

DURBAN'S HOUSING IN CRISIS

by Crispin Hemson, Durban City Councillor

The Durban City Council's housing programme is under pressure on two fronts: a series of conflicts with Indian and Coloured tenants culminating in a rents boycott, and rising costs that are making the provision of houses for most applicants almost impossible. I wish to outline the background to the present position.

Until recently, the Council's programme for Indian and Coloured housing has been a response to the situation brought about by Government action. The extent of the housing estates, particularly Chatsworth and Phoenix, may lead one to see the housing programme as the creation of a vast new housing stock. This is not yet so. Until Phoenix was established, the houses built have been merely replacing the great number of houses lost through the implementation of the Group Areas Act.

The fundamental grievance, that housing was taken from people, thus obliging independent residents to become tenants of mass housing schemes, remains to engender continual conflict over housing policy. It is an ever-present factor in the protests of the communities.

THE LAST 20 YEARS

The Council's housing programme of the last two decades illustrates this factor and the series of difficulties and errors which have led to the present impasse. The Council began Chatsworth in 1963 to house people displaced from Cato Manor, Greyville and other areas declared White. Today it is a huge suburb of increasing diversity, with an estimated population of about 160 000. Its comparative attractiveness because of its lower rentals and relatively convenient location must not hide the fact that the Indian community as a whole have never accepted the need to move there when the majority had been living in adequate accommodation.

'They had been living in areas with their own religious, social and cultural institutions, and in the joint family system. Their land had room for fruit trees and they lived close to town. There was a spirit of community. In comparison, people don't feel they are living in Chatsworth as human beings. They moved to a monotonous environment. The lack of amenities and the presence of gangsterism induces those that can afford it to sell and move elsewhere.' (one of the members of the Durban Housing Action Committee).

After Chatsworth the Council's programme was nearly halted as Government allocations were cut back in the early 1970s. But new housing applications did not stop. By 1974 the Council began pushing for more funds, initially for Coloured housing. The Coloured community in Durban have been particularly afflicted by an inadequate allocation of land, and immigration into Durban was exacerbating the shortage of homes. The Council responded, but made several errors as a result of the lack of proper consultation.

The first project was a set of three tower blocks in Sydenham, of the kind even then being condemned elsewhere as socially disastrous. High-rise flats are the least popular

housing option for most tenants, and the erection of the blocks has caused tremendous resentment.

Another scheme required the expropriation of homes in Sparks Estate. The scheme was then found to be economically unviable, and there is still conflict over what can be done with the land.

Since then sections of the Newlands East Scheme have been completed. Only half the land can be developed for housing purposes, because of steep slopes and the presence of ecca shale. Its location, the high rentals and lack of basic amenities have led to a militant mood amongst residents.

Improvements in amenities have been achieved in the other schemes, however. Durban's present Mayor, Sybil Hotz, campaigned vigorously for more and better facilities during her term as chairperson of the Health and Housing Committee. A Community Facilities levy on tenants has financed sportsgrounds, libraries, swimming pools and community halls. It was introduced to improve the acceptability of the schemes, but tenants are often unhappy that they must pay for these amenities, some of which are normally borne by the Rates Account.

In 1975 construction of houses began in Phoenix, a new housing area north of the city which is planned to be larger than Chatsworth. By mid 1986 over 28 000 houses should have been completed. It is superior in amenities to Chatsworth, but has similar problems of community dislocation, and much higher rents, as well as high transport costs for most tenants. An attempt to excise Phoenix from Durban was made by the Council in 1977, as part of a process of removing large Indian areas from the city. At the time this process had, it seems, the support of local, provincial and national government, but it met with determined and, so far, successful opposition from tenants and other voluntary organisations. The opposition to autonomy was the forerunner to a series of protests on housing.

An obstacle to our housing programme has been the extent of land held by the Department of Community Development, with a municipal valuation of roughly R24 million. Two former residential areas, Cato Manor and Block A in Greyville, have thus been sterilized for years. Cato Manor will eventually be released for Indian occupation, though the extent of ecca shale will limit its potential for development.

THE CONFLICT AND ITS CAUSES

Since 1979 there have been increasingly vigorous protests, culminating in a rents boycott in March 1981. A working committee was set up by the Housing Committee of the Council. It includes representatives of the Durban Housing Action Committee, which was formed from the various ratepayers' associations. The purpose is to improve conditions in housing schemes, but progress has so far been slow. DHAC is pushing for rental reductions, subsidisation of housing, and an initiative to pressure the Government into changing its housing policy.

It is clear that large numbers of tenants support the protests, although the rents boycott is the first test of strength for

DHAC. It seems that the factors giving rise to the new toughness among residents of housing schemes are these:

1. The continued implementation of the Group Areas Act, as I have mentioned.
2. Increased expectations aroused by Government statements.

Shifts in Government policy and its desire to meet some of the demands of conservative Black leadership have led to statements that seemed to promise improvements. Circulars 9 and 10 of 1980 appeared to have the effect of reducing rentals. In fact the net effect on "basic rentals" in Durban was a decrease of 3,3% (basic rental refers to interest and redemption on the money borrowed from the National Housing Commission), while tenants in the large R150-250 group suffered large increases.

3. The high costs of recent schemes.

Although the Council's rent increases in 1980 were limited to a maximum of 15%, and no increases had been made in 1978-9, they were enough to cause great resentment. Protests emerged mostly in areas such as Phoenix and Newlands East where rentals were already much higher than in other areas. It must be remembered that tenants who had been living in cheap older housing — e.g., site rentals in Tintown had been R2,40 monthly — faced great absolute increases in their housing costs by moving to new schemes, and many still do. Their incomes have not increased correspondingly. In addition, the location of the new schemes imposes high transport costs on most tenants.

4. The lack of political representation.

A powerful element in the protests has been the conflict over who represents the communities. The Local Affairs Committee system, promoted assiduously by the Government, even in opposition to the wishes of the LAC members, is increasingly unworkable. The forces opposed to the original imposition of the system have strengthened. In Newlands East no-one was nominated for two vacancies on the Coloured LAC, and the Administrator had to appoint two outsiders. In Chatsworth, LAC members may no longer serve on the Southern Durban Civic Affairs Federation. DHAC claims that it alone represents residents of housing schemes.

The lack of representation in local government has meant that the communities have been powerless to fight for a reasonable allocation of the resources of the city through the electoral process.

5. The political resurgence of the Black communities.

This was described to me as the awakening of a people who felt too insecure in the 1960's to challenge what was happening to them. Anyone who has had to work in a committee with the new political leadership knows how vigorous the forces now being unleashed are.

6. The long-standing mistrust of the Council.

Much of the conflict has shown the depth of the antipathy felt towards the City Council. One has only to read the early ethno-centric White accounts of Durban's establishment to realise how immediately White hostility to the Indian settlers arose. The City Council reflected this attitude for many years, for example, in the restrictions it placed on Indian trading in the 1890s. Even in 1980 some councillors claimed that the presence of cars and TV sets in Phoenix proved that protests based on poverty are fallacious (the statistical evidence produced was ignored). The persistent anti-Indian agitation among Whites in

Durban has forged a deep mistrust which has had no difficulty in finding fresh evidence. The protesters believe that there has been little fundamental change:

"There is a genuine and fully justified belief in the minds of our people that the authorities and more particularly the Durban City Council are not making any serious attempt to understand their problem and in many instances do not care about their problems." (Mr D. K. Singh, chairman of the DHAC).

What lies ahead?

So far I have examined the political dimensions of the conflict: there are other pressures on the housing programme that are not directly political.

A revision of the Council's application lists has led to a sharp cutback on new Coloured housing. There are fears in the Council that a similar position may result with Indian housing, and that before long tenants will begin to refuse houses that they do not like. Meanwhile the long-term planning goes on apace. In parts of Phoenix North services are complete, and work has begun in Newlands West, another extensive area.

Increased costs are leading to a reduction of standards in new housing. There was a gradual process of raising standards in new schemes which is to be reversed, and house sizes are likely to be reduced. Meanwhile, the Council is approving tenders which will result in rentals that very few tenants can afford, banking on an increase in earnings of applicants by the time the houses are available.

What resolution is possible?

There are several options open to the Council in its response to the challenges posed by increased costs and housing protests.

'Self-help' housing: Logically, constantly reduced standards must lead to site-and-service housing, if the Council agrees to relax certain building bylaws in housing areas. This is no easy option. The cost of a serviced site has risen alarmingly, and is perhaps highest in Durban, where the topography pushes up costs. An effective scheme would require thorough organisation to ensure that houses are erected without delay and at genuinely lower costs. There is however a great deal of support for this in the Council. It would make use of the skills of the hundreds of small builders who are currently excluded from participation in housing by the vast size of the contracts, which have given rise to nearly monopolistic conditions.

Home ownership: Many houses that were once 'sub-economic' are being sold, and there are proposals to promote selling rather than renting. The advantages to the Council include reduced administration and maintenance costs, and to the tenant increased security.

Ending the Council's programme: Several councillors believe the Council is administering policies over which it has little control, but for which it is blamed. They would prefer the Government to take full responsibility for housing, while the Council would ally itself with the tenants and applicants in pushing for a better housing policy.

A separate housing department: This is one of the aims of the present Housing chairperson, Lesley Sprague. Housing would be controlled by one Council department, instead of construction by one department, administration by another, and so on. The result should be greater efficiency and fewer bureaucratic obstacles.

I do not know if agreement between the Council and the tenants is possible at this stage. The gap between the two sides is great, especially on such issues as subsidisation. It is inevitable that rising costs must lead to increased rentals, and this may cause further conflict at least in some areas. Ultimately, though, a rational housing programme is possible. I believe it would encompass a much greater diversity of styles, from squatter upgrading through to formal housing schemes.

There would need to be extensive subsidies for the poorest groups, but economic conditions should be such that as many people as possible should be fully represented in the authorities that determine and execute housing policy.

Such a programme is perhaps not possible yet, but the fact that people are beginning to demand a say in the way that they are housed means we are moving in a positive direction.

Footnotes to Organised Black Political Resistance, 1912 – 1950 on pages 10 – 13.

28. Communist Party of South Africa, Johannesburg District, *Communism and the Native Question*, Johannesburg, n.d. (c. 1935).
29. Simons, H.J. & R.E., *op cit*, p. 484.
30. Further detail can be found in Bunting, B., *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary*, London: Inkululeko Publications, 1975.
31. Carter G. and Karis T., *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol. I., *ibid* p. 310.
32. *Ibid*.
33. Opposition to the legislation is discussed in Haines, R. 'The Opposition to General Herzog's Segregation Bills' in University of the Witwatersrand Development Studies Group, *Conference on the History of Opposition in Southern Africa*, January, 1978.
34. See for examples: Stadler, A., 'Birds in a Cornfield: Squatter Movements in Johannesburg' in *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*, Vol. 6, no. 1, October 1979; Stadler, A., 'A Long Way to Walk: Bus Boycotts in Alexandra, 1940 – 1945', University of the Witwatersrand African Studies Institute seminar paper, 1979; O'Meara, D., 'The 1946 African Mine-workers' Strike' in *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13, no. 2, July 1975; Webster, E.C., 'The 1949 Durban Riots' in Bonner, P.L., *Working Papers in Southern African Studies*, Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 1977; Gerhart, G.M., *Black Power in South Africa*, Los Angeles: University of California, 1978, Chapters 2 and 3; Davie, K., 'Capital, Labour and the South African State', University of the Witwatersrand African Studies Institute seminar paper, 1979.
35. See Simkins, C.E.W., 'Agricultural Production in the African Reserves of South Africa', University of the Witwatersrand African Studies Institute seminar paper, 1980.
36. See report in *Daily Dispatch*, (East London), 25 1946, p. 10
37. Gerhart, G., *op cit*, p. 41.
38. Carter, G. and Karis, T., *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol. II, p. 305.
39. The developing relationship between the CPUSA and the ANC is described in Brooks, A., *From Class Struggle to National Liberation, the CPUSA, 1940 – 1950*. University of Sussex, 1970.

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