# Housing strategy requires 'disciplined effort'

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Recent reports that the HDC housing waiting list has reached 200,000 have thrown up questions

about strategies for land usage, housing design and urban planning in T&T.

In our series on housing, JOSHUA SURTEES speaks to architects, planners and surveyors to find out if there is enough land available, whether everybody on the list can get a place to live and what kind of accommodation makes best use of space while HDC housing in central Trinidad. Chaguanas is the fastest growing town in that providing comfortable, functional living complements people's lifestyles.



The final instalment of our series features Afra Raymond, president of the Joint Consultative Council, MD of Raymond & Pierre Ltd chartered surveyors and an expert on land usage issues, procurement and housing.

## How many ultra-rich, multiple homeowners are there?

How many, I don't know. But as a practitioner I can tell you it's a significant part of what takes place. It informs how, when parcels of land become available, what are the forces that compete for it, and this is where the boundaries between public and private become very elastic. If the forces on one side have the capacity to go after that piece of land and get it before the government, that has an effect on what options are available to the government to build affordable housing.

## So the HDC is competing with private developers?

Absolutely. It's been referred to time and again by various housing ministers. Particularly when opening housing developments in the East-West Corridor. Sixty per cent of housing applications are for East-West Corridor—where 60 to 70 per cent of our population lives—but only ten or 15 per cent of what the HDC builds is in that area.

So there's a terrific mismatch. In reality, the HDC cannot find the land to build houses in those areas because of tremendous pressure on that land.

I went to a public meeting in D'Abadie about a newly-proposed HDC housing development at Trestrail. Tell me a bit about that, because it could be a good case study of what the HDC does and how it impacts on the local community and residents?

I don't want to limit it to Trestrail, but the issue is: we have a burgeoning demand for certain types of development and a limited land space in the country. Roughly half of the land in the country is forested. A significant proportion is swamp that you can't build on. Half of it is steeply-hilled—we could build tall up there but the cost of supplying a modern water and electricity is phenomenal. And the rest, well the very rich sector of the population know that if they buy, invest, in parcels of land it's a significant repository of wealth.

So Trestrail is an old horse farm. Local residents are not overly keen on 1,200 new housing units and are angry with the lack of transparency in the process. Is this what HDC should be doing?

I don't want to get into a blanket condemnation or approval of the HDC. I want to put Trestrail into the context of a broader discussion.

There's a phenomenon you'll be familiar with in the UK called the NIMBY. A NIMBY is a perfectly reasonable person who is educated, believed Nelson Mandela should be free, believe what is happening in Gaza is terrible, want to save the whale, believe in free education for young girls like Malala, all these progressive positive things, healthcare, taxing the rich.

But the one thing you must never do to those people is to come into their neighbourhood and put a development where poorer people are going to live. Because they will march and organise a big meeting and shut you down. Because NIMBY means Not In My Back Yard. Trestrail is a NIMBY kind of issue.

And, to place it in economic context, people who have property as an economic agent, it serves their cause for less property to be built. Because if less housing were built the value of their holdings would increase evermore.

And with Trestrail, like with the Highway Reroute Movement, Invaders Bay, the library in Chaguanas, the smelter, because of the limited land space and the ambitions of the population, large-scale development seems to be the vogue. Which means the entire process of development must be the subject of wide-scale consultation so that people do not feel that they are ambushed.

We've discussed the East-West Corridor as having developed as a necessity—people need to get into town even though it can take hours—and I suppose that will continue? And should it?

Well, what has actually taken place in the last 15 years is there's been a shift of the population, from the East-West Corridor towards Chaguanas. For the last 20 years, our statistics have shown Chaguanas is the fastest-growing town in the country. In fact, right now, they are lining themselves up for city status. The Chaguanas population, the last time I checked, was about 120,000. It could be more now. Largely comprised in private small-scale developments.

#### It's a huge sprawl, though...

Yes, it's a sprawl and there are significant challenges.

There's also a large population of people who traditionally inhabited the East-West Corridor, went to school there, many of them still work in Port-of-Spain and its environs—but they're living in Chaguanas. I don't have a problem with Chaguanas becoming a city, I think it's right.

Port-of-Spain is a whole tragic story...In 1980-81 when they did a census the population was 100,000. The current population is 38,000. I'm one of those people and I want to say that this is the only capital city in the world where we haven't suffered a war, famine, flood, earthquake yet we have allowed our capital to collapse and decline in the precipitous kind of way that it has.

What should we be doing in terms of residential housing to regenerate downtown? And will it be done, what is required of the people in charge for it to happen?

We're really dealing with a deep-seated series of issues, including the NIMBY phenomenon and a collapse over the last 30-40 years which has been legislated and allowed. It started with the construction of these large out-of-town and edge-of-town malls with lots of car parking and covered shopping, airconditioned... And that precipitated the decline of Port-of-Spain as a shopping city and a lot of other things have followed.

There really is a very limited number of people living here and an even smaller number of people who are willing to live here. It's no longer an attractive place for the vast majority of people.

#### Can we turn that around?

It's possible but it would be a long-term thing and would require mixed development, which we haven't had much of. The closest thing to mixed development—and its outcome is unclear—is One Woodbrook Place with shopping, offices and residences, which is a popular thing in the advanced countries.

I don't know if it's a success but it's one we could look at, eh?

But let me stick my neck out and say the vast majority of buildings built by Patrick Manning's administration, the government campus plaza, remain unoccupied. There's 1.3 million square feet of unoccupied space downtown. And, at the same time, the government has taken contracts to complete those offices by May next year. They've approved \$1.5 billion to complete those projects.

In addition, this administration has moved ahead with something people have talked about for decades: decentralisation. The relocation of significant ministries and state agencies to Central Trinidad.

Was his attempt to build skyscrapers the right thing to do to regenerate or should it have involved affordable housing?

I think it should have involved affordable housing.

What we may well have to coin in the next five to ten years, in terms of making the city attractive and making proper use of those buildings, is to contemplate a different future—they may have to be repurposed so that parts of the buildings may be residential. Because one is now questioning how many square feet can be occupied, given the number of state agencies that are now headed to Central Trinidad.

Should the HDC take a plot somewhere here or right down near Independence Square and build 500 to 1,000 units in a big nice building or set of buildings? Or should they redevelop and relocate the streets in the east of the city?

The relocation of those streets and the market were seriously contemplated projects between 2005 and 2007. Land was purchased for millions of dollars under the last administration and the projects never came to fruition. Everything east of Henry Street was proposed to be redeveloped.

Your first question refers to a wider purpose for the HDC. What that would require is a joined-up policy and a housing policy review. If they have this kind of money (abundant) and they're building 6,000 houses a year and the purpose is to make quality housing for the needy, your question is indeed a pregnant one: why not take a chance on the future and build 200 units that you'd give out on a rent-to-buy sort of scheme to professionals in a part of Port-of-Spain that remains undeveloped, in the hope of sparking a different economic outcome for the capital city?

It would require strategic thinking and HDC and Udecott to put heads together, which of course is a little ironic given that Jearlean John sits in both places. It requires a disciplined effort.

You asked at the beginning how they had gone in achieving the 100,000 targets. The HDC has built about 18,000 units in total between 2002 and the present. Now, of that 18,000 units they have distributed a little over 6,000 houses.

So in fact in our country at this time there's between 11,000-12,000 empty homes which taxpayers' dollars have paid for. And the fact they remain empty at the same time as there is a large number of people who are needy, it reflects a severe misallocation of resources in an area of severe social need.

So if the housing policy is to be properly evaluated, it's not only to be evaluated in terms of the cost per house and the important concepts about social design Jenifer Smith spoke about in her interview. But it needs to be reflected in the raw reality that if we build 20,000 homes with taxpayers' money, 20,000 needy citizens would be living in those homes.