Comment of the Holcim Awards Jury Europe

The new mahala (neighborhood) for Romani people in Belgrade is an outstanding demonstration of how private initiatives can lead to a substantial improvement in the living conditions for chronically poor inhabitants of informal settlements. Contrary to other slum upgrading projects, the new mahala for Romani people will not be placed in the existing slum but at a new location on land owned by the city of Belgrade which is already well-equipped with public utilities and in the neighborhood of vegetable and meat shops. The close integration of various goals such as education, employment, health care, housing, anti-discrimination, poverty reduction and gender equality issues is a unique and very promising approach.

All stakeholders, particularly the permanent and the temporary inhabitants of the informal settlement as well as government authorities, were involved in the goal setting, planning and realization process. The new housing units are designed and built in harmony with the Romani culture. The schemes are simple but appropriate with a high degree of standardization reflecting the traditions and habits of Romani families. Due to the intensive involvement of the future users, the later relocation of the community is accomplished selectively. Overall, it is a convincing example of a fruitful collaboration between individuals, families and government authorities.

Project description by author

Adequate home for Romani family consists of five “livings”.

In comparison with the conventional approaches, which have mainly sought to solve Romani housing problem via “basic needs” + “minimum standards”, the main contribution of our project is a response to five demands of Romani family life: a) living on the earth: home is on the ground; b) living out of cage: flat + verandah + garden form a home; c) living personal life: a home is not merely a flat; d) living inside a family: a core of family life; e) living out of cage: flat + verandah + garden form a home.

Inclusion and participation.

New mahala layout.

Ethical standards and social equity

Adapted home for Romani family consists of five “livings”.

Inclusion and participation.

New mahala layout.

Economic performance and compatibility

Acceptable financial relationship is a precondition for long-term viability.

Construction of new Romani peoples’ mahala is a part of Belgrade’s social housing program financed by the Secretariat for Social and Children’s Welfare. Houses will be rented to the families through subsidy schemes. Cost-sharing price around €350/m2 will contribute to rent affordability.

Contextual and aesthetic impact

For new Romani mahala will improve its urban context as well.

Development of new Romani peoples’ mahala throughout numerous programs will contribute to wider surroundings and non-mahala residents. Places where people gather (park, local center, social club, bus stop) are strong architectural anti-discrimination tools that could improve ethical tolerance.

Relevance to target issues by author

Quantum change and transferability

Romani inclusion is base for sustainable living.

Romani inclusion in process of strategizing, planning and designing new mahala: process of defining problem, analyzing options, finding solution, revising/research, understanding long-term consequences, ensuring the monitoring and feedback – was of vital importance for creating vision of viable living conditions for local Romani community. Romani inclusion is a first step of the poverty reduction. We accepted their culture of housing as adequate and attitude towards socially sustainable mahala. We understood their wishes about income generation and employment, and views to schooling and health care. We transformed their demands into designed solutions, concerning the new mahala’s interface with the surrounding environment.

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