

SOUTH AFRICA'S HOUSING CRISIS: SOLUTIONS THAT COMBAT POVERTY

By Gary White, Director at NEW URBAN Architects and Urban Designers



Fleurhof development, Johannesburg (Calgro M3, South Africa)

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Radio Sonder Grense (RSG) had a brief conversation with Gary White (GW), Director at NEWURBAN Architects and Urban Designers, on International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, about housing solutions that combat poverty.

RSG: What is the relationship between housing and poverty?

GW: We should remember that housing is only one of the socio-economic problems that South Africa face - which is also a worldwide challenge. I think that it plays a more significant role in terms of poverty, because if we see it in a positive light, housing provision enables people to enter the economy. This allows for steadfast households as well as individuals who invest.

RSG: What role can housing play in the decrease or increase of poverty?

GW: The positive aspect is as I mentioned before. The negative aspect is where housing is not provided in a suitable area. In other words, where housing is provided in areas that is not to the advantage of the people living there. For example, when people are based far from opportunities - such as work, schooling and healthcare - it becomes more difficult to access such opportunities.

RSG: Let's have a look at the existing housing solutions to release people from this situation and to improve their quality of life.

GW: There are two solutions that we should focus on: Firstly it is to be in closer proximity to opportunities to decrease the time spent on commuting. Secondly it is important to densify the environment. This topic is not easily understood by many. If we densify in the right manner, then transport costs decrease, there are enough learners in school, there are enough people to supply with public infrastructure - even with healthcare -, and people are closer to opportunities.

RSG: Is it not so that urbanisation equals densification? How are we doing in this regard in South Africa?

GW: We have a very low density in

South Africa. I think that our densest city is Durban, with 2000 - 2500 people per square kilometer living in its core, whereas Pretoria only has 800 - 900 people per square kilometer. A city such as London has 4500 people per square kilometer and New York even more with 8500 people per square kilometer. This means that the money spent on servicing such dense cities, gets absorbed by the people living there and it makes financial sense to provide more services, because more people would benefit from it. In a city such as London, there are many transport options such as a taxi, the underground and walking. There are many means of getting around whereas in Pretoria for example, commuting to work or to social opportunities, long distances need to be covered.

RSG: What is the ideal housing solution for poor communities?

GW: I think that people should be allowed to contribute something to building their home. In South Africa we have a subsidy system from the government, which is rather unique. Unfortunately it is heavy on public funds. There is the potential to spread the subsidy out over a few years to enable the community to, for example, pave the sidewalks themselves which in turn provides the individuals in the community with skills to empower them. This also adds a unique identity to the neighbourhoods that speak to the people that live there.

South Africa has a good housing system and the government owns a lot of land. I think that they could attempt to make some of the land that is closer to the center of cities available to develop housing in more suitable locations.

RSG: How is our government's policy enabling people in poor communities?

GW: I think that it has the potential to be more enabling than what it currently is. There are numerous foreigners that reside in poor communities. The first aim is to provide housing for South Africans. Then, to eradicate the backlog of housing is essential, but it has increased since 1994, even though large sums of money has been allocated to solve the problem. I think that the focus should be on social housing with more cooperation with the private sector and that more

suitable sites should be developed. If that all falls into place, then people can make use of the opportunities around them. If this happens, people will start participating and help one another so that communities will be created.

Author Biography:
Gary White



Gary White is a registered Architect and Urban Designer. He promotes strategies for sustainable urban environments in Southern Africa and applies the principles of New Urbanism in all the Urban Design initiatives he drives.

He was awarded for excellent work by the Charter of New Urbanism, USA in 2006 for the design of the new urban community, Cabinda, in Angola, in 2012 for the design of the new urban community, Verkykerskop, South Africa and in 2016 for a large-scale urban development called Southern Farms, south of Johannesburg, South Africa.

CATEGORY:
Housing