

User Participation in the Eyes of an Architect and Gendered Spaces

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ABSTRACT

In Kampala City, the high rate of urbanisation has led to sprawling informal settlements which are characterised by substandard housing conditions. Urban sprawl wastes valuable land and makes services and infrastructure delivery expensive. Several housing projects were undertaken by government to provide affordable, adaptable and convenient housing solutions to low-income households. Most of these projects adopted a “top-down” approach in design, which seems not to have considered how the low-income households actually used. The paper shows that considerations for space use would lead to the development of more appropriate housing designs. It also shows that outdoor space use, which has been insufficiently addressed in government housing projects, is both functional and a resource to the low-income households. The paper utilises a combination of methods such as literature and document searches and reviews, in-depth interviews and systematic sketching. It illustrates that involving housing users in the preliminary stages of architectural design, as well as studying the way they use both indoor and outdoor space can be a solution towards attaining more suitable housing designs for low-income households. The paper argues that to low-income households, the house as external and internal space is not only a home but a space for subsistence and sustenance. It further argues that the provision of houses with considerations for how gender is enacted spatially could lead to the development of houses that can be user friendly to low-income households. The paper ends by suggesting that developing house designs that adapt to the way low-income households use space while preventing urban sprawl in the informal settlements is an important step towards the development of more effective housing designs.

Keywords: Gender; Indoor Space, Low-income housing; Outdoor Space Use, Urban Sprawl

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Uganda, formal housing provision by governments has been inadequate due to scarce resources. Attempts to house the low-income households resulted in isolated interventions at Namuwongo in Kampala, Malukhu in Mbale and Masese in Jinja. The Namuwongo housing scheme seems not to have benefited its intended beneficiaries, since most moved to other informal settlements elsewhere (Nnaggenda-Musana, 2008). The houses developed for the Masese housing scheme, which was developed mainly for low-income women, has also been greatly transformed, which points to the users’ efforts of making them user-friendly. There appears to be a mismatch between the housing that government provides and what the low-income households actually need. Failure of government to provide appropriate housing for low-income households has forced them to develop detached one-storey houses through self-help. These houses are contributing immensely to urban sprawl and the wasteful utilisation of public utilities.

Hamdi argues that it is important to involve the users of buildings in housing decisions. He puts forwards the concept of enablement – a way of designing without detailed programs that encourage rather than discourage pluralism in built form. Hamdi also considers participatory design which refers to the involvement of users and the community in design as an important

part of project management and also as a way of ensuring that building design is a rigorous inquiry of building form, user needs and habits. He states that he spent a lot of time trying to understand the tools and skills (alternate design strategies) that need to be explored with community groups to achieve an integrated design response (Hamdi, 1991: xi- xii). We as architects need to develop more appropriate design interventions that “get things started” according to Hamdi (Hamdi, 1991:xii). As Hamdi suggests architects should be able to develop appropriate housing through the involvement of users in design decisions.

The availability of funds to develop appropriate houses is one of the problems faced by low-income households, thus ways of promoting spontaneity, improvisation and incremental housing development need to be sought. An issue which is usually not tackled in design is the issue of gendered spaces. This paper discusses gendered spaces in housing and focuses on how low-income housing can be developed by studying how space is used in relation to gender. The problem of the sprawling informal settlements and how they can be controlled is also examined.

2.0 GENDER CONSTRUCTED SPACE

The houses for the low-income in Kampala are spatial contexts in which the social order is reproduced. Public and private space in a home are understood in gender specific terms. For example houses constructed by men were found to have been transformed according to women views since they usually stay at home most of the day and do more chores in it thus show more design awareness towards spatial needs.

In the United States several books have been written about space and gender. Spain (1992) a professor of urban and environmental planning in Virginia in the book “Gendered Spaces” argues that in homes as well as academic institutions and work places spaces have been defined by gender; cultural constructions of gender have determined the definition of space. Women’s access to shelter has an impact on their improvement, that of their children and the whole society and ought to be a global concern. Most past international policy documents argue that “governments should” do any number of things, this may have a rationale in the abstract but it ignores the real forces which generate change on the ground (Dandekar ,1993). Hayden an urban historian and architect (1981) wrote about the need to change the designs of American homes, neighbourhoods and cities. The main impulsion in writing the book was to acclimatise the newly industrialised society and create an ideal standard of living, such that everyone, including the women and children would live up to their potential in their daily activities. To Hayden social problems can be addressed when spatial problems are dealt with.

3.0 METHODS TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

The results of an investigation into ways in which housing can be made more user-friendly are presented. It has been noted that various efforts and resources have been directed to this cause but the problem continues. This study considers alternative design solutions. The overall objective of the study is to develop low-income houses that will make the intended users stay in them without moving away. To fulfil the objectives the following methods were utilised:

- (i) Different literature about similar topics was surveyed and reviewed to understand how more appropriate low-income housing solutions have been developed elsewhere;
- (ii) Desk studies of documents and design proposals about housing projects and other government documents about low-income housing provision were studied to gain awareness on housing issues in Uganda;
- (iii) Field observations were done by the researchers to be able to understand the problem in its context;

- (iv) In-depth interviewing with house users and key-persons were carried out to acquire a comprehensive understanding of how space is used by the different users and the low-income housing community;
- (v) An inventory of the existing houses was made and different design variants were worked out through systematic sketching to arrive at the more appropriate solutions.

Data, investigator, theory and methodological triangulation of the different design methods were done as a way of cross verification from several sources to increase the credibility and validity of the findings. The different methods used led to the same findings.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 User Participation in Housing Design

Participation as a concept is well integrated in all housing schemes of Uganda. A large percentage of the Ugandan housing schemes adopted the participation approach for example by involving the users in preliminary discussions, building materials provision or house construction. However user participation is rarely applied in architectural design. For example at Masese project, designs are prepared at the technical offices with different prototypes from which the users can choose. It is noted that choices are made not according to the suitability of the architectural design to the needs of the users, but mainly due to household size or due to potential users' capability to repay loans. There appears to be a mismatch between the provided design solutions and what the low-income households actually need, which compels them to alter the designs of their houses to suit their ways of living and lifestyle or in some cases forced them to move to other places. This further contributes to the horizontal housing expansion which aggravates the problem of urban sprawl.

4.2 Gender Constructed Space

Low-income housing in Kampala portrays spatial contexts in which the social order is reproduced.



Figure 1: The main house (centre). Mbuya. (Photo: Nnaggenda-Musana, 2003)

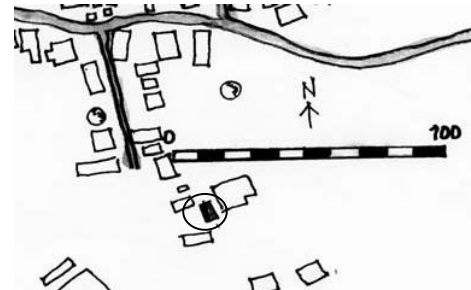


Figure 2: Location of the house in figure 1. Mbuya. (Photo: Nnaggenda-Musana, 2003)

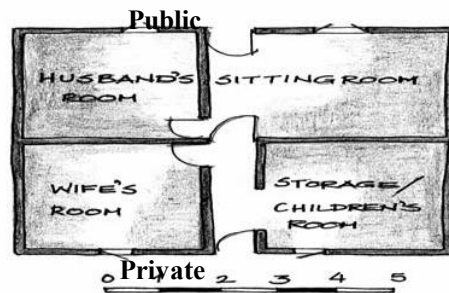


Figure 3: The floor plan of the house in figure 1, Mbuya. (Sketch: Nnaggenda-Musana, 2004)

Public and private space in homes is understood in gender specific terms, spatial relations in houses in the informal settlements show gender stratification. The main house “male sphere” usually occupies the front/important location while women and children are placed at the back and less important areas. It also signifies private versus public spheres where male sphere is closely related to sitting or public space compared to women backyard or private space. In figures 1 - 3 the male domain is positioned at the front or public space portraying importance while the women’s and children’s domain is placed at the back or private space. The man can be able to receive visitors easily since his space is located at the front.

4.3 Gender Transformed Space

Spatial relations in houses in the informal settlements of Kampala show that gender is enacted spatially. Houses constructed by men have been altered by the women who usually use them more since they work from home.

The timber shade in figures 1-3 was a later addition to the house that was required by a woman. The house had no kitchen and the veranda at the front of the house was used for cooking. According to the woman cooking was uncomfortable in a semi-private space at the front of the house and also during adverse weather conditions. Needing some privacy and covered space she asked her husband to construct the timber shade.



Figure 4: Altered frontal space. The timber shade (foreground) used as a kitchen is a later addition required by a woman. Mbuya. 2004

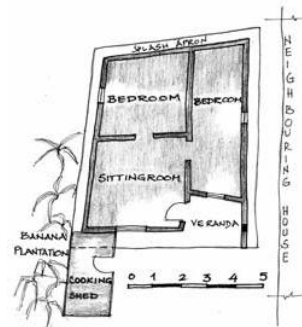


Figure 5: Plan of the house in figures 1 and 3 house. Mbuya. (Sketch: Nnaggenda-Musana, 2004)

Female and male spaces can be seen to be undefined in houses built newly (circa 90s). The dominance of the male space is reduced while women’s space starts to emerge invading the formerly male-dominated public space. In figures 4 – 5 the cooking space conventionally placed at the back is now predominantly placed at the front (public space).

4.4 Outdoor Space as a Resource

In the low-income housing, outdoor space is a basic functional space just like the indoor space. This space is hardly considered when housing designs are prepared. It is considered as a leftover after locating the various rooms, conventionally referred to as the house, within the plot and what remains becomes the outdoor space, although, this space is used by women for cooking, nurturing children, washing clothes, entertaining guests, and also bathing.

Outdoor spaces can also be a place for hosting visitors and socialising in good weather which would otherwise take place in the sitting room. It can also be used for storage of property during the day and as a place for children to play. Outdoor space acts as a place for income generating activities which can be performed while women attend to their daily activities.



Figure 7: Outdoor spaces are used by women for child rearing, cooking and washing clothes in Masese, (Photo: Elwidaa, 2010).



Figure 8 Entertaining visitors outdoors in Masese. (Photo: Elwidaa, 2010).



Figure 9: A woman selling vegetables while washing clothes. (photo: Elwidaa, 2010)

4.5 Indoor Space Usage

In almost all adopted designs, interior space has been modified and adjusted to suit the users. For example corridors are closed off at one end to act as stores, kitchens or bathing spaces. In figure 10 after the corridor was closed off following a woman's decision, a bed was placed at the end and the space was transformed into a children's bed room. The women stores clothes and personal belongings in room corners and on strings above the bed. Some internal space can have multi functions. An internal space can act as a sitting room in the morning, a reception in case of visitors, a sleeping/ bed room at night and a storage place for personal property.

4.6 Communal Spaces

In the low-income housing intense use of outdoor areas was recognised. Women usually cook and wash cloth while watching their children play. Home activities are sometimes carried out communally. Carrying out activities communally makes them less tiresome or boring and more enjoyable. Neighbours socialise while cooking, planting, washing clothes or selling produce.



Figure 10: Internal corridor turned to a sleeping area, Masese. (Photo: Elwidaa, 2010)



Figure 11: Several activities taking place in a communal space Masese, (Photo: Elwidaa 2010)

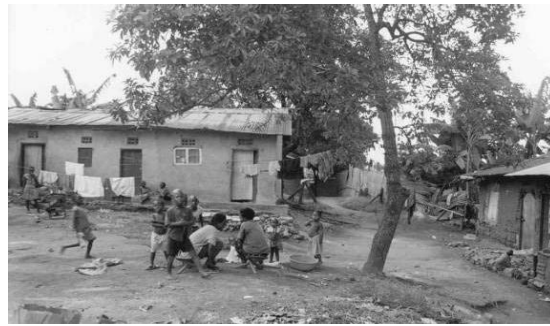


Figure 12: Women watching their children play as they cook. Mbuya, (Photo: Nnaggenda-Musana, 2004)

This solidarity among women combined with the insignificance of boundary walls and scarcity of land could indicate the need for architectural designs with communal spaces within the neighbourhood. Communal spaces would not only enable women to carry out activities in a more convenient way but can also create extra time for them away from routine chores, as well as minimise the need for house helps. As in figure 14, houses on individual plots can be joined together by backyards or front yards. This could be done easily by creating supervised play areas, to provide space for neighbourhood day care facilities, laundries, food or groceries kiosks, or elderly and homeless care centres. Toilets, kitchens or spaces for small scale agriculture can also be located in such spaces. Lack of public services such as garbage collection makes it necessary for the provision of communal efforts at the local level.

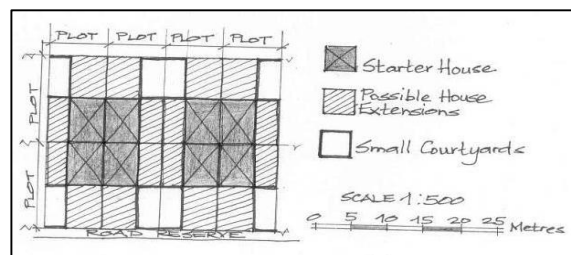


Figure 14: Extending houses to form smaller courtyards, which can be used as communal space. (Sketch: Nnaggenda-Musana, 2004)

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

User participation is not incorporated in low-income housing design resulting in a disconnection between the provided designs and what actually satisfies the users. User participation in design strengthens the ability of low-income households to participate efficiently in the development of good housing solutions and in decisions about priorities.

Housing should be viewed as a place where gender related forces and activities are continuously enacted. Design decisions should respond to these forces and activities whereby both women's and men's spatial, socio-cultural and practical needs are met. Outdoor space as key habitual and functional space is not well appreciated missing out on opportunities of attaining more convenient designs that respond to the users' life styles

Space when designed should emphasise the way it can be effectively utilised to prevent future alterations that can squander both the users and government limited resources, as well as contribute to urban sprawl, which could be reduced by guided incremental expansion.

Communal space has proved to be an important functional space, therefore, integrating it in housing design can reduce gender segregation, lessen domestic work and could support home based enterprises, which enable women to earn some income towards a more resourceful and satisfactory neighbourhoods.

6.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors of this paper are grateful to Sida/SAREC for the financial support that enabled them to accomplish the present research.

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