The Emerging South African Architect: Response and Responsibilities in State Housing

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Abstract

Housing in South Africa is often with limited or no involvement of the Architect. The noninvolvement of the Architect has been blamed on both the architectural practices and also on the attitude of the state to the importance of the architect in housing. Architecture being a profession that takes on socio cultural and environmental dimensions of the built environment has the ability to respond to the housing challenges in South Africa. But the South African Architect despite being skilled to take on such complex built environment challenges has so far not participated and housing deteriorates to a national crisis level. The paper starts out by outlining the background of architecture practice in South Africa and concludes by proposing ways the planner and architect may get involved in state housing.

Keywords: Housing challenge, Built environment, Architectural practice
1. Who is the Emerging South African Architect

Architecture as a profession in apartheid South Africa was exclusive to the white population and like in many other countries was (and probable still is) a male oriented profession. The medium of teaching and learning was in Afrikaans, which was the official language of the time. At the dawn of democracy this exclusion became glaring and like in all other professions needed strategic transformation policy intervention towards a more inclusive profession.

Professional practice is governed by the Architects Act of 2000 (Act 44 of 2000) which establishes the South Council of Architecture Profession (SACAP) and recognizes various categories of professional registration which are discussed later. Prior to this South African Council of Architects (SACA) legislated by the Architects Act 1970 (No. 35 of 1970), recognized only one professional architect with no recognition for intermediary professional categories such as technologist, or draughts person. Registration with Council of Architects was and is still required before a qualified architect can render services to the general public. So under the Architects Act 1970 only the professional Architect was registered and thus eligible to render architectural services to the general public. All other categories provided support services in form of technical documentation and drafting to the council registered professional architect. Due to the apartheid past there was a clear racial line between the registered architect and the other categories not registered with the SACA. The SACA professional Architect was responsible for building works of over 500 square meters irrespective of building complexity; as such the involvement of the architect in the design and construction of the state housing units was unwarranted.

SACAP introduced the intermediary professional categories being the Professional senior architectural technologist, professional architectural technologist, Professional architectural draughts person alongside the Professional architect as a means of achieving inclusion. This step was however met with criticisms and objections, which bothered around the specialization of technical expertise needed to support the ‘professional’ architect (Steyn 2011). This school of thought argues that architecture and the architectural technology represent two completely different streams of expertise. In other words the architectural technologist cannot progress to become the Architect. SACAP refuses this point of view and makes provision for the Architectural Technologist to progress into becoming the architect, all in the bid to be a more inclusive profession. Bearing in mind that architecture was historically reserved for the white African, it required concerted effort to get the deprived black African candidates on board in pursuing a professional carrier in architecture, as opposed to being support technologists and draught persons which was previously the norm. Each level of professionalism is allowed to carry out work as defined by the Identification of Work (IDoW) 2011 gazette notice of SACAP.

The paper presents the notion the involvement of the professional architect in state housing is of utmost importance, and the continued noninvolvement is part cause of housing delivery and human settlement problems unfolding in the country. Despite the huge budgetary allocation and large population affected by poor design and delivery systems the architect has been removed from participation in solving the housing crisis. It argues that the continued noninvolvement of the architect is due to past separate development of the apartheid era which affected both the training and practice of Architecture in South Africa. A historic approach is used to evaluate the past practices and the consequence it has on the present day practice.

2. The Architect in Training

To become a Professional Architect, SACAP recognizes both the formal tertiary educational and the experiential routes. Both routes take a minimum of seven years to achieve the professional architect status. In the tertiary institution route for example at the University of
Kwazulu Natal (UKZN), a student firstly does the three years Bachelor of Architectural Studies (BAS) after which he is recognized as a Senior Architectural Technologies by SACAP. On completing the BAS degree, the IDoW allows graduates to take on projects of low to medium complexity and sensitivity which includes guest houses, game lodges, 30 beds Hotel, and multi story apartments max 3 storey up to 10 units for town house developments. Project such as town house developments and residential villages are reserved for the professional architect. Some critics of the BAS program have argued that the program does not equip students with the necessary expertise to take on work as Senior Architectural technologists and advocate two separate streams of professionalism of design and technology (Steenkamp 2012). They argue that the program is too design focused and creates graduates that are not able to apply themselves in other needed areas of expertise, especially as technologists.

On completion of the BAS degree with an aggregate mark of 60%, the candidate is expected to proceed to the Master of Architecture (M Arch) two years program during which a course work and research thesis is carried out. With the M Arch in hand the student is the eligible to register with SACAP as a candidate Architect during which s/he is expected to train under the mentorship of a professional architect for another two years. Exposure and experience obtained during this period prepares the candidate to sit for professional exam to qualify as a professional Architect.

On graduation from school of architecture, the young architect is registered as a candidate Architect by the South African Architectural Council (SACAP). Like any other professional qualification, the young architect is expected to undergo further training in the field under mentorship of a registered architect for a period of two years. During this period the young Architect is exposed to practice issues which include project initiation, design, technical documentation and office administration. On the project administration exposure s/he must be able to take a project from inception to completion and with office administration s/he must be able to deal with all aspects of administration which will include dealings with the clients, contractor and other consultants. To be able to successfully do the latter, s/he must have good leadership and writing skills with which to communicate with the project team. Once the young architect is able to successfully carry out these aspects of work s/he becomes more confident in offering the services s/he has been trained for and prepared to venture off and set up a practice. But then on the business side of things; what kind of business vehicle should be used? What are the government statutory requirements the company must meet up with to qualify to practice in South Africa?

In setting up an architectural practice state policies on transformation must be taken into consideration, especially if to be of service to the state in housing. For instance the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) program of the state must be taken into consideration when considering a business vehicle especially if the young architect intends to work for the state. Other targeted procurement policies such as location of the practice, company size, number and demography of staff employed (or project team), annual turnover are critical considerations. The role of the Architect as the client representative must seek to implement client’s objectives. Of old it was that of division wherein the architect is said to have used the line to divide (Brink 2012). Now in the post apartheid era the architect is expected to use the line to pull together. This can be done both at planning and implementing stages of construction. As a key player in the construction industry, the Architect takes on leadership roles, making key decisions in implementing state policies.

Therefore if the architect fails at implementation levels of the broader transformation objective of the client then the project will fail on its short term objectives, achieving only long term objectives of infrastructure development. The role of the architect is therefore beyond impacting on the built environment (in form of design and technology) but also in the sphere of training, equipping, and mentoring young architects and also championing clients’ objectives in the construction industry.
3. Architectural Services and State Housing

Architects provide their services in areas of design, project documentation, administration and site supervision. The peculiar skill has traditionally been that of design with other skills are more unknown to the general public. For the successful completion of a project the architect also must be well vast in materials and technical knowledge and leadership skills. This failing the intended design can be distorted by poor specification writing, technical documentation and project management.

Since the time of le Corbusier (1927) the role of the architect has been questioned. From being the master builder, the architect as the main custodian of knowledge in the design and implementation of building projects, to the current period when the roles and skills are being shared by other professionals in the built environment. Despite this ‘deskilling’ of the architect (Gerald Steyn 2011), the role of the architect remains to provide professional services in the built environment, more specifically in the responsible design and implementation of a building or group of buildings and structures (SACAP 2011). The emerging South African Architect has to be sensitive to not only the physical environment but also to the socio cultural and political contexts.

The Interim Identification of Work (IDoW) Framework published in October 2011 outlines works for which the different categories can render to the general public in line with section 18 of the Architects Act of 2000. Its aims and objective amongst others is to protect the public, and the environment, provide a framework within which the identification of work can be legislated and enforced. It also aims to utilize skilled resources in a manner that is efficient. With the new IDoW recognition is given to the differences in the competences of the various professional categories In essence the architect has the ability to resolve complex project matters which include design, contract documentation and administration, legal and ethical aspects of project and business. These are the kind of complexity housing delivery and human settlement development present.

4. Client Architect Agreement

Housing in South Africa is complex and enshrines social, cultural, political and environmental challenges. It requires an understanding of this barrage of variables, thus can be categorized as a complex built environment challenge requiring expertise intervention of the architect. Section 26 of the South African Constitution 1996; give all South Africans the right of access to adequate housing. The department of Human Settlements recognises the need for sustainable housing development of quality housing products that improves the quality of life of the residents and also meets the requirements of sustainable development (Human Settlements Minister 2010). This moves away from the notion of single unit developments to a larger project scale and budget which warrants the involvement of the leadership skills of the Architect.

The housing delivery challenges have been blamed on a capacity problem, and an inability to ‘draw on resources located in the traditional housing and property markets’ (urban LandMark & SHF 2010). To meet this capacity need the UKZN floated a Housing masters program and now an undergraduate program which seeks to train future housing professional in dealing with the housing problem. But one asks where are the architects, who are trained to take on complex built environment challenges?

The answer to this question may lie on two basic grounds. One being the segregation history of the country and the other in the way architects are trained. During the apartheid era separate residential areas were established by the Group Areas Act of and kept different racial groups apart. The resulting consequences of this is the definite separate development of the different racial groups to the extent that the day to day domestic practices of one are
alien to the other (Maluccio 2000). Such practices include how a household socialises, the cultural behaviours, food cultivation and storage, hygiene, etc. While the black African maybe more exposed to the white African’s domestic practices, the vice versa is less likely. It is also uncommon to find the white African mixing and socialising easily in a black township. So how then does the architect (who was predominantly white) able appraise and define a housing development brief successfully without breaking down these barriers, or better still emerging from such black townships. Looking at the design of the houses delivered in the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) it demonstrates the lack of understanding of the black African household, especially in terms of socio cultural practices. Obviously the design which is reportedly to have been done in the 1950s (Frescura 1986) was done by a white African with little regards for the needs of the African household. To date this design has not been revisited and continues to be rolled out by the state. Coetzer (2010) notes that the same lines architects used to divide can now be used to bring together, this will only happen where there is a buy in to meeting the set objectives (of the states). This requires commitment to the profession.

The second reason for non-participation of the architect in housing of the poor is that architecture training focuses on design and side lines other aspects of the profession. Thus producing graduates that have an inclination towards the design of luxury projects (Noero 2011). As a result we see the continued rollout of the match box housing settlements. Noero notes that the South African graduates are removed from other spheres of practice such as project management, property development, and technical documentation. Further to this, probably due to a poor understanding of what value the architect adds, the states has exhibited reluctance to engage the architect in state housing (Harber 2010).

5. Conclusions and Recommendation

In conclusion the roles and responsibilities of the Architect are beyond those of design which has been the focus of architectural training for many years. While SACAP recognises other specialities in architecture, the state has not made use of the problem solving skills of the built environment professionals. To successfully engage the architect, an appraisal of project packaging in the housing and human settlement needs to be conducted by both the state and the council to outline architectural profession intervention.
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