

# Responsibility of the South African Architect - defining a role in contemporary social housing initiatives

**Marco Macagnano**

BSC (Arch), B Arch (Honours), M Arch (Professional) - Department of Architecture  
University of Pretoria, South Africa, e-mail: marcomac@mighty.co.za

**Key words:** user participation, grass-roots involvement, choice, sensitivity, innovation, social responsibility.

## **Abstract**

In an age when housing is a right that many are not afforded, the rush to provide habitable environments prompts a standard and uninformed response in the provision of basic shelter. Quality is forsaken in the quest for quantity. It has become apparent that both architects as well as the individuals to be housed are sidelined in the production of affordable houses. Thus the social responsibility of architects to emerge as public representatives is now apparent. Holistic interventions are required to create and improve the social, cultural and physical environment for communities, so that development may occur responsibly and sustainably. Recent policies and change in governmental trends have emerged to bring the focus back to human need and want, including the professional spectrum, such as architects, in the provision of suitable housing alternatives. This paper serves to identify the trends and processes at work in the current housing processes of South Africa, and proposes guidelines for suitable architectural intervention in this area of demand.

## **1 Introduction**

A professional is only as good as his/her public reputation. In terms of the architect, the profession is built on the forging of personal relationships, marketing exercises and the development of innovative design, all to influence public perception so as to view the profession as a necessary source of input for development in the built environment.

What is it exactly that an architect as a professional is supposed to do? In essence, the architect is somewhat schizophrenic in nature; a two-sided contradiction in terms. As “master builder” the architect is required to serve, not only as personal liaison between the development and the client, but also as intermediary between the worlds of art and science. Quite simply, a good architect is one that has made an optimum marriage of technological know-how with artistic ingenuity. Whilst it is not the wish of this paper to generalise, it serves purpose to mention that most architects do lie somewhere between these two extremes. Even though it is widely assumed that most would prefer to lend themselves towards the aim of creating poetry in concrete, this is not always greatly conducive towards consistent employment opportunities. This raises the issue of social perception. There’s only one person who appreciates an innovative design as much as the architect, and that’s the person who can admit to living in it. The use of an architect in design of an environment in most cases expects an innovative, stylistic and personalised solution to the design problem at hand. “To innovate” means to

be different from others (Prak 1984: 3), this in turn means that a portion of the construction costs must be devoted to funding the promise of such exploratory endeavours – all in pursuit of architectural excellence. And if the client is paying for something special, the client has every right to expect delivery.

Thus a precedent is established, the architects' paradigm defined by social expectancy, which is in-turn defined by the architects' paradigm. This chicken-and-the-egg scenario is not a cause for concern; it only serves to re-demonstrate that such attitudes are limiting the field of involvement for architects. Rarely is an architect commissioned without expectation for status-feeding and eye-catching design. Architects are now generally limited to only those who can afford them.

## **2 Social Housing in Context**

At present, the South African housing industry is full of opportunity. Public housing schemes are moving full steam ahead, with the ultimate aim of housing all families and individuals in this country.

In terms of section 26 of the Constitution everyone has the right to have access to adequate housing (Section 26(1)). The state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of this right (Section 26(2)).

Section 2 of the Housing Act, 1997 (Act No. 107 of 1997) compels all three spheres of Government to give priority to the needs of the poor in respect of housing development (Section 2(1)(a)). In addition all three spheres of government must ensure that a housing development –

- provides a wide choice of housing and tenure options as is reasonably possible,
- is economically, fiscally, socially and financially affordable and sustainable,
- is based on integrated development planning, and
- is administered in a transparent, accountable and equitable manner, and upholds the practice of good governance (Section 2(1)(c)).

In short, the housing process seeks to fulfil the vision of a nation housed in sustainable human settlements with access to socio-economic infrastructure. It is safe to say that this does provide wide challenges to the design and construction communities.

In the early 1990's unions, the civic movement and social organisations began to develop a plan for social transformation needed in a post-apartheid South Africa. A process developed which involved extensive consultations within the ANC, its allies and a wide range of experts that culminated in 1994 with the Reconstruction and Development Programme. A key aspect of the RDP was that it linked both reconstruction and development. National problems such as shortage of housing, jobs, and inadequate education and healthcare were recognised by the RDP as all connected. It proposed job creation through public works so that the building of houses and provision of services could be tackled in a way that created employment and possibility for economic empowerment (Knight, 2001). The Reconstruction and Development Programme of the South African Government has set the standard for the first majority-rule elected government in South Africa, and at its heart lie six basic principles: to perform as an integrated and sustainable programme, a people driven process that aims to provide peace and security for all, to build the nation, link reconstruction and development, as well as ultimately deepen democracy in the fabric of our society (Munslow, 1995: 42). These are admirable and pertinent targets for redevelopment in this country, and these principles have gained support right across the political spectrum.

Today, the RDP of the first ten years may be viewed as a “first generation” initiative, existing today only in its underlying principles as guidelines for present policy. Current policy, the “second generation” initiative, now attempts to identify and institute clear ideas for strengthening economic development, broadening of employment, and redistribution of income and socio-economic opportunities in favour of the poor. It was then that the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) plan was conceived. Its main concern is to bring long term economic growth and to positively increase the employment situation in the country (SA yearbook: 396).

Currently there has been a significant rise in employment in the informal sector, but a decline in employment in the formal sector. COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), who has proven to be quite an outspoken critic, says that GEAR has failed to deliver the promised economic and job growth or significant redistribution of income and socio-economic opportunities in favour of the poor. COSATU publicly has held the opinion that GEAR, with its focus on stringent monetary and fiscal targets, conflicts with the goal of the RDP of growth based on job creation, meeting people's needs, poverty reduction and a more equitable distribution of wealth (SA yearbook: 398). None-the-less, it is with GEAR that a new policy in housing provision has been formulated. While the first ten years of democracy housed as many people as possible, the next ten (second generation) seems destined to house fewer, but instead aims to increase the current quality of housing provisions.

While the definition of these targets is clear, the processes required to achieve them are lacking such clarity. Everyone agrees on the targets, which include level of employment, housing, education, healthcare etc., but there are conflicting views over the processes and level of involvement by the various stakeholders in order to achieve them. What this ultimately leaves the country with is a trial-and-error based development system where those responsible define and redefine the processes necessary for optimum execution of their goals. South Africa is, after all, a sufficiently large country with significant political autonomy, development potential and diversified internal and international funding sources, for all of its citizens to flourish (IDP 2004: 19). There is therefore much opportunity and will for experimentation, and there is nothing like trying to implement an idea to find out if it will really work.

Over the past ten years, in this “first generation” of housing, Government policy for provision of housing on a mass social scale has been predominated by the ambitious, and admirable, desire to house as many families as possible in the shortest given time. After the 1994 democratic elections, the promise of housing strongly resonated through the Government’s promises to the people as finally those previously disadvantaged contingents of the population had a representative through which to realise their dreams. Unfortunately the challenge proved to be slightly over-ambitious as expertise and resources were over-stretched. Lack of expertise, coupled with the frantic desire to deliver on the part of the Government resulted in a scenario whereby contractors stamped down as many houses as possible, as economically as possible, but without sensitivity to the intended Government ideals for delivery. This process, however, could not be halted or changed so easily. There was an overwhelming desire on the part of the majority population for an immediate and instantaneous response and delivery (Dewar, 1998: G6). Many years of hardship were endured on their part; the people were far overdue a governmental response that served their interests. Unfortunately, there is growing anger and disillusionment at the current pace of delivery (Dewar, 1998: G6). Popular pressure and a will to succeed on the Government’s part had thus created a system that focussed on supply rather than demand. In other words the emphasis was on providing as many finished “homes” as possible in the least time (numbers more than quality buildings have been the resulting priority). This does not detract from the fact that over 5 million people have received homes to live in (SA year book 2003: 408), a momentous achievement to say the least, but the quality of the environments does leave a lot to be

desired. Thus it can be said that hindsight is proving to be our greatest ally in determining the best course for action, no matter the scale of the project. The same can be said for the housing process: mistakes have been made and shortfalls in policy uncovered and through these growing realisations a new learning curve has been set, but the opportunity now arises to benefit from our newly procured knowledge by appealing responsibly to the needs of the concerned population of this country.

The momentous delivery of housing over the past ten years has certainly put a significant dent in the drive to formalise the housing situation in this country. Infrastructure and services have been provided to millions, but quality of housing is something that requires a deeper process. Formal Housing settlements over the past ten years can be defined by large expanses of land, regimentally subdivided into a vast system of plots, each one entitled to one family. This created vast low-density housing layouts whose grid-like urban planning was determined primarily by provision of roads to all areas, which is surprising since the majority of new home-owners were not in possession of motor vehicles. These areas would probably have benefited more from a pedestrian scale environment that would serve to enhance the energy of the neighbourhood. Urban planning of the formal housing settlements also importantly fell short of providing a mixed use environment whereby amenities and local markets could form part of the local framework.

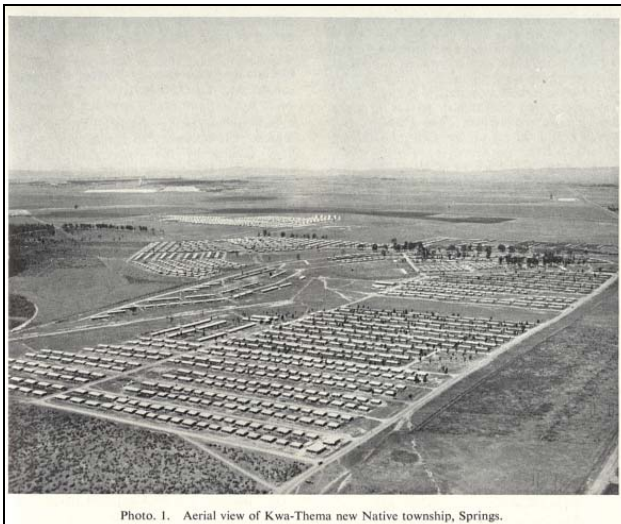


Photo. 1. Aerial view of Kwa-Thema new Native township, Springs.

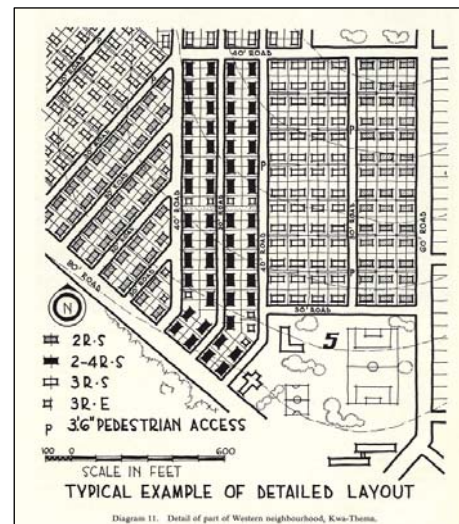


Diagram 11. Detail of part of Western neighbourhood, Kwa-Thema.

Figure 01 (above left). Aerial Photo of Kwa-Thema formal housing settlement.

Figure 02 (above right). Detail Plan of part of western neighbourhood, Kwa-Thema.

The earlier RDP housing process, as well as the social housing initiative in general sees policy predominantly concerned with growth and development, but mainly supply driven. For quality to improve, housing policy needs to shift towards a demand driven mentality. This does not mean solely dishing out the numbers, but actually responding to housing and habitable environmental requirements for individuals and their families. The importance of such policy changes lies in the creation of sustainable environments, rather than a collection of houses in an instituted and prefabricated urban framework.

Sustainable environments are those that serve the current social, economic and environmental requirements of its inhabitants as well as of future generations. Thus, with the creation of sustainable environments, an environment is designed to cater for the needs of people residing within its limits and retaining the inherent design principles necessary to accommodate for a sustained population interest in the area. It is this understanding and holistic vision that is yet to be brought to the table convincingly. It is this vision that the local architect is responsible to institute and manage within the

design and development phase. It is thus necessary that pre-emptive input and design development – with the long term in mind – needs to over-ride the reactionary trend at present (Osman, 1997).

### **3 The Middle Ground**

A new precedent is required to be set, one where an architect takes on a prominent role in housing the masses to aid in the creation of optimum living conditions and sustainable environments. The aim is such that a balance of financial gain, economic viability and social commitment may be created in order to enable a sustainable system that may benefit present and future generation. It seems the obvious solution, so why isn't it happening? Generally speaking, at present one of two scenarios is occurring: either the government-subsidised and contracted residential unit is stamped down repetitively on the environment – no architectural assistance required – or subsidies are provided directly to the future home-owner whereby the labour and contracting is performed by him. In either case, the money provided could not possibly cover the charges of a traditional architect, as in the case of a personalised home, and individual home builders who have received subsidy benefits quite simply are not aware of the potential of the architectural profession in project conception and development. Thus, architects are being left out of the loop. In addition, generally architects tend to limit their level of involvement to higher paying opportunities, and ultimately neither side of the story has much to do with the other. Since financing is hard to come by in such socially directed endeavours, this results in the fact that the only architectural input is by larger firms who are able to delegate specific tasks within their employee roster – specialised branches – and thus compensate for the economic losses incurred by means of their more mainstream commercial projects which are programmed to run simultaneously.

So a method to cover the middle ground is needed. Presently there is in existence an official Integrated Development Plan proposal by the local municipalities of the country. The aim is to involve both the municipality and the community in order to find the best solutions for sustainable development through a process of integration of ideas. By integration it is meant to consolidate various plans and actions of the municipality in order to achieve specific targets, including the community approach to planning, so as to address the relevant long-term development issues (IDP 2004: 1). The IDP is a form of planning that involves linkage and co-ordination between all sectors of activity that impact on the operation of a local authority. It is this sense of integrated development that serves as the platform for involvement by the professional architects. The problem yet again lies in the process of integration.

The development machine is a sum of its parts, from contractors to planners to the client – all functioning within the same spectrum and all impacting the other, but few actually have the capacity to relate to the other. Each part is completely involved in performing its specific task to the best of its ability. While this is effective at the small scale, a larger, more holistic approach is required to ensure cohesion. Thus a role is identified – namely one of project mediator. A leadership role is necessary to integrate these parts into one well-oiled machine that represents all stakeholders' interests. It is this leadership role – in terms of assimilating the parts – which the architect is best suited for.

People-centred housing development has been widely acknowledged as a positive move in the creation of suitable environments for living, whereby communities actively participate in the provision of their own housing (SA yearbook, 2003: 410), but rarely are their ideas merited with specific intervention. The architect must therefore serve as a conduit through which the needs of the community are expressed and answered for, as liaison between the technicalities and the technicians. An architect by trade is responsible to represent the needs of a client at all levels from environmental comfort, psychological well being and sustained shelter and security. The responsibility doesn't end here though. In a country as diverse in culture as South Africa, there is no standard template that may be

assigned in a matter as complicated as social housing. It is imperative that a large degree of environmental sensitivity be expressed when addressing an issue as important as providing homes. The term 'environmental sensitivity' is meant to be understood within a broad context. An environment is by definition the physical, cultural and social medium through which we interact in our daily lives. Thus environmental sensitivity encapsulates the ideal of knowing a problem before undertaking steps to proposing a solution. The diverse cultural landscape that is defined by the many peoples of South Africa means that significant exploratory steps are needed to be taken on the part of the design development team. In order to understand a people, contact is inevitable. A grass-roots approach is necessary to fully understand the problems associated with new development. "Evolving a shared language with community groups and at the same time appreciation of local systems is an essential attitude required in architects" (Osman, 1997).

To design with cultural and social sensitivity far exceeds the cause of provision of formal shelter, but instead serves to improve a current way of life. An environmental intervention that reflects a community, that adapts to its needs, instead of a community changing to fit into an environment. What this means is that such an environment is thus attributed with special cultural significance, and in time cultivates a wider sentimentality. Therefore a home is created where interest is sustained and opportunity for future development is created – economic empowerment opportunity lives rife in a community where a sustained population is guaranteed.

#### **4 Architects as Innovators**

Shifting emphasis from the large scale intervention by architects as project mediators, focus need not be lost on the importance of well-designed individual units. No one design problem is the same as another, just as the personality of one individual matches no other. Homes are more than a shelter; a house is a responsive environment to the needs of the users. Le Corbusier once described the house as "a machine for living in", a machine that is constructed to specification and is in continual labour to accommodate its inhabitants. Perhaps it serves to reason that a person does not just live within this "machine", but rather participates in a co-ordinated symbiosis. Thus the needs and limitations of one are responded to by the other. Ideally speaking, homes should be a reflection of the individual user/participant, just as the clothes we wear are an extension of our personalities and serve our basic human requirements.

Current housing layout is basic and constructed to the bare minimum. Lack of variety means that government provided houses create repetitive environments that do not serve the needs of individual expression. Regimental living is not what anyone would suggest as an attractive lifestyle. Short of creating an individual design project for every individual would-be household, the answer lies simply in "choice". Choice refers specifically to the availability of an alternative to the norm, whereby variety is afforded to prospective homeowners so that individual likes and dislikes may be catered for, as well as the development of a lifestyle that suits the individual's needs and income-based restrictions.

The People's Housing Process is one such governmental policy that serves to afford choice to the individual. This policy and programme encourages and supports individuals and communities in their efforts to fulfil their own housing needs and who wish to enhance the subsidies they receive from Government by assisting them in accessing land, services and technical assistance in a way that leads to the empowerment of communities and the transfer of skills. This housing delivery approach is reliant on subsidies from government and technical, financial, logistical and administrative assistance from NGO's and support organisations (Thematic committee 2001). Families are entitled to secure a subsidy for construction of their own home, which serves as both a place of residence but also a long

term investment that increases in value over time. Singular plots are assigned and the decision for manner and extent of construction of permanent improvements is left to the plot-owner and family. This subsidy is deemed to cover all material, construction and labour costs. Labour on the part of the home-owner thus reduces eventual costs for completion of the project, which is measured and valued as sweat-equity.

What needs to be understood – especially among designers and potential homeowners – is that a house is a lifestyle, a progressive development that grows with the user. By offering choice, the individual should not only be provided with variety in terms of aesthetic, but possibility for an adaptive environment that responds to his/her inevitable changing lifestyle. Subsidised houses are provided to a person only once in a lifetime, no second chances. Thus, the home must be able to accommodate its users throughout all phases of their existence. Opportunity therefore lies with the architect to provide alternatives to living beyond the standard. Granted, the standard option might be (barely) working, but wider acceptance may securely be attributed to current lack of alternative. While any such alternative may provide opportunity for individual expression in a choice of lifestyle, these choices should be responsive and appropriate to current context and social circumstance of the environment – derivation of which is a responsibility suited for the architect.

## 5 The Value of Choice

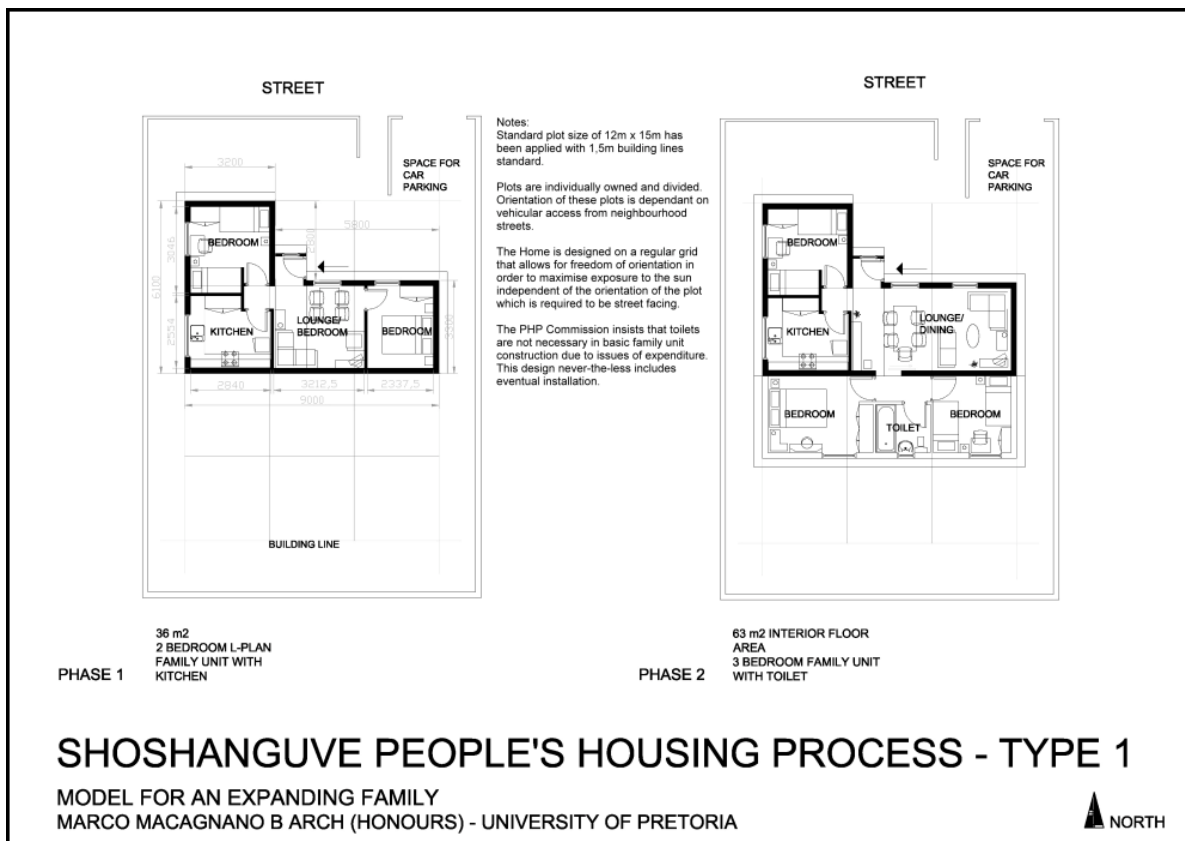


Figure 03. Example of expandable Housing Unit. Submitted and approved for the People's Housing Process Commission as part of a University of Pretoria initiative to provide potential homebuilders with an affordable option for construction. Housing Unit Design as the building expands simply to accommodate changing family needs. Acceptable limits were set by the Housing Commission at 36m<sup>2</sup> maximum initial floor area for building footprint. Design by Marco Macagnano, B Arch (Honours).

Flexibility of design ensures a sustainable livelihood. A flexible home offers the user opportunity to apply hands-on modifications to the physical layout without disruption to the essential layout. Such modifications take shape in the modification of internal partitions, additions for an extending family (birth of children or refuge for relatives) and possibility for internal subdivision and reduction of space for easier management in the case of a contracting family. This phased development is then provided as an option inherent in the available designs, which the user may then choose to implement according to eventual circumstance. This not only provides opportunity for a personally defined and responsive homestead, but the individual nature of the home institutes its status as an asset to the family/homeowner. This means that greater sentimental, as well as economical value is attributed to the domain.

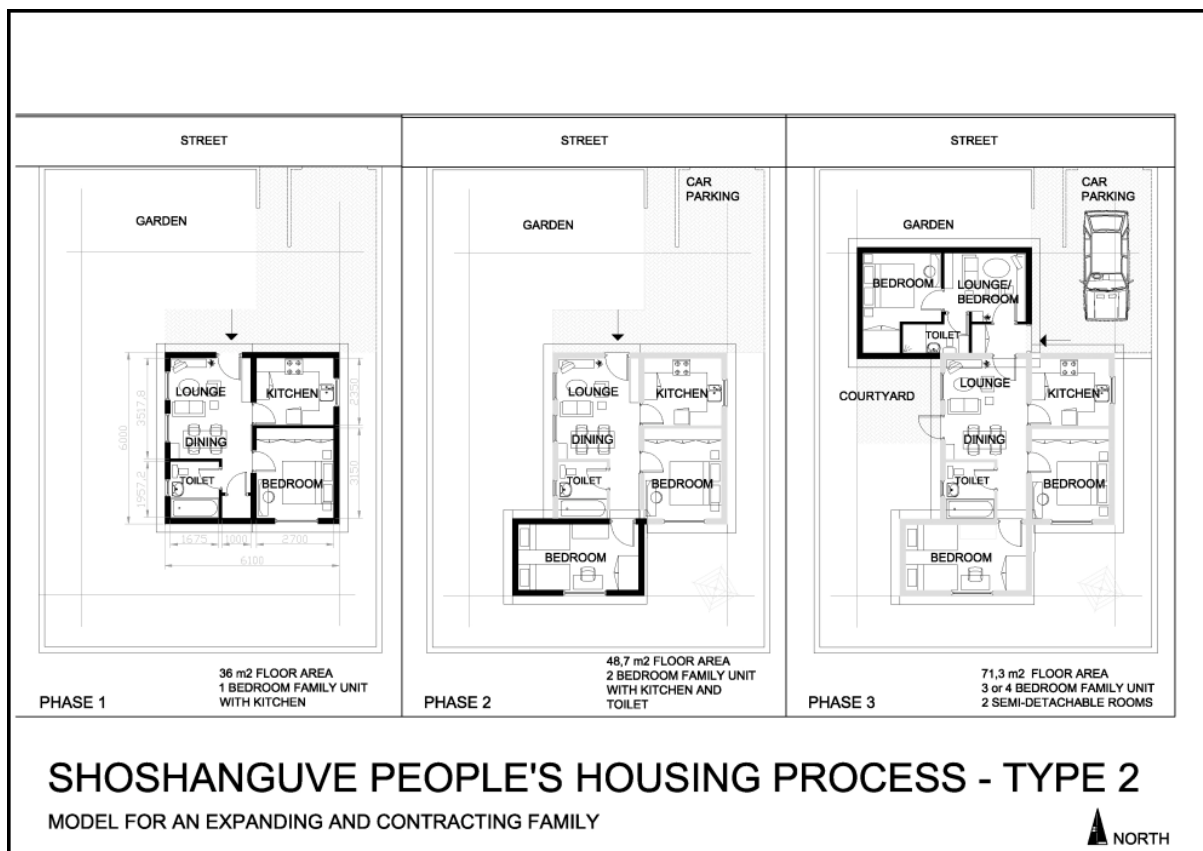


Figure 04. Example of expandable Housing Unit. Unit designed to accommodate for expanding and contracting families, therefore providing extended living quarters or possibility for semi-detached housing component to enable possibility for income through rental. Acceptable limits set by the Housing Commission at 36m<sup>2</sup> maximum initial floor area for building footprint. Design by Marco Macagnano, B Arch (Honours).

Providing choice at this level is possible through Non-Governmental Organisations that are not profit driven, nor do have political affiliations (Osman, 1997). The possibility of the architect as developer has thus come to the fore. Developers seek to provide suitable construction projects and market them to the community in need. Such endeavours are presently in a position to receive governmental aid in the form of subsidies whereby a development may be initiated in the aim of providing good quality housing to the masses. Personal contribution to the project is necessary as subsidy provision is not sufficient to adequately fund such an endeavour, but personal contributions in the form of instalments by the residents will, in time, cover much of the investment.



Furthermore, if designed appropriately, possible economic empowerment opportunities afforded to the residents within the development may further subsidise accumulated costs. Thus such developments – which opinion dictates will develop with interest in the future – have a mandate to be designed sustainably and responsibly, keeping in mind the interests of all stakeholders. It is for this purpose that the architect must assert himself, to ensure that such environments provide high-quality living conditions and will continue to serve the interests of its users for many years to come.

## **6 Conclusion**

Housing is a basic right that everyone is afforded to, where every individual member of our diverse population may find security in the fact that shelter and basic services shall be provided to them and their families. It is an incredible dream, but this dream is steadily becoming a reality. But while the objectives are clear and understood, the processes required to achieve them are lost on most of the stakeholders involved. This lack of clarity and cohesion between the elements of execution is thus responsible for the creation of insensitive and unresponsive environments that bear no relevance to the concerned cultural landscape.

It is therefore in the hands of the architect to provide clarity and mediation between all aspects of the process through leadership, so that the interests of the community, the developer and the policy are best represented. Most suitable ways forward more than likely involve input from Non-Governmental Organisations with the aid of a complete and competent team, with whom the responsibility may lie solely in the provision of good quality housing without the burden of living up to public promises. To achieve optimum provision of housing it is imperative that a hands-on approach be initiated in determining the nature of the context for which this housing is to be provided, at a grass-roots level of public interface. Thus greater sensitivity may be applied when designing and providing sustainable environments for people to live within, which will continue to serve the needs of future generations.

Importantly it must be reiterated that the provision of housing is more than just the provision of shelter but also that of a lifestyle. These homes represent a stable future for a family or individual around which a new life may evolve and thus need to be able to cater for every occurring opportunity for improvement. In doing so a world of possibility is opened to those concerned rather than one of complacency and limitations. The forging of personalised and well structured homes and environments results not only in a lifestyle based on freedom of choice, but also the establishment of a personal economic investment in one's home, granting certain economic empowerment in the long term. Public participation at every level is integral to success of a project.

The responsibility is therefore on the architect to manage such processes with full personal commitment and vision, to serve as a leader in the mediation of all its parts, and respond suitably to the problem on a human scale. Thus choice and the promise of personal and developmental growth may be attributed to those on the receiving end, with a greater expression of individuality and cultivation of cultural significance in order to ensure the sustainable provision of 'homes' instead of houses.

## Reference

- [1] Dewar, D. 1998. Settlements, change and planning in South Africa since 1994. In *Blank: Architecture, Apartheid and After*. Edited by H. Judin and I. Vladislavic. Amsterdam: NAI Publishers, chapter G6.
- [2] Knight, R. 2001. South Africa: Economic Policy and Development, [www.richardknight.com](http://www.richardknight.com) (04/10/2004)
- [3] Munslow, B and Fitzgerald, P. 1995. The Reconstruction and Development Programme. In *Managing Sustainable Development in South Africa*. Edited by P. Fitzgerald, A McLennan and B. Munslow. 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, pages 41 – 63.
- [4] Osman, O. A. 1997. “Why Architecture? The Role of Architects in Developing Countries”, *The Horizon-DAT*, Vol 1, No 1
- [5] Prak, L. N. 1984. *Architects: The Noted and the Ignored*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Publishing.
- [6] South Africa. City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. 2004. *Integrated Development Plan Revision 2*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- [7] South Africa. Dept unknown. 2003. *South African Yearbook*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- [8] South Africa. Thematic Committee. 2001. *The South African Housing Policy: operationalizing the right to adequate housing*. <http://www.unhabitat.org/istanbul+5/> (04/10/2004)