Learning from informal settlements: provision and incremental construction of housing for the urban poor in Davao City, Philippines

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Abstract: The incremental construction of housing for the urban poor is the main agent of progressive development in developing countries. Low income households in Davao City, Philippines, were classified into five different types from informal to formal housing. The aim of this paper is to explore the incremental construction of different housing types in the course of their development. Fieldwork revealed that the degree of security of tenure was directly related to the stages of incremental construction. For example, a simple dwelling in an informal settlement was upgraded with permanent building materials and standard methods of construction when the inhabitants’ degree of security improved. Over time, the physical condition of the house deteriorated when the inhabitants focused on payment for the land. Eventually, the completion of the house (defined here as a formal structure) coincided with legal ownership of the land. This typical incremental building pattern in informal environments, built by the urban poor, requires detailed understanding in order to provide effective housing interventions, and concomitant policy decisions, which are both appropriate and sustainable in developing countries.

Keywords: Incremental construction; informal settlements; Philippines; self-help housing.

1. Background to the study

This paper maintains that the incremental construction of housing in the lower income sector is the main agent of progressive urban development in developing countries. The link between self-help housing and the progressive development of urban settlements has been acknowledged since the 1960s. Turner (1967), most notably, cultivated appreciation for the unique opportunities that squatter settlements offered the urban poor to build their own housing in stages, as resources permitted. ‘The freedom to shape one’s own environment’, observed by Turner (1968), is how an informal dwelling could begin as a shack and end up as a permanent house occupied by its original settlers or its settlers’
children. Turner’s theories, which emerged from his experience in the squatter settlements of Lima, Peru, were influential world-wide. Relatively direct reflections, for example, were the ‘sites and services’ tactic for supporting and managing self-build housing, and the new policy of in-situ slum upgrading advocated by the World Bank in the 1970s (Pugh, 2000). Despite the further radical shift in housing policy to market oriented approaches to procurement, that was widely evident by the 1980s, Turner’s view towards squatter settlements continues to be influential in the works of recent urban scholars such as Kellet and Napier (1995), Pugh (2000), Payne (2006), and Rahman (2011), among others.

The practice of incremental housing construction (for example, the phases defined by Greene and Rojas, 2008) by the inhabitants of squatter settlements is often overlooked by professional architects and urban planners. But informal architecture such as that found in present-day slums and squatter settlements has always been a feature of urbanising civilisations. ‘Throughout history,’ as Kellet and Napier (1995, p. 8) claim, ‘...the poor have constructed their dwellings around the urban centres of the rich and powerful’. The same urban phenomenon can be observed at present especially in the case of developing countries. However, the difference in today’s scenario is the scale of activity. Following Turner’s influence, Kellet and Napier (1995) examine the relationship between squatter settlements and the qualities of vernacular architecture defined by primary theorists in the field. For instance, squatter settlements, like vernacular environments, are traditionally constructed rather than academically inspired. They respond to local culture and mediate environmental extremes (Rapoport, 1988). This kind of settlement houses the ordinary activities of the common people (Lawrence, 1982). Informal architecture in squatter settlements is also built based on inherited knowledge, collective wisdom, and social experiences which comprise generally accepted norms (Oliver, 1990). Finally, it is characterised as a transitional society in the process of evolving from one mode of production to another (Stea and Turan, 1990).

The theoretical implications of these earlier observations of parallels between squatter settlements and vernacular architecture are made clearer in more recent literature. Vellinga (2006, p. 88) for instance, includes squatter settlements as one of the categories of building that tends to be ignored in the field of vernacular architecture studies. Despite the fact that vernacular architecture still comprises the majority of buildings in the twenty-first century, it remains marginal in the purview of most design professionals and policy makers. Building on the work of the influential interpreter of vernacular, Paul Oliver, Asquith and Vellinga (2006) emphasise the value of learning from traditional knowledge, skill, and expertise to create appropriate and sustainable built environments. Furthermore according to Asquith (2006, p. 129), ‘once the vernacular is seen not as static building form, but as constantly evolving, reacting to changes in the communities that shaped its form, it will become higher on the agenda in architectural education’. In turn, sustainable human settlements can be informed by understanding of the vernacular environment from the perspective of human ecology (Lawrence, 2006). Lawrence (2006), reflecting on his studies of human habitats in the Alpine region of Switzerland, observes that societies can use legislation, behavioural rules, and socially agreed conventions reflected in their practices to ensure sustenance over many generations. Further referring to the translation of sustainable development into policies and practices by Dodds (2000, in Lawrence, 2006), Lawrence (2006) recommends that citizen participation is an integral component in the construction of settlements and one of the basic principles for professional practice.

Citizen participation is critical to house billions of people, which is a great challenge for urban planners and policy makers in the twenty-first century. Like Lawrence, Payne (2006) also places value on citizen participation in his study of initiatives by the urban poor in informal settlements in India and Turkey. He explores how people from different backgrounds have evolved rational and ingenious
solutions to meet their need for shelter. Payne is also influenced by the work of Oliver, Turner, Rapoport, and others engaged in the fields of housing, spatial organisation and the role of communities. For Payne, the ingenuity of the urban poor in providing their own shelter can provide lessons for professionals to address the issues of housing and urban development (Payne, 2006), most especially in developing countries. Furthermore in the study of the vernacular, Rapoport (2006) proposes to move from a natural history stage to a problem-oriented stage. This makes it possible to regard vernacular environments, including spontaneous informal settlements considered in this paper, as a laboratory of the wide range of human responses to various factors affecting their way of living. Housing and settlements for the urban poor in developing countries are affected by government initiatives and other processes such as the responses of the people to an urban policy, or their participation in the implementation of a housing programme. One way of understanding this phenomenon is from the point of view of the vernacular that motivates a dynamic and detailed understanding of the changing characteristics of informal settlements which remain an urban reality in the twenty-first century.

With its roots in the early works of Abrams (1964) and Turner (1968), the study of self-help provision and incremental construction of urban poor housing in informal settlements enjoyed a renewal in the work of later urban scholars including Payne in Delhi, India and Ankara, Turkey, in the 1970s (Payne, 2006), and Kellet in Santa Maria, Colombia, in the 1990s (Kellet, 1999; 2005). Now in the early twenty-first century, informal settlements are better recognised as a dynamic urban phenomenon that is important to understand as developing countries strive for sustainability, not least in the construction and operation of the built environment. Pugh (2000), for example, emphasises the resource and labour efficiency in the production of informal architecture in squatter settlements. Moreover, Rahman (2011, p. 144) argues that self-built incremental in-situ upgrading of informal settlements is ‘a form of affordable and hence sustainable housing for the low-income groups in the developing countries’.

Informal settlements in general share the same characteristics. Primarily, they are independently conceived and constructed by the occupants themselves. Secondly, occupation and construction activities take place simultaneously. Finally, such settlements are ‘in a process of dynamic change and demonstrate considerable ingenuity and creativity within limited resource constraints’ (Kellet, 2005, p. 22). To build on these observations and findings, this housing construction pattern in informal environments requires detailed understanding in order to provide effective housing interventions, and concomitant policy decisions, which are more appropriate and sustainable in developing countries.

2. Aims and objectives

This paper argues that the transition to formal architecture coincides with the legalisation of land tenure and improvements to sites and services. This argument is informed by a pilot study of one informal settlement in Davao City, Philippines, which was undergoing transition towards a more formal status (Malaque III, 2013). A subsequent study of 74 households in 11 settlements, in the same city, revealed that urban households can be classified into different types in a range of contiguous categories from informal to formal housing. Within the range of different housing categories, it was also observed how householders moved from one type to another until they became owners of formal housing (Malaque III et al., 2014). This multi-step transition process tended to happen in two ways. Firstly, an inhabitant moved from one housing ‘step’ to another in a different location. This trend is similar to the multi-step transition model defined by Lim (1987). This is an established paradigm whereby a household undergoes a multi-step transition through different housing submarkets (specifically in different locations) to improve their quality of life and shelter. Secondly, an informal housing unit in a progressive urban
settlement was upgraded to become a formal housing unit in the same location. This trend, also a form of the multi-step transition process, enables the inhabitants and their children to progress towards formal housing and secure tenure in the same location. This phenomenon is more reflective of the culture found in in-situ progressive urban development. Thus, the incremental construction of urban poor housing and its increasing formalisation in-situ merits further exploration.

The aim of this paper, then, is to explore the incremental construction of different housing types in the course of their development. Specifically, it will present the five different housing types identified in the previous paper (Malaque III et al., 2014); investigate the construction of housing units over the course of their development; and, discuss the incremental status of housing units in relation to the formalisation of land tenure and improvements to sites and services. This physical phenomenon is analysed and discussed in relation to various government programmes, NGO assistance, and self-help initiatives by the inhabitants themselves.

3. The study area

This study was conducted in the progressive city of Davao, Philippines, located a thousand kilometres south of Manila. The Philippine population reported by the National Statistics Office (NSO) (2012) was 92.34 million in 2010 with an annual growth rate of 1.90 per cent. In the case of Davao City, the NSO (2012) reports that of the 33 highly urbanised cities in the country, it is the only city outside the National Capital Region that has a population of more than one million. In 2012, Davao City’s total population was 1.45 million. Like other major cities in the country, it has experienced significant immigration of impoverished people who have settled in precarious informal settlements. Typically, then, housing provision is one of the major issues in local urban development. In an attempt to solve the housing problems, there are some government programmes and NGO assistance aimed to provide shelter for the urban poor (Malaque III et al., 2006). Despite these initiatives from the government and NGOs, urban poor housing in Davao City demands further attention because of the scale of the phenomenon and the observable characteristics of progressive development in-situ.

4. Methodology

Data collection was conducted in accordance with fieldwork protocols approved by The University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee (January 2014). Extensive fieldwork was conducted from February to April 2014, accessing a total of 74 household cases in 11 settlements. As discussed more thoroughly in a previous paper (Malaque III et al., 2014), the selection of settlements and representative household cases reflected a balancing of recommendations from both government housing agencies and NGOs, who also coordinated access to study areas. Selected cases therefore include recipients of assistance through government housing programmes as well as from NGOs, and cases of self-help housing as well as progressive settlement. Hypothetically, these also cover a range of different housing types from informal to formal. Finally, the selection of study sites was also mediated by their accessibility for fieldwork where safety and security could be ensured. Household names presented in this paper were used with the formal consent of the survey participants. In the classification of 74 household cases, a method of hierarchical cluster analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software was used. Multiple variables indicating the formality of housing structure, and legality of land occupation and completeness of sites and services were applied in the classification. As a preliminary result, five different housing types were identified (see Table 1). Upon further qualitative data analysis, it was
observed that these five different housing types are in contiguous categories from informal to formal housing, which are briefly described in Section 5 of this paper.

This paper explores the incremental construction of a representative sub-set of 16 of the 74 household cases examined in the larger research project. The 16 housing cases presented in Table 1 were selected from progressive urban settlements to represent the range of respective housing types identified in the previous paper. The data informing the analysis was derived from the physical documentation of housing ‘steps’ and interviews by the first author with householders. Qualitative variables to indicate self-help provision of living spaces and incremental construction of housing were cross-tabulated with the coded housing cases. Significant findings were based on the pattern of commonalities exhibited in the table, which is supported with physical documentation recorded through photographs and sketches. Results were validated with qualitative information from key informants in government housing agencies and NGOs pertaining to various housing programmes and assistance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case number</th>
<th>Household name</th>
<th>Settlement location</th>
<th>Housing type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D36</td>
<td>Domingo</td>
<td>Matina Aplaya Shanghai Village</td>
<td>Type I – ‘formal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D42</td>
<td>Rafales</td>
<td>Matina Aplaya Shanghai Village</td>
<td>Type I – ‘formal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E43</td>
<td>Amad</td>
<td>Toril II settlement</td>
<td>Type II – ‘almost formal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F53</td>
<td>Sereno</td>
<td>Piapi I settlement</td>
<td>Type II – ‘almost formal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D40</td>
<td>Nacorda</td>
<td>Matina Aplaya Shanghai Village</td>
<td>Type III – ‘semi-formal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F47</td>
<td>Albios</td>
<td>Piapi I settlement</td>
<td>Type III – ‘semi-formal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F50</td>
<td>Linasa</td>
<td>Piapi I settlement</td>
<td>Type III – ‘semi-formal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F54</td>
<td>Talin</td>
<td>Piapi I settlement</td>
<td>Type III – ‘semi-formal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A01</td>
<td>Abarquez</td>
<td>Arroyo Compound</td>
<td>Type IV – ‘in-transition informal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A02</td>
<td>Agan</td>
<td>Arroyo Compound</td>
<td>Type IV – ‘in-transition informal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A03</td>
<td>Albos</td>
<td>Arroyo Compound</td>
<td>Type IV – ‘in-transition informal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B27</td>
<td>Rabara</td>
<td>Kobbler settlement</td>
<td>Type IV – ‘in-transition informal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B30</td>
<td>Wagas</td>
<td>Kobbler settlement</td>
<td>Type IV – ‘in-transition informal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C31</td>
<td>Abellana</td>
<td>Peace Avenue settlement</td>
<td>Type IV – ‘in-transition informal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A19</td>
<td>Truya</td>
<td>Arroyo Compound</td>
<td>Type V – ‘informal’ housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B24</td>
<td>Lamanilao</td>
<td>Kobbler settlement</td>
<td>Type V – ‘informal’ housing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Results

This section briefly describes the five different housing types identified in the previous paper (Malaque et al., 2014). Furthermore, this section presents the selected housing cases which represent the respective housing types as the focus of this paper for analysis and discussion on the phenomenon of self-help provision and incremental construction of urban poor housing.

5.1. Type I - ‘formal’ housing

Type I housing is described as having secure land tenure, built in accordance with the building code. This type is usually delivered as completed single-detached housing units by the government and private developers. However, this type also includes dwellings that have undergone a transition from less formal types located in progressive urban settlements. Contrary to the more typical cases of completed housing units (which is the usual response to perceived housing crises by the authorities), the cases
included in this paper were initiated and developed incrementally by the inhabitants (from informal housing units to formal ones over time). For example, in the case of the Domingo house in Matina Aplaya Shanghai Village, the initial dwelling comprised approximately 40 square metres of floor area for a basic living space, a dining room, kitchen, toilet and bath, and two bedrooms. Later, an additional bedroom was added increasing the total floor area to 60 square metres (current at the time of the fieldwork in 2014). In terms of its incremental construction, the initial dwelling unit was made of discarded timber and light-weight building materials. During the course of development, cement was poured for the ground floor, and a concrete structure and galvanized iron sheet roofing was used to construct the additional rooms. The Domingo family secured legal tenure during the transition process as a beneficiary of the Community Mortgage Programme (CMP).

5.2. Type II - ‘almost formal’ housing

Type II housing may be described as having secure land tenure. However, it was observed that the houses needed further improvements to comply with the building code. This type includes dwellings that have undergone transition from informal housing units; they are described as ‘almost formal’. For example, in the case of the Amad house in Toril II settlement (Figure 1.c), the initial floor area comprised 20 square metres with combined living and dining areas. The same space served as a sleeping area at night time. Eventually, the house was doubled to include separate living and dining areas, a kitchen, toilet and bath, and two bedrooms. A neighbourhood variety store was also included in this upgraded dwelling. When the Amad family first moved into the settlement, their house was primarily constructed of coconut-tree timber mixed with hardwood for the structure, and galvanised iron roof sheets. As a result of deterioration, temporary building materials were incrementally replaced with concrete and other more permanent materials. In addition, the living spaces were increased. The Amad family was a beneficiary of a slum upgrading programme funded by the national government, which is implemented through the National Housing Authority (NHA) that secured their tenure of the residential lot.

Figure 1: The Truya house, a Type V - ‘informal’ housing (a); Albos house, a Type IV - ‘in-transition informal’ housing (b); and, Amad house, a Type II - ‘almost formal’ housing (c).

5.3. Type III - ‘semi-formal’ housing

In the case of Type III housing, there was no compliance with the building code. A certain degree of secure land tenure was recorded. Most houses in this category had become dilapidated over time. For example, in the case of the Nacorda house in Matina Aplaya Shanghai Village, the dwelling unit was initially a simple shack comprising a bedroom. Since the late 1980s, basic spaces were added including a living room, a dining area, a kitchen, toilet and bath. Two bedrooms are added with the help of the community of homeowners and personal initiative. At the time of the fieldwork in 2014, the house had a
total floor area of at least 60 square metres. The initial dwelling unit was built like a tent made of hardwood, coconut tree timber, bamboo, and other light-weight building materials. With the addition of more rooms, more permanent building materials such as concrete hollow block and plywood were installed. The household head of the Nacorda family claimed that they were beneficiaries of a land tenure assistance programme known as the CMP. They were in the process of paying for the land.

5.4. Type IV - ‘in-transition informal’ housing

Type IV housing is mostly incomplete and is described, here, as informal. The fieldwork revealed that the inhabitants were in the process of upgrading their dwelling. The householders were also organising themselves to negotiate the purchase of land from legal land owners, or to seek government assistance, or assistance from NGOs. There are cases which may have minimal assistance from the government but receive assistance from an NGO. For example, in the case of the Albos house in Arroyo Compound (Figure 1.b), the NGO was the main agency which initially provided a 60 square metre lot. Consequently, the informal dwelling unit was self-built by the inhabitants. The basic living spaces currently occupy the entire lot. The householder applied for a minimal loan from the NGO for the construction of the dwelling unit. The institutional support from an NGO motivated the inhabitant to invest in permanent building materials. These were used for the construction of their informal dwelling unit. This is evident in the case of the Albos house where permanent building materials, such as concrete, were already used in the construction of some parts of the house (Figure 1.b).

Another group of Type IV housing was located in informal settlements with inhabitants who were beneficiaries of government assistance for land tenure. The houses may appear physically informal but it was noted that the government was in the process of implementing a programme similar to the CMP known as the Land Tenure Assistance Programme (LTAP). This programme was either implemented on the same site where an informal settlement was formed (in-situ), or on another new site (elsewhere) developed for an association of urban poor beneficiaries. An example of an in-situ LTAP beneficiary was the Abellana family in the Peace Avenue settlement. When their settlement was informal, the house began as a traditional hut made of light-weight building materials such as wood and bamboo. Despite this informality, the dwelling covered over 100 square metres and included all required living spaces. Eventually when the inhabitant applied to the government programme in 2004, the house was refurbished with concrete and galvanised iron sheet roofing. Despite this description given by the respondent, the fieldwork revealed that the same housing condition was evident. According to the head of the Abellana family, when the interview was conducted, they were still in the process of paying for the land.

5.5. Type V - ‘informal’ housing

Type V housing is described as informal, the land occupation is illegal and the site lacks services. In addition, it was apparent that houses were self-built by the inhabitants and they did not comply with the minimum standards of the building code. For example, in the case of the Truya house in Arroyo Compound (Figure 1.a), the dwelling unit started as core house including a toilet and bath with a floor area of 12 square metres. Eventually, basic spaces comprising living, dining, kitchen, toilet and bath, and bedroom are added covering an area of 35 square metres at the time of fieldwork in 2014. Initially, the dwelling unit was made of light-weight building materials including thatched palm roofing. In the incremental construction of the house, the ground floor was roughly poured with concrete, the walls
were replaced with wooden frames and plywood, and the roof was replaced with galvanised iron sheets. The present housing condition is shown in Figure 1.a. It was further noted from the personal interview that this informal household did not benefit from assistance from either the government or an NGO.

6. Analysis and discussion

The incremental construction of houses in low-income settlements observed here offers evidence of progressive self-help provision of living spaces. The physical documentation of the dwellings conducted during the fieldwork, together with interviews of the householders, demonstrate the different types of incremental construction evident in Davao City. It was observed that the incremental housing construction accommodated the growing needs of the inhabitants and that this was specifically influenced by the degree of security of tenure. Typically, a housing unit was initially made of light-weight building materials. Unless there was an indication of formal land tenure (with assistance from either the government or an NGO), the housing unit remained temporary in nature, evident in the Type V - ‘informal’ housing cases. On the other hand, the house may be upgraded using more permanent building materials and standardised construction methods when the inhabitant gains a certain degree of security. This is the point in the course of development that an informal housing unit is in transition towards a more formal status, demonstrated in the Type IV - ‘in-transition informal’ housing. The housing units of this type may appear informal but a certain degree of security gained by the inhabitants motivated them to invest in the physical improvement of their home. This is exemplified in the case of the Albos (Figure 1.b) and Agan houses in the Arroyo Compound. The institutional support from an NGO motivated the inhabitants to invest in permanent building materials to improve their informal dwelling. In the same way, a government programme such as LTAP influenced the inhabitants of the same housing type to invest in more permanent building materials. Other than the recent LTAP initiative, other active government land tenure assistance programmes include the CMP, conceptualised in the mid-1980s, and slum upgrading and sites and services which have their roots in the 1970s to early 1980s.

![Figure 2: Google Maps satellite photo of Piapi I settlement (a); and, the Linasa housing case (b).](image)

Examination of the progressive development of housing and settlements, revealed that the house deteriorated contributing to the slum condition of the settlement, demonstrated in the cases of Type III - ‘semi-formal’ housing. This case is mostly observed in settlements like Piapi I and Matina Aplaya Shanghai Village where residents are beneficiaries of government land tenure assistance programmes. As in the case of the Linasa house located in Piapi I (Figure 2), this example appears to be deteriorating due to the limited financial capability of the inhabitant. The Linasa family like other settlers in Piapi I who were beneficiaries of a sites and services programme, focused on the payment for the land and attainment of legal titles, not on further construction or building improvements. However, as soon as
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legal land ownership was attained, observed in many cases of Type II and Type I, the inhabitant was able to refurbish his house incrementally until it became a permanent structure compliant with the building code. This is how the Sereno house in Piapi I settlement and the Amad house (Figure 1.c) in Toril II settlement (Type II housing units) progressively attained an ‘almost formal’ status. Apart from these cases, this is the same way the Domingo and Rafales houses in Matina Aplaya Shanghai Village (Type I housing units) have achieved formal status.

The phases of incremental construction began with access to land, followed by the construction of a basic nucleus, and the incremental improvement of dwelling units (Greene and Rojas, 2008). Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the incremental construction of low income housing is being influenced by the degree of security of tenure and various initiatives to achieve legal land ownership. This exemplifies Payne’s (2001) claim that there is a continuum of tenure categories that range in different levels of security, which means that a pavement dweller that initially has no security will undergo a series of tenure categories to become a freehold owner as the ultimate legal tenure category. In other words, the series of contiguous tenure categories is reflected in the progressive nature of low income housing, which is physically evident in the incremental construction of houses, as observed in this study.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that housing as a material expression of the status of the urban poor in progressive settlements reflects the socio-political process of legal land ownership that defines the security of tenure. The incremental construction of low-income housing started when the urban poor chose to live in informal settlements. Despite the precarious conditions, the inhabitants of informal housing units speculate that they can formalize land ownership. In the process, legal land ownership is achieved in part from government assistance for land tenure which leads to the completion of construction, when the dwelling becomes permanent and legal. In addition to assistance for land tenure, policy makers might consider this incremental construction process in the formulation of strategic housing solutions which offer an alternative to the traditional one-step regularization model that has rarely proved to be successful in developing countries. The early stages of this incremental construction process, discussed here, may seem disordered, especially when the inhabitants were in the process of paying for the land to achieve legal ownership. However, this incremental process offers valuable lessons for urban planners, architects and policy makers who must consider interventions that are best suited to progressive settlements as an alternative to traditional approaches such as slum clearance and demolition and the one-step regularization model. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer detailed recommendations for housing policy. However, this examination of the incremental construction of housing offers important lessons about effective and sustainable housing interventions which are better suited to developing countries and the well-being of the urban poor.

References


