

# What can we do with a slum?

**A great deal. We can "recycle" it; that is to say, we can build at the same site low-cost structures that accommodate an equal number of persons, and provide plenty of open space and other facilities.**

**LAURIE BAKER**

I AM 80 years old, and in my childhood India was a fairytale land of rajas, silks and spices, tigers, monkeys and peacocks. As a schoolboy my fairytale picture of India was mildly spoiled by my history work with its stones of the Black Hole Calcutta and the Mutiny!

During the Second World War, I was doing paramedical work in China and on the way back to England I had to wait for three months in Bombay for a boat. I saw no rajas, but saw quite a

bit of silk on beautiful ladies. But again my picture was spoiled because I was taken to see slums and chawls. But I *did* want to come back to India after I met Gandhiji.

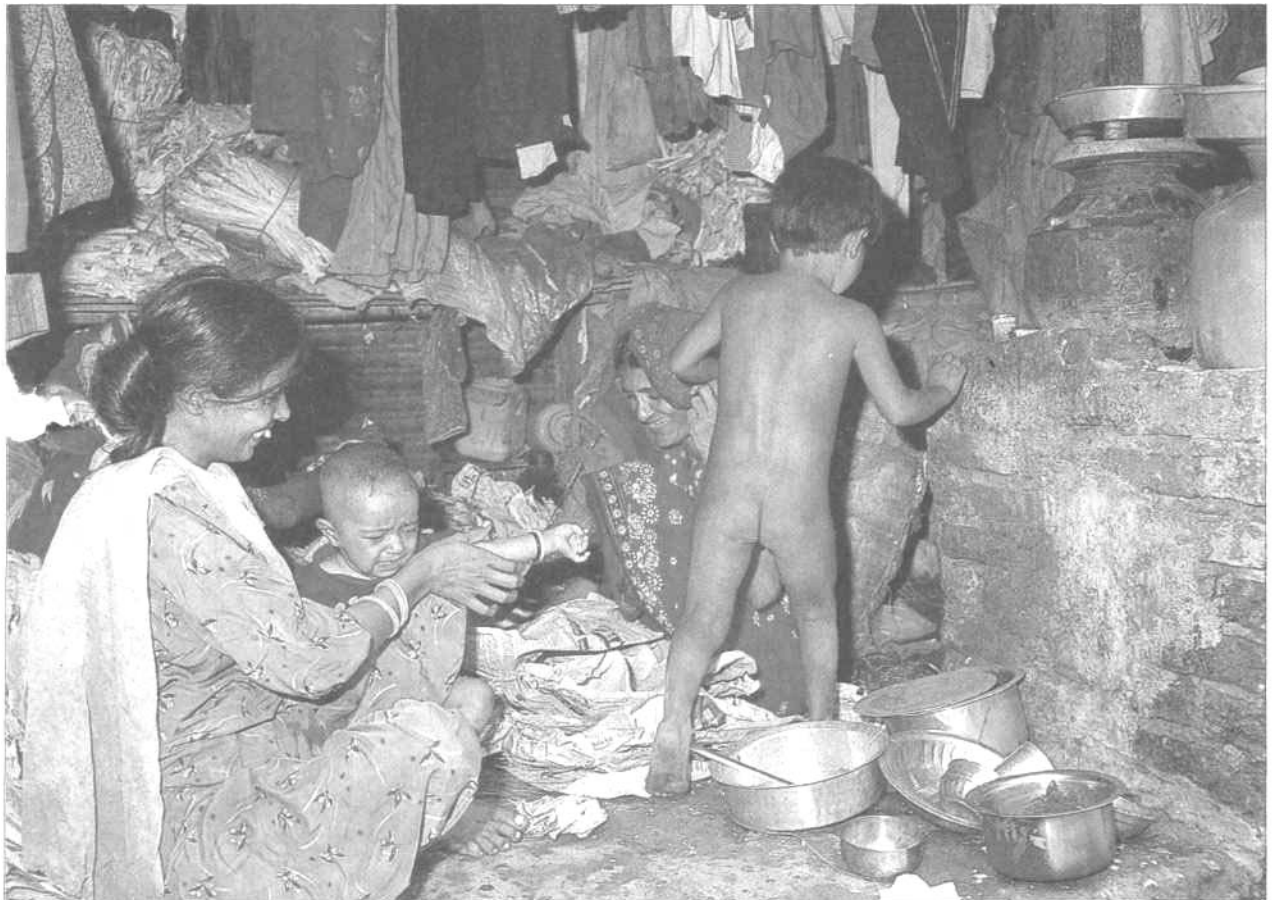
After a month or two I came back to rebuild old shelters and build new treatment centres in leprosy colonies scattered all over vast India - then still not independent. I saw the wonderful beauty and resources of India, but as my work took me mainly into remote backward rural India I very quickly became acquainted with rural poverty. Shocking though it was, the rural poor *did* have

access to fresh air and trees and plants, birds and animals.

Only later did I get an insight into the far more squalid conditions that prevail in urban slums, where people knew nothing of fresh air, clean water or of anything green.

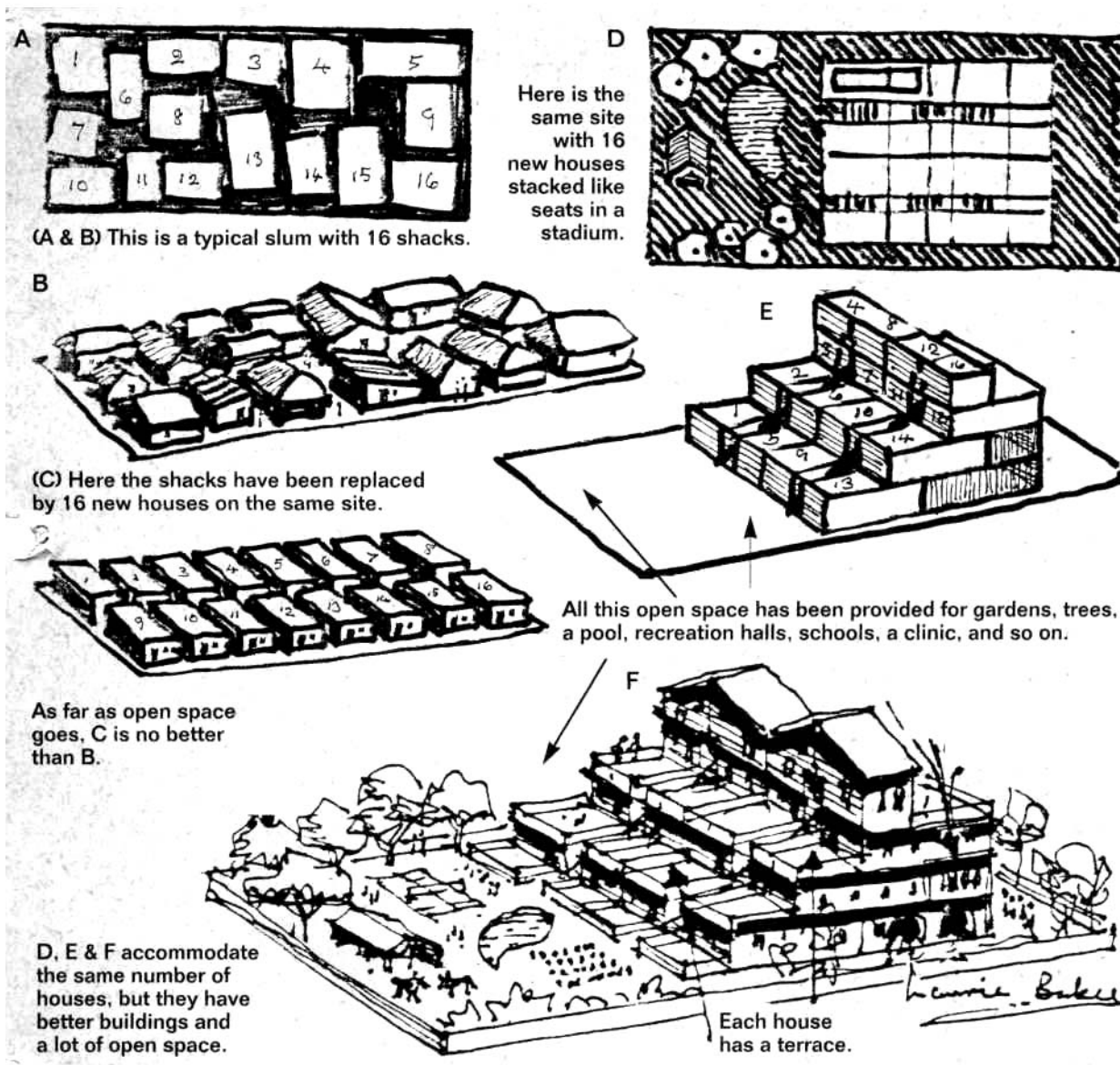
There is now a slight stirring of conscience among governments and the people to do something about slums. But most efforts are thwarted by those who use slums for their money-making trades of drink, drugs and sex.

One current idea of approach - because money is not readily forthcom-



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**Inside a pavement dwelling in Mumbai, a family sorts paper that will be recycled. Slum-dwellers should not be evicted and be forced to put up slums elsewhere. In their own way, they provide a valuable service by cleaning away waste and recycling some of the material.**



ing for slum-eradication and recycling - is to hand the job over to builders and contractors. They will build vertical cement block tenements for slum-dwellers to move into - and all the land cleared of sprawling shacks and hovels can then accommodate any number of high-rise luxury flats, offices and business houses. So although the slum-dwellers will have a water-proof concrete roof, they will still not know what fresh air, green plants and open space are.

Now, in the 50th year of India's Independence, we simply must not allow our slums to get denser, dirtier and more degraded.

So is there any way out of this population and housing impasse? I personally am convinced that there *are* ways and it will be to our shame and disgrace

if we accept the *status quo*.

**WHAT CAN WE DO WITH A SLUM?'**

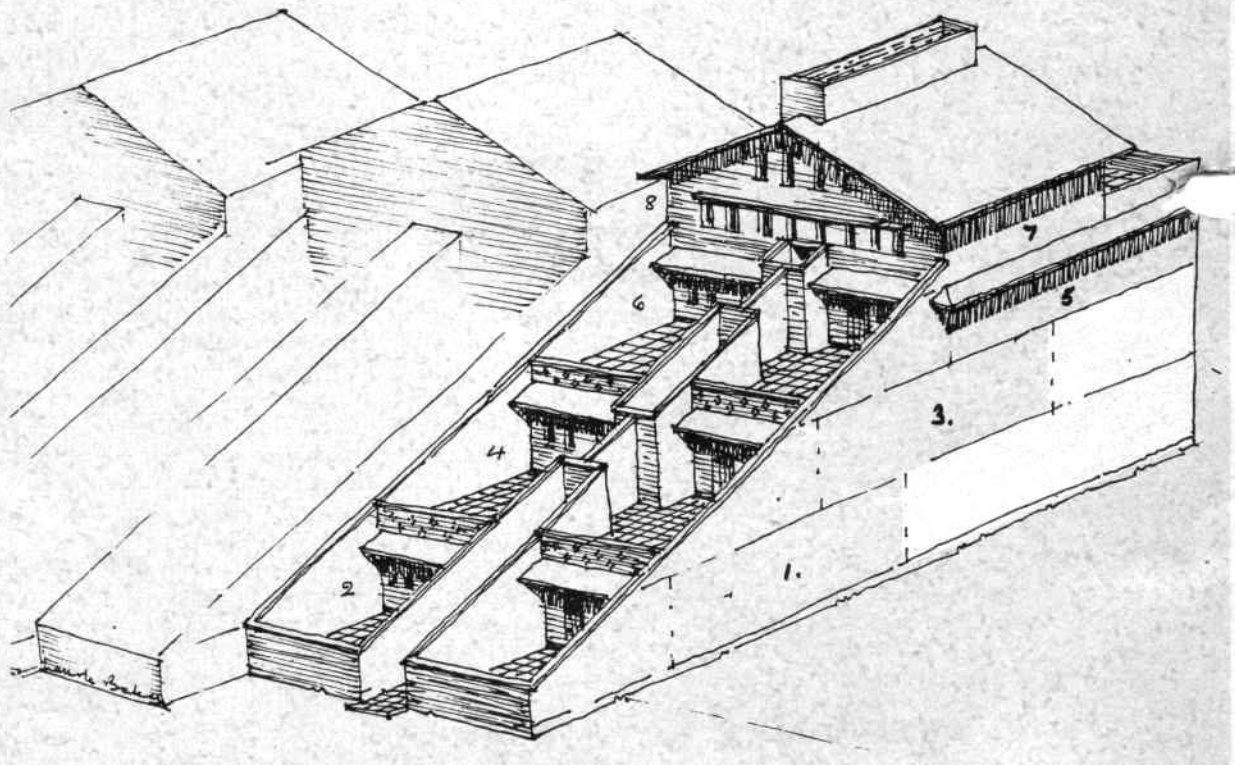
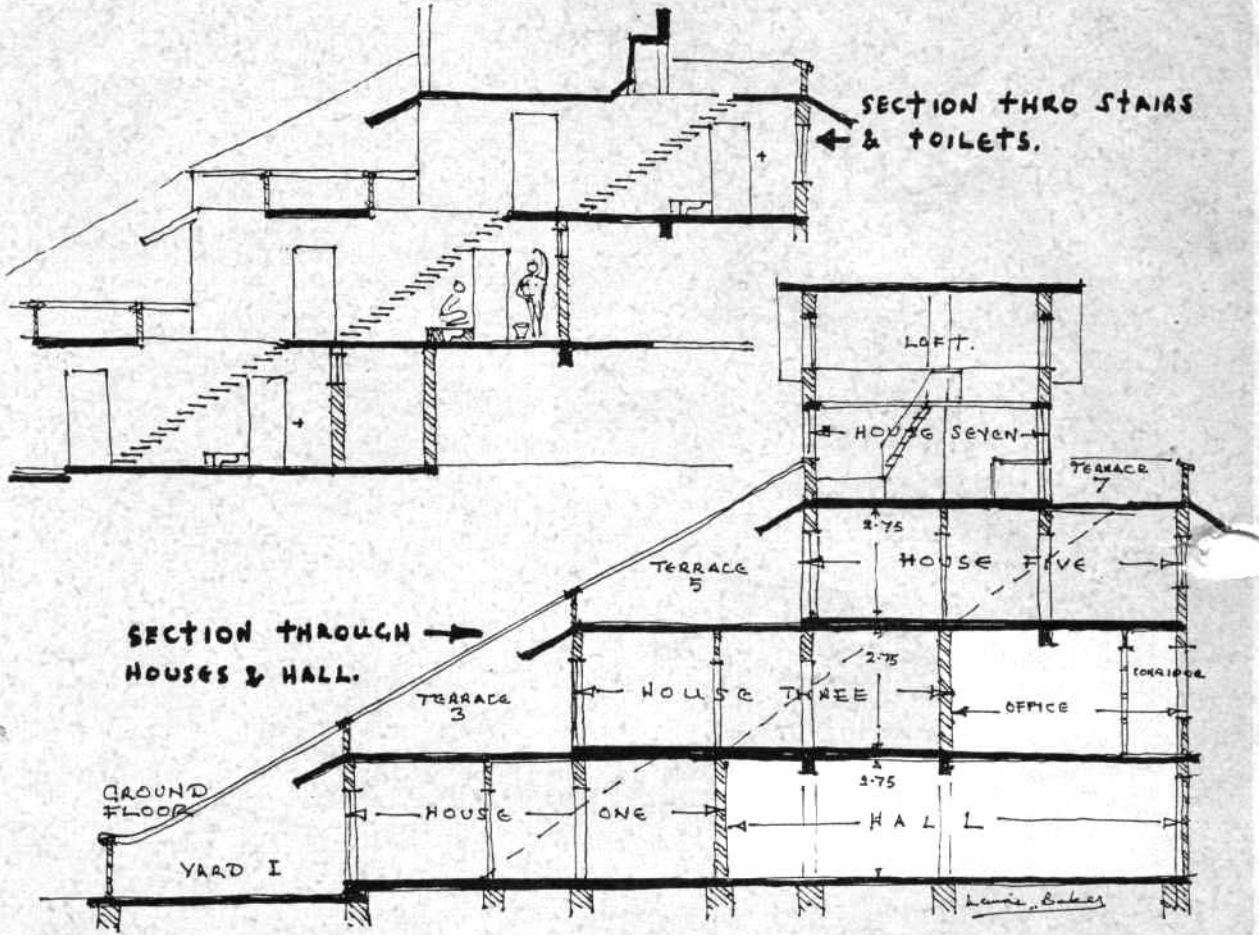
**A**SLUM is a shame and a disgrace, not to those who live in it, but first to those in authority, then to planners and builders and then to all of us who pass by on the other side of the road and pretend that no slum exists. A slum must not just be patched up and it must not be pushed to another waste place to become another slum. A slum must not be converted into a cement block replica, identical in planning and 'services' to the old original slum. A slum should not be converted into identical uniform units placed in straight rows.

So what should be done? A slum is probably where it is because there was a waste, "unusable" patch of land tucked

away between and behind prime city property, and homeless people moved in to be close to work. With almost no money they constructed shelters with bits of waste material. They built these shelters close to one another for company and protection and, as their friends and families joined them, the whole place got completely filled up with these shacks. There was, of course, no drinking water, and no roads, no lights and no sanitation.

They should not be thrown out and be forced to start all over again somewhere else. They are, in their own way, valuable, desirable and necessary fellow-citizens who are experts, skilled at jobs that most people dislike and will not do.

They are 'experts' at scavenging. They not only clean away our waste and



Our rubbish, but expertly sort it out into different categories of materials that can be recycled - metals, (toothpaste, tubes!), glass, rags and paper, plastics, organic matter, and so on. They earn money by selling these items at ridiculously low prices. When they do all this to our advantage, why should they not be provided with the facilities so that they themselves can also recycle and market it?

We live in pucca houses or flats which have a backyard or a garden or a balcony for outdoor activities — for children to play, to dry clothes, to keep pets, to grow vegetables and flowering plants. So why should not they also have open air space? Every house we build should have a yard or a terrace of its own.

There must also be open spaces for community recreation, children's play, for rearing cows, goats and poultry, a fish trees for fodder, fuel, fruit and flowers, and small patches of land for

growing vegetables. (I can hear you say: "Fine! Why not give them T.V. sets and cars?")

The recycled slum should also have its own shops and market, a health centre, a creche and a school, a library or a reading room, and a hall for community use and for letting out for weddings and other functions. It must have water, light and sanitation.

**T**HESE are not impractical, unworkable ideas. The tentative plans and illustrations detailed here show that all this is not just an airy-fairy idealist Utopia; there is no good reason why it cannot be done. The objective is to show that on the same plot of land where the slum exists at present, one can provide not only for the same number of occupants but for all these facilities too (though not the T.Vs or the cars!).

Government (and other) depart-

ments already have plans, personnel and the money to put up buildings and provide controlled water supply, electricity, solar and biogas energy, access paths and roads, education and health services and provide facilities for animal- and poultry-breeding, social forestry, agriculture and horticulture.

There will be problems and inconveniences - and resistance from those with vested interests - but as a nation we must overcome them. And the time to start is now.

The sketch F on Page 117 must not be allowed to become like the sketch on this page.

If it does we are merely converting a mud-and-tin slum into a concrete one. We have made the mistake of keeping nature out of cities. Should we persist in the folly?

Vertical tenements are neither practical (on considerations of water supply, sanitation and so on) nor acceptable. We should have learned *that* lesson from our chawls!

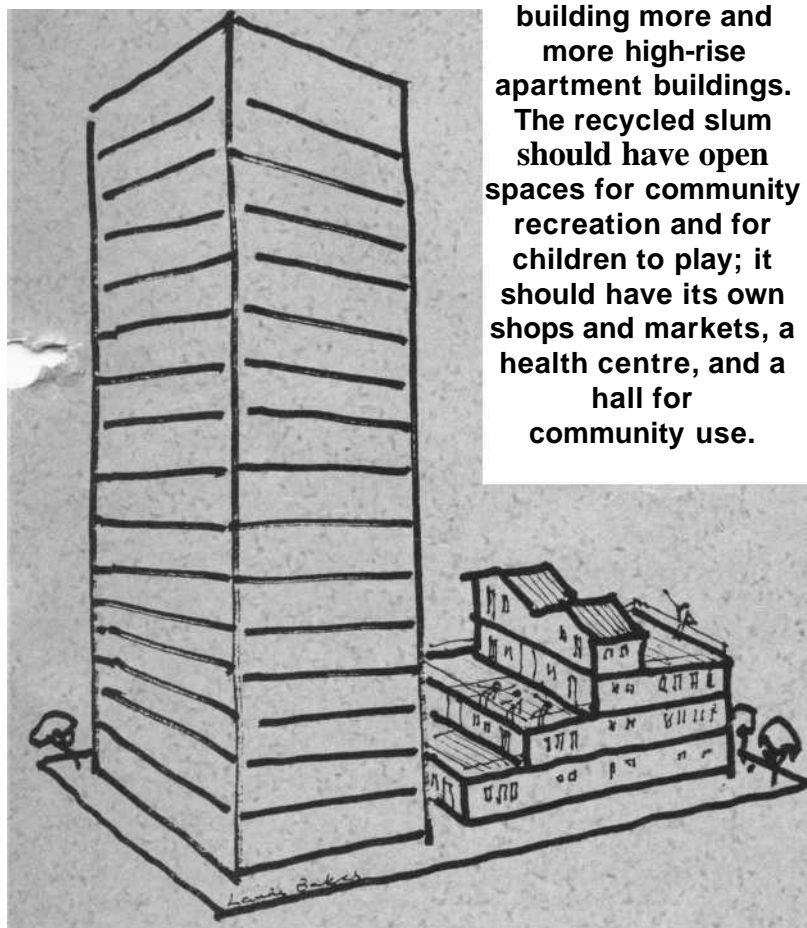
When put together in stepped tiers, the house units tend to give the impression of high-rise flats and there are fears that costs will be similar. However, these simple housing units, up to four storeys, can all be done with ordinary load-bearing walls; no RCC framework is required. Floor and roof slabs can make use of the R.C. Filler slab, which is as strong and durable as the orthodox R.C. slab and costs 30 to 35 per cent less. Similarly there are material- and cost-saving methods for brick walls, and so on.

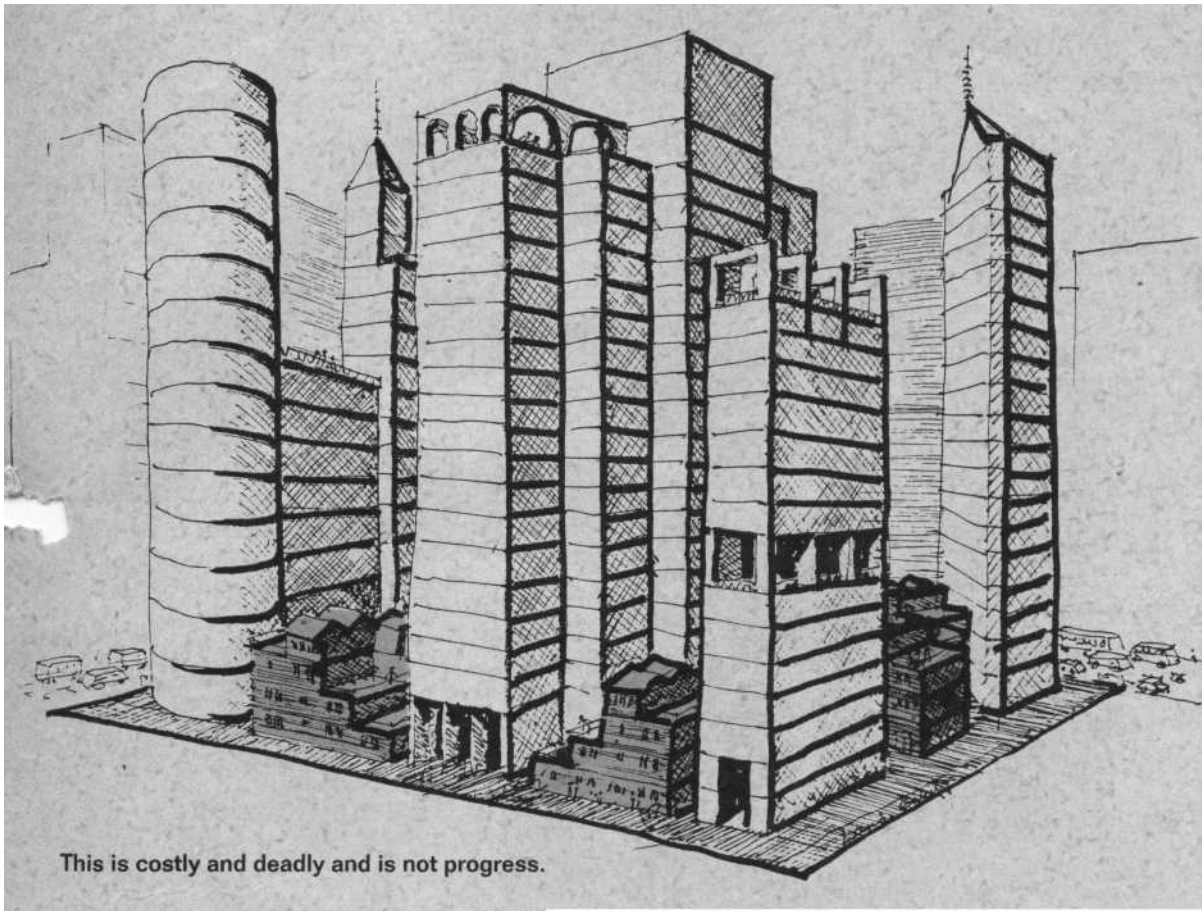
There are very many simple and effective ways of cutting down costs, without taking away from the structural stability. Obviously, in a country the size of India, the types of materials available and the methods and styles of using them varies considerably, even from district to district. In any case, it is better and safer to employ local and traditional methods of building; this also makes for variations in style, which is very welcome.

The deprived people - whose only idea of an open space was of the nearby highway with its traffic and pollution and noise and dangers, or else the two or three feet of mud that separates their shacks - can at last get a home and know what an open space with trees and grass for their children to play, and maybe even grow flowering-plants and raise animals, is like. Our hopes, and their dreams, can become a reality.

There are, however, a great many dangers that may descend on their new

**Recycling our slums should be given far greater priority than building more and more high-rise apartment buildings. The recycled slum should have open spaces for community recreation and for children to play; it should have its own shops and markets, a health centre, and a hall for community use.**





haven. Even if one has not been to New York, one is familiar with images of its concrete-and-glass precipices and canyons. One has to face the fact that very act of recreating an open space 'crime land' in the heart of a city is an invitation to greed and to false development. The result will be as in the sketch above.

Not so easy to find are the new types of houses shown on Pages 117 and 118.

All these sketches show the same plan for each living area or quarter. It must be understood that there is no good reason for endless repetition of one plan! Obviously, in the type of building shown, where units are placed one above another and where there are a certain number of units in each block, there has to be a certain basic structural pattern for each type of block. But within this basic pattern there is an endless variety of ways of dividing up a specified overall house unit area. The room units can be divided up in different ways to suit the requirements of each family.

Even the size of a living unit may vary, depending on the funds available or the needs of the community involved. There must be regulations to ensure that a family of a specific size gets a living unit of a certain area. For instance, a four-member family (a couple with two children) will require more living space than, say, a two-member family (a couple). But this is not an architect's job.

As was said earlier, there are many simple ways of reducing construction costs without weakening structural stability. The main point is that the process of manufacturing "modern" materials uses up energy in large quantities. For example, steel and cement, whose manufacturing processes are highly energy-intensive, are thought to be almost indispensable. For ordinary buildings, their quantities can be greatly reduced. There are alternatives that use much less energy.

All over India there are thousands of slums - from small ones in little pockets of "wasteland" to very big ones cov-

ering acres of prime land in big cities. It is not enough to attempt one or two pilot or model projects. These, our slums, are all equally shameful and we have to carry out a major war against them.

It will cost a lot of money, so we must use tried and reliable cost-reducing materials and methods. If we carry out schemes similar to the one described in these sketches, people get homes and open space and recreation areas; in addition, the extra built-up space beneath the tiers can be used to provide health and educational services or markets and generate income, which over a period will help pay back the building costs and provide the residents of the 'recycled' slum an income. Recycling our slums should be given far greater priority than raising more and more high-rise flats.

Dare we tell the 'haves' to take a back seat for a while and let the NIGs (no-income groups) and the EWSs (economically weaker sections) have a chance to become at least LIGs (low-income groups)? •