



# Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing

CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN ASIAN CITIES SERIES • APRIL 2021

**Vietnam's cities still have a lot of old, broken-down collective housing projects that were built to provide minimal housing for the workers in state-run factories. The factories are long gone, but the people are still there, and most of them are prevented from improving or rebuilding their houses by building regulations, because their houses and lanes fall below the government's minimum allowable standards. This is one of several projects that challenged those unrealistic standards and showed that it was possible for people themselves to build great big, decent, airy houses even on extremely tiny plots.**

- Project Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing
- Location Block 9, Nguyen Trai Ward, Hai Duong City, Vietnam
- Size 31 households
- Finished 2013
- Type On-site reconstruction of old "sub-standard" collective workers housing, with land-use rights.

## CONTEXT, PROCESS AND PARTNERS

### **The city:**

Hai Duong is a small city in northern Vietnam, 60 kilometers East of Hanoi, in the Red River Delta. The city has poor infrastructure, especially in the semi-rural communes around the periphery of the city, which have recently been merged into the municipality. Hai Duong has a population of 210,399 people, of whom 80% live in the 13 urban wards and the rest live in the 6 semi-rural communes. Although Hai Duong has achieved the coveted status of being a "Class 2" city, it has many run-down, low-income neighborhoods which the city development plans have not yet reached, with unpaved roads, dilapidated houses and lack of drainage and sanitation infrastructure - especially in newly merged communes in the outer edges of the city. At the same time, the cost of formal market housing has gotten so high that many of the city's residents can never dream of buying their own house or apartment.

In the 1960s and 70s, under Vietnam's centralized planning system, industrial development was promoted in cities all over Vietnam. Hundreds of collective rental housing projects were subsequently constructed by different companies to provide housing for their employees and their families. Most of that housing took the form of very poorly-built one or two-room row houses of 15 to 23 square meters. There are six of these collective housing developments in Hai Duong, and most are in badly deteriorated condition. In some cases, the factories sold these houses to the workers who occupied them, but because they didn't come with any land-use rights, the house owners are still vulnerable to eviction. In this market-oriented phase of Vietnam's development, many of these old socialist collective housing projects are being bulldozed and redeveloped, as the inner-city land they occupy skyrockets in commercial value. And poor families by the thousands who live in these neighborhoods and housing blocks are finding themselves facing either eviction or the prospect of having to pay for brand new, contractor-built relocation housing they cannot ever hope to afford. This is happening in Hai Duong, and in cities all over the country.

To make matters worse, efforts to upgrade these old collective housing projects bump into national and municipal construction bylaws, which prevent building permits from being granted to houses on plots below a certain size. In Hai Duong, for example, the minimum legal house plot has long been 40 square meters, and that means that all the old collective housing projects are "sub-standard" and cannot apply for formal land-use rights or for permission to upgrade or rebuild their houses.

### **The community:**

The Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing is one of six old collective housing projects in Hai Duong. This small community of 32 households was hidden away at the end of a small alley in Block 9 of Nguyen Trai Ward, off the bustling Chi Lang Street. The community was built in 1960 to house the garment factory workers and occupies an area of 946 square meters. Before the redevelopment project, the tiny and dilapidated row-houses (of 9 to 23 square meters) were tightly squeezed along a maze of narrow walkways.

Over time, the residential areas surrounding the community were redeveloped, with new houses and upgraded infrastructure that usually involved raising the level of the roads and storm drainage lines to well above flood levels. The residents of the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing found themselves becoming the default low-point in the neighborhood, and faced increasing problems of flooding and waterlogging, even when the rain fell very lightly. The community members shared a block of run-down common toilets, and when the community flooded - which was often - waste from the old septic tank would mingle with the flood waters and run in the lanes. It was a bad situation and a serious health hazard for the residents.

The residents had petitioned the local authorities several times for land-use rights, which are necessary for people to get permission to rebuild their dilapidated houses and improve their problematic infrastructure. But because the houses were below the minimum size standards set by the Provincial Authority, their requests were denied, again and again.

### **The CDF Network and ACVN in Hai Duong:**

In 2000, ACHR and the NGO ENDA-Vietnam began collaborating with the National Women's Union in a number of cities to strengthen community-based savings groups and set up city-level community development funds (CDFs) to link these savings groups and expand their development activities. The CDF network, which started in five cities, had an initial focus on livelihood activities and very small community upgrading projects. ACHR's ACCA program (which was implemented between 2008-2014), gave a big boost to the national community savings and CDF process, helped add many more cities to the network (including Hai Duong) and supported an active program of national meetings, workshops on savings and funds, exchange learning visits between cities and the involvement of young community architects.

The ACCA program also helped the CDF network to begin tackling the more complex and more urgent issues of land and housing. Vietnam faces many of the same problems as other Asian countries of fast urban growth and increasing numbers of urban poor households being without secure land or decent housing. The government has many projects and programs in poverty reduction, but they are scattered and loosely coordinated and have not been very effective. The ACCA program supported the development of housing projects in several cities which demonstrated an alternative housing redevelopment process, in which the residents were the designers and doers in developing healthy, secure, affordable new neighborhoods, in collaboration with their local authorities.

In 2007, as the ACCA program was beginning in Vietnam, ACHR and the CDF network forged an important new partnership with the Associated Cities of Vietnam (ACVN), a national union of 113 towns and cities, which helped to facilitate the sharing of ideas between cities and began promoting community savings and community-driven upgrading as key aspects of its work in its member cities. ACVN worked in close collaboration with the CDF network, the Women's Union and ACHR to implement and scale up the community-driven development process in Vietnam. With this national linkage between cities already in place, when a process worked in one city, it could spread easily to other cities.

When the community savings groups in Hai Duong became part of the CDF network in 2009, the city had almost no experience with the kind of community-led and bottom-up development the ACVN and ACCA program were promoting. The ACVN's first step was to send one of its young architects - Nga - to spend some time talking with the community people to understand how the ACCA intervention could help. Nga observed a lack of trust and solidarity among the families in the communities. So he made it his first task to find ways to build that trust and solidarity - within the communities, between the communities and between the communities and the local authorities, at ward and city levels.

#### **Initiating the project:**

One of the communities Nga kept visiting was the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing block, where he explained what kinds of support the ACCA program offered, and showed a film about the project in Cua Nam Ward, in Vinh, where the residents of another run-down collective housing community had completely redesigned and rebuilt their houses, with support from ACCA. In these first informal talks, the community people assured Nga that he was wasting his time, because nobody in this community wanted to do anything together at all. They couldn't even persuade every family to contribute 500 dong (US\$ 5 cents) to the cost of putting up a streetlight, much less rebuild their housing together.

Nga persisted, though. After talking with different groups in the community for a month, three active community members emerged who were able to persuade their neighbors to sit together and discuss their housing and infrastructure problems, to start exploring possible ways to upgrade their living conditions. That's when things really began. Nga and his team of community architects began spending more time in the community, talking with people and getting their ideas. What was clear was that the people wanted to stay there, and that the need to improve living conditions was becoming more urgent.

The people's first priority was to deal with the problems of flooding and sewage disposal. After discussing the problems with the Ward authority, they decided to close the troublesome communal toilets and use the ACCA funds to build new toilets inside the houses, with their own individual septic tanks. But after building toilets in a few houses, they learned the hard way that the entire community was well below the level of the city's sewer mains, so the sewage didn't drain away at all but just backed up in a smelly mess. After abandoning the individual toilet plan, the next idea was to raise the level of the lanes and build a new drainage system high enough to feed into the city's trunk sewers. But that idea was also abandoned because it would require each house to then raise the inside floor level by almost a meter - too much for houses with just 3 meter ceiling heights. Meanwhile, while these unsuccessful fix-ups were being tried and discussed, two of the most dilapidated houses in the community collapsed, and another two looked ready to follow. That was when everyone understood clearly that the Sewing Enterprise community would have to be completely rebuilt, from top to bottom.

In April 2010, ACVN and Hai Duong city's CDF committee members got together with some of the young architects to discuss what to do with the difficult situation in the community. In that meeting, it was agreed that a reblocking and reconstruction project in the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing community would be proposed as Hai Duong's pilot community-driven housing project, with support from the ACCA program.

So with technical assistance from the young architects, the community members began to design a reblocking plan for their settlement, and began negotiating among themselves to divide and re-allocate the land, in order to widen roads and somewhat equalize the house plots. In June 2010, the community set up a savings group. Their initial reblocking plan was presented by the community leaders in a national workshop

in Hanoi and then at the the Asian Community Architects Network workshop in Chiang Mai, Thailand the same month. The project was approved by the ACCA program soon after that.

### Setting an important new "people's standard" for Hai Duong:

The city and ward government all fully supported the reblocking project, and gave all permissions, even though the plans fell below the government's minimum housing standards, for both house size and road widths. Since the people had been living here since before the validation of the 1993 Land Law, and were all registered as permanent residents, the local government determined that they wouldn't have to pay land use fees and were eventually given their land use certificates.

In June 2010, a group of community members from the Sewing Enterprise community came on an ACHR-supported study tour in Bangkok, along with the community architects and supportive officials from the local government. In Bangkok, they visited community-driven housing projects that were developed in dense, inner-city areas where row-houses built on very small plots were the only option for on-site reblocking. These projects were powerful aids to the imagination, and showed the mixed team from Hai Duong that very nice two and three-story houses could be built on very small plots of land, in a tight, efficient layout of rowhouses. This visit helped the people to refine their reblocking plans and house designs. As soon as they got back to Hai Duong, in July 2010, the construction work began.

### Support groups and partners in the project:

- **The Hai Duong Municipal Government** and the **Nguyen Trai Ward officials** gave permissions to allow this first-ever community-led housing redevelopment project to happen, even though the house plots were below the legal minimum standard.
- **The Network of Community Savings Groups** in Hai Duong supported the community with a \$40,000 housing loan from the City Development Fund (CDF) they collaboratively manage.
- **The Women's Union of Hai Duong** supported the savings process and promoted a people-led housing model.
- **Associated Cities of Vietnam (ACVN)**, a national union of 113 towns and cities, partnered with ACHR and the CDF network to implement the ACCA program in Hai Duong (and 15 other cities) and helped to promote a more community-driven housing model in Vietnam's urban development.
- **Architect Le Nhu Nga** ("Nga"), who led the team of young architects working with ACVN, helped facilitate the participatory design of layout and housing in Hai Duong.
- **ACCA Program** (2008-2015): The Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA) 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 (including 17 cities in Vietnam).
- **Community Architects Network (CAN)** in Asia invited the community leaders from the Sewing Enterprise community on a study tour in Thailand and presented their community-led housing process in the CAN workshop in Chiang Mai which encouraged them to solve their own problems.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

### Land tenure and legal status:

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 grant, lease or sell the rights to use land, and a land use rights certificate is practically the same thing as permanent land ownership. Before the housing project, the 32 families in the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing block owned the dilapidated structures they lived in, having been given those houses by the company they worked for when it 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, so they could become legal occupants of the land - a status that was required to get permission to upgrade their dilapidated housing. The people had several times petitioned the Provincial Authorities to be granted the land use rights. But because their houses were too small, their petitions were rejected every time. According to Vietnam's Law of Construction and Building, only a plot of land that is 20 square meters or larger can be given a building permit. So even though this was one of the most shabby and dilapidated residential areas in the city, the people couldn't get permission to make any improvements. At the same time, the city had neither land nor funds to resettle the community elsewhere. This is a dilemma faced by hundreds of old, run-down and "below standard" collective housing communities all over Vietnam.



When the communities in Hai Duong came together into a network, though, and began their collaboration with the ACVN and the ACCA program, new energy and new ideas began flowing into the city. And that energy and those ideas began to soften those stiff rules and win the enthusiastic support of some key local government officials. In that way, this housing project showed a new way and set an important new "below standard" standard people's model for other communities in Hai Duong.

#### **Land tenure:**

Since the people had been living here since long before the 1993 Land Law and were all registered as permanent residents, the local government determined that they didn't have to pay any land use fees eventually all 32 households in the community were given individual land use certificates.

#### **Government support:**

The municipal authorities in Hai Duong had tried many times to address the environmental and housing problems in the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing community using the conventional top-down approach of redeveloping the area, but were unable to do anything because of lack of land and budget for resettling the families. When Hai Duong joined the ACCA program and the dialogue with the ACVN and CDF Network began, there were officials in the city who were open to new ideas and ready to support experiments with a more community-driven approach to housing planning and upgrading. But they didn't know where to begin and had no examples of this approach to see and learn from.

Finally the authorities and the CDF network agreed that the best way to start was to let the communities themselves discuss among themselves, analyze their needs and make improvements through their own pilot upgrading projects. Once the communities become active like this in leading their own housing improvement process, then the local authorities can support them best by giving a green light. And that is what happened in Hai Duong. The city and ward authorities provided full legal support to the reblocking plan at the Sewing Enterprise community, and gave construction permissions, even though the plans fell below the minimum government housing standards, for both house size and road width.

## **PROJECT FINANCING**

### **Project costs and who paid for what?**

**Land:** There were no land costs in the project.

**Infrastructure:** The cost of building a new storm drainage system and paving the new central lane came to a total of about US\$ 12,000 (about \$380 per family). Compare that with \$1,000 per family for the same level of infrastructure services in a similar contractor-driven lower-income housing development in Hai Duong. These infrastructure costs were partly financed by a US\$ 4,000 grant from ACCA. The rest came from people's own collective savings and contributions. The costs of adjusting the existing municipal water and electricity supply systems to accommodate the new layout plan were born by the local government.

**House construction:** The 31 row-houses in the Sewing Enterprise housing project are all different, and cost between \$2,000 and \$20,000 to construct, depending on the size and structure. The houses were only partly financed by a US\$ 36,000 collective loan to the community from the new Hai Duong Community Development Fund (CDF), with the first loan capital coming as a grant to the CDF from the ACCA program, and later revolving in other housing projects in the city. The city CDF set a low loan ceiling of about \$2,000 per house. This was just enough money for the poorest elderly woman in the community to build a simple one-story house with a loft, without having to invest other funds. Only 29 families took housing loans of between \$800 and \$1,200. The loans from the CDF were given at 6% annual interest (of which 3% stays in the community savings group to cover late repayments and 3% goes back into the CDF), repayable within 10 years. People had the option to repay daily, weekly or monthly, according to their earning pattern.

For most of the families, that small loan from the CDF came to just 10% or 15% of the actual cost of building their new two- and three-story rowhouses in the upgraded settlement. Many of the houses cost about US\$ 20,000 to build, and were financed individually by other loans or funds from savings, family and other sources. This substantial investment in the housing - above and beyond the small loans from the ACCA funds - show how even a small bit of extra finance and a greater sense of tenure security can unlock so many other resources and so much potential in people to improve their housing.

## DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

### Reblocking plan:

In the reblocking plan the community members developed with the architects (and kept adjusting throughout the construction), the community's land of 946 square meters was reorganized so that everyone would have a plot of at least 25 square meters, with the new row-houses being arranged along both sides of a single four-meter wide central lane that went straight out to Chi Lang Street. In the final reblocking plan:

- **3 houses** stayed in exactly the same place and were not rebuilt.
- **12 houses** stayed in the same place and were renovated or rebuilt, with an additional 8 square meters of land in front
- **16 houses** shifted to different parts of the site, to make way for the central lane, and were rebuilt in the new places.
- **1 household** moved away and was compensated for their land and house by the community.

### Housing construction:

The people built the houses together in groups, section by section. Each group of 3 - 5 houses was demolished and then rebuilt right away, in a set. During the construction, the families lived in tents put up on the internal road to save the cost of having to rent a house outside. After completing a group of 3 - 5 houses, the families would move in to their new houses, and the tents would be used by the next group of households, until all 31 houses were built or renovated. To keep costs down, the people decided to only hire some skilled builders, while all the masonry work and labor was provided by community members themselves. The housing project was completed in two phases:

**Phase 1 (July 2010 - November 2011)** In this phase, the 17 houses in the inner part of the community were reblocked and rebuilt along the new central lane. First the community dismantled the five houses that were in the middle and moved those families to the unoccupied end of the plot, where the communal toilets had been. Then, in the space cleared by the five moved houses, they constructed the new four-meter wide internal lane, with a system of new drainage pipes underneath. The next step was to construct or renovate all 17 houses, which now had more land in front for making larger houses. The houses were all built together, in batches of three or four.

**Phase 2 (October 2011 - April 2013)** In this phase, the 15 houses in the outer part of the community were reblocked and rebuilt or renovated, to make it possible for the new central lane to go in a straight line right out to the main road, without any twists or turns. The work stalled, though, when one family refused to dismantle their house, which they had recently rebuilt. That house was right in the way of the new lane. After almost a year of sometimes difficult negotiations, an agreement was finally reached in which the 22 families who benefited from the widened lane would contribute their own funds to buy out the one obstructing family for 210 million dong (US\$ 9,150), and the family then moved away. Once this bottleneck was removed, the construction work resumed. In October 2012, the people's new four-meter internal lane was opened up directly to Chi Lang Street, and the community officially became a non-hidden part of Hai Duong. To mark this triumph of perseverance, flexibility and collaboration, somebody on the community's building team scratched this message on a freshly-poured concrete manhole cover, borrowing the typical style of governmental propaganda: *"It takes great solidarity to complete the work and clear the road."*

### Taking care of everyone in the community:

In the course of collectively deciding how to do things, the 32 households in the community negotiated among themselves to make some delicate internal cross-subsidy agreements that manifest a very fine-grained sense of looking after each other and making sure that nobody was left out of the housing redevelopment. The community people agreed that households who gained land in the reblocking process would contribute money to a fund to compensate those households that lost land or had to move to make way for the new lane. They also agreed to pool their funds to help the three poorest families in the community to rebuild their houses (including one elderly widow). When the community agreed to buy out the one family whose house was blocking the new central lane, the amount each family contributed was calculated so that the three poorer families would contribute substantially less than the others.

### Project timeline:

- **April 2010:** Young architects with ACVN begin housing upgrading discussions with the community.
- **June 2010:** Community leaders visit housing projects in Thailand and present their reblocking plans at the Regional Community Architects Network meeting in Chiang Mai. Community starts saving.
- **July 2010:** Project is approved for ACCA support; Phase 1 reblocking construction (17 houses) starts.
- **October 2011:** Work on the second phase of the reblocking (15 houses) starts.

- **January 2012:** One family refuses to demolish their house and work stalls for 11 months.
- **November 2012:** The family agrees to move away, with compensation from others. Work resumes.
- **April 2013:** Project is completed.

## IMPACTS OF THE PROJECT

The Ministry of Construction imposes regulations on minimum standards for housing plot sizes, with different standards being set for different cities. These minimum standards are seen as a tool for managing urban growth and maintaining a certain kind of development. But these standards can become a barrier to lower income communities when they try to upgrade their housing and living conditions and find they are prevented from doing so because their housing falls below these top-down standards. By showing that decent, modern, safe and beautiful housing can be built on "below-standard" plots, this housing project at the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing community helped to set a more realistic, more inclusive "people's standard" for the city of Hai Duong, and also for other cities.

The success of the community-driven planning and housing construction process in the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing has boosted the confidence of other poor communities in the city and encouraged them to use the same self-help strategy to solve their own housing problems. The community-led housing process led to substantially improved housing and living conditions in this old collective housing area, without anyone having to move away. The people actively participated in the larger development of their city by improving their own housing conditions. Because of the success of this first community-led housing project, the local government more easily agreed to support a second housing upgrading project in another old collective workers housing community of 26 households, at the Woolen Carpet Company Collective Housing community.

With the support from the ACVN, the community network in Hai Duong worked to build a sub-network of old collective housing communities in the city. By August 2010, three collective housing communities in Hai Duong were organized and part of that sub-network. Residents from the Woolen Carpet Company and the Construction Company collective housing communities visited the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing project. After seeing and hearing from their neighbors who had improved their living conditions by their own efforts, these other communities were motivated to make improvements to their own communities and lives. The Woolen Carpet Company collective housing became the second community-led housing project in Hai Duong, starting in June 2012 and being completed in 2013.

The close cooperation between ACHR, ACVN, the local authorities (at city and ward levels) and the community - in which the team of young architects played a crucial bridging role - represents a new approach to solving a city's housing problems from the bottom-up, and were key to the project's success.

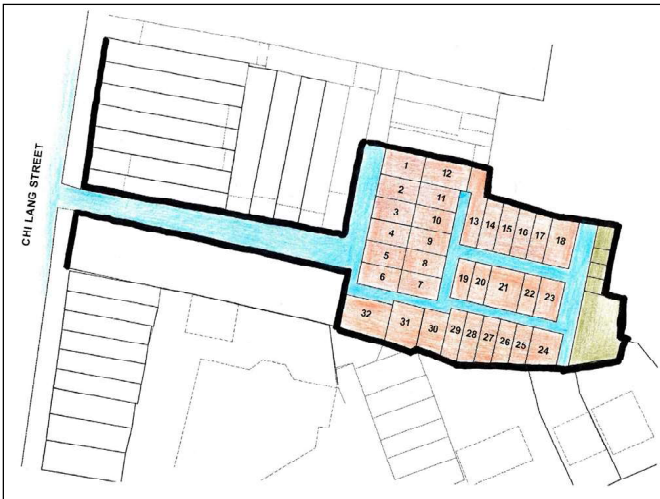
## FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

*This case study was written in March 2021 by Ms. Tran Minh Chau (at ACHR) and Mr. Le Nhu Nga (who worked with ACVN on many of the collective housing projects supported by the CDF Network in Vietnam).*

For more information about the Sewing Enterprise Collective Housing project, please contact ACHR:  
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## PHOTOS



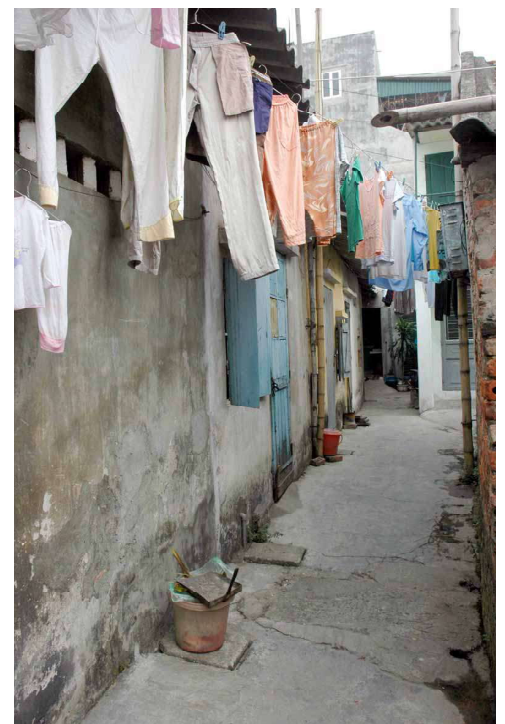
The 32 tiny rowhouses hidden inside a lane off of Chi Lang Street were built in 1960 to house workers at the Sewing Enterprise factory.



When the factory closed down, it sold the houses to the workers, but they couldn't get permission to upgrade or rebuild them.



This is what conditions were like in the crowded, dilapidated lanes, with crumbling houses, leaky roofs and frequent flooding.



Most of the houses had just one 20-square-meter room, where families of four or five lived, cooked, slept and carried on their lives.





▲ One of the many community meetings in which the people began to discuss the possibility of working together to rebuild their housing.



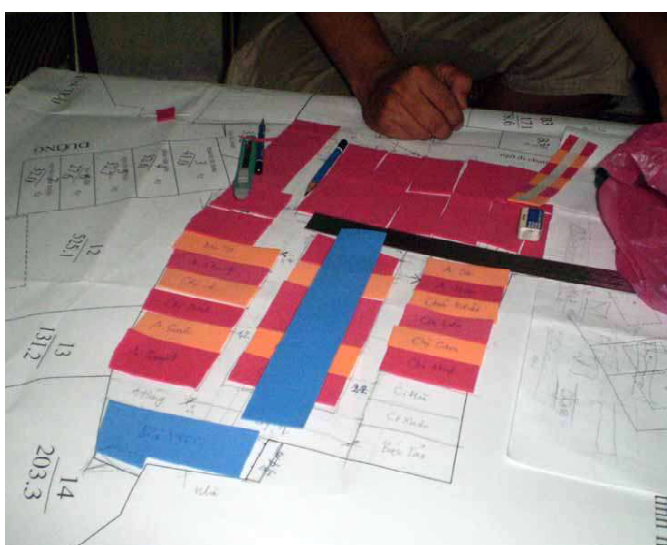
▲ When the savings group started in the community, it was mostly the women who saw the potential of running their own small loan fund.



▲ In this April 2010 meeting in Hai Duong, it was agreed to make the Sewing Enterprise reblocking the city's pilot community-driven housing project.



▲ Once the project was approved for ACCA support, the process of planning the reblocking process began, with help from young architects.

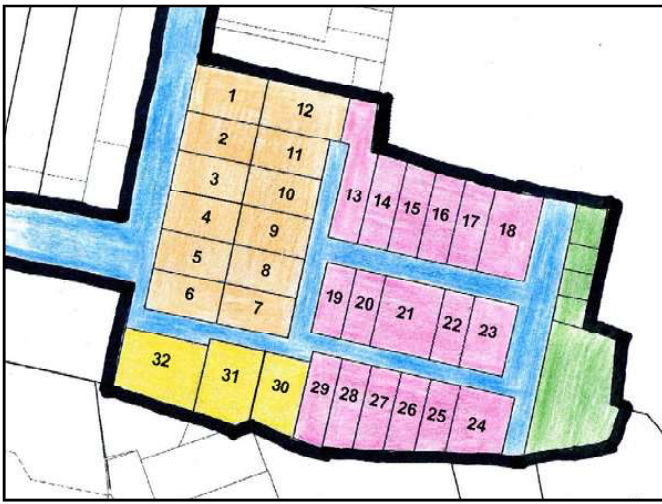


▲ Reblocking would let some houses to stay where they were, while others would move slightly to make way for 4m wide central lane.

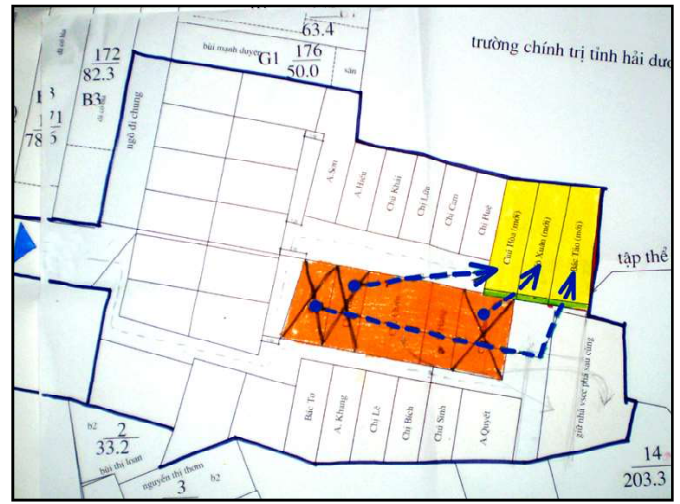


▲ A team of community leaders from nine countries visited the community in April 2010, as part of an ACHR supported learning exchange.

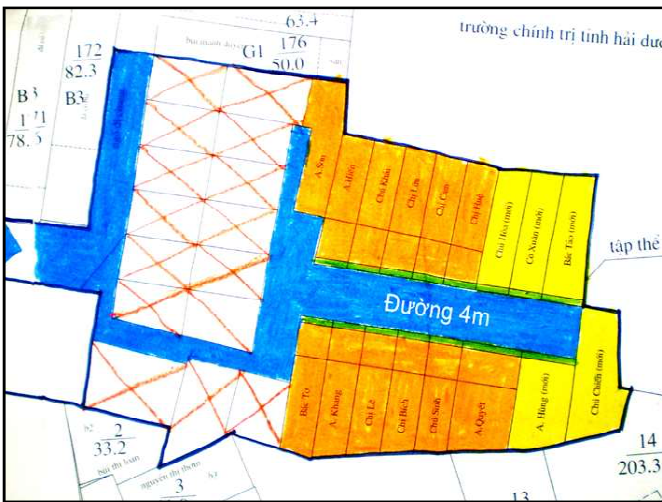




▲ The reblocking planning process began with this analysis by the community, with houses that need to be rebuilt (pink), that don't need to be rebuilt (orange) and have recently been upgraded (yellow).



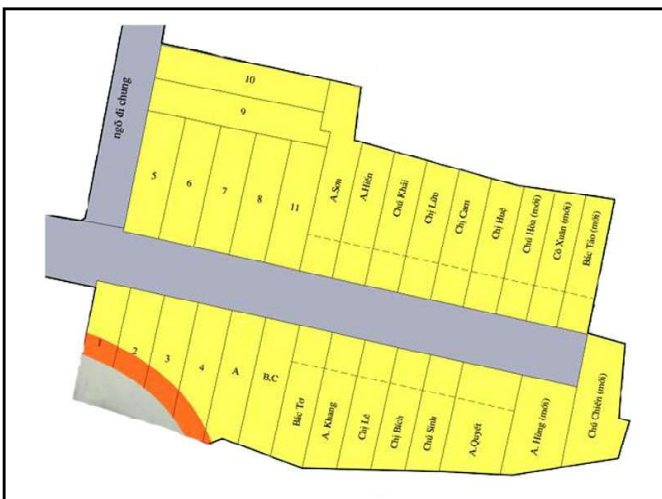
▲ In the first step, the five houses in the center were demolished and moved to new positions at the inner-most end of the area (where the common toilets were), to make way for the new lane.



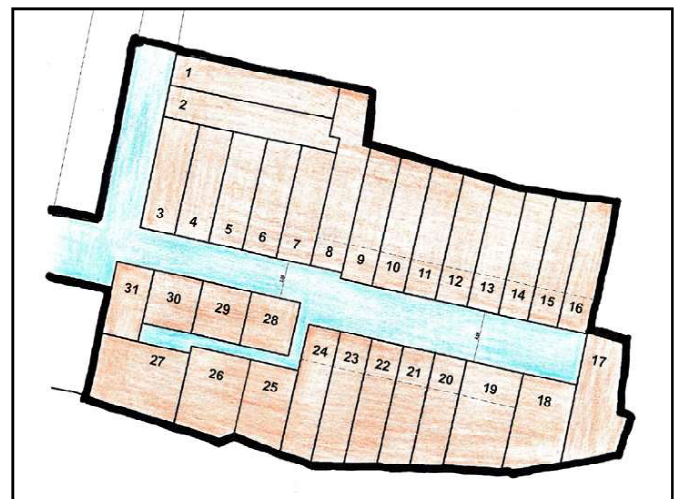
▲ The space freed up by moving the five middle houses provided enough room to build the 4-meter lane and added more space to the front of all the house plots, so everyone had a plot of at least 25 square meters to build their new house on.



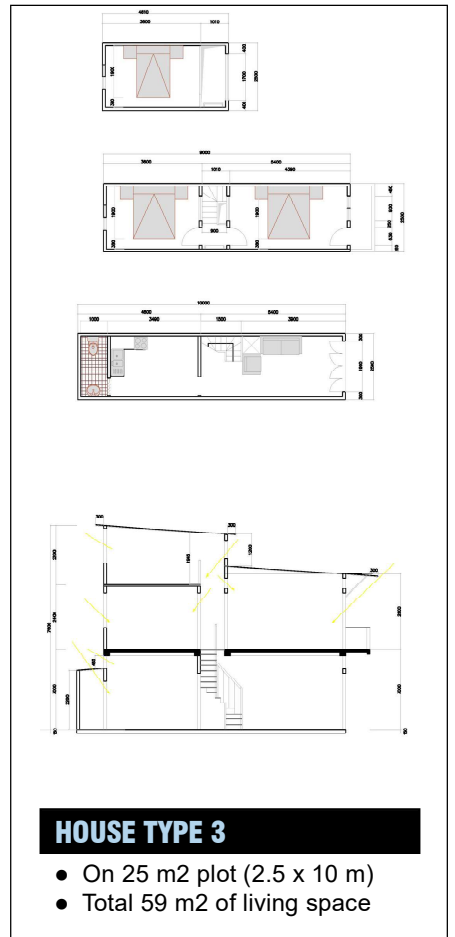
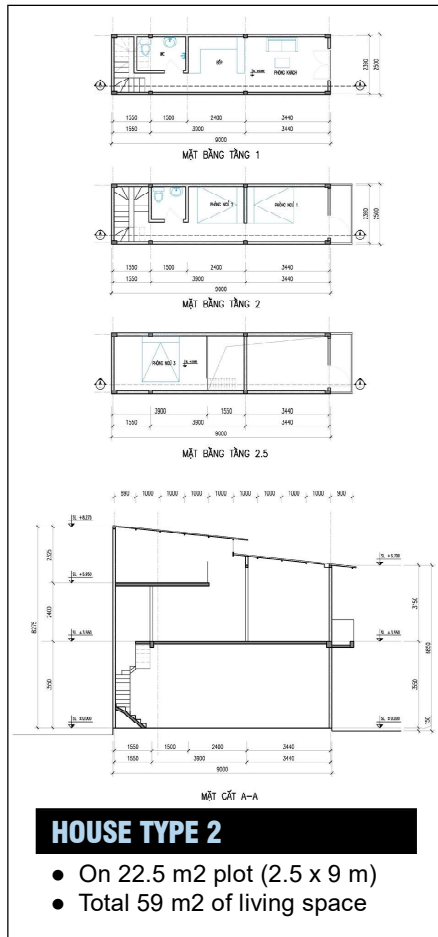
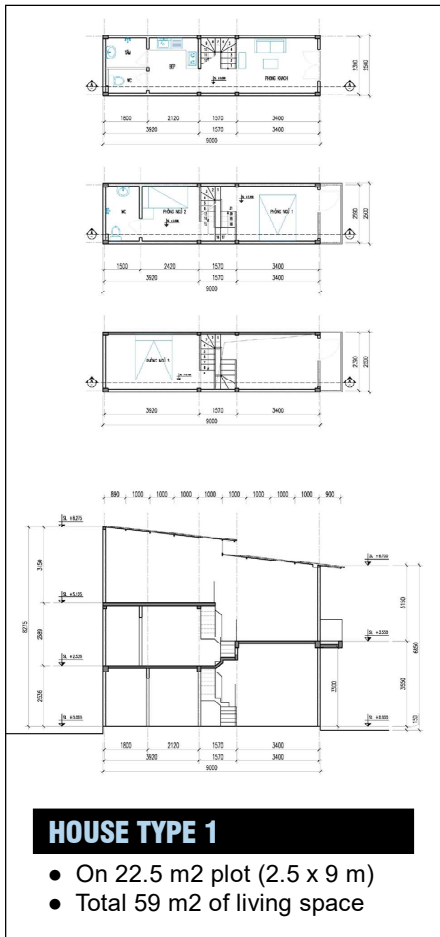
▲ Once the new central lane was opened, everyone agreed it would be good to extend it so that it went straight out to the Chi Lang Street. That required a second round of reblocking, with this initial plan for moving some of the houses.



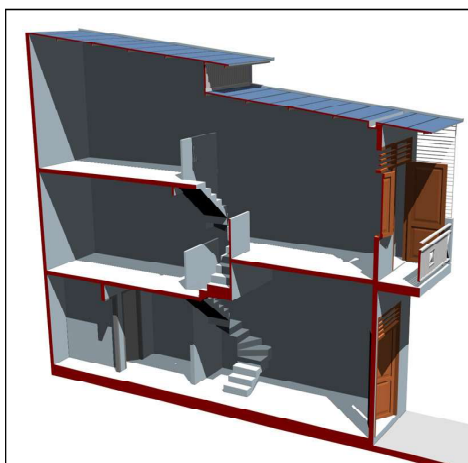
▲ This was the reblocking plan finally developed, but things got stuck when 3 families who had recently rebuilt their houses didn't agree.



▲ To achieve this final reblocking plan, one family was bought out and moved away and 3 families (# 25, 26, 27) kept their existing houses.



▲ *These are just a few of the many house designs the young architects developed, to give people a lot of different options for building tall, roomy houses on the extremely narrow house plots.*



▲ *Some of the computer-generated images the team of young architects produced to help people imagine their new houses and community.*





▲ The first step in the redevelopment was to dismantle the five middle houses to make way for the new central lane and drainage system.



▲ Everyone was astonished and delighted to see how much air and light came in when this space at the center of the little community was cleared.



▲ Construction materials from the old houses (doors and windows, timber, bricks and roof-tiles) were carefully rescued and kept for using in the new houses, to reduce materials costs.



▲ Work starts on digging ditches for the new storm drainage system and piling up rubble to underlay the new, higher-up central lane, which would then be above the local flood levels.



▲ For many years, people living in the Sewing Enterprise Community had experienced the worst effects of being below the rest of the neighborhood's drainage system, with frequent flooding and backed-up toilets adding sewage to the flood waters. So the new drainage system was a godsend.







▲ *The new houses were all built in batches of three or four, and here the first batch of houses are being marked out with string, to start the work of building the foundations.*



▲ *All the the bricks salvaged from the old houses were put to use in laying the strong foundations for the new houses.*



▲ *The houses were built by teams of community members, with everyone chipping in to help, and only a few skilled masons and builders were hired to oversee the construction work.*



▲ *Here some walls in the first three houses are going up. All of the houses used the standard building system of reinforced concrete frames and infill walls of fired bricks.*



▲ *The project unlocked so much energy and resources in the community, and the construction work progressed very fast.*



▲ *It took less than three months to finish these first three houses, which tower over the old houses, which now look even sadder than ever.*





A January 2010 photo of the first three houses. The footprint is small, but by going up, people could build lots of space for growing families. ▲



▲ Since it wasn't possible to bring trucks into the community, the sand, cement, gravel and other building materials had to be unloaded at the mouth of the lane, on Chi Lang Street, and then carried in by wheelbarrows. That's where the people set up the concrete mixing machine too.



▲ Photos from the construction of later batches of houses, being built with the same system of people providing most of the labor and only a few skilled masons and builders being hired to tell everyone what to do.



▲ Many of the families in the community built houses of two, three and even four stories, on their slightly expanded house plots of 20 to 25 square meters. After living for a half century in a single room of just 15 or 20 square meters, what a joy all that space must have been.





▲ Here some woven bamboo mats are being used as a base for laying the reinforced concrete floor slabs - an innovative and cost-saving technique.



▲ More photos from the construction process, in which the geography of the tiny site changed from low rolling hills to tall mountain peaks.



▲ Out come the chop sticks and rice bowls for one of the many meals that workers and helpers on the construction site cooked and shared.

▶ A view from one of the new balconies of the inner part of the central lane, before the second phase opened up the lane to Chi Lang Street.





Somebody in the building team scratched this message on a manhole cover: "It takes great solidarity to complete the work and clear the road."



A photo of the finished project, looking from Chi Lang Street into the newly-opened lane that goes right through the center of the reblocked community.



More photos of the almost-finished project, which give a sense of the ambience in the new lane, which is now fronted by long rows of very tall, narrow houses that are full of life.



This is the house of Auntie Tao, an elderly widow who was the poorest member of the community. On the left is her old house, and on the right is her new one-story house, with an internal loft for sleeping.

