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Statement on:

Common Housing – Gated Communities.

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South Africa is facing major challenges in terms of housing delivery mechanisms and how they are influencing housing environments. While some unsustainable practices in housing are unique to the country because of its political past, many problems are similar to those in other parts of the world. There are attempts to address these problems through the development of housing in inner city areas, the encouragement of denser settlements and the exploration of alternative forms of housing delivery.

Housing on the peripheries of cities has generated sprawl and long commuting distances. Whether this housing targets lower or higher income groups is not always relevant as the problems associated with either are more similar than they are different. Though in one case living in these areas is more by choice than by circumstances. For poor people other housing options are inaccessible and they live in isolation from the inner city where they are more likely to find jobs. “Disabling” people through the location of housing is sometimes referred to as architectural apartheid and ghettoisation. For wealthier people distance is self-imposed and so is incarceration as a response to increasing crime rates.

In both cases the visual landscapes are hostile. In the notorious ‘black’ South African townships, the landscape is monotonous and bland, the buildings repetitive and sterile. In security estates a sanitized environment is created and various house types are lumped together creating a disturbing lack of homogeneity, necessary in the creation of a unified urban experience.

Both are monofunctional residential settings. Both are ‘created’ rather than spontaneous and they lack the complex processes that can generate visually rich, economically viable and sustainable environments. When many participants are involved in decision-making related to an environment, it becomes more layered and humane rather than controlled and monotonous: unpredictability is a characteristic of many successful urban places.

In many residential settings the streets are uninviting and are scaled to vehicles rather than pedestrians, and because the buildings are not designed to relate to the street, or to each other, passive surveillance is minimal. Houses are treated as isolated islands that contribute little to the character of the streets or the open spaces. Sensitive treatment of the street/building interface can encourage vibrancy, activity and safety. 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. Through the positive relationship to site boundaries, buildings can act as meaningful edges and connectors in the urban setting and they give definition to space. Architects need to be able to move between the public and private realms, when previously they were encouraged to treat each building in isolation.

Because of perceptions regarding safety, gated communities and the closing off of public routes has become common in South Africa. This is not a new concept. Historically, parts of Muslim cities were sectioned off into gated neighborhoods. Research has shown that today’s gated neighborhoods are not necessarily safer, but people perceive them to be so and these perceptions have major influence on property values.

There are many legislative and economic constraints placed on practicing architects involved in housing. Observation shows that some architects respond to those restrictions more creatively than others thus, creating sustainable and meaningful places.