

## From Barn Raising to Community Empowerment: the legacy of Karl Linn and John Turner

### Del *Barn Raising* al *Community Empowerment*: el legado de Karl Linn y John Turner

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**Abstract:** This article examines the lasting impact of architects Karl Linn and John Turner on community development and informal settlements. Grounded in the barn raising tradition, their distinct yet converging paths highlight the power of community participation, collaboration, and self-help in marginalized neighborhoods. Linn's Neighborhood Commons projects and Turner's ideas on self-help housing and user-centered design have influenced participatory practices, challenged institutional norms, and prioritized a process over product approach in today's complex urban landscapes. This exploration underscores the profound impact of their work on neighborhood improvement and inclusive urban environments.

**Keywords:** self-help housing, barn raising, Karl Linn, John F.C. Turner, participatory urbanism.

**Resumen:** Este artículo explora la influencia que han tenido los arquitectos Karl Linn y John Turner en el desarrollo comunitario y los asentamientos informales. Partiendo de la tradición norteamericana del *barn raising*, o construcción comunitaria de graneros, sus trayectorias ponen de relieve el poder de la participación comunitaria en los barrios marginados. Los proyectos *Neighborhood Commons* de Linn y las ideas de autoconstrucción de Turner desafiaron las políticas institucionales y han tenido una enorme repercusión en las prácticas urbanísticas colaborativas actuales de mejoramiento barrial y entornos urbanos inclusivos.

**Palabras clave:** autoconstrucción, construcción comunitaria, Karl Linn, John F.C. Turner, urbanismo participativo.

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In the field of architecture, the concept of community development has evolved over the years and is rooted in a rich tapestry of influences. Foremost among these is the tradition of barn-raising in the United States, a testament to the power of collective effort and shared resources in shaping communities. Two notable architects, Karl Linn and John Turner, each drew inspiration from this tradition, albeit in different contexts and with unique approaches. While they never formally acknowledged each other's work, their parallel journeys, driven by a commitment to fostering community, collaboration, self-help and a belief in process over product, converged at MIT in the late 1960s and early 1970s<sup>1</sup>. Their ideas resonated with the nature of informal settlements, and slum upgrading became a central focus for both architects<sup>2</sup>. They believed in the transformative power of community participation and self-help in this context, which went beyond physical improvements to include economic and social processes that could uplift these marginalized communities. This approach was very much in keeping with the spirit of the 1960s, a time when calls for social justice and equality were reverberating across the United States<sup>3</sup>. In line with growing criticism of public housing, urban renewal and modernist visions of urban development, both architects rebelled with a focus on human-centered design, challenging authority and advocating a change in the role of government to a less intrusive one.

Drawing on Linn's archive collection at Berkeley, as well as Linn and Turner's publications and bibliography, this paper begins by situating the barn-raising practices of rural America as a pioneering model for community development, and speculates how these practices may have been the seeds of both architects' interest in mutual self-help architecture. The article then presents Linn and Turner's ideas in their historical context and their ability to translate their

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<sup>1</sup> There is no evidence that they exchanged correspondence or mentioned each other in their work, possibly because they were working on different geographical contexts. In 2000, Turner admitted that he was isolated to academic literature and networks outside of what was happening in Peru (Harris, 2003: 261).

<sup>2</sup> Slum upgrading refers to improvements in housing and/or basic infrastructure in slum areas (UN-HABITAT, 2014: 16). For Turner, informality meant uncontrolled, unplanned neighborhoods; for Linn, it referred to slum-like neighborhoods in disenfranchised areas of the United States, traditionally occupied by the displaced.

<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, a growing demand for greater participation and representation in society, inspired by movements such as civil rights and women's liberation, led to the institutionalization of a broad participatory agenda through President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. These initiatives, including the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Model Cities program, mandated greater community involvement in response to the social and economic challenges facing declining urban areas.

social consciousness into design action. Finally, the paper considers how they have been evaluated by other scholars, and their influence on architecture to come, seeking to distinguish their different strategies and to identify commonalities between them, while recognizing the profound contributions of each to the modern understanding of the commons and the collaborative and democratic approach to shaping the city.

## **1. BARN RAISING: THE ORIGINS OF MUTUAL SELF-HELP IN THE UNITED STATES**

The practice of “barn raising” is a cherished tradition rooted in the history of rural North America in the 18th and 19th centuries. At a time when large and costly barns were essential to farm life but beyond the means of individual families, communities came together in an exemplary display of collective action.

The origins of barn-raising can be traced back to medieval England and continental Europe, but evidence points to its association with pre-industrial America, especially in areas where skilled labor was scarce (Ensminger, 1992: 5). To meet this challenge, neighbors banded together to provide the necessary labor. The communal aspect of barn-raising was deeply ingrained, embodying the principles of cooperation and mutual aid that underpinned rural life and that made these communities excellent and self-sufficient settlers in North America (Arthur & Witney, 1972: 215).

The process was simple but labor intensive. A group of up to a hundred men worked together to raise the massive wooden frames into place. Work was voluntary –yet mandatory, and unpaid<sup>4</sup>. Meanwhile, women played a crucial role, providing communal meals and support, fostering a festive atmosphere around the laborious event (Stevenson, 1950: 440) (Figure 1).

As the 19th century progressed, hired labor gradually replaced the barn-raising tradition. However, echoes of this practice persist in contemporary community building projects, as we will see in the following pages.

Today, barn raising continues in some Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities, particularly in Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania and parts of Canada<sup>5</sup>. For these communities, participation in barn raising remains mandatory, underscoring the enduring importance of community values and mutual aid. In essence, barn raising exemplifies the collective strength of a community in which each member contributes selflessly, fostering a legacy of togetherness, cooperation and support in the midst of America’s westward expansion (Bronner, 2006: 72).

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<sup>4</sup> The only man to receive a fee for his service was the master carpenter. Also, all community members were expected to attend; failure to do so could lead to censure within the community.

<sup>5</sup> See Amish documentary by Burton Buller (Wesner, 2023).



Figure 1: Process of barn raising and final communal meal at Floradale, Ontario. Source: Arthur & Witney, 1972: 217-222.

## 2. KARL LINN: PIONEERING COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Karl Linn (1923-2005) may not be a household name in the field of landscape architecture, but his impact on the discipline and the communities he served is immeasurable. Born in 1923 in a small village in northeastern Germany, Linn's early years were marked by a unique upbringing amidst orchards and a deep connection to the land. It was during this time that the seeds of his later work in landscape architecture and community development were sown.

Linn's formative years were profoundly influenced by a fusion of zionism, socialism, and the communal lifestyle of the kibbutzim in Palestine<sup>6</sup>. These experiences instilled in him a strong sense of common purpose, egalitarianism, and a close relationship with the land (Linn, 2007: 9). As he grew older, however, Linn came to reject zionism, viewing it as exclusionary and oppressive (Linn, 2005: 20, 26). This rejection, rooted in his personal experiences of persecution

<sup>6</sup> Zionism is the Jewish nationalist movement that emerged in the 19th century, and kibbutzim, originated in Israel, are idealistic communities based on agriculture that combined elements of socialism and zionism.

and displacement<sup>7</sup>, set him on a path to explore new avenues for positive change and contributed to his participatory ideologies.

Linn's journey took him from the fields of agriculture and horticulture to the bustling streets of New York City in 1948, where he began practicing child psychoanalysis and studying body-oriented therapy. His background in agriculture and horticulture, combined with his evolving social consciousness, eventually drew him to the field of landscape architecture.

In 1952, he founded his own design-build firm, and soon after, although his private practice was thriving, he made a pivotal decision to shift his focus from corporate commissions to exploring how landscape architecture could serve a broader social cause (Hirsch, 2014). Linn believed in landscaping as an "ethic" with healing powers, and from then on, he would address the segregation and alienation prevalent in American cities (Linn, 1959).

## **2.1. Linn's recurring ideas embodied in the Neighborhood Commons**

One of the core ideas in Linn's work was to involve community residents in the design and construction of their own open spaces. He recognized that many public facilities failed because they lacked the active participation of neighborhood residents (Linn, 2007: 114). Therefore, when he joined the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania in 1959, he developed his concept of "Neighborhood Commons".

"Neighborhood Commons" were parks and playgrounds to be built on vacant lots in distressed neighborhoods, reusing materials and incorporating volunteer labor, with the goal of improving the community through self-help efforts, reaffirming its identity and serving as active poles of resident interaction (Figure 2). Linn's approach was to transform these vacant spaces into "self-help parks", in which he played the role of facilitator rather than traditional designer or expert (Hirsch, 2014).

The construction of a neighborhood commons became an opportunity to involve marginalized residents, disenchanting with top-down urban renewal, in the design and construction of their own collective spaces, and to participate in the collective act of productive labor (Figure 3). In Linn's words:

"People are alienated from their physical environment if they are unable to leave their personal imprints on their immediate surroundings. Relegating human beings to the role of passive spectators of their environment threatens their mental equilibrium, and robs them of the opportunity to assert their authority, to develop mastery over their places of habitat." (Linn, 1969: 65).

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<sup>7</sup> In the 1930s, Nazis forced Linn's family to leave Germany and seek refuge in Palestine.

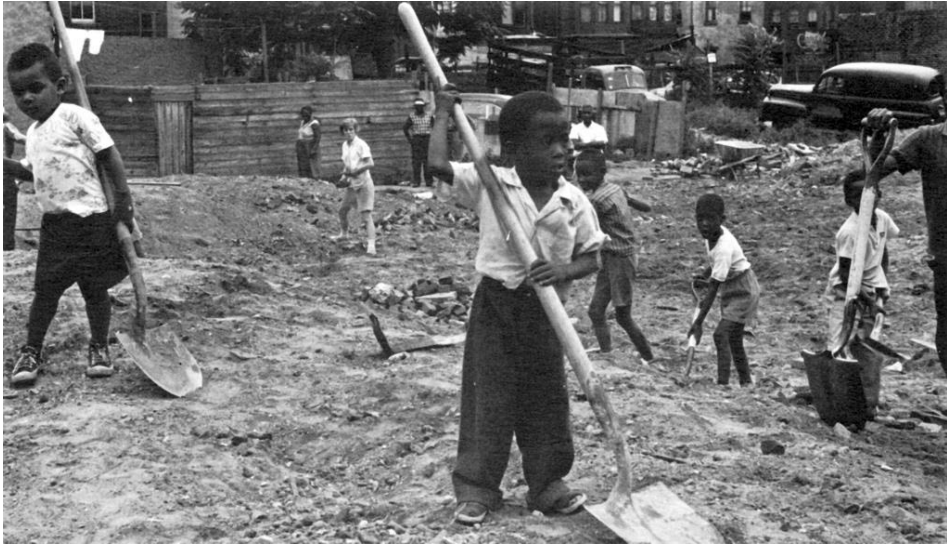


Figure 2: Children helping clearing debris from the Neighborhood Commons' lot in Philadelphia. Source: Linn, 1972: 76, Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Pennsylvania.

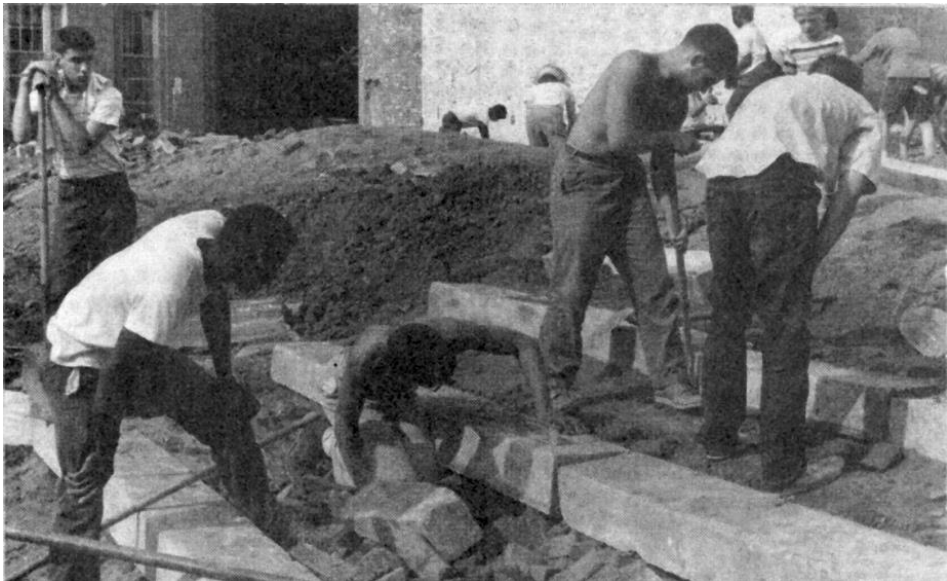


Figure 3: Urban barn raising. Volunteers working on the commons. Source: Linn, 1990a: 36, Karl Linn Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

By engaging in mutual aid and voluntary cooperation, citizens experienced a sense of interdependence and fulfillment that Linn compared to the historical practice of barn raising, emphasizing the collaborative effort and how such a communal act created meaningful physical spaces (Hirsch, 2015; Linn, 1990a; Linn, 1990b)<sup>8</sup>. For Linn, the act of building a commons was more important than the physical outcome, with a vision that valued the process over the end product. He believed in "open-ended design", which meant that public spaces were never finished, allowing residents to continually shape and adapt their environment (Linn, 1968).

Linn's idea of the Commons was also deeply entrenched in the principle of using salvaged materials (Linn, 1962) (Figure 4). In addition to the economic and environmental benefits, he saw the use of familiar materials as a way to satisfy the psychological need for "rootedness," to create a sense of connection to the human and physical environment, and to demonstrate that one need not always start from scratch (Linn, 2007: 84-85)<sup>9</sup>.

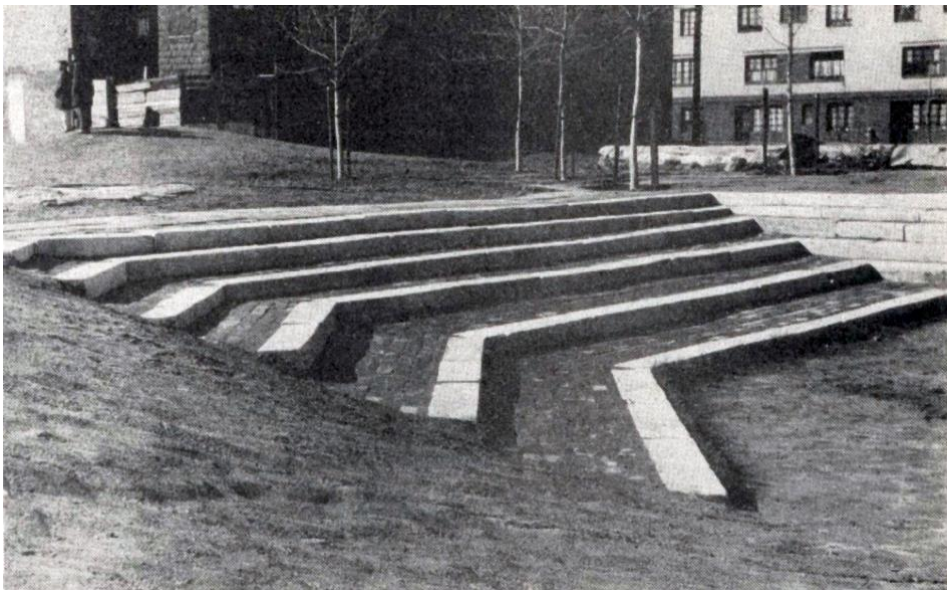


Figure 4: Used recycled marble slabs create this amphitheater. Source: Linn, 1990a: 37, Karl Linn Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

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<sup>8</sup> Linn believed in the "moral value of labor" where labor itself was a human need (Spiro, 1963: 11-12). This idea persisted in Linn's theories of community development.

<sup>9</sup> This idea of not starting from scratch was very relevant in the context of urban renewal at the time, where massive slum clearance campaigns were bulldozing entire neighborhoods and displacing their residents.

His “Neighborhood Commons” concept was first introduced in declining areas of Philadelphia<sup>10</sup>, where Linn and his students from Penn met with community members to assess the area's needs and resources, and then presented a final design to residents to build with them and volunteers. The idea later spread to similar neighborhoods in Washington DC, New York, Baltimore, Chicago and other U.S. cities (Hirsch, 2015). But Linn's vision was not without challenges. Many of the commons he helped create faced demolition as part of urban renewal projects. In addition, the use of salvaged materials was sometimes controversial, with some residents feeling discriminated against when they received recycled materials instead of new ones (Linn, 1969). These challenges underscored the complex nature of community engagement and the need for sensitivity to local dynamics.

In the mid-1960s, after the failure of building neighborhood commons, Linn began to formulate a more process-oriented model of community engagement that emphasized the self-determination of community members. His idea of the physical commons evolved into a model of "process institutions" that could serve as the basis for ongoing, creative, community-led solutions. These centers -the forerunners of the Community Design Centers (CDCs) that proliferated across the United States- provided landscape architecture services to economically disadvantaged African American and Hispanic neighborhoods played a critical role in empowering communities to take charge of their built environment, breaking away from traditional top-down approaches to urban planning (Linn, 1990a; Goodman, 2019).

Linn's recurring idea of prioritizing process over outcome resulted in a series of very diverse built objects that were criticized by the architectural establishment. Nevertheless, the idea that architects must empathize with communities on the ground, in their own spaces, has endured. This perspective continues to shape the contemporary Public Interest Design movement and defines how most designers view their role in supporting communities in need (Goodman, 2019).

In the late 1960s, Linn joined the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he taught from 1968 to 1972. These years gave him the time to reflect on the experiences and lessons of the neighborhood commons. In 1969, while at MIT, he received a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to convene a forum of grassroots leaders, designers, activists and government officials to discuss the role of urban design in inner-city communities. The result was the Workshop on Open Space report, which provided guidelines for participatory urban open space projects (Lawson, 1969). The report emphasized the importance of issues such as process prioritization, community control, and collaboration in the development and maintenance of

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<sup>10</sup> The pilot project was the Melon Neighborhood Commons in West Poplar, an area of abandoned buildings in Philadelphia.



these spaces. The group also expressed concern about the potential for professional expertise to overshadow community vision. Linn stated that "professionalized environments have contributed to people's alienation" (Karl Linn Collection, 1970), and advocated for a shift in design education to include grassroots leaders and students of color, which continues to challenge the field today (Linn, 1968).

## 2.2. Conclusions and legacy

Linn's contributions to American cities during the transformative 1960s were profound. At a time when few American designers were working at the grassroots level and most landscape architects were focused on suburban development, Linn devoted himself to the country's densely populated metropolitan areas, helping to revitalize an urban public life that had lost community ties and social interaction to modern housing projects (Talen, 2000: 345).

His commitment to empowering marginalized citizens through participatory design and construction of their collective spaces, with an emphasis on process and community engagement, continues to shape the practice of landscape architecture and urban design, reminding us that true success lies not only in the physical outcome but in the process of building and organizing community capacity for self-governance and creative production.

His legacy can be seen in the community design centers that continue to operate throughout the United States<sup>11</sup>, and serves as a reminder of the potential of participatory design to create more equitable urban environments. Moreover, the dissatisfaction with comprehensive government planning and the "right to the city" spirit that informed his practice has contributed greatly to contemporary debates about the commons and the public realm (Talen, 2000: 137). For a variety of reasons, including a recession that has reduced public investment in neighborhood revitalization, there has been a surge of interest in the idea of small-scale, incremental, do-it-yourself (DIY) urban improvement (Finn, 2014: 381). This new type of citizen-led placemaking activity, less reliant on official planning efforts, is gaining traction in an attempt to maintain an urban vibrancy that harkens back to the earliest urban improvement impulses promoted by Linn.

## 3. JOHN TURNER: THE MEANING OF HOUSING

John F. C. Turner (1927-2023) was a British architect and theorist known for his pioneering contributions to the field of informal self-help housing and

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<sup>11</sup> To name a few: Rural Studio at Auburn University, Yale Building Project at Yale University, Pratt Center for Community Development at the Pratt Institute (one of the first CDCs in the country along with the Architect's Renewal Committee of Harlem, ARCH), and many others. Many CDCs are affiliated with universities. combining teaching and training for students with a service to the wider community.

neighborhood development<sup>12</sup>. His work spanned several countries and left a lasting impact in Peru, the United States and the United Kingdom. Born to an architect father with a deep appreciation for the vernacular, he began studying architecture at the Architectural Association in London in 1944 (Goldstein, 1975).

During his first years in England, he worked with a local architect on small commissions. Even then, the ideas and diagrams of Patrick Geddes had a profound influence on him<sup>13</sup>, instilling in him the notion that a house should be seen as an integral part of a larger system that encompasses the user and the environment, ideas that would accompany him throughout his career (Oyón, 2021).

In 1952, Turner met Eduardo Neira, a Peruvian architect who was head of the Urban Planning Department of the Peruvian Ministry of Development and Public Works. At a time when Peru was experiencing significant internal migration as people moved from rural regions to rapidly expanding cities, Neira was working on the role of the state in the face of the emergence of informal squatter settlements known as *barriadas* (Gyger, 2019: 102) (Figure 5). Like-minded, this encounter marked the beginning of Turner's deep involvement in community development projects, and Turner moved to Peru in 1957.

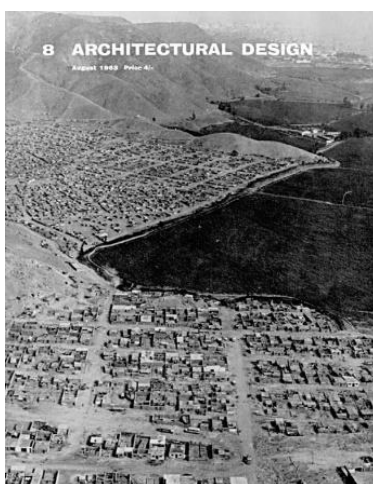


Figure 5: Cover of August 1963 issue of *Architectural Design* presenting a striking view of the city of Lima, with its *barriadas* dominating the foreground. Source: John F.C. Turner Archive, Colegio de Arquitectos de Cataluña.

<sup>12</sup> Although Turner is commonly identified as the principal architect of the self-help movement, he was less the inventor than the promoter, as the term "aided self-help" and its beginnings date back to Jacob Crane in 1945 (Ward, 2012). The idea of self-help was also present in the writings of Charles Abrams and William Magnin. Turner's main contribution was to bring ideas about squatter settlements and the urban poor to the attention of urban scholars around the world.

<sup>13</sup> Geddes's relational perspective emphasizes the interplay between the environment and organisms. Things and organisms should not be thought of separately, but what is important is the relationship between them.

### 3.1. Turner’s recurring ideas: learnings from Peru

Turner worked in Peru from 1957 to 1965, and it was these experiences that would shape his perspectives on the meaning of housing, the challenges posed by institutions and their potential solutions. By observing the processes of self-building in Peru, he consolidated his perception -already present in Geddes's thinking- that housing should be understood as a process in direct relation to its user (Fitcher & Turner, 1976: 245)<sup>14</sup>. Rather than seeing a house as an object or a finished product, Turner saw it as an ongoing process that grows, improves, and evolves according to each person's resources (Figure 6). In this sense, he believed that the key to the *barriadas*, or any shantytown was, in fact, its progressive growth, paced over time (Turner, 2018: 219) (Figure 7).

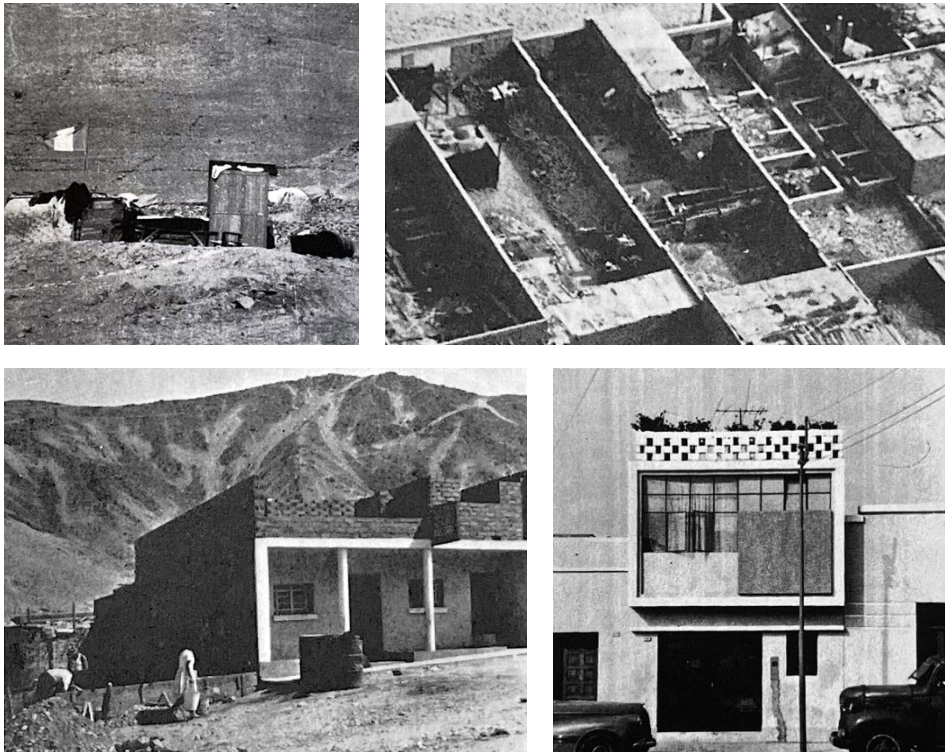


Figure 6: Progressive development of the shack. Turner distinguishes four main phases: the provisional hut in the first weeks (top left), the construction of the fence once the lot is appropriated (top right), the first floor building in the first years (down left), and the complete house with second floor and infrastructure of running water, mains electricity and paving after about twenty years. Source: Turner, 2018: 42, John F.C. Turner Archive, Colegio de Arquitectos de Cataluña.

<sup>14</sup> This is what Turner called "housing as a verb," linking the action of housing to self-construction and its ability to adapt alongside the lives of its inhabitants.

In addition, Turner championed the idea that self-build empowers individuals to create their own spaces. This concept is closely tied to the personal satisfaction from manual work, implication and creativity, as individuals would have the freedom to design their environment<sup>15</sup>. Building one's own home created a much more intimate relationship between the user and the environment that would also shape the owner in the process, something marketed housing units do not offer (Turner, 1968a).



Figure 7: Stages of squatter settlement growth. Source: Turner, 2018: 42, John F.C. Turner Archive, Colegio de Arquitectos de Cataluña.

He believed that the problem in these rapidly growing regions was one of housing deficit, arguing that uncontrolled urban settlements resulted from the mismatch between popular demand for housing and available institutional resources. He believed that “no housing agency in any newly urbanizing country can even begin to make an impression on the housing problem without the active participation of the people themselves” (Turner, 1968b: 128), and advocated a more democratic and community-based approach<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, he noted that

<sup>15</sup> Which ties back to the ideals of the barn raising tradition.

<sup>16</sup> Comparing hierarchical housing systems to grid structures, Turner pointed out that the former collapse financially, socially, and even physically (citing the example of the superblocks

coercive architecture often produced harmful results, making people's lives worse rather than better. True democracy in housing, he believed, would come from enabling individuals to take charge of their own housing solutions<sup>17</sup>.

In response to the inability of the formal housing market to provide affordable housing on a large scale, Turner proposed a solution based on self-help that would give the urban poor the means and authority over their housing in what Turner called "the principle of self-government" (Turner, 1977: 115). Central to this idea was a rethinking of the role of government. Turner believed in the state as a provider, and he proposed that government legislation and technical resources should complement the initiative and substantial investment capacity of ordinary people. He argued that for positive change to happen, there needed to be a shift from prepackaged housing programs to supporting self-managed housing actions at the local level (Turner, 1985: 540).

To determine how much support institutions should provide, Turner categorized self-construction processes into three forms: spontaneous, directed, and assisted. Spontaneous self-construction would allow families with their own resources to act independently as their own contractors, with no support of the state. Directed self-construction was often undertaken by local government agencies, which would define the scope of the project and the organization and acquisition of materials -Turner saw this as leading to inferior results- and assisted self-construction, where the government would provide loans and technical assistance (Turner, 2018: 71-76). From the different cases seen in Peru, he will gradually move from directed aided self-help to spontaneous self-help, in a progressive reduction of government control, although he was not radical and therefore did not reject assisted interventions when the government complemented the individual tasks developed by the inhabitants (Turner, 2018: 217).

After his transformative experiences in Peru<sup>18</sup>, John F. C. Turner continued to refine his ideas during his tenure at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he arrived in 1965. During this time -he taught at MIT from 1965 to 1973- he worked extensively on academic articles that provided a theoretical basis for his observations and experiences. His encounters with like-minded individuals, including William Grindley and Hans Harms, reinforced his commitment to self-construction and user-centered housing.

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built in Caracas in the 1950s), while the latter tend to thrive. He emphasized that the viability of any housing system depends on the care and participation of its users. (Turner, 1977: 50).

<sup>17</sup> To illustrate this, Turner presents two family situations: one in which a painter lives modestly in a shack and saves for a prosperous future ("supportive shack"), and another in which a bricklayer lives in a well-equipped house provided by the government but faces burdensome costs and risks ("oppressive house"). The material quality of the house does not always correlate with better living conditions. (Turner, 1977: 73-76).

<sup>18</sup> He refers to his work on slums in Peru as an authentic process of un-schooling of everything he had learned in England - "schooled as an architect, deschooled in Peru"- (Turner, 2018: 198).

At MIT, Turner encouraged students to explore the context of housing as a process, challenging them to consider the changing situations of families and how their house suited them. This approach led to a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between inhabitants and their environment, moving away from a focus on housing as a static object.

Upon the end of his stay, he published "Freedom to Build" and matured "Housing by People", and also wrote reports for various agencies, including research on self-building in the United States, arguing that the issue of housing reform by poor users were in fact universal issues, applicable to all contexts (Turner, 2018: 224).

### 3.2. Criticism and legacy

While Turner's ideas revolutionized urban development, they were not without their critics. After the enormous impact of *Housing by People* and the Habitat I conference in Vancouver -where Turner was a prominent keynote speaker- some argued that his philosophy overlooked structural inequalities and constraints, particularly poverty, that limited the real choices of residents (Golda-Pongratz, 2021). Others accused Turner of romanticizing squatter-type incremental housing, suggesting that it perpetuated *laissez-faire* housing policies<sup>19</sup>.

Despite these criticisms, Turner's advocacy of self-help housing strategies guided the housing policies of international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank in the 1970s (Cohen, 2015). These agencies began to support self-build and housing improvement projects, emphasizing well-managed programs such as sites and services programs<sup>20</sup>, settlement renewal initiatives, and the legalization of squatter property (Gyger, 2013: 291-29) (Figure 8)<sup>21</sup>.

His ideas about the power of the user to decide how to shape their physical space – the user as an active producer of space rather than a consumer – continue to shape urban planning today and can be seen in the "lighter, faster, cheaper" approach to placemaking that has gained momentum as a strategy for transforming spaces with limited resources. In contrast to the state-sponsored, institutionally based approach to urbanism, Turner's bottom-up tactics,

<sup>19</sup> This led to a movement on incremental housing that would later be followed by Balkrishna Doshi, Elemental, and others.

<sup>20</sup> Sites and services programs consisted of the division of the land into lots and the provision by the government of the minimum infrastructure development of basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation.

<sup>21</sup> Relatedly, another of Turner's great legacies is the principle of land tenure - residents don't improve the land if they don't own it - which has been updated to the present day to create Community Land Trusts (CLTs). For more information, see Min Soo Chun, Alice and Brisson, Irene (2015), *Ground Rules in Humanitarian Design*, Wiley, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tulaneu/detail.action?docID=1991753>.

empowered by local knowledge, have influenced an alternative to planning that allows communities to shape the public realm on limited budgets and build incrementally (McGillivray et al., 2023: 2).

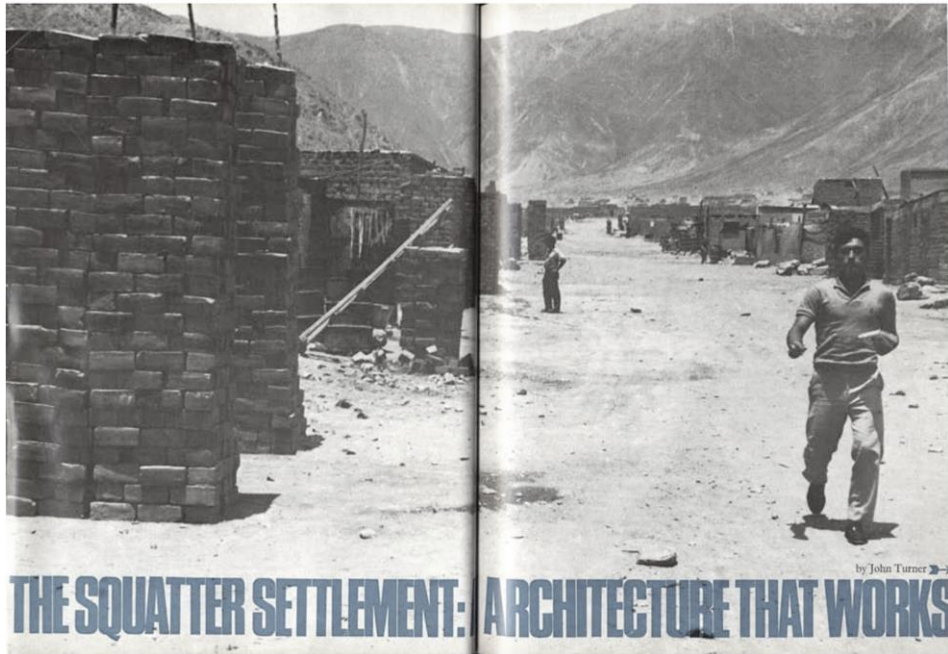


Figure 8: For Turner, squatter settlements, developed by residents with their own hands, according to their own needs, was "an architecture that works". Source: Turner, 1968a: 355-356, John F.C. Turner Archive, Colegio de Arquitectos de Cataluña.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In the field of informal architecture and community development, the visionary work of Karl Linn and John Turner illuminates a path toward more inclusive, resilient, and socially conscious urban environments, and their work remains relevant today for several compelling reasons.

First, both architects emphasized the importance of community participation to address urban planning issues in a more egalitarian and equitable manner. Participation, they believed, promotes social development by increasing local self-reliance, maximizes the efficiency of project implementation, reduces project costs, and ensures that the improvements made meet local priorities<sup>22</sup>. Based on their experience with marginalized communities, they realized that participation

<sup>22</sup> It must be said that not everything related to self-help is positive: It takes much longer to build houses as the labor is not specialized, the construction is imperfect, etc. See: Abrams, 1969: 171.

should not be limited to the construction process, but should be included from the earliest stages of decision making and design to ensure better acceptance and results<sup>23</sup>. This led to a shift at some point in their careers from community engagement (in Linn's case) and facilitated self-help ideas (Turner) to promoting process institutions (Linn) and autonomous self-help (Turner), demonstrating their commitment to sustained community self-determination. These methods are particularly relevant at a time when an urgent insistence on participatory democracy has resurfaced.

Linn and Turner's experiences influenced the policies and practices of international organizations that are still in place today. Turner's advocacy of the active participation of residents in creating and improving their living conditions has strongly influenced organizations such as the World Bank and UN-Habitat, which support housing programs based on self-help and increasingly recognize the need for community participation, local control, and in-situ upgrading of settlements (Hernández & Allen, 2012: 11). On the other hand, Linn's concept of Neighborhood Commons laid the foundation for Community Development Corporations (CDCs), which have since proliferated across the United States. These organizations have become vital resources that enable cities to embrace more participatory, community-driven urban planning that directly serves people and fosters a sense of grassroots ownership and responsibility.

Both architects were critical of institutions. In Linn's case, it was the racial segregation fostered by urban renewal and the rigidity and lack of diversity in universities<sup>24</sup>; in Turner's, it was the inability of the state to provide the amount of housing needed in rapidly growing cities and the imposition of impractical standards on the urban poor<sup>25</sup>. They argued that professionalized institutions had led to the alienation of people, and advocated a change in the role of the architect as someone who shares his knowledge, a facilitator (Turner, 1985; Hirsch, 2014), as well as the role of the state as a provider that complements the capacities and resources of individuals, promoting ideas of greater freedom and adaptability that have positively informed contemporary practice. Their redefinition of authority and control - who decides - has promoted new policies from a pattern of centrally administered projects to centrally supported and locally self-managed projects

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<sup>23</sup> These ideas are still present in UN Habitat reports. See: UN-HABITAT, 2014: 17.

<sup>24</sup> Linn worked in response to the physical conditions of ghettoized environments and the disruptive effects of urban renewal programs on the urban poor, who were predominantly African American. Thus, many of Linn's commons were built on vacant lots that were tangible reminders of municipal neglect (Hirsch, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Escalating land costs and stringent regulations are forcing low-income people to resort to squatting as their only housing option, especially in rapidly urbanizing cities. This highlights the disconnect between housing standards set by wealthy policymakers and the practical needs of a significant portion of the population who cannot afford these policies.



where the design, programming and implementation of local development is primarily in the hands of the local community<sup>26</sup>.

In addition, Linn and Turner championed the idea of process over product. Their commitment to flexible and open-ended design has enduring relevance in today's complex urban landscapes, where incremental development is a means to adaptability and resilience (Turner & Wakely, 2013: 5). This is closely related to the idea of sustainability and the efficient use of local resources -both financial and material- which are recurring themes in their work. Linn's reuse of discarded materials and Turner's affinity for vernacular architecture reflect a deep respect for a sustainable approach to building that remains a challenge today.

Furthermore, their common principles of phased design and civic participation have set the stage for contemporary practices of tactical urbanism and placemaking. Their ideas of self-help and locally controlled projects, coupled with the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges of uncertainty, a growing disillusionment with traditional models of governance, economic crises and loss of community identity, have shifted the focus of contemporary urban planners toward more inclusive, participatory, and locally driven decision-making processes (Bishop and Williams, 2012:3). Placemaking, being dynamic and adaptive, allows for the crossing of professional boundaries and power structures. It highlights the significance of experimenting with change and involving local communities in the co-creation of self-managed spaces (Petrescu & Petcou, 2013).

Their approaches are not limited to struggling nations, but transcend borders as the erosion of community bonds is a global concern. In a world increasingly dominated by electronic communication, the very concept of "community" needs to be redefined. Although Linn and Turner's ideas remind us that true community involves face-to-face interaction, mutual aid, and trust<sup>27</sup> -same ethos that guided barn-raising practices- we wonder what community is now, in a world where we work in a city different from the one we live in, with such high rates of tourism and little knowledge of our neighbors.

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<sup>26</sup> For example, The UK government is proposing what it calls *Open-Source Planning*. See: Conservative Party, Open Source Planning, Policy Green Paper No.14, retrieved from [www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/planning-green-paper.ashx](http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/planning-green-paper.ashx) (Accessed Oct 11, 2023).

<sup>27</sup> In Turner's words: "Community is where community happens."

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