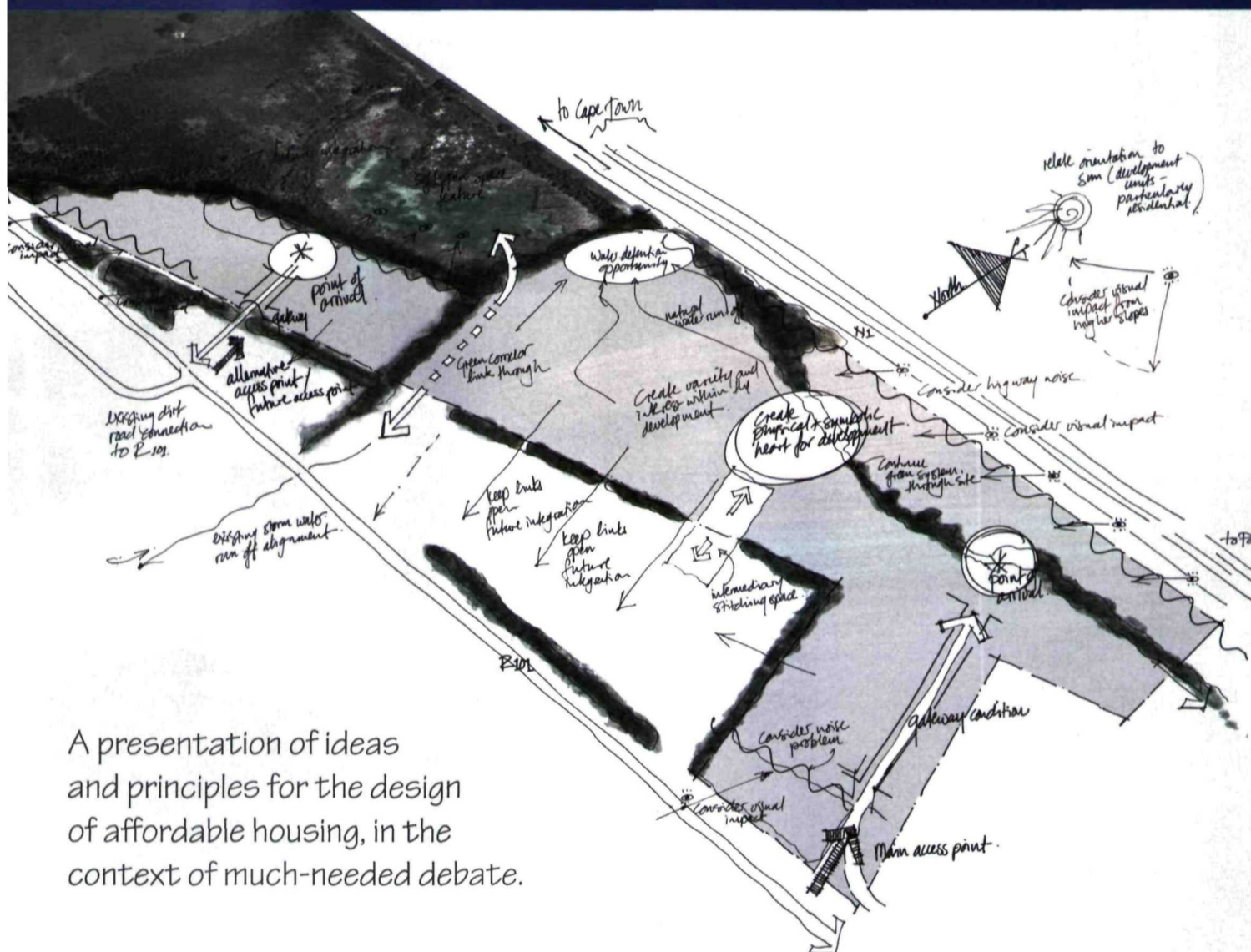


THREE PRECINCT SCALE PROJECTS

CRAFTING URBAN SPACES



A presentation of ideas and principles for the design of affordable housing, in the context of much-needed debate.

Figure 1: Analysis of wider influences at Fair Valley

There must be many unbuilt housing projects that populate the bottom drawers of architects and urban designers across the country. They may be considered failures at one level, but valuable contributions to a reflective debate at another. We have selected three unbuilt projects to highlight our approach.

The first design was our submission¹ for an ideas competition (2003 SIDA International Housing Competition), the second a public sector commission (2005 N2 Gateway Delft Symphony Precinct)², and the third a private sector commission (2008 Fairvalley Eco Estate for Kagiso Urban Management, in association

with Mike Schroeder Architect). The last has been creatively managed and was the only project that used a design-led charrette³ process.

All three designs are for green field sites and are conceived at precinct scale. The projects symbolise a trajectory of involvement from isolated visioning (ideas competition) to interdisciplinary engagement by a public sector client and by a private sector one.

In every case we very much enjoyed being involved as crafters of the fine-grained, three-dimensional urban spaces associated with

affordable housing. In the latter two projects we appreciated working in balanced and creative teams and actively engaging in design-led debate.

STICKING TO FIRST PRINCIPLES

The principles that we employed have remained relatively consistent. Through highlighting the variety that emerges even when using a consistent set of urban design

principles, we are able to show that it is not firstly about designing the most affordable or original house type, but about the conscious crafting of the shared spaces. In all our work a sense of enclosure and a *human-scaled place* has been given prominence, and we have made an effort to imagine and communicate the real experience at ground level through a variety of visualisation techniques.

The principles are not new, but the projects each provided opportunities to develop unique solutions. The project for Kagiso Urban Management and the Fair Valley Workers Association had to conform to norms of commercial viability which may provide a new benchmark⁴.

PRACTICAL SCALE OF INVOLVEMENT

In each project we were given predefined green field sites, which forced us to focus our efforts at this scale. We believe that, for designers, the greater balance of effort has to go into properly defining and developing hierarchies from the scale of the precinct downwards. There is a great deal of challenging design work to be done at the scales between that of the precinct and the front door to each house. The precinct typically incorporates the scale of several urban blocks with associated streets, open spaces and buildings. It is a scale where the spaces between buildings become tangible. Beyond the precinct a further four hierarchies need to be defined and the thresholds and interfaces between them properly 'crafted'. The hierarchies include public, semi-public, semi-private and private spaces in different arrangements. Urban designers have well-developed skills to define and communicate these hierarchies.

Broader issues, such as how cars and pedestrians access the precinct and how public transport improves overall sustainability, ideally need to be tackled at a different level by strategists in the public sector who have the power to link infrastructural needs to provincial and national budgets and broad political agendas. We do not suggest that city planning is superfluous and unrelated to design, but that it is unrealistic to expect consultants who are commissioned to work on a specific site to have any real influence beyond the site, particularly when there is an urgency to build. In the Fairvalley Project we collaborated with creative private sector planners and transport engineers who communicated with officials and distilled the higher-order fixes. This proved to be most effective in getting us out of the blocks in reasonable time.

DEFINE AND RESPOND RAPIDLY TO A WIDER SET OF INFLUENCES

Even the most isolated precinct will be subjected to outside forces. The grid and massing need

to be arranged in response to these forces, which may include topographical and ecological constraints, logical points of access, alignment of higher-order public transport infrastructure, heritage aspects and legibility. (See Figure 1.) The sooner the set of context-specific constraints are defined and confirmed, the better our ability to respond appropriately and to begin focusing on place-making at a more tangible scale.

SUPPORT STRUCTURE AND ECONOMY

With the early introduction of a robust and permeable grid we open up rather than close down design opportunities. Urban designers often refer to the underlying support as an enabling grid. A simple grid is the foundation of necessary affordability, because so much of the cost lies below the ground in the form of service infrastructure. The grid creates a neutral

backdrop over which variety can be crafted. (See Figure 2.)

The historic value of a grid system as a support has been well documented in John Habraken's *The Structure of the Ordinary*⁵. His theories show clearly that the grid is not only relevant in advanced societies – it is found in the urban vocabularies of both ancient and developing country societies. It is useful to begin with an efficient, empirically tested grid based on civil engineering criteria and to stop wasting energy and time denying this. The grid is not the place to be original (read funky road layout). The urban blocks, framed by the even grid, represent robust volumes that can be stepped back, carved out and layered in a multitude of ways to create necessary levels of richness and variety at the next level of exploration.

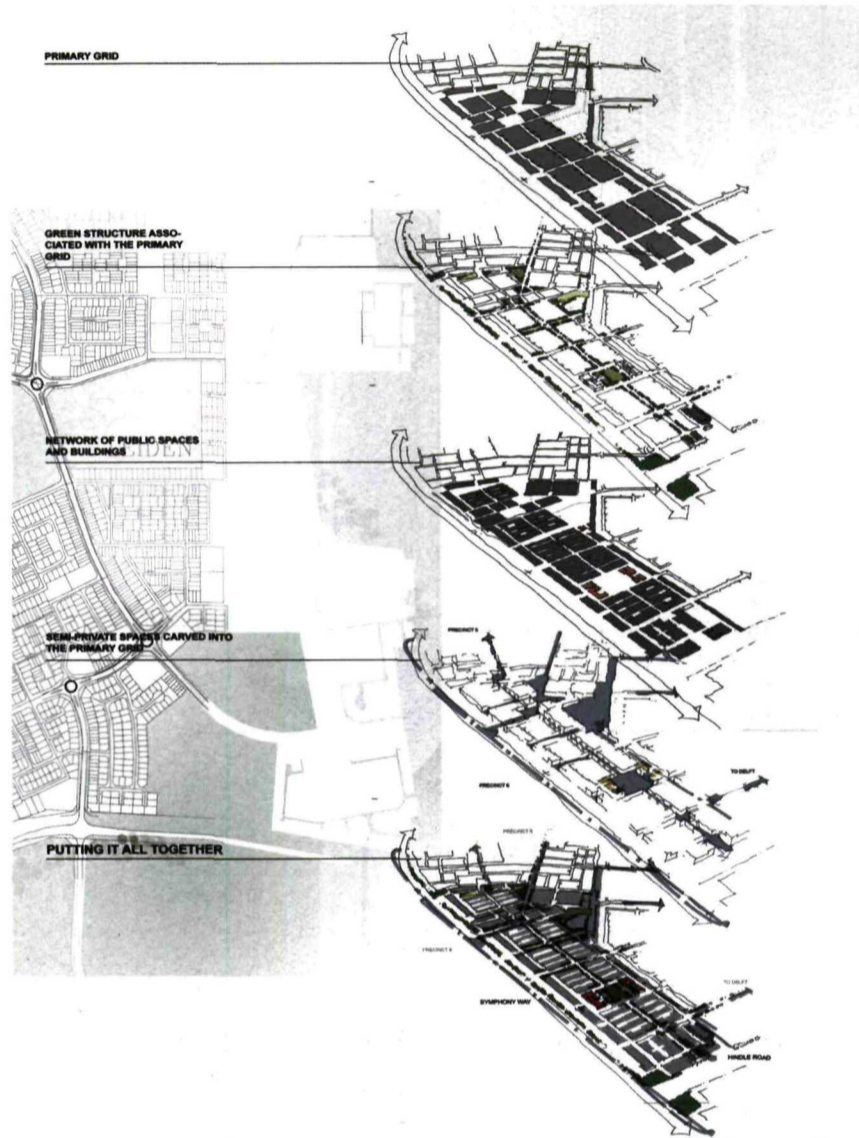


Figure 2: Delft Symphony Project – hierarchies overlaid onto a simple grid

