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# Building with, Not for

## Urban Poor Voices on High-rise Housing Development in Quezon City, Philippines

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### Background

The Philippines faces a staggering housing challenge with 3.75 million informal settler families (ISFs) and an estimated total housing need of over 6.6 million units, as of 2022. Metro Manila, particularly Quezon City (QC) - the largest and most populous city in the region - accounts for a huge portion of both the housing need and ISF population (NHA 2011; Dineros 2022; HFHP 2023). The QC Local Shelter Plan 2020 - 2025 estimates 213,978 ISFs in the city, most of whom reside in public lands and danger zones (Quezon City Government 2020).

During Mayor Herbert Bautista's tenure (2010 - early 2019), QC became infamous for rampant and often violent demolitions targeting informal settlements (Dimalanta, Cabaron, and Dones 2024). Data from the Urban Poor Associates show that QC had the highest number of eviction incidents among all Metro Manila LGUs (local government units) between 2014 and 2018. Bautista's approach earned him the moniker 'demolition warlord' from the urban poor group KADAMAY (Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap), which declared QC 'the worst place to live in for the urban poor'.

Among the communities most affected by these evictions was Sitio San Roque in the North Triangle, QC. Once home to roughly 16,000 families, this 37-hectare government-owned property is situated near major roads, employment hubs, & essential services.

Residents are primarily engaged in informal labor-vending, transport, construction, home-based work, among others.

In 2009, a public-private partnership between the National Housing Authority (NHA) and Ayala Land, Inc. marked the beginning of Sitio San Roque's transformation into the upscale mixed-use development project, Vertis North. This plan was supported by earlier government directives such as the LGU's QC Central Business District plan (Inklusibo 2019; Dimalanta, Cabaron, and Dones 2024; Dimalanta and Bautista 2024).

Large-scale evictions in Sitio San Roque began in 2010, prompting organized resistance from residents led by KADAMAY San Roque. Their tactics included community barricades, street occupations, and the rebuilding of demolished homes. In late 2019, KADAMAY San Roque submitted its own Community Development Plan (CDP)—a people-led housing counter-proposal—to the newly-elected QC Mayor Joy Belmonte (Dimalanta, Cabaron, and Dones 2024). Mayor Belmonte assured that no further large-scale evictions would occur and expressed openness to a 'win-win' solution. This marked a shift in the approach of the QC LGU, signaling its willingness to engage in dialogues and negotiations for in-city housing solutions (Dimalanta and Bautista 2024).

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Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, dialogues between the QC LGU and KADAMAY San Roque were maintained, particularly around pandemic relief. Housing dialogues resumed in 2022, leading to negotiations by early 2025 for a high-rise, in-city rental housing project for Sitio San Roque residents.

This project, to be developed by a private developer with support from the QC Housing, Community Development, and Resettlement Department (HCDRD), is located 5-6 kilometers from the original site and offers a 12-floor high-rise building with elevator access.

The said housing project is designed as rental housing stipulates a monthly rent of Php 800, with incremental increases every three years. A potential rent-to-own transition is also on the table. However, many details of the housing project still remain unclear to the members of KADAMAY San Roque prompting discussions in March 2025 among the organization to assess its implications.

## Objectives

This paper arises from those discussions, seeking to capture the voices—concerns and suggestions—of Sitio San Roque residents, particularly the KADAMAY San Roque members—regarding this proposed high-rise in-city rental housing.

Central to this paper is the argument that housing outcomes for the urban poor cannot be improved without their genuine participation in decision-making and planning processes. It argues that inclusion in these processes is essential to developing housing that is not only physically suitable and affordable but also aligned with the everyday realities of its intended beneficiaries.

## Findings

Insights from the discussions with urban poor households belonging to KADAMAY San Roque revealed key areas of concerns around the proposed high-rise in-city rental housing project.

Appendix A contains the specific worries and questions raised by the participants, which were used as the basis for the thematic analysis. These were organized into seven thematic areas: Financing, security of tenure & eligibility, livelihood & location, access to social services, utilities & basic necessities, comfort, safety & mobility, livability, and participation & personalization.

## Financing, security of tenure, & eligibility

**Affordability.** Residents are deeply concerned about the Php 800 monthly rent, particularly in light of additional, potential costs such as elevator maintenance and electricity charges, upkeep of the housing project's facilities, and building security. These costs - combined with utilities like water and electricity - may render the project unaffordable. Participants emphasized the need for transparent, upfront communication about the potential total costs.

**Rent-to-own transition.** While the transitioning to a rent-to-own financing scheme from rental financing scheme is welcomed, participants question whether low-income urban poor households could realistically afford future amortization. Participants requested that any transition be preceded by careful assessments of each households' financial capacity to avoid displacement due to inability to pay.

**Eviction protections.** Given the urban poor's irregular incomes, participants worry about the consequences of missed or non-payments. They asked whether due process would apply and proposed alternatives like promissory notes to mitigate risks of eviction. Clarity on penalties and safeguards remains an urgent issue for the participants.

**Eligibility criteria.** Past experiences with relocation programs of the government revealed exclusionary practices against solo parents, LGBTQIA+ individuals, the elderly, and even adult children who had already formed new households. Participants highlighted the need for clearly documented criteria in the beneficiary selection process.

**Post-occupancy management.** Participants called for concrete and clear plans for long-term management of the estate (housing project), including upkeep of shared spaces and facilities, elevator maintenance, among others.

## Livelihood & location

**Employment & transport accessibility.** Urban poor households typically rely on informal livelihoods tied to their location - vending, driving of pedicabs or tricycles, home-based retail, etc. Relocating 5-6 kilometers away may disrupt these arrangements.

Participants emphasized the need for reliable and affordable commuting options in and out of the housing project.

**Vending and parking spaces.** Vendors requested designated spaces inside the building and within the site—they explained that there may be designated vending zones per floor or flexible personalization of housing unit frontages for vendors.

The inclusion of a wet market or proximity to one was also proposed, especially for those selling perishable goods. Vendors also noted that they use vehicles to haul goods from larger markets in QC. Parking space within the housing project is essential to sustain this practice.

**Transport terminals for informal transport workers.** Pedicab and tricycle operators requested designated terminals and clear routes to ensure continued work in informal transport and service for prospective occupants of the housing project.

## Access to Social Services

Participants raised concerns about access to schools, daycare centers, and clinics or hospitals—social services that are already available in or near Sitio San Roque.

They proposed that the housing project integrate such facilities to avoid disrupting children's education, parents' ability to work, and access to healthcare.

## Utilities & Basic Necessities

**Water and electricity connections.** Participants fear experiencing the same problems faced in previous government housing projects in off-city resettlement sites, where residents had to shoulder the cost of utility installations.

They highlighted the importance for the QC LGU to ensure that all housing units of the project come with ready water and power lines connected to public service providers.

**Waste management.** Current waste disposal in Sitio San Roque benefits from proximity to Agham Road, where garbage is collected by the QC LGU.

Living in a high-rise housing, however, poses new challenges to garbage collection—how will garbage be collected from multiple floors? Participants requested clear systems for this.

## Comfort, Safety & Mobility

**Construction and building material quality.** Distrust of the participants in the quality of social housing projects produced by partnerships between NHA and private developers is rooted in their observations of other projects using substandard materials and having poor construction workmanship.

Participants, particularly, construction workers emphasized the importance of high-quality, durable materials for a high-rise building; and proposed that members of the community be hired to help construct the housing project, allowing them to monitor quality and also benefit economically.

**Elevators and staircases.** With 12 floors planned, adequate, reliable, and functioning elevators are non-negotiable - especially for the elderly, PWDs, and children. Participants also emphasized that staircases should be wide, well-lit, and fitted with handrails.

**Lighting and safety.** Proper lighting in corridors, roads, and common areas in the housing project is essential for safety, especially at night. Participants explained that well-lit areas deter possibilities for any criminal activities.

**Ventilation, sunlight, and privacy.** Participants surfaced fears that the housing units would resemble "bird cages"—lacking airflow, light, and open spaces.

Residents suggested ample windows and provision of balconies to ensure proper ventilation to prevent overheating. Soundproofing between housing units was also recommended to ensure privacy.

## Livability

**Laundry areas.** As explained by the participants, especially concerned mothers, laundry is a critical household task. In Sitio San Roque, residents wash and dry clothes outside their homes. However, high-rise living completely erases this option.

Participants suggested that there be balconies in each housing unit and/or common laundry areas per building in the housing project in order to accommodate this basic need without incurring additional costs.

**Community spaces.** Green and social spaces, such as playgrounds, open areas for gatherings, and places for worship, are essential for the well-being of the participants. These spaces help foster solidarity, especially important for urban poor communities with strong social ties like Sitio San Roque.

Participants suggested ample space for socialization and also children to play. They also requested that pets be allowed in the housing units—many of these pets for them are emotional support companions or service animals.

## Participation & Personalization

**People's participation in designing their homes and neighborhood.** The participants' experience in developing their CDP highlighted the transformative potential of participatory human settlement planning.

Through participatory workshops, they were able to articulate their needs in housing and draw their desired housing project which served as the foundation for a counter-proposal for a housing project that they take ownership over.

Participants emphasized that the same participatory approach be applied to the housing project. At a minimum, they urged consultation and openness to revisions of any existing plans. At maximum, they advocated that they be included in the planning process for the housing project, emphasizing not just informed consent or consultation, but genuine co-creation.

Despite ongoing dialogues with the LGU, residents have not yet visited the proposed housing site. Participants suggested organized site visits to assess its accessibility, surroundings, and existing infrastructure.

**Freedom to personalize.** Participants also requested clarity on whether they can personalize the housing units after occupancy - even just small modifications - adding shelves, painting walls, or improving ventilation.

Participants explained that even minor adjustments to the housing unit could enhance comfort and cultivate a sense of ownership and belongingness.

## The need for people's participation in housing development

The concerns raised by KADAMAY San Roque members are grounded in lived experience and reflect a clear understanding of what makes housing viable, inclusive, and humane for their sector. **Far from abstract demands, their inputs reflect the material realities of urban poor households - low and irregular incomes, precarious and informal livelihoods, and often multigenerational living arrangements. These realities must not be treated as constraints to be worked around, but as foundations upon which housing policy should be built.**

Participatory human settlement planning is not a tokenistic add-on - it is an essential condition for success of housing development. **Without the meaningful participation of people, social housing projects often fail - becoming unaffordable, inaccessible, or misaligned with the actual needs of those they are meant to serve.** This has been repeatedly demonstrated by numerous government housing projects that remain unoccupied or underutilized, precisely because they were designed without engaging the intended residents. The participation of the urban poor is central to any meaningful housing intervention (Racelis 1976, 2003, 2023).

Participation fosters a sense of ownership, cultivates empowerment, and enables residents to shape environments that reflect their socio-economic, cultural, and emotional needs. **When the people are engaged from the outset, housing projects are more likely to be embraced, inhabited, and sustained.**

**As the prospective high-rise in-city rental housing project moves forward, the QC LGU and the HCDRD face a crucial opportunity: to move beyond mere information-sharing and toward genuine consultation and even co-creation.** This means not only listening to input from the people and reshaping project plans around it - but involving them in the process. This ensures that those for whom the housing is intended are participants in shaping their future homes.

## Appendix A. Concerns identified by urban poor residents per area of concern

Areas of concern	Sub-areas	Articulated concerns, questions, and needs <i>(in Filipino)</i>
		<i>The statements from the participants have been slightly edited for brevity and clarity. The original phrasing and tone of how the residents expressed their concerns were retained.</i>
<b>1. Financing, security of tenure, and eligibility</b>	Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paano kung hindi kaya ang monthly rental fee pag dagdag ang elevator maintenance?</li> </ul>
	Rent-to-own transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magkano ang additional fee for maintenance ng elevator?</li> <li>• Dapat fixed na ang Php 800 monthly na rental fee - sana 'di na ito tumaas.</li> <li>• Php 800 monthly ba sa buong 5 years? Tataas pa ba ito?</li> <li>• Dapat 'yung kaya natin ang pagbabayad - pagka-kasamang babayaran ang elevator atbp.</li> <li>• Paano yung hirap sa pagbabayad at walang permanenteng trabaho?</li> <li>• Paano pag value ng building after 5 years - mahirapan pa rin tayo sa pagbili? Pwede kaya i-assess muna after 5 years saka tingnan kung kaya na natin?</li> <li>• Matapos ang 5 years nang pagrerenta, pwede na daw ibenta? Paano pag after 5 years hindi pa rin namin kayang bayaran ang per unit kahit bumaba na ang presyo nito?</li> </ul>
<b>1. Financing, security of tenure, and eligibility</b>	Eviction protections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pagkunwari 'di makapagbayad agad ng sunod-sunod - kunwari 3 buwan - anong mangyayari sa tenant?</li> <li>• Pwede bang mag-promissory note pag 'di makapagbayad?</li> </ul>
<b>1. Financing, security of tenure, and eligibility</b>	Eligibility criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paano pag solo parent - pwede ba maging beneficiary ng housing project?</li> <li>• Kung 5 years bang nakatira sa San Roque, pwede na maging beneficiary?</li> <li>• 'Yung mga anak namin na may mga anak na rin ba maging beneficiary?</li> </ul>
<b>1. Financing, security of tenure, and eligibility</b>	Post-occupancy management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paano masisiguro ang regular na maintenance ng mga elevator, at iba pang facilities sa housing project?</li> <li>• Sino ang mangunguna sa maintenance ng mga facilities rito?</li> </ul>

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<b>2. Livelihood and location</b>	Employment and transport accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible ba ito papunta sa aming trabaho?</li> <li>• Paano ang transportasyon ng tao paloob at palabas ng housing project? May masasakyan ba?</li> </ul>
<b>2. Livelihood and location</b>	Vending and parking spaces	<p>Vending spaces within or adjacent to the housing project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paano po yung mga vendors? Sana may maayos na palengke sa housing project.</li> <li>• Paano ang mga nagtitinda ngayon sa palengke sa San Roque? Saan pwede pumwesto?</li> <li>• Dapat may maayos na palengke na pwedeng pag-tindahan.</li> <li>• Sana may espasyo para sa mga vendors - nagtitinda ng isda at gulay, lutong-ulam, atbp.</li> </ul> <p>Vending spaces inside the high-rise building:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baka pwedeng bawat palapag, may espasyo para sa vendors tulad nung mga may sari-sari store.</li> <li>• Paano kung may tindahan sa kasalukuyan naming bahay?</li> <li>• Mas maganda yung bawat floor, may espasyo para makapagtinda ang vendors - para kung may panindahan - kunwari sa 7th floor - edi doon nalang kami bibili kaysa bababa pa sa ground floor ; hindi na kami bababa para lang bumili.</li> </ul> <p>Parking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paano ang parkingan ng sasakyan ng vendors?</li> <li>• Dapat sana may parking space para sa aming vendors.</li> <li>• Sana may sapat na parking.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Livelihood and location</b>	Transport terminals for informal transport workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paano po ang pedicab namin sa housing project? Magkaka-terminal ba doon?</li> <li>• Paano ang kabuhayan naming bilang pedicab driver o operator? Pwede ba kami doon mag-pedicab? May pwesto ba kami?</li> </ul>

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<b>3. Access to social services</b>	<p>This pertains to the availability/presence of or access to the the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools</li> <li>Daycare centers</li> <li>Hospitals/Clinics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malapit ba sa school 'yung pagtatayuan ng housing project? may daycare or school ba dito na malapit?</li> <li>May daycare center ba para sa mga bata? pag may daycare, doon ko na pwede iwan ng bata para makapagtrabaho - at malapit sa atin.</li> <li>Sana may clinic dito sa housing project. Para kung sakaling may mga sakit ng mga residente ay doon nalang pumunta.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Utilities and basic necessities</b>	Water and electricity connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tubig at kuryente ay kailangan. Dapat diretsong metro sa tubig at kuryente - hindi 'yung sub-meter ang connection.</li> </ul>
	Waste management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sana mayroong maayos na linya na ng tubig at kuryente - 'yung hindi kami paisa-isa ang mag-aapply pa ng supply.</li> <li>May water tank ba ito?</li> <li>Paano ang pagtatapon ng basura?</li> </ul>
<b>5. Comfort, safety and mobility</b>	Construction and building material quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pagdating doon sa pinapagawa nilang building, pagdating sa column - baka pangit ang bakal - patay lahat ang nakatira doon pag mahina ang pagkakagawa.</li> <li>Kailangan hindi tinitipid ang materyales o substandard - high-rise ito eh dapat matibay na matibay.</li> <li>Yung pabahay na ito? sumusunod sa standards?</li> <li>Dapat 'yung kunin sanang mga trabahante ay 'yung mga titira sa housing project.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Comfort, safety and mobility</b>	Elevators and staircases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sapat sana 'yung mga elevator at gumagana para sa mga titira lalo sa mga mataas na palapag.</li> </ul>
	Lighting and safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paano 'yung pagakyat-panaog nung matatanda na? yung may sakit na sa tuhod? Paano pag may batang maliliit?</li> <li>Sana malapad 'yung mga hagdan at may mga hawakan - at di masyado mataas yung akyatan.</li> <li>Paano ang kaligtasan ng mga bata sa paninirahan sa high-rise housing?</li> <li>Sana maganda yung pa-ilaw sa loob ng housing pati sa labas.</li> </ul>



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<b>5. Comfort, safety and mobility</b>	Ventilation, sunlight, and privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sana may sapat na mga bintana para yung hangin ay makadaloy.</li> <li>Sana hindi magkakarinigan basta-basta ang mga magkapitbahay.</li> </ul>
<b>6. Livability</b>	Laundry areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>aan ang sampayan? Paano maglalaba at magtutuyo ng damit?</li> <li>Paano kami magsasampay?</li> <li>May terrace ba tayo - para sa tuyuan ng damit?</li> <li>Dapat may labahan sa likod o balcony para sa paglalaba.</li> <li>Sana pwede ang halaman sa terrace - sana may terrace obalcony.</li> </ul>
<b>6. Livability</b>	Community spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sana may playground o espasyo para makapag-laro ang mga bata sa housing project.</li> <li>Maganda kung may espasyo para sa pakikipag-kwentuhan.</li> <li>Sana may simbahan.</li> <li>Paano po ang may alagang aso? 'yung merong alagang pusa?</li> <li>Paano ang mga alagan naming hayop?</li> </ul>
<b>7. Participation and personalization</b>	People's participation in designing their homes and neighborhood  Freedom to personalize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dapat makonsulta tayo sa magiging final na itsura o design ng housing project; maganda magkaroon nung planning na kasama tayo.</li> <li>Posible ba na magkaroon ng workshop para sa pagdidisenyo ng housing project natin? Maganda magawa uli.</li> <li>Dapat naman mag site visit muna - kung gaano ba siya ka okay?</li> <li>Sana makapagtripping o site visit po sa lugar ng housing project.</li> <li>Dapat mag-site visit doon sa lokasyon ng housing project.</li> </ul>

Note: Consolidated by the author.

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