

386 FORGOTTEN IDEAS: ARCHITECTURE AND THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY - A RETROSPECTIVE ACCOUNT

Jörg Seifert

Abstract

The decade from 1997 to 2006 which ended just a few months ago was the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. Within that context, the Union Internationale des Architectes (UIA) and UNESCO joined in sponsoring the international ideas competition entitled "Architecture and the Eradication of Poverty". Did this initiative represent a genuine commitment, a half-hearted initiative or a cynical intellectual mind game? The fates of the projects developed for the competition raise a number of questions.

Keywords

Architecture; poverty; competition; UIA, International Union of Architects; UNESCO.

All photographs are obtained from their original sources, courtesy of their owners, or taken directly from the competition entries booklet.

All diagrams were developed by the author unless otherwise noted

Introduction

In the announcement for the "Architecture and the Eradication of Poverty" competition, the UIA and UNESCO invited architects and architecture students from all over the world to present "ideas that will show that architecture has a social mission and that it can play a part in the betterment of the living conditions in the whole world – in developed or developing countries" (competition catalogue, 1999:10). In response, 386 participants from 55 countries, including numerous teams, developed and submitted project concepts in the form of posters in A0 format in the autumn and winter of 1997/1998 (1). Divided into separate categories for architects and students, eight submissions were selected for different awards, some of which had been established by such prominent architects as César Pelli, Mario Botta and Toyo Ito. Forty-five other projects received honorable mentions. The jury convened in Bucharest in April 1998, and the awards ceremony took place in Lausanne in conjunction with the festivities commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the UIA in June 1998. The entries were exhibited at the UIA World Conference in Beijing in 1999 and

on other occasions as well. The initiator of the competition, then UIA Secretary General and later UIA President Vassilis Sgoutas, wrote the following words for the catalogue featuring the 53 award-winning projects in 1999: "It is clear that this competition is the first link in a chain of events that will highlight our involvement with the triptych Architecture-Shelter-Poverty" (Ib.:8). At the end of the UN Decade, it is now time to ask what has since become of the 386 project proposals (2).

Ideas Without Impact?

An enquiry with the UIA Secretariat in Paris in the autumn of 2006 brought the sobering revelation that no attempt had been made to follow the individual projects after the end of the competition, since it had been conceived as an ideas competition from the outset. In view of this attitude, one is prompted to wonder whether it was really architectural ideas that were lacking in the global war on poverty at the end of the 20th century at all. Hadn't people learned by 1997 how to build suitable accommodations for human beings or established minimum requirements for social housing?

Efforts to propagate familiar ideas that have proven worthy in other contexts can indeed be very useful. Innovative solutions may very well emerge from the process of adapting such ideas to specific situations, as local conditions always pose unique challenges of their own. Yet without a genuine commitment to realization, such initiatives can easily draw suspicion of being nothing but intellectual mind games devoid of serious intent to bring about change – and, in the specific case of the ideas

competition, expose the actual objective of the UN Decade to ridicule.

As early enquiries during the invitation phase of the competition suggested, neither the UIA nor UNESCO was interested in any form of realization of the submitted project proposals. German architect Wolfgang Tochtermann, former Director of UNESCO's Human Settlements Division and a member of the competition jury, had positive recollections after eight years – of active participation in all five UIA regions, of the thematic and regional diversity of the proposals and of the substantive quality of the entries. Thus he has expressed regret that the competition had always been regarded as a self-contained event and that no other projects had emerged from it. This option had been discussed, but was ultimately discarded due to a shortage of personnel and financial resources within the UIA. But why did UNESCO fail to play a more active role? In this regard, Tochtermann cited fundamental developments and criticized UNESCO for its failure to support the Human Settlements Program he had managed with the same intensity following his retirement. According to Tochtermann, that program, which was devoted among other things to urban and slum renewal projects, quickly lost momentum and was ultimately abandoned by UNESCO.

Would it not have been the duty of the UIA in such a situation – since it had initiated the competition in the first place – to demonstrate the earnestness of the undertaking by continuing to observe, document and support the projects in collaboration with other partners? Couldn't the UIA have sought cooperation with UN-HABITAT, an organization

with which a cooperation agreement has been in effect since 2005? Or with aid organizations like *Architecture sans Frontières*, which have developed precisely the skills and know-how required? The declared objective of the competition was “to highlight ideas for improving the built environment of the less privileged” (Ib.:10). But is it possible to pursue such a goal – based on the premise that architecture has a social mission – in a credible way at the purely abstract level of “highlighted ideas” without any thought of concrete realization? Was the goal too ambitious? Or had it been charged with an ethical component in order to draw public attention to the discipline of architecture within the context of this theme? Was the primary purpose to demonstrate that architects possess the knowledge and technical skills needed to bring about improvements in the living conditions of the socially underprivileged – and thus ultimately to lobby for public support while sensitizing architects themselves to a fundamental issue of the future?

Heightened Awareness through Public Presence or an Exaggerated View of the Role of Architects?

Regardless of what one thinks of such a strategy, an essential prerequisite for its success is surely the presence of the initiative in the public and the professional community. As it turns out, however, the international ideas competition evidently left no lasting impression within architectural circles. When asked about the competition in 2006, prominent architecture critics and journalists – who presumably would have written about it at the time – no longer recalled the event through which the UIA and

UNESCO sought to mobilize architects from all over the world (3). Even Peter Burk, Chairman of *Architects over Frontiers* (the German section of *Architecture sans Frontières*), could not remember anything about the ideas competition. He recalled that there had been dialogue and contact with UN organizations during the UN Decade, as manifested for example in participation in the dissemination of UN building standards and invitations to UN-HABITAT conferences in Barcelona and Vancouver. Yet Burk was not aware of any enquiries from the UIA or UNESCO to German aid organization or affiliated organizations in other countries.

When asked about what architects could contribute concretely to the eradication of poverty, Burk made it clear that, in his opinion, attempts by architects to offer help are never more than a drop in the bucket. After all, he contended, the world’s massive poverty problem could not be attributed to causes related to building or architecture – nor, incidentally, to medical care emergencies or drinking water shortages – but are rather the products of profound and far-reaching economic imbalances. It is there, he said, that efforts must be made and key players mobilized. Compared to such issues as microcredit, architectural projects devoted to combating poverty were largely insignificant. The architect is a service provider, an absolutely secondary fringe figure who plays no particularly important role in the legal or economic system. While there are surely good reasons for holding competitions, mobilizing architects is much less effective than addressing economists, financial experts and local authorities in the southern hemisphere – and to promote competitions

on such themes as hereditary lease models or approaches to informal settlements.

Was the ideas competition sponsored by the UIA and UNESCO merely an expression of the persistent exaggeration of the importance of the role of architects among members of the profession and thus of no consequence whatsoever? Despite justified criticism of failures and missed opportunities, such a blanket assessment would be inaccurate, and would also discredit the efforts and commitment of all those who participated. As feedback from several award-winners clearly shows, some of the submitted projects did indeed achieve local impact – not least of all because contact with social institutions and organizations was sought during the preparatory phase in these cases. The following sections offer a brief look at the fates of five of the 386 submitted proposals. The selection is based on random hits obtained through personal research, as the initiators of the competition were prohibited by privacy laws from releasing contact information on the participants. Thus, only a few of the hundred-plus award winners could be found. The majority of entries and their subsequent histories will presumably remain unknown to the public unless the UIA and UNESCO decide after all to undertake the systematic research that has been neglected until now.

Housing for the Homeless in New York, A Youth Center in Tozeur, Strategies for Hanoi

Paul Parkhill, an urban planner and current Director of Planning and Development at the Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center in Brooklyn, “the only not-for-profit industrial

developer in New York City”, submitted a project in collaboration with architect Nolan Zail which he describes as a “reinvention of the flophouse” and which earned an honourable mention for both in the architects’ category. Their “reinvention” consisted of very compact temporary overnight accommodations for the homeless, shelters that offered an opportunity for intimacy and retreat and represented a viable alternative to the usual group shelters.

The project was developed in close cooperation with Common Ground, a New York non-profit housing company. The idea for these individual accommodations came from Rosanne Haggerty, Director of that organization, who had long been a strong advocate of the approach. When the competition was announced, the draft proposal, including specific suggestions for realization in New York City, was already complete for the most part. Quite apart from the competition, Common Ground took steps to realize the idea, and the proposal actually culminated in a concrete project, which was still in the construction phase last year (Fig 1). Thus it is reasonable to assume that the recognition of this project, which presumably would have taken place with or without the UIA/UNESCO competition, succeeded thanks to cooperation with a local non-profit organization.



Figure 1: Realization of Paul Parkhills' and Nolan Zails' „re invention of the flophouse“ by Common Ground, New York City (rendering).

Yet Parkhill regards such competitions as useful nonetheless. In his opinion, competitions of this kind “are very important in emphasizing to designers of all backgrounds that the most interesting, challenging and important work is not helping rich people live more extravagantly, but helping people without means to live decently”. Common Ground sponsored a design competition of its own with a similar objective in 2003. When asked whether he would have welcomed more interest in the realization phase on the part of the UIA and UNESCO, Parkhill said that he certainly thought “UNESCO has the ability and resources to push this kind of thinking further than a competition”.

Because architects receive relatively little recognition for social commitment as compared to planners and other NGOs, he would like to see more programs which involve designers in projects that have some public benefit. In his view, big architectural firms should be encouraged to assume more responsibility. Yet like Peter Burk, Paul Parkhill also points out that all of these efforts would amount to little in the absence of political and financial support for the realization of these projects.

Another competition project that was actually recognized is that of Bouslama Chamakh, a member of a student team from Tunis who received an honourable mention in UIA Region V. The group began its own initiative initially under the supervision of Professor Lotfi ben Abdelrassak, who has since died, by researching possibilities for local intervention. Chamakh chose as his project the extension of an existing youth center in a suburb of the Tunisian city of Tozeur, an area plagued by high unemployment. The student group had planned to pursue the projects to the point at which the actual construction plans were drafted.

In keeping with the action-based approach, the team sought contact with local decision-makers, to whom the finished plans were presented following several trips to Tozeur. Chamakh explains that he was fortunate to have attracted interest in his proposal and approval for recognition by the local authorities. Yet no further opportunity for collaboration – during the building phase for the youth center or as an architect on other social projects – arose in Tunisia. Even the honourable mention by the competition jury was not a sufficiently

strong reference. Bouslama Chamakh now lives and works as an artist near Bern, where he is involved among other things in projects for the blind and visually impaired.

Less successful in terms of recognition was the entry by Nguyen Xuan Anh and Pham Trung Hieu, students at Hanoi Architectural University at the time the competition was announced, who took part in the competition in a team of two and also received an honourable mention. In their large-scale approach to a theme of high complexity the two Vietnamese students proceeded from the premise that the concept of poverty comprises both a physical and a mental component. For Vietnam, a poor country with a rich cultural tradition, they regarded preservation and development of the cultural heritage as an effective strategy which could help local economic growth. On the basis of this premise, they devoted themselves

to political and urban-development strategies for an old district in the city of Hanoi comprising numerous typical, traditional “tube houses” as well as old pagodas and temples (Fig 2).

The project was discussed in the press, and a number of other renovation projects were planned for the old city of Hanoi. UNESECO also became involved in this matter outside the framework of the ideas competition. Yet by 2000 the plans had essentially been set aside for the most part. The reasons cited included the shortage of financial and structural resources: “International organizations financed a number of plans, but did not fund concrete realization programmes” (Waibel, 2000:15). Instead, the government in Hanoi has been promoting a suburbanization campaign involving the development of large-scale settlements in the so-called New Urban Areas in recent years (cf. Waibel & Schnepf-Orth, 2004).

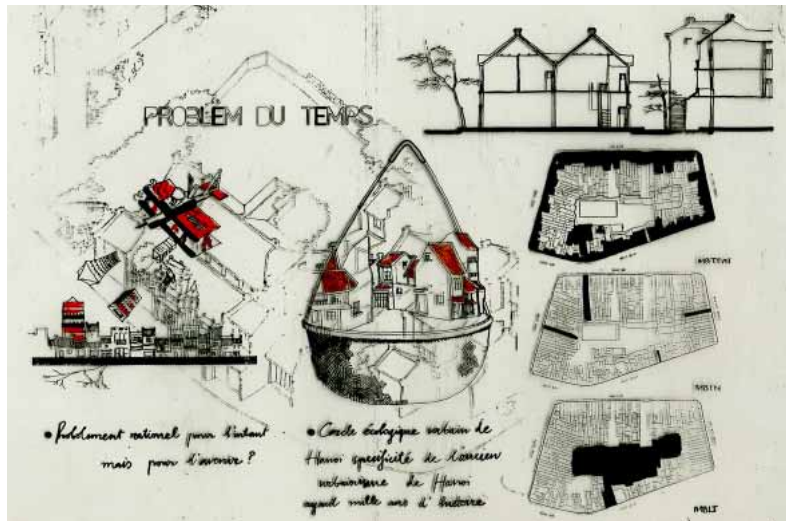


Figure 2: Pham Trung Hieu / Nguyen Xuan Anh: Political and Urban Development Strategies for a Hanoi District (competition entry details).

Low-Cost Housing in Bombay and Participative Design Processes in Egypt

The competition entry by Esther Sinnappoo and Markus Schäfer was an outgrowth of a documentary project. Sinnappoo and Schäfer were students of architecture at the RWTH Aachen at the time of the competition and now live in Bamberg. Their competition entry, for which they also received an honourable mention, was preceded by several months of research in Bombay. This study was made possible by a grant from the Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft under the ASA programme, which is concerned primarily with the cooperation of local NGOs. In collaboration with the Save

Bombay Committee and the Goethe-Institut in Bombay, Sinnappoo and Schäfer documented a specific, court-style form of settlement that originated in the 19th century – the *wadi*, in which residents enjoy a high level of spatial quality in social communities that are often still intact today (Fig 3, 4).

A type of house frequently encountered in *wadis* is the *chawl*, a residential building with exterior-corridor access and shared sanitary facilities which offer both density and privacy. The two students investigated both the architectural and social structures of ten out of about thirty existing *wadis* which exhibited highly typical features.



Figure 3: Esther Sinnappoo and Markus Schäfer: Documentation of Bombay Wadis (entrance to Bhang Wadi).



Figure 4: Figure 4: Esther Sinnappoo / Markus Schäfer: Documentation of Bombay Wadis (court of Amar Wadi).

Rents in Bombay are among the highest in the world. Thus one of the objectives of the competition project was to give people who could not afford a flat in the city a roof over their heads. The *wadis* and *chawls* documented in the study served as the typological model for the low-cost housing project proposed by Sinnappoo and Schäfer. They selected for their purposes a clearly underutilized area in Bombay with which they had become acquainted during an earlier research trip.

The competition project was supervised by a professor at the RWTH Aachen. The results of the students' research culminated in the brochure entitled *Wadis in Bombay*, which was co-financed by the Goethe-Institut. A presentation of these results at the Goethe-Institut attracted

considerable interest in Bombay, thus prompting the local press to take up the issue of the *wadis*. After the end of the competition, Sinnappoo and Schäfer also sent documentation on their award-winning design project to the Goethe-Institut. Yet contact with Bombay eventually broke off, and no further signs of interest in the project were forthcoming. The two architects continue to concern themselves with the theme of poverty today. They are currently involved in an effort to bring the photo exhibition "The Architecture of Homelessness" to Bamberg.

In contrast, the Egyptian architect Ashraf Salama, now a professor at Qatar University in Doha, focused on the subject of poverty at a more abstract level. He received the Paul Chemetov Prize, which included a grant of 5.000 US dollars, for his competition project. In addition to minimum income and the lack of access to water, infrastructure and recreational areas, Salama sees poverty manifested above all in the inability to play an active role in society. Proceeding from this position, he focuses on the democratization of design processes in order to offer people ways to contribute to shaping their living environment.

Because Salama was already involved in the work of various organizations and research groups devoted to structuring participative design and planning processes before the competition began, he was able to incorporate the results of a survey of some 35 people regarding their basic everyday needs along with insights gained in several different workshops into his project (Fig 5, 6). His competition entry was published in several academic research papers, and was also introduced as an important consultancy document. However, it did not progress beyond the concept phase and was never implemented. Still – and Salama is convinced of this – he was able to help heighten awareness among Egyptian architects and planners of the need to involve users more closely in design processes.

Furthermore, his successful participation in the competition provided Salama the encouragement he needed to develop and practice his principle of participative design processes. As an educator, his goal is to “teach

future architects how to adopt a facilitator role; that is, not to solve people’s problems but to create a process that enables people to solve their own problems.”

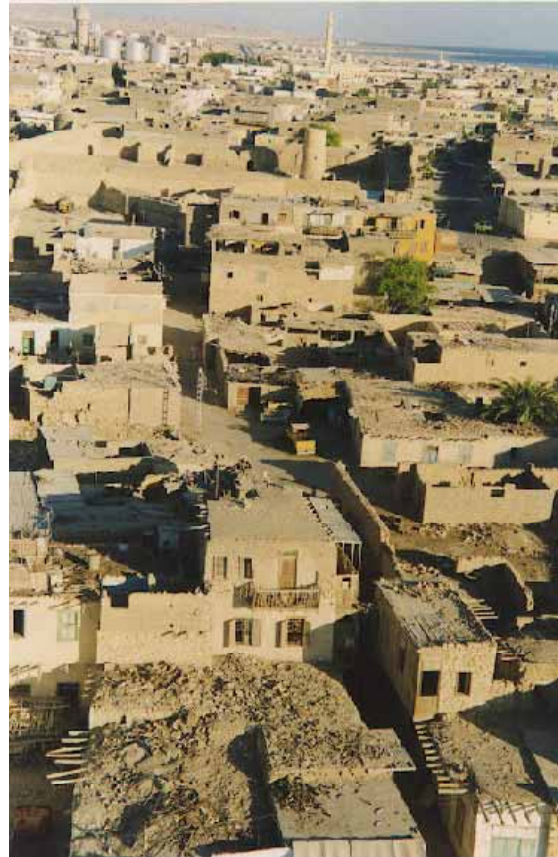


Figure 5: Overview of Quseir: Deteriorated Houses and Poor Physical Condition in the Urban Core.
(Courtesy: A. Salama).

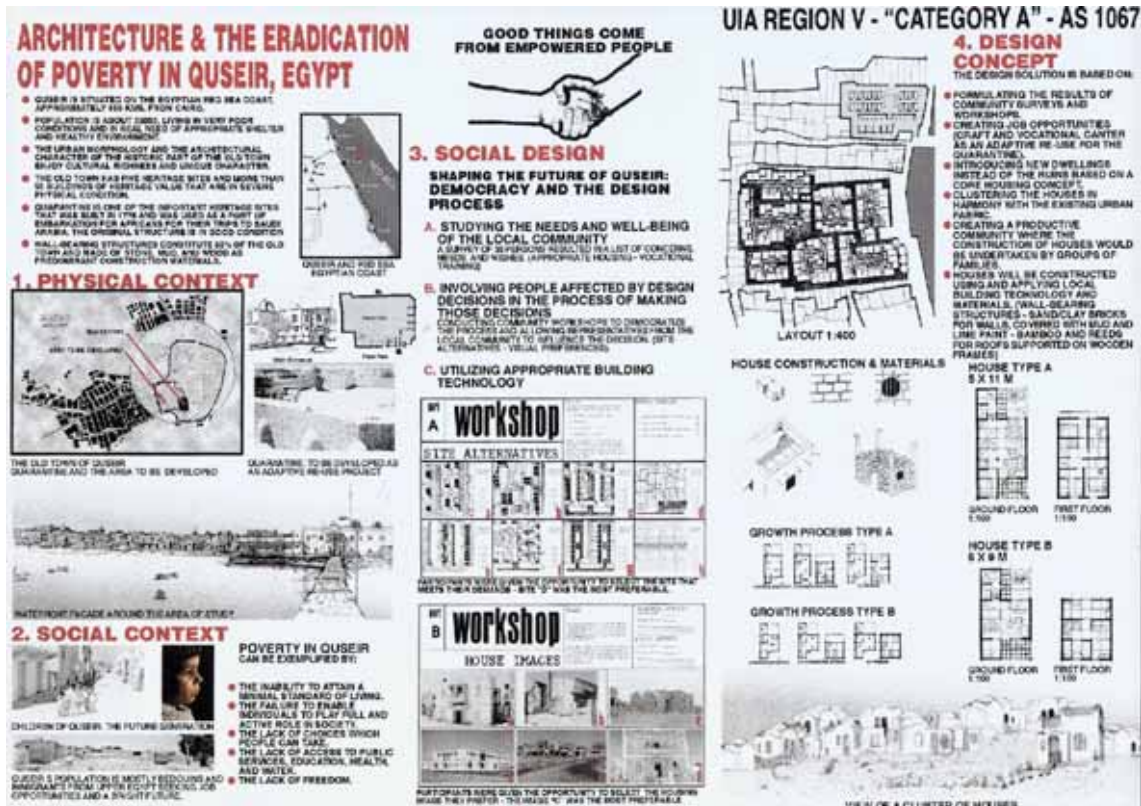


Figure 6: Democratization of Design Processes- Submission of Ashraf Salama, (competition entry details).

The Extended Grace Period

The UN Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, which prompted the competition under discussion here, has been criticized since its conclusion from several different sides. One critic even pronounced the devastating judgement that it had been a "lost decade" that fell far short of achieving its goal. This is attributable

among other things to the realization that, while the number of people living below the poverty level has declined world-wide, Sub-Saharan Africa had almost 100 million more people living on less than a dollar a day in 2001 than in 1990. "The past decade can be measured in promises broken and hopes deferred. In fact, it has been a decade of poverty ..." noted Sister Joan F. Burke, Chairperson of the

NGO Committee on Social Development, in February 2006 at the 44th Conference of the Commission for Social Development (CsocD) in New York. Characteristically, the participating governments were unable to reach an agreement on a resolution on the main theme of the conference, a review of the first UN Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. Even an attempt to achieve minimum consensus ultimately failed due to acute disagreements between the developing countries of the G77 Group and the United States, and the resolution was simply postponed (4).

The declared goal of international commemorative days, years or decades proclaimed by the UN is "to attract world-wide attention to problems" and to set specific points and periods of time for the purpose of "assessing past achievements, reviewing the facts and examining convictions and resolutions with respect to future action" (5). Thus they should serve as a means of taking stock of progress in efforts to combat global problems and assessing the fundamental goals of the global community as well as the instruments employed for these and other conceivable purposes. Such a stock-taking took place during the UN Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. "At the turn of the millennium, the United Nations presented an alarming summation: At that point in time, more than one billion people were living in extreme poverty. In other words, every fifth person in the world is forced to live on less than one dollar a day" (6). On the basis of this summary assessment, the UN member states reached agreement on the eight so-called "Millennium Development Goals" as well as a timetable for recognition by 2015 at the Millennium Summit in New York in September 2000.

It is uncertain whether these goals will be achieved by the year 2015. In his report delivered on March 21, 2005, Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General until 2006, noted in a critical vein that "The promise of the Millennium Development Goals still remains distant for many", because "too few Governments – from both the developed and developing world – have taken sufficient action to reach the targets by 2015" (Annan, 2005). Yet the year 2015 represents a new time horizon – an extension of the grace period within which national politicians may hastily complete the homework they failed to do during the first UN Decade. One might also hope that the UIA and UNESCO will use that time to take another look at the ideas and projects that have emerged from their competition and pursue, observe, document and support them wherever possible and useful. The initiators have nearly eight years to demonstrate that their interests deserve to be taken seriously – and to quell the suspicion that they had merely engaged in a cynical, intellectual, totally inconsequential mind game in 1997/1998.

Notes

(1) In collaboration with Tove Wallsten of Sweden, author Jörg Seifert also submitted an entry to the Architecture and the Eradication of Poverty competition in 1998, for which they received an honourable mention. This can be considered as one motivation for this article which was originally published in German in *archithese* 2/2007, pp. 12–17. (English translation: John Southard).

(2) Distribution of entries by category and UIA Region: Region I (Western Europe): 102 entries in the students' category / 81 entries in the architects' category; Region II (Eastern Europe and Middle East):

58/28; Region III (America): 19/21; Region IV (Asia and Australia): 45/19; Region V (Africa): 10/3 (cf. competition catalogue, 1999:10).

(3) Most of the respondents selected on a random basis were culture-section journalists writing for major daily newspapers and editors of architecture journals.

(4) for data and quotes in this section: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/csd/csocd2006/PressReleases/Development-TheLostDecade.pdf>

(5) <http://www.dgvn.de/veranstaltungen/dgvnun-dekaden.htm>

(6) <http://www.wusgermany.de/index.php?id=969>

References

Annan, K. (2005). In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All, United Nations General Assembly, Fifty Ninth Session, Report of the Secretary-General. (Document A/59/2005, available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/>)

Competition catalogue (1999). International Ideas Competition: Architecture and the Eradication of Poverty, Simetria, Bucharest, Romania.

Waibel, M. (2000). Vietnam – Preservation versus Progress? System Transformation als Bedrohung für die Altstadt von Hanoi: Das Beispiel der 36-Gassen, Südostasien, Asienstiftung/Asienhaus, Essen, Germany, Vol. 1, pp. 13-16.

Waibel, M. & Schnepf-Orth, M. (2004). Reiche werden reicher und Arme haben keinen Zugang? Auswirkungen des Neuen Staatlichen Wohnungsbaus in Hanoi/Vietnam, Südostasien, Asienstiftung/Asienhaus, Essen, Germany, Vol. 3, pp. 6-8.