When housing is seen as a product, then it is also treated like a commodity where all the emphasis is on its physical attributes. On the other hand, when housing is approached as a process, it is an activity, which corresponds to both psychological and physical needs of its inhabitants (Turner, Freedom 151, 152). This definition of housing as a process with both social and material benefits for the community as presented by Turner forms the basis of my research report.

The aim of this research report is to study the alternative to conventional architecture approach where professionals and policymakers make all the decisions for the end-users. Community Architecture<sup>1</sup> is one of the many names that have been given to this alternate approach, which is simply architecture created as a result of the true participation of the concerned community (Wates, Handbook 184). The true participation of the end-users ensures the complete interpretation of their needs and requirements for the future sustainability of the project in addition to empowering and creating a sense of ownership among the people.

---

<sup>1</sup> Community Architecture is discussed in detail in Chapter 4, however, it is important to acknowledge here that even though the term represents a specific movement of 1970s in UK with some defining characteristics (Wates, Community 27), it has been used throughout this report to represent community-based architecture in general.

The origin of Community Architecture can be traced back to the 1960s, when respecting community needs and involvement in decisions concerning their built environment grew out of a reaction to the government led heteronomous approach towards housing (Wates, Community 27), as explained in detail later in this report. Slum Clearance and Urban Renewal measures in both United Kingdom and North America dating back to the 1930s were the practical manifestations of the paternalistic thinking on part of the governments and professionals (Couch 29; Greer 13). The governments and professionals prescribed solutions for the well being of the poor based on what they deemed proper, without involving the concerned individuals. These housing solutions failed miserably in many countries (Greer 18), which propelled the policymakers and professionals to rethink the conventional architectural approach.

There was a shift in the conventional architectural approach starting from the 1960s when communities organized themselves to protest against the governmental policies to demolish their neighborhoods without involving them in these decisions. The professionals joined in these community efforts during the 1970s to develop alternate proposals countering the demolition plans slated by the government authorities for poor neighborhoods. By the 1980s the potential of community participation in the meaningful development of the built environment had been established in several built projects and today it has been recognized as a successful alternative to the conventional top-down approach in architecture in many community-based projects around the world (Wates, Community 22).

Housing constitutes a main part of Community Architecture projects and it does not only involve building of houses but building of communities as well. As architect Ralph Erskine explains in the book, The Scope of Social Architecture, “While architects plan physical structures which communities use, it is the inhabitants who build communities” (Erskine 190). This quotation sums up the intention of my research project. I am interested in exploring the true scope of community-based architecture, which in addition to improving the living conditions of the people can also contribute towards communal and social development. I believe in the concept that architecture created in partnership with the end-users can result in meaningful physical and social benefits, which forms the basis of my interest in Community Architecture.

### **1.1. Research Problem**

Housing projects excluding communities in their making have resulted in disasters as seen time and again. Housing that was produced mostly in the form of high-rise apartment buildings after demolishing poor existing neighborhoods as a part of the Slum Clearance activities of the 1930s in the US and the UK, is a good example of government initiated projects without the involvement of communities (Couch 29; Greer 15) Most of these projects failed miserably in improving the living conditions of their inhabitants and were demolished after a few years in many cases (Couch 35). On the other hand, community-based architecture has proved to be an effective means of achieving physical and social development in many instances as

compared to the conventional architecture approach, however, it does not enjoy universal applicability and still struggles to be included in the architecture curriculum. There are still many countries where the people are either completely excluded or involved superficially in projects planned and designed for them. Moreover, architecture students are taught very little, if at all, about Community Architecture as part of their syllabus.

Several reasons could be attributed to this bias against Community Architecture. The governing agencies and policy makers find Community Architecture as a lavish and time-consuming alternative to the top-down projects (UNDP). Governments also view the Community Architecture approach as a threat to their existence and fear that giving control to people over decisions affecting their built environment may lead to eventual disruption of the power structure. It may be argued that the lack of inclusion of Community Architecture at the institutional level is because it cannot be learnt in schools hypothetically and only through experience, which still does not justify its complete exclusion. Another misconception is that a user intensive approach would undermine the profession of architecture and hence, the role of architects (Hamdi, Housing 42) Whatever the reasons maybe, it is important to clarify all the misconceptions and create awareness about the concept of Community Architecture for it to be propagated and accepted at the government, institutional and professional levels.

The understanding of Community Architecture and its promotion forms the basis of this report and the first step in doing that is to determine the most effective way of communicating and propagating this concept. One obvious approach is to

examine the extensive literature that already exists on the subject. The concept of Community Architecture exists in theory, mostly under different names of community planning, community design, social architecture, and so on, all broadly referring to the same thing, that is, people's participation in design, planning and architecture. Experts and theorists have done a great deal of work in developing the theory of community architecture over the years. Another method for propagating the concept of Community Architecture is by studying successful community-based projects for potential markers and deducing lessons that led to their realization. Nick Wates, a specialist in community based projects, from his book entitled, Community Architecture: How People are Creating Their Own Environment, points out,

The best way to understand how community architecture provides a solution to the seemingly elusive task of creating humane environments is to examine case studies. Just as there is no single identifiable problem, there is no single solution. (70)

The above statement forms the basis of my research project, which is to study the translation of Community Architecture in practice by examining a successful community-based architectural project. I also want to see what benefits have the community been able to draw out of this project as a means to prove its effectiveness in achieving meaningful development. It is important to learn from existing Community Architecture projects by analyzing their process, the roles of various actors involved and the challenges encountered during the course of the project that contribute towards their success or failure. Professionals and policymakers can also

mutually benefit from this: the professionals can learn lessons from best practices while policymakers can understand the value of such projects as compared to the conventional approach towards housing. If professionals and policymakers can see for themselves how community participation in architecture can result in meaningful development, it may be possible to dismiss all the previously mentioned doubts and fears that they may have in their minds. This report is a humble attempt in understanding the concept of Community Architecture and at the end of this report it is aimed to present a comprehensive study of an existing community-based project.

## **1.2. Research Questions**

- I. How was the theory of Community Architecture translated into practice in the case of a chosen community based housing project?
- II. What lessons can be learnt from this practice?
- III. Based on the study, is the practice of Community Architecture a means of achieving satisfactory development?

## **1.3. Methodology**

This research investigates Community Architecture in both theory and practice and retraces its process in the case of a real community-based housing project. The study of the theory and its application in reality was used to deduce lessons about the process and to test the usefulness of community architecture for

achieving satisfactory development. For judging successful development in the case of the chosen project, emphasis was on determining the improvement in the living conditions and personal development of people who participated in the project.

The theory and evolution of Community Architecture in this report has been researched through the existing literature by pioneers and theorists like Charles Abrams, Christopher Alexander, John F. C. Turner, N. J. Habraken, Rod Hackney, Nabeel Hamdi and Nick Wates, among many others. There is a wealth of existing literature on the subject, which was reviewed to understand the concept and relevant terms related to community participation in architecture followed by the historical evolution of Community Architecture in the UK and the US. Since the final case study for this research is geographically situated in Montreal, a historical account of the community based architecture projects in the city have also been researched through literature.

For the practice of Community Architecture, a detailed case study of the process undertaken by a community-based project has been used as an example for answering the research questions. It was decided to base my research on a single community based project for an in-depth study of the process that it followed. Since the aim of this study is to examine the entire process, the main criterion was to find a project, which was either near completion or completed recently. The reason being that the process of a near completion or a recently completed project would be more effectively retraced simply because of its recency as compared to an older project completed a while back. Since the process of community-based projects is relatively long involving several stages, it was decided to select a project in its final phase to get

an overall picture in the limited time period. Once the criteria were determined, the project search began by meeting with professionals and organizations involved in community development. My search ended at a local technical resource group, Groupe Conseil en Développement de l'Habitation (Groupe C.D.H.) where I was able to identify a case study for my research report. The project is a non-profit housing cooperative for low-income families in Montreal called the Zone of Opportunity or simply Z.O.O. It consists of 46 dwelling units and was initiated and developed by a small group of young mothers. Z.O.O. Project had then recently entered the move-in phase in case of some of its apartments and was nearing completion. The second aspect that made the project an attractive choice was the very nature of its community and its active participation through out the project, which will be discussed in detail later on. Finally the connection that Z.O.O. Project shares with the Benny Farm Redevelopment project (discussed in Chapter 5) makes it a project of historical significance in Montreal as well.

All the data for the case study has been collected through interviews and documents acquired from the community members and other actors involved in the project. Each actor was selected for interviews based on his or her role in the project. The personal interviews were designed to determine the role of the actor in the project and a step-by-step account of the development of the project stage in which the actor was involved. Documents, photographs and useful contacts relevant to the project were also obtained from the actors. In the case of the Z.O.O. community, the founding members were interviewed in person to get information about the reasons for initiating the project, their involvement in the project and the challenges faced by

them in different stages. All interviews were candidly carried out to encourage additional information, recorded and transcribed for use in the report. The new members were interviewed over the telephone about the changes this project has brought to their living conditions. The research for the step-by-step development of the chosen project was almost of investigative nature where the information received from individual actors was pieced together to retrace its process and its various stages. Since the project was still under completion at the start of this research, its progress was followed through in order to report its most recent stage.

#### **1.4. Report Outline**

This report has been divided into two parts; the first part presents the theory and evolution of Community Architecture while the second part presents the case study of a real life community-based housing project followed by a final analysis.

**Chapter 1** gives an introduction to the report and states the research problem, questions and methodology.

**Chapter 2** presents the definition of basic concepts and issues related to Community Participation in architecture.

**Chapter 3** presents the changing trends in architecture and the corresponding role of the architects based on a literature review of the existing pioneering works of various theorists.

**Chapter 4** discusses the historical evolution of Community Architecture in the United Kingdom and North America.

**Chapter 5** situates Montreal in the discussion of community-based architecture by presenting an account of relevant projects in the history of the city.

**Chapter 6** retraces and analyses the step-by-step process adopted by the chosen community-based housing project in Montreal.

**Chapter 7** presents the design process, the role of the architects and the architectural details of the chosen project.

**Chapter 8** concludes this report with a final analysis of the results of this research on Community Architecture.