

ADDRESSING URBAN INEQUALITY THROUGH INNOVATIVE SOCIAL HOUSING STRATEGIES – A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF APPROACHES AND OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a detailed examination of how social housing is approached in three major South African cities: Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town. These cities serve as unique examples, each dealing with different issues and finding creative solutions. The study conducts this comparative analysis through document analysis namely the City of Johannesburg Housing Policy, Durban Metropolitan Housing Strategy, the City of Cape Town Integrated Development Plan, and the National Department of Human Settlements Annual Report. Community involvement, and sustainable practices related to social housing emerge as critical components in all these cities seeking to achieve adequate urban development through social housing. In Johannesburg, there is a strong focus on addressing the ongoing effects of apartheid through „restorative housing” and encouraging diverse communities through mixed-income housing. Durban stands out for its „cultural inclusivity” approach, which views diversity as an advantage in urban development. In Cape Town, they have adopted „ecological urbanism” to harmonize nature and urban life, overcoming geographical challenges. One common theme in these cities is the involvement of the community, empowering residents to be active participants in shaping their living spaces. Sustainability is not just about the environment but also about connecting housing projects with economic and social systems. This analysis highlights how social housing can transform urban areas into fair, inclusive, and sustainable places, not only in South Africa but worldwide.

Keywords: social housing, urban development, South African cities, community engagement, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Urban Inequality and the Need for Effective Social Housing

Urban inequality is a persistent and complex issue that affects cities all over the world. In terms of housing, urban inequality refers to discrepancies in accessing to sufficient and affordable housing, as well as differential treatment based on socioeconomic level, race, ethnicity, and other criteria. Despite efforts to address the issue, numerous cities continue to face entrenched disparities that exacerbate social divisions and exclude disadvantaged communities.

Presentation of the Social Problem

The existing housing policies prioritize profit-driven development over affordable housing, resulting in the displacement of low-income residents and the gentrification of urban neighbourhoods (*Rafael, 2013*). Furthermore, zoning rules and land-use regulations frequently increase spatial inequalities by limiting access to desirable sites and maintaining socioeconomic division.

Diversity of urban populations

Cities are home to a diverse population with different socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural identities, and housing requirements. However, existing housing strategies frequently fail to account for this variety, resulting in standardized and discriminatory methods that ignore the specific needs of marginalized populations (*Sutherland et al., 2018*). In places such as Durban, the melding of ethnicity, language, and cultural traditions worsens efforts to alleviate urban housing disparities.

Challenges in Land Use

Land scarcity and competitiveness for excellent urban real estate present substantial hurdles to reducing urban inequality in housing. Rapid urbanization and population expansion put pressure on available land, raising property prices and rendering homes unaffordable for many residents. Furthermore, restrictive land-use rules and zoning regulations frequently impede the building of inexpensive housing in desired areas, compounding spatial disparities and maintaining social divisions.

Informal Settlements and Housing

Informal settlements are a visible reflection of urban inequality, demonstrating the inability of current housing policy to provide adequate shelter for marginalized people. These settlements are distinguished by insecure living circumstances, a scarcity of basic amenities, and susceptibility to removal and displacement (*UN-Habitat, 2004*). Despite their widespread presence in many urban areas, informal settlements are frequently overlooked by policymakers, prolonging cycles of poverty and marginalization.

Diversity among urban populations

Cities are home to a diverse population with different socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural identities, and housing requirements. However, existing housing strategies frequently fail to account for this variety, resulting in homogenized and discriminatory methods that ignore the specific needs of marginalised populations (*Sutherland, 2018*). In Durban, the confluence of ethnicity, language, and cultural traditions challenges efforts to solve urban housing disparities.

Urbanization, the ongoing trend of people moving from rural areas to cities, is a defining feature of the 21st century. It promises economic opportunities, cultural exchange, and a better life for millions globally. However, it also brings with it a significant challenge: urban inequality.

Urban inequality comes in various forms, including disparities in income, education, healthcare, and housing. Among these, the unequal access to adequate housing is a glaring symbol of the difficulties faced by marginalized urban populations. Housing inequality is not just a consequence of urbanization; it is a driver of serves as a driving force behind it. As more people seek opportunities in cities, competition for housing increases, raising costs, and reducing the availability of affordable, decent homes. This leads to a housing crisis that worsens homelessness, overcrowding, and housing instability (Schiller, 2021; Beeckmans et al., 2022).

Governments and civic organizations worldwide have been striving to address urban inequality, particularly concerning housing. Social housing programs have become a frontline strategy to tackle this issue. Social housing involves offering affordable housing units, often subsidized by the government or non-profit organizations, to individuals and families who cannot otherwise secure stable living conditions,

Social housing aligns with the concept of the right to adequate housing, as outlined in international agreements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This right emphasizes not just providing shelter but ensuring that housing is safe, secure, habitable, and affordable. Social housing helps ensure that the basic human need for shelter is met, regardless of one's income or social status (Yuan, 2020).

The Purpose of this Comparative Analysis

This article conducts a comparative exploration to evaluate diverse approaches to urban social housing. The focus is on the South African context, where Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town have grappled with the formidable challenge of urban inequality, driven by historical and socio-economic factors. These cities have adopted distinct strategies to tackle the issue of social housing, reflecting their unique demographics, policy approaches, and urban dynamics. The aim is to assess the effectiveness of these approaches, explore their outcomes, and show the intricacies of addressing urban inequality through innovative social housing strategies (Beeckmans et al., 2020).

South Africa provides a fascinating landscape for this comparative analysis. The nation's history is marked by a legacy of apartheid, a system of racial segregation that resulted in profound disparities in housing and social services. The post-apartheid era has brought significant political, social, and economic changes, including efforts to redress housing inequalities and provide social housing solutions. It is within this intricate socio-political tapestry that the diverse approaches and outcomes of urban social housing programs are examined (Mudau et al., 2020).

This analysis is not only relevant within the South African context but also holds broader implications for other regions facing urban inequality. By scrutinizing the strategies and outcomes of these cities, valuable insights are extracted that can inform policymakers, urban planners, and researchers worldwide (Schiller, 2021). The goal is to offer an understanding of what works, what does not, and why when it comes to addressing urban inequality through social housing.

As the journey through the intricate landscape of urban social housing in South Africa.

The Impact of Urban Inequality

Urban inequality is not merely an abstract concept or statistical phenomenon; it has tangible and far-reaching effects on individuals, communities, and society. For residents of cities marked by significant housing disparities, the struggle to secure suitable shelter can be a relentless battle. The inability to access stable and affordable housing poses an array of challenges, ranging from homelessness and overcrowding to a lack of security, stability, and access to essential services (*Biggs et al., 2022*).

Moreover, urban inequality can compound existing social divisions, creating a cycle of disadvantage that spans generations. It can hinder individuals' access to education, employment, and healthcare, making it challenging for them to escape the grip of poverty. This not only impacts the well-being of individuals and families but also influences the overall economic and social fabric of cities.

The Significance of Social Housing

Social housing programs emerge as a crucial means to address urban inequality and its far-reaching implications. By providing affordable and decent housing to those in need, these initiatives strive to break the cycle of disadvantage and foster a more inclusive, equitable, and stable urban environment. Social housing not only serves as a lifeline for individuals and families facing housing insecurity but also contributes to the broader well-being of communities (*Soyturk et al., 2016*).

To effectively combat urban inequality, it is essential to consider the relationship between housing and broader social and economic factors. Housing is not a standalone issue; it is intertwined with employment, education, healthcare, and social inclusion. Therefore, social housing programs that offer more than just shelter, incorporating support services and community engagement, are more likely to achieve lasting, positive outcomes (*Roberts et al., 2016*).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, primarily qualitative content analysis, to explore the intricacies of social housing strategies in Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town. The qualitative approach offers a deeper understanding of the contextual factors, motivations, and outcomes of these initiatives (*Lewis, 2015*).

Document Analysis

The research process involved an analysis of various documents, reports, policies, and studies associated with social housing in the selected South African cities (*Table 1*). These documents, to name a few are the City of Johannesburg Housing Policy, Durban Metropolitan Housing Strategy, the City of Cape Town Integrated Development Plan, and the National Department of Human Settlements Annual Report. They were essential in providing historical context, outlining the goals and methodologies of the initiatives, and highlighting key challenges and achievements. The following were the document categories that were analysed.

Data Analysis

The collected data was subjected to a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis allowed for the extraction of meaningful insights by categorizing and interpreting the data. Themes and patterns were identified through examination and coding of the textual data from the documents to identify recurring themes, concepts, and patterns related to social housing strategies.

Table 1: Document sources

| Document Type | Source |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Municipal Housing Policies and Strategic Plans | City of Johannesburg Housing Policy (2020) |
| | Durban Metropolitan Housing Strategy (2018-2022) |
| | Cape Town's Integrated Development Plan (2022-2027) |
| Government Reports | National Department of Human Settlements Annual Report (2020/21) |
| | Gauteng Provincial Government Housing Report (2019) |
| | Western Cape Department of Human Settlements Annual Review (2020) |
| Academic Studies and Publications | A century of South African Housing Act 1920–2020. In Urban Forum. by <i>Mabin A</i> (2020) |
| | Pathways to meaningful upgrading of settlements. Towards adequate housing infrastructure in South Africa. By <i>Mndzebele & Gumbo</i> (2024) |
| | A critical analysis of housing inadequacy in South Africa and its ramifications. Africa's Public Service Delivery & Performance. By <i>Marutlulle</i> (2021) |
| Reports from Non-Profit Organizations | Habitat for Humanity South Africa Annual Report (2020) |
| | The Assessment of SDG. Sustainability. By <i>Mudau et al.</i> , (2020) |

RESULTS

This study found that the historical context in Johannesburg plays a significant role in shaping the city's social housing strategies (*Table 2*). The legacy of apartheid, with its deeply entrenched housing disparities, continues to cast a long shadow over the city's housing landscape. During apartheid, housing was systematically segregated along racial lines, resulting in stark inequalities that persist today (*Schiller, 2021*). Cape Town presents a unique challenge when it comes to addressing spatial inequality. The city's topography, with its natural boundaries, profoundly influences housing patterns. The complexities of reshaping housing within these geographic constraints are a central concern for social housing initiatives (*Aghajor & Mewomo, 2024*). Durban's housing landscape includes a substantial number of informal settlements. The city has undertaken efforts to upgrade these settlements, aiming to provide basic services and, where feasible, integrate residents into formal housing. This strategy reflects a commitment to improving living conditions for the most vulnerable (*Sutherland et al., 2018*).

Table 2: Intercity comparison

| City | Housing Policy Framework | Diversity among the urban population | Land use challenges | Urban inequality and impact |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Johannesburg | Prioritization of mixed-income developments, spatial transformation, and community engagement (<i>Hale, 2018</i>) | Diverse population with various socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural identities (<i>Hale, 2018</i>) | Land scarcity due to rapid urbanization and competition for available land resources (<i>Hale, 2018</i>) | Persistent housing inequalities along racial lines, compounded by historical apartheid policies and spatial segregation (<i>Schiller, 2021</i>). |
| Durban | Emphasis on partnerships and collaboration, inclusive policies, and informal settlement upgrades (<i>Sutherland et al., 2018</i>) | Mixture of ethnicities, languages, and cultural practices (<i>Sutherland et al., 2018</i>) | Challenges in upgrading informal settlements and providing basic services to marginalized communities (<i>Sutherland et al., 2018</i>) | Complexities arising from diverse cultural backgrounds exacerbate efforts to alleviate housing disparities (<i>Sutherland et al., 2018</i>) |
| Cape Town | Focus on mixed-income developments, inclusive housing policies, and spatial integration initiatives (<i>Agbajor & Mewomo, 2024</i>) | The rich tapestry of cultural diversity, including various ethnic groups and linguistic (<i>Agbajor & Mewomo, 2024</i>) | Spatial challenges due to topographical constraints, limiting urban expansion and reshaping housing patterns (<i>Agbajor & Mewomo, 2024</i>) | Spatial disparities influenced by natural features exacerbate socioeconomic divisions and hinder equitable housing access (<i>Agbajor & Mewomo, 2024</i>). |

Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis of the various documents related to housing policies and strategic plans in South Africa reveals several key themes that are central to the discourse on housing development and urban planning in the country. These themes cut across various sources, including government reports, academic studies, and reports from non-profit organizations, providing a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities in the housing sector.

Policy Frameworks and Strategic Planning

One prominent theme that emerges from the documents is the focus on policy frameworks and strategic planning in addressing housing issues. The City of

Johannesburg Housing Policy (Hale, 2018), Durban Metropolitan Housing Strategy (2018-2022), and City of Cape Town Integrated Development Plan all highlight the importance of having clear policies and strategic plans to guide housing development. For example, the Durban Metropolitan Housing Strategy outlines specific goals and objectives for improving housing access and affordability in the region, demonstrating a commitment to long-term planning and sustainable development.

Housing Inadequacy and Inequality

Another key theme that runs through the documents is the issue of housing inadequacy and inequality in South Africa. Academic studies such as „A Century of South African housing acts 1920–2020” by *Mabin* (2020) and „A critical analysis of Housing Inadequacy in South Africa and Its Ramifications” by *Marutlulle* (2021) shed light on the historical context and current challenges facing the housing sector. These studies highlight the persistent inequalities in access to adequate housing and the need for targeted interventions to address housing inadequacy in marginalized communities.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Housing

The documents also reflect a growing emphasis on aligning housing policies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. Reports such as „The Assessment of SDG. Sustainability” by *Mudau et al.*, (2020) underscore the importance of integrating sustainable development principles into housing strategies to promote environmental sustainability and social equity. This theme indicates a shift towards a more holistic approach to housing development that considers the broader implications for sustainable urban growth and inclusive communities.

Community Participation and Empowerment

Community participation and empowerment emerge as a recurring theme in the documents, emphasizing the importance of involving local communities in decision-making processes related to housing development. Non-profit organizations like Habitat for Humanity South Africa emphasize the role of community-driven initiatives in addressing housing challenges and fostering social cohesion. This theme underscores the need for inclusive and participatory approaches that empower residents to shape their living environments and advocate for their housing rights.

Thematic analysis of the documents on municipal housing policies and strategic plans in South Africa reveals a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities in the housing sector. The identified themes of policy frameworks, housing inadequacy, sustainable development, and community participation provide valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners working towards improving housing outcomes and promoting inclusive urban development in the country.

DISCUSSION

Johannesburg's Ongoing Battle with Apartheid Legacies

The city of Johannesburg stands at the intersection of a complex historical legacy and a contemporary struggle for social justice, particularly in the realm of housing.

Johannesburg's social housing strategies are deeply intertwined with its tumultuous apartheid history, a legacy that continues to reverberate through the city's housing landscape. The consequences of apartheid-era racial segregation persist, manifesting as enduring economic and spatial disparities that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

What distinguishes Johannesburg's approach from other cities grappling with similar challenges is the innovative concept of „restorative housing.” This approach transcends the traditional boundaries of housing policy, positioning housing as a tool for healing historical wounds and addressing deep-rooted socio-economic injustices. Instead of merely providing shelter, Johannesburg's social housing initiatives aim to rectify the injustices of the past by actively working to dismantle the structural inequalities perpetuated by apartheid.

Central to Johannesburg's strategy is the commitment to mixed-income developments. By intentionally integrating diverse income groups in housing projects, the city aims to foster social cohesion and reduce income-based segregation. This emphasis on inclusivity and integration signifies a transformative leap in urban policy, challenging the entrenched patterns of segregation that have defined the city's landscape for decades. Moreover, Johannesburg's approach to social housing represents a paradigm shift in how cities conceptualize and address historical injustices. Rather than treating housing as a mere commodity or service, the city recognizes it as a fundamental human right and a potent instrument for social change. By prioritizing the needs of marginalized communities and actively working to dismantle the legacies of apartheid, Johannesburg is paving the way for a more equitable and just urban future.

However, despite these efforts, Johannesburg's ongoing battle with apartheid legacies is far from over. The city continues to grapple with entrenched poverty, spatial inequalities, and systemic discrimination that have deep historical roots. Addressing these challenges requires sustained political will, comprehensive policy interventions, and meaningful community engagement. Johannesburg's approach to social housing represents a bold and innovative response to the enduring legacies of apartheid. By reframing housing as a tool for restorative justice and social transformation, the city is not only providing shelter but also initiating a reparative process to rectify the socio-economic wrongs of the past. However, the journey towards true equality and justice is long and arduous, requiring continued dedication and collective action from all stakeholders involved.

Durban's Cultural Mosaic: A Unique Challenge and Opportunity

Durban, known for its extraordinary cultural diversity, is not just a city but a melting pot of various ethnicities, languages, and traditions. This diversity, far from being a challenge, is a source of strength and a unique opportunity for the city. The innovative concept of „cultural inclusivity” in housing has emerged as a powerful tool to redefine the way cities approach diversity. Instead of viewing cultural differences as obstacles, Durban demonstrates that they can be the cornerstone of urban development, nurturing inclusivity and social harmony. The notion of cultural inclusivity in housing goes beyond mere accommodation; it celebrates diversity and

actively integrates cultural traditions into the fabric of urban life. By embracing and celebrating cultural differences, Durban creates an environment where diverse communities not only coexist but thrive together, contributing to the enrichment of the city's social and cultural tapestry.

This transformative approach sets a precedent for other cities with multicultural populations, emphasizing that cultural diversity is an asset rather than a challenge in urban development. By embracing diversity and fostering inclusivity, Durban not only creates vibrant and dynamic communities but also lays the groundwork for a more harmonious and resilient urban future.

Cape Town's Topographical Challenge: A Test of Innovation

Cape Town's distinctive geographical constraints, characterized by its natural boundaries such as mountains and oceans, have necessitated a fundamental rethinking of traditional urban development approaches. These constraints have paved the way for an innovative perspective known as „ecological urbanism,” which challenges conventional paradigms and advocates for a harmonious integration of nature and urbanization. At the heart of ecological urbanism is the recognition that housing projects are not isolated entities but integral components within a larger ecological, economic, and social system. This perspective views urban development as interconnected ecosystems, where the built environment interacts dynamically with the natural environment. By embracing this holistic approach, Cape Town seeks to create urban spaces that not only meet the needs of its residents but also enhance the overall ecological integrity of the city.

One of the key principles of ecological urbanism is the idea of mixed-income developments that serve as thriving hubs of self-sustaining urban ecosystems. These developments go beyond simply providing housing; they incorporate green spaces, sustainable infrastructure, and renewable energy sources, creating vibrant and resilient communities that are in harmony with their natural surroundings.

Cape Town's embrace of ecological urbanism serves as a blueprint for cities worldwide grappling with geographical challenges. By demonstrating the potential for creative and harmonious urban development within the context of nature, Cape Town inspires other cities to rethink their approaches to urban planning and design. In doing so, it offers hope for a more sustainable and resilient urban future, where cities and nature coexist in harmony.

Sustainability as a Holistic Imperative

Sustainability has evolved beyond its traditional definition focused solely on environmental conservation. Instead, it has expanded to encompass social and economic dimensions, forming the foundation of a comprehensive mission known as „holistic sustainability.” This paradigm shift signifies a departure from the narrow view of sustainability as purely „green” initiatives towards a more interconnected understanding of urban development. **Holistic sustainability** recognizes that housing is not an isolated element but rather an integral part of a larger system where social, economic, and ecological factors converges. In this view, housing developments serve as more than just physical structures; they function as interconnected hubs that impact

various aspects of community life. By embracing systems thinking, cities understand that housing projects play a crucial role in shaping economic opportunities, educational access, healthcare provision, and overall community well-being.

By adopting an integrated approach to urban development, cities reimagine the purpose of housing initiatives. Rather than focusing solely on providing shelter, these initiatives aim to create thriving communities where residents can lead fulfilling lives. This shift in perspective acknowledges that sustainable housing is not an end but a means to achieve broader societal goals, such as poverty alleviation, social cohesion, and equitable development. In essence, holistic sustainability challenges traditional perspectives on urban development by emphasizing the interconnectedness of social, economic, and ecological systems. By embracing this comprehensive approach, cities can envision and create communities that are not only environmentally sustainable but also socially inclusive, economically vibrant, and resilient to future challenges.

Community-Centric Approaches: The Key to Success

Community engagement is more than a consultative step in these cities; it is the cornerstone upon which successful social housing strategies rest. The idea of „co-designing communities” transcends consultation, moving towards the active involvement of residents in shaping their destinies. It signifies a transformative concept — „community-led urbanism.” In this paradigm, communities are no longer passive stakeholders in urban development. Instead, they become active agents in moulding their urban environments. This concept reshapes the dynamics of urban planning, reflecting a shift from a top-down process to a bottom-up movement. Urban development is no longer driven solely by officials and planners; it is increasingly influenced by the grassroots, making communities the architects of their urban destinies.

CONCLUSION

The comprehensive analysis of social housing in Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town reveals a web of complexity, nuance, and innovative ideas. These cities provide profound insights into the significance of historical legacies in shaping housing policies, the potential for cultural diversity to become an asset, the opportunities created by geographical constraints for innovative urban development, the transformative power of community engagement, and the necessity for urban development to be a holistic mission.

The community-centric approaches in these cities not only signify community participation but a fundamental shift in power dynamics. Communities are no longer passive stakeholders; they are active co-creators. This is not just a different way of doing urban development; it is a profound transformation in the balance of power, where residents become architects of their own urban futures.

The lessons from these cities extend beyond being case studies; they represent a new philosophical foundation for urban development, guiding cities toward more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable urban environments, where equity, inclusion, and sustainability are guiding principles, not mere buzzwords.

It is important that cities worldwide consider the transformative lessons from Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town, adapting and reimagining their social

housing strategies to create urban environments that are not only equitable and sustainable but also inclusive and community-led.

The role of policy frameworks in shaping social housing in urban centres is undeniable. The experiences of Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town offer a compelling narrative of how well-structured policies can catalyse transformative change. In the South African context, post-apartheid policies have paved the way for a more equitable and inclusive society. The National Housing Policy (Scheba *et al.*, 2021), and the Social Housing Act of 2008 provide the legal underpinning for social housing, emphasizing mixed-income housing, community participation, and sustainability.

Johannesburg's pioneering policies, encapsulated by the concept of „restorative housing,” serve as a model for addressing historical injustices and promoting mixed-income developments. Durban's focus on cultural inclusivity aligns with the broader national policies aimed at fostering social cohesion and celebrating diversity. Cape Town's holistic sustainability policies resonate with South Africa's sustainability goals, contributing to a more environmentally conscious urban environment.

However, policy implementation is not without its challenges. Resource allocation, bureaucratic hurdles, and the need for public awareness and support are ongoing issues that cities face when translating policies into actionable plans.

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