

Chasing a black cat in a dark room

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THE term 'white elephant' is said to originate from Thailand where the ancient Siamese King punished problematic members of his court by presenting them with the animal, the upkeep of which would ruin the courtier. Providing our poor with only housing, as limited to a house as a place to live, is such a stiletto dressed in veil of sugar, and designed by a higher echelon.

As a student I also learnt that 'housing' is a verb: it is an activity encompassing many others, meaning its mere availability is neither possible, nor a remedy to all urban ills. In fact, some begin from there.

A seminar paper opening up a debate is a success indicator of that seminar for the sheer initiation of a healthy discussion. That has been the case with the seminar presentation, as critically analysed in Dr. Shayer Ghafur's paper that we carry today.

Our effort as a print media is to highlight the verity that the think tanks in the country, academia and deliverers of the product, are concerned about the need for housing the poor. That too is a positive signal.

Housing has always been conjoined with business interest. The present day situation in Bangladesh cannot be expected to be any different. It could be though with the proper intent in place. The tale of Mirpur housing of the late 60s is a classic example of the urban poor unable to sustain society's gratuity and the end result was that all the units ended up as bought property of a

richer clientele, who found the product affordable. The poor should not get a raw deal, for they know no better, nor are they any wiser. They are not even present at the seminars discussing their fate, to a large extent at their cost; participation is yet one step further.

Oversimplification of any course of action is not likely to bring good results. The plan should be a comprehensive undertaking: land-use, fiscal, social, cultural, religious, employment, health, education, pension scheme, inheritance; housing is just a slice, however big, of the whole cake.

'Housing for all' is a myth at best. If it were possible to find an infallible solution, some of the most developed countries in the world would have a home for its every citizen. The fact is a grim tale of people sleeping in cardboard boxes on the pavements of New York, for example.

Let us remember that 'homeless' is after all an English word.

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Spectre of product fetishism

Reviewing housing development proposal for Dhaka city

DR. SHAYER GHAFUR

DHAKA, a city of teeming millions, requires improvements in housing situations. Persistent housing shortages the gap between demand and supply is one quantitative aspect of this housing situation. Sustained delivery of affordable and liveable dwelling units and land to all people, then, becomes a priority in housing. A recent initiative for housing delivery is the 'Proposal for Comprehensive Housing Development for Dhaka City', presented at a seminar on 19 June 2008 by Prof. Nazrul Islam and Ms. Salma A. Shafi. They authored 'a vision for housing programme by 2025'; the 'philosophical stand' concerns housing for all, satisfying affordability, equity and environmental sustainability. The proposal was prepared as an 'immediate response' to the desire of the Honourable Chief Adviser to suggest a comprehensive programme for housing development in Dhaka city. Noting several recent events focusing different housing issues, including PRSP 2 initiated and REHAB participated ongoing discussions, a review of this proposal is felt due to contribute to a public debate.

It is much easier to consider housing for a specific social group, be they located at the high-, mid- or low-end of the housing continuum. Housing discourse in Dhaka has mostly been made in this segmented way. But the present proposal for comprehensive housing development is unique in considering the whole housing continuum. The proposal has given emphasis to the quantitative assessment of housing units to be produced in three phases (2008-25) for addressing deficits and existing/future demands (Table 1). Addressing the plight of the urban poor held a special consideration in their proposal, as well as its Phase I implementation. The intention embedded in the proposal, i.e. solving the housing needs of all, may be seen as altruism and questioned on account of realistic means and methods to achieve the set targets. Nevertheless, the comprehensive approach is arguably the way to ensure equity in one's access to housing. Given that, does this proposal really give us a vision as it claims?

The authors have made their proposal a 'production' driven phenomenon with focus on delivering the 'product' (dwelling unit). On the contrary, international wisdom has been arguing since decades to approach housing as a 'process', developing and maintaining a context responsive to housing construction. The process of housing without (delivering) houses has now an established alternative orthodoxy, a way of

benefiting maximum people with minimum resources. Enablement, flexibility and participation are the key concepts that drive the process. Government stays away from direct construction while it facilitates others. What their proposal has suggested instead is to focus on the delivery of the physical end product. This attempt of increasing the supply of housing units is a gross simplification of the complex relationship that housing process has, for example, with social, economic, political, and transportation sectors. The delivery of dwelling units is dependent on many different aspects. A note of caution from the open session pointing out the proposal's wished to be autonomous; it is impossible to conceive this proposal without due thought to the provision of water, among others.

Delivery of more than half of all estimated 4.45 million dwelling units (53.93%) has been for the middle-income groups. Their delivery is mostly sought through real estate developers in three phases during 2008-25. This observation is in compliance with the existing trend in the real estate business in Dhaka in terms of its identifying the growing market for the middle-income households. This proposal has actually paved the path for developer led commodification of housing, allegedly initiated in the name of the urban poor, figuring 40.67% percent of all dwelling units. If we take into account the percentage share of LIG (40.67), MIG (53.93) and HIG (5.39) dwelling units, and the respective land they require then we would not possibly get a better picture than those 1980's often quoted figures from Prof. Nazrul Islam's 'unfairly structured city' article. A dissent on the product driven housing delivery is valid so long the Poor's pre-existing inequitable access to land in Dhaka continues.

Inadequacies and inconsistencies that accompany product fetishism, over process, are discussed next to allow me reflecting upon them.

Self-referential and Speculative Projection: The immediate response by the authors can best be considered a speculative projection of how they want the comprehensive housing development to be. Their proposal, in method, content and analysis, remains acutely self-referential without any acknowledgement to the local/international scholarships. They claimed to have had 'consulted' many local documents whose consideration helped making their decisions. A long set of eighteen issues of broader urban sector development policy framework and planning principle were merely listed without explanation. There is, however, a regulation assurance: "In formulating the

housing development programme proposal we have kept all the above issues in mind". But to any sceptical mind, the question is 'where and how' these issues would fit in implementing the proposal? Repeated reminders to the audience about one of the author's previous involvements in major surveys and projects had aimed to get credibility for the proposal. This attempt had appeared hopelessly self-referential instead of practicing the objective rigor one would expect from any academic or practitioner in submitting a proposal of national importance.

Absence of Rationale: The proposal lacks necessary backup theorization that unfortunately dents its credibility. This proposal's coming from the Nagar Unnayan Committee fails to show how housing development relates to Nagar Unnayan i.e. urban development. What would be the rationale, vision for a possible urban development policy in Dhaka is a major question whose omission makes reading the proposal a 'blueprint' to follow. Why would the state engage in what means in housing provision and/or facilitation for the low-

income groups, the urban poor in particular? Is this provision or facilitation of the urban poor would take place for the mere reproduction of labour power, for maintaining cheap supply of labour to serve the formal sector economy? To what extent an informal sector housing market remains beneficial to the survival of the urban poor, especially, in a period of acute price hikes of essential commodities to justify an informal housing market's abolishment? These are some of the few critical questions that require due clarification and reflection for outlining a rationale, before formulating and implementing a proposal for comprehensive housing development in Dhaka. Without due clarifications, the proposal remains unanalyzed projection with high risk of worsening the already burdened lives of the urban poor.

Urban Cleansing: The proposal assumes every illegally occupied settlement as potential sites for future housing development after the squatter dwellers' removal (one can use the word 'eviction' in these cases as well) for relocation. Even if

we accept on principle that illegal occupants are to be relocated then this relocation does not qualify the subsequent housing development which one might call, after Arjun Appadurai, urban cleansing for alleged greater public wellbeing. The consequence of this urban cleansing is all too familiar around the cities in developing countries. The site of the urban poor fell victim to market poaching, thereby benefits the higher income groups. That the site may have potential non-housing uses, open space for example, for public wellbeing has not been taken into consideration. Korail slum dwellers' not being rehabilitated in Korail, despite initial promise, is a classic example of urban cleansing.

Unqualified Design Precedence and Proposals: This proposal directly concerns the roles and responsibilities of the design discipline/ profession/ institute/architecture/ architects/ IABof how to create a liveable housing environment for any given group in Dhaka city. Few argue the necessity of air, light and green in housing. On this account, we demand to know, through objec-

in the use of scarce land, energy and natural amenities. Second, how these examples become responsive to the dwellers way of life by ensuring residential satisfaction. They have left us deeply concerned about the impending catastrophe of design determinism's featuring our future lives in Dhaka.

Now I would reflect on the noted inadequacies and inconsistencies of the product fetishism.

The proposed 'vision of housing for all by 2025' would initiate a 'social transformation' through 'spatial restructuring' of the Dhaka city by delivering 4.45 million dwelling units. Dhaka would surely be a different city than what we know of it today, socially and physically. One can suspect hidden in this vision is the beginning of a paradigm shift in urban policy. The key feature of the existing urban policy has been the 'developmentalist intervention' in the context of rampant informality and illegality; it identifies, enumerates and surveys a specific 'population' group as poor or slum dwellers to offer services and assistances that they otherwise would not be able to claim legally. While the upcoming policy would feature a 'modernist intervention' in the formal and legal context of it's served 'citizens' classified on income groups. The proposal aims to transform the urban poor population into low-income citizens through their access to formal and legal housing. Being citizen, the poor would pursue their rightful claim on resources as long as they can afford buying in the market.

So far so good toward a Dhaka without slums. The aim is laudable; however, citizenship is but access to housing alone. What about poor citizens' access to employment, education, health, and importantly, political participation? At present, no one gets any clue from the proposal regarding how these needs of the urban poor would be met. Given the neo-liberal policy regime pursued around developing countries, state subsidy in the utility and service sector would be a thing in the past.

Housing is not an end in one's access to a given product but a means to achieve true citizenship to live a life that people value. To situate the significance of housing process today, beyond its delivered physical product, we can quote from Arjun Appadurai's Deep Democracy: "Housing can be argued to be the single most critical site of this city's [Mumbai] politics of citizenship". This view becomes clear in Dhaka if we ask how does the proposal hope to trigger a reversal of the existing exclusion of the poor from all decision making process? Where had the evicted poor from Korail slum stood in voicing their opinion in the initial allocation of land for rehabilitation in Korail, or later, in its cancellation? Despite all rhetoric, the evicted poor have had actually disempowered, i.e. left to ponder without having any voice to negotiate their claims from the authority. A process driven housing would have never ignored the poor. This proposal with its product bias erodes completely what Partha Chatterjee has perceptively called "The Politics of the Governed". Amidst informality and illegality in the cities in developing countries, the governed population the poor have their own ways of coming into terms with the governing regime: the Poor's real politic of

survival.

The offered 'vision of housing for all by 2025' envisions a different Dhaka that has already started unfolding its scheme of restructuring city space and power-relations. The Dhaka city has lately been offering a spatial premise for productions, consumptions and transactions within a global network of cities. Micheal Hardt and Antonio Negri take that as outcome of a new 'Empire'. New business/corporate elite has evolved amidst citizens and discrete population groups in Dhaka by their gainful integration in the global as much as in national economy. An effective and efficiently functioning city as well as disciplined labour force is central to their business, trade and commerce. Rapid modernization of Dhaka's infrastructure and transportation are first (billion dollars) business themselves in addition to good for other businesses by their value-added contribution to increasing productivity. Opposite side of the vision for housing is actually a vision for good business, initially in the construction sector then beyond for the reproduction of labour in other sectors. It is no surprise that the elite citizens, read businessmen, their benefactors and corporate agglomerates, have drawn attention in the policy making level, in national politics too. Their powerful presence is hard to ignore. One author in the seminar had actually gone to justify the proposal's giving of ten katha lands for the rich businessmen; otherwise they would leave the country to settle abroad. Let us now explain the proposal's sense of unjust benevolence against equity.

In offering a vision for housing, we would now chart the ground that makes an academic different from a politician or a businessman. A politician ought to resolve a housing problem, i.e. shortage of dwelling units, among probable alternatives in the public interest. If knowing the causes of a problem is a precondition for its solution then I believe a politician in our country does not want to know the deep rooted cause of the problem unless its revelation offers him the opportunity to blame the past, deeds of the political opponent in particular. Politician is usually interested in quick-fix, and importantly, to show to the public the results of actions within his/her tenure. The urgency to show the results would be more if the problem is the politician's own making. The path followed by a businessman to resolve the housing problem, on the contrary, is driven by the opportunity of making profit. A businessman ensures his profit first, the greater the better. Knowing the problem he wishes to offer, again, opportunity for making profit. Profit by investments in housing surely does not have to be a bad word after all; but the question is profiting at what cost, at whose expense?

An academic's path, ideally speaking, differs from a politician or a businessman as he is alleged to have worked from a neutral space with no interest in the outcome other than the public wellbeing. An academic's output can and should be of pragmatic values in guiding policies and programmes rather than remain an inert academic exercise. Unfortunately, the presented proposal is but an academic's vision; it is devoid of either

academic content or pragmatic value.

The presented 'vision for a housing programme' dwells in product fetishism; it stays away from grasping what 'housing' or urban living would be like toward 2025 and beyond: how to manage a habitat for so many people in so less land. Proposal's product fetishism makes ground for the commodification of housing; a rather biased commodification, solely for the owner-occupiers with no consideration for the middle-income renters. One does not necessarily become a revolutionary either to offer a critique or rethink a vision for housing. However, one's contemplating upon a vision for housing requires going beyond naive positivist linear reasoning. One's claim to offer a vision for housing has to build upon, first, an understanding of the making of the government's inability to provide affordable land and housing. Second, a revelation of the causes of the poorest section's continued living without 'adequate shelter'.

The proposal has been a classic example of the native 'self's' portrayal of what the 'other' should have. This portrayal, soaked in unmasked parochialism, originates from the narrow, uncritical positivist urban studies a premise that delivers commissioned surveys more comfortably than original studies. We have a vision for future in hand that is ignorant of its past, especially, the housing history of Dhaka.

This history would portray the privileged position the native self in Dhaka holds as an outcome due to, first, the imported modernity's separation from the traditional by identifying modern housing different and superior than popular housing. Second, the ways power and wealth have accumulated asymmetrically among the rich elite had contributed to their manipulation of the institutional means in their favoured access to formal housing. Third, increasing income-asset-opportunity inequality in Dhaka has marginalized the poor in claiming their access to housing.

Above reflection will now be wrapped up. Land and people are the two most essential ingredients of any city, giving spatiality and life to the city. Housing has always been the crucial arena where land and people infused to give meaning to the city, and importantly, not by avoiding competing interests. The point is that housing in a city has always been a contested arena; who wins and who loses in one's access to housing remains a question to reckon with, to discuss and debate in the public realm. Nagar Unnayan Committee should certainly think about how best to infuse people and land, along with many different aspects, in the comprehensive development of housing for Dhaka. It wouldn't be unfair to suggest that the Nagar Unnayan Committee should try its best not to be autonomous in thinking but work in close relationship to the existing statutory and institutional tools and mechanisms.

The author is a Professor at the Dept. of Architecture, BUET. Some of the views expressed here are based on an earlier review of the proposal submitted to the Ministry last year. The opinions expressed in the article are explicitly that of the author.

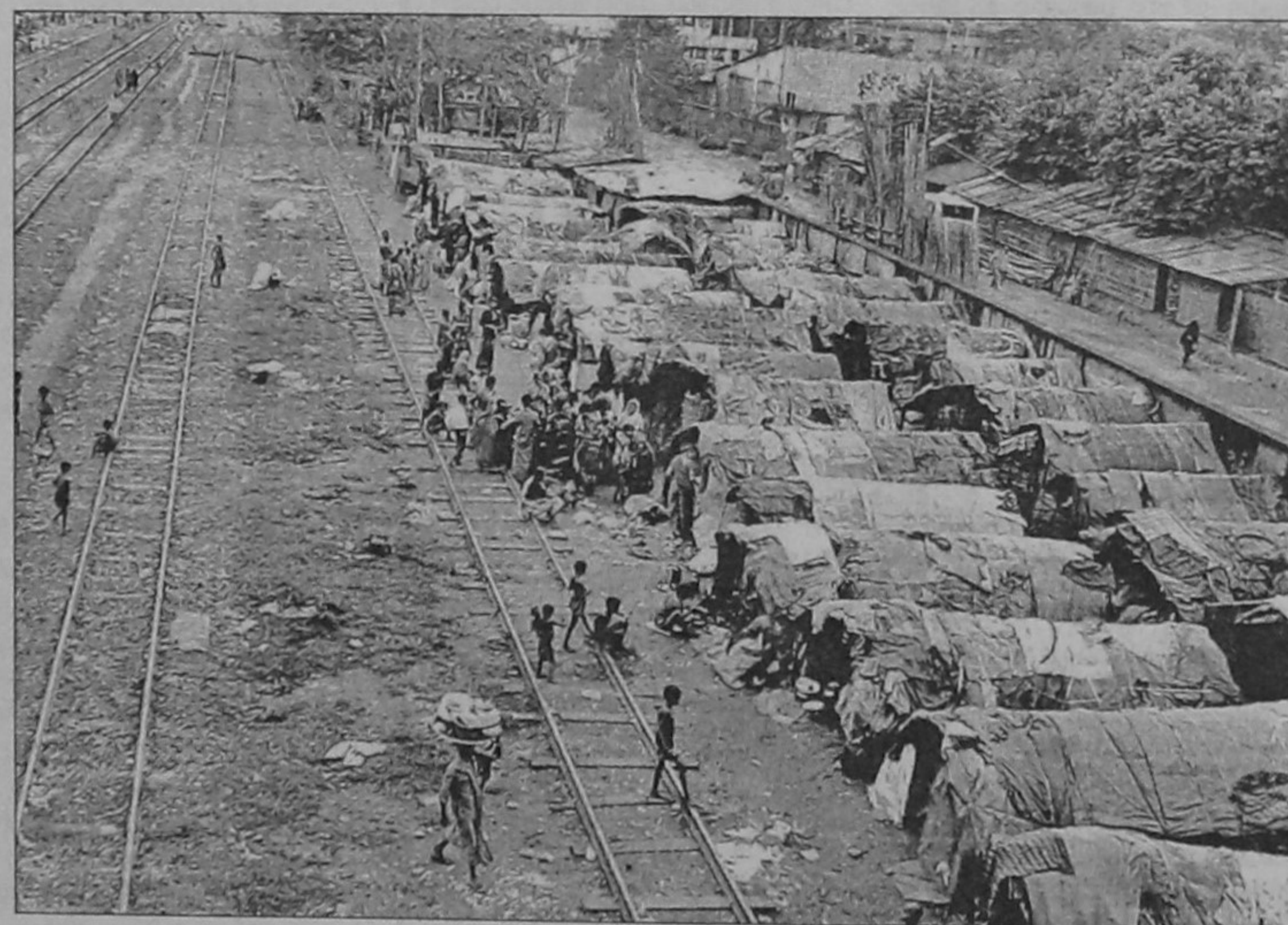


Table 1. Proposed Phased Delivery of Dwelling Units (2008-2025)

Phase	Period	No of dwelling units to be delivered (in million)	Total		
		Low Income Group (LIG)	Mid Income Group (MIG)	High Income Group (HIG)	
Phase I	2008-2013	0.82 (41)	1.10 (55)	0.08 (4)	2.00 (100)
Phase II	2013-2018	0.57 (39.31)	0.80 (56.17)	0.08 (5.52)	1.45 (100)
Phase III	2018-2025	0.42 (42)	0.50 (50)	0.08 (8)	1.00 (100)
Total		1.81 (40.67)	2.40 (53.93)	0.24 (5.39)	4.45 (100)

Notes: i) Shelter requirements for homeless (0.15m persons) and occupants in non-residential buildings (0.40m persons) are not included. ii) Figures within parentheses indicate percentages.