Low-cost housing in Cape Town: The supply, shortage and possibilities for improvement

by

June Humphry

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LOW COST HOUSING IN CAPE TOWN: THE SUPPLY, SHORTAGE AND POSSIBILITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT.

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Introduction.
Notwithstanding the many innovative approaches of recent years to the supplying of shelter, housing on a world scale is likely to remain in short supply. This shortage has been especially felt by the low income families of the world. In 1972 it was reported that whilst the industrialised nations of Europe and North America had been able to maintain a post-1945 rate of building which had reduced housing shortages, most of the poor countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America had made no visible progress in alleviating their housing crises.1

The shortage of housing in South Africa for population groups other than white is extremely severe. Using figures for Black housing needs presented by different speakers at a conference in 1981, one writer quotes estimates ranging from 3.4 to 10 million units over the remaining years of this century. If these needs are to be met he says, then according to calculations based on the lower figure, an increase in construction rates of 24.51 per cent would need to be attained. Calculations for other races, which were also based on the numbers of housing units built between 1976 and 1981 indicate that increases of 37 per cent for Coloured people, 24 per cent for Indians and a decrease of 65 per cent for Whites, respectively would


be required. Another commentator on the dire situation states that "to make a significant impact on the housing problem, all experts agree that the country will have to revolutionize all aspects of housing."

Whilst for the country as a whole it is the Black population whose housing needs are most great, in the Western Cape, the Municipality of Cape Town faces a massive task in its responsibilities towards approximately 30 000 Coloured applicants who have applied to rent or buy accommodation. It is to the subject of supply and shortage as well as to the amelioration of the situation that the rest of this paper addresses itself.

The Supply of Housing.

As a developer of housing and landlord, the Municipality has attained considerable significance. Starting with small schemes of cottages in Mowbray and Maitland in the early part of the century the Municipality had built 43 969 units for renting and 23 325 houses for sale by 31st December 1982. Of these, 98 per cent were for Coloured and Indian occupation and almost all were built with funds supplied by the National Housing Commission. In addition it has restored about 70 dwellings which were previously privately owned. Approximately 29 500 rented dwellings are at present being offered for sale to the tenants who occupy them. This procedure is in terms of the government's decision to sell half a million low-cost houses throughout the country. However, as the actual supply of housing is not affected by whether it is owned or rented, no discussion of the above is offered in this paper.

The areas of rented dwellings can be divided into roughly three groups which reflect the qualitative aspects of the dwellings and therefore their desirability and degree of popularity. The very oldest schemes have now reached a state where major renovations are required to the fabric of the dwellings as well as to the infrastructure and environment. A high proportion of the tenants on these schemes are of low income relative to other tenants. A second group comprises dwellings which are also old (approximately 40 years) but which offer some of the best conditions of the Municipality's rented schemes, both in the quality of the housing and neighbourhood. The third group comprises the bulk of the areas built during the last 15 - 20 years which contain a high percentage of flats in neighbourhoods which vary considerably and include some where there is a high level of criminal activity.

The Shortage of Housing.

The extent of the need for housing is shown by various observations. Chief among these is that revealed by the applicants themselves. This figure was almost 30,000 as at 31st December 1982. A very high percentage of these applicants have been on the waiting list for between 7 and 10 years and it is mainly for the less popular dwellings where applicants are waiting shorter periods. Notwithstanding the fact that all applicants are issued with registration cards which are numbered and dated and that they are assured by word of mouth and letter that their particular application will be dealt with, many make periodic enquiries as to the progress of their application. During a typical month, November 1983, for

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4. This figure comprises 19,951 wanting to rent and 10,442 to buy. The latter number includes 1,868 families who have also applied to rent and 1,384 who are also tenants. During 1983 the number of applicants who were added to the waiting list exceeded the number who were allocated dwellings.
example, the following enquiries were received:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerning dwellings for rent</th>
<th>Concerning dwellings for sale</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of applications received</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of interviews</td>
<td>2,479</td>
<td>1,022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of telephone enquiries from or concerning applicants</td>
<td>951</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of letters from or concerning applicants</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not only from the applicants themselves that we have evidence of the gross and steadily increasing shortages. Many researchers both academic and official have computed and analysed the situation over the years and have clearly indicated that whilst severe backlogs were at hand, even greater shortages were to be anticipated. A particularly lucid and unequivocal call to halt the relocation of Coloured people "disqualified" in terms of the Group Areas act went unheeded. In his paper Professor Cilliers showed that such an action would have had the effect of reducing the number of housing units then needed by over 14,000 or 25.7 per cent of the total. A more recent report is that of the Municipality's City Engineer which quotes the very high densities per habitable room which are found throughout many of the large

5. Whisson, M.G. and Khan, S., Coloured Housing in Cape Town, University of Cape Town, 1965.
estates. In order to reduce to acceptable levels the overcrowding which these densities represent says the report, 8,500 homes would be needed annually for five years. The implication behind this statement is that many thousands of families who are waiting their turn to be allocated dwellings and the households of whom they form a part are living in severely overcrowded conditions. So severe is the physical shortfall in sheer quantity of housing and the problems arising therefrom that comparatively little documentary attention has been given to the subject of quality of housing and environment. However, considerable correlation exists between the severity of overcrowding and such factors as crime, poor quality of neighbourhood and general amenity. Many thousands of tenants have registered requests for transfers: these are for dwellings in better neighbourhoods, of larger size and from flats (which are extremely unpopular) to cottages.

The Chronically Poor and Their Applications for Housing.

The maximum permissible income of heads of applicant families is R800 a month: those who earn more are expected to acquire accommodation through the private sector. In fact a very small percentage earn near the maximum and in mid-1982 three quarters of applicants earned below R280 a month (equivalent to R327 a month in October 1983 cost of living terms). As well as being of very limited means applicants live without security of tenure, being forced to rely on the good will of relatives or to rent accommodation at high rentals. Notwithstanding the fact of most applicants having low incomes, there is among them a more seriously deprived core group which is made up of about 10 per cent of the applicants wanting to rent dwellings. These are the chronically
poor, who experience for the most part the greatest difficulties
with regard to satisfactory housing no less than in other aspects
of their lives. Household heads in this group are likely to be
illiterate, semi-employable or single persons with dependants in
receipt of grants. Their coping mechanisms deal mainly with
immediacies and long term matters such as their applications for
improved accommodation are but dimly perceived. For such persons
many aspects of their applications are much more difficult than for
others financially better off, better educated or with a greater
sense of personal organisation. For example, illiterate app-
licants experience difficulty not only with application forms
but in supporting them with documents such as a Book of Life and
evidence of a marriage or common law union. Others change their
addresses frequently due to arguments arising out of tensions,
difficulties in paying rental, and misunderstandings owing to non-
communication. The frequent moves are very traumatic in terms of
suddenness, upheaval, sense of loss of place and adjustments to
new people and physical surroundings. Apart from these psycho-
logical effects there are material considerations such as loss
and damage to furniture and other possessions that often occur,
and it is difficult for staff who deal with applicants to retain
contact if the latter do not advise their new addresses. Even when
long waiting periods end and applicants are allocated dwellings,
the chronically poor still experience difficulties compared to those
better off. Being poor means - in housing as with anything else -
aving less resources. It is therefore inevitably harder to obtain
the advance rental, to organise moving house and to understand the
legal language of the lease, that important document which says
what may and may not be done. In one respect the chronically poor
are better placed than those of higher socio-economic standing: the waiting lists for cheap accommodation in rough, downgraded areas is shorter than for better types and areas. It is a dubious merit. Apart from the fact that the long waiting period for 'average' accommodation reduces the word 'shorter' to one of little practical value, these poor, crime ridden, vandalised areas contribute to a cycle of poverty from which only the exceptional few extricate themselves.

Is Help at Hand?
What are the prospects for a resolution of the critical shortage that has been described? Current estimates are that the unbuilt on land within the Council's boundaries can carry a maximum of 5 000 dwellings. Once this has been developed the central authorities will be compelled to make different provisions for the development of housing, for example the Municipality might form part of a larger regional authority to which existing applications would be transferred. Such considerations are formulated, researched and debated at high government level and are outside the scope of this paper. It is clear however that the complicated nature of jurisdictional changes combined with the massive scale of development and funds that would be required is likely to lead to lengthy delays.

Can anything be done besides await some distant "Grand Solution"? The author believes that it is important from many different perspectives to ameliorate a bad situation especially when 'the solution' is likely to be slow and remote from the understanding of the common man. Effort at solution must not only be made but must be seen to be made. The possibilities for practical
action must be fully explored and where found to be feasible, put into effect. The following are some options which appear to be available to the Municipality within the constraints of severe shortages of land and funds. It is fully conceded that not all of them contribute to an increase in the quantity of housing. They may however be able to challenge accepted ways of envisaging housing provision and services and if pursued, increase the very limited choices which are available to those in need.

Possibilities for Improvement.

(a) Relief of overcrowding in existing dwellings.
(b) Use of land
(c) Generating of funds
(d) Development of core and self help housing
(e) Improvement and care of existing housing schemes
(f) Encouraging informal helpers.

(a) Relief of overcrowding in existing dwellings. Since 1983 a new policy of permitting tenants to erect acceptable outbuildings at their own cost to the cottages and maisonettes (but not flats) they occupy has been pursued. As there is space available for such extensions in a very high proportion of rented dwellings the potential for relief of overcrowding within individual dwellings is considerable. In the case of applicants already sharing accommodation in the better class areas where vacancies are rare, extension of a well established cottage, which is rented or owned by other family members may provide the most realistic home likely to become available. The Municipality is attempting to publicise the fact that extensions are permissible and that an advisory service is available for those wanting help with building plans.

(b) Use of land: One of the most problematic aspects of the shortage of land concerns the oldest established estates which are
critically in need of extensive improvements. Many of these estates were built on the garden cities principle, giving each dwelling a sizable piece of land. By today's standards these estates are of very low density and generally regarded as extremely wasteful. If a rational policy were followed, the existing dwellings would be demolished and the entire areas developed at higher densities. The objections to this have been twofold: firstly that the cost of building today is so high that demolition is an absolute last resort and, secondly, that consequent rentals would be beyond the means of the existing low income families. There can be little doubt that demolition and redevelopment at medium to high density would represent a far more efficient use of land but such a course of action appears to be impractical. Under the circumstances the best alternative seems to be that of a combination of renovation with the type of extensions described under (a). Such extensions are of course voluntary and entirely at the discretion of occupants. The complementary role of the authorities would be to use all available vacant ground to build new (self contained) dwellings.

(c) Generating of funds: The Municipality has long recognised the need to supplement whatever funds are obtained from the central government by raising funds of its own to use in whatever way it wished. Over the years difficulties have been voiced about how this might be done. During 1983 publicity was given to the possibility of raising funds by means of a lottery, competitions and premium bonds. It appears that official enthusiasm for these methods is very limited: a recommendation was made, for example

that the investigation of the viability of premium bonds should not be taken further. It is difficult to query the results obtained by experts which show that "it is doubtful whether [premium] bonds would be a cheaper form of raising money than existing methods." Nevertheless it is salutory to remember that public response to homelessness can be very strong. As evidence of this one can cite that in 1977/1978 the Shelter Fund which was publicised by a Cape Town newspaper raised R300 000 in donations to assist the plight of squatters. A market research type survey would give feedback on the likely response of citizens to investing money for purposes of housing improvement.

(d) Development of core and self help housing: In July 1982 the government announced that it would introduce far reaching changes when providing funds for housing development. Among the categories of housing for which preference would be given when allocating funds in future was that of "controlled do-it-yourself building schemes for those who wish to help themselves to housing." So far it appears that the Municipality has only one pilot scheme of this type and that progress is slow. Among the objections raised to the various forms of self-help housing are that it is a method suitable to rural settings and to Black participants with an established tradition of self reliance. It is to be hoped that proven success among Blacks will not be seen as a deterrent to exploring the value of the method for other social or racial groups. A body of experience on which to draw goes back at least 20 years. Additionally, limited experience has been gained among Coloured people: this has

10. Speech by the Hon. S.F. Kotze, M.F., Minister of Community Development during a visit to Benoni on 8th July 1982.
been described in a report of the Shelter housing scheme at Valhalla Park, a small scheme of houses which have been extended by the occupants. It is important that the option of self build be more fully recognised and given a fair chance to succeed. For this to happen, well motivated applicants and staff must be chosen.

(p) Improvement and care of existing housing schemes: The management and administration of housing schemes has traditionally been left solely in the hands of authorities. Over the years mounting difficulties for both tenants and landlords have become entrenched and the prospect of breaking this spiral of deterioration is daunting in the extreme. It seems clear, however, that any reversal that may be possible lies in the realm of the combined efforts of users (tenants) and providers (the Municipality - which comprises officials and elected representatives). Such a tenet has been expressed in a United Nations report which stresses the importance of direct involvement of inhabitants in the improvement and preservation of existing housing estates. In Cape Town the situation lends itself to the application of two way communication and action in a restricted context. The progress of such a project should be studied, and after analysis modified and reapplied to other situations where users and providers are motivated to engage in some aspect of improvement or upgrading.

(f) Encouraging informal helpers: A number of helpers selected from residents in some of the poorest housing estates controlled by

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the Cape Divisional Council are trained and supervised by St. John Ambulance. The helpers who are called home auxiliaries are volunteer workers who receive on-going leadership training in areas of welfare such as housing, alcoholism and care of the aged. Their task is to assist the occupants of a group of contiguous dwellings: in many cases this is the block of flats in which they themselves live. It is believed that their great value lies in their ability to communicate with people of very little education and in their ready availability by virtue of their being neighbours. The body of auxiliaries which is already established has been of special assistance to very poor families. Indications are that they could be of similar assistance to the Municipality's tenants especially, though not necessarily limited to the very poor. Further investigation should indicate how valuable and realistic such a system would be.

Conclusion.

The received doctrine of housing policy has been to build more and more houses and it is vital that negotiation between the relevant authorities for overcoming the constraints to doing so remains a high priority. However, second best contributions also have a part to play and within the Municipality no effort should be spared to provide all possible opportunity for their maximum utilization.