

## young urban designers

### Rebuilding Homes in Post-tsunami India

What happens when housing developments are planned in other parts of the world, and in developing countries? This summer I spent a month in south-east India and saw one approach to the delivery of a large-scale housing project there.

Tarangambadi is a busy fishing village in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. With a population of 7000, around 80% of its citizens belong to fishing families, the remainder being other Hindus, plus Muslims, Christians and Dalits - members of Hinduism's lowest caste. Situated close to the sea and on low-lying land, a large proportion of the homes of fishing families were destroyed or damaged in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, which also took the lives of 500 citizens. Those who lost their homes are currently living in temporary shelters provided by western charities and other NGOs - either long sheds subdivided to give each family a room, front door and kitchen area, or an individual, stand-alone hut. Their residents are understandably impatient for new permanent homes, as particularly in the less sophisticated shelters, overcrowding, lack of privacy and hygiene risks are ever-present issues.

The socio-economic situation of the fishing families sets the context for the reconstruction of homes. Water quality is a big issue; government tankers bring drinking-quality water into the village, but supplies are inadequate, and since the tsunami, the water yielded from ground pumps has been saline. Only 4% of homes have a toilet, so open defecation is the norm, generating risks of disease and contamination of the groundwater and sea. Electricity is universal here, however, with even temporary shelters benefiting from lighting and fans. A doctor is based in the village part-time, and although most fishermen and women did not receive formal schooling, their children are increasingly doing so. Fishermen typically make 150 rupees (£1.20) a day during the 7.5 months of the year when they can fish. Their wives often transport and sell the fish, generating around 50-100 rupees each day. With many issues facing the fishing community, charities and other organisations are busy at work in Tarangambadi. There are over 90 NGOs actively involved in education programmes, health initiatives, financial support and construction here, including the South Indian Federation of Fishermen's Societies (SIFFS).

The SIFFS reconstruction project intends to re-house all of the displaced families. Funded by Christian Aid and the Swiss Red Cross, the project is the brainchild of local architect Benny Kuriakose. The concept is that of a participatory approach, where - in contrast with most government- and NGO-led housing projects here - families contribute to the design of their homes and have a sense of ownership from the outset.

Following the tsunami, the government bought an area of land immediately inland of the existing village and donated it to SIFFS for the project, subject to certain conditions. The fishermen's Panchayat - the village's most influential (although unelected) governing body - opted for a grid layout for the new neighbourhood and requested an even distribution of open spaces throughout the area. Between the Panchayat, the lead architect and the other project staff, a layout was developed based on principal roads at its centre and perimeter, secondary streets leading off these and 680 orthogonal plots of land, each allocated to a specific family. Four house designs were drawn up; as well as selecting their preferred house type, families have been able to determine where their new house will sit within its plot of land, where windows and doors are located, and choose some of the internal fittings.

I joined the project as an intern, working in the project office situated between the existing fishing families' neighbourhood and the new housing area. Construction was underway and was slowly progressing; the first houses were nearing completion but many decisions were outstanding. The project approach represented a picture of aspiration and achievement mixed with naivety and weakness. A positive aspect was the mix of people in the office: architects, engineers and a social team from across south India, teenage volunteers from the village itself, and interns from India and Europe. But unfortunately the work undertaken was marred by an absence of leadership and management, and construction on site was beset by a lack of adequately skilled managers and in-existent quality control.

Many elements of the new neighbourhood were still to be planned. A toilet was to be provided for each house, but the sanitation system was yet to be determined. Electricity, street lights and drains were expected to be provided by the government, but only after completion of the houses. Open spaces were allocated but did not yet have a purpose. The interns started to address these issues; for me, the challenge of persuading people of the importance of good connections between the new neighbourhood and the places where fishing families go - mainly the beach and the centre of the village - was huge.

What did I gain from the experience? An insight into the realities of poverty, international aid and housing in one part of a developing country, and experience of post-disaster reconstruction and the challenges it poses. It was also a great privilege working alongside the villagers, local professionals and interns. What did the project gain from my involvement? I don't know yet if my ideas for improving connections and shaping streets and open spaces will make their way into reality. Hopefully it was a learning process for everyone; and hopefully those who need to gain most from this project will indeed do so.

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