

Daphne Bramham: Reimagining housing for the poor and cities without cars

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST JANUARY 25, 2015



McGill architecture professor Vikram Bhatt, winner of the Margoese National Living Design Prize from UBC, thinks people should live where they can grow some of their own food.

Photograph by: Dave Sidaway, THE GAZETTE/Dave Sidaway

A slum or a squatter's settlement isn't where one expects to find an architect.

Yet, it's in those communities on three different continents that Vikram Bhatt has spent most of his distinguished career.

What he's learned from the people who live in some of the worst places in the world has informed his 40 years of teaching at McGill University and led to his designs for minimum-cost housing that have been used in China, India and Mexico.

What they've shown him has turned him into one of Canada's leading proponents of urban agriculture and encouraged him to believe that we must reimagine and reshape our cities.

Bhatt received the 2014 Margoese National Design for Living Prize and \$50,000 last week from the University of B.C.'s school of architecture and landscape architecture.

"By observing, you learn," he told me over the phone from Montreal. "But you need to observe humbly and sympathetically. It's not easy to do.

"If you ask a question, people will answer you in the way that they think you want to be answered. Instead, you need to see what people are doing ... People say the darndest things."

But if there is a question worth asking, Bhatt says it's this: "What is your dream home?"

Few architects, planners, developers and politicians ask that question, he says. They especially don't ask the poor.

What he's observed is that the poor will squat in makeshift accommodation at an opportune location rather than live in a better home some distance away.

"Space is always more important to them than a permanent structure. Of course, it's a bit different in places where the climate is colder," he says. "But even if they (squatters and slum dwellers) build a little structure, many would rather rent it out to generate a little money while they stay in their little (temporary) structure."

But even the middle class rarely has a say in what's built. If they did, Bhatt suggests, we'd likely have something other than rows and rows of identical houses. We might not have shopping malls or paved parking lots, and maybe a lot fewer cars downtown.

What he's certain we'd have is more green space.

We'd also likely choose higher-density housing because, regardless of income, people's priority for their dream home is always to have it located close to everything they need, not least of which is work, Bhatt says.

Beyond location, when Bhatt has probed a bit deeper into people's dream homes, they almost inevitably say, "It would be nice to have a garden."

Gardens provide an opportunity to grow fresh vegetables, but they're also spaces that anchor people to their home and their community.

Growing one's own food is an economic necessity for many of the world's urban poor. But it may become a necessity for more of us. Already a majority of the world's seven billion citizens live in cities, with more flooding in each day. Where will all the food come from to sustain the community?

Bhatt calls that conundrum of how to build sustainable communities architects' "Hydra" question. (Hydra is a mythical, multi-headed beast.)

Beyond providing shelter, sustainable communities must be places where people have a sense of ownership and responsibility; where they can attain and use skills to become fully engaged citizens; and, where they have the opportunity to move up within that society.

In terms of the poor, that means finding ways for them to build equity, even as tenants.

Forty years ago, Bhatt pioneered the use of rooftops for gardens. Now, rooftop gardens are an essential part of energy-efficient and environmentally sustainable buildings.

Because of his work, commercial gardens and fish farms are now legal to operate in cities such as Kampala in Uganda, Colombo in Sri Lanka and Rosario in Argentina.

At home in Montreal, Bhatt led the movement a decade ago to rip up and replace the grass and

ornamental beds that covered much of McGill's campus with gardens.

In 2011 alone, campus gardens yielded 1,500 kilos of produce, which was given to organizations such as Meals On Wheels and sold at neighbourhood markets.

Bhatt was also a proponent of getting cars off the campus.

He emphasizes that he's anti-car, but Bhatt believes we must reimagine cities so that they work best for us.

For the past 120 years, cars have reshaped and moulded cities. But Bhatt believes it's an unsustainable model. The land is too valuable for housing and food production to be paved over and parked on.

"It's a unique time in history. The majority of humanity is living in places of our own creation," he says.

"Most of us now live in places conceived, imagined and intellectually formed in our own image. So, the future is all ours if we can engage this challenge creatively."

The first part of the challenge is simple. We need to dream.

The second part is harder. We need to find leaders and elect politicians who will listen.

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Ideology, not cost-benefit-analysis, is the underlying theme of this article. The world cannot go back to the way things were and still support the existing, much less the future population! - cjk