

A Herculean task in Alexandra township

Alex Renewal Project director, **Julian Baskin**, talks about the almost insurmountable task of providing housing to Alexandra township's large population and of government's new approach to achieving this.



In Alexandra township, north of Johannesburg, about 350 000 people live in a space of 1.6sq kilometres. Providing adequate housing for these people poses a difficult challenge. An aerial view of Alex (as it is known) reveals wall-to-wall roofs. There is no extra space on which to build new homes. About 8 500 families have already been removed from around the Jukskei River which runs through Alex and which can break its banks during summer rains. But even these removals have provided little extra space for building new homes.

COMPLEX HOUSING SCENARIO

A deeper look at Alex reveals a complex housing dynamic. It provides a home for older residents

who originally held tenure but who were disposed of this tenure by the apartheid state. In the absence of documents it is impossible to prove who currently holds the land. In the numerous backyards of these houses live tenants most of whom have long since stopped paying rent. This has resulted in a tense tenant/landlord relationship within Alex.

New arrivals also flooded into Alex and built shacks on any available space - on school grounds, in space reserved for roads, on the tributaries and the Jukskei's flood plain. Government policy states that these households cannot be evicted without government providing them with alternative housing. This policy has created resentment with older

residents who have long waited to be housed in decent accommodation. Yet despite this squeeze on accommodation according to Baskin, "If you're poor, you would prefer to live in a well located Alex shack close to work opportunities and other urban services than in a RDP house in a badly located area."

Another grouping are the households who occupy the abandoned factories/warehouses along Alex's borders. Crammed into these dilapidated buildings are thousands of Alex residents who cannot find any other housing. It is not uncommon for property owners to charge R350 for a small partitioned space, earning about R40 000 monthly rental from people living in these buildings.



With Alex upgrading, investors wish to build new shopping complexes to capture Alex spending. It now becomes more profitable to develop the land than to slumlord. The new owners of the buildings are demanding that government re-house such people when they evict them to enable commercial development. The government has taken the position that people cannot simply jump the housing queue because they are being evicted as tens of thousands of people live in equally desperate conditions and are waiting.

Then there are the hostels some of which have been converted into upgraded accommodation. At present hostel dwellers pay a low rent of R36 a month to the Council. In reality rents should be more like R350 per month. Residents however cannot afford this and so maintaining hostels costs the Council millions of rand each year.

Added to these complex demands for housing is the fact that most residents cannot afford decent accommodation. About a third of Alex's population has formal employment while the remaining two-thirds are employed within the informal economy with many scraping a living together on the margins. Some 20% of households earn R1 000 or less a month.

Compounding this inability to pay is the problem that about half of residents (52%) do not consider Alex their primary home. As a result many do not want to use their housing subsidy for a permanent home in Alex but rather on a house elsewhere, such as Limpopo, where they eventually aim to live or retire. Also 30% of residents are single people without children who do not qualify for a housing subsidy. So finding the resources within existing housing policy provides a huge challenge for those dealing with housing implementation.

PRIMARY OBJECTIVES

The Alex Renewal Project (ARP) began in 2001 with the idea that every ministry would contribute to a holistic strategy to transform the township. This only partially happened and by the end of 2004 it was clear to both government and the community that the ARP was not delivering. In 2005, into this housing quagmire, stepped Julian Baskin, as the new director. His job was to salvage the project. Amongst his tasks was to forge a new housing policy and translate this into actual homes for thousands of residents.

Various objectives have been set. Environmental health is the starting point, as any projects need to ensure against the outbreak of disease. Normalising the environment is also a primary objective. Good governance has to prevail and normal community services must be provided for and must run smoothly.

Governance in Alex broke down in the political struggles of the 1980s. In the more stable political environment of our newborn democracy new civic infrastructure has been built such as the impressive Alex police station. Crime has dropped by 40% as a result. The Alex community is well organised. More than any other township in South Africa civic structures have mushroomed. The hostel dwellers for example are well represented. For the City Council to move forward community consultation is essential and it has to know whom to consult in Alex's different constituencies.

A HOUSING STRATEGY

The ARP's housing strategy aims to provide for a variety of individual needs and circumstances. In the original strategy, 22 500 households were to be relocated out of

Alexandra; 6 500 backyards upgraded; and 11 000 social housing units were to be built. In the event 8 500 households were relocated to Diepsloot and Braamfisherville far from Alex's convenient location. As a result many have simply returned to Alex. The backyard programme never got off the ground because of tenure disputes, and the few social housing units that were built proved too expensive to rent and only served the 7% of households that earned more than R5 000 per month.

The Council has now decided to drop the original plan and for the first time to truly engage with what it means 'to have poor people in the city'. As a result it has revised its housing strategy. It has decided to provide 9 400 RDP houses and to introduce social housing with affordable rents. It also aims to upgrade hostels and provide single rental units.

About a third of the current residents will still have to be relocated and the Council needs to find an appropriate location on which to build homes. But *where* is the critical question. A decision has been taken not to remove households to land outside of the greater Alex sub-region.

The Council has looked at a number of options and it is the combination of these options that will provide the solution. The first is a greenfield development, which means building a new town from scratch and providing all the necessary bulk infrastructure such as access, sewerage and electricity. The second is to find smaller infill sites in adjacent areas like Kelvin and Linbro Park, which enables more cost effective development as the bulk services are already in place. The Council aims to find land on the periphery of greater Alex as previous relocations have clearly not worked and were also

perceived to be unjust.

Although infill sites provide less space for housing the Council believes this will in the end be cheaper as the infrastructure already exists. This policy is however contested within government as the Johannesburg Property Company, for example, prefers to use infill sites for the development of townhouses for richer residents who will provide a larger tax base for the city. The ARP however has continued to search for infill sites.

The Project is, for example, conducting discussions with AECl at Modderfontein that has a large land buffer area around its dynamite plant. AECl wants to develop the land for its own purposes but the Council is negotiating a 42-hectare piece of this land. The costs of this land will be off set by government investing in infrastructure that will enable better access to the rest of Modderfontein.

HOUSING TYPES

In building houses the Project has to ask a question that is being posed worldwide: how do you manage urbanisation without controlling people through stringent laws such as influx controls? The housing model that the government is looking at bears this question of increased density in

Johannesburg's urban townships in mind.

It has firstly developed a model for accommodating both family and single person households. The Council is looking at a housing model that will increase the density of housing. Typically a government RDP house is built on a 250m² plot. This has been reduced to an 80sq metre site. By building a double storey RDP house space is created to build rented rooms at the back. While the house itself is more expensive it requires less investment in roads. Thus the overall package remains much the same. In this way housing for single people can be provided whilst providing income for residents in the main house. This approach, the ARP believes, will be more effective than continuing government's expensive and unsuccessful attempts to collect rents.

These social housing units will be constructed with safety in mind. The walls of the houses will provide a wall to the street and thus are both cost and space saving. Children will be able to play in a safe space behind the walls and the housing units will be protected from crime. Access to the social housing units will be controlled through a single entrance.

The Council aims to put a great deal of energy into the rules of governance in these social housing units. In this way it hopes to move Alex from the ungovernable to governability. Households who commit to the township by using their housing subsidy will get help from the Council to maintain their housing units. A parallel process of urban governance will also take place. People are already learning that they cannot build or erect shacks wherever they want - in recent times no parkland around the Jukskei River has been occupied.

The civil construction for these houses is already underway and the Council will closely monitor their success.

Besides this social housing model, the ARP has developed other approaches to housing. One of these is a rented room complex with either shared or private facilities. Many management models are currently being explored including that of a franchise. Within this model the government would provide accommodation and hand it over to people to run as businesses. The franchise would establish certain standards that people would have to adhere to such as around the upkeep of buildings and rental limits. In turn franchise owners would rent out rooms in the buildings, some of which would have attached bathrooms, and thus make a living from the income.

Such facilities would be ideal for single people coming to Johannesburg for the first time. They could share a room with two or three other people at a reasonable cost. It would also provide single housing for those currently living in hostels. Over time such accommodation would replace the old hostels.

The housing policy is only a part of the Alex Renewal Project. But it is a critical part and if the Council does not get it right other renewal elements will probably also fail. The ARP is providing bold solutions for a huge and difficult task but for the first time the Council are genuinely grappling with the needs of the majority of Alex's poor residents.

This article is adapted from a presentation given by Julian Baskin at the Gauteng Natural Step Network Sustainable Breakfast in February this year.



The proposed double storey RDP house in a social housing complex