

## City's new housing plan entrenches old divides

By Anzabeth Tonkin

There is no doubt that our country's "mother city" ranks among the most picturesque and scenic in the world. Unfortunately, it also tops the charts when it comes to the world's most unequal cities.

In Cape Town, class and racial divides are still as tangible and functional as 15 years ago: we have highways forming neat impenetrable buffers between predominantly coloured, black and white suburbs (Bonteheuwel, Langa, Athlone, Pinelands, for instance); a city centre courting foreign capital investment that hardly provides housing opportunities for its lower-income employees who keep it ticking for the Fifa World Cup and beyond; households living in informal settlements flanking the road to the airport being removed to "transitional relocation areas" on the periphery of the city; thousands of households dreading the onset of winter every year as their dwellings will certainly be flooded once again; leafy suburbs with no affordable housing for domestic workers, child minders, and gardeners who travel great distances every day from townships at high financial, time, and societal costs. The list goes on.

This polarisation also manifests in less physical ways. The recent employment equity report in the Western Cape described our beloved city as "backward" compared with Johannesburg. One respondent, echoing the general experience of many, declared that "(i)t's a sad place with a sad psyche ... it's such a beautiful place but there is no soul".

Clearly, there is something missing in the way both government and citizens conceive of the future of our mother city: different standards, quality levels, and rules for different citizens, demonstrating clear patterns of division and favouritism among this mother's children. There is ample reason to become sad and unsettled, especially if the two elements that doubtless have the most potential to integrate a highly divided society, namely housing and land, are not utilised in creative ways to integrate, equalise and assimilate. The most recent example of such inequity that will almost certainly erode the soul of Cape Town even further, are the city's views on densification.

It is widely recognised that there is a shortage of available well-located land for housing in Cape Town. The city's estimates are that roughly 10 000 hectares of vacant "greenfield" land will be required (based on one family per plot) to meet the current backlog. According to the City's Five-Year Housing Plan, Cape Town has doubled in size over the past 20 years and had a population of almost 3.5 million in 2007.

Approximately 400 000 (44 percent) of the mother city's households are inadequately housed, with 39 percent of all households living below the poverty line. For most Capetonians, "44 percent of households inadequately housed" is just a statistic, far removed from the practical implications of almost half of Cape Town having to cope daily with the far-reaching implications of inadequate housing. This sad state of affairs has serious implications for democracy, equality, citizenship and human relations. Considering the enclaves of affluence prevalent in our "paradise" at the foot of Africa, it is fair to ask whether we even care.

As a response to this shortage of land, the City of Cape Town recently revealed that its densification approach included "multi-storey units in mini-towns" based on the "Beijing model", and would manifest as high-density integrated towns with 6 000 housing units of up to 14 storeys (Cape Times, August 21, 2009). Cape Town would be the pilot site, with housing being developed along transport routes to Atlantis, and along the Klipheuwel/Malmesbury railway route, pending investigation of the suitability of development along these routes.

It is good that the city is considering densification strategies to address the soaring housing problem. The current low-density urban sprawl housing delivery model yields between three and 12 dwelling units per hectare (gross), which is unsustainable whichever way one looks at it - economically, financially, environmentally, socially.

However, the city's Draft Densification Strategy, lacks a vision or grounding in normative principles of a city-wide, inclusive approach that addresses the needs of all Cape Town's citizens. It merely mentions concepts such as "efficient, safe and sustainable", and it certainly does not talk about inequality and the vast rift (spatially, socially and economically) between rich and poor that plague our city. Even more alarming, it fails to set out the critical and necessary contribution of residential densification to integrating racially divided suburbs and neighbourhoods.

Furthermore, it is important to view the Densification Strategy against the backdrop of the city's Five-Year Housing Plan. This plan does indeed mention "a series of smaller sites" due for development. However, looking at the plan's "New Housing Projects" list, it is clear that the location of these projects is, with very few exceptions, in predominantly black and coloured areas, therefore continuing apartheid spatial patterns.

The question beckons why infill housing for the poor (predominantly black and coloured households) is not also located in historically white suburbs, where relatively large tracts of open land often are unused (unused road reserves and parks where most households have access to gardens, for instance)? This should be a critical consideration in its city's way forward in terms of their commitment to equal, sustainable and integrated settlements.

Under-utilised open spaces in more affluent suburbs of less than one hectare can be put to use very productively: the high-quality Springfield Terrace infill housing project in Woodstock, for example, yielded 133 units on a total area of 0.8ha utilising three- and four-storey blocks. A significant opportunity presents itself to use medium-density housing to integrate Cape Town along social and racial lines by providing good quality, well-managed medium-density public rental housing for lower income households (such as domestic workers, gardeners, hospitality industry employees, shop assistants, etc) in small pockets of land in higher income suburbs as infill housing and along activity corridors.

From research done by the Development Action Group (DAG), academics and practitioners, we know that when residential densities increase appropriately, a great number of positive spatial and non-spatial outcomes result. There is, of course, a critical or optimum

density range that makes a city socially acceptable and financially viable. It is widely accepted that this range is between about 30 and 100 dwelling units per hectare (gross). These densities are associated with certain building typologies, row housing, semi-detached housing, maisonnettes, courtyard housing and three-to four-storey walk-ups.

A combination of these typologies - coupled with other critical components, such as good location, the quality and management of the public and semi-public spaces, safety and surveillance, employment and local economic development opportunities, meeting the needs of vulnerable residents, responsible financial management, and other factors - have been proven to yield urban environments that are pleasant, conducive to high-quality living, and that create a sense of place and community. These typologies are very well suited to infill housing proposed in low-density (often suburban) and mixed-use, mixed-income areas.

Several international and local projects have demonstrated that low-rise medium-density housing can yield similar densities as high-rise buildings, with much higher quality environments. It is therefore with concern that DAG notes the inappropriateness of modelling housing for Capetonians on high-rise high-density models where households in these countries have an altogether different relationship to space and housing than those in Cape Town - especially as this would be a housing solution for predominantly poor households. Inadvertently, the image of a Delft in the sky, is invoked. Statements such as "you have left us here to die" (Happy Valley resident) and "this place is like a desert" (Delft TRA) echo the long-term impacts to households relocated to peripherally dysfunctional areas.

Especially concerning is the fact that while the Densification Strategy is still open to comments, pilot projects contradicting the strategy are already mentioned in the press. As we have seen from the N2 Gateway project, pursuing pilots without a clear vision or policy results in a waste of public funds, and terrible ramifications for involved communities. Internationally, many examples also exist of the social, financial, maintenance and physical failure of high-rise flats to provide long-term, adequate housing, especially if the configuration consists of a high number of units per block - the City's Housing Directorate, proposes 200 units. It is questionable whether this is "appropriate densification of Cape Town". The Densification Strategy Draft Executive Summary clearly states that "terrace and perimeter block designs are better suited to Cape Town" as opposed to favouring the tower block.

Unfortunately, both the Densification Strategy and the Five-Year Housing Plan treat development of housing opportunities for low-income households as separate from that of high-income households. Any local government faced with a city characterised by inequality and polarisation to the extent that it has a negative impact on the way citizens interact with one another, cannot afford to ignore the issues of integration and equality. An acknowledgement of and position on poverty and inequality are conspicuously absent in both these documents. Is it that a tacit NIMBYist, if not classist and racist, attitude is present in our local policies?

How does the city justify continued separate housing developments for different race and class groups? What are the impacts of inequality and separate development of Cape Town as a city and a society? How are the principles of citizens' right to the city incorporated and translated into practice?

In light of these questions, the provision of new formal higher-density housing for Cape Town at scale needs to consider certain important preconditions. Here are but a few:

- That it forms part of a city-wide approach and is part of a vision for the development of Cape Town as a whole that includes the accommodation of both rich and poor, not a formal "new town" dumping ground for spill-over population.
- High-density, high-rise housing developments are suited to inner-city areas and along mixed-use activity corridors and should ideally not extend more than one kilometre from the corridor. It should gradually change to medium-density and lower-density outward from the corridor.
- Grouping high numbers of poor people in one "mini-town" is another way of "ghettoisation". A mix of income groups is essential, and with mix, we mean rich and poor, black and white.
- Higher-density housing should always be linked to an economic development strategy for the area, considering employment and livelihood opportunities in and around the housing development.
- Architectural and urban design considerations such as scale underlie safe and sustainable higher-density environments.
- All stakeholders involved in the development of higher-density housing must place the ongoing development of social capital and community participation at the centre of project planning and management processes - before, during and after implementation.

Will the lessons from history, locally and internationally, distant and recent, be heeded by our civil servants and citizens? After all, good city structure, form and function are the products of many minds and much hard work, or else it will be paradise lost.

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