



Cua Nam Ward

CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN ASIAN CITIES SERIES • JUNE 2020

When the city announced plans to evict and redevelop all the old collective workers' housing in Vinh, 29 families in one of those communities, in Cua Nam Ward, decided to propose to rebuild their housing themselves. The plans they developed, with help from architects, included widening the lane and rebuilding 2-story row-houses. They used this plan, and the availability of housing loans from ACHR, to negotiate for permissions with the local authorities, which finally agreed to the people's proposal. This little project ended up changing housing policy in Vietnamese cities.

- Project Block 6A, Cua Nam Ward
- Location Vinh City, Vietnam
- Size 29 households
- Finished 2010
- Type On-site reconstruction of old “sub-standard” collective workers housing, with approval from the government, but without formal land-use rights.

CONTEXT, PROCESS AND PARTNERS

The city:

The coastal city of Vinh is Ho Chi Minh's birthplace. In the 1970s and 80s, under Vietnam's centralized planning system, Vinh was targeted to be developed as an industrial city. Many collective rental housing projects were built by different state-run factories to house their workers and their families. Most of this housing took the form of poorly-built one or two-room row houses of 15 to 23 square meters. After *Doi Moi* economic reforms began in Vietnam in 1986, many of Vinh's state-run factories were either closed down or privatized. In many cases, the factories sold these houses to the workers who occupied them. But because the houses didn't come with any land-use rights, the house owners were still vulnerable to eviction. In 2009, there were still 142 of these collective housing developments in Vinh (with 3,386 households), and most were in badly deteriorated conditions.

In 2008, Vinh was reclassified as a "Special Class 1" city, even though its population was much smaller than in the other Class 1 cities like Hanoi, Danang and Ho Chi Minh City. The upgrading of Vinh's status was a boon for civic pride, but a nightmare for the city's poor communities. With the new status came a whole range of urban planning standards and "modernization" imperatives the city had to meet, like wider roads, larger land plots and taller buildings, and these changes caused a lot of eviction and demolition of the city's many poor and "substandard" housing areas.

Then in 2007, as part of the modernization process, the Provincial authority approved a proposal from the city to demolish all of Vinh's collective housing stock and upgrade the areas as "social housing", with higher planning standards, wider roads, bigger plots and larger houses. In the process, many families would be evicted and relocated to newly-developed housing elsewhere. For both the in-situ and relocation parts, the redevelopment process was to be a conventional top-down, state-planned, contractor-built housing process, with no community participation, and the people would be expected to pay for everything: land-use rights, infrastructure and expensive new houses built to a very high standard. Most of Vinh's poor worker households could not afford such housing, and would end up being made homeless by the process.

The community process:

The poor communities in Vinh did not take these big changes in their city lying down, though. Over the decades, Vinh's collective housing developments had become tightly-knit communities. The people had jobs and support systems in those areas and they wanted to stay. In February, 2009, a citywide training workshop on participatory planning and self-help housing construction was organized in Vinh by ACHR and ACVN, with technical support from a team of architects and community organizers from CODI in Thailand. In this workshop, the city authorities unveiled for the first time their plans to demolish and redevelop the city's collective workers housing. This meeting was the beginning of a public dialogue on the issue, and started a process of looking for cheaper, more community-managed alternatives to the city's expensive, top-down, contractor-driven redevelopment model.

The city of Vinh has a large and richly-developed community savings and credit movement and a Community Development Fund, but the savings groups were still quite scattered. Many of them were still managed by the Women's Union and followed the traditional Vietnamese savings group models, where all the members would take turns getting the full savings kitty, or else have shares and withdraw all their savings at Tet - the Vietnamese New year. The people had not yet been able to link the savings with issues of land and housing.

The community:

Cua Nam Ward is one of the neighborhoods in Vinh where the city had approved plans to demolish 142 units of old, "sub-standard" collective workers housing and replace them with a contractor-built redevelopment with houses of at least 70 square meters, which was the province's "minimum" house size, and which people who wanted to stay would have to pay for, at market rates. The 29 poor families living in collective housing in Block 6A were a tightly-knit community. They had all been employees of the state-run Huu Nghi ("Friendship") biscuit factory, which had long-since closed, but they had all bought their houses from the factory and were now doing other jobs. Those 29 families all wanted to stay, but they could never afford units in the new scheme.

Initiating of project:

The Block 6A community members decided to propose an alternative plan to the provincial authority, in which they would redevelop their block themselves, to save on costs, and nobody would be displaced. And ACHR and ACVN would support them. As Mr. Le Viet Hung, a community leader in Block 6A, said at the time, *"We have been living here for 30 years, and our houses are in very bad condition, with leaking roofs*

and very hot in summer. We want the government to give us the land use rights so that we can improve our settlement and rebuild our houses ourselves. Now we have a lot of work to do, to show our government another way - a way that is different than the usual system of evicting poor families living in old collective housing."

Support groups and partners in the project:

Besides support from the Vice Mayor and the Provincial Authorities, the housing project at Block 6A was supported by:

- **The Block 6A community** planned the project, negotiated the permissions and did all the construction themselves, hiring out only the difficult parts to a small local contractor.
- **Mr. Nguyen Van Chinh**, the Vice Mayor of Vinh City, was a tireless supporter of the project.
- **CDF community network in Vinh** supported the project with a \$40,000 housing loan from their CDF.
- **Women's Union of Vietnam** supported the savings process and promoted a people-led housing model
- **Associated Cities of Vietnam (ACVN)** which partnered with ACHR to implement the ACCA Program in 10 cities in Vietnam, including Vinh, and helped to promote a more community-driven housing model in Vietnam's urban development, in Vinh and other cities in Vietnam.
- **ACHR's ACCA Program** (2009-2015): The Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA) Program, was a 5-year program of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) that supported a process of citywide and community-driven slum upgrading in 215 Asian cities, in 19 Asian countries.
- **CODI:** The Community Organizations Development Institute sent teams of community leaders and staff to Vinh to learn from the project and to provide organizational and technical support.
- **Local community architects** helped the community develop their new housing layout plans and design their new row-houses.

LALAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

Legal background and legal status:

Before the housing project, the 29 families in Block 6A owned the dilapidated structures they lived in, having been given those houses by the company when the company closed down. But they did not have any papers which give them legal rights to the land. The community's first goal was to secure individual land use rights to the land, so they could become legal occupants of the land.

Land tenure:

Here is one of the most interesting aspects of the project at Block 6A. Under Vietnam's socialist system, all land is collectively owned by the people, and is administered on their behalf by the government. That's the official line. But the government can lease or sell the rights to use land, and a land use rights certificate is practically the same thing as permanent land ownership. The "fees" for buying these land use rights certificates are set by the government and vary from city to city. In Vinh, for example, land use rights in 2009 were pegged at \$350 per square meter, but by 2020 the fee had risen to \$700! With rates like that, it's easy to see how land speculation and profiteering has become the government's chief source of revenue in Vietnam, and forget about "collective" anything.

At first, the community in Block 6A tried to get official land use rights to their community, from the Provincial Authority, to ensure their legal, permanent tenure. But each family would have had to pay about \$16,800 for its 48m² plot, and that that cost was too high for almost everyone. Plus, although the city and provincial authorities were willing to give them permission to construct their houses on plots much smaller than the minimum allowable plot size of 70m², it was not willing to sell them land use rights to those sub-standard plots. As Mr. Hung pointed out later on, *"Even if our families could buy land use rights certificates, that means they would eventually sell their houses to richer people and our community would break up, bit by bit."* For in Vietnam, there is no longer any legal framework for collective land use rights - only individual.

So finally, the community just proceeded with their project anyway, and have only their togetherness, their construction permits and the public recognition of the city and provincial governments for their project to bolster their right to stay on the land they have occupied now for over four decades. And indeed, the city's Vice Mayor and the Provincial Chairman were there (with the press and TV reporters) to smile and cut the ribbon when the Block 6A project was inaugurated on World Habitat Day, in October 2010.

Government support:

The support from Vinh City's Vice Mayor, Mr. Nguyen Van Chinh, and from the Associated Cities of Vietnam (ACVN) were crucial in the community's negotiations with the city government and the provincial authorities to undertake a kind of housing development which did not follow the city's new planning standards, and then

to promote those new "people's standards" in other projects to upgrade Vinh's stock of old collective housing, without evicting or impoverishing anyone.

PROJECT FINANCING

Project costs and who paid for what?

- **Land:** The land cost nothing, because the people opted not to pay the very high fees the Provincial Government charges for getting individual land use rights. Nor is it clear the government would have sold the residents those rights, since the 48m² house plots are smaller than the Province's new 70m² minimum allowable plot size.
- **Demolition of old houses:** Cost \$103 per family (total \$2,987).
- **Infrastructure:** Cost \$303 per family, or \$8,787 for the whole community (including drains, paving, electricity and water supply connections). Compare that with \$1,166 per family for the same infrastructure services in a similar contractor-driven lower-income housing development in Vinh. The city government contributed \$350 to the infrastructure development in the community.
- **House construction:** \$72 per square meter (average total \$6,500 per house, or \$188,500 for all 29 houses). Compare that with the cost of a similarly sized 2-story row house developed by a contractor in Vinh, which would cost at least twice as much: \$141 per square meter, or \$13,000 for the house.

Financing:

The housing project at Block 6A was only partly financed by a \$40,000 big project loan from ACHR's ACCA Program, which went through the Vinh City's joint Community Development Fund (CDF). The ACCA loans from the CDF went to individual families, at 7.2% annual interest, repayable within 5 years. All the other project costs were financed by the community members themselves, from their savings. Which shows that just that small bit of extra finance and a greater sense of tenure security could unlock all this potential in people to improve their housing.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Design process:

The community developed its house designs and layout plans with help from a team of local community architects, with support from the Thai team from CODI, included widening the central lane to five meters, laying proper drains and rebuilding their own small houses using a modest two-story row-house design, on 48 square meter plots. They used their redevelopment plans to negotiate permissions, first with the city government. Once they had won the support of Vinh City's Vice Mayor, Mr. Nguyen Van Chinh, they used the force of that approval to negotiate with the provincial authority. The province finally agreed to the people's proposal in early September 2009, and the community held its ground-breaking ceremony to start the house construction on 19 March, 2010.

House design and layout plans:

The modest 2-story row-houses are built on 3m x 16m plots, and provide families who used to stay in small, dark, leaky hovels with 90m² of light-filled space.

Housing construction:

To keep costs low, the community hired a small local contractor to help with the heavy parts of the construction: excavation, concrete foundations, concrete frames, floor slabs and putting in septic tanks, etc. Community members provided all the unskilled labor, working in shifts, including carrying materials and doing the finish work. The houses were all built together, with everyone working on everyone else's house. During the course of the construction, a team of community-based builders from Thailand came to Vinh to chip in to the community's efforts and show solidarity. It took just six months to demolish the old houses, prepare the ground and construct the new houses, from top to bottom.

COMMUNITY AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Mr. Le Viet Hung (Community leader): *"The cost of the houses we built ourselves was just about half the cost of the same size house built by a contractor in Vietnam. What brought the cost of our houses down so low was solidarity in the community. We did all the construction together, we bought the building materials together, we built the foundations together and we share the common walls between houses. Through all that, we were able to reduce the cost of our houses by half. Only a community can do those things, and only when we are the ones in charge."*

Project timeline:

- February, 2009: Citywide training workshop on participatory planning and self-help housing construction
- Sept 2009: The province agreed to the people's proposal
- March 2010: The community holds its ground-breaking ceremony to start the house construction
- April 2010: Foundations completed
- May-June 2010: A group of community-based builders from Thailand come to assist the construction
- September 2010: Construction completed. People move in to their new houses
- October 3, 2010: Project is inaugurated in gala celebration and ribbon cutting with city and provincial officials, and with a seminar and celebration of World Habitat Day afterwards, at City Hall

IMPACTS OF THE PROJECT

This little housing project set an important new precedent in Vietnam. This was the first-ever case in Viet Nam in which an urban poor community living in collective housing won the right to design and rebuild their own affordable housing on the same site, with the support from both the municipal and provincial governments. It was an important breakthrough because in cities all over Viet Nam, municipal governments keen on modernizing their cities are now on the warpath to demolish and redevelop their stock of run-down collective housing, which is seen as an eyesore. When the redevelopment is done by for-profit developers, as it usually is, the redevelopment process invariably means eviction and homelessness for most of the poor families who lived there but get displaced.

The project also challenged and changed unrealistically high building standards, which make most new housing unaffordable to the poor: In all cities in Vietnam, there is a system in which communities have to link with the ward authority, the ward with the district, the district with the city and the city to the province. This centralized system has many tiers and it works very efficiently in Vietnam. But sometimes there are problems, as when the system imposes the kinds of standards we see in a city like Vinh, where all houses are supposed to be 70 square meters or bigger. That standard suddenly makes all the existing poor people's houses in the city illegal and creates an artificial reason to evict them. People might have lived and prospered for centuries in their less-than-70-square-meter dwellings without any problem, but these kinds of new standards can suddenly create a lot of problems for them.

This project at Block 6A was the first case of a collective housing community getting permission to build houses that were considerably smaller and more affordable than the provincial government's minimum social housing standards. Their new 48 square meter row houses are big, airy and comfortable, and were designed to more closely fit their affordability. This people's standard has now been officially sanctioned by the municipal government, which has agreed to replicate this model, in which the communities develop their own rebuilding plans and build their houses together, in 140 other dilapidated collective housing areas in Vinh. By 2014, five of those projects were already underway.

Spreading the idea to other communities of old collective housing in Vinh: After winning approval for their community-driven redevelopment plans, the Block 6A community began to assist four other communities living in collective housing quarters elsewhere in Vinh City to initiate the same process, in which the communities develop their own rebuilding plan, and then design and build their houses together.

Problems: The most serious problem in this project was the land tenure, and the community's inability to either afford the cost of land use rights certificates or to convince the government to provide those official land use rights in a project that doesn't meet the new official standards. Finally, the community decided not to pursue the land rights certificates at all. Mr. Le Viet Hung, the community leader in Block 6A, though, says that nobody in the community is worried: they have stayed here a long time, and now that they have rebuilt their community and have beautiful new houses and full services, and they did all that with the full, public support of the vice mayor and the city and provincial governments, and that nobody is going to try to evict them after all that!

STORIES FROM THE PROJECT

Mr. Nguyen Van Chinh (Vice Mayor of Vinh City) *"It is totally possible to link community-driven activities with the government system, because we have the same objective: communities want to improve their housing and living conditions, and that is the government's objective also.... This little project has changed the building standards and changed the city's policy for redeveloping old collective housing, from an*

expensive, contractor-driven model where many families get evicted, to a flexible, people-driven model where everyone stays and rebuilds their housing in the same place."

Mr. Nguyen Van Chinh (Vice Mayor of Vinh City) *"The people are my teacher. This community in Block 6A has set a new standard for social housing, which is now the standard for the city. This project is now being used as a model to be replicated in 140 other dilapidated old collective housing areas in the city of Vinh - the city has agreed! Now the savings group network is trying to start savings groups in all these collective housing communities and bring them into the network."*

Mrs. Le Thi Xuan (She and her husband are one of the poorest households in the community) *"Many times we told each other that we have no choice but to bear this hard life. We're close to 70 years old now. Our only income is from a small government pension and the little we earn from our tea stall. How could we ever think of building a house? When we were given a 48 square meter piece of land, many friends told us we should sell that land for a few hundred million dong and move somewhere far away to live. But luckily, with the support from the community, and with the long-term loan from the savings group, we now have this house. We are very grateful of the community and to the local authority."*

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

This case study was written in January 2020 by Ms. Tran Minh Chau, who works with ACHR in the Bangkok secretariat office and was closely involved with many of the collective housing projects implemented in Vietnam, with support from ACVN, the CDF Network and the ACCA Program.

The project at Block 6A in Vinh was one of three community-driven housing projects profiled in a film called *"The Way to End Slums"*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzyJTS6RHm8>

For more information about this and other collective housing projects, please contact ACHR:

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PHOTOS



These are some photos of conditions in the Block 6A collective housing project before the project began, with some houses unchanged.



Many of the residents would have been ready and willing to improve their small, dilapidated houses, but were unsure about eviction.



The houses and living conditions were bad, for sure, but there was no problem with social relations in this tightly-knit old community.



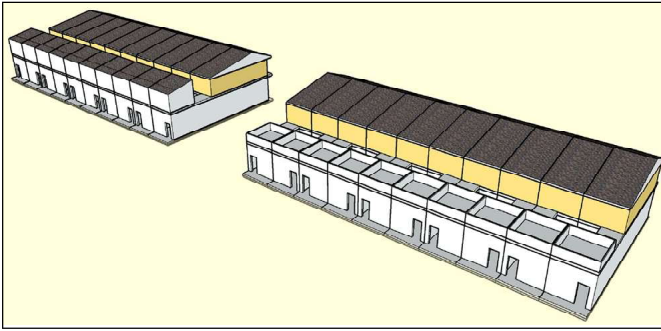
Here are some members of the generation that will grow up in nice, tall, airy, decent and secure houses, instead of run down old hovels.



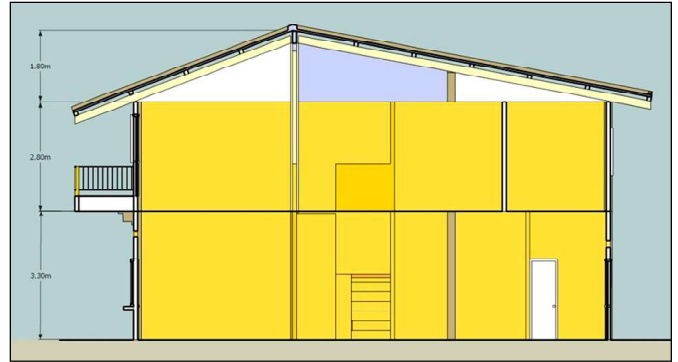
It was in this citywide workshop on self-help housing in Vinh that the idea of upgrading the collective housing in Block 6A was born.



Local architects worked with the community to develop their new layout plan and housing designs for the upgrading project.



With such limited land, the only choice was to develop small rowhouses, which made most efficient use of the land, and allowed families to go up, in order to provide more living space. In the final construction, some families built three stories and some built two.



Here is one of the schemes the people developed for a two-story rowhouse design, with two bedrooms upstairs.



Some of the design ideas included rooms upstairs which can be rented to low-income workers in the neighborhood, to expand housing and to boost the incomes of poor families.



During the construction, the families in Block 6A all found temporary accommodation nearby, so the whole site could be turned over to building.



That's Mr. Hung, in the grey suit, explaining things to some visitors to the site. He is the community's intrepid leader.



That's Mr. Nguyen Van Chinh, in the blue tie, the Vice Mayor of Vinh, who was a resourceful champion of the project from start to finish.



Some poorer families provided their own labor to keep house costs down, and the community all contributed their own money to build the house for one very poor widow who lived alone and had no income and nobody to support her.



The mood on a construction site can't help but be upbeat when the people doing the work are fulfilling a dream to build their own houses.



There is no such thing in Vietnam as a celebration that doesn't come with lots and lots of fabulous food, and the festivities to inaugurate the new houses in Block 6A was no exception.



The project was finished and formally inaugurated on World Habitat Day, in October 2010, with ceremonies at City Hall and in the community.



The ribbon-cutting by dignitaries from the community, supporters, the local government and visitors from neighboring countries.



More photos of the new project in inauguration day, with lots of visitors coming to see the new community.



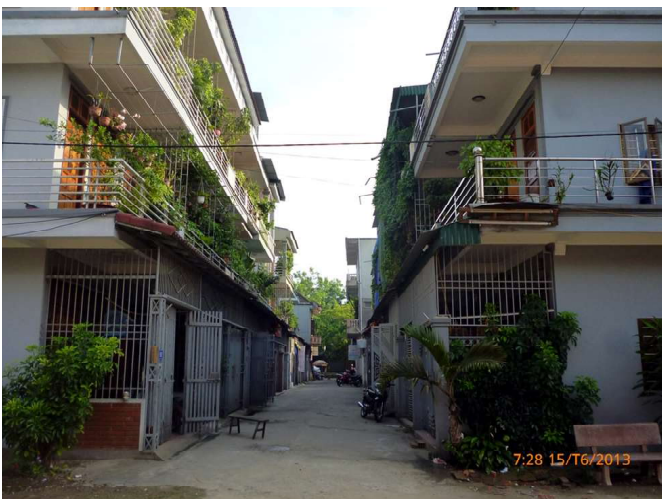
Every house had its front door thrown open to guests, and the proud community members in Block 6A were dressed up for the occasion.



The tall ceilings and light-filled spaces inside disguise the fact that the houses are built on a very narrow, "substandard" plot.



That's Mrs. Xuan in front of her new house, posing for a photo with Somsak Phonpakdee, a Thai social worker who has supported poor communities in Cambodia to do similar housing projects all over the country. There is a lively exchange of learning and sharing between the community networks in Southeast Asia.



And there is the Block 6A community a few years later, looking much more lived-in, with flowers spilling over all the balconies.