

DWELLING IN THE CITY by Gwendolyn Wright

A Response

Amira Osman
Department of Architecture,
University of Pretoria

Gwendolyn Wright brings up pertinent issues of housing currently being debated, such as the isolation of individual buildings, limited understanding of the term 'housing' and little-explored alternative design strategies. She refers to the 'site of each commission [being treated] as if it were a world unto itself' or 'bracketing'. David Dewarⁱ expresses it as 'the sea of space' between buildings, which has the potential to be the 'glue' that binds a development together. Thus transforming, what Wright calls the 'surrounding urban conditions' into meaningful places in people's lives, or what Ralph Erskine refers to as 'people's places'.

Unpredictability is a characteristic of successful urban places. According to Dewar and Uytenbogaardtⁱⁱ, the quality of urban spaces can be 're-discovered' and 're-interpreted' through time. Individual, creative responses can be encouraged through design products and processes. This is referred to as a process of 'negotiated reactions'. This 'alchemy of design and social interaction' adds complexity and value to housing developments within urban settings.

The phrase 'housing is a process rather than a product' is perhaps a cliché. Yet, it is as relevant today as ever. The 'open-ended exploration' referred to by Wright leads to vernacular settings that can provide lessons for architects in housing design, more than institutionalised architecture can. Architectural history traditionally deals with individual buildings, while vernacular architecture is always about town planning. The community is the basic architectural unit. This is the daily face-to-face social network – the pattern of interaction that ultimately defines the settlement.ⁱⁱⁱ If there is a statement made by the vernacular built environment it is a collective statement and not an individual one.

As Turan^{iv} explains, vernacular architecture teaches us about building activity with respect to social relations, thus broadens the scope of architecture beyond function and aesthetics. It raises questions otherwise excluded from architectural debates. 'It leads to concerns about what must be done, thus combining theory and practice.' This is what we aspire to learn and to bring into our urban designs. Learning from traditional settings is more than imitating forms or spatial layouts; it is learning that process of 'negotiated reactions'.

The scope of housing extends beyond the boundaries of a particular site and impacts on the adjacent locality; the content of housing encompasses all facilities and services, as well as work opportunities. Isolation and fragmentation undermine housing and city life. It is not only an American problem or a South

African problem. In the Sudan, each house is treated as a separate island. Two obstacles confront us when attempting to adopt new approaches to design. Legislation is one of them, which in many cases encourages this fragmented pattern and undermines traditional patterns of dwelling. The second obstacle is how we are educated as architects.

Flexibility in **legislation** could encourage the creative exploration of layouts, materials and methods. Yet, legislation generally tends to stress the smaller scale of the building and to neglect the larger scale of urban planning. It focuses on buildings treated as isolated islands, or on building elements rather than on communal expressions and processes of design. It is prescriptive rather prospective in nature and allows for little innovation and creativity.

Our **education** has trained us to work very well within an individual site. We respond efficiently to defined boundaries and a given brief. How a building could have an effect on its surroundings and how it could enhance the locality through its relationship to site boundaries has not been emphasised in architectural schools. The building as an 'edge' and as a 'connector', the building providing 'definition' and 'boundaries' to space is re-gaining predominance. Educational situations for students and communities can be combined and the apparent alienation of professionals can perhaps be addressed in the process.

The use of the term 'housing' is debated and its connotations are seen as negative: 'the autonomous, individualized building'. Wright proposes the appropriation of the word dwelling, and use of the term 'urban dwelling' thus allowing architects to move between the public and private realms. The concept is indisputably valuable, the change of terms debatable. The term 'housing' is as limited or as broad as our definition of it.

Alternative approaches could easily be dismissed or labelled as non-professional or political. Housing design is a powerful communicative medium. Housing is and has always been a reflection of people's social values and political motives. Changed paradigms in both are what can generate real transformation.

ⁱ Dewar, D. 1998 *Settlements, change and planning in South Africa since 1994*. In blank Architecture, apartheid and after. Editors: Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavi. David Philip Publishers, Cape Town and NAi Publishers, Rotterdam.

ⁱⁱ Dewar, D. and Uytendogaardt 1991 South African Cities: A Manifesto for Change. Urban Problems Research Unit, University of Cape Town.

ⁱⁱⁱ Refer to Lekson in Turan, Mete editor 1990 Vernacular Architecture Aldershot & Vermont: Avebury, Gower Publishing Group England

^{iv} *ibid.*