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 cemetary 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 Obiero, 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 35 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 Salud y Ayuda Social
Below: map of Venezuela indicating localities where rural improvement programmes have been undertaken. Highland areas are shown shaded
The John Turner Archive:
Government aided rural housing
Dwelling resources in South America, Architectural Design 8, August 1963

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 Schaevel and Wisdom say in their report on Community Development in Venezuela (1960): ‘... 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 180 projects under way in 24 communities.

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.