Diversity in townhouse complexes in South Africa

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In reaction to the continuous challenges posed by social and spatial segregation in contemporary cities, there has been an increasing call for greater socio-spatial integration in housing developments and neighbourhoods in recent years. This is especially the case in South Africa, where fragmentation remains a major challenge in cities. South African cities have experienced varying degrees of socio-spatial transformation since 1994, which necessitates a reconsideration of the status quo and the levels of diversity and integration – or lack thereof – in urban areas.

→ *Townhouse complexes have contributed to the changing urban landscape.*

It is argued that socially and spatially mixed developments and neighbourhoods can support place diversity and contribute to safer and more sustainable human settlements (Jabardeen, 2004; Baily et al., 2006). Place diversity is diversity that exists within the realm of "everyday life" activities and can broadly be described as "the phenomenon of socially diverse people sharing the same neighbourhoods, where diversity is the result of a mix of income levels, races, ethnicities, ages, and family types" (Talen, 2008:4-5).

One of the most significant factors changing the urban landscape in South Africa has been the proliferation of so-called townhouse complexes or sectional title schemes. These complexes range from large to smaller developments, including a variety of housing types ranging from luxury villas in secure complexes to smaller units catering for the lower middle class. Secure or gated townhouse complexes refer to complexes that are fenced or walled and have controlled access through a gate. In response, the Department of Town and Regional Planning at the University of Pretoria has embarked on a project to investigate the level of diversity in and around townhouse complexes/developments to determine their impact on socio-spatial transformation in South African cities.

While there is disagreement in the international debate on what constitutes a diverse neighbourhood or housing complex, a number of factors keep reappearing. It is clear that diversity refers to both spatial and social diversity, where spatial diversity is mostly accommodated through a mix of unit types and facilities or amenities in these complexes, while social diversity generally relates to the presence of diverse people in a neighbourhood or complex based on a mix of income groups, races, ethnic groups, ages and family types.

In South Africa, the concepts of diversity and integration are often used in a very broad sense, without common agreement of what this

entails in practice. Therefore, it is difficult to define what it means to say that neighbourhoods are diverse, and on what statements are based that there is a lack of integration in housing complexes and neighbourhoods. There is a need to clarify the meaning of diversity in the South African context and to understand how this influences people's perceptions in typical townhouse complexes. This is especially important, as there is a general perception among the public and some built environment professionals that many South Africans remain hesitant to live in more diverse complexes. A number of students[1] from the University of Pretoria started to explore this in 2012.

These studies indicate that people's perceptions of diversity vary between and within the different townhouse complexes. While many associate diversity with different race or cultural groups, there are also some who link the notion of diversity to a mix of language or religious groups and educational backgrounds. Most of the interviewees agree with the factors linked with social and spatial diversity in the international debate. Everyone agrees that the presence of a variety of race or ethnic groups would contribute to greater diversity, while the majority also links diversity to the inclusion of various income groups. While most people acknowledge the presence of different age groups and family types in their complexes and agree that these factors contribute to social diversity, a few are more sceptical. For them, this is a given, and not something that should be considered as a factor per se. One resident remarked that while it is easy for a large city such as London to be diverse due to the presence of many cultural, racial and religious groups, it is much more difficult for a complex to be diverse. This also raises the issue of the scale and proximity of diversity that would start to influence people's perceptions. In this regard, diverse neighbourhoods may be more feasible than diverse complexes.

Spatial diversity was not considered as that important. A number of residents did, however, raise the issue of aesthetic diversity. The appearance of the units is considered to be more important by some. Yet, others acknowledge that a variety of unit types and sizes would tend to accommodate a wider range of income groups. For many respondents, the presence of communal space inside the complex is very important, as they feel that this contributes to greater spatial diversity.

A number of issues emerged from the initial studies. Although there are some similarities, ideas regarding diversity vary between the different complexes, both in terms of what constitutes diversity, and how diversity influences their decision to live in the complex. The sampled residents tend to welcome diversity. Some of the motivations include that as South Africans, it is important to learn from different cultures and other people's ways of living. Most of the residents highlighted the fact that diversity did not influence their decisions to stay in townhouse complexes. Other issues such as safety and security, affordability, a secure investment, unit size, well-maintained outdoor spaces, and the income groups in the complex are considered as much more important. Income is therefore the only factor of diversity that appears to play some role in their decision-making. However, some residents from one specific complex stated a concern about the social diversity of neighbours in the development. Finally, it also emerged that diversity is somewhat different to levels of integration and actions towards integration. While many of the respondents acknowledge the presence of diversity in their complexes, this does not automatically lead to more

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1   These included a number of master's students enrolled in the coursework master's study programmes offered by the Department of Town and Regional Planning who elected to work on the project for their mini-dissertations. Each student worked in a different townhouse complex, but used the same interview schedule to guide their questions to residents. Townhouse complexes all over Gauteng were included and students interviewed at least 15 households per complex.

→   *The presence of communal space inside townhouse complexes is very important.*

social interaction. Only in a few cases did respondents remark on the interaction and social integration between neighbours, facilitated by the presence of communal facilities. In other cases, people referred to the presence of these facilities, but maintained that they were rarely used by residents.

This article only highlights some of the initial findings. Further studies are needed, including the influence of the design and layout of the complexes on opportunities for greater diversity and integration. It is also important to widen the scope of the study area. The initial studies only included townhouse complexes in Gauteng. Ongoing studies will look further and also include many other provinces in South Africa to obtain a better understanding of the perceptions towards diversity in townhouse complexes in the country. What is evident, is that the initial studies seem to indicate that people, in general, are much more willing to live in diverse complexes than what is generally considered by the public at large and built environment professionals. ⊖

References

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