

Most new low-income housing environments in SA 'architecturally impoverished' – US expert

Low-cost housing

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I RECENTLY returned to Johannesburg, having spent a few years abroad as a university professor and the head of a large school of architecture. What I find disappointing is that most new low-income housing environments are still the same as when I left: a shameful assault on the poor. They are humiliating, awful and architecturally impoverished.

Why do we tolerate this? SA must be one of the few countries in the world where poor and marginalised communities suffer the consequences of a lack of design leadership because of the deliberate exclusion of professional architects from their housing environments. This cynical, antidesign mind- set shows in the crass, socially disagreeable townships that continue to be rolled out.

It is a fact that one of the biggest challenges facing SA is the need to accommodate low-income communities in sustainable human settlements. This is the current mission of the Department of Human Settlements because the townships built since 1994 cannot, surely, be considered to be sustainable, from any point of view — environmental, social or economic. Clearly, this limited and naive approach to settlement making sees no value in good design.

In order to fix the problem, we need to reconsider a few basic things about how built environments work.

First, we have to appreciate that built forms are extremely sophisticated artefacts. Design, at all scales — from buildings to neighbourhoods to cities — has social, economic and environmental effects on the way communities function. Therefore, the creation of sustainable human settlements has to be rooted in a profound understanding of this form-function relationship. I see no evidence of this knowledge in SA's new townships.

Second, built forms play a major role in the way people express themselves culturally, and in the way communities constitute themselves socially. Therefore, housing isn't just about a roof over one's head. It is an intricate bundle of technologies, spaces and symbols that has enormous socioeconomic and cultural significance as well. This is a lot more than simply trying to provide a technical answer to the need for shelter. Yet, visit just about any low-income housing estate in SA and that's what you'll see — row upon row of superficial boxes.

Third, built forms are multifaceted creations that should make it possible for people to go about their daily lives. We do not build in order to lay brick upon brick. We make buildings and cities because they are means- to-an-end phenomena. They should not constrain the multifunctional purposes for which they are built. But that's what our monofunctional, dormitory-like townships do.

Fourth, there's a word for these means-to- an-end phenomena: architecture. It is precisely the social, environmental, cultural, physical and other needs architecture fulfils that make its design so difficult.

Maybe that's why it is convenient to apply quick and easy technical solutions, replete with one-size-fits-all house plans and off-the- shelf township layouts. Perhaps architects have been excluded from project teams because their involvement would confirm the elaborate nature of good design, and thereby make the process trickier which, by definition, it has to be.

So here's the thing: our housing environments are dysfunctional because the architectural dimension is missing.

For too long, we have ignored the architecture of mass housing and human settlements in SA. It is time we addressed this ignorance and infused our strategy to achieve sustainable settlements with the architectural factor. Here's how.

It has been said that great design is all about the simplification of complexity. Speak to any professional architect and you'll appreciate that design-thinking is the ability to synthesise, simultaneously, all the different variables that make up the design problem.

That is why design that is both functional and elegant is so hard to achieve. It is hard because you need to see each facet in an integrated way. Every aspect of the problem, from energy efficiency, budget considerations and climate, to accommodation requirements, aesthetics and culture, can be addressed only in relation to the others.

What we regard as great architecture is the result of a tricky process of holistic problem-solving. Architectural excellence is achieved by way of iteration between analysis and synthesis, eventually putting everything together in a design that is simultaneously elegant and functional.

This is something that cannot be done by multidisciplinary teams of professionals, where each specialist sees the design problem from a singular perspective. The design leadership that architects are educated to master can achieve it.

Yes, you need the technical inputs of many consultants to help achieve well-rounded, complete settlements. But without the overarching conceptual vision that an architect brings to the table, you are likely to get partially successful built environments, in the sense that only this or that aspect of the problem is solved, but not all. In other words, you may get elegance at the expense of function and vice versa, or neither, if the problem is not tackled holistically.

This raises another issue: cost. It is simply wrong to assert that good design is inherently expensive. Good architecture exemplifies value for money, and that needs to be a key goal in the low-income housing sector.

Buildings and cities need the design value that architects deliver. If you purge built environments of that holistic approach, and the integrative thinking behind it, you get incomplete, unsustainable places.

Low-income housing in SA is a prime example of this purge. The human settlements we've produced since 1994 contain more than 2,3-million houses that accommodate about 11-million people.

On first inspection this is quite an impressive achievement. Except for one thing: very few of these projects have involved professional architects.

The results speak for themselves: costly sprawl, environmental pollution, no innovation, a lack of community facilities, segregated spatial patterns, stifling RDP houses, no sense of place, monotonous streetscapes, barren public spaces ... miserable places.

What SA sits with are shack-harvesting townships. We've certainly squandered opportunities for creating viable and lively human settlements.

And yes, delivery teams have so far included town planners, engineers, land surveyors, builders, project managers, bureaucrats and others.

But they've messed things up. Without the architectural leadership that pulls this technical horsepower together, under the umbrella of an innovative design concept, the complexity of the challenge is glided over. That is why SA has so many unsustainable, undignified settlements that are a burden on the poor.

New opportunities exist to rectify things. They're in the housing backlog, which today stands at about 2,1-million units. This translates into a need for about 220000 houses every year for the next few years.

This is a solid prospect for innovation that adds lasting value to the human settlements we have to create. The moment has arrived for new design leadership. It is time to bring in the architects.

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