

# **Development Action Group's Medium Density Housing Programme**

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### **Introduction**

'Housing' does not only refer to a house as a physical structure, but encompasses different components making up the living environment. In an urban setting, adequate housing combines private space and communal space and enjoys access to facilities and urban opportunities (such as employment, education, health and others) which contribute positively to the living conditions of residents.

The right to adequate housing, which is essential to living in dignity, to physical and mental health, and to overall quality of life and social well-being, is regarded as a fundamental basic human right. This right is protected in the South African constitution and other widely endorsed international treaties and declarations. The majority of South African citizens, however, live in inadequate housing, many located in settlements without access to basic services or a safe and healthy living environment. The continued lack of access to adequate housing prohibits the attainment of other human rights such as the right to an adequate standard of living, to water, education, privacy, security, and self-determination. The development of medium-density housing in well-located can make a positive contribution to the realisation of these and other rights.

### **Background**

South Africa's housing problems are mainly a legacy of the colonial, apartheid and modernist systems – housing was provided and used as an instrument of social segregation, economic deprivation and land use separation. Our urban landscape is therefore characterised by a lack of social and class integration, an absence of integration of urban opportunities such as places of employment and economic activity, recreation, education and health facilities, and wide range of housing types in residential areas. With some of the lowest urban densities in the world, the sprawling nature of the contemporary South African city is one of the biggest factors preventing the attainment of good urban quality. Paradoxically, well-located low-income inner-city urban areas (such as informal settlements) are becoming so dense that overcrowding poses serious problems.

Until recently the focus of housing delivery has mainly been on the delivery of large numbers of free-standing housing units, rather than on the creation of vibrant human settlements that encompass a range of housing types and a variety of urban opportunities and activities. The illusion that South Africa has unlimited land must be dispelled; even in the South African context, single residential accommodation for urban living is a huge and unsustainable extravagance. The cost of adequate infrastructure, roads and services to areas located on the outskirts, as well as the time and cost implications of traveling long distances in order to access urban opportunities and employment are unaffordable for both municipalities and urban dwellers (especially the growing number of single women-headed households).

Major disadvantages accrue from low residential densities and low levels of compaction. Sprawling cities, where the market is thinly spread and thresholds are insufficient, have detrimental effects on especially small-scale economic activities as small businesses are likely to be dominated by larger enterprises that can afford higher rents. In diffuse, sprawling systems, unit costs of social and other services are high due to low levels of support per facility, and the range and levels of commercial and social services are low, as are convenience and equity of access to them. Another disadvantage is the inconvenience suffered by urban dwellers due to the lack of mix, diversity and overlap of activities. Access for pedestrians is also particularly problematic and public transportation is inconvenient,

inefficient and unaffordable, especially for the poor. Other disadvantages include an increase in the rate of land consumption and environmental degradation.

Accessibility therefore, needs to be increased through reducing the need to travel. This can be achieved through the development of more compact, integrated and diverse land use patterns.

Low density low-income housing continues to be developed on the periphery of urban settlements, despite these disadvantages and the many policies (for example, the Social Housing Policy and Breaking New Ground policy framework) that promote integrated, sustainable settlement planning and which encourage the provision of a range housing types. Attempts are often made to reduce the costs of housing by reducing plot size, but the free-standing pattern of housing continues, making nonsense of privacy and obliterating the intended advantages of single residential plots.

### **Medium Density Housing**

Density pervades all components of the residential environment and has an array of implications for the social, economic and environmental aspects which shape the city structure and residential areas. Density should therefore be used “rationally” and “creatively”, and as more than a static control mechanism or standard for calculating the number of community facilities required in a residential area. In South Africa, associations are made between poor environmental quality and high density development but environmental quality varies independently of density and good or bad environments occur at both high and low densities. To overcome these perceptions it is necessary to develop new building forms which create higher densities without increasing height and without compromising environmental and social sustainability. Increased densities must be used in establishing new development forms which provide opportunities for a greater variety of residential development options, and in formulating development strategies which go beyond transport needs alone.

In order to start addressing the problems, a major shift in resource allocation, political and bureaucratic will, popular perception and policy instruments is required. This shift needs to move towards compact urban housing which is properly designed, socially and economically sustainable, with higher levels of services that are affordable and amenities that are accessible. Land-use management and zoning should for example, be used to deliberately promote densification in desirable locations. Unless we implement feasible alternatives, this highly unsustainable and unaffordable settlement pattern will persist and perpetuate the vicious poverty traps typical of spatially separated South African communities.

Increased densities do not necessarily imply the extensive construction of high-rise buildings. Truly urban, ground-related, higher density environments can be achieved through attached housing, cluster housing and two, three and four storey walk-up housing typologies. It is possible to create environments related to these housing types that are humanly scaled, safe, and that provide the necessary privacy to residents. Furthermore, densification should not be encouraged everywhere, but should be informed by an analysis of utility service capacities, social dynamics, impacts on existing developments and open space, and vacant or under-utilised land. Land policies of local authorities should inform the location of developments aimed at densification.

New housing should be located around specific activity routes, around the intersection of transport routes, and around interchange points between different modes of transport to increase thresholds. Similarly, vacant and under-utilised well-located land and inner-city areas must be used to their full potential to transform the urban environment, and therefore improve the social and economic situations of city dwellers.

Densification would not entirely prevent outward expansion of the city, but would decelerate the growth of the city, while improving existing performance. Densification should also not be imposed

on existing areas with under- and un-utilised land. Instead, policies should enable people to realise the advantage of densification, as economic benefits make it advantageous to densify.

### **DAG's Medium Density Programme**

DAG's Medium Density Programme aims to influence South African urban development praxis by advocating for the development of sustainable mixed-income medium density housing on well located land through demonstration, project related research, policy engagement, lobbying and capacity development.

- DAG will undertake the Medium Density Housing research project to investigate and make recommendations pertaining to the social and economic sustainability of medium density housing. The study is intended to instruct those involved in the design and implementation of affordable medium density housing projects and will be published as a practitioners' handbook. The study includes an in depth analysis of case studies in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth. The research will provide valuable insights from the experiences of residents living in medium density housing and will illustrate that medium density housing environments are important tools for the creation of sustainable human settlement creation. The research will be used as a basis for advocacy and lobbying for policy and practice that promote the provision of sustainable, affordable and well-located medium density housing.
- DAG will implement the Ndabeni Land Restitution project focusing on building the capacity of the Ndabeni trustees and general claimants as to implement the project which involves the development of medium density housing on the well-located Wingfield land.
- DAG will implement the Rainbow Housing Cooperative project which endeavors to co-ordinate the provision of affordable accommodation, in the form of communal ownership, for Rainbow Housing Co-operative members in a well-located area close to their places of work (the Atlantic Seaboard or Cape Town city bowl areas). Notwithstanding the advantages of proximity to urban opportunities and resources, inner city areas seem unaffordable to lower income earners due to high land prices, high costs of building conversion, difficulty to accommodate low-income residents at scale and high service costs of sophisticated infrastructure (e.g. lifts) associated with high density developments. Assistance from government in the form of land or building donations is therefore vital in accessing housing for this group.
- DAG will document the Marconi Beam project as a case study of an innovative incremental housing project on well-located land which was planned and implemented in an integrated way whilst confronting Not-In-My-Backyard (NIMBY) issues.

### **Conclusion**

Affordable medium density housing for lower income groups in areas of high urban opportunity is imperative to the creation of sustainable human settlements. Good quality, well-located medium density housing will contribute to the promotion of dignity, as well as physical, mental and social well-being and will increase overall quality of life. Support for DAG's Medium Density Programme will enable us to lobby for adaptation of housing policy and practice to ensure that such housing becomes accessible to people of low incomes.