

THE RED LOCATION PILOT DESIGN PROJECT

A flexible approach to housing

The standard approach to subsidy housing in South Africa is free-standing houses on separate plots, which causes urban sprawl and increases infrastructure and transport costs for residents and the municipality.

There is a need for higher density urban development to provide better access to social and commercial services and public transport, while lowering infrastructure and service costs. This would enable more resources to be spent on larger and better quality homes.

Red Location – a flexible approach to housing

In order to encourage the use of alternative materials, new designs and high-density housing, Nelson Mandela Bay embarked on a pilot housing project in 1998, in an area in New Brighton called Red Location. The pilot houses were designed by Joe Noero, the architect of the Red Location Museum, which is located across the road from the housing development. The design accentuated the link between high-density housing and the existing slum dwellings in the area. Land was identified and the design was accepted in cooperation with the community and ward councillors.

The Red Location Project introduced higher density, multi-storey living, alternative building materials, possibilities of extension, and integration of residential and commercial activity. The innovative and flexible approach attracted local and international attention and environmental and energy sustainability practitioners see it as a significant example.

The project demonstrates an alternative to the old township model of “one plot, one house, one family”. 18 narrow semi-detached units show what can be done with the housing subsidy (R16 000 in year 2000) plus a top-up loan. Most low-income houses in South Africa are built on 250m² sites. Each semi-detached



PHOTO: ERIC MILLER

RED LOCATION

Red Location is an area in New Brighton in Nelson Mandela Bay, that derives its name from the red corrugated iron houses that were originally army barracks. During apartheid, the area was a site of intense political and racial conflicts which resulted in mass unrest and police brutality.

Prior to the advent of democracy in 1994, many museums celebrated historic victories and battles of the British and Afrikaners. But in New Brighton, the Red Location museum has a unique focus on the issue of institutionalised racism and the anti-apartheid movement.



The Red Location houses.

house in the Red Location Project, is built on a mere 100m².

This is a 21st century variation on the Victorian terraced house, standing on a foundation not wider than a single garage. Every house shares a communal covered courtyard with its neighbour. The narrow foundations greatly reduced costs and the materials used are environmentally friendly. Two of the houses have a third storey constructed entirely of corrugated iron (making use of the building materials already available from the shacks in the area).



Red Location Apartheid Museum to the right of the new housing development.

A high-density, mixed use development

The houses are “multiple-use” – residents can live on the first floor and perhaps let the roof unit to a tenant, while they may open a “spaza shop” (small retailer operating from home or a small stall) or workshop in the garage on the ground floor. There are also places for light industry in the neighbourhood. These 16 units are of different sizes from 42 to 69m² double-storey row houses, on 100m² plots. Inside and outside spaces were designed to enable extensions upwards or sideways.

In consultation with the community, 18 beneficiaries were selected from 250 people. Income level was a main criterion, where future tenants had to be in the R1 500–R2 500 salary bracket, to ensure that they could pay the rent. Tenants had to come from the nearby New Brighton area, and female-headed household, larger families and elderly people were prioritised. Two units were allocated to disabled people and were adapted on the ground floor with larger bathrooms, toilets and grab-rails.

The future tenants participated in house design meetings and workshops and their input resulted in changes and improvements to details and finishes. They accepted key features such as double-storey units, small plots and shared walls.

Social workers also talked with people about the necessity of paying and about the problems they have.

The project provided the “rent-to-buy” alternative, where units

will be transferred from the Housing Company to the families after an agreed period of time. Due to problems with rates defaulting, the project prepared to transfer all houses to owners. The selling cost of each unit was R24 000 and the difference with the housing subsidy to be redeemed was between R12 000 and R24 000 for families not entitled to access the housing subsidy.

The houses led to or inspired other high-density housing projects such as Abahlali, Sakhuluntu, and Sakhasonke. The project opened a fruitful debate on new kinds of housing in the municipality and appeared in different papers and magazines. The houses are easily noticed due to their bright colours, and people still phone the municipality to ask about them.

In 1998 a national competition was held for the design of a civic precinct, and the Red Location Apartheid Museum emerged as the winning entry. The Red Location site was chosen to honour the people in the area who were involved in the drawn-out struggle against racism and apartheid. When the municipality built the Apartheid Museum in front of the Red Location houses, the housing project with its streetscape, trees and lighting became an integral element in the museum spatial environment.



The Red Location Project was presented in the South African journal Architect in the Nov/Dec 1998 issue, and in "Leadership" in March 2000.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM RED LOCATION

At the time of implementation, there was a predominant opinion among poorer people that one should receive housing for free. People demanded to be given houses. Through the Red Location Project people learned to be more open to new ideas and that they need to cooperate if they want something extra. If not, the option was to remain on the long waiting list to receive an "RDP house", i.e. the small house delivered through the former Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP).

The association between the housing company and the local authority must not be too close, because people ask "Why should we pay for houses when others receive government houses free?". Government and housing companies must thus be separated, structurally and physically. The housing company should also not be seen as a bank with perceived unlimited resources.

It is important to consider community views, as well as the views of key politicians, regarding suitable houses in a project that introduces innovative housing types. Technical solutions should be sufficiently new, without provoking too much controversy.

A mix of different housing sizes, materials, and overall variation in design contributes to communities with less segregation and enhances the well-being of the inhabitants, as opposed to the dullness often found in those housing developments that consist of endless rows of small identical and impersonal units.

Low quality construction material becomes expensive in the long run if maintenance is not carefully planned. In the case of Red Location, the material choice was partly made by the contractor. If technical quality had been better, houses would have been even more sustainable.