INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

From CONTESTED_CITIES to Global Urban Justice

Stream 2

Article nº 2-011

SELF-MANAGED HOUSING CONSTRUCTION

LENKA KUŽVARTOVÁ

SELF-MANAGED HOUSING CONSTRUCTION

Lenka Kužvartová

Art History Institute, Faculty of Arts

Charles University in Prague

next_time@centrum.cz

ABSTRACT

Housing shortage is part of Brazilian reality already for many decades and it manifests itself strongly specially in the biggest Brazilian cities such as São Paulo. The impossibility of achieving dwellings in the city centers drives low-income population to live in slums. Housing movements began to emerge together with illegal settlements dissemination, demanding improvements in the periphery where was no urban infrastructure. In the 1970s, the housing movements started to oppose to mass-housing construction carried out by the government and drew their own alternative of popular housing: self-help construction financed from local government's budgets and administered by the community of future users. The model was inspired by Uruguayan housing cooperatives which had accomplished better and cheaper construction than official housing programs. The goal was not only to achieve housing but also form a strong and organized local communities able to fight for their rights. Through various difficulties and challenges, self-managed housing construction represents not only solution of housing for the urban poor but also critical approach to the question of production of urban space and architecture under capitalism.

KEYWORDS: housing, self-management, Brazil, housing movement.

SELF-MANAGED HOUSING CONSTRUCTION

Photo 1. Da Utopia à Construção: A participação popular na política habitacional em São Paulo

Source: Prefeitura do Município de São Paulo. 1991, p. 15

The slide you are looking at is a photo of a single family house in the Jardim São Francisco VIII quarter at the Eastern part of the city of São Paulo, Brazil. How you can see it is still under construction. I chose this photo because it characterizes the self-managed housing construction: the emphasis lays on the process of construction, not the finished product. In Brazilian Portuguese it is called *mutirão autogerido*: *mutirão* is a word borrowed from native language of Tupí and it means collective non-remunerated work to benefit the whole community; *autogerido* is an adjective from the word *autogestão,* which we can translate as self-government or self-management. This specific project is interesting for its architectonic form of interconnected volumes, either cubic or terminating with gable or shed roofs. It was built at the turn of 1980s and 1990s when the self-managed housing construction was supported by local government.

The self-managed housing construction emerged as a specific response to a long lasting housing shortage in Brazil which had not been significantly reduced either through the centrally administered mass-housing production during the military regime (1964-1985), nor democratic governments' attempts. The impossibility of acquiring dwellings in city centers had driven emerging low-income population[1] to live in slums called *favelas*, or to build their houses on illegally-occupied plots at the periphery of the city. Housing movements began to emerge together with the dissemination of illegal settlements, demanding improvements on the edges of the city where was no urban infrastructure.

During the 1970s, these movements were gradually striving to formulate their own conception of housing for the poor, as governmental housing programs worked to improve

---

[1] Emergence of favelas in the biggest Brazilian city, São Paulo, was parallel to the establishment of new foreign capital industrial complexes in the city from 1940s on. During the government of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961), known for his program of accomplishing fifty-years of development in only five years, it was mainly automobile industry which attracted poor population to migrate from the poor rural Northeast of the country.

only the middle class housing situation. The help of architects to develop the self-managed housing construction was necessary, and a primary figure was architect Guilherme Coelho, who had traveled to Uruguay and mapped the activity of the housing cooperatives there, which were successful in producing cheaper and better quality housing emphasizing community organization and self-management. In these new districts, local services were established such as health centers, day care centers, libraries, cooperative groceries etc. and ran as partly self-organized. These cooperatives were so successful that they were included in the Housing Act (Ley Nacional de Vivienda) in 1968. and more than 16 thousands units were built by them until the present day.[2]

The general economic depression at the beginning of the 1980s worsened the housing crisis again. The slums became over-crowded and the land on the edges of the city based for construction nearly depleted. The situation called for a collective action. There were more than 60 organized land invasions between September of 1981 and May of 1984, involving ten thousands families.[3] The aim was to gain visibility and question the traditionally unequal distribution of land in Brazil in times of urgent housing shortage. One of the groups of families living in precarious conditions started to negotiate the possibility of self-managed building. In this way the first self-managed project was started at the Vila Nova Cachoeirinha (1982-1985) in cooperation with Guilherme Coelho. He formed a group of professionals, mainly architects and social workers, who assisted the process from a technical and organizational perspective.[4]

At that time, the groups of students and professors from architectonic faculties had been already formed with a purpose to travel to the periphery to see the reality of housing shortage and try to invent solutions for specific needs of concrete communities. These "housing laboratories", how they were called, were predecessors of the interdisciplinary groups who supported the local communities in the process of the self-managed housing construction. These groups of architects, city planners, lawyers, sociologists, social workers etc. are today known as *technical auxiliary groups (assessorias técnicas)*. They support self-organization mechanisms in the communities, inform them about the technical aspects of housing production and civil construction, and encourage participation in the design process. Auxiliary groups have become indispensable in negotiations with the public authorities, as they can argue from a specialist point of view.

In the self-managed housing construction process, it is desirable to democratize specialized knowledge, e.g. architectural, enabling the communities to decide on very specific topics, and to influence the actual design of the houses and common facilities. The architects of the technical auxiliary groups were inspired by the teaching of Paulo Freire, the well-known Brazilian educator, who introduced the concept of emancipation of the poor through non-hierarchical education and sharing life experiences. In his approach, the teacher and student are partners involved in dialogue which is beneficial for both parties, and during which one can understand his/her position in the society and possibilities of the change.[5]

The biggest problem with self-managed construction has always been inconsistent financing from the public budget. Despite the strict demand for autonomy in decision-making before and during the self-managed construction period, the housing movements have always seen housing provision as responsibility of the state, and for this reason demand plots of land as well as funds for construction material, tools, and hiring specialized labor, including technical

[2] Baravelli J. E. (2006). O Cooperativismo uruguaio na habitação social de São Paulo (dissertation). Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade de São Paulo, p. 62.
[3] Bonduki N. (1992). Habitação e Autogestão. Construindo Territórios de Utopia. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fase, s. 28.
[4] Reinach H. (1984). Projeto Vila Nova Cachoeirinha. in: Espaço & Debates, no. 14, São Paulo: Cortez.
[5] See: Freire P. (1973). Education for Critical Consciousness, New York: Continuum; and Freire P. (1968). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Herder and Herder.

auxiliary groups. Families themselves carried out most of the work on construction site on weekends and days-off. Local groups, often formed as basic religious communities with their roots in Liberation Theology, became stronger, combative, and united during the process. Often, the neighborhood has been formed before the houses have been finished. For the practical reasons of having place to gather and rest, and as a symbol of the collective effort, the first building to be erected has always been a community center.

The struggle for housing has always been also a fight for urbanity, and for the urban infrastructure lacking so much on the periphery of the city. For this reason, some portion of services and shops were always part of the self-managed projects, and it was intended that the communities would urge the local government to open necessary facilities such as schools, health centers locally. The goal is to create real urban space on the periphery, but for a long time it has been equally important to build in the self-managed way on the lots nearest to the city centers.

The election of *Worker's Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores)* representative Luiza Erundina as mayor of the city of São Paulo in 1989 launched big hopes of possibility to fight marginalization of the self-managed housing construction movement. The Workers' Party was founded in 1979 as an anti-dictatorship power with roots in labor unions and social movements. The party was considered socialist and its aim was social change, the establishment of society based on the concept of self-government and self-management formed from below and against the state. The party was very critical to the authoritarian and state-dominated regime in the Soviet Union and the countries under its influence. *Autogestão*, self-government, was meant to be introduced gradually, in workplaces through labor unions, and in housing production through independent associations of future residents fully controlling the process of the construction. Self-managed housing was a tool to alleviate the housing crisis, which was so enormous that it could not realistically be solved by the demolition of all precarious housing and building up new homes.[6]

Luiza Erundina brought to office some radical academics and housing movements activists as Ermina Maricato who became head of Housing and Urban Development Department, and began immediately with a series of interventions in the most precarious localities. There existed a widespread optimism about possibility of building cheaper popular housing of a better quality than the quarters of uniform building on periphery with a lack of the urban infrastructure built by government during the military dictatorship. Special fund was created to finance the self-managed projects. Communities were encouraged to set up associations to be able to obtain funding from government and to control the construction works executed by self-help effort. The funding was covering material and tools for construction, specialized workforce, and work of technical auxiliary groups composed of architects, social workers and other professionals who were encouraged to establish themselves as NGOs financed by 4% of total cost of the construction. The architects developed techniques of including future inhabitants into the design process, and made efforts to learn their needs and preferences. In 1991, there were already 80 associations carrying out construction of about 10 thousand housing units.

At first only single family row houses were built together with shared facilities as community centers, leisure areas, communal kitchens, and preschools. The architects soon came up with the option of self-help apartment buildings construction – one of the first projects of this type was COPROMO in Osasco with fifty five-storeys buildings with one thousand flats.

---

[6]In 1990 67% of the population of the city of São Paulo was living in non-regular housing as slums, cortiços which were old houses spatially re-divided to obtain more housing units, illegally constructed houses on periphery and precariously built houses. Slums had one million residents at that time. From: O trabalho em cima de um diagnóstico rigoroso, in: A política que a prefeitura de São Paulo está praticando (1990). São Paulo: Prefeitura do Município de São Paulo, not paginated.

Another example is a project called Vila Mara/Rio das Pedras, at Eastern part of the city, providing housing for almost 600 families.[7]

Aside from the construction of new dwellings, there were also many projects of so-called urbanization of slums. This meant paving streets inside slums, consolidating slopes, canalizing streams running through the community, and providing networks of electricity, gas, water, and sewage. Sometimes parts of the slums were demolished and replaced with new buildings. Community centers were built too. Most of the work was executed by the slum inhabitants themselves, which made it cheaper. Another equally important advantage was the stimulation of local relationships around the common work. This was the reason why Workers' Party supported the self-managed construction – its main objective back then was to establish self-governance through the self-organized local communities.

During Erundina's term, construction of almost 28 thousands of housing units was initiated,[8] both self-managed and executed by hired construction companies. Slum urbanization affected the lives of hundred thousands families.

In the following elections a conservative candidate won and most of the self-managed projects were halted with a cessation of financing in connection with accusations of misappropriation against members of the future-residents associations. For countless obstacles from the following government, the self-managed projects from Erundina's time were realized only after 2000 when other politician from Workers' Party assumed power in the city.

In the meantime in was sometimes possible to build in the self-managed way through state housing programs[9] but the number of houses built this way represented only a small percentage of the total of constructed. At the end of the 1990s, there was a peak of *Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, MST)* activity and even housing movements were mobilized at the time. The occupations of unused land were organized by the housing movements after years of right conservative governments when production of social housing stagnated. The movements established contact with University of São Paulo students and from this encounter, many groups originated around the topic of housing for the poor and the self-managed construction.

Thus the concept of self-managed housing construction was revived in some form, through its significance had shifted. Social transformation and decentralization of power was no longer the issue at stake anymore, as at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, but instead effort was placed on formulating an alternative to a neoliberal model of housing production and urban space production.[10]

Due to the necessity of lobbying local governments to get financing and construction lots, periods of construction lasted very long, longer than many families could afford to wait. Apart from an afford of the housing movements to create some legislative support for self-managed construction, there was ongoing discussion focused on actualization of the self-managed housing construction for a time when big social change cannot be anticipated. The well-known Brazilian sociologist Francisco de Oliveira criticized *mutirão* as overwork by

---

[7] <http://mural.blogfolha.uol.com.br/2014/09/24/mulheres-constroem-cohab-do-jardim-helena/> Visited on March 20th, 2016.

[8] Lombardi, M.R., Barboza Silveira, M. N. (2011). Políticas de Habitação Popular, Trabalho Associado e Relações de Gênero: A Experiência da Usina. Coleção Textos FCC, vol. 32, outubro de 2011, p. 29.

[9] The city of São Paulo is capital of the state of the same name, so there are three levels of the state power: municipal, state, and federal.

[10] Arantes P. F., Lima C. G., de Oliveira S. B., Percassi J., de Queiroz Pinheiro R. M., Rezende H. D., Tone B. B. (2012). Mutirão Paulo Freire. Movimento Popular, Arquitetura e Pedagogia da Praxis, p. 3.
 <http://www.usinactah.org.br/files/MutiraoPauloFreire.pdf> Visited on June 5th 2013.

which *mutirantes* actually decrease their own salaries down and make it all easy and simple for capital and even the state.[11] Although this opinion simplified the reality, it cannot be denied that weekend work on construction site is tiring and does not carry the same potential for mobilization.

As the economic situation in Brazil improved significantly just after 2000 under the government of the Workers' Party, there was an expectations arose that the state would have more money for housing. The housing movements began to negotiate budgets which included hired construction workers. The slogan *"less self-help work, more self-management" (menos mutirão, mais autogestão)* characterized the new demand of the movements. They tried hard to incorporate the self-managed housing into the new housing programs, but without great success.

In 2009, a new federal housing program *My House, My Life (Minha Casa Minha Vida*, MCMV) was launched. It was formulated by the federal government in cooperation with major construction companies. The deal was simple: in order to survive the global financial crisis of 2008, construction companies would have guaranteed income to build housing units in large scale not only for the poor but various income groups, and the government would thereby solve the housing crisis in less than a decade. This way, the movements' effort to decentralize the decision-making on housing production was discarded to make way for the return of centrally-planned housing policy, uniform and constructed in large quantities. Unfortunately, this program was created and launched under the auspices of the Workers' Party and its then leader Lula da Silva and President Roussef.

Between 2009 and 2015, 2.2 million housing units nationwide were built[12] in the first two phases of the MCMV program. The third phase, in which another 3 millions units are slated to be build, is endangered by the President Roussef's current impeachment process, as the opposition would stop it immediately. After the launch of the program, the movements put intense pressure on the government to such a degree that self-managed housing construction has been directly incorporated to the program as its modality called *Minha Casa Minha Vida Entidades (MCMV-E).* The associations of future inhabitants can register and apply for financing for construction costs including labor costs. Through financial parameters have become more clear and reliable, having been detached from influence by local current government, the self-managed construction is still less feasible because of a high level of bureaucracy and the condition that self-managed projects fulfill the same requirements as the big construction companies. The families also become debtors of the state bank and need to repay the loan during the maximum period of 30 years.

The technical auxiliary group Usina, one of the few groups which still provide services for the housing movements, is working on various projects financed by the MCMV-E program. One of the important tasks of the architects and social workers of Usina architects and social workers is to prepare applications for financing, implying a large amount of paperwork followed by long waiting times for decision. In my research, I am following the development of one specific Usina project. It is situated in Suzano, an Eastern suburban district of São Paulo. The project is divided into two parts on two lots placed near each other. It will house 144 local families who live in precarious conditions and meet the income limits of the MCMV-E program. The project was initiated already in 2009 with mobilization of the poor families by *the Union of Housing Movements (União dos movimentos de moradia*). The movement gradually withdrew from the project and let the families continue alone with Usina. Due to

---

[11]de Oliveira F. (2006). O vício da virtude. in: Novos Estudos 74, março 2006, p. 67-85.
[12]<http://www.brasil.gov.br/economia-e-emprego/2015/06/minha-casa-minha-vida-3-sera-lancado-no-segundo-semestre> Visited on June 12th, 2015.

lack of support from the movement, some of the salient issues in self-managed housing construction are more evident in this case.

The participatory design process was coordinated by Usina in 2010. Architects wanted the families to share their needs and ideas about ideal housing. As typical for this type of project, the architects had to persuade the families to accept apartment houses instead of single-family houses because of lack of zoning space.[13] Residents in single-family homes would have to be able to supplement their income by renting part of the house, running a small business there or growing their own food. Usina attempts to compensate the lack of private backyards by building balconies and terraces on the apartment houses and surrounding them with greenery[14]
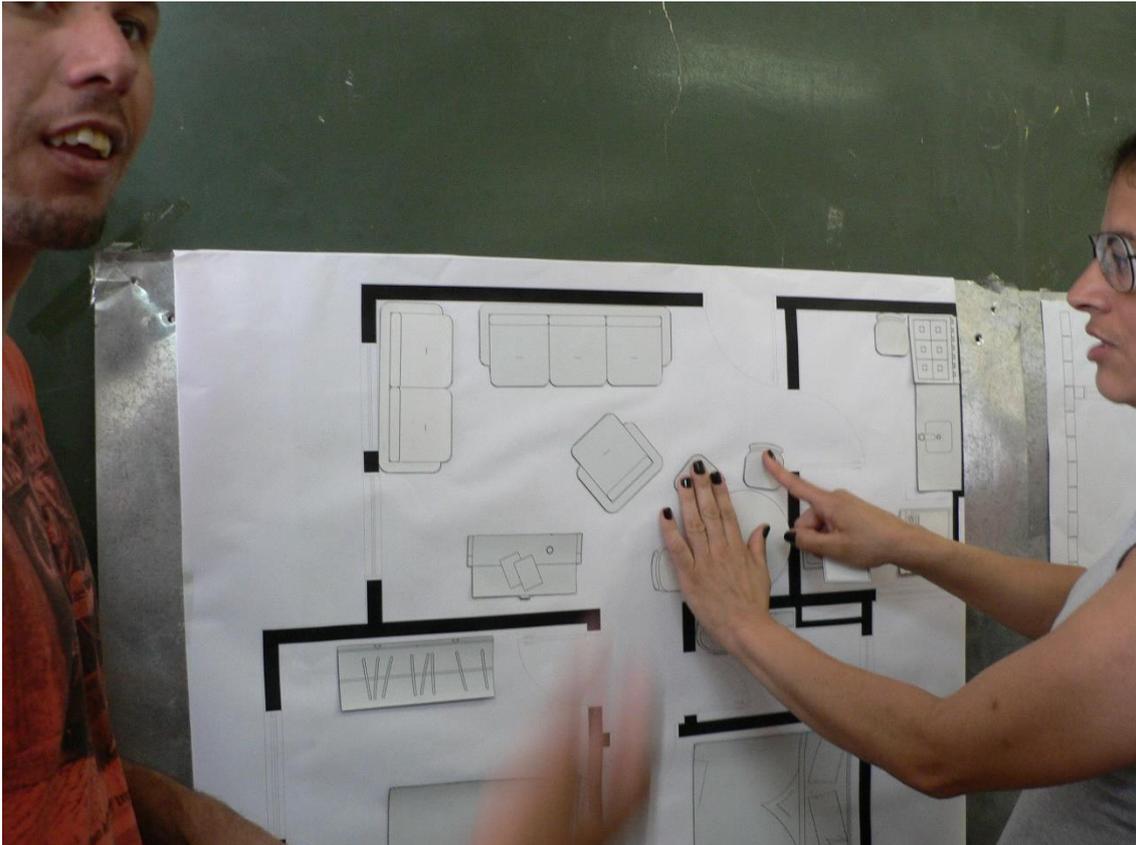
Source: Author

An important part of the participatory design is to find out how the families imagine their dwellings. Usina uses printed flat plans with the approximate size of the final unit on metal desk and magnets in a form of furniture and fittings. The families can place the magnets on the layout the way they would like to furnish their apartment. In this way they inhabit abstract space of the layout and give the architects a clue how the definite layout should look like. Subsequently, a discussion on common neighborhood spaces and facilities was initiated. This phase has been very mobilizing and the families participate and contribute actively. Unfortunately, during Usina's application for financing, a legal dispute on expropriation of one of the lots took place, causing a four-years halt in the project. A coordination group comprising some family representatives cooperated with Usina on these tasks. During this

---

[13] The traditional inequality in distribution of land among the population impede to obtain bigger lots in better localities because together with the pressure of real estate market. The question of land distribution and need of land reform unite the struggles of the housing movements with the struggles of the Landless Workers' Movement.

[14] Coletivo Usina (2010). Habitação com autogestão no município de Suzano: Apresentação do estudo preliminar. Princípios, métodos, atividades e propostas, agosto 2010

"waiting period", many families lost their dedication to the project and some accepted flats from mass constructed MCMV projects instead, even their standard is much lower.

Families were again included in the process only in 2014 when Usina and the coordination group organized inclusive family activities as beginning of the construction was approaching. It was needed to present the conception of the project to the families as some of them were newcomers. The architects and the coordination's members resembled teachers while explaining the advantages of the self-managed construction to the families on common meetings. Autogestão, self-management, is a difficult concept for many to comprehend because every day reality is dominated by authorities who undermine one's confidence in the own abilities.

Another obstacle was the reluctance of some families to confront local government causing political obstacles to the construction of the project. Some of the families are right wing voters, the opposition of the Workers' Party in power in contrast to the housing movements which are directly connected to the Workers' Party and use successfully tactics of civil disobedience such as demonstrations and blockades to reach their goals.

In Suzano the demobilization and depoliticization of the Brazilian poor is very apparent. With the growth of Brazilian economy after 2000, the Workers' Party introduced a series of social improvements and benefits which lifted the majority of the poor from dire poverty. This segment of society may no longer be starving and can buy consumer goods, but its basic need like housing are not fulfilled because the Workers' Party failed to carry out its promises of major land and urban reforms.

Self-managed housing construction remains an important critique of state mass housing construction and the production of urban space under neoliberalism. Self-managed construction still represents a minimal percentage of housing produced and is riddled by challenges. During the process families can see how the local and federal politics work. They can experience the pressure of the real estate market which influences the development of the city, learn how to manage the construction, and see how the construction is carried out. Families establish strong bonds to the place where they will live and with their future neighbors. At the end, they obtain a flat of better quality in a neighborhood with common spaces and urban infrastructure, unlike the precarious gated community of the MCMV projects. The price of waiting and frustration is sometimes high, but self-managed housing production remains practical evidence that other city is possible.

REFERENCES

A política que a prefeitura de São Paulo está praticando, Prefeitura do Município de São Paulo, novembro 1990.

Arantes P. (2002). Arquitetura Nova. São Paulo: Editora 34.

Arantes P. F., Lima C. G., de Oliveira S. B., Percassi J., de Queiroz Pinheiro R. M., Rezende, H. D., Tone B. B. (2012). Mutirão Paulo Freire. Movimento Popular, Arquitetura e Pedagogia da Praxis. http://www.usinactah.org.br/files/MutiraoPauloFreire.pdf (Visited on June the 5, 2013).

Bonduki N. (1992). Habitação e Autogestão. Construindo Territórios de Utopia. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fase.

Bonduki N. (1993). Arquitetura e Habitação Social em São Paulo 1989-1992 (katalog z II. Bienal Internacional de Arquitetura de São Paulo). São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo e Instituto de Arquitetos do Brasil.

Baravelli J. E. (2006). O Cooperativismo uruguaio na habitação social de São Paulo (dizertace). Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade de São Paulo.

Coletivo Usina, Metodologia de projeto aquitetônico participativo em empreendimentos habitacionais autogeridos em São Paulo. A experiência recente da assessoria técnica Usina junto aos

movimentos populares de sem-teto (UMM) e sem-terra (MST), setembro 2010
http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/searchq=cache:nl5hBwdHK6EJ:xa.yimg.com/kq/groups
/15665882/1692834133/name/CEVE_Usina_Hirao_Lazarini_Arantes.pdf+&cd=6&hl=cs&ct=cl
nk&gl=cz (Visited in October 2013).

Da Utopia à Construção: A participação popular na política habitacional em São Paulo. Prefeitura do Município de São Paulo. 1991.

Lombardi, M.R., Barboza Silveira, M. N. (2011). Políticas de Habitação Popular, Trabalho Associado e Relações de Gênero: A Experiência da Usina. Coleção Textos FCC, vol. 32, outubro de 2011.

Maricato E. (1997). Enfrentando desafios. A política desenvolvida pela Secretaria de Habitação e Desenvolvimento Urbano da Prefeitura de São Paulo 1989-1992 (dissertation). Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade de São Paulo.

De Oliveira F. (2006). O vício da virtude. in: Novos Estudos 74, março 2006, pp. 67-85.

Rodrigues E. L. (2013). A Estratégia Fundiária dos movimentos populares na produção autogestionária da moradia (dissertation). Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade de São Paulo.

Rodrigues S. (2006). Casa própria ou apropriada? Duas abordagens: O FUNAPS Comunitário e o Projeto Cingapura (dissertation). Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade de São Paulo.

Turner J.F.C. (2009). Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments. London: Marion Boyars Publishers.