

Accommodating Diversity in Housing
Housing Design and Delivery: Failures, Successes and
Opportunities

Afesis-corplan Workshop
Housing Co-operatives- Accommodating Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to give an architect's perspective on the various issues listed for discussion in the workshop.

Housing policies, ownership options and management structures of housing organisations need to accommodate for the needs of all sectors of the population including women, youth, old aged, children and the disabled.

How these needs impact on the spatial/physical/visual aspects of a project is sometimes neglected- or more accurately, housing design and layouts have become linked to one planning and building type that it is not being questioned enough and new, alternative building typologies and urban layouts are not being investigated.

This paper is a brief contribution to the general discourse on the above issues.

POLICIES

Housing environments are formal expressions of social and political systems, and this aspect is as important as what housing does to improve health, generate incomes and provide security.

'Housing progress lags far behind industrial progress in many parts of the world...as far as housing is concerned the whole world has remained underdeveloped'. The complicated realities of South African history have made the issue even more prominent in this part of the world.

Housing policy in South Africa is strongly linked to land reform issues. Through long periods in time there was systematic control imposed on land by the apartheid authorities in terms of control of the influx of Africans to urban areas, race segregation, and restrictions on land acquisition.

These policies had very drastic implications on the visual landscapes of the townships. The gaps that were created by the strong divisions are still existing and this fragmentation is one of the greatest present-day planning challenges: to 'erase' boundaries and significantly 'fill' those gaps to create more integrated urban cities. The 'matchbox' houses became linked to massive housing schemes of the 1950's onwards and, ironically, are still linked to the housing schemes of today.

The development of single-sex hostels emphasised the view that Africans were temporary visitors to the urban areas, and townships were deliberately planned to discourage long-term settling by African migrant workers.

One of the more extreme problems was that the townships never developed independent and viable economic centres. That same problem is being repeated again in the vast, sterile and depressing housing landscapes of today.

We notice repeatedly through the aspects mentioned above, that despite the removal of many political and legal restrictions on land ownership, despite the

transformations of the role of local government and despite the will to encourage humanistic and environmentally sound principles in planning, there are still many obstacles to housing delivery and the improvement of the quality of the housing being delivered.

Some of these shortcomings can be related to the lack of management skills needed to cope with these changing approaches and changing social and political agendas. Yet, the following question must be asked: If housing types are true manifestations of the social and political intentions of a people, what does that say about the intentions of the new political movement in the post-apartheid South Africa? What message is being conveyed by the housing landscapes of today?

ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

People's participation in housing is a democratic concept that should be ensured if people are not to feel alienated from decisions and processes in which they themselves will be affected. The different role players in the housing process and their conflicting interests need to be considered.

Existing housing models need to allow for more flexibility and transparency and should be inclusive in their approach. They should also allow for innovation through a creative design process that ensures communication between all the parties involved.

It is true that any aspects of design affect women more profoundly in the long run, thus, they need to be fully involved in the process right from the brief formulation stages. The Peoples Housing Process is one form of housing delivery where communities, mainly women, are equipped with basic design and measurement skills that enable them to take responsibility for the final design. It is an effective form of people's empowerment.

Lack of access of the groups of concern to the key decision making powers in housing can be overcome by such new and innovative approaches to managing and implementing housing schemes in full co-operation with well trained professionals.

Quality control becomes another factor of concern in these new processes. Planning and building regulations and inaccessible legislation is not a solution in many housing situations. Control guidelines need to be compiled and enforced by housing organisations within the broader legislative framework.

The changing role of the professions in the housing process becomes evident through the above issues.

THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL

Professionals have not been trained to cope with these changes and academic curricula and teaching methods are very late to catch up with the strong flux of change in the country. 'There is no shortcut to education...' when it comes to changing approaches to housing. There should be an awareness from existing and new housing organisation groups of their important role in the education of future professionals. Partnerships need to be established with educational departments.

Professionals seem to be investigating the reasons behind these failures. For the first time in a long period of South African history there is the political will to motivate change and an urgent NEED to do so. Yet, the anticipated enthusiastic mobilization of communities, politicians and professionals to seek new and innovative approaches to housing problems never took place.

For housing policies and professions to be more sensitive to the needs of women, youth, old aged and disabled, the designers role needs to be made more prominent throughout the whole process.

Confidence and communication between the architecture and design professions and communities and housing authorities and organisations needs to be re-established. Sheila Nation makes the comment that sometimes architects are viewed as 'arrogant decision makers'. This 'arrogance' could be the result of a feeling of incompetence in the face of vibrant housing contexts.

SOCIAL/CULTURAL.

'Create inhumane environments and people are likely to respond likewise'.

It has proved, through numerous experiences all over the world, that it is possible to significantly reduce crime and vandalism through sensitive design. The concepts of 'defensible space', 24-hour monitoring by the community, mixed use residential areas, communal spaces that create a strong sense of belonging and ownership can contribute immensely to the quality of life in an area.

In many parts of the world, housing is still being measured by 'the number of units per year' or how quickly housing units can be delivered. As the architect Ian Lowe comments, housing is mostly viewed 'as an economic and utilitarian conception'. This is unfortunate, since housing is a PROCESS that long precedes the planning or construction phase and extends beyond handing over the keys to the house owners. Though this may seem obvious it is still seriously neglected in the way that housing is being delivered now.

Housing projects should become vehicles of people's empowerment through the creation of environments where there can be an on-going process of capacity and community building. They should encourage the creation of what the architect Ralph Erskine calls 'people's places'.

To the housing practitioner involved in housing issues on a daily basis, these issues

may be lost among the more pressing and genuine realities of the need to house large numbers of people who are many times desperate for a home. A balance needs to be achieved

Many aspects of ownership are rooted in social attitudes rather than in legal aspects or organization. As, for example, house ownership and responsibility being automatically delegated to the male member of the household. This could be due to the loss of some cultural aspects that have been gradually wiped away due to the strong forces of urbanisation and exposure to alien cultures and ways of life.

Basotho houses have traditionally been the domain of women, analogous to the concept of the 'womb', while the cattle kraal is the domain of the men. Men and women have been responsible for different aspects of the buildings within a systematic and well organised social structure. But these have been disrupted and it is important for us now to learn from the past, not just the most evident visual features, but the intrinsic values inherent in the design. Forms of traditional dwellings have become normative but the meanings are deeply rooted in peoples general attitude to life. Thus, resulted the cultural confusion that has emerged with people adopting lifestyles that are untrue to those age old values.

Another analogue that would be interesting to investigate could be the idea of the feminine as the interior, the refuge within, and the masculine as the concept of the protective hard, solid exterior of the house. This is similar to the traditional idea of home.

This is mentioned at the risk of appearing to be encouraging the confinement of women to their traditional roles within the homestead. This is not the case. It is also sometimes evident from traditional ways of 'doing' that society was much more balanced in its views to gender and both men and women shared equal responsibilities in decision making and the physical manifestations of needs and values.

Negative perceptions of housing can be challenged and the unfortunate mental link between housing and certain building typologies contested through attempts at renewing peoples pride in traditional values.

The sterile housing environments have many negative implications on all types of users and especially so on the groups that we are concerned about in this workshop. This will be elaborated on in the section concerned with the design aspects below.

DESIGN ISSUES

Architects and communities have conflicting views to housing. As someone commented: 'People don't want to be described as those living in the weird experimental box'. Some designers believe that a housing scheme is not the place for experimentation with materials and technology. This is a debatable issue.

House designs should not destroy the concept of 'home', someone else argued. But, what is the concept of 'home' and how has it evolved and been transformed through time by external influences? Does it differ from community to community or has it become the globalized concept of the pitched roof, the gables, the porch at the entrance and the bay windows?

The house is perceived by the writer to be an armature that allows for modifications and additions by the occupants, that express their individual tastes, their changing social status, their financial successes through time. The attempt is not to impose a repetitive image while at the same time renewing alternative solutions and encouraging change.

Housing as a combination of social, political and cultural aspects has a variety of implications on design forms. These manifestations are sometimes aspirations to resemble more affluent societies as mentioned elsewhere. In the Sudan, for example, the trend is to imitate the inappropriate styles of the rich oil producing countries. The aspirations of under privileged South Africans seems to be that their homes should resemble the sub-urban housing types found in the financially, socially and politically affluent white areas. To imitate that could be a way of expressing their new found freedom and political strength, if even at the theoretical level.

The sterile landscapes of housing projects has been challenged by alternative means of housing provision such as housing co-operatives, that cater for smaller groups of families that are encouraged through an organised process to work closely together.

There are issues still need to be debated and resolved. How big housing co-operatives should be, for example? The COPE Urban Village in Newtown, Johannesburg, a housing co-operative though the process could be questionable, as an example, is a project done at a scale where it is difficult to create intimate and interesting communal space that encourages interaction and facilitates organisation. The spatial results of this very large project (over 400 units) are overwhelming and create an overpowering sense monotony. For children, for example, there is a total lack of interesting visual and sensory stimulations. Addition of colour to some schemes is a commendable awareness of this aspect that is lacking, but different, repetitive pastel colours can not improve the quality of space, or increase the sense of ownership. The real challenge is a SPATIAL one, yet we always seem to focus on the wrong aspects of housing design when small modifications can add a wealth of visual and sensory experiences.

There is always too much focus on the house unit and not to the overall context. This relates to such issues as accessibility for the disabled. This is a broader issue than just house design.

The more that diversity is accommodated for in housing schemes the more that this diversity will become evident visually and spatially. Issues such as house types, ownership options, catering for the various sectors of a community etc. will have positive manifestations on the design of an area if they accommodate for as wide a variety of scenarios as possible.

Housing and neighbourhood design covers such aspects as mixed-use, urban space, materials and technology, infrastructure, implementation procedures, urban renewal, densities (elaborate on attitudes towards...), plot sizes, land utilization indices, scale, recycle reuse reduce and sustainability issues, the planner/people interface, one-unit-one-plot, urban blocks, flexibility and robustness, communal and public space.

It must be emphasised that there is no one answer to the issue of AFFORDABILITY- economise by giving more space? By using simpler techniques? By creating more economic layouts in the overall area and the saved money being poured in to create more livable homes? The quality of the houses being provided by the RDP can be questioned - too bland- too rough- too sterile to be called home- the housing process should not finish there it should be an on going process.

User involvement in determining the form

the beginning of a dialogue

to challenge existing perceptions about housing

to explore new ways of providing houses/to investigate alternative approaches

to challenge more than the policies of the apartheid era- in terms of rejecting the spatial and visual legacies that have been retained

to emphasise the potential of the design professions in making a change in the situation of housing in the South African context.

