Good choices make healthy homes:
Reflections on sustainable human settlements in SA

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Introduction

According to a World Health Organisation (WHO) survey, scientific evidence on the associations between housing and health has grown over recent years. In spite of this knowledge, housing and construction standards are still governed by technical issues, rather than human issues, resulting in "sustainable housing" being informed by technological rather than health rationales. Current evidence shows that the home environment is still a major contributor to ill health through exposure to factors such as "home injuries, chemical substances, mould and damp, noise, pests and infestations, poor access to water and sanitation, proximity to pollution sources, or flooding, and inadequate protection from extreme weather". Added to this is the fact that the most vulnerable population groups (poor people, sick people, children, disabled people and the elderly) often spend a substantial amount of their time at home, therefore increasing their need for healthy living environments. Planning for sustainability should also be a very important component in planning for housing.

South African situation

South African cities have inherited a dysfunctional urban environment with distorted settlement patterns that are functionally and spatially inefficient and costly, and huge service infrastructure backlogs in historically underdeveloped areas. In most cases, demands for housing have been addressed through the creation of settlements located on the cities' peripheries. These communities are located at considerable distances from economic opportunities and government services with increased transportation costs. Hence the thriving backyard rental market which remains a huge problem to this day. Over time, this has led to pressures in urban services brought about by overcrowding, poor living conditions and illegal occupation of land through the establishment of free-standing informal settlements. Housing issues are therefore of concern in the South African context. In line with this, the need for a "sustainable human settlements and improved quality of household life" has been one of the South African government's key focus areas for development.

Changing approaches to housing in South Africa

The quality of a settlement implies the manner in which its components, people, activities, land uses, buildings and spaces are mixed together. The South African space economy is characterised largely by the legacy of apartheid spatial planning which engineered an inequitable settlement structure. Since 2004, Housing Policy actively advocated a shift in policy focus from quantity to quality through the Breaking New Ground programme (BNG). This

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would require a move away from improving basic services such as housing, water and electricity, towards the development of sustainable human settlements (SHS). These SHS principles promote the planning and designing residential units for the long term to increase flexibility and effectiveness of housing stock and therefore lower long-term costs of having to relocate or adapt the design according to needs.

People's needs may change over time. It would therefore seem right to produce houses which have flexible physical structures so that they are adapted to changing uses over time. There are certain examples of housing projects in the BNG era that are characterised as mixed-use housing developments, which also encourage higher residential densities with social opportunities within close proximity of each other. These reduce travel by bringing different activities closer together, increase access to employment and increase the sense of place and quality of life.

Experts argue that a city can be both high-density and offer a high-quality living space comparable to that in many lower-density areas. Moreover, that it is how this density is configured and designed along with other aspects of city living such as green space, quality of housing, and access to amenities that is likely to be more important than any overall density figure. It is further argued that presenting well-designed communities that offer the same (perceived) quality of life as alternative locations should be a critical objective of planners and designers in the modern city. The major challenge is, therefore, for urban designers and planners to convince residents that high-density residential areas can be attractive locations throughout all stages of their life-cycle. ■