

## VIEWPOINT

### SERVICED SITE: A SOLUTION?

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Up until the late 1960s housing was considered by most classic economists to be a sure way of helping the national economy to grind to a halt. Since then the World Bank, IMF and economists have come to accept housing by the public sector as a vital, albeit long term investment, which has got to be made. Various forms of housing have since been tried, ranging from completed units, to core houses, to serviced sites. The site and service option seems to have won the day, by becoming the form preferred by the state in virtually all developing nations.

There are a number of reasons why the serviced site won quick and widespread support in official circles. It held out the promise of providing every urban family with suburbia. It allowed the public budget to be stretched maximally. It seemed the best way of providing the poor with housing which could be maintained by themselves. For these reasons site and service is still being peddled as the best (and in South Africa, the only) option by planners. Unfortunately the site and service form of state housing is not based on any clearly expounded ideas of how people get ahead in life.

Physical planners have levelled a number of criticisms at site and service. They regard it as being conducive to urban sprawl, of encouraging low density neighbourhoods which cannot create the population thresholds needed to ensure viable mass transportation systems, and, serviced sites promote sterile, monofunctional and very inflexible (sub)urban areas. Although there is some truth to all these criticisms they are frequently overplayed. Densities in site and service schemes rapidly exceed those originally intended. Following extensive subletting and subdivision, densities often exceed

those of urban areas with high rise flats, albeit under conditions of overcrowding. An active informal sector also rapidly transposes the original layout into a far more complex pattern of activity than purely residential.

The real failing of site and service projects are that they contain a set of implicit value and theoretical assumptions, which are by all accounts, insensitive. I will briefly mention some of these.

#### VALUE ASSUMPTIONS

Site and service contains a number of intrinsic values which do not and cannot possibly reflect the priorities of all individuals in a community; nor do they necessarily promote the cause of the poor.

#### Ownership

They assume that home ownership is preferred. This is not the case. With the high levels of unemployment, individuals and families need to be footloose, able to move about the city in search of jobs, which are often highly insecure, lasting anything between a few days and a year. These people in particular, are reliant on rental accommodation, and state support. The high levels of subletting surely indicate, at least in part, the need for rented accommodation.

#### Income generation

Policy makers view housing as no more than the provision of a place to live. Among low income groups, houses are considered by many as both a residence and a potential means of income generation. Houses very fre-

quently double up as shops, lodges, shebeens, workshops etc. This is a tendency not confined to low income groups however. As the South African recession deepens professional people increasingly offer their services from home.

#### Owner builders

A third built-in assumption is that all home owners aspire to building their own homes incrementally. This again is a fallacy. There are most certainly a number who do provide their own homes in this fashion, but they are in the minority. Such builders also tend to make extensive use of subcontracting, both formal contractors and extended family. It implies a careful division of labour by the owner rather than actual building. The majority need an immediate and completed place to live, hence the extensive evidence of shacks on site and service projects.

#### Detached house

The serviced site assumes, since nothing else is on offer, that a single residential detached house, which is the ultimate product for which the foundations are being laid, is superior to any other form of housing. Quite obviously the notion of superior is relative. At a city level, for purposes of saving on land which is a scarce resource, it is not. For the individual who wants to plant a patch of vegetables, fix motor vehicles or keep many pets, it may well be. For people who feel the best way of getting ahead in life is to spend all their time on interests other than home maintenance it is not. Detached housing also rules out other possibilities such as saving on immediate building costs by sharing

walls or of being creative in design.

### Private motor car

Private motor cars are beyond the reach of virtually all lower income groups, particularly with the economy in its present state. Neither do the rising petrol prices make private transport a long term efficient alternative. Yet the layouts of site and service schemes are designed for vehicular access to all plots, with the assumption that some time in future all families will own a private car. Higher order roads are accordingly designed to carry the expected increase in traffic. Such a planning approach seriously undervalues public transport as a viable means of movement. Despite low vehicle ownership in the short to medium term, detailed layouts are not deliberately flexible enough to permit cycling or walking to become the dominant mode of movement during this period.

### THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Providing no alternative form of public housing in South Africa suggests that official policy makers view all people unable to gain access to shelter through the formal market, as being the same in terms of their needs and values. In other words whether they are desperately poor or simply unable to raise a bond, whether they are recent migrants to urban areas or second and third generation urban poor, they are all one category of people in the eyes of official housing policy, with only one way of moving upwards socio-economically.

People in this category need, by implication, not make trade-offs or rational choices, between whether it would be in their interest to rent accommodation close to work, or buy a site to build a home incrementally over time on a peripheral location. So although circumstances differ dramatically from one individual to the next in that some are old and disabled, others young, some have an extended family network to rely upon, others are marginalised, all are forced into the site and service route of gaining accommodation in the city.

To help overcome this problem Dewar (1988) has argued that housing must be seen as an integrated set of urban goods. Housing is not simply the provision of shelter and security of tenure. An occupant simultaneously gains access to location (i.e. proximity to cultural, commercial and recreational facilities); access to utility services such as water, sewage and waste disposal; access to shelter (i.e. protection from the elements); access to land (i.e. security of tenure); and finally access to an external physical and social surrounding. Hence housing is a tightly interlinked set of decisions.

Seeing housing as a set of interlinked decisions implies that each location presents a unique combination of these factors. Each household will need to select a suitable combination on the basis of its income, size, physical abilities and interests, in order to maximise its survival chances and socio-economic position. It implies that a housing policy must provide a whole range of different factor combinations, not as a matter of elegance but of necessity. It will be the first steps in the direction of a much needed demand oriented housing policy, as opposed to the current supply driven policy.

No packages are being presented under current housing policy. The serviced site option emphasises basic utility services and massively undervalues the other factors. It rationalises this under the 'public health' and the 'cost of land argument'. It in effect then severely compromises the poor's capacity to help themselves.

### OTHER CRITICISMS

Site and service schemes have been criticised on far more debilitating grounds. These include that they represent merely a token concern for the poor by developing country governments. It has been called a shrewd way of devolving construction and maintenance costs onto the poor. It results in perpetual community dependency on the authorities. Other analysts contend that site and service policy cannot work if not directly supported by concurrent adaptations in the regulatory systems and a more progressive land tax. Finally, some

writers feel that communities are being involved only in as much as their labour is being used and not during the planning and decision making processes.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this review has been to highlight some of the often neglected dimensions of the site and service form of public housing. It has not been to discredit the notion to the point of suggesting that it has no place in a national housing policy. Rather it is argued that, in light of a more sensitive and sophisticated definition and understanding of the poor and urban processes, site and service has a very small and limited clientele. It will not meet the needs of all. It will need to be but one of many forms of housing on offer, and make up a small proportion of the total.

### REFERENCES

- DEWAR D (1988). *Towards a Housing Framework*, UPRU, Working Paper No 39.