

Boundary-less Living

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ABSTRACT

Governments of developing countries initiate low-income housing schemes with the objectives of enabling the urban poor: upgrade their living conditions, acquire house construction skills and, own houses. In Uganda, most of the low-income housing schemes are estate-driven. Most estate-driven housing correlates with the modernisation development paradigm that holds the assumption that modernity includes the adoption of presumed attributes of western society (Venter and Marais, 2006). This is evident in the plans of most of the low-income housing schemes in Uganda, which were developed with the assumption that each house would be encased by boundary markers to demarcate the plot boundaries by separating the public spaces outside the plot from the private space within. Siting the house block in a plot is usually stipulated by the project, thus further dividing the plot into back and front yards, with the latter posing as a transitional zone between the public space outside the plot and the very private space in the house. A hierarchical spatial pattern of a public space outside the plot, a semi-public in the front yard, the private space inside the house and the semi-private space in the backyard is assumed.

In a home setting, the backyard conventionally houses most of the home chore activities usually performed by women, while public spaces are male-dominated (Nnaggenda-Musana, 2008:147). Thus a gendered space use pattern is expected to be associated with the spatial patterns that emerge due to the existence of boundary walls around the houses both at the house and neighbourhood levels. However, it is observed that in almost all government-provided low-income housing schemes, boundary walls are rarely constructed resulting in the emergence of blurred spatial patterns whereby distinction between private, semi-private, semi-public, and public space is vivid.

This paper explores the effects of the emerging organic spatial patterns on the gendered space use, and the appropriateness of the proposed housing designs to their users. Findings of this study are expected to inform low-income planning and design both nationally and internationally, so as to enhance their appropriateness and efficiency.

The study employs the case study research approach where the Masese Women Housing Scheme (MWHS), manifesting the highest ambition of reducing women's marginalisation with respect to housing in Uganda, was selected as an atypical case for exploration of gendered space in housing. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, observation, photography, sketching together with document and drawing review and analysis.

The study revealed that the spatial patterns that resulted due to absence of boundary walls are conducive to the low-income households' life styles, of women, as they provide security, social interaction and enhance home-based enterprises. The study further revealed that the blurred

spatial patterns that emerged due to absence of boundary walls have no significance on the gendered usage of the space both at the house and neighbourhood levels. The study thus recommends low-income housing that is devoid of boundaries when planning and designing low-income housing.

Key Words: housing, boundary-walls, spatial patterns, gendered space-use.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sixty per cent of the urban population in Uganda lives in inadequate housing, (MLH&UD, 2008: iv). This prompted the Ugandan government, through the Ministry of Land Housing and Urban Development (MLH&UD), to implement housing projects targeting low-income groups to uplift their living environments in different parts of the country, for example the Namuwongo project in Kampala, Oli in Arua, MWHS in Jinja, and Malukhu in Mbale.

Most of the low-income housing schemes were established in the early Museveni era of the eighties (Nnaggenda-Musana, 2008:59). In the same period, Uganda underwent a period of gender awareness as a result of the impact of the Third World Conference for Women (TWCW) that took place in Nairobi in 1985. Since then, the Uganda government has been committed to engendering all sectors including housing. Hence the MWHS, which targeted low-income women as a way of reducing their marginalisation, was launched. Most of the low-income housing projects, including MWHP, emphasised providing access to housing for the low-income through credit, land ownership formalisation, building by-laws stipulation, construction material and technology introduction, as well as users' participation in the construction activities on the assumption that these would contribute to housing adequacy and convenience (MLH&UD, 2012: 42). This reflects a quantitative approach to housing that views a house as a dwelling unit over the qualitative one which considers housing as a system of activities concerned with housing an individual household and the entire community (Horelli, 2005, p.18). The latter approach gives more importance to the socio-cultural context and values households embrace, more than the quantitative approach that focuses mainly on the mass production of housing units (Goodchild, 1991:133).

For proper management and speedy delivery of the low-income housing projects, standardised house types, plot sizes and space layouts were encouraged in their planning. These restrictions sometimes included dictating of building off-sets, orientations of buildings within the plots, and location and sizes of fenestration, leaving optimal opportunity for the households to personalise their domestic space (MLH&UD, 1992). The probable assumption was that these restrictions would yield an orderly physical setting to the neighbourhoods, hence implying upgraded living standards.

2.0 PROBLEM

Housing units within housing schemes that target low-income groups are expected to be developed encased within boundary walls, which are usually not highly emphasised, to demarcate plots and to secure the houses. But, in most housing schemes that target the low-income groups, boundary walls are rarely observed even in cases where these walls are fragmented and very modest both in size and construction material. This, coupled with the transformations that the households make to accommodate their changing needs, results in the emergence of spatial patterns that differ from the original designs. The resultant spatial configurations are characterised by blurring of spatial configurations.

Conventionally, in African Islamic societies (Fathy, 1973) and patriarchal societies like Uganda, public domestic spaces are male-dominated while women are confined to the private spaces of the home. Even within the home space, women's presence is expected to be at the backyard where they carry out domestic chores while the front is where the men sit and or host visitors. In the case of MWHS the fuzzy and intermingled spatial patterns that emerge due to the absence of boundary walls not only deconstruct the conventional private, semi-private, semi-public and public demarcations of space at the home and neighbourhood levels, but also lead to tension between the associated gendered space usages due to the lack of boundaries.

3.0 SITUATING THE STUDY

The TWCW that took place in Nairobi 1985 had a major role in raising awareness regarding gender issues in housing by promoting women as beneficiaries and agents of change in the area of human settlements (Celik, 1992). In 2002, Anita Larsson, a prominent architect and researcher in the fields of gender, housing and urban planning, advocated for mainstreaming gender in housing at all levels including but not restricted to, accommodating and responding to the needs of women in spatial planning and design of their houses. She argued that, "*Housing... both as a shelter and its social and physical surrounding is... crucial for women as a center for their activities*" (Larsson, 2002). Research on low-income housing emphasises that women should be focused on in housing design since they spend more time and do more chores in the housing environment, and are thus affected most by inadequate housing conditions (Dandekar, 1992). This argument can apply well to the low-income women in Uganda's urban areas.

Attempts to reduce low-income women's marginalisation in housing have been made in Uganda. The MWHS located in Jinja, in eastern Uganda, is proof of such an attempt because it was mainly aimed at improving the social and economic conditions of low-income women.

4.0 STUDY OBJECTIVES

The study explores housing schemes that target the low-income groups, and analyses the spatial patterns emerging in boundary-less neighbourhoods. The influence of gender on space use and the extent to which the low-income housing is conducive to women's life styles is also explored. Findings of the study will inform housing research about ways of developing more gender-sensitive low-income housing designs.

5.0 METHODOLOGY

The study utilises a case study research approach, which allows the researcher to capture various realities that are not easily quantifiable. The approach warrants that the research topic is well explored and that the essence of the phenomenon is revealed (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1995). In this case MWHS, which manifests the highest ambition among Uganda's low-income housing schemes to reduce women's marginalisation, was selected for an in-depth analysis. In practice oriented fields, case study has a special strength of enriching the professional repertoire which in turn enhances the designer's ability to provide appropriate solutions through relating and comparing between "*known cases from the repertoire and actual design situations*" (Johansson, 2005, p.32). As researchers and reflective practitioners in the field of architecture, the authors use their personal experiences and observations to relate and deliberately reflect (Schon, 1983) on empirical evidence, existent theory and their practical experiences to generate knowledge that can inform future actions and interventions in regard to the production of flexible designs that can be more appropriate to low-income women.

Multiple research methods were employed to collect and interpret data on spatial use patterns in neighbourhoods that are boundary-less. These included personal observation, photography, in-depth interviews, sketches and document analyses, and review of archival records. Personal observation entailed the researcher actually going the study area to observe and record behavior in its natural setting. Photography, which complemented the personal observations helped in obtaining and recording of visual data. In-depth interviews were carried out with key persons and the households in the study areas to get comprehensive information and views. Houses and other physical artefacts were sketched after taking measurements of houses, and recording of how interior and exterior space was used in order to comprehend the spatial quality and space use. Analyses of archival records, and documents like maps, plans, and aerial photographs were done to understand past and present inclinations of housing development in the study area.

6.0 Findings and Discussions

6.1 Organic Growth of Plots

Plots at MWHS were designed in an iron-grid layout allowing for an open space per every cluster of 8 to 18 houses for public and communal use. This physical setting is assumed to promote orderly and upgraded living environments as is figure 1. A hierarchical spatial pattern of private, semi-private, semi-public and is expected to materialise. Fathy notes that most architects when re-planning places are prone to re-arranging houses *in straight, orderly streets, parallel to one another* (Fathy, 1973, p. 54). In present-day MWHS however, the spatial pattern in that has emerged is different from what was anticipated.



Figure 1: MWHS as planned originally housing development at MWHS

Adapted from Ministry of Lands, Housing and Communication, Masese Women Housing Project map. Developed by Elwidaa, Drawn: Bukulu Ismail, 2013.



Figure 2: Actual

In MWHS women who have traditionally been relegated to the private space of the back yard have started to move to the semi-public front yard. Housing extensions, coupled with the absence of clearly identified boundary walls, makes the distinction of the originally planned private, semi-private, semi-public and public spaces difficult to discern, see figure 2 (orange shades).

6.2 Open Public Space

Open public spaces that were for recreational activities appear to be neglected, see figure 4. The open public spaces are sometimes encroached upon by makeshift structures for domestic and

home-based enterprises (HBEs) such as bars, worship places, video halls, stand pipes for water selling, as seen in figures 5 and 6.



Photo: Elwidaa Masese, 2012



Figure 4: Neglected open spaces. **Figure 5:** Makeshift structures in an open space **Figure 6:** Stand water pipe outside plot premises

Photo: Elwidaa, Masese, 2012.

Photo: Elwidaa, Masese, 2012.

In open spaces with favourable environmental conditions the multi-use of this space by some households was noted. The households sometimes fenced-off some of the open space to accommodate subsistence farming, therefore converting part of it to individual private space, see figure 7.



Figure 7: Laundry being done in public space.

Photo: Elwidaa, Masese, 2013.

6.3 Absence of Boundary Walls

The grid-iron housing arrangements that were planned at MWHS connote gendered spatial configurations that are related to the gender division of labour, whereby men are expected to occupy public spaces outside the home attending to paid labour, while women are consigned to the home space attending to unpaid home chores, (McDowell, 1999, Hayden, 1980). Today the formal boundary walls that were planned for MWHS to encase houses are absent in most cases, in the few scenarios where they do exist, they are in the form of light boundary markers such as unmaintained hedges, reeds, and other plants as illustrated in figure 8.

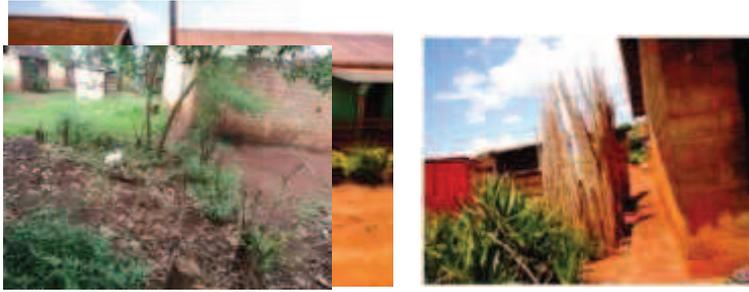


Figure 8: Fragmented irregular fences between plots

Photo: Elwidaa, Masese, 2012

Solid boundary markers are preferred by a few households as they promote, privacy, territory demarcation to avoid conflict between neighbours, and facilitate tidiness by keeping property free of strewn garbage. Boundary markers were usually light or short and did not impede visual or physical interaction between neighbours, see figure 8. Although hedges were sometimes appreciated they were thought to be expensive and hard to maintain.

To ensure tight security against burglary in a few cases, solid types of boundary walls were observed around houses that are occupied by higher-income households, see figure 9. Household members occupying such houses are considered snobbish and are thus alienated. One respondent stated: *"When you place wiring around your house, it means that you do not approve of my presence in your space. So in case you or your home are in danger, I will not come to your rescue as I might be accused of trespassing"* (Joyce, interview, 2013).



Figure 9: Chain links and solid walls common to higher-income households at MWHS. Photos: Elwidaa, Masese, 2013.

6.4 Space Use at the Plot Level

The households in MWHS intimated that they preferred living without boundary walls since their absence allowed for natural surveillance whereby they could watch over each other's children and property, and interact with neighbours, see figure 10. The absence of boundary walls makes the detection of strangers easier thus enhancing security.



Figure 10: Absence of boundaries facilitates watching over children and properties. Photos: Elwidaa, Masese, 2013.

Some female respondents mentioned that the absence of boundary walls reduced domestic violence since passers-by would easily see or hear any commotion and come to the rescue of anyone who called out for help. Women also preferred to live without boundary walls around the houses as it enabled them to socially interact with neighbours and passers-by and still be able to attend to their domestic chores, like washing clothes, cooking and watching over children. The women further mentioned that a boundary-less setting facilitated the promotion of their HBEs since the potential buyers could see their goods easily. The front yards, being exposed to passers-by along the road, offered better opportunities to promote HBEs. The spaces used for HBEs sometimes extend beyond plot limits due to the absence of boundary walls without causing any disputes with neighbours, see figure 11.



Figure 11: A groceries kiosk run by a woman erected at the front yard of the house and extending beyond the plot limit.

Photo: Nsereko, Masese, 2013.

7.0 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

MWHS has not developed the way its initiators envisaged that it would. The MWHS houses have transformed naturally as a response to habitation, corroborating Tipple's (2000) findings from his various researches in different countries, concerning informal housing, whereby ascertained that both the houses and households with time shape and reshape themselves to each other until there is a tolerable fit between the two.

Instead due to the absence of solid boundary walls and the on-going extensions, more organic spatial patterns emerged. To a large extent these growth patterns resemble the boundary-less physical setting of the Ugandan informal settlements where most of the low-income households live, see figure 12.



Figure 12: (Left) Part of MWHs; and (Right) An adjacent informal settlement. Both are devoid of boundary walls.

Photos: Elwidaa, Masese 2013.

Clear distinction between public and private spatial patterns is not evident; and there are no distinct variations in gendered space use patterns both at the neighbourhood and house levels.

Boundary-less housing areas are more conducive and responsive to the ways of living of low-income households and should be considered when planning for and designing housing schemes that target these groups so as to enable them realise their different gender roles and dispositions more appropriately.

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