

# ALEXANDRA RENEWAL PROJECT

## JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

July 2008



## Housing Options in Alexandra

Two key conditions in Alexandra demanded a different approach to housing from that delivered through the State's low income housing scheme. Typically, the State's housing programme delivers a detached house on serviced land in a newly developed neighbourhood, transferred to the new owner through freehold ownership. The first challenge in Alexandra was the extreme shortage of land for new housing delivery in and around the project area, particularly since the revised strategic direction adopted in 2005, which aimed to have no further relocations of people from Alex to other parts of the city. Limited land therefore had to be utilised much more effectively by



raising housing densities. The second issue was recognition of the heterogeneity of residents of Alexandra and their priorities, questioning the suitability of ownership as a universal tenure model. The Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP) has therefore crafted a range of physical, tenure and management typologies to meet the housing needs of a diverse group of poor people in a dense, well-located urban environment.

The **K206 project**, for example, substantially increases densities, and in addition combines ownership with rental accommodation. This layout directly replicates the 'yards', which typify the old part of Alexandra. Access ways and courtyards around which a number of living units are clustered, some formal houses, some more informal rooms and shacks characterize the yards. The new project provides a double story house for ownership to an eligible beneficiary with, in addition, 2 separately accessed rooms, which share a toilet and shower. These rooms are controlled and managed by the homeowner and are rented out to tenants. Six to eight of these owner-occupied houses and their associated rooms are clustered around a defined yard, creating a sense of enclosure and semi-private space, and contributing to the urban quality of the neighbourhood.



A housing development with mixed tenure options

The **K206** is a technical name which hints at the land's former status as a road reserve, now no longer needed and secured for housing instead – enabling a large, innovative development of 3000 units of different tenure types. By building a double story unit (thus reducing the footprint) and attaching 2 rented rooms the 80m<sup>2</sup> site provides a yield of 145 units of different tenure types per hectare. The ARP believes that this is a creative response to the challenge of both increasing densities and meeting the diverse housing needs.

The second innovative project consists of '**520 affordable rental units**'. This project provides 2-story clusters of rooms-for-rent, each cluster organized around a common recreation space and sharing communal ablution facilities. Each cluster is made up of 4 buildings, each with 10 rooms for rent located around a courtyard space. This model both learns from and aims to match the affordability and convenience of the backyard shacks run by private landlords in Alex. Not only are higher densities achieved than in conventional state housing, but also the rooms provide an affordable and flexible living quarters for a variety of more transient personal circumstances. Demand for this accommodation is strong.



Environmental issues integrated into an affordable rental room complex

The project has a strong environmental ethos. Each building incorporates solar water heating and water harvesting tanks. The grounds are landscaped with indigenous plants as well as with fruit and nut trees. Space has also been planned for urban agriculture.

Strict access control, public lighting, courtyards with surveillance, equipped play areas and community facilities help ensure that the environment will be safe for both woman and children. In addition certain blocks have been designed to ensure wheel chair accessibility and all community facilities are disabled-friendly.

These two examples provide what the ARP sees as an affordable alternative to 'shack dwelling'. A survey undertaken in 2005 found that some 30% of households in Alex would choose not to invest their housing opportunity within Alexandra. These include single person households, and households that still have strong linkages back to the rural areas. Their needs may best be served by access to affordable and safe rented rooms. The other side of the rental story is that it has been dubbed 'the business' of Alexandra. Julian Baskin, current Director of the ARP, recognises that:

"We cannot intervene in programmes such as shack relocation without understanding the role that these structures are playing in the local economy...there is resistance to an upgrade that will alter the existing landlord-tenant relationships in which landlords earn income from renting out space".

The K206 project in particular recognizes the importance of rental income to small-scale landlords, and also some of the institutional advantages of localized and decentralized management of tenants.

A third project is known as the **RDP flats**. In this, 'give-away' units, similar to the state's standard low-income house, are configured into a walk-up apartment block. Like the freestanding units the tenure for each apartment here is ownership but through sectional title. The excellent location of these units, close to retail and transport hubs, is maximized through much more intensive use of the site than is usually achieved through the standard freehold title option.



Maximising location through high density options

The ARP has also had to respond to the stark reality of several vast, over-crowded and poorly maintained single sex hostel complexes. In aerial images of the Alexandra area these huge, brutal structures stand out in contrast to the fine-grained texture of the dense pattern of houses and shacks. Not only are the hostels in dire need of physical overhaul, they are tainted by association with the notorious migrant labour system of the apartheid years.

In line with the democratic state's policy for hostels, the ARP is creating **social housing**, a term used in South Africa to denote family rental accommodation run by housing institutions. In addition, however, the ARP has recognized the needs of some hostel dwellers for smaller accommodation units for single or two-person households. A series of one-room apartments have therefore been created, each with their own ablution facilities.

Other housing projects in Alexandra are closer in nature to conventional state-provided low-income housing, but with some innovative aspects.

The Extension 7 project, for example, creates higher densities than usual through reducing plot sizes down from 250m<sup>2</sup> to 80m<sup>2</sup> and by attaching units by a common party wall. These **row houses** on either side of the street enhance the spatial definition of public space. Active programming is in place to ensure that households soften the urban environment through greening of the small yards. In addition some 70 housing units have been specially designed for people living with different disabilities.

But the key attraction in this area has to be its prime location right next to the new station of Johannesburg's first rapid rail link, currently under construction.

Perhaps more than anything the securing of this space for the poor demonstrates the commitment of the ARP to maximizing the many opportunities of Alexandra for the benefit of its existing inhabitants.



An apartheid hostel converted into affordable rooms to rent, with internal ablutions and free individual access



Attached housing on 80 m<sup>2</sup> plots