

TRANSFORMING REALITY

ARCHITECTURE AND THE POSSIBILITY FOR A NEW SOCIAL ORDER IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Introduction

This paper is structured in four parts. The first part situates housing in South Africa within the context of the historic circumstance of the apartheid state. The second part attempts to locate the present housing situation with reference to government strategy which has developed subsequent to the 1994 election.

The third section is directed at revealing most recent developments in the built environment which have occurred in response to issues established by our state of transformation. Examining, in particular, the Rapid Land Development Program [RLDP] of Greater Johannesburg's Local Authority, the Transitional Metropolitan Council [GJTMC], recognition will be given to the attempt to rebuild a productive alliance between architecture and current political and economic agendas through the deliberate fostering of process through a precise social program.

Finally, I will draw some conclusions relative to the future of housing in the emerging South African context, notably regarding the potential of architecture to play an active and informative role in this as a social process.

The problem of modern dwelling is primarily architectural, in spite of its technical and economic aspects. It is a complex problem and can therefore be solved by creative minds, not by calculation or organization.

– Mies van der Rohe, 1927

Background

Today, in this age of late western capitalism, the above declaration by Mies van der Rohe still holds relevance for the production of housing. It has particular pertinence for architects working within the emergent context of rapid urbanization in post-apartheid South Africa.

For the majority of South Africa's previously marginalized people, the Freedom Charter¹ exemplifies an oppositional aspiration to the conditions to which they have been subjected for the past 350 years.² With respect to the built environment, it is the 8th Statement of this charter: "There shall be Housing, Security and Comfort," which embodies this ideal and which looks to

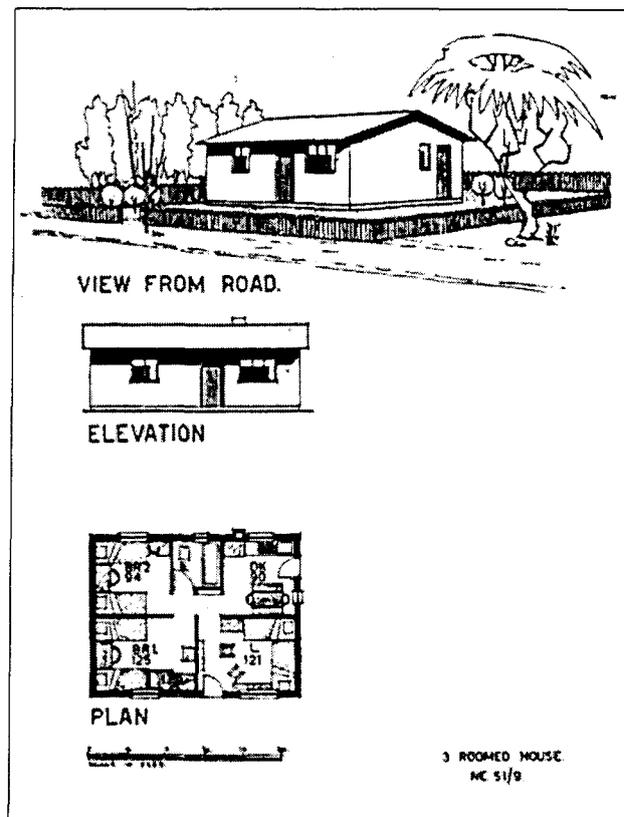


Fig. 1. NE51/9 (NBRI).

architecture for its realization. The coming to power of the African National Congress (ANC), subsequent to the first democratic election in 1994, suggested the imminent delivery of such comfort.

However, in moving from its historic position of struggle, the exigencies of governance appear to have deflected the African National Congress (ANC) from its original social intentions. Housing policy in South Africa is currently characterized by an economic and utilitarian conception. The vision is a quantitative and functional one, measured through a maximized delivery of dwelling units per annum. This philosophy is realized by an extremely narrowly defined and limited housing subsidy

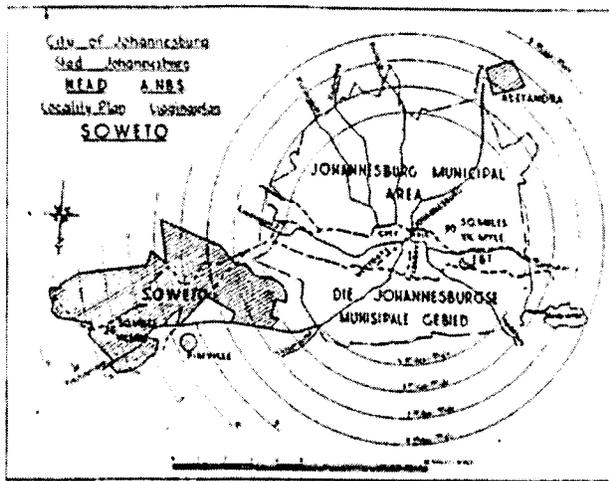


Fig. 2. Johannesburg layout (GJTMC).

system. Relying mainly upon a sliding scale financial assistance without substantive social facilitation, it tends to favor delivery by the formal private sector.³ Furthermore, the spatial paradigm for housing is a highly circumscribed one, being grounded in a conception of "one dwelling/one site." This approach serves to reinforce the autonomy of the individual dwelling and is somewhat reminiscent of the apartheid's production, exemplified by the NE51/9 unit⁴ in contradistinction to the production of an imaginative terrain wherein people, as members of families and communities, might construct their lives as social beings.

In part, this diversion from social principles may be attributed to the death of Joe Slovo, the first Minister of Housing. His early departure seems to have emasculated the Housing debate from substantive intellectual social discourse. However, it should be recognized that, as Minister of Housing, Slovo's initiating policies relied largely on rational analysis and reflected little of the fertile social dimension which should be expected from a communist intellectual who had operated as a key political activist in the struggle for a free South Africa.

Furthermore, the marginalization of the Reconstruction and Development Program, commonly known as the RDP, has further exacerbated transformation in South Africa. Representing the ANC's pre-election policy framework, the RDP represents a radical paradigm shift from the previous apartheid policies of the Afrikaner nationalist regime. Its intention was to provide the primary mechanism for the delivery of social good, primarily in the form of housing, and informing the translation of struggle into governance. Commencing with its own special Ministry in 1994, the RDP was sidelined and tellingly absorbed into the Ministries of Finance and into the Deputy Presidents' Office as early as in 1995. Currently the delivery of its projects reflects little of the initial importance attached to its program. In addition the delivery of formal housing in South Africa since 1994 has been measured as little as 124,000 units,⁵ being approximately 30,000 units per annum within a backlog of more than three million dwelling units.

Considering the above situation, housing delivery is currently characterized by a number of divergent

approaches. The architecture of these approaches each adopts a strategy which is reflective of the social status of the peoples it is serving. This may be understood as a direct consequence of the diverse geographic and economic situations whereby communities have been historically located within the South African context. The policies of the apartheid regime resulted in a peculiar spatialization of the urban landscape; one constituted by radical physical separation and the autonomy of communities, essentially based upon their racial classification. Consequently, all South African cities are divided cities.

The city of Johannesburg is divided between north and south, with the wealthy whites occupying the better northern terrain and the poor black communities having being reluctantly relegated to so-called "native townships," at an extreme distance from its center, in the worse southern terrain.⁶ A horizontal dolomite mining belt establishes a convenient buffer maintaining the divide between north and south. The northern suburbs are characterized by the surplus that wealth produces, while the southern townships are characterized by the negative minimalism that apartheid's plan demanded. The disparity in these divides is compounded by an absence of institutional and service infrastructure in the townships, reducing them to mere dormitory status, consistent with their original conception as temporary solutions.

The central business district [CBD] located immediately to the north of the divide was predominantly white but offered a limited confluence within the separations. Consequently, this dual phenomenon of separate and unequal cities persists, presenting perhaps the single most challenging task for architecture to address in the post apartheid era.

The present situation

Despite the possibility presented by political change in South Africa, the heritage of the apartheid city seems to endure. Nevertheless, apartheid's demise has had a number of direct implications for the built environment. This is most conspicuous in the CBD where white flight and black influx have produced the most provocative transformation. Almost overnight, the CBD of Johannesburg has been transformed into an African city. An architecture of occupation, reflective of values of personal sanction or entitlement, has begun to emerge. The most frequently invaded terrains are those perceived as most vulnerable. Roofscapes, streetscapes and the in-between realms established by infrastructure prove the most vulnerable. A cyclic appearance, disappearance and reappearance of urban nomads as traders have reclaimed the street as a site of interchange, thereby returning urban significance to the city. Necessity is producing a fluid terrain which is reshaping our inner urban areas. Necessarily instantaneous and limited in its palette, their architecture projects itself through a proliferation of innovative semi-permanent temporary installations. Despite poverty and dispossession, these actions recall the prodigious capacity of Africans to actively participate in the construction of shelter. This imaginative response to the exigencies of time and place promises a return of civic meaning to the city. Government

assistance is clearly unnecessary.

Johannesburg's northern suburbs, however reflect a different architecture — one of paranoia. Abandoning the CBD, business is in the process of rebuilding itself at the periphery. The model for this development is the fortified medieval city. At the commercial scale this is demonstrated by the familiar internalized shopping mall. In compensating for the loss of power and control at the centre, the elite have predictably resorted to simulacra which take on a multiplicity of nostalgic forms. The popular model is Disney-like and a compensatory gratification is provided through the production of Italian piazzas, waterfronts and village walks. Representing a somewhat safe haven from the unfamiliar, this form of development has become ubiquitous and is epitomized by a concomitant marginalization of the public domain.

At the residential scale, the representation is similar. Through both individual and collective effort, enclaves of fortress-like developments are proliferating. Security is paramount and the resultant insulation seems an ironic inversion of the apartheid paradigm. Privilege has finally produced its own demise, and relegated the wealthy to a form of voluntary incarceration.

One consequence of this has been probably the most rapidly emerging edge city in the world!

A further phenomenon is that of radical appropriation. Characterized by mass land invasions, the organized occupation of large tracts of government and private land has constructed a dilemma for local authorities. Frequently facilitated by so-called community leaders or "warlords" these actions are reminiscent of the acts of defiance which produced the squatter settlements of the 1980s and have provoked a crisis of militant reaction by the authorities. On one hand there are legitimate claims by the dispossessed to land, and on the other there is a social responsibility to maintain law and advance orderly urban development. Clearly, however, the one conclusion is that the present Government subsidy system has insufficient substance to address the basic needs of the many.

Given the relative difficult access to this centrally structured housing program, and the absence of a comprehensive approach, it is understandable that current development in South Africa is predominantly *laissez faire*. It is therefore unsurprising to find alternatives emerging at local government level. Between the extremes of central government and individual effort, a third condition is developing. In response to these disparities, the Greater Johannesburg Transitional Metropolitan Council (GJTMC) has initiated its Rapid Land Development Program (RLDP), as an investigation toward resolving the housing problem.

The RLDP: Social experiment through architectural demonstration

The notion of housing as a research project has previously been demonstrated in Germany, through both the *Siedlungen* and more recently through the *Internationale Bau-Ausstellung (IBA)* here in Berlin. An equivalent South African paradigm is emerging in the form of the newly formulated Rapid Land Development Program.

This program presents perhaps the first attempt to radically redress the past through intervention across all levels of urbanization. Conceived of as a complex cultural construct, it is designed to address the political, economic and social dimensions of dwelling through a spatial strategy which builds upon the preexistent to transform reality. Not dissimilar to the post revolutionary SAAL projects in Portugal, most notably represented by the work of Alvaro Siza, this program owes its conception to the presence of an architect within government. As chairperson of Urbanization and Housing in the GJTMC, Councilor Lindsay Bremner is foremost an architect, and occupies a position similar to the Nuno Portas in the post revolutionary Portuguese government. This position has been used to both modify and direct local housing policy through the location of the RLDP firmly in the terrain of architectures creative potential for imaginative conception and delivery.

Process/Product

While operating within the financial confines of the government subsidy policy and working with preexistent communities, the RLDP has allied itself with a reorganization of the built environment. Three simple spatial operations have been identified as both necessary and sufficient for the social unification of the fragmented city.

1. Topos/Crossing

The primary move consists of a deliberate relocation of the poor by a crossing of the traditional apartheid divide. The so-called township of the south is to be strategically inserted into the fabric of the white north, emphatically contesting the historic racial and class divide.

2. Techne / Preparing Ground

The preparation of land for invasion, whereby tracts of land are strategically identified and re-organized for mass inhabitation by communities previously identified as being in the most social, economic or political distress. New urban order promotes a sense of interaction and community.

3. Type / First Marks

The architectural invention of a "first mark" which, while conforming to the financial subsidy formula, is capable of multiple interpretations over time in relation to the diverse and emergent requirements which normally characterize individual need.

The long term intention is one of creating orderly urbanization through strategic temporal process by building upon latent capacity. Whilst each of the above three operations constitutes a design consideration with implications for the spatial environment, the latter, "first marks" constitutes the most architectural and is further scrutinized in this paper. Given the South African context, the notion of a first mark demands an open architectural interpretation capable of accommodating relatively unlimited user preferences.

Preparing ground for first marks

Given the scale of the housing problem and the limited resources of the nation, the agricultural connotation associated with this precept are apt. What, then, are the necessary preconditions to produce a good

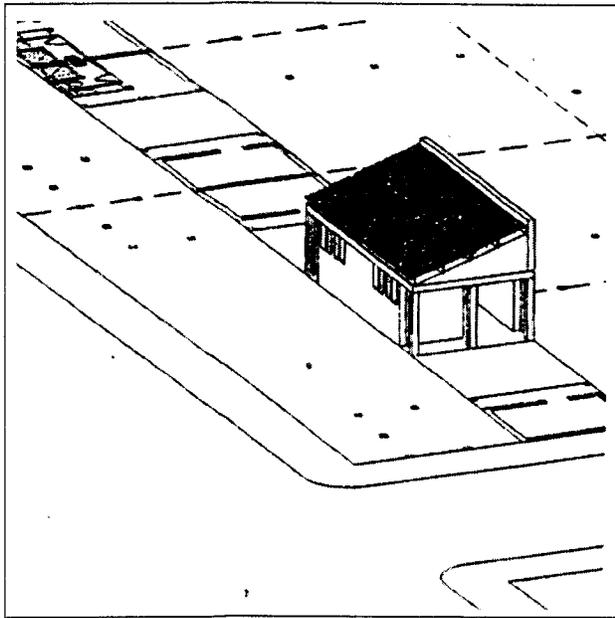


Fig. 3. Basic core.

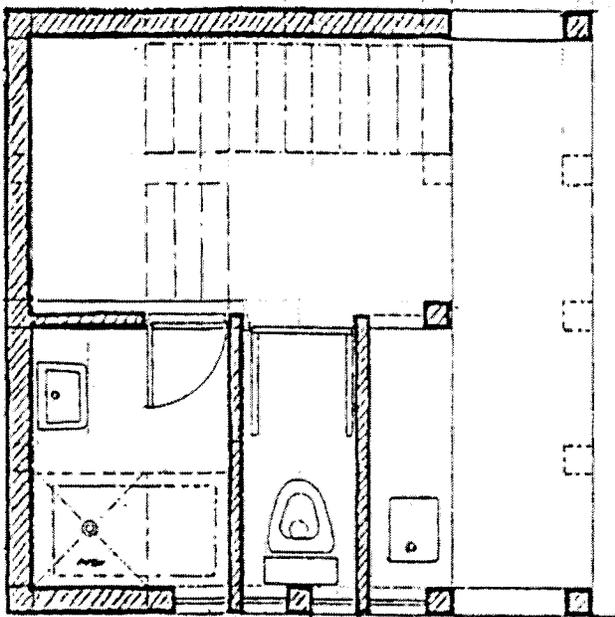


Fig. 4. Basic core; plan.

environment for dwelling? It is from the intuitive and preexistent responses of local homebuilders as initiators of their own shelter that the following set of parameters was gleaned.

1. Core, as service strip and collective strategy, across sites;
2. Terrace, as a means of grounding on uneven terrain;
3. Traditional outdoor space, as productive space and means of limiting coverage;
4. Front/Rear dialogue, as a means of guiding differential build out;

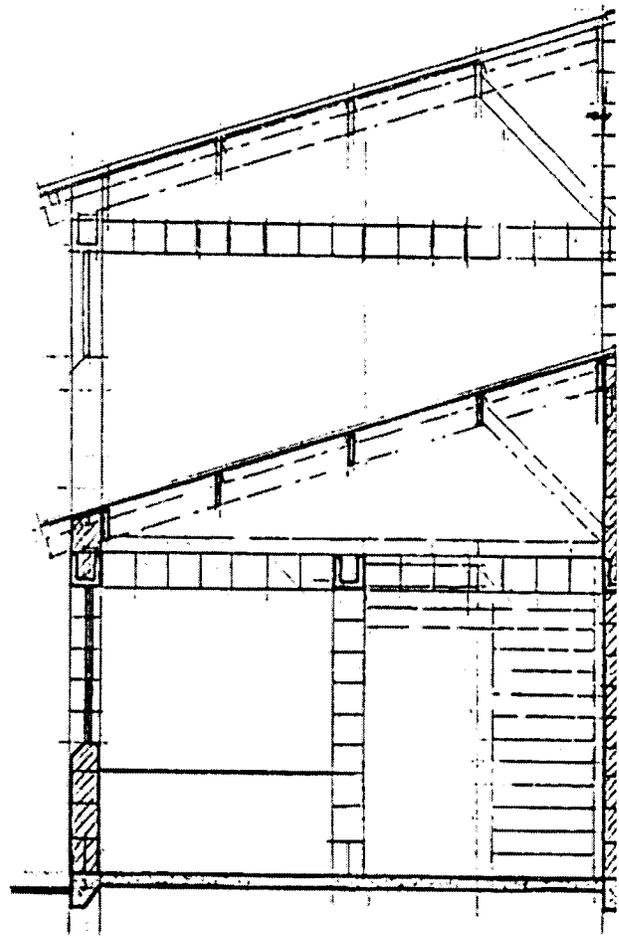


Fig. 5. Basic core; vertical growth.

5. Shared walls, as a means of facilitating and directing incremental growth;
6. Structural frame/umbrella, as means to facilitate vertical growth and enabler of structural and spatial order by infill over time.

The coordination of these parameters is ordered by three collective aspirations, being:

1. Social structure of the unit: accommodating the choices between different family structures; nuclear, extended, working from home; and secondary rental accommodation;
2. Building type: single storey, double storey; or laterally interconnected;
3. Temporal: participative and piecemeal construction over time in accordance with need and economic ability.

To produce a single but open architectural representation, capable of the multiple interpretations necessary to construct difference. The combination of the above mentioned three levels of indeterminacy, whereby inhabitants must make informed choices relative to social structure, building type and individual participation, are intended to ensure the production of a heterogenous environment. The dialogue between spatial need and economic ability with temporal process will therefore contribute to the social formation of an urban landscape

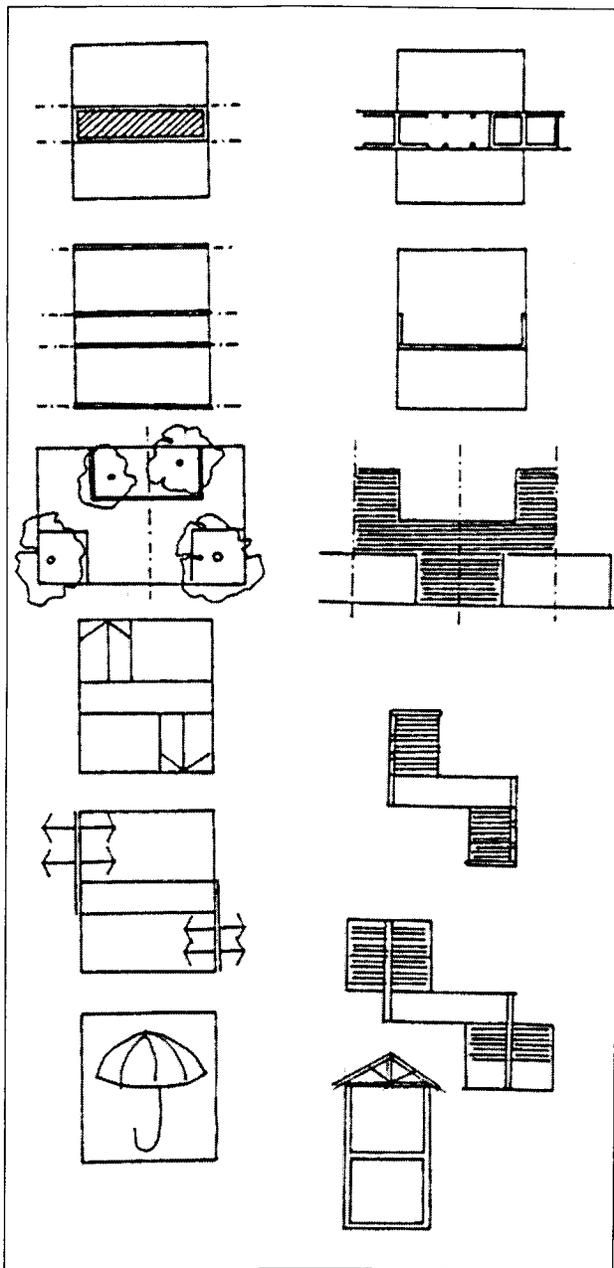


Fig. 6. Basic core; build out over time.

differentiated through direct participation of homemakers as co-producers of the physical fabric. In this manner, the RLDP stands to substantially increase the rate of participation and delivery afforded by the current housing subsidy mechanism.

Conclusion

The social program inherent in the RLDP of the TMC in Gauteng provokes a different reality from that of our past. It indicates a first cogent paradigm shift to address apartheid's spatial legacy. As such it holds promise for genuine transformation. Directly confronting the conditions of the past it conceives of housing as a cultural construct and attempts to build within the complexity of our present social reality. Social program has been

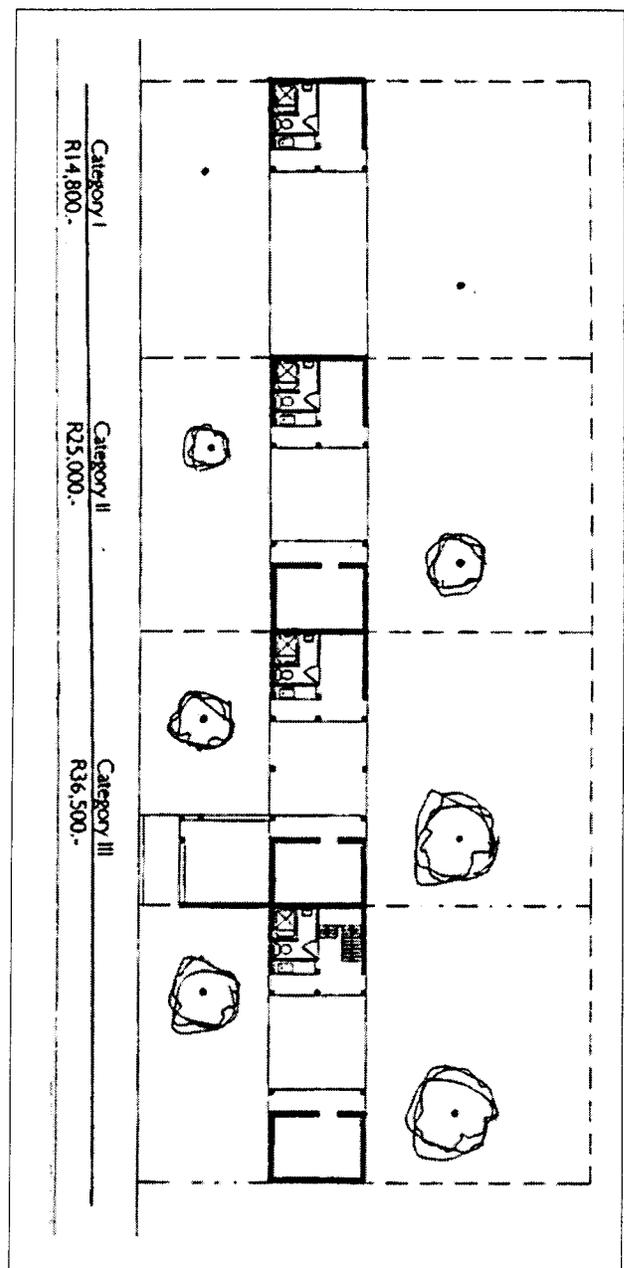


Fig. 7.

repositioned above that of economic limitation and thereby a critical role reestablished for architecture in the production of an imaginative terrain. Housing, and therefore architecture, is hereby re-conceptualized as the realm for the bringing together of the social, economic and political agendas designed to empower previously disenfranchised communities.

Architecture, as spatial and temporal practice, becomes the initiator of this construct, through the deliberate confrontation of "form + life." The willful de-centering of "house as product" is directed at the promotion of participation and unknown outcomes. A qualitative environment constructed through individual choice becomes a different goal for housing policy. Housing delivery may then be measured through the

<u>Total monthly household income before tax/deductions</u>	<u>Government subsidy</u>
R0.00 - R800.00 per month (US \$ 175.00)	R15,000.00 (US \$3,300)
R801.00 - R1,500.00 per month (US \$ 330.00)	R12,500.00 (US \$2,750)
R1,501.00 - R2,500.00 per month (US \$ 550.00)	R 9,500.00 (US \$2,100)
R2,501.00 - R3,500.00 per month (US \$ 775.00)	R 5,000.00 (US \$1,100)

Table 1 - Government Housing Subsidy Formula (Ministry of Housing).

building of community rather than through the mere production of dwelling units per annum.

In this way a potential exists for architecture to ameliorate the urban landscapes of apartheid.⁷ The role of architects as imaginative designers who ask speculative questions about what could be, may then reemerge through research by demonstration. As Mies has said:

"The problem of modern dwelling is primarily architectural, in spite of its technical and economic aspects. It is a complex problem and can therefore be solved by creative minds, not by calculation or organization."

Mies van der Rohe, 1927

The transformation of reality is a problem which demands provocative actions which promote new social order, and this is necessarily a task for architecture, especially in South Africa.

ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
CDBE	Centre for the Development of the Built Environment (University of Witwatersrand)
GAA	Group Areas Act of 1955
GJTMC	Greater Johannesburg Transitional Metropolitan Council
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Program
RLDP	Rapid Land Development Program
TMC	Transitional Metropolitan Council
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Committee
UIA	Union of International Architects
UCT	University of Capetown

NOTES

- ¹ The Freedom Charter, adopted at the Congress of the People, Kliptown, Johannesburg, on 26 June 1955.
- ² The first official colonial settler occupation of the Cape is recorded in Jan van Riebeeck's arrival at the Cape of Good Hope in 1653.
- ³ Refer to Table 1.
- ⁴ NE 51/9; represents the Non-European housing unit designed in 1951, under the apartheid era.

⁵ Ministry of Housing; March, 1996.

⁶ The original apartheid policies denied the presence of non-whites within white urban domains. Legislation such as The Group Areas Act of 1955, the Pass Law Act, the Influx Control laws and the Migrant Workers Act, all served to support and sustain this philosophy. It was only through economic necessity that exceptions were made to the rigidity of apartheid's ideal of total separation. Soweto, the South Western Township, to the south of Johannesburg, is a direct manifestation of these policies.

⁷ The willing and, for the most part, uncontested participation of the architectural profession in the construction of the apartheid cities having produced the physical manifestation of apartheid planning demands further scrutiny. It is surprising that the profession and its Institute and Council have not yet been called before the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC), South Africa's constructive equivalent to the Nuremberg trials.

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