REBIRTH OF A RAJPUT VILLAGE

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Housing the homeless after disasters frequently demonstrates external and state architectural intervention in a vernacular tradition. Often, as in Gediz, Turkey, this results in culturally inappropriate house design and may incur settlement relocation. Indigenous capacities to recover and rebuild are frequently overlooked. The self-regeneration of Jubbo, a Rajput village in the Pakistan Punjab, demonstrates this ability to recover and rebuild. This article compares the results of a post-disaster study of Jubbo with a study made shortly before the village was destroyed in a flood. It concludes by indicating where external assistance rather than intervention could be most beneficial.

As a concept, the notion of “Development” as a process of transition from a predominantly peasant economy to an industrialized one is of relatively recent date. The process of industrialization has been one which has taken place at intermittent rates, and in a wide variety of cultural contexts, for the last two centuries. Such processes, whether under colonial rule or in the post-colonial period of independence of nations, have sometimes had unexpected consequences. So, for instance, India, often regarded as the epitome of a vast country with a peasant economy, is in fact the tenth largest industrialized country in the world. Economic development marked by growth in per-capita income was experienced by a number of the newly independent countries in the post-World War II years. Bolstered by the support of countries with advanced technologies in the power blocks of both the East and West, the newly “developing countries” nevertheless encountered many complex problems as they became increasingly dependent on the International Monetary Fund, and the “aid” of the major powers.

In the 1970s the definition of development shifted from an emphasis on income per head to the elimination of poverty and unemployment. In the struggle to reduce poverty and inequality, and to provide basic services, loans from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development—the World Bank—were used to support the supply of water, improve sanitation, and upgrade housing, among other applications. The World Bank, essentially administered by the wealthy nations, imposed and still imposes its conditions on the projects it finances and, in effect, intervenes to ensure that they are met. While there may be good economic reasons for doing so, external intervention has become a commonplace of development. It has meant the frequent, if often misguided, involvement of planners and architects from “advanced nations” in housing, resettlement projects, and disaster relief.

Just when the term “intervention” entered the language of development is uncertain—perhaps in the late 1970s or early ’80s. It is always instructive to ascertain what the terms we use actually mean. “Intervention” derives both from the Latin inter and venire, literally “to come between,” while the Concise Oxford Dictionary definition runs, “Come in as something extraneous; occur in the meantime; (of person or thing) come between, interfere, so as to prevent or modify result, etc.” Somehow the term has acquired benign associations in the decade or so of its currency, but the dictionary definition is a salutary reminder of the intrusive nature of architectural design intervention in development contexts.

Among the diverse situations in which such architectural intervention occurs, the most dramatic, most immediate, and most widely sanctioned is that of post-disaster housing. Some forms of slow-onset disaster, such as desertification, drought and famine, do not have immediate housing implications—though in the long-term migration as a result of such disasters, as in Ethiopia and the Sudan, may lead to resettlement problems. Impact and rapid-onset disasters, such as earthquakes, avalanches, hurricanes and floods, may create considerable housing problems, as the recent massive earthquakes in Armenia and Gilan Province, Iran, or the recurrent floods in Bangladesh have tragically emphasized.

Immediate responses to housing needs in disasters like these may include the dispatch of tents or polythene sheeting for temporary shelter. It has become a standard exercise in schools of architecture to “design an emergency shelter,” and in 1990 the International Union of Architects (UIA/IUA) proposed an international competition for the design of such temporary prefabricated or rapidly assembled units, which could be flown in immediately after a disaster occurs. To architects this seems a desirable demonstration of their potential to contribute to the solution of world problems, and they have been displeased when they have encountered objections, including those of the Disasters Management Centre at Oxford Polytechnic. All the issues cannot be dealt with here; suffice it to say that temporary shelters always become permanent ones, and that since they are designed for short-term use, they rapidly deteriorate, exacerbating housing difficulties. In cases where they have been designed for long-term use, the very nature of mass solutions capable of being delivered rapidly to any notional place on the earth militates against their appropriateness to any specific geographical or cultural context.

In a previous paper I discussed in some detail the damaging effects of housing and settlement design by absentee architects which does not take into consideration the sociocultural requirements of the communities for which they were built. An extended study was made of post-disaster housing in Kutahya Province, Turkey, where a major earthquake in the Gediz region in 1970 had resulted in the destruction or serious damage of two towns and more than 300 villages. Although the country’s resources were stretched to achieve it, new houses were provided for those who had lost their homes. Many of these were prefabricated; others built to the same standardized design by local builders. The basic provision of a living room, two bedrooms, kitchen, shower and toilet was, in view of the numbers involved, generous. Yet, a dozen years after the earthquake many state houses stood empty; others were virtually unrecognizable.

The reasons why the state-provided houses were inappropriate, and in some cases totally unacceptable to the stricken communities, are complex. However, I will attempt to summarize a few of the more significant of them, perhaps the most important being the fact that the house type was designed to accommodate the nuclear family of two parents and two children—the type of family that was familiar to the state architects of Ankara. The extended families of the Gediz region were accustomed to living in large, two-storied houses which could each accommodate a score of people on the upper floor and their animals below. Either an extended family had to live in acute discomfort in one of the new one-story houses, or they had to split up in randomly selected dwellings and live in the unfamiliar fashion of the urban nuclear family.

But the problems were much more far reaching; the intimacy of congested living affronted local values. Turkey has been officially a secular state since 1924, but the people of the Gediz region are observing Muslims and place a high premium on privacy. The new houses provided no saLon or reception space (the living room was invariably used for sleeping), while the
women had no room where the could withdraw. Settlement patterns that did not take advantage of site or solar gain, houses for agricultural peasants that were placed in suburban proximity and allowed no room for animals or stores, windows in dwellings that overlooked those of other houses, concrete floors that were too cold for sitting on, and a multitude of other design faults at the macro- and micro-scale had a cumulative effect which caused great discontent. For some, the state houses were so unsuitable that they rejected them altogether, and rows of them were standing idle and empty a dozen years after they were built. For others, as impoverished peasants, the provision of any kind of house alleviated some of their post-disaster misery. As time and the finding of scrap materials permitted, they added crude extensions to the dwellings, making them culturally more acceptable, but greatly increasing their vulnerability to any further seismic shocks.

Well-intentioned and in many ways admirable though the post-disaster housing provision may have been, it largely failed because the architect-engineers had their own design program and paid no attention to the cultural values of the victims of the earthquake. Theirs was an intervention that sadly met the dictionary definition: they “came in as something extraneous” and interfered with the close relationship between a peasant society and its dwelling, preventing the desired result of achieving culturally appropriate post-disaster housing.¹

Intervention of the kind exemplified by the Gediz case is predicated on the belief that the victims of a disaster should be provided with housing as they may be provided with medicines, blankets or food. But First World housing is largely based on the concept of the dwelling as consumer product and marketable commodity; the separation of owner and builder is assumed. Consequently, designers with this background are confident that mass housing which meets the physical needs of the members of any community can be designed by the pragmatic synthesis of the available site, practical structural considerations, internal space minima, provision of basic utilities, cost of materials and labor, and the meeting of legal requirements. From such a position the cultural dimension is of no significance, and the intended owners of the building play no part in its design or construction.²

So extensive has this mode of intervention been that little attention has been paid to the capacity of stricken communities to cope with their own recovery or to rebuild after a disaster. In particular, the motivation to invest in new building the values of the pre-disaster tradition has been virtually ignored. An opportunity to make such a study presented itself in 1989 when I was in Pakistan. I had been invited by the faculty of the School of Architecture of the National College of Arts in Lahore to present a series of lecture-seminars on the Anthropology of Architecture. After principles, theories and methodologies had been examined in some detail, it was clearly necessary that fieldwork should follow. Members of the group had knowledge of a number of villages which were considered for detailed study. Among them, Assistant Professor Yasmin Cheema mentioned a village of considerable interest, Jubbo, some ten miles beyond the city limits of Lahore, which had been the subject of a study she had conducted with a staff team the previous year. Unfortunately, the village had been totally destroyed by the flood waters of the Ravi River the following September. “What happened to the inhabitants?” I asked. No one knew, but presumably they had been absorbed into the city or rehoused. I had a hunch, however, after learning more about the village that the site would be well worth revisiting. Preliminary reconnaissance revealed that, indeed, the villagers were still there. We decided to study the post-disaster recovery of Jubbo.³

JUBBO, A RAJPUT VILLAGE

Jubbo was a Rajput village. Innocuous though the phrase may be, it is by no means easy to explain. The Rajputs are a proud people who are distributed across northern and central India and Pakistan, from Rajputana to Bihar state. Their name, Raj-put, means “son of a Raja,” indicating a superior caste status. Traditionally, Rajput males were soldiers or merchants; they had a distaste for manual work, and those that were high-caste farmers were considered by the British during the long years of the British Raj to be intelligent but idle and poor at husbandry. They were frequently compared unfavorably with the industrious Jats, another and frequently contiguous high caste who were, and are, dedicated farmers. Today the Rajputs are not tied to one religion; there are Muslim, Hindu and Jain Rajputs, and they are so numerous as often to be regarded as a distinct tribe.

Some two million Rajputs lived in the former British administrative region of Punjab, which extended beyond its present limits. Known as “The Land of the Five Rivers,” this fertile alluvial plain is watered by the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej Rivers, which have their headwaters in Kashmir, Kangra, and the hill states on the slopes of the Himalayas (FIG. D). Further to the southwest a web of canals built by the British increased the potential of farmlands to sustain densities of up to a thousand people to the square mile.⁴ When the partition of India and Pakistan came
following independence and the subsequent civil war, the frontier between the two new countries separated the nearby cities of Amritsar and Lahore and bisected the redesignated state of Punjab. Many Rajputs moved back to India, but large numbers remained in Pakistan, some to become urbanized, others to continue their former way of life. Pakistan is united by its devotion to Islam, but ethnically it is far from homogeneous; some 32 distinct languages are spoken by its peoples, and there are innumerable dialects. Up to nine-tenths of the population in most of its states are farmers.7

The villagers of Jubbo are among them. They trace their origins to a Rajput prince who gave his name to the village, and who settled his clan close to the River Ravi during the rule of the Sikh, Ranjeet Singh. "He who neighbors a river is neither hungry nor thirsty," runs the proverb; Prince Jubbo chose a long, low, and slightly inclined hill with its adjacent land partially screened by trees (FIGS. 2, 3). In time the village of Jubbo attracted sailors and fishermen on the Ravi River, who settled in the vicinity, and the population eventually numbered some 2,000. But frequent floods and a change in the course of the Ravi drove many people away; by the time it was studied in 1988 there were only about 200 inhabitants of the village, two-thirds of them children.

In the course of 150 years the Rajputs had clearly overcome their reputed distaste for farming; they bred numerous heavy-horned buffalo and other cattle, kept goats, and farmed the nearby lands. At the time of the survey there were some nine extended families in the village, each farming a small-holding of approximately five acres. Cereals were grown, but sugar cane was also an important crop, thriving in the well-irrigated fields, the heat, and humidity. The village sold milk and marketed its crop surplus, with family income averaging some 3,000 rupees a month. The National College of Arts team who studied the village gained much information from the zemintbr, the village head, who as one of only two adults in the village to have ever attended school, negotiated sales and acted as intercessionary between the government revenue collector (the dehildar) and the village.

The nine extended families lived in *katchi abadis*, mud-built houses that were single storied and flat roofed, and the low-lying village presented a simple profile in its position on the inclined hillside. There were no windows, but the groups of small rooms (*kansa*) opened onto a *vera*, or family courtyard. A few had open-sided loggias (*baranda*) facing the *vera* with columns and arches. Some of the columns, molded over discarded pots, had an abacus-like form, while the interiors of the loggias were often painted in deep earth colors. Three extended families, members of one clan, lived in a *hatta*, or joint compound, which opened onto a shared courtyard (FIG. 4). The *kansa* would be used for sleeping when the weather was cool enough, but during the oppressive heat of summer villagers slept on the roofs, which were mud plastered over logs; there was sufficient timber available for this.

Inside, the *kansa* would be kept immaculately clean, the mud and dung-plastered floor swept and polished, the few possessions stowed in chests. Except, that is, for china, glassware and mirrors, which would be displayed on shelves, their reflectivity aiding illumination by candle light. The wall opposite the entrance usually had a molded relief of a tree, birds or a figure. Outside, there was a chliani, or kitchen and ablutions place for the women off each *vera*, and food preparation and cooking would be done there (FIG. 5). The mud-built ovens, fired by use, would be decorated in relief. Water was obtained from wells, with three hand pumps and a motor pump with an unauthorized electrical connection.

Comprehending the social structure proved difficult. While three families lived in the joint compounds, the males of the other six had separate houses of their own. Not all the household heads were male; two were women, who also owned their own houses. Marriage was largely endogamous within the village, but residence was patrilocal, the married sons living...
with their parents. Maintaining the dwellings was the work of the women, who did not observe purdah, and who were free to move as they chose, though they might retire to a kanra when the men had visitors. Uneducated but intelligent, several of the men serviced tractors for other villages. About one in five of the children went to school; generally they helped with the care of the animals, crushed the sugar cane, or helped in the house. The cattle were kept tethered for much of the time in a darra (byre) or the tawala, the cattle yard at the top of the rise, and were taken to the Ravi to drink and to be washed (FIG. 6).8

"To go and live by a river is to place a babe in a witch's lap," says another Punjab proverb. It was the river which wrought havoc for the village. Abnormally heavy rains in the Himalayas caused flooding in the five rivers region on a scale unprecedented for seventy years. Commencing Sept. 28, 1988, the floods totally inundated 17 of the 21 districts of the Punjab. The Ravi rose three meters in the first two days, and continued to rise. By Oct. 9 the Red Crescent was reporting that as many as three million people were rendered homeless. Counting the cost a month after the flood began, it was evident that 50,000 cattle had been drowned and 300,000 acres of cotton and 200,000 acres of rice had been totally destroyed. Some 40,000 kilometers of the canal and irrigation network were damaged, and 14 bridges, 28 hospitals, and 6,500 schools were destroyed. An estimated 4,000 villagers were severely affected, and more than 900 people were reported killed, though the eventual toll was certainly higher (FIG. 7).9

When the floods subsided, only three single-cell pucca (brick-built) buildings in Jubbo remained standing. After the emergency relief phase was over, the city of Lahore offered a site for the Jubbo villagers on the urban side of the bund, but this they refused, choosing to return to their hill site. The reasons for their refusal related to their strong associations with their ancestral lands and their fear of being absorbed into the city; they preferred their independence, and, led by the zemindar, proceeded to rebuild. It was the rebuilt village of Jubbo which we visited four months later.
JUBBO REBORN

Between the bund and the village site the terrain is flat but rough; bullock cart or jeep is the only practical means of transport. There are groves of acacia trees on the way, but within the vicinity of the village itself the fields were cultivated and freshly green. On the slight incline of the hill, probably not more than 20 meters at its highest point, the low-lying village seemed complete and timeless; in fact, it was still in the final stages of being rebuilt (FIG. 8). A member of the faculty had already established contact; on our arrival the adults were dignified and reserved, but welcoming. While some of the team redrew the village plan and compared it with the former plan of 1988, others interviewed Niamat, the zemindar, and the inhabitants of many of the houses. Some of the children noisily crushed sugar cane, while a few followed us and indicated where different families lived.

All but two of the families had returned to the village. One had retained contact with the promise of eventual return, and
the other had apparently decided to settle in the city. Even so, the village respected their homesite in case, after all, they chose to come back. With the fields well cultivated, the village looked prosperous, and in some respects it had profited by its shrewdness at the time of the disaster. Other villages had not untethered their animals as the waters rose, fearing that they might lose them; consequently, many cattle drowned. Jubbo’s villagers found that there was a larger market for their milk and a demand for the calves they bred. It was clear, however, that the zemindar’s land, which had been protected by trees, had retained more of its topsoil; the families on the lowest part of the slope had lost much of theirs to the floodwaters. They were somewhat disadvantaged, and there was evidence of a social, if not a sub-caste, distinction related to elevation, perhaps reflecting the length of their ancestral claim to their homesites.

To a remarkable degree the village was as it had been studied before the flood. Each family had identified its homesite and proceeded to rebuild on it, generally to the identical plan (FIG. 9). Here and there a few changes could be noted — a room built in an open space, a vada or storehouse constructed near the chliani. But these were minor rather than significant alterations. The women did much of the mass-construction of the mud walls, though the men built the roofs and usually did the plastering. Children, watching intently as they learned the techniques, prepared the mud for the walling and the plaster. Inside the houses the floors were already hard and polished, and many walls were painted. Newly made shelves hung on the walls, and dishes and mirrors were again on display. A bicycle or a sewing machine might stand beside the wall with the beds, but there were few signs of modernity beyond a light bulb in some of the rooms. Refusal to accept the offer of a new village site had placed the community virtually beyond official recognition, but a concession had been made with the provision of poled electricity.
The loggias were simpler than they had been formerly, but the beautiful forms of the earlier columns and arches had not been arrived at overnight; in due time, no doubt, they will be enriched. As it is, in the chliani the hearths and ovens were surrounded by zigzag fire symbols molded in the mud surfaces. One woman, building a new hearth while we observed, commenced to mold the symbolic motifs when the structure had barely risen a foot in height (FIG. 10). Within her karna the center of the wall facing the entrance was molded in the form of a Tree of Life, symbol of fertility — and, it might be said, of the rebirth of the Rajput village of Jubbo.10

**INTERVENTION OR PARTICIPATION?**

All this might suggest that, with the exception of the welcome supply of electric light, the inhabitants could effect-
expectation of a trade-off — like the proposed absorption of the inhabitants of Jubbo into the city of Lahore. When international financing bodies are involved, the trade-off is likely to be more demanding and the intervention in the functioning of a rural culture still more intrusive. Simplistic solutions of rehousing to pattern-book plans without the involvement of the cultures involved are commonplace. But people who have traditionally built their own homes to meet their specific cultural needs do not readily accept or adapt to such housing provision.

Such observations are necessarily sweeping; in practice every case is different, not only because environmental and economic conditions are highly variable, but because every culture is distinct, and because every administration or financing agency has different targets. It is part of the work of the Disaster Management Centre at Oxford Polytechnic, of which Shelter and Settlements is a constituent unit, to research, evaluate and advise on the cultural implications of housing resettlement and post-disaster projects.

There is a role for the designer/engineer in the housing of disaster victims and in safeguarding houses against future tragedies. Yet such projects can only be successful with the participation of the victim communities, by aiding them in achieving their housing objectives, while giving greater assurance of safer housing in the future. Interference in the process by housing “provision” can divest a culture of the ability, let alone the right, to house itself, creating a more dependent culture in so doing. It is time that “intervention” was deleted from the vocabulary of development and post-disaster housing.

REFERENCE NOTES


5. As noted in the text, this paper arose from a lecture-seminar course on Anthropology and Architecture offered at the invitation of the head and faculty members of the Department of Architecture, The National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan. The visit was made possible by the Specialist Tours Department of the British Council, whose interest and support is gratefully acknowledged.


8. P. Oliver, Y. Cheema, et al., from field notes compiled during survey, Feb. 1989. Other members of the team included Valerie Oliver and Professors Bil-Al, Sayyed Kausar, Fauzia Qureshi, Mamoon ur Rashid, and Nazir Mehmood.

All figures by author except where otherwise noted.