

Government aided rural housing

Rural improvement programme by anti-malarial division of the Public Health Ministry, Venezuela 1959

Rural development and housing present totally different problems from their urban equivalents; there are, in general, quite different scales of needs and values: in countries with relatively low levels of development, the rural dwelling is much less important in the everyday life of the peasant than the town house is to the industrial or city worker, even if it is a slum. At the simplest levels the peasant's 'house' is little more than a dormitory, store and corral for animals—almost all social activity and most family life takes place outside the house. It is, therefore, easy enough to build an adequate shelter for these simple rural needs from materials at hand and with the simplest tools. The most important fact of all, frequently overlooked by city-bred architects, is that the peasant's property and capital, if he has any, is his land and the condition of it. The city family's only property and only opportunity for material investment, is its house.

Other differences, of kinds of wealth and living standards, of rates of local population increase, of status and of the differences between being the source and terminus of migrations, are all very important too but, if these factors alone are taken into consideration, the rural housing and local environmental development problems will be misunderstood.

In Venezuela, where one of the most interesting programmes is being developed, rural housing was seeded by the consequences and demands of a public health programme and is being consolidated and enlarged as part of a national community development plan. Although Venezuela has had a rich and powerful public housing agency for many years—the Banco Obrero, now one of the most effective institutions of its kind in the hemisphere—this has taken no effective part in the solution of rural housing problems.

Like every country in the region, Venezuela has special and important individual characteristics but, in all its essentials, the rural situation is typical of any countries that are undergoing very rapid urbanization. The 35 : 65 ratio between urban and rural populations has been reversed between 1936 and 1962—in the course of one generation. The population has doubled in the same period—from 3½ to 7 million and is expected to reach 20 million by the end of the century. If, as is likely, virtually all the population growth is concentrated in the towns and the rural population remains numerically static, as it has during the past 25 years, the urban : rural ratio will be around 80 : 20 in 35 years' time, a situation typical of a fairly highly urbanized and industrialized country.

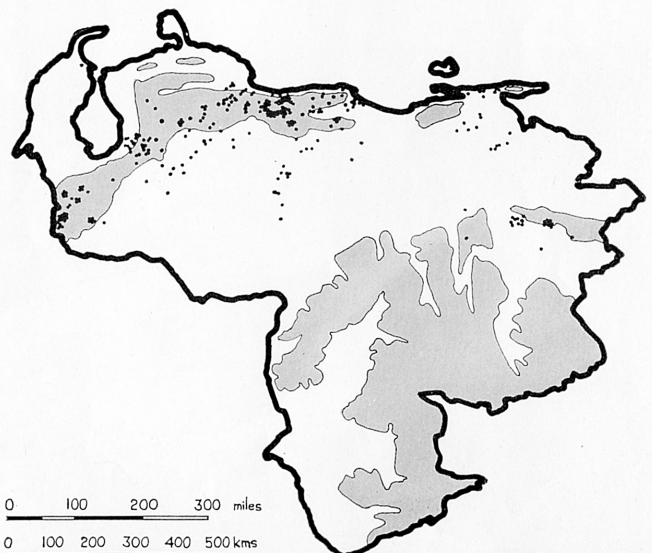
As agricultural productivity is not necessarily proportional to the number of farmers, and over-population of the land can seriously retard

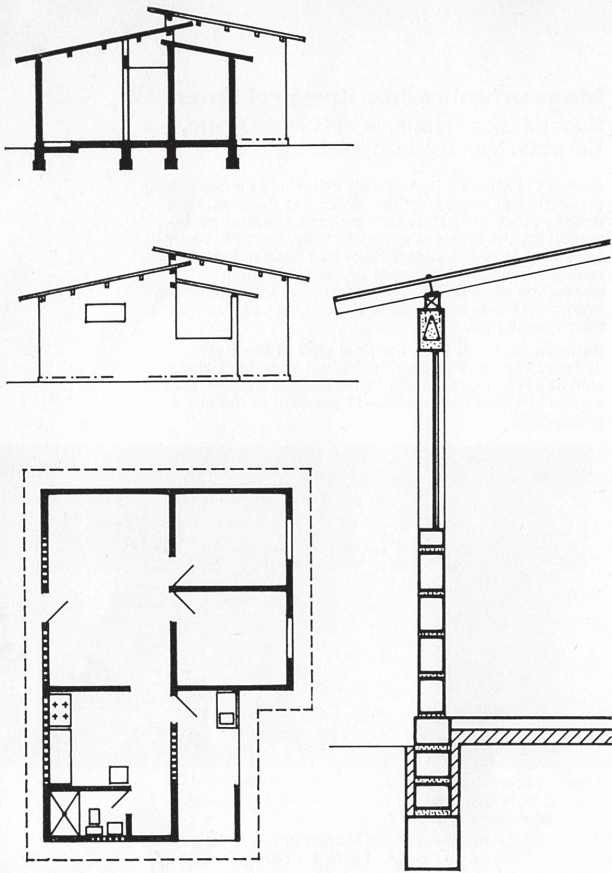
*Above : old and new houses in one of the villages of the programme
All photos Ministerio de Sanidad y Asistencia Social*

Below : map of Venezuela indicating localities where rural improvement programmes have been undertaken. Highland areas are shown shaded

agricultural development and productivity, as Peruvian experience shows, it may be essential for the nation's survival that the surplus rural population emigrates to new rural areas or to the towns. The logical objective of rural improvement, other than agricultural development, is not to retain would-be emigrants but to retain enough potential leaders, from among the most active sons and daughters, by providing them with opportunities equivalent to those offered by the cities. If staying at home to look after the family plot and livestock means condemnation to a low standard of living and a low social status, only the dullest children will remain. And if the nation's food supply depends on great improvements in cultivation and productivity, this is a serious matter.

With the foregoing in mind, the Venezuelan Rural Housing programme is exceptionally interesting. As already mentioned above, it grew out of public health programmes—the eradication of malaria produced a sudden increase in the population and consequently a crisis in housing, among





Above: cross section, elevation and plan of typical house, together with section showing constructional system

Below left: self-help workers engaged in construction of houses

Below right: a general view of a finished scheme

other things; and another endemic disease (chagas) which needed to be controlled, is caused by bugs harboured in thatch and wattle-and-daub structures. Although severely restricted by lack of funds for the first 10 years of its housing work, the anti-malarial division of the Venezuelan Public Health Ministry has done invaluable pioneering work in the housing field. During the past few years, with greatly increased budgets and through the coordination of its plans with those of other agencies, the Division is carrying out an increasingly effective rural housing and improvement programme on a national scale.

The Division's objectives are not those of 'an agency for the construction of houses, but of a training centre for the improvement of living stan-

dards in all aspects'. In the same document from which the above quotation is drawn, the Division goes on to say: '... in contrast with other government agencies' interpretation of the housing problem as a simple material deficit that can be solved by the massive construction of dwellings, the Division of Malariaology sustained that its solution is intimately related to the raising of the cultural levels of the population ...'

The emphasis of the Division's work is on widespread diffusion of technical knowledge by instruction and by example. The Division publishes and circulates an excellent information bulletin, for the public as well as for its own personnel, in which useful technical information and current plans and projects are simply and clearly explained. By the middle of last year, the Division had carried out or was carrying out, projects in over 200 localities in all parts of the country but these are mostly small projects between 20 and 50 units. They act, above all, as catalysts to stimulate demand for higher standards and to demonstrate how these can be achieved. Technically the Division's efforts have been concentrated on the improvement of locally available or easily transported and cheap building materials. Widespread and successful use is made of stabilized earth blocks which the owner-builders can manufacture themselves as, traditionally, they manufacture adobes. Aided self-help methods are, of course, generally employed, mainly in the strictly 'classical' Puerto Rico lines of supplying the owners with materials and instruction so that they can build themselves. This has been modified, to some extent, by the inclusion of credit for the more skilled jobs as it was found that the quality of blocklaying and other specialized operations was deficient and costly when carried out by the owners, both for the agency and for the owners themselves because of the losses of time involved. The most important *labour* contribution is, undoubtedly, as has been found in other circumstances, that of the women and children, and of weekend and holiday community or group work.

The administrative methods employed are aligning themselves with local, traditional practices adapted to suit the new construction techniques employed.

Considerable attention has been, and continues to be paid to design. Encouraged, no doubt, by the biological and sociological bias imposed by working for a public health agency, the Division's architects are developing successful and accepted designs which are revolutionizing the peasant's image of the dwelling and of its value. Success in this direction is proportional to the architect's sympathy with an observation of the peasant's way of living and of the ways in which it can be developed.

No account of local development work in Venezuela would be complete without reference to CORDIPLAN (Central Office for Coordination and Planning). This original and extremely effective office, as Schaedel and Wisdom say in their report on Community Development in Venezuela (1962): '... in its coordinating function operates on a multi-agency switchboard, plugging in those agencies which relate to the planning, execution and funding of the projects'.

CORDIPLAN does not carry out any programmes or projects: it merely ensures that programmes and projects which it is responsible for are carried out through the coordination of existing executive agencies. The Community Development Division, for example, had, by the middle of last year, over 800 projects under way in 243 separate communities in four *pilot* programmes; these included 32 different types of project (the most common are school buildings but also include aqueducts, roads, technical training courses, cooperative credit unions, housing and so on) being financed and carried out by 37 different institutions, both public and private government, municipal and voluntary.

Venezuela is the first Latin American Government to recognize the broad implications of community development as a vehicle for 'democratizing' the country by strengthening local and regional responsibility and hence autonomy.

