Diepsloot - Diep Soak & Curl

INFORMAL CITY: DIEPSLOOT

Diepsloot Reception Area, Johannesburg, 2009

First Fix - Autodesk Open Think Box Competition 2009 - Winner of Professional Category
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This competition entry suggests an alternative approach to the provision of services in the upgrading of informal settlements. Whilst formal upgrading approaches concerned with defining ownership, security of tenure and eventually housing delivery are long and arduous processes, something can be done in the interim to improve inhabitants’ quality of life as well as stimulate the local economy through the provision of basic services. In fact, the failure of services that plagues informal settlements presents obvious opportunities for employment and development. Phase 2 of the Expanded Public Works Community Programme even makes provision for this.

In Diepsloot’s Reception Area, the failing sanitation system comprising communal toilets and water points results in 7.2 km of daylight sewage affecting the health of its approximate 25 000 inhabitants. The state is in the process of upgrading (reinstating) this failing system without addressing any of the factors which have contributed to its failure in the first place. This
scenario forms the basis for a ‘First Fix’ strategy developed for the competition.
When considering growth over time (in the form of self-constructed rental rooms or backyard shacks), the RDP type in fact performs as well as the much touted row-house and delivers densities approximating those of Reception Area. However, the siting of the RDP house in the middle of its plot results in poor in-between spaces when rental rooms are added over time.

Simultaneously, the existing settlement infrastructure and social amenities are often overburdened by the increased occupation. Interestingly, Chitungwiza on the outskirts of Harare, Zimbabwe presents an effective alternative in which two freestanding houses are joined along a shared boundary leaving enough space for rental rooms to define a quality semi-private communal space. The row-house type, promoted as the alternative to the free-standing RDP, starts out with higher initial densities, but has limited growth potential over time due to the inconvenience of tenants passing through the main house to access their accommodation. Units with passages on one side or access lanes at the back of stands may alleviate this to a degree. Whilst BNG ('Breaking New Ground') principles have been developed to render houses 'safe' as collateral for bank loans, current densities are not particularly efficient in the use of land and infrastructure. The banks furthermore frown upon self-constructed additions.

Due to Reception Area's complex and dense urban fabric, the strategy is realized in three scales: an existing toilet upgrade, a medium-sized toilet and shower facility, and a large service centre with toilets, comfortable bathrooms, laundry and community services.

The large units are arranged around semi-private courtyards. Besides regular bathrooms, they contain retail spaces which could be used by a hairdresser, internet cafe, laundry, tuck-shop, crèche, gym, etc. The two roof terraces can be used for drying clothes and by the gym as outdoor exercising spaces respectively.

Through incorporating lessons learnt from the dynamic urban and architectural character of the Reception Area, the facilities are cross-programmed to offer multiple services and income streams. All typologies would provide business opportunities for local caretakers and operators.
An environmentally sustainable approach is advocated in that the medium and large units employ a biogas digester, which will assist with the revival of river ecologies and improvement of water quality. Most large units are thus located near the river edge and can promote the revitalizing of this space as natural amenity. Methane, another by-product, can be used as fuel for public lighting and heating. Hot water can be sold for nominally less than what it costs to heat it with traditional fuels.

This proposal posits the notion that just as a multitude of services are offered in the informal city, so public infrastructure can become a service offered to residents. This requires a lateral shift in thinking beyond the confines of specialised civil engineering and back into time, when the early industrialising cities’ bathhouses and serviced rooms in boarding houses catered to the needs of its migrant and temporary workforces attracted to jobs and opportunities. Providing dignified amenities in informal settlements hitherto suspended in an illegal, temporary limbo may be the first step in the slow process of formalising the many informal cities as legitimate parts of the city. As such, this project conceptually outlines an unexplored role for professionals of the built environment to work more creatively in multidisciplinary developmental teams considering some of the more pressing needs of a rapidly urbanizing society through embracing, rather than eschewing complexity.

26’10 SOUTH ARCHITECTS

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