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Public Housing and Patterns of Family Life: Indian Families in Metropolitan Durban

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AIMS

To speak of 'the family' and 'housing' is akin to speaking of 'the dancer' and 'the dance'. Their ties, their oneness, and their otherness are endless. In our *experience* they often seem one; in our *thinking* they can be separated and joined in endless patterns. Intellectually, they can be expressed singly: here is the dancer, here is the choreographic sequence, or, here is the family (big, small, extended, nuclear) and here are the plans of the house. But, ultimately, to speak of one is to speak of the other. Many factors separate the two, intervene between them, and serve to make them non-coincident. There are dwellings that have nothing to do with families (or nothing *obvious* to do with families) and families which may be conceived of beyond, or before, any dwelling. It remains true, nevertheless, that in overt ways and overt liaisons, each is rooted in the other.

It is within this congeries of units (social and physical, physical and social) and relationships that the aims of this paper are to be found. Simply, they are:

1. to sketch the relationships which exist between houses and families;
2. to review Indian family-housing relationships in Metropolitan Durban;
3. to offer some hypotheses concerning the effects which housing forms have had on family life and community structures.

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The three sections of the paper provide, first, a background to family-housing relationships; second, a review of the provision of Indian housing in the Metropolitan area; and finally a consideration of family patterns and their hypothesized links to the system and form of housing and its provision. The emphasis is, however, on fairly pragmatic issues, on data we have gathered, and on family-cum-housing conditions as we have observed them using empirical, positivistic (and to that degree, limited) research techniques.

FAMILY AND DWELLING: A BROAD BACKGROUND

The 'physical' and 'social' relationships which link families and dwellings are, in one sense, so obvious as to deny the need for comment. Given certain climatic, technological and broad 'cultural' circumstances, it stands to reason that families, however defined, will live in dwellings, again however defined, which reflect their needs, desires and their structures.

Needless to say, social and familial images of needs, desires and ideal structures do not always coincide with everyday functions and behaviour. A Western 'architect-designed' home which separates adult and child sleeping areas and joins them in a common living and eating space may reflect general patterns of Western thinking about parents and children, while in practice the children may be in the adult rooms more than in their own as the reality of relationships makes itself manifest. Similarly, a Foulbé 'kraal' in the Cameroons may have a central room for the male head of family surrounded by the six rooms of six wives, while in practice the head of the family may rarely use his own room and, just as rarely, the second, third and fifth wives' rooms. Again, the practicalities of daily life, personality, the need for companionship and simple preferences may dictate a functional reality which deviates from the planned/built layout. Nonetheless, the relationships are there as a reflection of conceived need and idealized use patterns. And, in the cases cited at least, functional patterns of use and behaviour are a convenient and presumably acceptable adaptation of a space which was, in the first instance (and may very well remain), congenial to the family group and its members. In short, actual patterns are a modifi-

cation yet, conveniently, also a sub-set of conceived patterns and layouts.

The points made so far reflect ideal and ideal-derived family-dwelling relationships — those which come (or can come) into being in societies characterized by a system of housing provision run by families or by groups which reflect, more or less directly, their interests, values and desires. In social systems where this relationship is not found, it is quite conceivable that even *starting* plans, patterns and layouts will have little to do with imagined or actual family needs. In such cases, the dwelling and family do not fit; modified uses of dwellings are, then, not a subset of idealized structures, but are attempts made by occupying families to impose upon dwellings their idealized living desires and patterns or, of course, their actual needs derived, in part, from the ideals. And the chances are that, in such cases, neither ideal nor real family patterns will relate to the dwelling design.

This distinction, drawn between systems of housing provision which are, and are not, compatible with family ideals and practices (however disjoint *those* two might be), is critical, since it underlies the empirical observations and hypotheses we wish to offer concerning Indian family life and housing in Metropolitan Durban.

INDIAN HOUSING IN METROPOLITAN DURBAN

Indians have constituted a functional and identifiable part of Natal's population since 1860, when the first indenturates arrived to take up labouring positions in the sugar production and mining industries. Within a very few years a number of so-called 'passenger' or free-immigrant Indian families had also arrived and such families lived in urban rather than rural and resource frontier areas, earning their living in the business sector rather than in agriculture or mining.

Until 1897, 'free' Indians and those who had served out their periods of indenture were integral parts of the Natal community. In that year, however, Indians were disenfranchised and local municipal legislation began to discriminate against them (as it always had against Africans), especially in terms of where they

might live. In 1946, the Union Government passed legislation which restricted Indians in terms of the areas in which they could trade *or* live. In the case of Durban, this legislation served simply to re-enforce some existing municipal bye-laws and considerable local White sentiment.

Six years later, in the early nineteen-fifties, the Group Areas Act began to take effect in Durban and between that year and 1978, 140 000 Indians were moved as a result of the Act (Gordon, 1979).

In short, there were two broad categories of Indian immigrants: indentured and 'free'. Indentured workers joined the 'free' settlers in due course, but within a generation of the first arrivals the first of many restrictive and discriminatory pieces of legislation had been introduced. With time, such legislation managed to segregate Indians geographically and, largely, socially from White and African society, while the economy of the area undoubtedly owed much of its agricultural, mining and business success to Indians.

Against this broad (and somewhat simplified) background it is possible to sketch an equally broad and generalised picture of Indian housing and its provision.

Initially, indentured families lived in rural areas in dwellings provided by farm owners, or mining companies, and in dwellings which they had to build for themselves using unfamiliar local materials. The dwellings were generally inadequate for the climatic conditions in Natal and few, or no, basic facilities and services were available.

'Passenger' Indians who settled in urban areas also provided their own homes, often of a better quality and (at that stage) alongside the homes of White settlers. In time, as indentured families served out their contracts, some opted to move to their own smallholdings and others to urban areas. In either case, people built their own homes in, increasingly, informally segregated areas, but with a better knowledge of local materials and conditions.

During the early part of the twentieth century, much Indian housing was private, although some families occupied company housing of one kind or another (most of it meagre). Some private dwellings were very substantial, most were adequate and yet others were shanty-dwellings such as those which developed in the Cato Manor area of Durban. Yet, in so far as they reflected family needs, funds, skills and designs, even shanty-dwellings had *something* to recommend them and many were securely built and comfortable to live in.

It was with the introduction of the Group Areas Act that the major structural changes in the system of housing provision arose. For with the Group Areas Act came two associated matters — first, the need to move *and rehouse* many thousands of families, and secondly the attempt to eliminate so-called 'low-standard dwellings' — primarily homes which, because they were in one way or another threatening, Whites considered to be 'unsuitable' or 'unhealthy' or 'inadequate'.

The result was vast (but still insufficient) government expenditure in the realm of public housing. In Durban, Springfield, Merebank and Chatsworth, housing estates were developed and, later, Phoenix was planned. The houses provided conformed, technically, to Western standards; in all other respects they were almost totally inadequate, being too small, having too few rooms, and with major design and construction weaknesses. Most important of all, they were designed by Whites, built by White companies and had little (if anything of consequence) to do with the desires, needs, ideals and practices of the families, who had no option but to live in them. In addition, families were removed from thriving, viable and often conveniently located communities and sent to live in areas which, like the dwellings of which they consisted, were totally foreign and alienating.

It is our estimate that, in 1978, somewhere between 50% and 60% of Durban's Indian population lived in such homes (flats and houses), although it needs to be added that many families (about 70% of those living in houses) had *bought* their homes and of those a good number had added to, changed, or otherwise improved the basic public house with which they had started (Butler-Adam and Venter, 1984). (Such changes represent, in

themselves, attempts to escape the stereotypes and limitations of public housing).

Nonetheless, large numbers and proportions of Indian citizens lived, and still live, in public homes built to standards and designs which were certainly of little relevance to the occupants' needs or desires.

HOUSING AND INDIAN FAMILY LIFE

In relating these broad patterns to Indian family structures and life, and in producing some hypotheses concerning the impact of *public housing* on those structures and experiences, several obvious problems arise.

The most notable is the problem of terminology and definition concerning family structures. When reference is made to traditional Indian family patterns the term 'joint' family is often used, although it is unclear as to what it means. What *is* clear is that it does not mean the same thing to all people, and users. To overcome this problem we have used a series of terms based on the idea of nuclear families as usually conceived of in the West. Thus, a family structure which is nuclear in nature is called a *single* family. A structure which includes, *in the family* (and not *just* in a dwelling), other nuclear groups, is called a *multiple* family. Both single and multiple families can be 'extended' by the addition of related or unrelated individuals who do not, themselves, make up a nuclear grouping.

The second major problem is the question of historical data. Being scarce, these data are not always as clear as they might be. Producing comparisons over time is, therefore, not easy. Finally, there is the problem of knowing (or, rather, of not knowing) what, and how many, factors have played a role in changing family structure, ideals, preferences and practices. Needless to say, only the most naïve ideologists assume situations characterized by uni-causal change.

With these problems in mind, let us proceed with a brief description and a number of hypotheses about family patterns and dwelling types. Our concern is, of course, with *public*

housing since it is the hiatus between the system of provision and the needs of the occupants which is at stake.

There is no doubt that multiple and extended multiple-family living was predominant amongst Indian families in the nineteenth century and until quite late in the first half of the twentieth century. Equally, there is little doubt that the box-like, single-family, small public dwellings to which people were moved after 1950 led to a rapid, undesired, and traumatic change to single and extended single family living. Not only the dwellings, but also the effects of forced removal from kin-surrounded organic communities, contributed to this change. We would hypothesise that the Westernized context of White family structures in Durban, and the general spread and invasion of Western culture in the Third World, would have effected such changes in the long run (as we believe they are doing now). The advent of removals and public housing undoubtedly forced such changes upon unwilling families at least a quarter of a century before their time.

Our research has shown that it is now true that most families are single or extended-single families (about 80%) and that a vast majority of all families (single or multiple) would actually *opt* for single family living (Butler-Adam and Venter, 1984). The hypothesis remains, however, that government residential and housing policies induced the birth of this change at a point when it could not have been other than traumatic and painful. This major issue apart, a complex of other effects of public housing on family life and experience may be charted.

The government's housing policy, based on segregated areas, residential removals, rehousing and the provision of public dwellings had, for a series of inter-related reasons, the effect of creating substantial housing shortages. (These affected people living in private homes to a substantial degree as well). It also had the effect, already noted, of producing, for large numbers of people, homes which suffered from serious design, development, and locational flaws.

The result of the shortage of dwellings was twofold. First, it forced many families (possibly 16% in 1978) to live in non-houses

such as garages, parts of garages, and outbuildings (Butler-Adam and Venter, 1984). Secondly, it meant that people who lived in houses were, in many cases, overcrowded. Such overcrowding is attributable to both inadequate and *inappropriate* house size and to the fact that married children (and others) who might otherwise have moved out of small dwellings, had no option but to share dwellings or form multiple families in dwellings designed for only single families. For many, there was simply nowhere else to go.

Such overcrowding inevitably spilled over into neighbourhoods and residential areas generally, leading to a deterioration in both physical and social conditions. Only in the last five years or so have such poor life-conditions begun to stabilise or improve.

Housing and land shortages affected people in private homes too, where similar effects are evident. Indeed, it is very often in such areas that families live in non-houses, and face all the associated physical, social and emotional problems which attend such family experiences. Indeed, in this regard, a study of crime in Durban (Wakeman, 1981) has suggested that a significant number of instances of grievious bodily harm, as they occur in Indian families, arise from conflict between women who unwillingly share inadequate kitchen/cooking facilities.

Although the approach to public housing development has undoubtedly improved with time, the question of inappropriately designed homes has had equally notable consequences beyond materially affecting patterns of family-types. At a conceptual level, public houses lack the flexibility which traditional Indian family life-styles demand, while the shortage of housing has reduced mobility to almost zero, so that families cannot even change dwellings, with ease, as their needs change. Within dwellings, families are usually faced with a few small rooms, when most (95%) would prefer fewer, but larger and more flexible spaces in which to work (Butler-Adam and Venter, 1984). At this same broad level, two further violations of family need and preference have been imposed on people. Flat life, previously considered unthinkable, became an unthinkable reality for many

people, some of whom had previously lived in large homes with multiple family ties. Then, too, many people lost gardens — a source of vegetables and herbs to supplement purchased foods — and hence an important tie with remaining rural values and daily pleasures.

Also, at more pragmatic levels, kitchens are far too small to allow for desired family uses. Instead of being effective and comfortable focal points, the places of interaction, family communication and informal dining rooms, they are too small to fulfil their desired role in an adequate manner. As a result, many families have been left without a functional place for their most important, cohesive activities. We would hypothesise that this design failure has certainly led to undue levels of family stress and added to intra-family alienation and potential discord.

Other design features which have either affected family life or introduced stress are the lack of a formal room for entertaining guests, and the fact that bathrooms and toilets have usually been combined in a single room. The lack of a room solely for entertaining guests (brought about by the standards of the Housing Code) has often led families to create such a space at the cost of crowding, indeed overcrowding, other living areas, while the combination of bathrooms and toilets severely reduces the usability of the room and hinders effective family operation by limiting the room to one of its functions and precluding the other at any one time.

Finally, the matter of the location of dwellings is critical. Not only were people moved out of viable interacting communities and often into social wastelands largely bereft of functional human contacts and basic urban facilities. They were also moved, very often, from residential areas situated near to their places of work, to new areas at far greater distances *and costs* from work areas. The strains which this imposed on family budgets already stretched by frequently higher rents can only be guessed at. We believe, however, that these strains must, in many cases, have had adverse effects on family relationships and patterns of interaction.

75

CONCLUSION

The desideratum (if such it is) of free-choice is seldom if ever experienced by most people, Milton Friedman's exhortations and perorations notwithstanding. Nonetheless, for many people, for many families, there *are* choices concerning their homes which approximate the dancer-dance choice: that is to say, there is room for manoeuvring, there is room for the selection of the *most* appropriate, and there is room for extemporization and / or adaptation. Given the intimate relationship which exists between families and homes, we believe that some such fitting of ideals, needs, and practices to physical circumstances is essential. We believe that families will function better, or stand a chance of doing so, if they have control over at least some critical elements of and stages in the provision of housing. In this regard, studying the successful strategies of families which have lived in public housing and, by means of one kind of adaptation or another, have survived or even succeeded, may prove to be a very valuable exercise.

But it remains our contention that, in the case of public housing for Indians in Durban, the minimal-choice-circumstance has been violated so that not even the basic, the least possible, involvement has been allowed for. Inevitably, therefore, families have been subject to, and have experienced, physical, social and emotional strains which they might otherwise have avoided. And even if they have experienced these as a cohesive, loyal group, they have undoubtedly done so at unnecessary and undesirable cost. We would hypothesize, that is to say, that public housing has in the past represented not so much a dance to the tune of the dancer, as a march to the tune of the leader of the band.

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