

REPORT OF THE FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
SELF-HELP HOUSING

Arling House

Westmonton, Virginia

December 6 - 9, 1965



What the participants recommended

What they talked about in workshops

What the speakers had to say

What plans are being made for the future

What literature and financing is available

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THE FUTURE OF SELF-HELP HOUSING

by

Richard J. Margolis*

By and large, it has been an excellent three days; so good, in fact, that I haven't much to add, you'll be pleased to hear. Besides, Bill King has asked me to be brief. He apparently has read some of my articles.

What does one say about the future of self-help housing in America to an audience that represents its past and its present, as well as its future? Perhaps I should discuss the implications of self-help, but I think that was well covered last night. Or I might deliver a short tribute to all of you and to your martyrdom, but I don't think that would really further the cause of self-help.

And now I catch myself using the word "cause" in association with self-help, and that really leads me to the main point that I want to make. A conference such as this inevitably creates its own vocabulary, and it is often a vocabulary of the crusade. Now I think that's dangerous. And we should beware of the danger.

I have called self-help a cause; it really isn't, it's a technique, a method which many of us feel merits wide application. We are not out to slay dragons but to build communities.

While we are at it, let me bring up a couple more words that have been used around here. I have used them myself. One is "manifesto," a blunt, heavy instrument which, apparently, we are to hurl at an indifferent society; the other is "the self-help movement," a term that suggests, among other things, great masses of people and the inexorable tide of humanity. Actually, as we all know, self-help housing in America has affected only a few people in a few places. How many United States families are now living in houses or apartments aided by self-help techniques? If we counted, could we reach 1,200? The answer is no; I've counted.

I think we do ourselves an injustice if we exaggerate the role our fragile technique has played in American life. For how can we expect to move ahead, if we delude ourselves that we've already arrived? On Monday night, referring to the Administration's noisy war against poverty, someone noted an "aura of hypocrisy over this crusade." We should be careful that we who are committed to self-help housing do not earn a similar criticism. This certainly means that we must measure our performance, not in terms of the obstacles we have had to hurdle (and they've been considerable) but in terms of the needs we have yet to meet. Measured by such standards, our self-help movement -- this peculiar institution of ours -- is still an infant. We may expect great things from it; we may even cherish it for what it may some day grow into; but we cannot by any stretch of the imagination treat it as if it has already come of age.

*Writer on housing, education and race problems; Consultant to government agencies.

and a book of diagrams. With this kit a builder could be more independent of the supervisor after he has been given preliminary training in techniques.

(N.B. Donald Hanson concluded his remarks by presenting the recommendations developed in the Workshops.)

Now having said this, let me very quickly move on to a few thoughts on how we can speed up this process of coming of age. These remarks should not be interpreted as a blueprint for a total program but rather as some random ideas, most of which I've already voiced during the last few days.

First, financial flexibility, which is a happy euphemism; I really mean the need for money. I think, however, we can't get more money until we admit to ourselves that conventional self-help is not necessarily the only way of doing it. If we see the condition of self-help housing in America, we see that the technique is following a kind of set pattern or mold, and we find it difficult to break. For example, every self-help housing project I've run across adheres to the concept of a long-term mortgage and sweat equity. Is it an essential feature? Well, we behave as if it is, but we forget that we wrote the rules. Can we conceive of a self-help project that short-circuits the mortgage system -- that gives the participating family outright ownership of the house? Immediately? Why not? Of course, it would require a subsidy, but there's nothing in the statute books that says the war against poverty has to break even; no one expects it to. Only we self-helpers, in our apparent anxiety to justify our existence, speak of stamping out poverty by staying in the black.

It is time, I think, that we admit to ourselves and to everyone else, that self-help costs money, that it may not be the very model of free enterprise that we sometimes claim it to be and that we are more interested in saving people than in saving money. Why not pay the participants for their labors? We have not done this, usually, because I think we've been captives of our own vernacular. The idea of sweat equity has mesmerized us. It seems plain that a man who must stay away from his job in order to build his house needs more than his sweat -- he needs cash. And it seems equally plain that in many communities, any sensible excuse, ANY sensible excuse for pouring cash into the economy, should be seized upon.

What I'm trying to say is that self-help is young, is growing, and yet it has already given rise to a number of economic orthodoxies; and we should beware of them because they are traps.

The second idea we might give some thought to concerns the nature of the process of self-help. We sometimes use the term while avoiding the substance. Now, we've gone over this before but I am a bit concerned about the word "self-help" as a kind of coinage which we are capitalizing on more and more -- the kind of coinage that buys grants, for example. I think we should make sure that this term has a meaning behind it, and that we just don't use it as a label.

If we approach self-help with the idea that the builders must prove themselves, if we fail to see the difference between voluntary labor and conscription, then self-help becomes empty of meaning and the houses may also become empty of meaning. Unfortunately, some self-help projects in the United States actually work against the very benefits they are expected to achieve. By relying entirely on sweat, while ignoring spirit, some sponsors tend to invite resistance. In the philosophy, for example, that "the Indian must work for it," or the migrant worker must work for it, or the Negro slum worker must work for it, there is an element of force or compulsion, of the big stick, which can, and sometimes does, put quite a damper on the group's enthusiasm. To be sure, the participant must work for it, but to make this

truism the cornerstone of a housing project is to imply that he must be pressed into labor. Such a notion is hardly compatible with authentic self-help, which relies mainly on voluntary initiative.

A sponsor's insistence on a prescribed number of hours of labor, his finicky tabulating of sweat, his tendency to make and enforce all the rules himself, his frequent failure to consult the participants about any of the details of the project -- these may all serve to stifle initiative and discourage meaningful involvement. Ultimately, the family may play a merely passive role, treating the self-help requirements like some bad-tasting medicine, as something they must swallow in order to get the house. We cannot, in other words, weigh a man's perspiration and call it equity. And we cannot tote up a man's hours at the construction site and call it meaningful participation.

The vital ingredients of self-help are qualitative and do not readily yield to measurement. And we all know what they are. They can be found in Mrs. Nosie's fabulous, awesome painting crew at San Carlos, at Giff's Corner in Philadelphia, and in the home of the Indianapolis builder who said: "I'll never move; my blood is in this house." I'm saying in effect that the process is at least as important as the project. And if the process of acquiring his own house is to be meaningful, the participant must play a vital role in that process.

In places where most of the population is down and out, and where little can be done unless it is done in concert, community development is the first order of business. Therefore, and we should face up to this, one important test of a self-help housing project is whether or not it produces more long-term community development.

Third, we ought to consider whom precisely self-help can best serve, and I'm not talking about the poorest of the poor here, for we're all aware that we haven't reached them. And we don't really know -- I'm not quite so optimistic as some of you others -- but we don't know whether we can reach them or not. We know we haven't. All I can say on that is that we'll never know unless we try. It's useless to speak theoretically on this point. We have to be willing to risk failure by pushing the self-help technique to its natural limits.

Urban areas are more and more ready for self-help. As Alinsky gallops from city to city, from slum to slum, and as the concepts of community action, block development, neighborhood associations -- as these concepts grow and take root -- our big cities all over the country will be ready for self-help housing. Most neighborhood groups are not aware of self-help housing. I've talked to a number of them and they've never heard of it.

One caveat here. It is not enough to discover for ourselves that self-help can work with this group or that group. We also have to ask ourselves whether it's the best solution -- sometimes it isn't. Yesterday I gave an example -- you'll have to bear with me, you who've heard of it -- of the Sioux Indians on Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. Many of the children are sleeping in rusted out old car bodies. It gets to be 40° below in January, and some of these children die of exposure. Now I think it would be rather barbarous to force such families to go through the long educative process of self-help. What they need now is shelter.

In short, let us recognize that self-help is not a universal faith to be indiscriminately applied wherever someone complains of a leaky roof, but simply a useful technique that will help some people in some situations.

But I still must return to the poorest of the poor, whom we have neglected, partly because of our own timidity, because we have not wanted to risk failure, and partly because we've been prisoners of financing techniques which exclude the very poor. Certainly we are not in the business of pushing self-help in order to house the middle class, but rather to create a new middle class.

Yet self-help as it is presently being practiced, sometimes focuses on precisely those families who would have helped themselves anyway. Sponsors who choose families who are already capable of saving themselves may get their houses built, but they remind me of a short four-line poem called: "What is a Patron." It goes like this:

He is a patron who looks down
With careless eye on men who drown;
But if they chance to reach the land
Encumbers them with helping hand.

Fourth, leadership. We didn't do enough talking about leadership here. We need to recruit leaders, to train them, to get more of them. I think this, in fact, is the single most important thing we must do if we want self-help to spread. You all know better than I do how much the success of self-help depends upon leaders, and how scarce the supply usually is.

We need internship programs. In Puerto Rico and elsewhere nearly every project yields a leader who is promptly snapped up and sent off somewhere to another project, for pay; he is put on the staff. We do this occasionally, but most of the time we don't. Most of our natural leaders vanish. We don't seem to know how to make use of them.

Finally, I would like to suggest that we cling to a certain toughmindedness about the process of self-help and its results. What does that mean? We should be quite chary of making claims for self-help that we cannot substantiate. What really are the long-term benefits of self-help? Do we know? Have we any solid research on the subject? We do know that not all the blessings we claim for self-help are guaranteed -- the good maintenance, the continued community action, the family involvement. None of these long-term blessings is automatic. The assumption that honest perspiration can overnight make winners out of losers is far too simple a proposition to support the complexities of human motives. We need to know more about the consequences of self-help, and to learn what we must do to insure its promised benefits.

These five points hardly cover the subject, but I think you yourselves have covered the subject with admirable thoroughness in the last three days. In closing, I would like to point out that after thirty years -- I think it is about thirty years of incubation -- self-help housing seems now to have hatched. We have a responsibility to see that it grows up, not as a wild adolescent but as a sober, productive adult. And we must make sure that it reaches all the people who stand to gain from it.

And so I counsel a combination of pushing and patience -- pushing the governmental authorities to recognize self-help, to facilitate its use by law and by subsidy; pushing for more houses, and pushing the technique itself to its natural limits so that we might finally know what those limits are and whom we can best serve. And patience with the ponderous processes of government, and with the tide of human affairs in general, which always seem to lag behind our fondest aspirations.