

Housing for Tsunami Victims.

Town House - A sustainable alternative to walk-up flats

1 INTRODUCTION.

Economic and Social sustainability is of paramount importance in any development plan. Re-housing the tsunami victims is not an exemption. Massive inflow of resources must be utilized for creating better settlements to them in a strategic manner to ensure long term sustainability. Planning for sustainable human settlements should, among the other factors, needs due care in selection of appropriate house forms varying from individual stand-alone units to multi-storied flats. Important considerations relating to this selection would be; social characters, livelihood characters, capacity/affordability for operation and maintenance, adjustability to change according to the family needs, and the other factors like environmental considerations and technical feasibility including disaster safety. Improving productivity of the massive untrained labour force in the country by gainfully engaging them in the rebuilding process, technical transfer to the local construction industry are important indirect benefits that could be achieved through a thoughtfully planned rebuilding plan.

It is in this context that this paper attempts to compare between two forms of houses, Walk-Up apartments (Flats) and 'Town Houses' in terms of their

appropriateness as a form of housing for relatively lower income segment among victims, many of them belonging to fisheries sector.

2. DEFINITIONS.

Before proceeding further, it is important to differentiate between the two forms here in discussed. (The definition given here may differ from theoretical architectural definitions)

Flat is an assembly of housing units, arranged in different floors, one over the other, with elements sharing with other units. Among such elements are, the structure itself, partitioning between units, stair ways/lifts, water, electricity, sewerage systems, common lands etc.



Middle Income Flats

Town House is a self-standing multistoried housing unit, with possibilities of attaching units side-by-side and arranging in clusters or in linear forms to achieve higher densities.



Town Houses

3. PAST APPLICATIONS.

Flat is a popular housing form, widely used world over, in urban areas, where land is scarce, as it offers high housing densities.

In the Sri Lankan context, flats, particularly ‘Walk-up’ Flats (Flats without lifts to go up) are a popular form of housing, particularly in Colombo. The National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) and its predecessor National Housing Department had been the main developers who offered flats to a broad spectrum of the urban society, ranging from relocated shanty dwellers to senior public servants. Not limiting to Colombo, the NHDA built two storied flats in relatively rural areas under the ‘Electoral Housing Projects’. NHDA, in the recent past, has assisted the Fisheries Ministry to build flats for fishing communities.

In contrast, Town House forms have not so frequently been used in public housing in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, it is widely used world over, in urban and suburban applications, as a compromise for high-density housing where user autonomy is an important concern. NHDA has adopted Town House types in shanty relocation projects in suburban towns and for relocating Line Room dwellers in the Plantation Sector. Single

storied slum units in many slum gardens in Colombo have been converted to better quality Town Houses as a result of ownership being changed to higher income sector.

The substance of this article is backed by the writer’s association with the sector; in the areas of planning, designing, building and maintaining all types of above stated projects, over a period of 20 years.

4. LIMITATIONS OF FLATS...

Among the options of different house types being proposed for re-housing the Tsunami victims, ‘FLATS’ is heard to be the most preferred one among the decision makers. Main justification for this preference seems to be the need to achieve high housing densities, to address the issue of limited land availability for re-housing.

Flats inherent several limitations in low-income applications, as amply exhibited by many housing schemes implemented in the past. Most important of them are described below;

- Sustainability of flats as a healthy form of housing very much depends on disciplined community living behaviors of inhabitants. Reason for this is interdependency among housing units and the inhabitants. When required level of integrity among residents is not there the quality drops enormously.



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- Also, it is proven to be a technically unfeasible housing solution in areas with no pipe borne city sewer networks. Ground soakage dependent sewage systems provided for flats in un-sewered areas have failed everywhere. Even some low cost biological treatment systems introduced by NHDA have failed to sustain long due to negligence of maintenance. Exclusive sewage treatment facility for a housing projects often not viable.(high capital & running cost).

will be more important, due to presence of salt in the environment.



Low Income Flats

- Ownership rights and Management of flats come under Condominium Property Laws and are unfamiliar to communities and too complicated for practicing among them.

- Considering resource constraints in the local building materials sector and skilled labour market, re-housing strategy would be a phased out one with a part of the house being constructed for immediate occupation and balance later. The construction of flats does not support such Incremental construction / expansion.
- One of the important benefits achievable in the rebuilding process is, gainful engagement of victim communities in the construction work to eliminate dependency on the State or others, by allowing them to gain skills in the construction industry leading to future employment. Construction of flats will have to be done by contractors limiting community engagement in such construction..
- Does not address individual family needs or tastes in design. Common type plan, often done by an Architect is imposed upon, without important family requirements being incorporated.



Poor Maintenance

- Management of many common elements including maintaining them is often an expensive and complicated activity, often beyond the capacities of poor irregular income earners. Common problems are colour washing external walls, repairing leaking water lines, roof repairs, wastewater leaking from up stair slab to down stair house. In the coastal areas proper maintenance

- No ground space for upstairs dwellers. Ground floor dwellers often extend their houses encroaching common areas. These unruly acts create serious social and maintenance problems.
- Does not support fire wood cooking, pet animals etc. some of them being important requirements of low-income sector.



Due to the above stated limitations flats are more suitable for economically sound, socially disciplined segments among victims.

‘TOWN HOUSE’ AS AN ALTERNATIVE.

‘Town House’, eliminates many of the limitations in the Flats, offers compromising densities achievable in a layouts of flats, when arranged as clusters or linear forms by attaching side by side. It is a self-standing, self-sustained multistoried housing unit, with plot of garden space attached to each in front and rear. Number of storied in most cases is two but can be increased at the choice of the user.



Town House offers the following advantages over Flats, in low-income applications.

- Supports individual family living without significant dependency on neighbors. Does not require rigid community living discipline.
- Governed by familiar property laws for ownership and management. (Condominium law may apply if a common wall is used to divide two units, but the ease of maintenance will yet be their as only common element is that wall.)
- Offers more autonomy. Design can address specific user requirements; Number of rooms, floor area requirements, aesthetics to suit individual tastes etc.
- Stands on an individual land plot, offering garden space, and space for individual on-plot sewage/waste disposal. (Cess pit/ septic tank, compost bin). Periodical emptying of septic tanks too will be within the self capacity of the dweller. Individual water and electricity connections to the unit offer simpler self-maintenance possibilities. Less costly and affordable to poor.

Community involvement in maintenance minimum.

- Supports Self-Help/User participatory construction programmes.
- Incremental expansion is possible. Ground floor can be constructed first for immediate accommodation (a requirement for victim re-housing).
- No maintenance problems affecting neighbors, as in the case of flats.
- Supports low income needs like fire wood cooking, cloth drying, and pet animal keeping possible.
- Flexible form of housing to any income level.

CONCLUSION.

Considerable portion of tsunami victim population are involved in fishing related activities, therefore needs to be resettled close to the sea. Income levels of majority of them are low. In re-housing them, density is an important consideration due to the limited availability of suitable lands, in one hand and the form of housing should meet the socio- economy of the communities on the other hand. In this paper, two popular housing forms, Flats and Town Houses were compared for their relative suitability and established that the latter offers sustainability over former, in the given situation.

The object of this paper is met, if the planners and decision makers struggling to put their best of efforts to rebuild the devastated Sri Lanka, be refreshed of their knowledge with the considerations highlighted in this paper, which are derived through experience, to facilitate in arriving at best possible housing solutions in the rebuilding exercise.

In essence, the message I wish convey is that, the socio- economic parameters should not be neglected in the physical plans produced, to ensure SUSTAINABILITY. Other wise the colossal investment will be another waste.

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The contents of this paper do not necessarily reflect the official stand of the National Housing Development Authority, where the writer serves as the General Manager.