The Architecture that Works in Housing the Urban Poor in Developing Countries:

Formal Land Access and Dweller Control

Trynos Gumbo

Housing is more about attitude than purse size. Since time immemorial, humans have always provided solutions to their habitat problems with minimum assistance from outsiders. However, aided self-help housing provision approaches became popular for solving the housing problems of the urban poor during the last half of the twentieth century. Since then, there have been constant efforts to position the urban poor at the centre of the housing development process, where they can exercise greater control and make investment decisions as funds allow. It has been proved, however, that the fundamental ingredient in home-ownership schemes for the urban poor is the smooth facilitation and provision of adequate and appropriate land in terms of occupation rights, size, location in relation to distance from city centres, planning ideals and costs. Allocating secure and affordable housing plots encourages incremental development of housing structures, on-site infrastructure and improvements of community environments. Experiences in the allocation of sites without prior services to the urban dwellers in Zimbabwe’s cities during the past few years have demonstrated that such approaches improve the targeting of the genuinely urban poor, over and above the facilitation of phased development.

Introduction

The majority of former colonial cities found within the developing world today were regrettably designed and modelled to cater for a small, elite and privileged minority during periods of segregation, while the majority locals were condemned to impoverished and neglected rural areas or cramped in substandard townships. Sadly, the rigid application of strictly modernist urban planning and development ideals has continued in cities of developing countries against the backdrop of rapid urbanisation. This is long after the wave of independence swept across the three continents of Africa, Asia and South America, leaving behind serious socio-economic and environmental inequalities.1 Notably, it has been a mammoth task for governments of developing countries to provide

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The fundamental ingredient in home-ownership schemes for the urban poor is the smooth facilitation and provision of adequate and appropriate land.

Adequate housing, particularly for the urban poor. Their failure has led to the proliferation of squatter settlements and slums that have become common sites of social struggle and crime, communicable diseases, and fire outbreaks that also result in huge losses of property and human lives.² The African continent, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, has been experiencing unprecedented rapid urban population growth, giving rise to insurmountable housing shortages, especially for the lower-income sector.³ In the quest to inform ways of improving and promoting home ownership among the African urban poor, this study reviews and investigates innovations in land and housing delivery that seek to bridge gaps between the outcomes of formal and informal land and housing delivery systems. The work maintains that conventional land and housing provision approaches, which adopt strictly planning-servicing-building-occupation (PSBO) models, are tailored to serve only the well-off, while condemning the urban poor to informal means of accessing land and housing, which unfortunately follow the problematic occupation-building-planning-servicing (OBPS) framework. In the light of the shortcomings emanating from both approaches, there is therefore a need to bridge the two models of accessing land and housing, for the benefit of those who cannot afford the stringent approach, and also suffer from inadequate housing conditions. The bridging model adopts the planning-occupation-building-servicing (POBS) approach, which ensures the allocation of properly planned, orderly and adequate housing sites, while at the same time facilitating incremental development of structures and on-site infrastructure. This process empowers the urban poor to make flexible investment decisions as funds permit, an innovation that is inspired and influenced by experiences of informal land and housing delivery approaches.⁴

Conventional land and housing delivery systems have to conform to stringent standards to achieve and maintain order in the built environment.⁵ Emphasis and detail is accorded to the planning-servicing-building-occupation (PSBO) stages of development, with every phase followed by inspections and approvals. The religious adherence to orderly land parcelling processes and sequential development of structures to meet stipulated standards results in increased costs, making this approach highly unaffordable for the urban poor majority in most cities of the developing world.⁶ Table 1 is a diagrammatic representation of the stages of development and the traditional stakeholders involved at the different levels. The diagram is developed from the seminal work of various scholars on the experiences of formal land delivery processes.⁷

Throughout the planning, servicing and building stages, built environment professionals perform prescriptive tasks to fulfil conceived or abstract space ideals, giving rise to substantial increases in costs that unfortunately cannot be met by urban poor households.

Sadly, the rigid and expensive land delivery approaches that have been dominating housing provision in most developing countries have largely left the urban poor with no options but to devise illegal and unconventional solutions to their housing problems.⁸ The informal housing solutions have always followed the occupation-building-planning-servicing (OBPS) sequence, as clearly highlighted in discourses and debates on informal housing development by renowned scholars.⁹ Table 2 summarises the sequence that is commonly followed in informal housing development.

**Table 1: The sequence of formal land and housing delivery**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence of development</th>
<th>Planning</th>
<th>Servicing</th>
<th>Building</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
<td>Central government Local planning authorities</td>
<td>Contracted Companies Private sector developers</td>
<td>Individual allottees Private sector companies</td>
<td>Beneficiaries Buyers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Adequate and secure housing units, but very few, and unaffordable to the urban poor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author, developed from ideas put forward by Baress, 1990
The invasion and illegal occupation of land for the purposes of erecting housing structures by the urban poor can clearly be explained by representational or lived spaces, as argued by scholars on urban spaces development and creation.\(^1\) Such approaches give rise to insecure and substandard housing outcomes, with serious repercussions that include overcrowding, disease outbreaks, as well as unsecured investments that suffer from demolition and eviction threats. In the majority of cases, disregard of order and spontaneous reactions to housing problems by the urban poor give rise to unstable urban communities that are riddled with socioeconomic and environmental ills.

**Finding common ground**

As has been pointed out, the two different land and housing delivery approaches serve the extremes of socioeconomic groups, with both positive and negative outcomes, hence the need to find common ground and bridge the gap between them for the benefit of the majority in cities of the developing world. The adjusted land and housing delivery approach would therefore follow the planning-occupation-building-servicing (POBS) sequence, as clearly shown in Table 3. The diagram also highlights the relevant stakeholders involved in the provision of the key ingredients for successful implementation of the housing projects.

This novel approach takes into account the benefits of providing properly planned housing stands while at the same time relaxing regulations on servicing the land before building and occupation. This results in the development of stable, secure and affordable housing outcomes, with on-site infrastructure being provided as and when resources permit. Perceived spaces or spatial practices\(^2\) by both built-environment

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### Table 2: The sequence of informal land and housing delivery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence of development</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Building</th>
<th>Planning</th>
<th>Servicing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
<td>Homeless urban poor individuals</td>
<td>Homeless urban poor individuals</td>
<td>Central government</td>
<td>Local planning authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-operatives</td>
<td>Co-operatives</td>
<td>Local planning authorities</td>
<td>Contracted companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speculators</td>
<td>Speculators</td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), community organisations and co-operatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Inadequate and insecure housing units, but they do accommodate the majority of the urban poor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author, developed from ideas put forward by Berner, 2000

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### Table 3: The hybrid and bridged land and housing delivery approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence of development</th>
<th>Planning</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Building</th>
<th>Servicing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
<td>Central government Local planning authorities</td>
<td>Individual participants</td>
<td>Individual participants</td>
<td>Individual participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Members of co-operatives</td>
<td>Members of co-operatives</td>
<td>Members of co-operatives</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community-based organisations</td>
<td>Community-based organisations</td>
<td>Community-based organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-governmental organisations</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Adequate and secure housing units, accommodating the majority of the urban poor</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author
professionals and the urban African poor assist in the creation of sustainable, harmonious, compatible and secure urban environments.

The bridging exercise is broadly depicted and summarised in Table 4, highlighting the sequences of housing development and the outcomes. It should be noted that, with the hybrid model, occupation of the allocated housing plots and their development can take place concurrently, or sometimes occupation may be delayed while a core house is being put up, while some may live in temporary structures pending the construction of proper housing structures. This, however, depends on the socioeconomic status of participants.

Allocating housing stands on planned schemes ensures security to the urban poor who subsequently improve their structures and environments incrementally, creating liveable and healthy communities.

**Example: Formal land access and dweller control in Cowdray Park, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe**

The Zimbabwean government adopted the bridged land and housing delivery approach in 2005, in response to national and international condemnation of its notorious informal-housing demolition exercise, code-named Operation Murambatsvina or ‘Restore Order’ (OM/OR). In an effort to pacify both the victims of the operation and international agencies such as the United Nations UN-Habitat, the government innovatively devised less costly, but environmentally and socially viable land and housing solutions to alleviate the plight of evictees. Borrowing from both approaches (as in Table 4), the government allocated thousands of appropriately planned but unserviced housing plots across major urban centres of the country. In Cowdray Park Extension, one of the high-density residential suburbs of Bulawayo, 7 860 planned but unserviced housing plots, measuring on average 200m², were allocated to the urban poor. They were allowed to occupy their stands and develop standard houses using designs of their choices from BB3, BB4 and BB5 housing plans that had been adopted and approved by the City Council of Bulawayo. To ensure orderly development, a layout plan with spaces demarcated for future development of roads, water and sewerage systems, as well as community facilities such as schools, clinics, halls and churches, was adopted and implemented. Offering housing stand numbers to beneficiaries guaranteed secured ownership, leading to massive development of housing, as depicted in Figure 1.

The participants have been contributing nominal amounts of money towards the servicing of their housing scheme, and through their housing trust (Bulawayo Home Seekers’ Consortium Trust) the community has been connected to other existing residential areas, the city centre and the rest of the city through temporary roads, culverts where necessary, and communal water sources such as boreholes. Individual housing plot owners have also developed Blair toilets that are being used temporarily while modern sewer and water systems are being put in place.

Encouraging occupation before servicing of stands considerably improved targeting of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approaches</th>
<th>Sequences</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Rigid formal land and housing delivery</td>
<td>Planning → Servicing → Building → Occupation</td>
<td>Adequate and secure housing units, but very few and unaffordable to the urban poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridged hybrid land and housing delivery</td>
<td>Planning → Servicing → Building → Occupation</td>
<td>Adequate and secure housing units, accommodating the majority of the urban poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loose informal land and housing delivery</td>
<td>Planning → Servicing → Building → Occupation</td>
<td>Inadequate and insecure housing units, but they do accommodate the majority of urban poor and are very affordable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author
needy and homeless people, as people with real challenges in accessing housing and those who commonly face discrimination; for example, people with disabilities (PWDs) benefited from this programme, as depicted in Figure 2. The innovation also discouraged and largely reduced speculative tendencies and down raiding by middle- and high-income people from the city.

Efforts to fully service and transform the area with running water and sewerage in the suburb in order to make it a fully habitable community are at an advanced stage, as shown in Figure 3. The programme has successfully placed the urban poor at the centre of the housing development process, where decisions to invest in the structures and community infrastructure are being flexibly applied as and when their resources permit.

Conclusions and recommendations

The innovative POBS model significantly addresses the traditional problems of conventional public housing programmes, which inadvertently miss their intended targets and disregard affordability considerations. African governments should adopt the sites-without-services approach, as it recognises the gross inequalities inherent

Figure 1: Massive development of housing plots by participants in the housing programmes

Figure 2: The programme largely achieved its targeting of the needy.
in most post-colonial cities of the continent and addresses the needs, rights and capabilities of the urban poor.

- There is a need for proactive and timeous identification, expropriation and efficient allocation of planned land to the urban poor for housing development purposes.
- Physical planning and land surveying services should be improved and relevant personnel need to be well resourced to efficiently respond to the demands of land by the urban poor.
- Only the needy who do not own properties should be allocated planned land to achieve the objectives of urban-poor housing programmes, as it will help if occupation of the allocated plot is a major precondition and element of the programme.
- Beneficiaries of such housing plots need to be organised to pool their resources beyond building their houses and contribute towards servicing and the physical development of the community at large.
- Supply-side instruments of making housing affordable by cost-reduction mechanisms through reduction of standards where necessary and relaxation of regulations should be combined with demand-side instruments such as strengthening of income sources of the housing-plot beneficiaries.
- There is also need for continuous research and development on affordable building materials and innovative low-cost technologies for servicing; their uptake by the urban low-income communities should be encouraged – for example by the prefabrication of sewer and water pipes.

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