

Western Cape

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## Reimagining inclusive future inner city housing projects in CT

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The only way forward for sustainable housing delivery in and around Cape Town is to go for inner city rejuvenation with dense, low-cost housing. And, with some imagination, mixed-use development with a touch of “urban entertainment” can enhance the city’s cosmopolitan flavour and improve quality of life, says a housing official with the United Nations.

Speaking to *The New Age*, Claudio Acioly, the Nairobi-based chief of housing policy at the Shelter Branch of UN Habitat, says the “peripheral growth” that has characterised the city’s growth over decades has been a waste of resources.

Such growth is not only unaffordable over the long term, but it leaves inner-city infrastructure, sewage, lighting and water redundant after office hours, turning the central business district into an urban wasteland at night.

Along with this night-time urban desertification comes a range of social ills, particularly crime, which can undermine the best efforts of high-minded developers without an eye on the overall social impact of these developments.

At the end of March the provincial authorities, the City of Cape Town and the executives of the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC) announced a major expansion of the convention centre precinct that will not only double its exhibition space, but will create a new hospital, an office tower, vast retail space, parking bays and a green space to be called Founders’ Park.

But amid the fanfare around the highbrow development plans, predicted to lead to investment and related economic spin-offs worth around R4.5bn, no mention was made of a residential component, revealing a blind spot in the Democratic Alliance-led administration when it comes to solving the city’s problems around urban development.

It became apparent when the plans for an expanded CTICC were announced that inner-city housing was barely an afterthought, as a question arose about a residential component of the CTICC’s plan.

Officials were unable to properly answer the question, although Felicity Purchase from the City of Cape Town was able to say that “there is an element of residential development”, and that the City was looking at “a few proposals” for development of residential space but declined to provide further details.

It seems that as tourists are being urged to flock to Cape Town's proliferating hotels, already in oversupply, they are expected to wander around a deserted city at night, vulnerable to inner-city criminals, as middle-class professionals go home to the suburbs and workers travel home on overcrowded trains and minibus taxis to sprawling dormitory townships on the city's fringes.

It is this "socio-spatial segregation" that has come to typify central Cape Town, says Acioly, pointing to similar trends in Latin American cities, which "grew to violence", becoming "no-go areas", at night.

While the city has warned there will be very few "single of house-on-a-single plot" developments in future housing projects, no mention has been made of where high-density housing will be located. Yet one also hears complaints about the high cost of inner city land and the expense of building there.

On the question of cost, Acioly points to a wider picture.

"I think there is a problem with the way the city is growing and it will become very costly, spending a lot in terms of sheer transport, time commuting and carbon emissions," warns Acioly, a Brazilian national.

At the moment, there is "very little housing for low-income groups offered in the urban core of Cape Town" and as a result people can't live close to their jobs.

The worst-case scenario for Cape Town is what Acioly calls the "business as usual" approach, where the city continues to offer cheap housing on the periphery, "investing in dramatic fashion further and further away from centre" in dormitory cities, from where people commute daily "under very bad conditions of transport".

This will lead to "all kinds of negative externalities", he says, warning, "There is trouble ahead if you go ahead with business as usual."

Speaking generally, he adds that cities need to decrease their rate of consumption of land.

"The rate of consumption of land for urbanisation is growing faster than the population," says Acioly, pointing out that Africa has the fastest rate of urbanisation in the world, and it has the highest rate of slum formation.

In a second scenario, the city recognises that current growth patterns are not sustainable, and that it costs a lot to expand a city horizontally, and is prepared to go for mixed-use developments, with at least 10% to 20% of developments allocated to social housing.

In scenario three, he says, "there is more economic vitality, more employment, less expenditure to expand the city's infrastructure", which can then take higher occupancy rates, with business and residential stakeholders.

While the latter scenario is more akin to developed country environments, given the fact that the South African economy has “breath”, with large numbers of South Africans receiving housing subsidies, it remains a possibility.

And taking this scenario further, one moves to the notion – being developed by cities like Rotterdam – where housing is linked to “mixed-use environments” and where the “urban entertainment” phenomenon is being developed, says Acioly.

However, this will involve rethinking the future of the city, better land-use planning and consideration of the economy of scale offered by the city, he says.

A key element here is the question of integration of land use, housing and transport – these elements “can’t be thought sectorally”, he says, but must be looked at as a whole.

Failure to consider these can come with woeful consequences, he says, adding that “what we are seeing in Cape Town and South Africa is an army of youth desperate for power and opportunities; an army of energy and dissatisfaction”.

Helen Zille, the DA leader and premier, pointed out last week that a growing middle class was “not the enemy of the poor”, as the rates they pay contribute to an expanded revenue base for government, leading to greater ability for cross-subsidisation of services for the poor.

However, it could be argued that, when it comes to urban development and inner-city rejuvenation, neither do the poor need to be the enemy of the middle class.