

Architects and the Housing Challenge
A Process, Not a Product

Dr Amira Osman is a Senior Researcher in the area of Sustainable Human Settlements (Planning Support Systems) at the Built-Environment Unit of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. We asked her in an email interview about the state of architecture and the housing challenge in South Africa.

The term “housing” is often debated and its connotations seen as negative among architects.

I always argue that the term is as limited or as broad as our definition of it. Because there is limited understanding of housing and little-explored alternative design strategies, what has happened is that policy, funding and practice have focused on individual buildings as isolated enclaves within city structures. However beautiful, efficient, “green” or accessible these buildings may be they still contribute to the perpetuation of the Apartheid city.

To what extent can a building be inclusionary within an exclusionary city? Is an individual building ever that important?

Vernacular settings can provide lessons for architects in housing design, more than institutionalised architecture can. Architectural history traditionally deals with individual buildings, while vernacular architecture is always about town planning. The community is the basic architectural unit. This is the daily face-to-face social network – the pattern of interaction that ultimately defines the settlement. As Turan explains, vernacular architecture teaches us about building activity with respect to social relations, thus broadening the scope of architecture beyond function and aesthetics. The scope of housing extends beyond the boundaries of a particular site to encompass all facilities and services, as well as work opportunities.

You’ve said that unpredictability is a characteristic of successful urban places.

Architectural history has mostly ignored complexity in the built environment represented by buildings changing over time, being appropriated and adapted, having multiple interpretations and many actors having a role in decision-making regarding the built environment.

According to Dewar and Uytenbogaardt, the quality of urban spaces can be “re-discovered” and “re-interpreted” through time. Individual, creative responses can be encouraged through design products and processes. This is referred to as a process of “negotiated reactions”; Gwendolyn Wright refers to it as the “alchemy of design and social interaction” and this responds positively to the complexity of housing developments within urban settings.

So what are the housing issues in South Africa? In what way is housing related to crime, to xenophobia, to anger, to frustration - among officials, researchers, funders, policy makers and communities?

I can offer you some more questions: How can these challenges be addressed without reverting to handouts – how can addressing the housing problem lead to true empowerment? How can we achieve effective delivery and community participation? How can we challenge the perception that limited funds means poor quality? We are architects after all! We are expected to have innovative ideas regarding low-cost design that is also high quality. We are believed to be able to not only envision, but also assist in realising the ideal of places where people enjoy the daily experience of their surroundings and subsequently care for and further develop them.

Why then has our role been so limited in these processes?

That the phrase "housing" is a process rather than a product is perhaps a cliché. Yet, it is as relevant today as ever. Alternative approaches could easily be dismissed or labelled as non-professional or political. Housing design is a powerful communicative medium. Housing is and has always been a reflection of people's social values and political motives. Changed paradigms in both are what can generate real transformation.

What are the obstacles to alternative approaches to housing in South Africa?

Many obstacles confront us when attempting to adopt new approaches to design: policy, legislation and funding. Another important factor that undermines traditional patterns of dwelling is how we are educated as architects. Flexibility in legislation could encourage the creative exploration of layouts, materials and methods. Yet, legislation generally tends to stress the smaller scale of the building and to neglect the larger scale of urban planning. It is prescriptive in nature and restricts innovation. Our education has trained us to work very well within an individual site. We respond efficiently to defined boundaries and a given brief and neglect a building's effect on its surroundings and how it could enhance the locality through its relationship to site boundaries. The biggest problem in my opinion with regards to housing issues is that people think, "We now have a solution!" and proceed to implement it in a blanket manner as if this is the solution for all people in all contexts. However every community has their own needs and every context has its own dynamics. Understanding these is key to developing unique solutions with a high level of participation and acceptance.