

Reviews

JJG Lombard, *Housing Strategies and the Urban Poor in South Africa: A Brief Critical Evaluation, Working Paper No.80* (Development Planning Unit, University College, London, 1996)

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The Development Planning Unit publishes working papers with the aim of disseminating ideas for information and discussion. These papers are prepared by DPU students and presented as work in progress, and the publishers acknowledge the “notable scope for clarification or development of some of the arguments and conclusions” contained in them.

This, the 80th paper in the series, provides us with a brief overview of recent developments in housing policy in South Africa, beginning with the “seeds of the crisis” sown during our colonial past, as European settlers displaced African peoples from the land. It examines the way in which the Nationalist government continued the process through further land appropriations, forced resettlement and the fracturing of urban areas along racial lines. Although housing policy as such hardly existed in any coherent way until more recently, the delivery and location of housing was most certainly used by the previous government to control black South Africans, first through Group Areas and forced resettlement, and later through such policies as “orderly urbanisation”.

Lombard traces the shifts in housing policy which occurred during the transition to democracy, notably the move from public sector dominance in the delivery of formal rental stock toward a policy which relies more heavily on the private sector in the broadest sense for sustainable delivery. He gives particular attention to several key role players in this process. The Urban Foundation was perhaps the most significant private sector policy influence, and the National Housing Forum emerged as the most important policy making body. These organisations, together with the Independent Development Trust, are largely

responsible for what has become national housing policy today.

The paper is true to its title in its brevity, but lacks critical depth. Lombard left South Africa in 1987 and has returned only intermittently. He has therefore relied on published material and interviews to prepare his paper, and one has the sense that he understands the housing sector in the country only through these intermediaries. As a consequence, what passes for critique is at best a restatement of some of the views of South African commentators. This approach weakens his account, for several reasons.

First, as is common with many commentators on housing in this country, Lombard places great weight on published works as having the most significant impact on policy. As a consequence, he believes the De Loor Commission report to have played a pivotal role in the formulation of a new, post-apartheid approach to housing, and to urban administration. The commission, it would seem, was responsible for the establishment of the National Housing Finance Corporation, metropolitan authorities that amalgamated black and white local authorities, and the principle of one-city, one-tax base.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Commission had certainly made proposals, published in 1992, which later, coincidentally became part of the new dispensation, but these proposals were made in many forums by many other actors, and the influence of the Commission in the opinion of this reviewer, was negligible. Most housing specialists and urban planners remember it only for its unfortunate proposal to

establish what were effectively temporary transit camps for the poor - for urban ghettos with minimal servicing and without permanent tenure.

Secondly, Lombard selects published work which may not always be the most appropriate to make his case. For example, in discussing the work of the Independent Development Trust he unquestioningly adopts only the criticisms of Robinson, Sullivan and Lund. These authors were appointed by the IDT to evaluate its performance in the housing sector and produced a report which was fairly critical of the organisation's focus on the delivery of housing product, and the way in which it structured developmental processes such as public participation around that imperative. Their preference was for housing to be seen as an integrated process, presumably incorporating the whole range of developmental issues. Yet practical experience in housing projects using both the IDT capital subsidy scheme and the subsidy programme of the new government has shown, if anything, that if the housing programme is to deliver, it must be focussed, and focussed on delivery, and that other processes such as public participation, however important, must be contained and managed within that ethos. When viewed from the perspective of delivery, the IDT experiment must be judged a success. Lombard fails to judge the organisation in the one way which would really count: the number of serviced sites actually delivered to beneficiaries given available resources.

This leads one to the third reason for the weakness of Lombard's critique. It lacks any empirical basis for many of his assertions. This is particularly the case when he examines the land question. There is no doubt that land lies at the root of the housing problem in this country, and until we develop the means to provide every household with access to land we cannot begin to address the question of shelter. Lombard does make some fairly standard proposals as to how land might be made available, such as through land banking, land sharing and land pooling, but without discussing the practical problems and costs involved.

However, he relies on the unsubstantiated claim that one of the key reasons for the non-availability of land for the poor is land speculation. This

argument, which emerged during the early nineties as the question of integrated cities became more feasible, is based on the view that the fragmentary urban fabric of South African cities (the consequence of apartheid planning) has left large tracts of open land available for residential development for the poor. Presumably speculative land deals would involve private concerns purchasing this land and holding onto it in anticipation of large windfall profits. The problem with this argument is that it is purely anecdotal. Very little, if any empirical research has been done to substantiate the claim. It is true that in some cities, such as Johannesburg, there are large tracts of land close to the city centre apparently available for development. However, much of this land has been owned by mining companies operating in the area literally for a century. The owners have earmarked it for commercial and industrial uses. In practice, it would seem that the NIMBY (not in my backyard) phenomenon and the question of existing versus emerging rights to land are far more important than speculation in constraining access to land for the poor.

None of these observations are meant to suggest that the new national housing policy is not without flaws. Two particular problems, which Lombard addresses, are the high expectations which beneficiaries of the new housing subsidy policy have with regard to housing standards, and the related question of how the poor are to access housing of this standard given a ceiling on the subsidy amount and the non-availability of housing credit from formal financial institutions with which to finance the balance of the purchase price. Lombard has not tapped in to the exciting developments in retail lending since the then Group Credit initiative began to provide credit to the poor for housing purposes in the late 1980's, nor the plethora of lenders that now exist thanks to support from the IDT Finance Corporation. It seems strange that government still seeks to pressure the formal mortgage lenders into the low income housing market rather than exploring the possibility of expanding the markets of these smaller, dedicated lenders.

The issue of housing standards has also been a controversial one. Debated within the National Housing Forum when the policy was in its infancy, and finessed through the Botshabelo accord by

Minister Slovo, it will not go away. There is no easy path for government in dealing with the issue. Popular pressure will always push standards, and hence the cost associated with delivering subsidised housing, as high as possible. There are few signs that government has the stamina (or will) to resist these demands, and Lombard is right to be concerned that ever-increasing standards will undermine the current housing policy and move it further and further from its focus on the poor.

In sum, Lombard has provided an interesting perspective on housing policy and practice in South Africa, but one which remains limited by the lack of primary research - something which research students may hopefully begin to overcome in the near future. ¶

Carole Rakodi, *Harare: Inheriting a Settler-Colonial City: Change or Continuity?*

Chichester and New York: John Wiley (World City Series), 1995
xvi + 298 pp.; 16 photographs, 12 maps, 16 graphs, 27 tables, index. £35.

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Carole Rakodi has wide experience of planning and urban research in many parts of the world, particularly southern and eastern Africa. Her book on Harare provides enormous amounts of information on that city, but also supplies fascinating insights into the complexities of urban change with the advent of democracy in formerly minority-ruled southern Africa. The book constitutes an enquiry into the 'balance between continuity and change' (p. 8) under these circumstances.

The text is primarily a detailed description of the development of urban form, paying attention to political, institutional, economic and social factors in the shaping of the urban environment. The beautifully produced book consists of seven chapters, all readable if somewhat unexciting.

The first chapter provides an analysis of the political and economic context. It contains among other things an excellent section on 'urban administration' (pp. 32-43). A central aspect of Harare's history has been the genesis of an urban form with considerable disparity between formerly white (now 'low density') and formerly black (now 'high density') areas of the city, with the latter being rooted in segregated public housing

estates placed in often less favourable locations. The extreme case of the latter in Harare is that of Chitungwiza, physically separated by miles of open country from the city proper, and now a dependent centre of several hundred thousand people with its own administration. So while Harare as a whole has grown rapidly to a population over one and a half million people, and while its administration has been significantly restructured and unified since independence in 1980, it remains a city divided.

The second chapter describes this 'urban structure', essentially a historical geography exploring several themes. Unlike so many other African cities (but like Namibia and South Africa), a fairly strict system of land use management continues to work, at least in large sections of the city. The author provides an excellent account of planning practice in this respect (pp. 84-101). Her critique of the combination master plan of 1991 follows the now-familiar 'urban management' concern over the lack of relationships between physical planning and resource allocation processes. Given the strength of the land use management system in Harare, though, the master plan would appear to have been influential in shaping more recent development. Some of its