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**Traditional and Cultural Aspects in Rural and Urban Housing in Kenya**

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## **Abstract**

*Most of the people who live in the urban areas have formerly lived in the rural areas where within the African context many families continue to keep strong ties. It is not unusual to find families with two homes one in the rural area and one in the urban area. Rural homes meet the desire for rootedness and a sense of belonging, whereas homes in urban areas are perceived as places from where a person can launch into the job market and where business opportunities are rife. Hence, most experience a duality of standards, due, among other things, to contrasting dwellings.*

*The paper discusses the cultural, social, traditional and economic aspects that contribute to different standards and quality of life peculiar to each of the places. Other issues included are how cultural aspects are incorporated into house layout and design, their occurrence in both rural and urban housing, occupancy rates and accessibility to amenities. The specific areas studied are Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, as the urban area and Muranga, a predominantly rural area to the north of Nairobi, as the rural area. The study is limited to members of one cultural group, the Kikuyu, within the low-income bracket.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Rural-urban migration occurs ubiquitously and its consequent problems and issues have been extensively studied. This is apparent in Nairobi, and as in some other parts of African countries links are maintained with rural homes, resulting in bilateral affiliations to both the rural and urban areas even after migration. The quality of the housing in the two systems is discussed here. A contrast is made of the two living situations assessing the quality of life by factors such as house construction, size, accessibility to various social amenities, density and some cultural factors. The factors include some of those stipulated by the Welfare Monitoring Survey II<sup>1</sup> as contributing towards a decent quality of life (CBS, 1996).

The concept of 'home and house', envisages the idea of permanent rural *homes*, and urban *houses* which are used for a limited duration. Urban houses are usually termed 'temporary' and are used for the period during which a person lives in the town for the purposes of work or study. Upon retirement from formal or informal employment, there is a tendency for people to go to the rural homes (Weisner, 1972, 83), which are considered immutable. They are a place where special family gatherings take place irrespective of whether members of the family reside in the rural or urban area. Ferraro (1978) in his overview of Nairobi terms as cyclic the nature of the rural-urban ties whereby people go back and forth during the year. The quality and characteristics of the urban and rural houses are very different each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Within Africa many live this duality of life, maintaining links in both areas (Nas, 1985, Little, 1974). Weisner (1972) who carried out a study on migrants from Western Kenya in Nairobi, found that this duality appeared to be primarily for economic reasons.

Given the diversity of cultures in Kenya and in Africa at large, this study was based on the cultural setting of a particular people. The group discussed mainly occupies the central regions of Kenya within the Central Province. This province borders on Nairobi district, hence bringing about an influx of these people into the main urban centre in Kenya, Nairobi.

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<sup>1</sup> A welfare survey carried out in Kenya in 1996 by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 1996)

Both the rural and urban houses discussed in this paper were those of the low-income group, with the urban housing consisting of rented council housing.

Some of the observations came out of a broader study on housing and cultural adaptations of Kikuyus in Nairobi. It sought to investigate factors that were culturally predominant within the rural areas and to find out the missing cultural structures in the urban areas. All these aspects were deemed to affect the quality of life of the residents. The study was carried out mainly using a structured questionnaire that was used to obtain relevant issues from rural and urban residents of 68 households. Measured drawings facilitated the study of house layout and designs that were later used to make a comparative study.

## **2.0 Some Aspects of the Traditional Architecture**

The rural study revealed that housing clearly epitomised the social interrelationships of the residents. Houses seemed to have been erected accretively over the years, as and when they were required. The units were purely functionally based. The housing usually consisted of homesteads which area comprised of several units that often housed members of both the main family and the extended family. The main features were that the units that belonged to the same family and included a main house for the parents, female children and young boys. Culturally it was seen as important to have separate spaces for the different sexes of the children. What was consistent was that grown-up boys on initiation did not continue to live with their parents (Kenyatta, 1978, Wanjohi, 1997, Muriuki, 1974). They seemed to move out of the parent's house and built completely separate houses either within the same compound or adjacent to it. It was in these houses that they would usually continued to live in when they got married.

A clear distinction was observed not only between roles, but also between the spaces used by the male and female members of the family. There was the desire to have a separate unit for a kitchen that also provided an entity for the women who mainly used it for food preparation and at times also for consumption. A separate food storage granary was in evidence with farming being the mainstay of the rural population and animal rearing being of substantial importance.

The house layout was such that the units were oriented towards a central courtyard that was used for the day-to-day activities. Separate units belonging to the sons were placed around secondary courtyards that were a little set back from the main central courtyard (see Figs. 1a and 1b).

## **3.0 Rural Area Characteristics**

The rural population of Kenya is 84.5%<sup>2</sup> of the total, so clearly the majority of the people live in the rural areas. Occupancy rates were low as there was more accommodation per family member in the rural than in the urban area where densities were higher. Each family had approximately 0.01 square kilometres<sup>3</sup>, which was fairly adequate to support a large family homestead including a livestock and farming area. House layout alterations or additions for cultural reasons were facilitated by land ownership, which allowed for flexibility of house

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<sup>2</sup>Central bureau of Statistics, Nairobi 1996, using figures for 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Kenya Government DDP

design and use. Additional units were made as and when required allowing for expansion as the family grew.

Recent houses tended to be made of timber and corrugated iron sheets. Although these materials were more expensive than those used formerly<sup>4</sup>, to the owners they were a reflection of status and development. The maintenance required by these new materials was lower than those used previously as they were longer lasting.

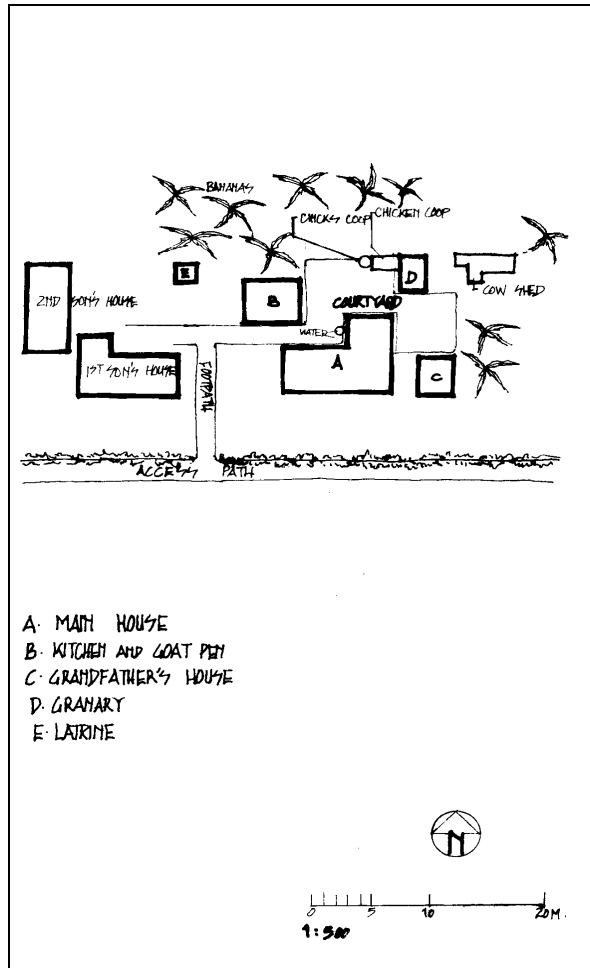


Fig. 1a

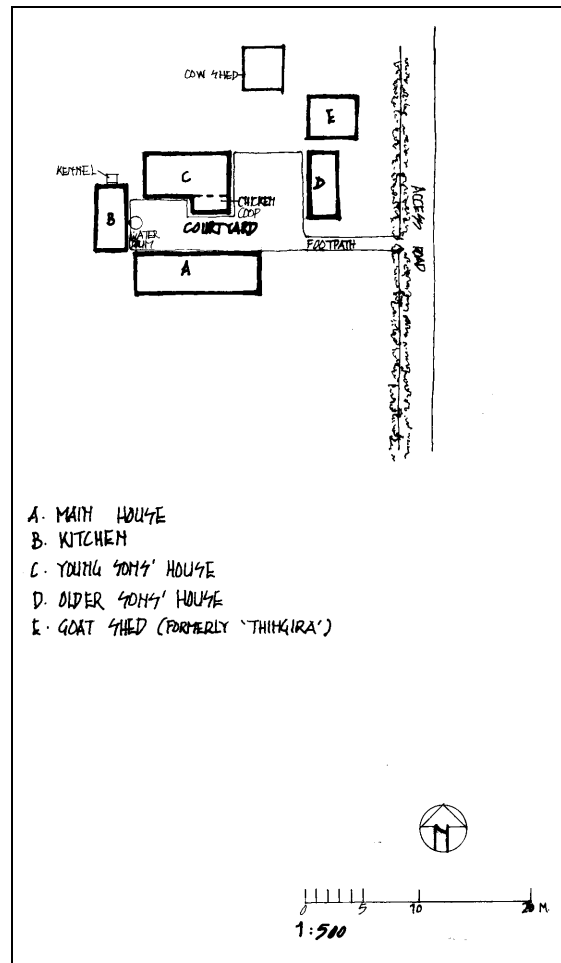


Fig. 1b

Examples of two family homesteads, in Muranga, each with two sons

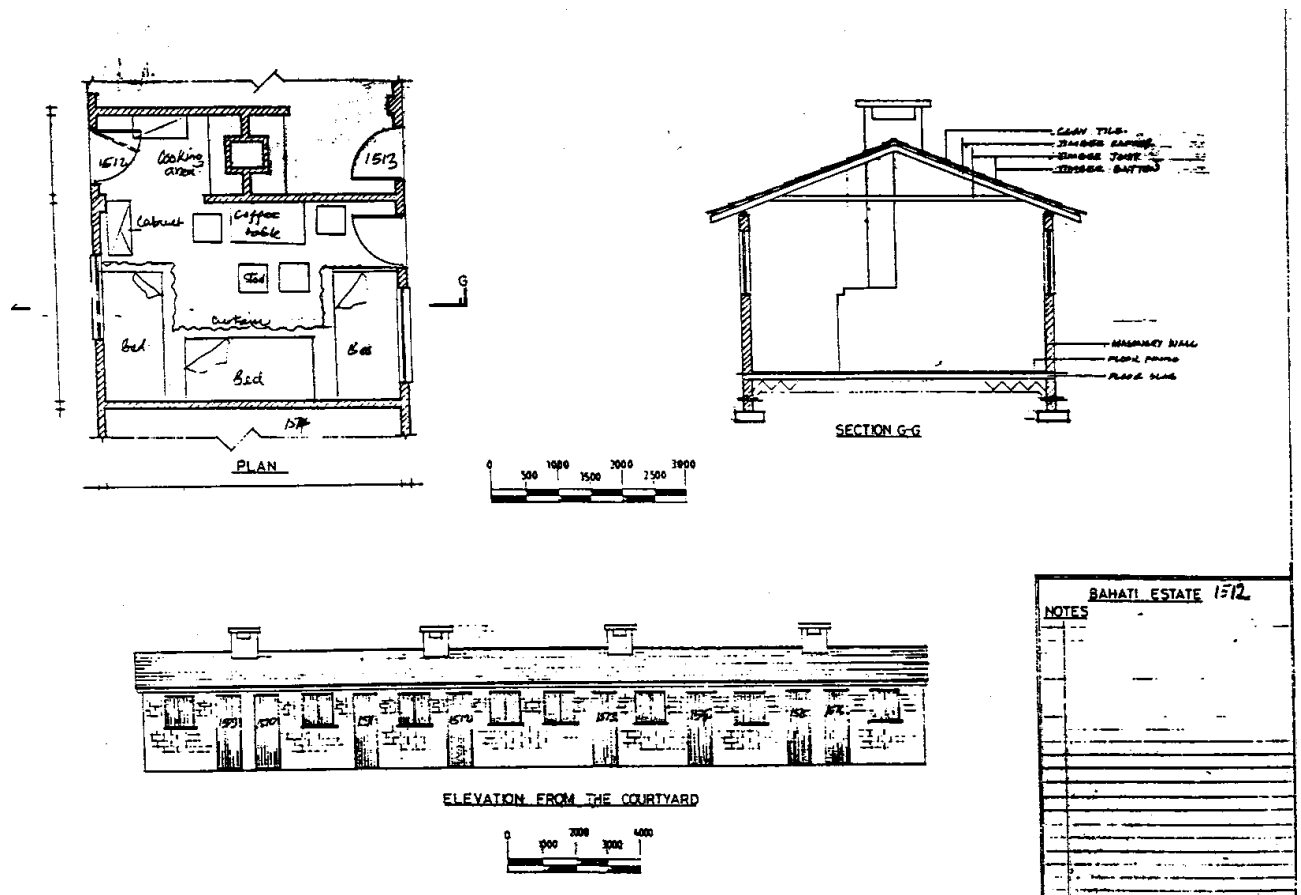
#### 4.0 Urban area Characteristics

Some of the older urban housing estates portrayed a formal housing layout with rectilinear arrangement, masonry stone walling and with clay roofing tiles or corrugated iron sheets for the council built houses. 70% of the people lived in such estates or at times worse of shanty areas, which are to the eastern and southern parts of the city of Nairobi (Weisner, 1972). The Bahati estate (see Fig. 2) that is cited in this paper is an example of the former type of housing

<sup>4</sup> Timber or mud walled houses with thatched roofs used before the introduction of modern materials during the colonial period.

and displays an arrangement that allows for courtyards in between the housing, with the communal facilities to one end of the courtyard. This housing was erected during the colonial period.

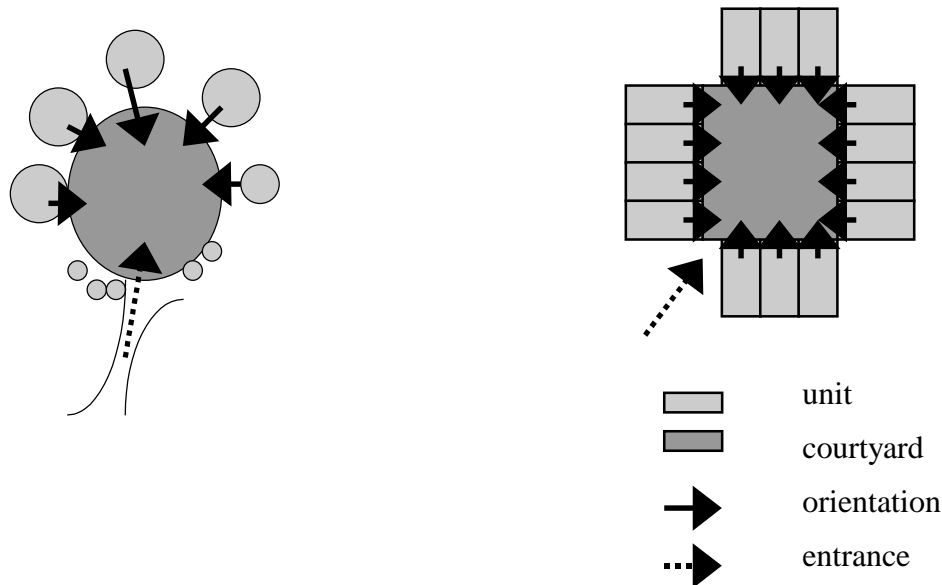
Bahati lies about 2.5 km from Nairobi towards the east of the city centre. It consisted of one-roomed units with an adjacent kitchen and store. The ablution facilities were set at a distance from the house and shared among several units. The housing estate was owned by the local council and was available for rent at very subsidised prices. Although this was a rental estate many people treated it as their own. The favourable price and convenient location, very near Nairobi city centre and the industrial area, meant that job opportunities were easily accessible. Consequently most of the residents had lived in the area over long period.



**Fig. 2 Bahati Estate House single roomed units, and Elevation of a row of houses in Nairobi (Tuts et al 1989)**

Although the housing was built during the pre-independence period, other later versions of housing for low-income families seemed to follow a similar pattern whereby the residents used one room for the family with shared common utilities. They were not intended for families but for individual male workers who would leave their families in the rural areas to

work in the city (Weisner, 1972). The concept of the layout was derived from the traditional<sup>5</sup> (see Fig. 3a) one where rooms surrounded an open courtyard that was used by all the residents. In the traditional compounds members of the same family used the courtyard, whereas in these low-cost housing schemes it was likely that various families from diverse cultural backgrounds shared the courtyards.



**Fig. 3a Courtyard concept derivation from the traditional e.g. Kikuyu traditional architecture families**

**Fig. 3b and the modern manifestation in courtyard houses for low-income**

Due to economic constraints it was not unusual to find habitation of single rooms by entire families<sup>6</sup>. In the urban areas 57% of low-income housing (CBS, 1996) often had shared communal facilities. Space limitations led to over-crowding in many instances. The demand for houses in Nairobi which has a population growth rate of 4.7% per annum (Statistical Abstract, 1998), is far beyond the abilities of the government to provide adequate housing (Schmid, 1983).

## 5.0 Basic Amenities in the Urban and Rural Area

Urban homes often had the advantage of better amenities than homes in the rural areas, such as all-weather roads to enhance communications, drainage facilities, services such as piped water, electricity and access to telephones. Others advantages included closeness to a

<sup>5</sup> Most traditional villages in Kenya have the units around an open courtyard used for various activities, such as socialising and food preparation

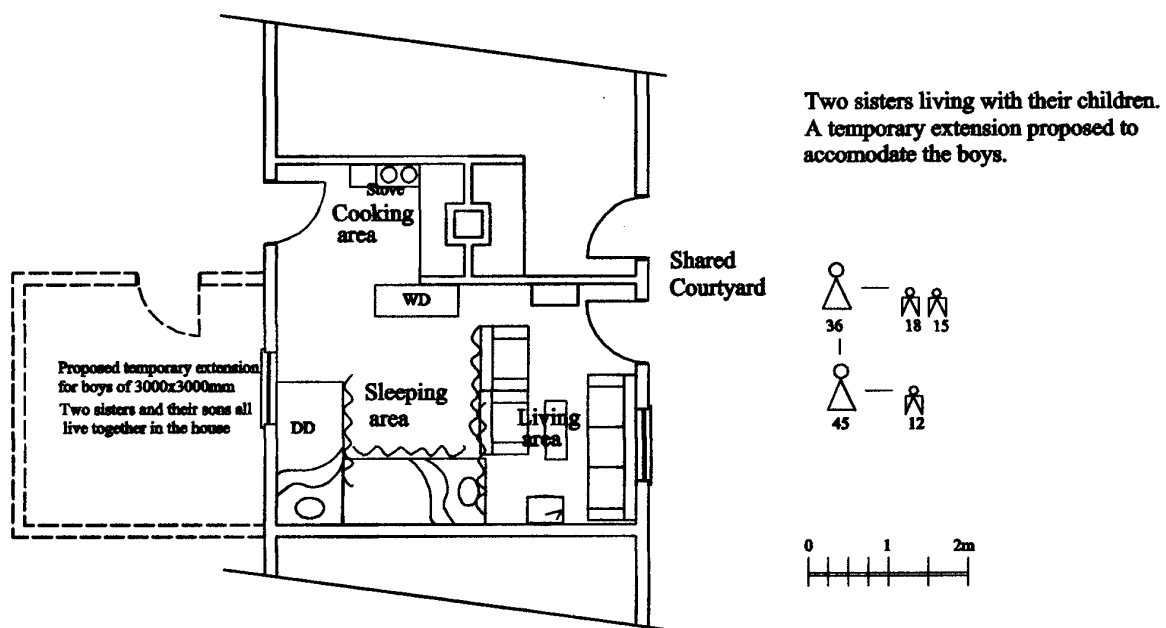
<sup>6</sup> When the estates were initially implemented they were intended to house migrant male workers only, who did not intend to bring the families anyway because of the expense of living in the city (Ferraro, 1978), now some of the families now include the wife and children, who may be studying or working in the city as well.

commercial centre, public transport, educational, social and religious facilities. However such public services and the maintenance of basic facilities were sometimes in need of improvement. Increased densities and poverty, higher insecurity because of increased crime rates were also in evidence. The opportunities for contamination from unsanitary conditions are higher because of the shared washrooms in some types of accommodation. There were 49.6% (CBS, 1996) of residents who use paraffin, which is used for both cooking and lighting. Although electricity was available it was not affordable to the majority. In order to reduce costs it was not often used for cooking. Cooking was carried out in the rooms, the main fuel used being paraffin. There was the added risk of fire and carbon monoxide poisoning from charcoal, which was also used as a cooking fuel.

In the rural areas as homesteads were surrounded by large farming areas distances between urban centres were vast. Loose surface roads rendered communication difficult during the wet season, as there was little development of these facilities, including a lack of proper infrastructure in most of the areas. Firewood was the main source of cooking fuel, and paraffin was used for lighting. Only 38.5% (CBS, 1996) of water sources were safe to use.

### 6.0 Cultural Factors and the Quality of Life; Some Comparisons

In order to uphold some of their cultural and traditional customs and in order to bring about the desired environment, urban migrants in Bahati were found to make certain arrangements. As children grew some adaptations are made to accommodate them with friends or relations or by renting additional rooms for the boys. It was preferable for them to have independent rooms or houses so alternatives are sought to cater for this. The rooms, such as the ones in Bahati Estate were small and eventual crowding and infringement of personal privacy seemed inevitable. Being council owned, it was not permissible to implement alterations or additions. This notwithstanding, some of the residents did make or propose some temporary<sup>7</sup> changes.

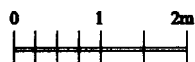
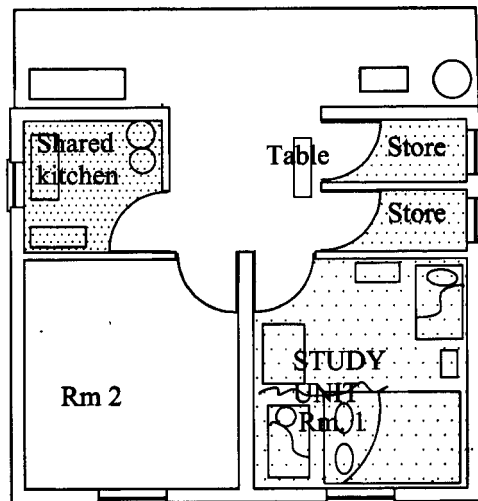


<sup>7</sup> These were made of temporary materials and seen as a measure to solve space problems only in the short term.

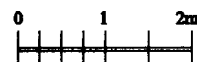
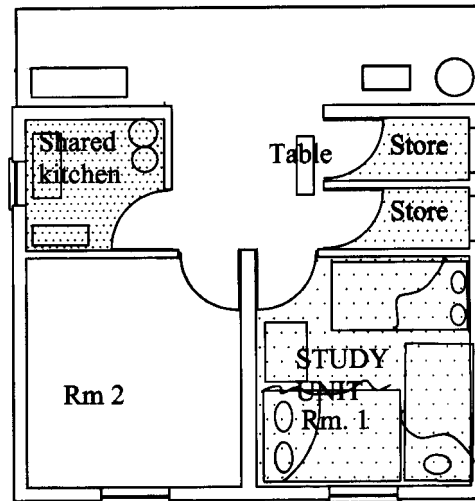
**Fig. 4 Proposed extension for boys in Bahati**

### 6.1 Urban Area Case Study

Many people in Bahati did not make additions to the house but adapted to the house in different ways over the years such as in the case given below. This illustrates what residents may experience in order to adapt some urban designs to their requirements. Four stages were identified (see Figs. 5a to 5d) covering approximately 20 years. In the first stage during the first five years of using the room, the children were young and the room seemed adequate. The second stage during the following five years, children's beds were added and although some screens were added, there was a lack of privacy. During the next ten years, the third and fourth stages, the boy was initiated and the parents rented accommodation for him in another section of the estate although he returned to his parent's house for meals. This arrangement was very similar to that made in the rural situation whereby older initiated boys lived separately from the parents. Due to tight space the girls also moved out to live with female relations within the same estate. It was only in the final stage that items of furniture such as seats and tables were incorporated, as there was more space.



**Fig. 5a Stage one**



**Fig. 5b Stage two**

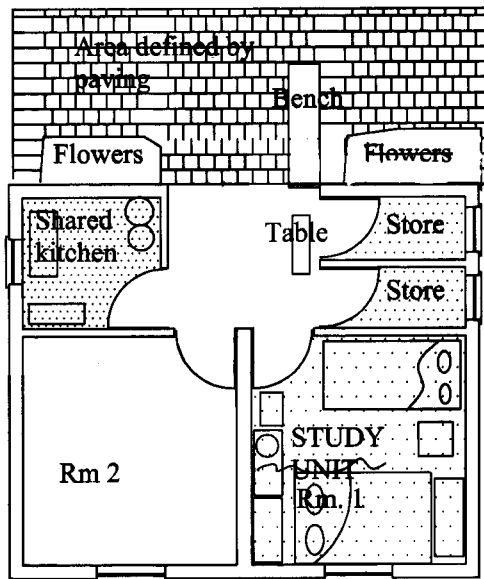


Fig. 5c Stage three

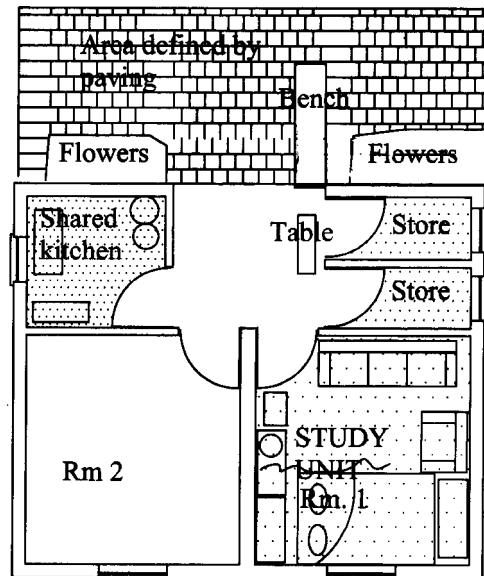


Fig. 5d Stage four

One of the basic limitations of this house was the space constraint. Space was limited and it was not possible to increase the area as and when the need arose. It was not possible to build for the son at the appropriate moment when he underwent initiation, which was still practised. As it was not possible for the son to live with the family, there was no option but to opt for rented accommodation for him within the same estate due of cultural reasons.

Due to the space constraints the family was unable to live together physically but they managed to keep the family ties as they continued to eat together and shared the same cooking pot. This was a cultural aspect that was maintained. Owing to its small size, the urban house such as those of Bahati estate often resulted in over-crowding, and appeared to lack the flexibility of the rural house. The rural house was much more easily adjusted to suit the different social and cultural needs of the family. It was complicated trying to achieve a fine balance between the type of house and the social-cultural, family and traditional ties of the immediate family and at times of the extended family.

## 7.0 Conclusions

The quality of life in the cities, although offering more opportunities and amenities can create problems due to overcrowding and poor infrastructure especially in the low-income areas. The limited space in the dwellings did not allow for changes or incorporation of aspects that appeared to be important to their culture.

The rural situation seemed to provide a better quality of life because there was more space, hence less over-crowding was apparent. The presence of strong agricultural activities ensured a healthier style of living than in the urban areas. The main setback was one of accessibility, as the distances in between households and urban centres seemed large.

Originally designed only for one or two persons without families, the situation was now very different where entire families were using the houses in often totally inconceivable ways. The family seemed to adopt various solutions to cope with social and cultural pressures and with the changing patterns of family life. Important cultural and social norms were still upheld (Mabogunje et al 1978). Even when faced with a difficult housing situation the family seemed to be able to conform (Berry, 1980).

Although it may seem slightly better in the rural areas, the residents there often expressed their wish to be in the city, especially in Nairobi. A major aspiration of these people was to live in a house constructed of permanent materials. However, due to the cost, even the newer houses made with modern materials were small. The prohibitive cost of land and materials in the urban areas appeared have a major bearing on the size of the house. What low-income earners (~Kshs<sup>8</sup> 2000/Month<sup>9</sup>) can afford was usually small if houses were erected in permanent materials. Some in the end opted for the shanty areas where the houses were made of residual materials and conditions are far less good than in some of the council houses.

The government's regulation for adequate housing indicates that this should comprise a minimum of a two-roomed house, which should accommodate a maximum of five persons (Syagga, 1987). The study undertaken at Bahati has shown that some one-roomed houses have much larger families occupying them, clearly outside the basic requirements. In reality the house more often than not is used in a very different way than anticipated by the designers, resulting in higher wear and tear and a larger strain on the infrastructure. Higher than envisaged densities occurred in many of the low-income housing schemes (UNCHS, 1987).

Planners never envisaged some of these situations, and this together with cultural and traditional aspects of living poses a great challenge to the international plight to provide proper housing, especially in urban areas of the developing countries. Many urban residents today face cultural challenges in the way they use domestic space of modern housing. Although people do alter their traditional lifestyles, they still experience some limitations in living in housing in the towns. This often moves them to find alternative ways of coping which at times undermines some of their traditions. The struggle to provide enough housing often results in qualitative aspects of solutions being overlooked and quantity aspects stressed. The consequences encountered in these solutions and the social repercussions brought about in the new houses are some of the issues that are raised.

A more sensitive outlook for those concerned with mass housing provision is advocated to allow for some flexibility to accommodate at least the dominant traditional customs and practices within house design wherever possible. The material standard of these houses was usually an overriding factor; they were intended to be durable and maintenance costs were to be low, factors that were often at the expense of the quality of the space that was achieved.

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<sup>8</sup> ~Kshs 120 equivalent to £1

<sup>9</sup> Statistical Abstract 1998, using figures for 1997

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