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Making spaces or building places? a look at social sustainability in low cost housing, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Abstract

South Africa's first democratic government committed itself to reducing the housing shortage in South Africa in 1994, nearly two decades later, they fail to meet these ever increasing demands. This paper addresses how sense of place in South Africa has been influenced by the draconian legislation of apartheid government. It highlights how social sustainability could assist in building local identity in a community, enabling a successful neighbourhood development.

Keywords: sense of place, community social capital, social innovation, low-cost housing.

JEL Classification: Q01.

Introduction

The United Nations Center for Human Settlements asserts that homelessness can be seen as a condition of detachment from society characterized by the lack of the affiliative bonds that link people to their social structures. Homelessness carries implications of belonging nowhere, rather than having nowhere to sleep. So, the ownership or occupation of a *house*, attaches a dweller to its immediate neighbourhood and provides access to different resources within the community (Bourne, 1981; Carter and Jones, 1989). Having a place to reside, a home in a specific place, is important in various ways, it impacts on our daily lives and connects us to the broader socio-economic reality. This is seen as a highly complex system of more or less ordered relations with place, an order that orientates us in space, in time and in society.

1. From apartheid to post-apartheid

Apartheid had a significant impact on the social organization of South African cities. The reorganization of urban space by the National party Government in 1948 saw residential segregation under the Group Areas act of 1950 as the merciless division of towns and cities into 'white', 'coloured', 'Indian' and 'African' areas. Restrictions under pass-laws existed under the Influx Control Act which dictated where African people could live and work, and served both to limit the growth of the urban African population, as well as dictate where they were allowed to live in the cities. Many African workers were confined to overcrowded migrant hostels and shack dwellers were largely banned from the cities and towns in 'white' South Africa. Family accommodation was limited to organized townships, in small matchbox housing, often on the peripheries, with limited infrastructure. Apartheid cities were thus highly ordered spatially, and controlled through political power (Lemanski, 2009; Aucamp et al., 2011).

Through forced removals, clearing of 'black spots', policies on influx control, the migrant labor system,

the Immorality Act, and other devices of population control, the apartheid state managed a complex system of spatially conceived law enforcement. These spaces remained separate for white and black, through devices known as buffer zones, various empty spaces or physical barriers to connection, such as major highways, valleys, rivers etc. Education was separate and inferior for black people through policies of Bantu Education, and spaces of resistance, and coexistence, such as the inner city areas South End in Port Elizabeth, District Six in Cape Town, and Sophiatown in Johannesburg, were destroyed. In place of these, the space created for the settlement of these displaced people with the forced removals, were townships. It is this dichotomy within the post-apartheid city (between city, suburb and township) that characterizes lines of inequality showing divides of wealth and poverty, access to resources, forms of exclusion, crime and violence, and many other aspects (Shepherd, and Murray, 2007).

2. Post apartheid scenario

Institutional support for the delivery of housing obviously came from the 1996 South African Constitution but also from early policy documents such as the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) and the 1994 White Paper on Housing. All underscored the urgency to address the housing and social well-being related needs of the poor. Subsequently, the provision of low-cost housing in what popularly became known as 'RDP housing' developments dominated attempts by the South African government to address the country's low-cost housing deficiency and inequitable urban spatial arrangements. Driven by the government's desire to eradicate informal settlements, the provision of low-cost housing generally came in the form of subsidized housing schemes in large formalized townships. A subsidy mechanism applied in most cases, providing a fixed amount per house to cover the cost of construction, the necessary infrastructure, as well as the cost of the required land. Houses were small (30 m² generally), freestanding and offered

individual freehold title to applicants. At the time, such developments formed part of the Urban Development Strategy of the National Department of Housing and its 1997 Urban Development Framework. This framework embodied the government's commitment to effective urban reconstruction and development as well as its vision that future urban settlements should be "Spatially and socio-economically integrated, free of racial and gender discrimination and segregation, enabling people to make residential and employment choices to pursue their ideals", as well as "environmentally sustainable" and "marked by good housing, infrastructure and effective services" (Department of Housing, 1997). However, as virtuous as this initial visualization may have been, the reality for low-cost housing developments eventually turned out quite differently (De Wit, 2011).

From the start, the delivery rate of low-cost housing has been notoriously slow. This according to some can be explained by the government's uneasy position between its commitments to fiscal responsibility on the one hand and its very expensive constitutional obligations to the country's poor on the other. What happened in effect was that neo-liberal economic policies limited financial support for public welfare programs (De Wit, 2011). With the low-cost housing programme consequently underfunded, and in spite of the construction of approximately 2.8 million houses between 1994 and 2009, the national backlog has increased over the same period from about 1.5 million to an estimated 2.1 million units. This means that, until recently, around 12 million South Africans were still in need of a better shelter (Tissington, 2010).

The provision of low cost houses has been met with mixed emotions by recipients in some neighbourhoods. They report satisfaction and gratitude for their new homes, yet mention the lack of neighbourliness, and community spirit in their new locations. To understand this dilemma, a theoretical framework will attempt to outline how an individual's sense of place is affected by both the environment and community that they find themselves in.

3. Sense of place

'Place' is generally conceived as being 'space' imbued with meaning. The personal meanings that turn space into 'place' become embedded in people's memories and in community stories. They can be associated with both positive and negative feelings. *Place making* is the process of transforming 'space' (no-space) into 'place' and can occur at individual and institutional levels. Place making is also the process of transforming bad places into good places, of changing the way people feel about a place. Indi-

viduals themselves must connect to a locality, who must develop their own attachment to a place. "Place exists when a 'house' becomes 'home'" (Vanclay, 2008, p. 4).

Thomas Gieryn (2000) says that places are locations where people gather, play, meet or share stories, such as parks, shopping malls, cafes pubs. These can become special because of their social meaning. Place is the coming together of the biophysical, social and spiritual worlds. Place is space that is special to someone.

Sampson and Goodrich (2008) maintain that "place" is important because it is central to the social world. Places are what are made of local spaces when accounting for interaction with the environment. Place can be characterized by the range of human activities and the social and/or psychological processes that the community possesses, not just the physical setting or environment. The apartheid regime was very cognizant of the importance of the living environment as a determining force in shaping social relations. The townships, still evident today, are visible reminders of the dividing lines of these planned social relations by the past regime. For example, Haferburg noted that residents of the overwhelmingly Black African informal settlement of Phola Park, on Cape Town's outskirts, returned to Black African townships for schooling, leading him to conclude that "social networks in the 'New South Africa' still operate along the lines defined by apartheid" (Haferburg, 2002, p. 31).

Places are also produced and maintained through an array of social and cultural mechanisms that refers meanings and values to them (Sampson and Goodrich, 2008; Moore and Graefe, 1994; Altman and Low, 1992; Tuan, 1977). Tuan's concept of *Topophilia* explains people's emotional ties to a place, through affection for a place, religious or emotional ties to a place, or a personal identity and or collective memory being tied to a place (Tuan, 1977).

I seek to define sense of place as a dynamic process rather than as a static outcome.

Doreen Massey points out that place is not static at all. She says that if places can be conceptualized in terms of social interactions which they tie together, then these interactions themselves are not frozen in time. Places are *networks of social relations* "which have over time been constructed, laid down, interacted with one another, decayed, and renewed. Some of these relations will be, as it were, contained within the place; others will stretch beyond it, tying any particular locale into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too" (Massey, 1994, p. 12). Stress is placed on the fact that

the physical space is also pertinent in sense of place processing (Stedman, 2003; Sampson and Goodrich, 2011; Sack, 1997; Shumaker and Taylor, 1983).

International debates on social cohesion and social capital in the neighbourhoods, identifies and analyzes the decline in community between residential neighbours and highlights these various contexts (Putnam, 1993; Kearns and Forrest, 2000; Castells, 1997). This work aims to focus toward the neighbourhood as providing a 'community' of local friendship or support relationships in everyday life, a context usually attached to a specific reputation, in those cases where neighbourhoods are socially poor. (Forrest and Kearns, 2001). The 'community' function of a neighbourhood is primarily considered, although, the context of being a low-cost housing area and the role of new homeownership as a 'commodity' also play a role. A concern of Kearns and Forrest (2001) with social cohesion in relation to cities or neighborhoods focuses their discussion particularly on *notions of belonging, place attachment* and spatial mobility.

Attachment to place can be defined as the sentiments/emotional ties that one holds about a particular locale, and assist in the community sentiment and notions of belonging. Place attachment contributes to individual and group cultural production through the process of attributing meaning to place and subsequently becoming attached to those meanings. An example of this attributed meaning attached to place could be a continued connection through history, marriage, family lineage, religious connections, or the attachment through loss or destruction of place (Vanclay, 2008; Sampson and Goodrich, 2011). The latter rings true when remembering the forced removals of non-Whites from proclaimed areas, as experienced in many parts of South Africa under the apartheid regime. Or the destruction and loss caused by raging fires that often plague informal settlements in South Africa.

The role of community in attachment to place, belonging and shared identity is central. Communities provide the medium through which meanings are mediated and shared, and in doing so, also provide the context in which individuals can articulate who they are (Sampson and Goodrich, 2011). Given that the identity of the South African has been socially reproduced by apartheid, and has been re-engineered by giving the previously disadvantaged South African the right to constitutional recognition through the democratization of the country, it can be understood that the norms that define the South African identity were not common to all those who would now call themselves 'South Africans' (Aucamp et al., 2011; Lemanski, 2006). The question begs asking, "Where do I belong?"

3.1. Innovation in social capital. The community should be looked at as the social setting in which action can occur. "Communities, as symbolically constructed social places, provide a setting in which individuals are able to articulate themselves through social interaction" (Goodrich and Sampson, 2008). A shared identity of people living in the same location, usually involves interrelationships between these people.

Social innovation at a territorial level, involves the transformation of social relations in space, the re-production of place-bound and spatially exchanged identities and culture, and the establishment of place-based and scale-related governance structures. This also means that social innovation is quite often either locally or regionally specific, or/and spatially negotiated between agents and institutions that have a strong territorial affiliation (Moulaert et al., 2010). In the case of the Zanemvula residents in Port Elizabeth, collective action is required to enhance community cohesion, through collective identity building.

Israel et al. (2001) maintains that localities with high community social capital are characterized by extensive civic engagement and patterns of mutual support. According to Wilkinson (1991) even when there is interaction in most locales, community occurs when local actors link groups and coordinate activities that serve the public at large rather than the interests of private groups. A pattern of community activeness builds social capital in that the networks developed during past activities provide a foundation for new community efforts to address educational or other needs. Similarly, relationships developed in the ongoing activities of community-oriented groups, as well as a social psychological investment in the community, are resources that facilitate residents' mobilization to address issues of common interest and concern (Israel et al., 2001).

3.2. Attributes of community social capital. According to Israel et al. (2001) attributes that can influence the accumulation of community social capital include socioeconomic capacity, isolation, instability, and inequality. These features shape opportunities for where emergence of the community field, as well as for interaction between youths and adults at the local level. A larger community generally has greater access to outside resources and greater structural differentiation for dealing with an array of community issues (Luloff and Wilkinson, 1979). Structural differentiation increases adaptive capacity because people with the expertise and experience needed to address a particular issue, including the generation of human capital, are available in the organizational structure of the community. In short, structural differentiation can facilitate the accumulation of community social capital. One way in

which community social capital accumulates is through the activities of generalized leaders (Israel and Beaulieu, 2001; Wilkinson 1974, 1991), whereby local interests are coordinated through overlapping, multiple relationships.

Other attributes, such as isolation, instability, and inequality, affect the development of community social capital by enhancing or inhibiting opportunities for relationships that contribute to structural integration. Structural integration provides normative channels in a local society, through which specialized resources may be mobilized (Luloff and Wilkinson, 1979). The degree to which local activity is actually coordinated by integrative structures, such as local government or informal community networks, can vary greatly across communities. Physical isolation, both spatial and temporal, decreases the interaction necessary for building community bonds among residents (Wilkinson, 1991).

South Africa with its complex history of segregation and pre-determined settlements have no doubt shaped the formation of the communal identity within neighbourhoods. To understand this, a brief insight is needed into the community sense of place for residents of low cost housing.

3.3. Communities sense of place in post-apartheid South Africa. Port Elizabeth's African townships are predominantly inhabited by the Xhosa people, one of the many indigenous tribes of South Africa. The Xhosa people are endemic to the Eastern Cape province, within which Port Elizabeth lies, and they form the large majority of the local population. The isiXhosa people usually refer to their dwellings as *indlu* (a house) or *ikhaya* (a home). Traditionally this polygamous culture used the term *indlu* to refer to the several individual structures which make up a homestead. The father of the family occupies the main house, while each of his wives lives in their own dwelling surrounding his house. Collectively these structures constitute the *ikhaya* or *umzi* (a home). This term *ikhaya* suggests connectedness, and it is at this place that connections with ancestors can be made through rituals which allow communication with deceased family members. Vanclay (2008) asserts that people who have a strong sense of place often have high levels of belongingness, rootedness or alternatively, it is called community connectedness. These terms could mean that they have ties to the local social place and feel that they belong there.

Ikhaya is a sacred place, rites of passage take place here. When a child is born here, its umbilical cord is dug into and buried in a wall of the main house of the baby's father, making a strong connection between the soil of that place and the living human being. This alludes to rootedness to that place. "To

be buried at this place is then a vital connection with home and with family members who have passed on" (Watson, 2007, p. 67). At this place too, the rites of passage take place where a child, on becoming an adult, will be introduced to their ancestors who will watch over them.

Watson describes how in contrast, the term *indlu*, suggests separation from family, and is often used to refer to urban houses because they serve to physically separate people from their kin and from ancestors. The sense of separation from ancestors is usually because of the control over urban space inhibiting the keep of cattle. Many rituals are based in the cattle byre, and contacts with ancestors are pivotal to this physical space. "Without these, connection with the deceased kin is difficult and an *indlu* cannot be considered *ikhaya*" (Watson, 2007, p. 67). Ngxabi (2003) describes how residents in a low cost housing development in Cape Town (South Africa) travelled between the city and the rural areas to perform rituals and connect to ancestors. Equally important in performing these rituals are the flora that are traditionally found in these rural environments. Dold and Cocks (2012) document how these plants find their way from the countryside to the cities, in an effort to keep the cultural heritage and connection alive in the houses (*indlu*'s) which over time and generations, may be forced through circumstance to eventually become home (*ikhaya*).

It is this connectivity that is lost in the modern township, it here where rootedness is sought, where belongingness is an aspiration, and where community connectedness indicates a sense of belonging. Yet the townships are often not planned in this manner.

The low income housing policy adopted by the South African government in 1994 has been influenced by the models and development approaches of international agencies such as the World Bank. The precise concept of society which influences planning and living environments, where the notion of "what is a proper living environment becomes stark in the context of developing countries..." (Watson, 1997). Often, the informal settlements are regarded as unacceptable (where not located in areas at risk) and the regulated development of these areas in the city shapes the planning efforts of the developing world. A multicultural approach to planning is called for, where the concept of identity, as defined in the Western literature, needs to be appropriated into the local South African context. It has been argued that identity in Africa is often a product of hybridization, fusion and cultural innovation (De Boeck, 1996; Fraser, 2000). South Africa is no different, as seen in the narrative above where place attachment is hindered by the traditional township

development. It is, therefore, crucial that cultural values and indigenous knowledge systems be incorporated into designing of low cost housing developments. Particularly when these low cost housing developments involve a largely heterogeneous community, as is often the case in the South African context. Community participation is strongly encouraged, where the voices of the people need not only be heard, but their wishes accommodated. By doing this, the local authorities, development agencies and planners are making the community feel part of the process of development. This will encourage a sense of belonging to the development of their neighbourhood, and aid the building of collective identity within their community.

We briefly look at two case study areas in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, namely Zanemvula and Sakhasonke. Each has a unique history, and the community within each of these display ample evidence of the historical account of the development process that each suburb underwent.

In two separate low-cost housing developments in Port Elizabeth, it becomes clear that for community development projects to be successful, bonds and relationships need to be strong and positive, guided by a legitimate authority. In the first housing settlement, namely Zanemvula, the development was planned with one community center, situated at the very front of the development which spans more than two kilometers at its shortest distance to the periphery. There are no amenities or facilities such as schools, libraries, sports facilities, public open spaces, play parks, clinics, hospital, to name but a few. Residents were previously located in closer proximity to these facilities when they lived on the floodplains. Now, having being relocated to the Zanemvula settlement, nine kilometers further away from the town of Port Elizabeth, residents seem are more isolated and stranded because they cannot afford the increased transport costs.

There have been no opportunities to grow social relations in this settlement. There is very little interaction between residents, as they have no forum to enable this. With no schools present, there is no “mom’s chats” or parent meetings, where parents get a chance to bond with each other and work towards the common goal of educating their children. Churches were not planned for, and there are small groups of individuals who have started religious meetings in their homes. These examples seem small, but will have huge impact on network building amongst residents. Through the creation of bonding and bridging capital in the community, it will be possible to strengthen community ties. Community building could take the form of projects

initiating communal gardening for subsistence, or skills training programs where residents are taught how to maintain their homes. The provision of a small meal by the community kitchen, has shown that cooperation has been established through the few men and women involved in the feeding scheme. In this case, social capital is a by-product of the feeding scheme; these individuals joined the scheme in response to incentives such as gaining a free meal and promoting goodwill, and social capital is generated by their ensuing membership. The motivation for joining a group or network is not trust, but a need to form a collective to achieve a social end (Jackman and Miller, 1998).

A ‘unity of purpose’ based on common interests could benefit community development and prevent conflicts. Social capital and intracommunal ties are the basis for collective action and social movement supported through community development projects (Melin, 2010).

By getting involved in collective projects, residents will grow to know each other and have vested interest in enhancing their settlement, and growing their community identity. This will enable a sense of place to grow, where people feel that belong, are rooted here. Hothi et al. (2007) asserts that social capital in a neighbourhood is not generally conceived as an end result itself, but rather as a means of achieving aims such as well-being, and strong, welcoming communities who assist in place-shaping. Focusing on social capital and neighbourhood, Stuer and Marks’ (2008) research shows the places are more likely to be distinctive and welcoming if communities are actively engaged in shaping their places.

There is a poor sense of place in Zanemvula. The lack of resident participation in shaping the living space, their neighbourhood most certainly adds to this poor sense of place. There is no communal pride in their neighbourhood, and they certainly are hungry for projects that will make their settlement grow into a stronger community with networks and social bonds to strengthen their development

In the second housing settlement called Sakhasonke village, residents display a strong sense of place, and existing social capital is strong. It is in complete contrast to the situation that exists in Zanemvula where very little community identity exists. This housing project shows that it is possible to create a high-quality built environment for low-income earners with the government housing subsidy through alternative design solutions and reducing land and service costs. It was planned that the establishment of community support programs could potentially contribute to the social sustainability of the Sakhasonke Village (DAG, 2009).

Intensive planning, consultation with the community and successive training produced an arena for building networks of relationships amongst community members. This relationship building strengthens local ties, creates bonds amongst neighbours, and ensures that residents have common goals for neighbourhood creation. A strong community identity was fostered through the entire process.

According to a report on Sakhasonke, “overall, the creation of a sense of place with a unique identity was an important factor in the design and implementation of the village, in order to deviate from the standard RDP and ‘township’ appearance. Higher density units arranged as far as possible around small, greened public squares, with central features such as trees and benches around manhole rings used as planting containers, make for a pedestrian-friendly and humanly-scaled environment. Emphasis was placed on (grassed and paved) public areas with public pedestrian walkways and landscaping. The width of road reserves and pedestrian-orientated reserve widths were reduced, resulting from significant changes in geometric standards. Communal parking areas were provided on the roadside. Community representatives emphasised the fact that the quality aspect of the units and the public area received special attention during the building phases. The importance of a strict quality controller was highlighted in ensuring quality end-products” (GMSA Report).

The residents of Sakhasonke Village display pride and take great joy in showcasing their housing environment (DAG, 2009). The community undertook to refurbish an old remnant ablution facility that existed when the land was bought, and transformed it into a community centre. It is within this community center that the resident committee shares an office, and where residents seek assistance in matters pertaining to their houses. It serves as a meeting point for inhabitants, where social interaction is made possible and maintains relationships amongst residents and encourages social participation.

For community development projects to be successful, bonds and relationships need to be strong and positive, guided by a legitimate authority. In Sakhasonke’s case, guidance was led by the local NGO and planners. Participation in communities requires social structures allowing community members to partake in the projects. “Bonds, relationships, culture and traditions are part of the social make-up of society” (Melis, 2010, p.13). Community building will form an important part of community develop-

ment, in that a community with strong social relations and structures, can aid collective action for growth and the realization of collective goals within the community, and in doing so, creating a collective identity. Developing this collective identity takes time and requires interaction, so a participatory approach with residents’ input is invaluable. “Strengthening cooperation could foster more interest in the community project, and, if successful, promote support for future projects” (Melis, 2010, p. 16).

Conclusion

This paper has indicated that South Africa has a long history of housing inequality and a growing backlog in provision of housing for the poor, as chartered in the post-apartheid constitution. It attempted to contextualize South Africa’s low cost housing situation within a theoretical framework, to better understand the dynamics at play in these low cost housing settlements. It briefly looked at the housing scenario in the apartheid, as well as post-apartheid regimes. The case studies highlighted how two low cost housing developments have vastly different social outcomes. The various contributing factors to the social sustainability, or lack thereof, within the communities were highlighted.

The need for placing the “social” back into housing is called for. Government at various levels need to consider long-term sustainability, amongst others, over short term political gain. Social sustainability needs to be at the forefront of the development of neighbourhoods. Community development should be part of the planning of these low cost housing estates.

Much can be said for encouraging collaboration for sustainable community development. By doing this, it could mean that increasingly, local community organizations, leaders, and governments must form partnerships with other levels of government, with the private sector, and with civil society organizations and work towards the common goal of creating socially, environmentally and economically sustainable communities in low cost housing estates.

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