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## **COMMUNITY DESIGN/PARTICIPATION AND THE HOUSING PROCESS: THE CASE OF AN EGYPTIAN CITY, QUSEIR**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Community design as a term embraces community participation, social architecture, and community development. Although the issue of participation has been in vogue since the late sixties, basic disagreements do exist among professionals over what is meant by community participation. Some conceive it as political organization, while others advocate it as a sort of relationship in a decision-making activity. The idea of participation can be traced to preliterate societies. However, it has reemerged as a movement from the growing realization that the mismanagement of the physical environment is a major factor contributing to the social and economic ills of the world and that there are better ways of going about planning and design.

The question that this paper addresses is how people can best participate in the housing process? The reverse question is in fact more important: How can architects and planners best participate in housing processes? To answer these questions the case study of Quseir, an Egyptian city located on the Red Sea Coast 600 Km away from Cairo, is presented. The case study highlights aspects that pertain to community involvement in the proposed action plan, developed by the author, for the historic core of the city. Also, it introduces a community design approach as a framework that delineates new roles architects and planners can play. This approach has been implemented by the author in a housing project within an International Idea Competition launched by the International Union of Architects and the UNESCO in 1998, and won one of the five major prizes. The most important conclusion is that local and personal housing activities should be controlled by local decisions, and that professional roles must be redefined to meet social aspirations of contemporary societies.

### **KEYWORDS**

Community Participation; Community Design; Quseir City; Housing Process; Housing Pedagogy

### **INTRODUCTION**

The idea of participation can be traced to preliterate societies. The concept is not new but merely the rediscovery of an ancient wisdom. That wisdom was lost during the last two centuries of industrialization and rapid urbanization. Thus, according to Sanoff (2000), it has reemerged from the growing realization that the mismanagement of the physical environment is a major factor contributing to the social and economic ills of the world, and that there is a better way of going about development, planning, and design.

During the past four decades there have been considerable movements toward the direct involvement of people in defining their environments. In the early sixties the role of the user was discussed while by the end of the same decade the concept of community participation came in use as a result of increasingly politicized debates. This was also a reflection to paradigm change, especially when talking about things versus relation between things. According to Capra et al. (1992), the reductionism of the old paradigm was reflected in the belief that the dynamics of the whole could be understood from the properties of the parts, but in the new paradigm, the properties of the parts can be understood only from the dynamics of the whole. John Turner affirms this view when he argues that there are no parts at all, what we call a part is a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships.

Corresponding to the preceding views, one can argue that different assumptions of value can provide insights into the understanding of new paradigms. In the old paradigm, the value of housing, for example, is assumed to be in the quantifiable attributes of dwellings, sometimes including their immediate environments. In the

new paradigm, housing values lie in the relationships between the process, the product, the users, and the social and environmental contexts. In the old paradigm, housing has been conceived in terms of what it is, rather than what it does for people and the way in which people interact with the built environment. In this respect, one can assert that by focusing on relationships the new paradigm converts the insoluble problems into encouragingly practical tasks and promising ends.

Community participation acknowledges the importance of user needs, preferences, and behaviors. However, it is paramount to note that it does not assume the ability of the participants to design a physical environment, but their input can simply inform the process. In this respect, Hardie (1990) argues that the designer evaluates the input of those for whom he/she is designing, and therefore seeks out appropriate tools to elicit the information required.

Within the scope of the preceding discussion, this paper bases its argument on the appropriate mean in which community members can be involved in housing and development processes. The main concern is to provide answers for two crucial questions: How can architects and planners best participate in the housing process? And how to achieve a truly participatory process in the face of increasingly complex decisions and diverse populations attempting to communicate their different needs effectively?

The paper introduces the concept and definition of community participation and a brief glossary of participatory processes and techniques based on the recent work of Henry Sanoff. It presents a case study on the city of Quseir, Egypt, in which different forms of community involvement are clarified. Involvement of Quseir community took place while developing the development action plan of the historic core of the city, and through a design project developed for participation in the International Idea Competition, launched by the UIA and the UNESCO, on architecture and eradication of poverty. The paper concludes with an agenda or a framework that delineates the need for new roles architects and planners can play, and their impact on the future housing pedagogy.

#### **WHAT EXACTLY IS COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE HOUSING PROCESS?**

Community participation is based on the belief that good things come from empowered people. According to Sanoff (2000), it has a number of different synonyms such as community planning, community architecture, social architecture, community development, empowerment, and others. This implies that it is an umbrella term and/or a generic concept that covers different forms of decision making by a number of involved parties. It is also based on the recognition that professional knowledge is often inadequate in resolving social problems. Consequently, it represents the addition of moral, ethical, and political contents to planning and architectural practices.

According to Habraken (1986), some advocates of participation define it as a vehicle for user decision making power. The lay person is asked to voice his/her opinion to be heard and to be taken seriously. Sanoff (1988) defines it as the face to face interaction of individuals who share a number of values important to all. He argues that our environments are designed by a few and affect many. People rarely have the opportunity to significantly influence or even modify the form in which they live. It is the only way of taking the needs and values of those who use an environment into consideration. In this respect, one can assert that community participation would have two major effects on culture and society. On the one hand, It increases people trust and confidence in the organization. On the other hand, it provides people with a voice in planning and decision making and thereby improving the overall service delivery system of the profession.

Community participation in housing is of paramount importance. Who decides what for whom is a central issue in housing and urban development Turner and Sanoff affirm that when people are in control of decision about the design, construction, and management of their housing, the process and product will enhance their social well being. Hatch (1985) argues that the most important purpose of participation is not good buildings, but good citizens in a good society. On the same line of thought Alexander (1984) confirms this view when he debates that in a participatory housing process users integrate their values and themselves.

There are several benefits that can be gained from community participation. To users, housing satisfaction would be greatly enhanced and different groups with different environmental values can negotiate critical decisions. To designers, it enriches professional expertise via non-professional aspects of social activity and expands the role designers and planners can play. Most importantly, it allows diversity to occur. In this

respect, Olivgren (1984), comments on the Klostermuren project in Gothenburg, Sweden, the community participation process led all of the houses to be completely different and have different individual characteristics. There is no house like any of the others. All in all the project expresses both individuality and community within the physical environment.

The involvement of community members may take place through a wide range of participatory processes and techniques that are based on the objectives identified by a community group, together with the designers and policy makers. Techniques for community involvement are defined in the following list based on Sanoff (2000):

- Charrette: A process that convenes interest groups in intensive, interactive meetings lasting several days.
- Community Action Planning: A process that empowers communities to design, implement, and manage their own community programs.
- Focus Groups: A structured interview consisting of several individuals, permitting discussion of ideas.
- Group Interaction: A process in which interpersonal techniques are used to facilitate discussion and problem solving.
- Participatory Action Research: An empowerment process that involves participants in research and decision-making.
- Public Forum: An open meeting held by an organization or agency to present information about a project at any time during the process.
- Strategic Planning: A process for developing strategies and action plans to identify and resolve issues.
- Visioning: A process for thinking about how the community should be and finding ways to identify, strengthen, and work toward that end.
- Workshop: A working session to discuss issues in order to reach an understanding of their importance.

What is happening in almost all housing developments in Egypt is opposite to the preceding debate. Thus, one can assert that there is a failure of present housing policies in Egypt to meet the socio cultural needs of local populations. Consequently, the housing produced is becoming a barrier to achieving personal fulfillment and a burden on the economy. This indicates a real need for truly participatory processes and techniques that may help make design more democratic by enabling the community members to be properly involved in shaping their physical environments.

#### **QUSEIR, A TRADITIONAL SETTLEMENT IN A HISTORIC CONTEXT: POTENTIALS AND CONSTRAINTS**

Quseir is a small harbor city on the Red Sea, with a history that goes back to the ancient Egyptian and Roman times, and with a high potential for tourism development. It has flourished during the medieval Islamic rule of Egypt and after till the French occupation of the country. According to the 1996 census, Quseir has a total of 5325 families, and about 25600 inhabitants with an almost equal male-female ratio and with an average family size of 4.8.

Historians described the inhabitants of the city as mostly Arabs with a few Ababdah Bedouin, while Egyptians were entirely absent. Today, a large percentage of the population is comprised of immigrants from Upper Egypt, who work in the phosphate industry. Others from the Luxor and Quena provinces, who seized employment opportunities in tourism business in Hurghada, have moved to settle in Quseir because of its high potential for tourism (Figure 1). About 5.1% of the inhabitants older than 10 years old hold a university degree, 25% illiterates, 37% can read and write, and the remaining 34% are classified as having less than a university degree. Quseir represents a traditional settlement in terms of culture and traditions, since more than 72% of its males older than 18 years and females older than 16 years being married. The city has a very low rate of divorce, less than 5% and about 18% have never been married (Abdel Fattah, 1998 and CAPMAS, 1998).

The city houses a number of attractive historic buildings and heritage sites (Figure 2). It enjoys significant streetscapes and facades. The streets are not only noted for specific architectural features, but also because

the individual facades have retained the best of its traditional appearance, scale and proportions, and visual quality. They are traditional in terms of reflecting the cultural aspects of the region, where similarities are evident in the visual attributes of buildings, both in Quseir and other cities at the Western Coast of Saudi Arabia, especially Jeddah. Streetscape elements together with architectural features form an intrinsic part of the urban fabric including shrines and vistas (Salama, 1996).



Figure (1). The location of Quseir on the Red Sea coast – its relation to other major cities.

Architectural and urban features of the historic core of Quseir are obviously of paramount importance. Evidently, they reflect the impact of Arab culture on the built environment. They also reflect the intelligent use of building materials and the traditional wisdom of dealing with the desert environment. The Cornish represents the city eastern boundary while the Mountains represent the western boundary, forming a poetic atmosphere. Traditionally designed architectural features such as domes, minarets, building corners act as visual cues for people to find localities. There are also buildings that have open ground floor terraces that overlook the outdoor environment. In some buildings, the ground floor level is higher than the street level. Some houses have bent entrances (a bent entrance does not allow pedestrians to see people inside). This may reflect the association with cultural traditions and conventionalities. There is always a balance between solids and voids in houses facades, and an extensive use of ornaments and decorated wood in the treatment of those facades.

The preceding description of the city reveals some of the positive aspects of Quseir, but what about the negative side? When investigating the historic core of the city, it was possible to identify some problems that are obstacles in the face of the new housing developments (Salama, 1997). Over 70% of the buildings in the historic core are in average or bad physical condition, while more than 7% have either partially or entirely collapsed over the last decade. The striking problems are the inadequacy of public services and infrastructure of the city. Private funding for rehabilitation and maintenance is limited, partly because doubts exist over continued tenure of buildings, and also because householders have very limited incomes and rent levels are far too low to allow them afford the upkeep of their properties.

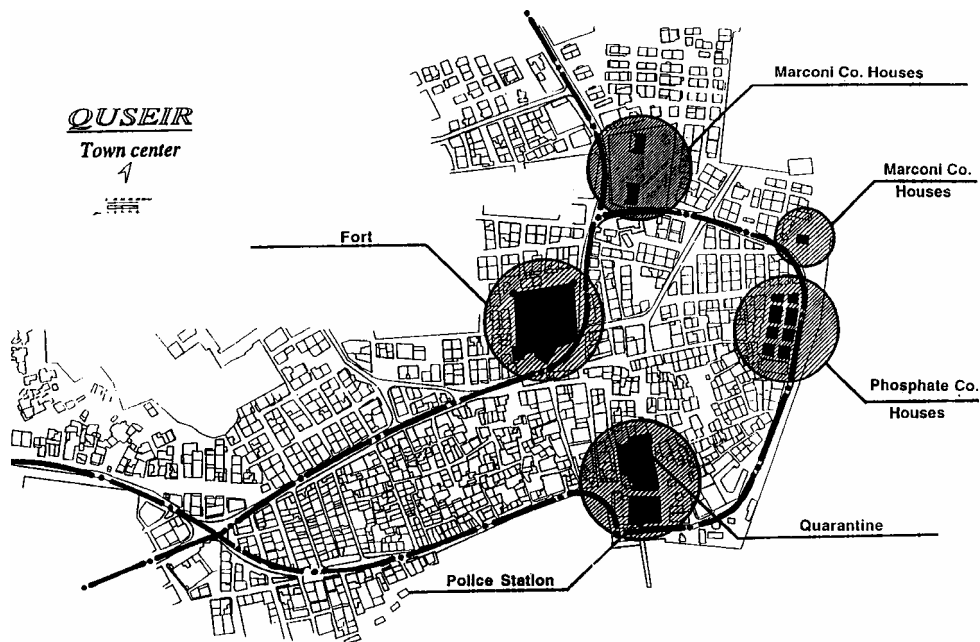


Figure (2). The urban fabric of the historic core and the major heritage sites of Quseir

Another concern is the uncontrolled development arising from the need for more housing to meet the demands of a rise in population numbers. Currently, such development is spreading around the northern and western city limits and in some areas within the historic core. The housing strategy of the governorate and the Ministry of Housing did not prove to be responsible for the social aspirations of the local population. Eventually, more and more traditional houses will be altered or demolished and replaced with modern ugly concrete blocks to meet the housing demands.

#### FORMS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND A DEVELOPMENT ACTION PLAN FOR THE HISTORIC CORE

In the face of the preceding uncertain prospects, an action plan strategy was urgently needed. Funded by the United States Agency for International Development, USAID, the action plan strategy has been developed as part of the Environmentally Sustainable Tourism Project, EST, 1997. The goal of which was to enhance the capabilities of the Egyptian government to develop the expanding tourism industry of the country whilst simultaneously protecting its cultural and natural heritage from decline and continuing to support the local communities. The author was the principal consultant of this activity.

The aim of the action plan is to integrate and coordinate the lifelong sustainable utilization and historic preservation of Quseir, with physical improvements, socioeconomic development, and institutional strengthening required to meet the changing demands, and at the same time, improve the living standards of the local community. Two teams have been involved in the process of obtaining information necessary for developing the action plan.

Forms of community involvement took place by implementing three techniques, visioning focus groups, and strategic planning. The methodology that encompassed these three techniques is outlined below:

- *A Participatory Survey of a Random Sample of Residents:* this was designed to question issues related to the housing and tourism development of Quseir, the reuse of historic buildings and the introduction of more public services. Thirty-five citizens were interviewed and asked to express their opinions and to cite their wishes about the future of their city.
- *A Household-Based Survey of the Historic Core:* this was designed to profile the occupants of houses. Occupants of twenty-six buildings were included in the survey to investigate the conditions of their houses, evaluate the current public services, and assess the willingness and

ability of the local community to participate in the development and beautification of their city.

- *Semi Structured Interviews*: these were designed to get feedback from local government officials, community leaders, business representatives, and city planning officials. Interviews were constructed to determine the interviewees views on the role of the city in tourism, and the infrastructure and public service requirements.

Citing all the results of the preceding three procedures might go beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, the discussion here is limited to the most important ones. Almost every one interviewed believes that an improvement in the basic infrastructure services, sewerage system, and water supply is necessary for the development of Quseir. 80% expressed the need for craft and commercial centers related to tourism, and 75% mentioned that historic buildings should be repaired, preserved, and re-used. The most pressing needs for people of Quseir are housing for young families, language education and training in tourism skills, a well-equipped hospital with specialist medical services, and job creation through the expansion of the fishing industry side by side with tourism development.

Generally speaking, the respondents feel that an action plan should concentrate on Quseir in its entirety rather than concentrate on a small number of buildings in the historic core. For instance, the whole community would benefit from a new decent housing development and green spaces. Although they believe that historic preservation is valuable, they believe that there is little incentive for conservation of traditional buildings because of the complexity of ownership.

All in all, the results testify the high awareness of the local community about the needs of their city, and indicate their willingness to participate in the sustainable development of the city at different levels. Needs, wants and values have been considered while developing the action plan that has envisioned four types of actions. These were 1) housing, conservation, and planning actions, 2) infrastructure actions, 3) public services actions, and 4) institutional strengthening actions, each of which was developed based on the actors and key players, cost, and the development priorities and immediate actions.

#### **IMPLEMENTING A COMMUNITY DESIGN APPROACH: HOUSING AND THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY**

The United Nations has declared the period 1997-2006 to be the world decade for the eradication of poverty. To support this initiative, the International Union of Architects (UIA) together with the UNESCO has organized a series of events and various activities that highlight the role architects and architecture can play that achieves this aim. As part of this effort the UIA launched International Idea Competition open to professional architects and students in two categories. The objective was to propose design ideas that may contribute to the eradication of poverty.

The city of Quseir has been introduced in this competition as a context for the community design approach. The project, developed by the author, won one of the five major prizes of the competition, Paul Chemetove Prize accompanied with special mention.

Poverty has been defined in recent debates as a severe failure of basic capabilities to enable the person to play an active role in society (Sen, 1983). The Human Development Report of UNDP defines it as a lack of choice which people (the poor) can take. Abdel Fattah (1995) argues that the investigation of social qualities which affect the standard of living such as education, health, access to public services, is crucial to developing a deeper definition of poverty. This indicates that the annual income of a person, which is higher than the poverty line is not an issue in itself. That person may be considered poor if he/she does not have a voice to be seriously taken and does not have access to good education, health facilities, water and public services. These are critical aspects that affect human life

The project placed emphasis on the process rather than the product. It has envisioned the physical context of the historic core of the city and elaborated on the social context that allowed for a developing a precise definition for poverty in Quseir. Consequently the features of poverty have been exemplified by inability to attain a minimal standard of living, failure to enable the local population of Quseir to play full and active role in society, the lack of access to education, health, public services, and water, and the lack of freedom. In response to these aspects, the project adopted the theme of social design or community design. Concomitantly, the design process introduced the concept of democracy. Democracy in this sense is

conceived as the belief in freedom and equality between people and a system of decision making based on this belief. It is to structure the design decision making process by involving the local community thereby providing the respect for the individual within the community. Democratizing the design process took place through other form of community involvement, where workshops with community representatives were conducted. These are based on Sanoff's participatory model (1978) that emphasizes community participation via workshops and group decision making sessions. The design process featured the following:

- Conceptualizing and formulating the results of the surveys and interviews conducted while developing the action plan. Appropriate housing and vocational training center were identified, as priority needs.
- Involving people affected by design decisions in the process of making those decisions. In order to democratize the process, two community workshops were conducted in March 1997 with the assistance of four architecture students. Representatives from the local community were given the opportunity to influence design decisions. In the first workshop, eight site-planning schemes were delivered then explained to participants who were asked to select the most preferable one. Other issues that pertain to the house concept were raised. In the second workshop, six house images were presented to participants who were asked to select the house image they prefer. Other issues that pertain to the impact of cultural values on the public face of architecture were also raised.
- Based on the results of the community workshops the design concept was envisaged. It is conceived through enhancing local employment, introducing a new housing development based on a core housing concept, clustering the houses in harmony with the existing urban fabric, using and applying traditional construction techniques where community members can properly be involved in the building process as well.



Figure (3). The winning project (Architecture and the Eradication of Poverty in Quseir) illustrates a community design approach in housing and development processes.



The jury comprised of ten international architects has examined 386 projects. 152 proposals were submitted by professional architects, and the rest by architecture students. The jury commented on the project the following:

*The idea is based on the results of a community survey and workshops, and suggests a housing program conceived with the participation of users. Two types of houses are developed in a convincing growth process and make use of locally available materials, and traditional building techniques.*

*The layout of the proposed clusters is in conformity with the existing urban fabric and results from the participation from groups of families, the future inhabitants. The scheme is highly convincing in several ways mainly because the users form a productive community deeply involved in design decisions and because the architectural expression is highly satisfactory.*

All in all, the project illustrates an approach to community participation in the housing process (Figure 3), and the jury comment reveals the international consensus on the importance of involving people in decision making as one of the means for the eradication of poverty.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR HOUSING PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE: CRITICISM AND AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE**

Community design has been and still is a growing movement all over the world. In recent years it has been recognized as a researchable and teachable subject, and appears as an increasingly important field in university courses, especially in architecture and planning schools. A key issue that will occupy a major concern in the near future is how to incorporate community design aspects into teaching programs of planning and design professionals (Salama, 1997 a, 1998, 1999).

Community design reflects the belief that design experience should develop housing projects through the direct involvement of clients and users. It is proposed to respond to the powerless, the poor, and the underrepresented. It, however, requires dialogue that involves an equal distribution of power amongst different participants. Unfortunately, this dialogue is lacking either in the development of housing policies and strategies, or in the planning and design of new housing projects at both educational and professional levels. Gregory Baum (1977) supports this view and argues that:

*True dialogue takes place only among equals. There is no dialogue across the boundaries between masters and servants, for the master will listen only as long as his power remains intact, and the servant will limit his communication to which he cannot be punished. In fact, to recommend dialogue in a situation of inequality of power is a deceptive ideology of the powerful, who wish to persuade the powerless that harmony and understanding are possible in society without any change in the status of power (Baum, 1977).*

Concomitantly, the author asserts that true dialogue does not exist in housing practices. Although policy makers and planning and design professionals claim that dialogue is important in housing and development processes, they miss the understanding that dialogue requires equal distribution of power between them (the powerful) and the local population (the powerless).

Many architects, in academe and in practice, still insist that architecture is an art and only an art, not a science, technology, or even a business. This view seems to be dominant in architecture schools worldwide. Those who believe in it claim that social concerns are not of an architect problem (Salama, 1995). Unfortunately however, those who believe the opposite and attempt to act as social catalysts with deep involvement in social issues failed to recognize other technical and economic limits. Consequently, This has led that architecture either lost its specificity as a professional discipline or lost its credibility and social responsibility.

Students and young professionals in the developing world, including Egypt, are under social and peer pressures to make good in a world that measures success based on professional status and prestige. Consequently, they want to distinguish themselves from others and demonstrate their creative individuality. Again, this view can be supported when looking at the commentary made by Nabeel Hamdy in his book *Housing without Houses* (1991). He argues that students are taught that innovation in housing is the prerogative of their profession, and they earn their grades for the new, the unfamiliar, the extraordinary,

while the ordinary is suppressed and frowned upon. From experience for many years as a student and then as an educator, one can assert that the main emphasis is on the visual product at the expense of social responsibility. The concern for visible architectural products has caused the proliferation of paper architecture and drawings as products, thereby leading to the suppression of alternative interpretations about the role and meaning of the architecture of housing in a real social context.

The preceding debate reveals crucial issues that are far too serious to be ignored. It poses critical questions about the role of planning and design professionals and the task of their schools. This requires a radical rethinking of what, how, and why of teaching our future professionals. The following is a set of generic recommendations that acts as an agenda or framework for the future of community participation in housing pedagogy and practice:

- We need to shift our attitude away from thinking of how it looks and physical appearance of houses and move toward how it works attitude. This means that the aesthetic concerns of housing as a product should be integrated with the social concerns of housing as a process.
- We need to shift our attitude from thinking of how to develop master plans for housing which rely heavily on static needs, singular prescriptive solutions and consistency over time, and these are fallacies, and move toward strategic planning and dynamic models that are responsive to change and that tolerate spontaneity.
- We need to think of educational programs that deal with systems of habitation that encompass housing as a process and product.
- We need to engage our budding professionals in various cultural settings similar to the ones they will encounter in practice. In this respect, the study of real housing problems in real social contexts will be indispensable.
- We need to simulate the interaction with clients and users in our educational settings, offering our students opportunities to directly interact with real clients and real users.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was, by and large, to answer two basic questions: How can architects and planners best participate in the housing process? And how to achieve a truly participatory process that engages different people attempting to communicate their different needs effectively? To answer these two questions, the paper has introduced the concept and definition of community participation. It has envisioned the participatory process in terms of techniques that involve different types of interaction with people. Quseir, a small traditional settlement in Egypt, has been presented as a case study that illustrates different of community involvement in housing and development processes.

Three techniques for involving the community in the action plan of the city have been applied. These were visioning, focus groups, and strategic planning. Thus, three major procedures have been implemented and exemplified by a participatory survey of a random sample of residents, household-based survey, and semi structured interviews. Two workshops have been presented as a medium for community involvement in design decision making. Representatives of the community were given the opportunity and have input in the design product as part of developing housing scheme for the UIA/UNESCO International Idea Competition on the role of architecture and architects in the eradication of poverty. The case study corroborates the willingness of the local community to be actively involved in the development process of the city and to voice their opinion seriously. It also avows the adoption of the international community to participatory design practices. The most important conclusion is that local and personal housing activities should be controlled by local decisions through the direct involvement of the key players in the development and housing processes, and that professional roles must be redefined to meet social aspirations of local populations.

The paper has envisaged a critical analysis of the shortcomings in dealing with community participation in housing pedagogy and practice, and concluded with an agenda for the future. Such agenda raises issues about the changing attitudes that are needed for developing more responsive housing practices and opens new avenues for further investigations.

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