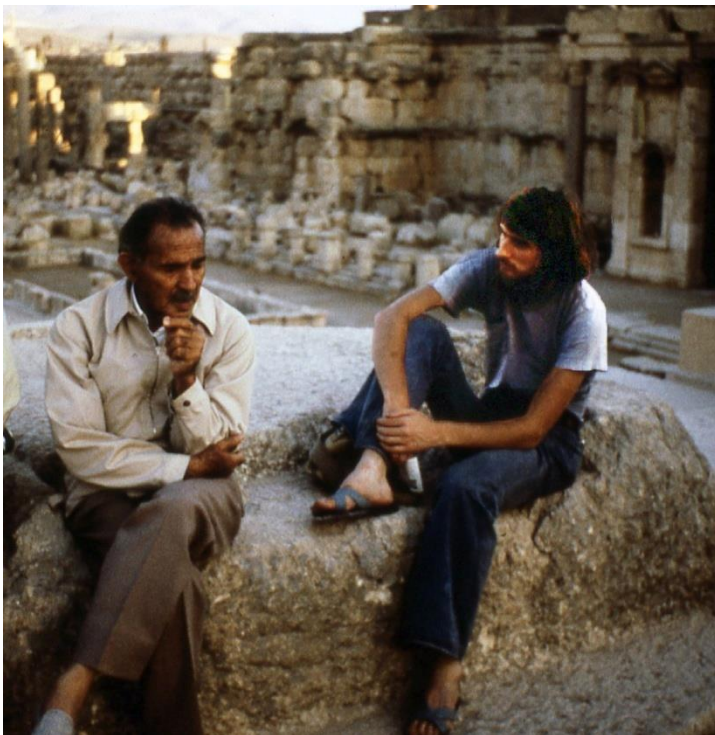


## **From Self-Help to Urban Justice: A Practice in Housing Rights and Participatory Land Development**

### **Allan Cain – a profile**

This narrative reflects Allan Cain's long-standing commitment to advancing housing and land rights through participatory, incremental, and people-centred approaches. Beginning with the co-founding of Development Workshop in 1973, Allan's work developed alongside the debates that shaped Habitat I in Vancouver in 1976, where he represented the organisation at the founding meeting of Habitat International Council (HIC). Since then, his work has evolved in dialogue with broader efforts to recognise housing as a human right and to support more inclusive forms of urban development. Grounded in the principles of self-help and the social production of habitat, it has sought to contribute to more equitable and locally rooted urban processes.

Allan's professional formation was influenced by his engagement with his mentors including Hassan Fathy, with whom he interned in Egypt, and John F. C. Turner, his professor at the Architectural Association. Fathy's work highlighted the value of vernacular architecture, local materials, and climate-responsive design grounded in cultural practice. Turner emphasised the importance of user participation and control in the housing process. These perspectives contributed to an understanding of housing not as a finished product, but as an ongoing social process shaped by the capacities and priorities of its inhabitants.



***1973 - Hassan Fathy and Allan Cain at Balbek Lebanon.***

*When Allan was a graduate student at the AA he interned with Prof Hassan Fathy in 1973 and 1974.*

Early field experience reinforced these ideas across a range of contexts. In Egypt with Hassan Fathy, Allan worked with informal and traditional building systems in Cairo and Gournah. In Oman, he undertook research on indigenous built environments to inform planning approaches. Later, in Iran, he was involved in rural & regional planning and school construction in Luristan, drawing lessons from research on settlement patterns and local construction practices in the Caspian and Yazd. In the Sahel, he contributed to the introduction of woodless

construction techniques in Niger adapted to conditions of environmental stress due to the changing climate. These experiences helped to build an appreciation for the diversity of local systems and the knowledge embedded within them, particularly in contexts where formal systems were limited or absent.

While working in Iran, Allan and his colleagues were invited by David Satterthwaite to present their work at the Habitat I Forum in Vancouver in 1976. This gathering brought together practitioners, researchers, and activists engaged in housing and urban development, and became the setting for the founding of what was then known as the Habitat International Council, later the Coalition. It created a platform linking grassroots experience with advocacy on housing and land rights.

At Habitat I, Allan and his colleagues also met representatives of newly independent Angola, who were seeking support in responding to large-scale displacement and rapid urban growth following their protracted liberation war. This encounter led to an invitation, and in 1981 Allan relocated to Luanda. The country was once more at war, facing internal conflict alongside wider Southern African struggles linked to Namibia's independence and the anti-apartheid movement. Cities were absorbing large numbers of displaced families while also hosting refugees and supporting liberation movements.

Under these conditions, Luanda's informal *musseque* settlements expanded rapidly, while institutional capacity to manage urban growth remained limited. Working with Angolan professionals and community committees, Allan and his Development Workshop colleagues promoted practical approaches to settlement upgrading. The emphasis was on improving living conditions by building on existing social solidarity. Women heads of households identified water and sanitation as immediate priorities, closely linked to family health, and these became the initial focus of urban interventions. In Sambizanga, one of Luanda's largest and historically significant *musseque* settlements, residents were supported to develop community-managed water systems. Women were elected as caretakers, user fees supported maintenance, and systems were built incrementally. Many of these systems remain operational decades later, illustrating the durability of locally managed approaches.

In Angola periods of optimism, such as the 1991 peace accords, were followed by renewed conflict and further displacement. During ceasefires, efforts focused on rebuilding over 100 schools, markets, and basic infrastructure, particularly in war affected cities such as Huambo.



**1997 - Post-war reconstruction of schools - Huambo Angola**

Work evolved toward supporting emerging civil society organisations and local peace-building initiatives. At the time, Angola had very few independent civic structures, and work with neighbourhood associations and small organisations contributed to dialogue and reconciliation processes that later supported the transition to peace in 2002.

Allan remained engaged in HIC's development, including the 1987 Limuru meeting in Kenya, where our network evolved from a council into a coalition. This period also coincided with broader global debates on environment and development, including engagement in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio and the Social Forums movement.



**2009 – Allan with HIC colleagues at World Social Forum – Belem Brazil and World Habitat Awards - Hue Vietnam.**

Alongside field-based work, Allan remained engaged in research and policy dialogue. In collaboration with UN-Habitat, national institutions, and university students, an urban observatory was established using GIS and participatory research to map Angola's rapidly growing cities. DW's post-war urban programs, the Luanda Urban Poverty Programme and Community Voices for Urban Change piloted approaches including municipal development forums, community-managed water systems, and participatory budgeting. These urban programs received international recognition (UN-Habitat Best Practice 2010 and Southern African Drivers of Change Award) and were more importantly taken up within government practice, illustrating how locally developed initiatives can influence broader policy frameworks.

In the post-war period, Allan's work increasingly engaged with questions of land governance and urban policy. In Huambo, where returning families and new migrants occupied peri-urban land, participatory land readjustment approaches were developed. Land was pooled, re-parcelled, serviced, and redistributed in collaboration with local authorities and residents. Increases in land value helped finance infrastructure, while occupation licences improved tenure security. This experience, later documented by UN-Habitat-GLTN, also highlighted the importance of municipal autonomy—particularly financial autonomy—in supporting such approaches.

Through teaching, visiting academic roles, writing and advisory-board membership with journals such as the *Environment and Urbanization* —alongside colleagues such as Yves Cabannes and David Satterthwaite —Allan has contributed to linking practice, research, and policy dialogue. Throughout this period, Allan has remained engaged with HIC and related international networks, including UN-Habitat's Global Land Tool Network and Global Platform for the Right to the City (GPR2C). These connections have provided opportunities to exchange experience and contribute to wider discussions on housing rights and land governance, while remaining grounded in practical work.



***2013 - Allan at GLTN meeting Nairobi and 2024 at the Habitat Village - WUF12 - Cairo***

He has remained active in global forums, including the World Social Forums and the Habitat conferences in Istanbul (1996) and Quito (2016), which led to the New Urban Agenda. These engagements have helped connect local experience with wider international discussions on housing and urban development. Allan has maintained links with HIC and its African and advocacy networks, contributing to ongoing exchanges on housing rights, land governance, and climate justice.

From the founding of HIC to its continued evolution, Allan's contribution suggests that more inclusive urban development can emerge through sustained engagement, incremental approaches, and learning from local practice. It underscores the importance of linking land governance, finance, and participation, while strengthening the role of local institutions and communities. In this context, the social production of habitat offers a grounded way of understanding how cities are shaped and how more inclusive outcomes can be achieved through practice.