

"Dividing Resources by Building Costs Does Not Give You a House" or The Need for a Second Look at Housing Strategy

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At the end of 1977, when the building boom was about to begin in this country, the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects held a seminar on "The Architect in National Development" where many significant papers were presented indicating a direction that housing policy should take. One such paper was of that of Chartered Architect P. G. K. Fernando where he raised several crucial issues that are still relevant today. He pointed out that ownership of houses, as against rental, has mitigated against the actual housing stock, and he called for a significant re-thinking on this important policy issue. He also recommended that the policy of fragmentation of land for buildings, must be arrested and people encouraged to conserve land; government must build for its own employees; and the eventual ability to build cheaply, usefully and effectively lies in higher professional skills becoming employed. A frank and realistic look had to be made into the way in which professional skills were being employed.

Housing in Sri Lanka and formulation of policy relating to housing, has been the subject of many Seminars in the past. Unfortunately, policy still remains confused and unclear. What has been achieved, is policy and programmes relating to particular sectors with emphasis on one as the other of the many aspects involved. A solution to the housing problem can only be achieved through a consistent and realistic strategy which emphasises and responds to a wide variety of needs and circumstances. A policy that emphasises any one aspect, to the detriment of others, cannot meet the requirements of a progressive society.

This paper attempts to enumerate, classify and otherwise identify patterns that need to be understood should a consistent and realistic policy be desired. A remarkable aspect of the discussions on housing hitherto, has been the use of the term "house" as a blanket term and

we are familiar with references to housing shortage, housing demand, housing strategy, etc. However, if we seek to begin at the beginning it would become clear that the need is not so much a housing policy but rather a national accommodation perspective.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ACCOMMODATION NEEDS

The statistical household of Sri Lanka is said to include 5 to 6 persons and there is evidence of surveys undertaken that, the statistical household involves several families living under one roof. In fact, they cut across several generations as well. That is to say, old parents, family with married children and grandchildren. Obviously, within a progressive policy, the demand for housing needs to be studied as individual needs and not in terms of a rehousing of a 'statistical household'.

For the purpose of this paper, the analysis is based not on the conditions prevailing within households at present, but rather on a desirable conceptual structure which may be enumerated as follows:—

- (a) A single person
- (b) A couple
- (c) A family unit of 3
- (d) A family unit of more than 3 persons

At any particular time, the consumers of accommodation fall within the listing given above, and it would be a feature, that the category (a) namely, a single person, over a period of time, change his status and shift down the line. Another feature is the requirement of mobility. People, in terms of various criteria, require to be mobile. Some would wish to be mobile and others may be compelled to be so. Young persons, which may involve category (a) and (b) may wish to be mobile. However, Government servants and other per-

sons employed in transferable services would be compelled to be so.

A further characteristic is the inevitable fact that the edifices of living, themselves, have a life span. With change of aspiration and physical decay, replacement needs become a significant aspect of housing. A national policy must recognise that over time, decay and replacement is a vital reality and nothing enforced today should stifle the potentials of the future.

A national policy on accommodation would need to, therefore, accommodate three primary characteristics, namely:

- a) diversity of space needs
- (b) mobility to consumers of accommodation and
- (c) change

A FURTHER LOOK AT ACCOMMODATION NEED PATTERN

The diagrams (i) and (ii) attempt to summarise the multiple space needs of the human being, placed against the format of the list of space consumer previously mentioned.

The diagrams generally indicate that, should individual needs be identified, the requirements of accommodation become classified in patterns. Clearly, therefore, a national programme of accommodation supply, should mirror the requirements of this reality. The degree of success of a good social policy in relation to accommodation will depend on our ability to identify the dimensions of these patterns and also our ability to identify the dynamics imposed upon it by the requirements of mobility and change already mentioned.

Even though housing has been the subject of many studies in Sri Lanka, some published and some as private papers, we are yet to see the dimensional perspectives which is implied in the two diagrams given above.

The available statistical material relating to housing stock, population and household on a national, as well as in a regional basis would enable us to clarify, if not precisely, at least, in a conceptual sense the issues outlined.

RENTAL Vs. OWNERSHIP: THE ECONOMIC REALITY AND SOCIAL GOALS

A large part of recent policy in relation to housing, has been based on a pre-conceived notion that house ownership is intrinsically more desirable than rented accommodation. It is not clear as to how such a significant conclusion has come about, other than perhaps as an ideological spin off conditioned by a

DIAGRAM I - SPACE & FACILITY NEED PATTERN

	URBAN				RURAL			
	No. of Persons				No. of Persons			
	1	2	3	Above 3	1	2	3	Above 3
1. Living area		+	+	+		+	+	+
2. Living/Sleeping Area	+				+			
3. One Bed Room		+				+		
4. Two Bedrooms			+			+		
5. Three Bedrooms				+				+
6. W.C.	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
7. Wash Point/Bath	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
8. Kitchen	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
9. Storage/Store	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
10. Drying Area/Facility	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
11. Access	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
12. Security/Safety/Shelter	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
13. Disposal of Waste	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

DIAGRAM II - ACCOMMODATION TYPE (desirable)

	URBAN				RURAL			
	No. of Persons				No. of Persons			
	1	2	3	Above 3	1	2	3	Above 3
1. As Boarder					+			
2. Hostel Accommodation	+				+			
3. One Room Flat	+	+						
4. Two Room Flat			+					
5. Three Room Flat				+				
6. One Room House		+				+		
7. Two Room House			+				+	
8. Three Room House				+				+

social philosophy. In the previous 7 years, the policy on housing has been significantly conditioned by this philosophy and no doubt, some papers in this Seminar and participants would assume this as a fundamental axiom of all strategies.

A closer look suggests that the realities of incomes and affordability and that of mobility, dictate that rented accommodation is more logical and desirable to most consumers of accommodation. One may even hypothesise that those who desire rented accommodation would actually form the majority of users of accommodation.

This is for the reason that, if low income groups alone were to be considered, the general income levels, imply that available finances for accommodation is limited. It has been said elsewhere and many times earlier that a realistic rental, that an average low income earner in Sri Lanka could afford to pay would be as low as Rs. 20/- per month. Ownership of property, immediately brings about the additional responsibility, which becomes committed to finances. Ownership implies upkeep and further imply responsibility for common amenities. A low income earner, in the Sri Lanka context, who may be the recipient of what would be considered a well meaning rent purchase scheme, finds himself rapidly caught up in expenditure far in excess of what he could afford. When he cannot afford he would naturally not expend on essential costs of upkeep and, further, cannot contribute to a co-operative venture, which is the maintenance of common amenities. The result is a deterioration of the asset which he is aiming to own and instead of a rise in its capital value, his investment would actually decline in value with time.

Those who are subject to the requirements of mobility find that such schemes would, in fact, compel them to not only maintain servicing rent purchase schemes but also pay in excess for additional accommodation. Many fathers in Sri Lanka tend to live as boarders and in make shift hostels whilst maintaining a household elsewhere. Alternatively, they travel long distances (between regions) for work.

Even as a consideration of long term social policy, the question of house ownership must be approached with care. It has been identified, it is a natural eventuality that, renewal of developed areas becomes a necessity. Ownership patterns of a wide spread nature will make it an impossibility to re-aggregate these properties towards a renewal programme.

Present policy has meant that the urban environment is becoming fragmented into land allotment of as little as 6 perches. Present moves to sell tenements and flats to tenants

will mean even smaller parcels of ownership. Arregation of land towards future development and renewal needs, seem already lost, at least as far as the City of Colombo is concerned. Too much of the City of Colombo is already lost to roadways which serve less and less buildable land.

MEETING THE DEMAND: A VIEWPOINT

What has been discussed above is essentially the demand characteristics of accommodation and any meaningful policy formulation needs also to look in a similar way at the supply characteristic to meet these demands.

The following potential sources of supply can be postulated in the context of Sri Lanka. Some of these patterns already exist, some must become the concern of policy formulators and policy implementers.

Private Sector

- (a) Individual or family group interested in building their own accommodation.
- (b) Individual or family group interested in building excess accommodation initially for rent but for subsequent transfer to children and other beneficiaries.
- (c) Private investors prepared to invest in housing for purposes of sale of houses after building.
- (d) Private investors interested in developing housing property for purposes of rent on a long term return basis.
- (e) Housing initiated by private businesses and industrial organisations as a facility for Staff.

State Sector

- (a) Government building houses/other accommodation for its employees (including the Armed Services).
- (b) Corporation sector enterprises building houses/other accommodation for its employees.

In the past, local authorities have attempted to build houses as a part of their social programme, and so have other specialised agencies, such as, the National Housing Department in terms of Government programmes. Essentially, these programmes are artificial as they are devised to meet unknown needs, based on assumed criteria, with impossible targets for eventual disposal. Most persons occupying this accommodation do not accept them as satisfactory and the society at large area singularly bewildered by the lack of even one successful case. (The Kepptipola Road housing complex perhaps being the only exception — and reflects some criteria that this paper contends as important). Some may disagree on this declaration. However, surveys and inquiries would tend to confirm the reality of this. The lack of success may be identified as follows:—

- (1) They do not meet with the accommodation requirements of the occupants.
- (2) Unsatisfactory overall environment due to lack of maintenance of common areas and amenities. Example: squalor, ill-lit public corridors, staircases, unremoved garbage, etc., about which occupants have no control or redress.
- (3) The actual planning of accommodation, due to insensivities to the requirements of occupants, cannot

even cater to such eventualities as where stretcher-bearing, would be involved, or funerals, privacy internally and externally.

- (4) Tree-less surroundings, broken roads, lack of safe play areas and the insecurity arising from the absence of street lighting (a visit to any of the more recent housing schemes undertaken by State agencies reveal this disparity between the social need and the State's ability to look after the sensitivities of the individual).

In terms of what has been said above, it appears that from the context of the supply of accommodation, such agencies as local authorities and the National Housing Department are better suited to promote the necessary structures within which a natural process of accommodation supply can take place. That is to say, these could, in fact, become agencies through which subsidies and an incentive/disincentive structure may be implemented towards an overall policy of housing and accommodation. They could also be agencies, of a financial nature, providing subsidies directly to desirable building programmes of private parties or State investors in housing. They could also function effectively as bodies providing information and guidance in this specialised area.

The diagram III attempts to outline the supply types that may be realistically harnessed towards meeting the demand already outlined elsewhere in this paper—

This diagram identified the type of demand against the investors capable of supply in a natural way — all of them are capable of the maintenance of these assets and have

DIAGRAM III—SUPPLY POTENTIAL OF ACCOMMODATION TYPES

	Private Individual for Self.	Private Individual for Rent.	Private Investor for sale	Private Investor for rent	Business/Industry for Employees for Rent	Public Corpn. for Employees for Rent	Construction for Govt. Servants for Rent
1. Boarding Facility		•					
2. Hostel		•		•	•	•	•
3. One Room Flat		•		•	•	•	•
4. Two Room Flat		•	•	•	•	•	•
5. Three Room Flat		•	•	•	•	•	•
6. One Room House	•						
7. Two Room House	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
8. Three Room House	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

sufficient incentive to do so. Realistic Government policy must allow these potentials to be realised.

We may further look at this aspect of supply in terms of desirable construction patterns. Diagram IV outlines the type of space need against a possible construction type.

CAN WE AFFORD A HUMANE HOUSING POLICY?

The question will no doubt be asked whether our apparently meagre resources are capable of generating accommodation to meet such diverse needs. It may be contended that our resources allow only what we already do and that it is inevitable that accommodation needs outlined will always be impossible to achieve.

However, this is not the case. Far too much of past priorities have been on the proliferation of minimal accommodation within a limited availability of funds. The little resources — available within a State programme — has been applied too thinly. Thus the resources spent have resulted in only an enigma of a... "house". Too much thinking in this area has been bagged in square feet and in square foot rates, and too little on actual needs, building form, environments, and real costs. There is no average approach to housing design — each individual case has its potential and cost. Detail and skillful design, planning and implementation will maximise the outcome of the available resources.

Should we be prepared to look at the overall again — it will be possible to find that:

1) Not all the potential resources available to housing has been harnessed in the past. Several artificial strictures have been imposed which has mitigated against investment in housing. A bias towards ownership has meant that individuals build for themselves, and those who cannot do so are the victims of a restricted

market of accommodation. "The individual" building, as a method of supply, is perhaps the most wasteful in terms of resources. Apart from the harmful effect of land fragmentation, an individual builder suffers individual cost, where it could have been shared, or costs distributed on several units of housing. The individual cannot benefit from the economies of scale associated with the large project and the individual cannot afford the levels of professional skills needed to build well, cheaply and safely. (In the context of a large contract, a three-bedroom house has been tendered, awarded and built, inclusive of a garage, kitchen and two toilets at Rs. 44,423/36 in 1976 — 1977.)

2) A large potential exists for private sector Business Houses and Industries to participate in housing. These potentials have not been realised in any way today.

A business organisation may well be prepared to provide a housing facility for its employees, should adequate safeguards be given — for rental of such accommodation and its recovery. The accommodation should go with the job, and will constitute a realistic sharing of profits with workers. These assets will be maintained, as such businesses are capable of generating the necessary resources to do so. The maximising of resources will be achieved by the use of higher professional skills in design and the management of the building process, as they are also able to afford such professional services.

3) The Corporation sector in Sri Lanka has been dragging their feet in the area of housing. Even the very small number of Corporations committed to housing have, due to mismanagement, costed modest dwellings into the luxury class. Some Corporations are known to have built basic houses at costs reach-

ing the Rs. 100,000 and over — and good professional skills and proper tender and award procedure would have ensured these units at half this cost.

Here again, artificial strictures imposed such as the exclusive award of such works to the SEC (State Engineering Corporation) has meant that the cost benefits of competition have not been realised.

4) The Government itself has not looked at its own housing need in a systematic way. We are aware that not only lower grade posts are affected but even District Judges in the provinces are forced the humiliation of looking for accommodation in an adverse market! Even though high professional architectural skills are available in the State sector, building of houses are still in the hands of those unqualified to design and manage the process of realising housing assets. Chronic structural defects in the State construction set-up continue to work against the maximisation of resources, not only in the field of housing but in all areas of building.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A socially acceptable programme of housing must reflect the actual needs for accommodation at any given time. Should studies be made of the accommodation needs it will be seen that a variety of types is needed. Should the problem be looked at in this way, the need for the larger accommodation will be recognised as smaller than what is thought to be the case at present. An accommodation mix will be necessary and as a result a building type mix as well. Resource need for housing must be looked at in this way.
2. Whilst ownership is an undeniable right, the largest demand for accommodation, at least in the urban areas,

DIAGRAM IV - ACCOMMODATION TYPES VS. CONSTRUCTION ALTERNATIVES

	Boarding	Hostel	1 Room Flat	2 Room Flat	3 Room Flat	1 Room House	2 Room House	3 Room House
Cottage/Terrace House Single Floor	*					.	.	.
Low Rise Ground & 1 Floor	
Medium Rise Ground & 5 Floors		.		.				
High Rise - Ground & more than 4 Floors			.	.				

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is for rental accommodation. The present emphasis on ownership of houses, as against rental, has mitigated against the increase of actual housing stock. A significant rethinking is called for in this important policy issue and a valuable landlord/tenant relationship be evolved in the form of progressive laws. At present, the prejudice against landlords in some quarters are directed to individuals as landlords. Should individual landlords be not acceptable, institutional landlords may be an acceptable political solution. This paper suggests that business enterprise, the Corporation sector and the Government should become the landlord structure. Should a control exist on these groups, the market conditions of other rented accommodation will adjust itself and could be effectively controlled.

3. The present policy of fragmentation of land must be arrested and people encouraged to conserve land. The society at large should be prepared to encourage people to build together — in Building Societies/Co-operatives or as group developers so that land is conserved.

More and more area is lost to road access on account of the emphasis on house ownership which has meant a proliferation of sub-division at 6 perches, with more than a third of available buildable land thrown to roadway.

The resource of land once consumed is irretrievably lost, except unless recovered in major renewal. Extreme care must be taken to ensure the proper utilisation of available buildable land, not only in the urban but also in the rural areas.

4. Government must build for its own employees. A direct commitment of Government to high quality housing can set standards and show the way to others who may be able to employ resources towards housing. The present State housing is of so poor quality that it is a humiliation to its occupants and a disgrace to the society at large.
5. The eventual ability to build cheaply, usefully, and effectively lie in higher professional skills becoming employed. Appropriate skills must be correctly employed. Far too many unqualified and inexperienced persons today attempt to cover the area of building that they have no training or experience to provide. A frank and realistic look must be made into the way in which professional skills become at present employed — and necessary structural changes made for the overall good. The Architect's skill and training are different to that of the Engineer. It would be nonsense to accept a situation where these skills should be interchanged or denied. They must become employed in a manner in which they become complementary.