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African low-cost housing programme: Development strategy

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African low-cost housing programme:
Development strategy

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights Development strategy adopted in most low-cost housing in African towns and cities. The configuration of structures in housing, the orientation and spatial arrangement maintain certain concepts in specific regions. It is a well known fact that built environments produce significant changes, so general design approach would differ from place to place. A critical appraisal of the changes on architectural concepts and planning of housing in Africa is presented with full illustration of past and present experience.

Suitable form and function of most African low-cost design by present-day architects are becoming more and more relegated to the background. For example acute shortage of housing due to rapid urbanization has found solution in the concept of low-cost housing with the attendant negative effect of designs that are focused only on cost savings. Housing irrespective of low-cost or high-cost, should provide solutions of the built environment where interrelationship between people, socio-cultura, house and climate are well accommodated.

The paper contains a comparative analysis of housing problems in time based on past and present design concepts, forms, functions, construction methods and materials in relation to the environment. The adverse consequences of present day technological innovations on low-cost housing design are documented and the paper concludes with proposed solutions and guidelines for low-cost housing.

Introduction

Most developing countries especially in Africa are experiencing rapid urban growth through urban migration and natural increase. This has resulted to shortage of housing especially in the urban centres. The population projection as against urban housing supply has resulted to many governments adopting strategies and recommendations that are geared towards low-cost housing provision concepts and establishment of housing finance institutions.

However past experiences show that implementation of these government policies with mass production of housing units had led to loss of architectural values and sense of identity for its residents. The paper produces a comprehensive new approach method by highlighting past problems in form of comparative analysis over time in house evolution, taking into account the functional aspect needs, methods of construction and material usage, and concludes that focus on savings alone is not the issue, but if possible to accommodate the social and cultural needs of the low income urban dwellers.

Definition of Housing

Housing is a generator of lifestyles reflecting the belief, aspirations and achievement of a people within their specific regional and cultural context. Upon housing depends to a great extent man's health, social and political stability and generally his constructive contribution to his society.

Ali stresses that beyond basic needs, a house expresses the culture of the people who use it, the space and the relationship they imply (Ali, 1985). This brings the idea that a house should be related to the people's culture and social life irrespective of low or high-cost and to maintain a specific architectural value.

Traditional House

In the justification of the above definitions, the Traditional architecture solves the problem of housing basically for the cultural and functional aspect. See Fig.1 This shows examples in different regions of Africa. 1. Mali 2. Nigeria 3. Tichit 4. Kenya. It clearly identifies the significance of our courtyards that provides for climate solution and social cultural performance. The functional concept of the traditional house considers the family structure and their living pattern at the present and possible future expansion. The additive concept recognises the expansion of family in terms of a son taking his family to the homestead, not necessarily implying the economic growth of the head of the house.

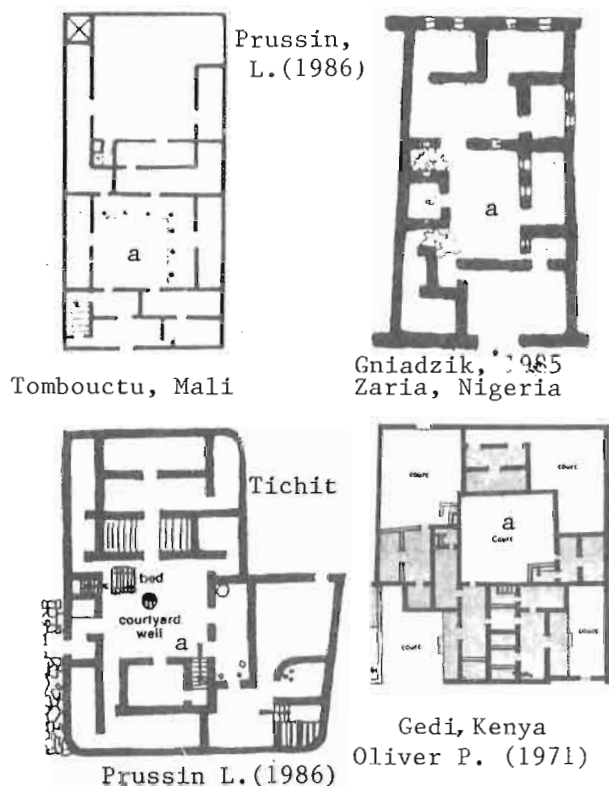


Fig. 1 Groundplans of African Traditional houses. a = Courtyard

The traditional houses were constructed with mutual help of the community. The building materials were mud, wall, thatched roofs, wood roof structure etc. All these materials were available locally and the method of building technology was simple. In some cases a demand of maintenance is high but could be replaced with better materials that have the same performance.

Problem and Concept of Low-cost Housing

Since colonial to post colonial period, there has been an alarming problem of housing because of population growth that results to formation of slum and squatter settlements that led Governments of each country to tackle the problem of housing by putting many things into consideration through amendment of policy and promulgation of laws.

For example in Nigeria in the 1970's - 1980's lowcost housing was difficult to implement because of land tenure system in pre-colonial under customary tenure as described by Awotona in the idea of group title, which is found in family or whole community holding as a unit; land does not belong to an individual and the head of the family is in charge of land.

The consequence of this customary tenure system is that any prospective purchaser of land must look for the head of the community, thus causing problems that hindered development. (Awatona 1978).

During the colonial period, to ease this problem especially in the southern part of Nigeria, three important laws relating to land were introduced by the British Government. The first, the Native Land Acquisitions Proclamation No. 1 of 1900 which was designed to control the purchase of Land by Nigerians; second, the Registration Ordinance No. 15 of 1907 instituted compulsory registrations of all sales of Land with the colonial government, and third, the Crown Land Ordinance No. 13 of 1908 which regulated the management, control and disposal of Crown Land (C.K. Meek, 1957). This relates to the fact that land is an important aspect of implementation of development of low-cost houses.

However the non-customary tenure changing from communal one to an individualistic one was a model based on English statutes, the common law of England and the doctrines of Equity - this non-customary does run parallel to the customary. Despite all changes, problem of conflicts and withholding land does exist.

The UN had earlier identified the problem in the UN conference on human settlement in Vancouver in 1976 which stressed that land is a scarce resource whose management should be subject to public surveillance or control in the interest of the nation and warned also that private land ownership is a principal instrument of accumulation and concentration of wealth and therefore contributes to social injustice. If not checked, may become a major obstacle in the planning and implementation of development schemes (UN Report 1976) such as the low-cost housing. This inspired Nigeria Government in her policy issues and recommendation was based on Nationalisation of the land which was the "Nigerian Land-use Decree of 1978" (Federal Republic of Nigeria Gazette 1978). This has eased the provision of Nigeria low cost housing but there is problem of rivalry between State Government and Federal Government. The Federal low-cost housing were located at distances far away from urban infrastructure. The decree spelt out that each state government shall be in charge of this land, and any occupation of land shall be allocated by the Governor of the State. But with the new decree the land was available for low-cost projects throughout the country.

In most cases land for building low-cost housing is costly in most African cities, as evaluation of most researchers has always been based on material alone. If material cost is reduced, solution to land is also an important issue.

Development Concept

Most African governments embark on the provision of low cost housing, for example Kenya's 1969 - 74 Development Plan - argues for policy of decent housing in which a decent house was defined as a structure with at least two rooms, a toilet, a shower, and a kitchen. Despite the policy argument for two rooms decent house, most researchers at the time objected to the idea, that poor people could not afford it. Even during the colonial period as Richard Stren 1972 explained in the case of Kenya, colonial government knew in 1943 that experience in the rest of the world had shown that it would probably not be possible to build reasonable housing for the poor unless some form of subsidization was adopted. That is why it provided housing on a bed space basis to workers (UN Habitat 1987). The Colonial Government prohibited workers from taking their families along with them from villages, so the question of providing housing for family never arose (Habitat, 1987).

The concept of sites and services was also adopted in most African countries for the poor, in which World Bank is a major donor. Their objective in 1973 was to stimulate self-help and made it possible for the poor to house themselves in a cohesive community with minimum public expenditure. However experience shows that such projects may not reach the target group. Even in Kenya the council felt that site and service plots are not the answer to the man with no means but it was a solution to the man who had money and the desire to build. In Kenya it was noted that dozens of schemes were undertaken all over the country, only for the plots to remain vacant for many years without development. (Habitat, 1987).

Possibly with all the above approaches the Governments of various countries in Africa embarked on one-bedroom housing scheme to be built and the project beneficiary should be encouraged to build additional room, when he could afford to do so. This was not new because the colonial governments in most African countries had earlier started with the idea of bed spaces. However, most Governments of African countries embarked on low-cost housing in this form. Like many other countries in Africa, N. O. Jorgensen, 1972 for Kenya noted the following areas where standards have to be applied, (a) Over all plan for layout of houses; (b) Maximum distance between houses acceptable floor level and floor materials; (c) Minimum room size; (d) Acceptable standards for ventilation insulation, lighting and other services. Likewise Nigeria had the same objectives

for planning and implementation of one core that is designed principally to meet the needs of low income workers. The essence of the design is affordability. The design was one bedroom core house (Ministry of Housing, 1984). See Fig.2.

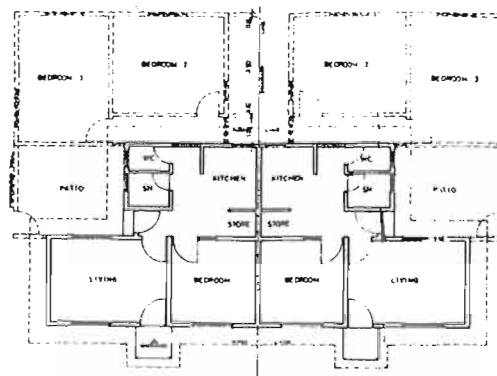


Fig.2

Nigerian Low Cost Housing, One bed core-

Therefore single plan was designed for a whole country with diversity of traditional, and cultural background, and different climatic problems and was not suitable for the country. Even in Kenya one-room 'core' housing could not be started at the time. They were opposed as building the room did not provide enough privacy, especially for families with children (Habitat 1987). However, in Nigeria, 1979 - 1984 the civilian administration of the president Shehu Shagari embarked on 2000 low-cost dwelling units in each of the then 19 States plus the Federal capital territory per annum (A.O. Ozo, 1986). But the project target for the whole nation was of 40,000 units annually (West Africa Magazine, 1982). At that time Nigeria became one of the few countries in the developing world, where housing was placed second to agriculture in its national development plan 1980 - 1984 and was the biggest and most ambitious project ever undertaken by any government in Nigeria (A.O. Madelior, 1987).

Politically, many governments have aimed to solve the housing problem. Architecturally, the political discussion without the proper view of the architecture, social, and cultural background led to such low cost housing schemes not achieving their aim. In the Northern part of Nigeria, the houses were abandoned and police forces were forced to live in them because they did not reflect their living pattern. The layout was of grid-iron system.

Building Materials

The building materials is another aspect in the low-cost housing to be looked into, in most cases. Costly materials were used for construction in order to meet the building standard, most of this materials were imported that increased the price of

price of construction. It would be better for the standards to encourage available building material within the given environment.

Finance

The finance aspect of housing in Nigeria for example was mainly from the Federal Government for low cost housing. The Federal (FMB) is the major Agency in mortgage financing for individuals to obtain loans, and buy houses and also provide loans to new class state government housing corporation and private real estate. Developments focus only on middle and high income groups. Even the government low-cost financing policy made it difficult for the poor (N. Ozo, noted in 1986) that a loan coverage of 90 percent of the total cost of valuations is subject to a limitation and amortisation period of not more than 20 years an interest rate of 3.0 percent (now 6 percent or more) and Mortgage repayment of 25 percent on monthly income for owner occupiers. The monthly repayment constitutes about 50.0 percent of the urban poor household income if not more as against the required 25.0 percent (a. Ozo, 1986). This causes debt, the amortisation repayment structure is not towards the income of the urban poor and does not reduce the cost of house.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The low-cost development strategy shows that most urban poor need to be subsidized for the low-cost housing. The living pattern of the people in most cases was not put into consideration, also climate and environmental conditions were not considered as part of living. A well designed house should always put all the factors above into consideration.

Land as an important aspect of low-cost house, in many cases was not put into consideration in determining the cost of a house. It does not show that cost can only be based on material of construction without labour and land, in which case many researchers do not indicate.

Location of low-cost housing is another problem. Even if the price of houses is reduced in many ways, the poor may not be able to afford if low-cost housing is far from place of work. In the Kenya Sessional paper No. 5 of 1986, it was recognised that housing estates should be sited fairly close to industrial enterprises and other places of employment in order to save workers some of the time and expenses involved in travelling (Habitat 1986).

For example in Nigeria, rivalry between the Federal Government and State Government projects indicate that the low-cost housing was located at a far distance from urban infrastructure. The urban poor are faced with high transport cost. Low-cost housing should be located within an existing infrastructure or attempts to integrate the poor and the rich within minimum distance from one another, or possibly to be served by the same infrastructure where the rich will oversee the efficiency of the facilities while the poor will benefit from the same facilities.

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