Contested modernism: post Slums Act public housing in Cape Town

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Following the introduction of the Slums Act by Central Government in 1934, the Cape Town City Council embarked on an ambitious public housing project linked to slum clearance being undertaken in the inner city areas of the Bo Kaap and District Six. The housing was intended for the people displaced by the clearances and provided an opportunity for the city to create racially segregated residential areas for Coloured people in addition to the already established African residential area of Langa. The city council adopted modernist design principles and aesthetics for these housing schemes, despite the fact that their approach to housing for White housing remained focused on conservative detached houses. It appears that they were willing to experiment with modernism for those they viewed as 'Other' as they tentatively engaged with the modernist discourse. This paper examines the situation that existed in Cape Town in relation to international trends and relates these to the actual projects.
Keywords: Cape Town, housing, modernism, Slums Act

Modernismo impugnado: después de la Ley de barrios de tugurios de vivienda pública en Cape Town
Tras la introducción de la Ley de barrios de tugurios por el Gobierno Central en 1934, el Ayuntamiento de Cape Town se embarcó en un ambicioso proyecto de vivienda pública vinculada a la remoción de los barrios de tugurios que se realizan en el centro de las ciudades de Bo Kaap y Distrito Seis. La vivienda estaba destinada a las personas desplazadas por los espacios y una oportunidad para la ciudad para crear zonas residenciales segregadas racialmente a las personas de color, además de la ya establecida la zona residencial de África de Langa. El ayuntamiento aprobó los principios de diseño modernista y la estética de estos planes de vivienda, a pesar del hecho de que su enfoque de la vivienda para la vivienda Blanco siguió centrándose en los conservadores viviendas unifamiliares. Parece que estaban dispuestos a experimentar con el modernismo para aquellos que veían como 'Otros' ya que tentativamente comprometido con el discurso modernista. Este documento examina la situación que existía en Cape Town en relación con las tendencias internacionales y los relaciona con los proyectos reales.
Palabras clave: Cape Town, la vivienda, el modernismo, Ley de barrios de tugurios

"Colonial regimes, particularly late colonial regimes, have often been sites of extensive experiments in social engineering. An ideology of 'welfare colonialism' combined with the authoritarian power inherent in colonial rule has encouraged ambitious schemes to remake native societies" (Scott 1989: 97).

Cape Town tends to be seen as an architectural backwater when considering the introduction of modernism in South Africa. The focus generally falls on the work of the Johannesburg architect and academic, Rex Martienssen and that of the so-called Transvaal Group who, through their work and in the teaching at Wits University's School of Architecture brought the tenets of the modern movement to South Africa (Herbert: 1975). However, much of their early work was in the design of houses and flats for an urban elite, with very little attention being given to the issue of social responsibility or public housing. By contrast, Cape Town, lacking a progressive school of architecture and mired in the innate conservatism of an established architectural fraternity, would seem to be an unlikely location for any form of architectural modernism. Yet, despite this, the city embarked on some of the most ambitious modernist public housing projects in South Africa both in the inner city and on the Cape Flats in the Thirties and Forties as it responded to the issue of slum clearance in a manner that grimly foreshadowed the forced removal policy of the post-1948 National Party government. In later projects the sense of space and identity that these initial schemes had were lost to mechanistic layouts and minimal architectural treatment that stripped both the housing and ultimately, the occupants of their identity. Faceless, they became the stage for the violence of gang warfare and the brutalisation of the human spirit, places without hope. From these early experiments with modernism were spawned the monsters of the post-war Group Areas-regulated spaces of Cape Town.

The slum issue

> From the huddle of hovels, from the depths of grimy lairs...there sometimes came the hot gust of rebellion; the plot would be hatched in the dark recesses of an accumulated chaos in which any kind of police activity was extremely difficult.... St. Paul of Tarsus was impossible to arrest while he was in the slums.. .
> Le Corbusier-The Radiant City, quoted by Scott 1989: 116.

With these words Le Corbusier reflected the fear that existed among the middle classes of the threat of revolt that the slums offered. His ideas on slum clearance and urban renewal was the universal Zeitgeist in the 1930s and one finds programmes being undertaken around the world to implement slum clearance and new housing programmes that were, if not in their initial proposals, more often than not, linked to the removal, segregation and control of the urban poor. Dealing with slum problems was a issue that was receiving international attention in the Thirties and had become the focus of countries worldwide, as the pattern of urban migration, coupled with declining rural and agrarian societies in the inter-war years, affected cities globally. Thus the type of comprehensive housing programme described by Heynen (1999: 43-70) in Germany was also being implemented in many countries throughout the world at this time. The United States, for instance, began its public housing programme in 1933 in a limited way, with their Housing Act of 1937 marking the start of a more comprehensive public housing programme. The American historical archaeologist, Solari (2001: 26) says that:

> In the 1930s a war against slums swept the nation. Much of the housing stock was ageing and lacked modern amenities. Almost all houses built before 1900 were considered substandard...In 1931 President Hoover convened the 'President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership' to study America's housing problems. In the federal government's view, there was a close connection between housing and health, safety, morals, and family health and general welfare.

> Solari notes that the language used to describe slums was dramatic and fear inspiring: slums were equated with cancer or a contagious disease that could spread to surrounding areas if left to rot and fester. Slums were dangerous and threatened the destruction of entire urban communities. This phenomenon is also reflected in the writings of Le Corbusier and reiterated in media comments in Cape Town. Western (1981) quotes the American writer Marris on the question of the assumed connection between visible physical dilapidation and supposed social dysfunction.
> Physical squalor is an affront to the order of society, which readily becomes associated with other signs of disorder in the public image. Crime, drunkenness, prostitution, feckless poverty, mental pathology do indeed cluster where housing is poorest- but not there only. Once this association has been taken for granted, any anomalous pattern of life embodied in shabby surroundings is easily assumed to be pathological, without much evidence. Bad housing thus becomes a symbol, of complex discordances in the structure of society and so be treated as if it were a cause of them (Western 1981: 144).

There was a constant complaint in the late 1920s and early 1930s about the inadequacy of existing legislation in dealing with the slum conditions in the cities of South Africa. The Minister for Health, in recognising the call of municipalities, promulgated the Slums Act No. 53 of 1934, which gave the Medical Officers of Health sweeping powers to expropriate property that they deemed to be a health risk (Jeppie: 2001: 118). The Slums Act was 'legislation of a new kind in South Africa, although it has been demanded for many years. The main object of the Act is to avoid the obstacles and delay caused by resort to the courts' (AB&E November 1935: 9). On the 17th August 1934 the Slums Clearance Special Committee was constituted by the Cape Town City Council to implement the Slums Act No. 53 of 1934.

Slum owners would be served notices to repair their property, reduce the number of residents or face having the occupants evacuated. The legislation set out the process with rights of appeal. In cases of overcrowding it was required that the occupiers had to agree amongst themselves who would move out and lodge a list of these occupiers with the Council The slumlords were very largely White. Jeppie gives examples of people who owned as many as 400 properties, with 20% of these falling into District Six (Jeppie: 118). Large areas of District Six and the *Bo Kaap* were expropriated by the City Council in the years between 1935 and 1945. The City Council had used civic authority to demolish the overcrowded Well Square in

District Six in 1932 after calls in the newspaper that: "it is high time we awoke from our civic slumbers and got busy sweeping before our own doors with relentless brooms and at any cost" (Jeppie: 117).

The array of housing legislation was used in Cape Town to implement the City Council's policy with regard to the identification, classification and rehousing of the city's poor. James C. Scott (1998) and Edward Soja (1989) both draw attention to the modernist programme of dealing with the poor of the world in a much more comprehensive way than had ever been undertaken before. Poverty, ethnic difference and slums represented a threat to a controlled colonial society. The legislation rendered visible the problems of the city's slum areas and, furthermore, created environments where the poor were either clearly visible, for example in the inner city schemes with their open spaces, easy access and hence controllable spaces; or removed to separate areas, isolated from the White populace and thus like Foucault's leper, identified and excluded. (Foucault 1975) The first level of the process of control was the dehumanisation of the problem. Thus, in the late 1920s, there is a call in Cape Town for "comprehensive housing schemes for various Classes (Housing & Estates Committee minutes: 30 Aug.1927).

The people who are possibly more concerned with the poor as people rather than merely statistics are groups such as the Citizens' Housing League led by Archdeacon (later Bishop) Lavis. The League was strongly opposed to the erection of 'tenement buildings'. "The feeling is universal among the poor. Privacy, individuality and home feeling cannot be obtained except in a separate house." In greater Cape Town they pointed out "there is no argument by reason of scarcity of land, either for tenements or terraces", adding, "if a Scheme is set forth which will remedy present evils, responsible opinion here, as in England, would allow a reasonable sub-economic element in such a scheme" (Housing & Estates Committee minutes: 22 September 1927). This point of view recalls Heidegger's view of the dwelling as a utopian rural structure, inextricably linked to the concept of *heimat* or home (Heynen: 16).

This was to be the thrust of the proposals considered for Cape Town, with the Garden City model as the preferred housing mode for all sections of the inhabitants. There was initially no support for any other form of dwelling despite the recognition that this could not be achieved in the inner city areas.

The evidence suggests that the Slums Act was not as effective a tool as the Council had imagined it to be in the elimination of overcrowding and slums. There was now a perceived need to tackle a much more comprehensive planning exercise that would create a modern city unencumbered with the problems of the past. These views, calling for a more comprehensive way of dealing with slums reiterates the views of Le Corbusier. Scott indicates the attitude of Corbusier who condemned the 'misery, confusion,' rot', 'decay', 'scum' and 'refuse' that he believed needed to be overcome. He regarded the slum inhabitants as "a dead weight on the city, an obstacle, a black clot of misery, of failure, of human garbage" (Scott 1998: 106). He objected to the lack of discipline of these people, which he regarded as being against nature, which was all discipline. He was also concerned about the potential revolutionary threat posed by these people. Scott says that Corbusier understood, as Haussmann had, that crowded slums were and had always been an obstacle to efficient policing. He goes on to say, "Le Corbusier proposed to clear the decks completely and replace the centre of Haussmann's city with one built with control and hierarchy in mind" (Scott: 115). Foucault's description of panopticism (Foucault 1975: 197) is the underlying order of the modern city as proposed by the modernist vision of Le Corbusier.

It is clear that the agenda of the City Council was to overcome both overcrowding and racial mixing; characteristic of the inner suburbs, by establishing cheaply planned settlements

on the Cape Flats, well away from White residents. The Provincial Administrator Fourie, in examining Cape Town's housing proposals for an area adjacent to Maitland Garden Suburb did not like

> the scattering of non-Europeans from one end to the other of the city (which) was not in the best interests of Cape Town. The City should be completely zoned... so that certain sections should be set apart as European areas, others as Non-European areas and areas where noxious trades might be established"(Housing &Estates Committee Minutes: 10 May 1928).

This, *de facto*, creates the model of an ethnically segregated city that was to be reinforced in 1950 by the Group Areas Act. As part of the concept of ethnic segregation between sub-economic housing schemes and White housing, Bokmakirie, Bridgetown, Silvertown, Gleemoor, and Alicedale were laid out on the Cape Flats in the mid 1930s (Bickford- Smith et al: 149). Rylands and Belgravia townships followed in 1936 (Housing & Estates Committee minutes 15 June 1936). These were all intended as segregated suburbs for Coloured residents, removed from the slum areas of the city. They were primarily dormitory suburbs, consisting solely of 'cottages' at this time, although flats were built during the war years.

Figure 1
Alicedale Township (*SA Architect,* Aug 1939: 179).

As Pinnock: (1989: 150) points out, "urban planning cannot be separated from political and economic considerations.... Cape Town ...was to throw up some particularly brutal solutions." He relates the replanning of Cape Town that culminated in the so-called Foreshore Scheme of 1947, proposed by the French architect, Beaudouin, and endorsed by Prof. Thornton-White (Head of the Architecture School at the University of Cape Town 1937-1965), to the modernist planning influence of Le Corbusier. This was first shown in the scheme for Cape Town put forward at the town planning congress held in Johannesburg in 1938, where the architect and planner, Norman Hanson paid "tribute to the colossal achievements in creative thought of Le Corbusier" (Pinnock: 155). Le Corbusier (1929: 211) had stated that

> In terms of town planning the flat may be considered as a cell. Cells, as a consequence of our social order, are subject to various forms of groupings, to co-optations or to antagonisms, which are an essential part of the urban phenomenon... It is possible by a logically conceived ordering of these cells to obtain freedom through order.

This authoritarian viewpoint can also be linked to Foucault's assessment of the Panopticon "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power."(Foucault: 201) The English architectural historian Colquhoun identifies an anti-liberal, anti-democratic attitude amongst the modern movement architects of Europe

who were looking for a position that mediated between Marxism and capitalism, and who consequently adopt authoritarian design principles (Colquhoun 2002: 183).

Scott points out that for Le Corbusier the doctrine of the 'Plan' was based on centralisation. "Functional segregation was joined to hierarchy. His city was a 'monocephalic' city" (Scott: 111). He also shows that "Le Corbusier had no patience for the physical environment that centuries of urban living had created. He heaped scorn on the tangle, darkness and disorder, the crowded and pestilential conditions of Paris and other European cities..." (Scott: 106). His words are reflected in an article published in Cape Town in 1934 pointing out that

> History has a habit of repeating itself not only in Johannesburg but in Cape Town too. We think that our difficulties (are) singular and exceptional. But they are the same sort of difficulties as those that beset every city with a past, which has suffered a haphazard growth. (AB&E June 1934: 6).

The Cape Town City Council used segregation as a method of controlling the living spaces of those whom they wished to control; to remove them to places where they would be clearly visible. Foucault suggests that "all authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding...and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who is he; where must he be; how is he to be characterised; how is he to be recognised..." (Foucault: 199). The colonial discourse on racism focussed heavily on differentiated assignment particularly with regard to the 'superior' characteristics and 'responsibility' of Whites in relationship to other ethnic groups. The White Man's Burden', was the description used in 1927 to predicate a diatribe on other ethnic groups.

> We find for instance that the native labour is unintelligent and unskilled, that the Coloured labour is only partly skilled, that the native labour though loyal is incompetent, and the Coloured worker, though partially competent, is untruthful and disloyal.
> It is our duty and our privilege to render such service to the measure of our own capacity ourselves. That is the White man's burden.
> It is the White man's burden to so minister to the weakness of subordinate races and so to utilise it even when to his own advantage, that no cruel injustices shall result (AB&E, June 1927: 2).

Jeppie identifies "a powerful racial element in the discourse on housing and urban renewal.... 'Slums' and 'Coloured' were almost interchangeable terms" (Jeppie: 117).

The 'Coloured' category was further sub-divided in the prevailing colonial ethnic discourse. The 'Malay' section of the community was viewed quite differently to the 'Cape Coloured'. In the published assessment of the Schotsche Kloof housing design competition, they are described as: "As a race or caste or class or faith, call it what we may, ... noted as being intelligent, sober, law-abiding, cleanly, and in the vast majority of cases anything but unskilled" (AB&E April 1939: 2). The writer of the article goes on to complain:

> Our Malay people don't want barracks! They want homes! As a folk, they are fond of the open and of as much joy and freedom as they can get out of life, just as we are; and *in their degree* (emphasis mine) they are as much entitled to it as we are.
> Dr. D.F. Malan, later to become the prime minister of South Africa, had already in 1924, in an address to the Cape Malay Association, described the Malays as being "unlike Indians... true South Africans with 'a distinct status'"(Bickford- Smith et al: 83). This association had also been particularly susceptible to the 'invention' and promotion of their identity, by the Afrikaans writer, I.D. du Plessis in the 1930s, and this identification of a Malay tradition encouraged subsequent moves to preserve the Bo-Kaap as a 'Malay Quarter' (Bickford- Smith et al: 83).

The outcome of this differentiation and assignment of 'Otherness' to ethnic groups was used to map out the differing planning approaches that would be adopted by the City Council in the housing policies applied to different groups. In Langa, the Africans, removed as far as possible from family structures, were given mainly hostel accommodation. The Q-Town project on the Cape Flats was based strongly on Corbusian principles. In District Six, modernism's 'clean knife' would be used to cut out the decay and to replace the existing living pattern with a 'modern' vision of urban housing, that laid open and visible the threatening alleys and spaces

that potentially fomented revolution. The Canterbury-Bloemhof flat scheme in District Six was set in open spaces, clearly visible and controllable. In the Bo-Kaap, there was a reticence to adopt the same approach despite the declaration of slum areas and the palpable air of decay. Schemes that had been prepared for replacing the existing urban fabric with a 'modern' alternative were shelved, and the Schotsche Kloof flats, the outcome of an architectural design competition, was prominently placed on a green field site above the historic area of the Bo Kaap. Was this in response to the different attitude being shown to the Malay populace? Or as a result of the writer I.D. du Plessis' championing of their cause and his call for the preservation of the Bo Kaap? Official records are silent as to why this was done. But the link between the modern housing and mechanisms of control were clearly apparent. The spaces were 'rendered visible' as Shamil Jeppie contended.

Slums Act housing schemes

After the introduction of the Slums Act and the subsequent compulsory purchase of properties in slum areas the City Council embarked on its ambitious housing schemes under the aegis of the Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Shaddick Higgins. Initially the architectural designs were undertaken by private architects appointed by the City Council, but in 1937 the City set up its own Housing department under the Edinburgh trained architect, P.D. McManus. This newly formed department undertook the Kewtown and Langa projects, while the Bloemhof Flats in District Six were given to private architects, Simon Chapman and Ian MacGillivray. It was decided that in view of the prominence of the Schotsche Kloof site above the Bo Kaap that it should be the subject of a competition. The practice of John Perry & Lightfoot won the competition and was appointed by June 1939; although the City Engineer and some councillors considered that the City Engineer's department should undertake the project instead of the winner.
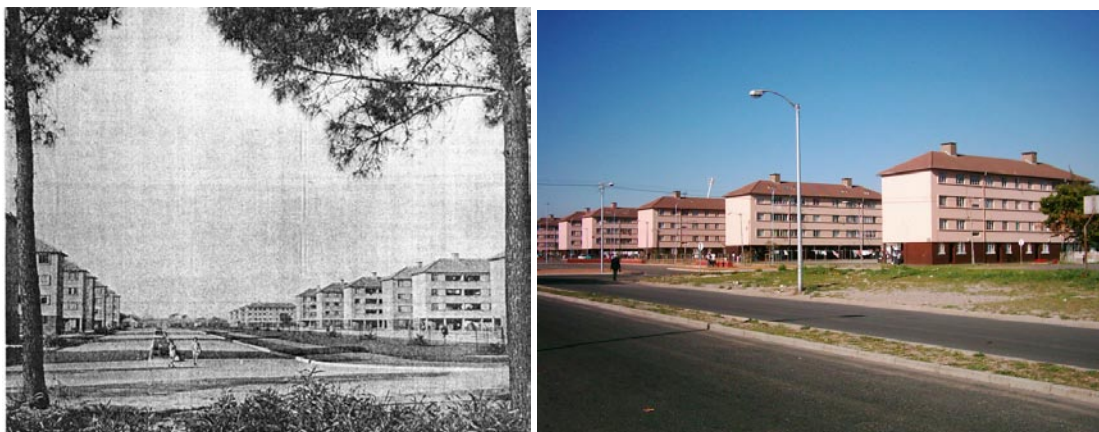

Figure 2
Planned view of Q-Town (Cape Town City Council Mayoral Report 1943) & view in 2008 (photo by the author).

Kewtown

On the Cape Flats, the Kewtown (Initially Q-Town) flats were being built with the first block ready for occupation in 1941. It had been suggested at the time that this would become "a town the size of Bloemfontein.... City Planners believed that all that was actually needed was actually putting together a few blocks of low-cost flats" (Jeppie: 123). Although this is Jeppie's contention, there are in fact extensive records in the City Council's Mayoral Minutes

of the extensive proposals for this development and it would appear to have been an extremely ambitious scheme. By 1944, Kewtown had 224 flats with double that number out on tender. The layout ominously reflected Le Corbusier's planning layout as interpreted for central Cape Town in 1938, separated, not by parks, but by acres of concrete and tarmac.

Figure 3
The cross boulevard as planned but never executed (Cape Town City Council mayoral report 1943).

Langa

The essential characteristic of Langa, which had been designed in 1927, despite the subsequent adoption of modernist design principles, was the acceptance of the principle as laid down by the Stallard Commission that Africans were only temporary urban residents and that any family life was to be discouraged- families remaining in rural areas- while men were accommodated in hostel blocks. Racism remained the underlying concern in the design of the hostels. Open parks that neither considered social living patterns nor social interaction separate slab blocks. The temporary nature of African urban residence is highlighted in the comment in *The Architect, Builder & Engineer* (Nov. 1924:27):

> The estate has been laid out as far as possible on town planning lines, and with the idea that in the future the natives may possibly be cleared away and this may become an extension of the suburbs of Cape Town. It is a very beautiful site and it is a great pity that it has to be used for such a purpose.

Inner city housing: Bloemhof and Schotsche Kloof

In both the Bloemhof and the Schotsche Kloof schemes the blocks are placed with regard to the orientation, contours and seek to avoid formalist layouts. They were designed to include community spaces and facilities. In both, the architectural character was regarded at the time as being 'modern'. The buildings use standard steel horizontal glazed windows and both schemes have facades that are strongly horizontal in expression, with plastered walls and both use their

balconies and entrances as contrasts, a device found in a number of European prototypes. In both schemes the balconies are horizontal elements. Both also use the entrance staircase tower as a contrast to the horizontality of the blocks with a vertical expression. But there is essentially no ornamentation on the buildings, although ribs that would now be considered 'Art Deco' in character mark the entrances. The schemes were considered to be 'purely functional' in appearance, budgetary constraints leading largely to the more functional appearance.
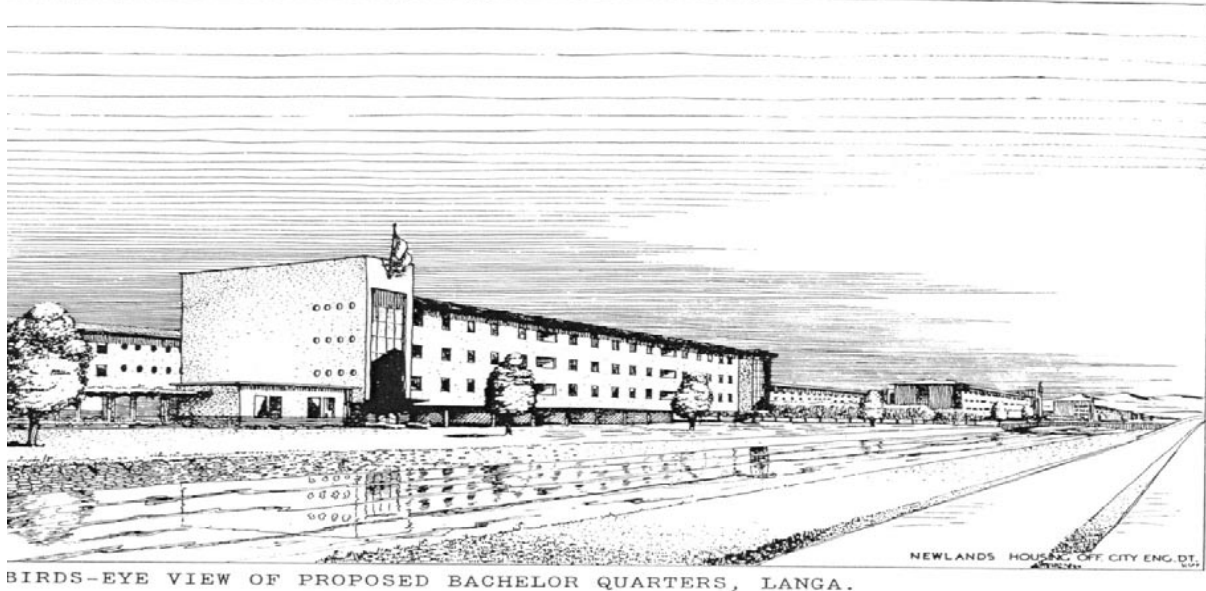

BIRDS-EYE VIEW OF PROPOSED BACHELOR QUARTERS, LANGA.

Figure 4
Single quarters at Langa (Cape Town City Council Chief Housing Architect's Branch report 1943).

Figure 5
The Schotsche Kloof Flats (photographs by the author 2005).

In the design of the Schotsche Kloof Flats, the architects proposed a smaller living unit, "a simplified flat' where the sleeping spaces were divided by a screen wall rather than a full height division. This was the cause of considerable controversy. It found favour with the Council on economic grounds, but some councillors objected on the grounds that it was unsuitable for "Malays (who) on the whole earned considerably more than the average Coloured person." It was suggested that the "Architect had put forward a design which was in vogue for superior Europeans." (Housing & Slum Clearance Committee minutes 11 October 1939) This proposal is closely linked to the *Existenzminimum* that was the subject of CIAM congress held in Frankfurt in 1929 (Mumford 2000:41-42).

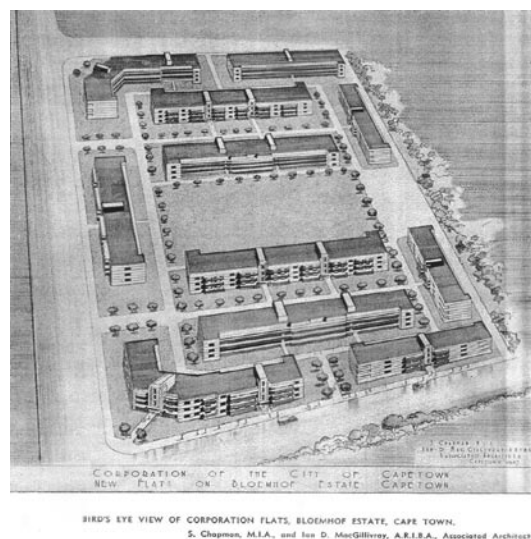**Figure 6**
Bloemhof Flats in 1939 (AB&E May 1939).

Figure 7
Layout of the Bloemhof Flats (*SA Architect,* May 1939: 50).

The architecture of the *Neue Frankfurt*, Heynen asserts, "lacks a number of salient features that are fundamental to the work of other avant-garde architects. Flexibility, mobility and dynamism, for instance- essential elements in Giedion's concept of modern architecture- do not predominate there" (Heynen: 64). Since there was not any intention to destroy the old but rather to create juxtaposition between old and new, nor is there any radicalisation of modernity, but rather a desire to build as much as possible within the shortest time, Heynen identifies this as a characteristic of programmatic modernism. Once again, this juxtaposition between old and new could be used to describe the architecture of both inner city schemes in Cape Town.

Bozdogan describes the Turkish architects who tried to dissociate modern architecture from cubic forms. The architect Abidin Mortas (2001: 238), quoted by Sibel Bozdogan, wrote in his 1936 essay 'Our Homes' that

> modern architecture does not mean horizontal windows, flat surfaces and wide terraces. It is the most logical and aesthetically sophisticated solution to modern psychological and sociological needs (Bozdogan 2001:238).

She goes on to say that "he suggested that modern architecture was formally indeterminate, acquiring shape only in the specific circumstances at hand, thereby effectively negating the stylistic uniformity claimed by a more doctrinaire and canonic modern movement" (Bozdogan: 2001:238).

Conclusion

The architecture of the city housing projects mediates between programmatic requirements and site. Possibly, the economic constraints of the projects led to a 'purer' form of modernism being applied. The schemes were clearly part of a comprehensive strategy for planning the city. The strategies for the implementation of the housing schemes were extensions of social and political domination by spatial control of people by the city. Whether the architects were consciously part of the process or merely the instruments is hard to say from the available evidence. They appear to be applying norms that had been used in more egalitarian societies, but as Bozdogan points out, architectural form does not necessarily reflect only one political ideology. That the forms and layouts adopted make access, visibility and observation easier is apparent. Was this intentional or inherent in the design decisions taken? They seem to reflect a *Zeitgeist* that placed society above the individual, and the State above society.

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