



◀ Typical conditions in the squatter and land-rent settlements in Yangon's Hlaing Tar Yar Township.

A big milestone for **BURMA** :

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A group of women in one of the savings groups in Hlaing Tar Yar Township had been trying for some time to purchase some government land to relocate, since many were facing the possibility of being evicted from the land they were squatting on. But nothing came of their efforts, so they decided to find an inexpensive piece of agricultural land nearby (just 6,600 square feet) to collectively purchase and then do a housing project there, with support from WWM and ACCA.

This small housing project (for 30 households initially, but now being expanded to add another 20 families on adjacent land) is being supported by the Yangon-based NGO Women for the World Myanmar (WWM), with design support from the ACHR community architects. This is Burma's first-ever community-planned and community-built urban poor housing project, so it's a real milestone. The project demonstrates a new model of collective secure housing for the poorest landless squatters in Yangon's peripheral slums - in a situation where no solution exists yet and where the possibility of free government land for housing is still a long way off.

In August 2010, two young Thai architects from ACHR, Nad and Tee, spent three days with the women in the Pan Thakhin savings group, helping them to develop plans for building a new community for some of their poorest members, on the new land they had purchased. Besides the community members, the site planning and house design workshops that Nad and Tee organized were attended by community representatives from other slums and villages in Yangon, some local architects and engineers, and some support professionals from other NGOs working with poor and cyclone-affected communities in Burma.

The group worked in collaboration with the government's Housing Cooperative Department, which means this cooperative will be able to provide a proper legal status to the cooperative these 50 households set up, to buy their land and develop their housing collectively. The \$40,000 ACCA big project funds were channeled through the women's saving group to the new cooperative, in the form of loans of about \$800 per family (for both land and house), which the women will repay in 5 years, in monthly installments of about \$15 to the new city-wide community development fund.

Here are some notes and photos from Nad on the Pan Thakhin women's remarkable housing design and construction process.



▲ **Affordability is the starting point** : The process began with letting them tell us about who they are, where they live, how much they earn and save. We start from that important reality: how much people can afford to invest in their house and how much loan funds are available. We designed the houses only after making a financial system to support houses people can really afford.



▲ **But there is still room for dreaming** : After that, we let them dream on paper about the kind of community and houses they'd like to have. Then we prepared some tools to help them work out a scale map of the new land and design a layout of roads, houses and services on it. Leaders from other communities facing similar land problems also joined, to learn from the design process.



▲ **Designing the houses** : We started by letting the people explore their housing ideas in paper models, with some simple scale tools. People are almost always extremely practical and realistic when they draw their dream houses, which showed a simple house on stilts, a toilet, a shelter for the pig, a water pump and a big tree. From there, we moved into the design of the real houses, at scale.



▲ **The role of professionals** : We architects just helped them with a few details, like proposing shared septic tanks to save money on toilets. All the households have at least two pigs, so we suggested they could do biogas. And when the people's house and community layout designs were more-less finished, we helped to draw them up and showed them in 3-dimensional model form.



▲ **A new community built in just 3 months** : The people staked out the plots, constructed the infrastructure (with water pumps, toilets, shared septic tanks and simple raised earth lanes) and built the houses themselves, in sub-groups, very simply and well. They figure that these simple houses will last about 7 years, when they'll be better-off and be able to upgrade them.



▲ **Super cheap \$300 model house** : Another thing we did was to build a sample house which showed what kind of house you can build for US\$300, which was about how much people could afford to borrow, so we focused on options which fit within that budget, gathering all the ideas from carpenters and the women in the community on how to make the house well but cheaply.