

# Activism through Architecture and Urban design

By Diane Arvanitakis, Executive Manager of SHiFT

The contemporary context in which (social) housing is developed in South Africa is repetition of precedent, with mistakes from the past repeated inadvertently based on a lack of understanding of the impact of quality design in housing. In spite of progressive policies such as the contemporary Breaking New Ground Strategy (2004)<sup>1</sup> only a handful of (social) housing projects have delivered projects that “contribute to the national priority of restructuring South African Society in order to address structural, economic, social and spatial dysfunctions”<sup>2</sup>. The post-apartheid (social) housing sector has lacked significant participation from ‘activist’ architects, urban designers and planners who seek to invent a post-apartheid housing environment for a number of reasons. These reasons from SHiFT’s perspective include the focus on delivery of quantities rather than quality (in the RDP); the lack of specialized knowledge and experience in what is now a 10 year old social housing sector; and the general ignorance of the impact the built environment has on the quality of lives. SHiFT with its (voluntary) board of architects and other built environment professionals, engaged proactively with role players in the sector addressing this specific need at policy, practitioner and community levels.

Formed by a group of architects and other built environment professionals in 2000 who, developed “Guidelines for Social Housing design” during a SHF workshop and thereafter established an organisation that would occupy itself with the long-term improvement in the quality of the built surroundings in South Africa.

SHiFT set its own mandate advocating the “creation of integrated and sustainable communities through the design of quality and humane living environments.” Its activism aims to demonstrate that design of mass housing starts within the context of the nation (through its policies), city ( its spatial development frameworks), the village (by urban design), the neighbourhood ( through community management), then the street and the home (through architecture). Advising not only on technical aspects but on delivery processes and energy efficient practices. Uniquely SHiFT’s activism and architecturally skilled staff have the capacity to engage in the sector holistically.

Through research, SHiFT builds information regarding contemporary practices in the sector<sup>3</sup> and architectural site visits. The information transcends into knowledge through its dissemination to practitioners and built environment professionals, building the capacity to design and deliver houses attuned to the nuances of low income (rental) housing. Creating awareness of (social) housing issues targets: student architects through the “Innovation in social housing” student competition held every two years (4 competitions completed); community associations through collaborations with SHiFT in developing spatial frameworks for their

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1 Breaking New Ground Strategy aims at the improvement and development of sustainable and good quality human settlements for all South Africans through a range of housing programmes (and sub-programmes) that more inclusive and demand responsive than the narrowly focused mass ownership drive of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. Sub-programmes include the Restructuring Zones, Inclusionary Housing, Community Rental Unit (CRU) programme, and the Social Housing Act (2008) relevant to the social housing sector.

2 Odette Crofton, at a briefing for the Social Housing Bill, 05 March 2008

3 19 commentaries on social housing developments have been completed, including the planning, specifications and management (in the latest series)

neighbourhoods; practitioners and the general public through the impending launch of an online discussion forum located on the SHiFT website ([www.shift.org.za](http://www.shift.org.za)).



Brixton design workshops in 2006 engaging role players in the (social) housing sector

Stretching across the (social) housing sector SHiFT has built alliances with role players in the sector.

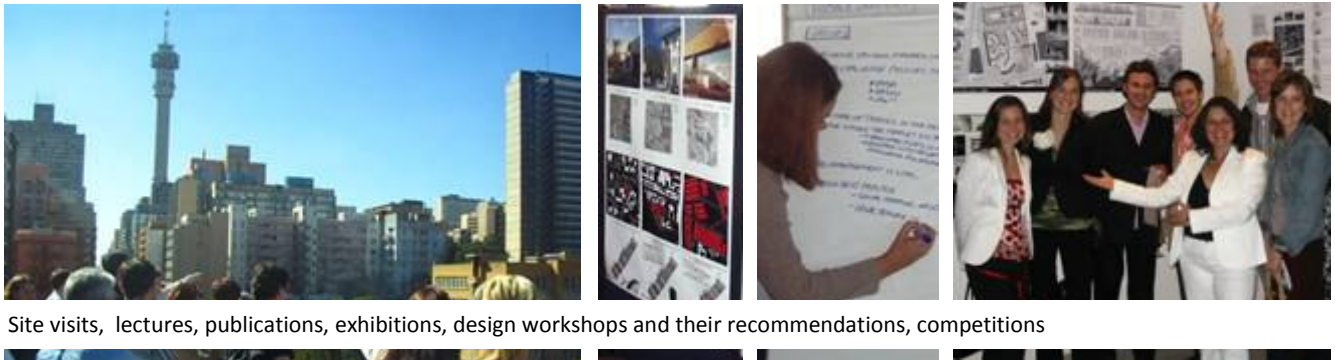
At government level with the National Department of Housing and the Social Housing Foundation (SHF), where we serve on the Capacity building, product delivery and technical support task teams respectively; with practitioners in the sector such as social housing institutions, architects, quantity surveyors, project managers and housing supervisors who have been in attendance at our workshops; with other non governmental organizations (NGO's) in the sector such as NASHO (National Association of Housing Organisations), Planact; with other parastatal organisations South African Local Government Association (SALGA), the National Housing Finance Corporation (NHFC) all form part of our affiliates and have supported our initiatives and; with community oriented organizations such as Kagiso Urban Management and more specifically resident's associations.

Recently the South African Institute of Architects is proposing a relationship with SHiFT heading up its Habitat and Heritage Programme thereby recognizing the value the organisation offers to the sector.

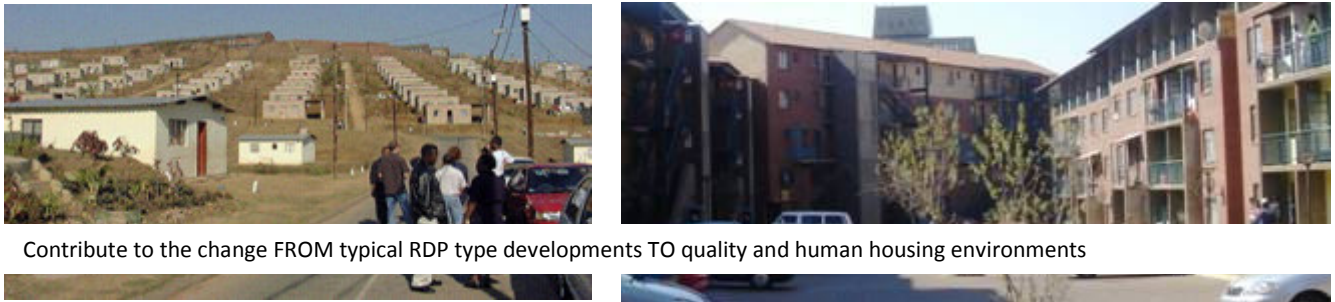
SHiFT registered as a Section 21 company (in South African legal terms a non profit organisation) in 2002 and has since then has generated income through its research via the SHF, some funding for its operational costs from Dutch grants, and projects (the competitions, design lectures and workshops) funded by a handful of South African supporters. Unfortunately the lack of understanding of quality urban environments by South African's in general results in a lack of financial support for SHiFT where the organisation's strength is also its weakest points. Firstly, its mandate tackles 'soft' issues defined in quality and "humaneness" which are difficult to quantify for funders; and secondly its relationship to the inhabitants of low cost (rental) housing is indirect through local government, built environment practitioners and professionals are not deemed the most in need of financial support.

SHiFT aims in the foreseeable future to reaffirm a position in the sector through a yet (undefined) relationship with SAIA; increasing general awareness of quality and humane housing environments and continue its

research and knowledge building design focused workshops. Those interested in becoming 'friends of SHiFT' and contributing to our initiatives please do not hesitate to contact us.



Site visits, lectures, publications, exhibitions, design workshops and their recommendations, competitions



Contribute to the change FROM typical RDP type developments TO quality and human housing environments