

# APPLYING THE BRIEFING PROCESS ON THE PEOPLE'S HOUSING PROCESS PROJECTS

**Mark Massyn and Shaun Lamont**

*Department of Construction Economics and Management, Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Cape Town, South Africa*

The briefing process is seen as one of the most important and influential activities within a conventional construction project as it has the power to eradicate potential problems and, in so doing, save the client and developer problems and delays and prevent unwanted costs. The vital aspects to a brief are seen to be communication, the role of the client, client classification, and appropriate allocation of time. South Africa hosts one of the most diverse housing schemes in the world, with a variety of subsidy options. The People's Housing Process (PHP) is a housing mechanism that encourages client engagement in the development process and the aims of this delivery system are the empowering and uplifting of the community by giving them the responsibility, skill and power to assist each other in developing their own community environment. The client or beneficiary engages in the process from the start and has a large degree of choice over matters relating to the product, the project and the development process to be followed. The objectives of this research project were to address the effectiveness of the PHP as a delivery process, the level of client satisfaction on completion of the project, the level of participation by the client, who can be defined as inexperienced, in the briefing process and the level of development experienced by the client as a result of participating in the project. This paper reports on phase one of the project namely the level of client involvement during the briefing phase of the project.

Keywords: community participation, briefing, housing delivery, housing procurement systems.

## INTRODUCTION

The briefing phase finds its relevance by being a channel of instruction. It is used as a means of stimulating communication and discussion to determine client needs with regard time, cost and quality. On projects where the design team engages with an experienced client or a client that has a clear understanding of the project, the briefing process in most instances provides the required outcomes. When dealing with inexperienced clients however the question is whether the briefing process can provide the same results. Traditionally on government funded housing projects in South Africa it has been the local council, municipality or private developers that have taken the key role in the development process. In these instances training and technical assistance and the management of the project is provided by one of these role players to aid the beneficiaries and the community provides the labour force. The People's Housing Process (PHP) is a housing delivery system aimed at empowering individuals to develop their own community through government grants and training. With this delivery system the intention is that the community engages in the management aspects of the project but also provides the labour component of the project, at no cost to the project, which in turn frees up subsidy money to create larger

and better quality houses. The delivery system is unique in that it empowers the beneficiaries of the housing subsidy to be responsible for managing the development and building process. This paper reports on findings of a research project that was initiated to determine the effectiveness of the PHP delivery system within the Western Cape in South Africa, to determine whether the beneficiaries were satisfied with the end product on completion of the housing project as a result of being involved and to what extent the briefing process assists the client achieve the end product required. This paper therefore discusses the briefing process and the effectiveness of this process on PHP projects in the Western Cape.

## PROJECT BRIEFING

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA 2000) Plan of Work outlines four stages of a project one of which is the briefing stage. The document states that one of the key functions that must be addressed during this stage is to focus on the clients' requirements and the project objectives. Influential decisions take place at the very beginning of the project and it is here that significant project decisions are made in an attempt to eliminate potential problems. It is because of this that it is vital that the design team manage the briefing stage effectively. The briefing process has been researched and discussed in detail over the last 30 years because it is considered crucial to the success of the project (Yu *et al.* 2006). Professional organisations and statutory bodies also recognised the importance of the briefing process and in South Africa for example the statutory bodies that govern the Built Environment namely the South African Council for the Architectural Profession (SACAPSA 2008), the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP 2008) and the South African Council for the Project and Construction Management Professions (SACPCMP 2008) have all included the briefing process in their identification of work agreement.

The development of a brief is the process which allows the client to explicitly state their requirements and objectives of the proposed project to the design team members which in turn allows the design team to consider what service the client and others require (Bowen *et al.* 1999). The briefing process is therefore about effective communication between the client and the design team (Barrett *et al.* 1996 and Boger *et al.* 2008). One problem however is that in the construction industry many professionals lack the knowledge on how to conduct the briefing process effectively (Barrett and Stanley 1999). They go on to state that there is apparently little evidence to show that the consultants managing the briefing process actually consult with other professional to learn how to approach the process.

The Latham Report (1994) recommended that more effort should be placed on understanding the client's needs on a project. It is felt that more energy is required here and the results of doing so will positively impact on the construction process. The client's role within the brief is therefore highly significant and to ensure this is achieved it is important to develop a checklist to assist the design determine the client's objectives and project requirements (Gameson *et al.* 1993; O'Reilly 1987; Shen *et al.* 2003; Yu *et al.* 2004). Barrett and Stanley (1999) however argue that it is not always the 'good practice' that has the greatest effect. In certain cases 'bad practice' or unstructured approaches achieve the required effect just as well.

Briefing can be conducted through various channels or methods with the most popular methods for developing a brief being meetings, the use of sketch drawings, use of checklists, site visits, and written briefs or a combination of a few of these methods

(Ormerod and Newton 2004). Despite the method used it must also be remembered that with inexperienced clients they will require guidance and this guidance should be adapted to the type of client being dealt with Barrett (1991). Newman *et al.* (1981) expressed a distinct difference in handling clients from different backgrounds. What is meant here is to firstly understand what type of client is being dealt with (public versus private) and the level of experience attached to this client. It has been found that different approaches to defining a brief are necessary in each scenario

There is a need to understand the category of client you are working with to know how to best assist them in developing a brief and contributing to the construction process (Newman *et al.* (1981), Green (1995), Kelly *et al.* (1992). The argument is made that the construction industry does not apply enough energy into the research of client types or even the consideration of different groups of clients (Green 1995; Kelly *et al.* 1992). Newman *et al.* (1981) found client inexperience and preconceptions as their most frequently occurring problem when developing the brief and that in this instance the brief could fail to function at its necessary level.

## **GOVERNMENT FUNDED HOUSING IN SOUTH AFRICA**

### **The funding process**

Housing is defined as “a variety of processes through which habitable, stable and sustainable public and private residential environments are created for variable households and communities” (Department of Housing, 1994a:21). This definition recognises that the environment in which a house is situated is as important as the house itself in satisfying the needs and requirements of the occupants. A house should therefore not only satisfy the basic needs of shelter and warmth, but also the socio-economic well being of the resident. It is therefore imperative that within a housing development project the home owner be satisfied with both the end product and the environment in which it is situated.

The South African government’s housing programme that was initiated in 1994 following the election of the Government of National Unity was first published in the Housing Arrangements Act, No 155 of 1993 and then amended in 1997 in the Housing Act No. 107 of 1997 (Department of Housing 2007). The Housing Act brought the national housing policy into South Africa’s constitution as well as defined the roles of the national, provincial and municipal governments. With the introduction of the new housing programme the South African government created an international precedent in the housing field as this programme accommodated a diverse approach to supplying houses to individuals who fell within the low-income bracket (Rust 2003). Thurman (1999) summaries the main aims of the programme as being a mass delivery system that has a people centred process, which accommodates choice of a product that is conveniently located; racially, socially and economically integrated, financially and socially sustainable and which leads to community empowerment through the delivery process.

The Housing Act identified three programmes/schemes to address housing delivery and the main focus of one of these programmes namely the National Housing Subsidy Scheme is on the delivery of new housing projects. This programme in turn allows for four types of subsidies to be allocated. These are:

- The Individual subsidy which caters for single transactions and allows the beneficiary to purchase an existing house, including the land it is situated on.

- The Consolidation subsidy which caters for those recipients who have previously obtained a subsidised and serviced plot and now qualify for a grant to build a top structure.
- The Project-linked subsidy which is subjected to the same requirements and payouts as that of the individual housing subsidy, the only aspect that changes here is that the project -linked subsidy is aimed at the production of housing on a greater scale. The management of this demands the assistance of a third party.
- The Institutional subsidy which requires finance from an organisation willing to contribute towards the building of a project. With this subsidy the houses belong to the organisation that funds the development, and not the individual beneficiary, for a minimum period of four years after completion. After the four years the houses can be sold or transferred to the beneficiary.

### **The delivery process**

With the project linked subsidy scheme the Department of Housing requires a social compact and a clear institutional arrangements to be in place before any project can be approved. The social compact is a formal agreement that is concluded between the local authority and the community in which agreement on the terms and conditions of the contract are finalised. Another important aspect of the social compact is the identification of the key stakeholders from within the community. In a number of instances NGO's are involved in the identification of all relevant community stakeholders and the establishment of the community steering committee. They are also instrumental in helping the community draw up the social compact. In some cases the establishment of the social compact can be a lengthy process because of political instability within the area. Once the social compact is in place the development phase of the project can commence.

A number of different management arrangements can be applied to manage the development process. The most common management approach is the Developer/Community approach. In this instance the developer will approach the community steering committee and agree to act on their behalf. The second approach is when the Local Authority assists the community by appointing a project management organisation to manage the development process. The final approach is when the community decides to manage the development process on their own with some assistance from a NGO.

### **Community participation**

McEwan (2003) believes that a citizen –orientated community approach is possible if a good working relationship between government and the community exists. Choguill (1996) states that the main objective of community participation is to ensure that the community is involved in the formal decision making process of both the formulation and implementation of projects or programmes. The World Bank's definition of participation is "a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them" (Paul 1987). The Local Government White Paper of 1998 states that the role of Local Government is to work with communities to find sustainable ways to meet social, economic and material needs to improve the quality of the lives of the community. Fransman (2005) acknowledges that participatory democracy or community involvement is not without problems and that the theory is not always realised in practice. In summary therefore the advantage of community participation is an active

community which helps enhance the understanding of the process and helps give the parties insight into the local conditions but the negative aspects of community participation are a slow project start up, an increase in administrative staffing and the creation of power vested in the hands of a small group of individuals (Davidson et.al, 2006).

### **The people's housing process (PHP)**

Gilbert (2004) observes that the South African Government's choice in 1994 of going for the quantity rather than quality option was most probably dictated by the large backlog of housing required when it introduced the National Housing Subsidy Scheme. It was only in 1998 that the South African Department of Housing introduced a policy on self help housing which it called the People's Housing Process (PHP). In the same year the South African Department of Housing, UNCHS, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) established the People's Housing Partnership Trust with the intention to use it as a mechanism to encourage and support the PHP within South Africa. The aim of this housing delivery system is to empower people to develop their own community through government grants and training. . The Western Cape Provincial Government's guidelines on PHP states that PHP projects are directed at assisting families to build or organise their own homes, with technical support from third parties (Department of Housing Western Cape 2005. The policy goes on to state that the PHP method is a lower-cost method, saving funds by utilising fewer professionals and encouraging beneficiaries to contribute labour to their own houses. These savings result in a bigger, better house for less money. The aim of this system is to empower and educate the community as well as train the beneficiaries in the construction process, provide the required artisan skills so that this training will become a life-skill to be used to obtain future employment and also ensure that the housing unit meets with the client's requirements.

A PHP project needs to be initiated by the community but as most communities do not have the capacity to initiate these projects they are normally supported through the process by either a community-based organisation, a non-governmental organisation, a provincial department or the municipality. The Development Action Group (DAG) is a NGO that operates in the field of community facilitation and have been involved in numerous PHP projects since the inception of this delivery model. The main objective of a DAG PHP project is to provide for housing delivery in a participatory way that leads to an integrated understanding of development amongst the community and local authority participants (Manie and Tapela 2006). They further state that the main ingredients of a DAG PHP project is capacity building prior to commencement of the project, community control, choice of design and specification of the housing unit, use of local and own labour and a high quality end product. It must be noted however that despite Government expressing an interest in increasing the use of the PHP delivery method is has only been used on approximately 10% of housing delivery for the period 1998 - 2003.

### **METHOD**

The major aim of this phase of the research project was to determine whether the identify the methodology used on PHP projects and determine whether this differed from the methodology used on conventional projects. The Department of Housing within the Provincial Administration of the Western Cape provided the contact details of the facilitators who were involved on PHP projects during the 2006 – 2007 financial years. Of the ten organisations identified seven agreed to participate in the

survey. Each organisation identified a facilitator within their organisation to be the contact person. From the literature review a number of key questions were identified regarding the briefing process and public participation. A semi structured questionnaire with both closed and open ended questions was compiled which allowed all respondents to answer specific questions but also allowed them to give their views on specific topics. The questionnaires were distributed via email and facsimile. In instances where these methods did not produce a result, telephone interviews were arranged. Findings of the study are reported in the following section.

## DISCUSSION

### Level of experience - facilitators

The seven facilitators indicated that their organisations collectively were involved on 37 housing projects which total approximately 12 000 housing units. All the respondents indicated that their knowledge of managing the briefing phase of the project was based on their experience in the field. 57% of the respondents did however indicate that they had acquired the knowledge at tertiary level and 14% of the respondents indicated that they had made a deliberate attempt to acquire the information on their own. This observation seems to be in line with that of Barrett and Stanley (1999). Unfortunately the question was structured to determine the knowledge level of the facilitator and not that of the rest of the facilitators within their organisations.

All the respondents indicated that they had set procedures in place within their organisations which were followed on all housing projects and on the PHP housing projects in particular.

### Level of experience - clients

Table 1: Client experience on housing projects

Housing sector	Percentage		
	High	Moderate	Low
PHP Housing	0	14	86
Low Income	0	28	72
Medium Income	0	86	14
High Income	28	72	0

The respondents were asked to rate the client's level of experience on housing projects. Table 1 below shows that on low income housing projects in general and PHP projects specifically the respondents indicated that in 86% of the cases the clients showed a high level of experience on medium and high income projects but that on the PHP projects 86% of the clients showed a low level of experience. The main reason given for this observation is that on the medium to high income projects the clients had been through the process before however on the PHP projects this was the first time that the clients had been give the opportunity to engage in the process. This reinforces the observations made by Newman et.al (1981) that it is important to recognise that we do deal with different levels of clients on housing delivery construction projects and that the structuring of the briefing process needs to be adjusted to accommodate this.

### At what phase of the project is the client engaged

The research established that on 57% of the projects the beneficiaries were involved at the feasibility phase of the project. On 14% of the projects the beneficiaries only

engaged with the projects during the preliminary design phase after the sketch plans had been finalised and that on 29% of the projects the beneficiaries were only engaged after key decisions regarding size and orientation of the house and type of construction were finalised. No clear reasons were given for the lack of engagement.

### **Level of engagement with the client**

With reference to the level of engagement between the facilitators and the homeowners 29% of the respondents indicated that they spent a minimum of three weeks and 15% of the respondents indicated they spent between 4 – 6 weeks engaging with the client. The remaining 47% indicated that they spent between 6 and 12 weeks engaging with the client.

Of the time engaging with the client 29% of the respondents indicated that they spent more than 80% on this activity, 43% indicated that they spent on average 50% of their time on this activity and 14% indicated that they spent less than 20% of the time on this activity. The majority of the respondents also felt that the time they spent with the client was sufficient. Only one respondent (14%) felt that the time allocation for consultation client during this stage was inadequate. 57% of the facilitators felt that the contribution given from the beneficiary during the PHP brief was insufficient.

### **Aspects that the clients needs help with**

A shared majority (43%) of the respondents indicated that they guided the client with regard finishes to the house and orientation of the house. 57% of the respondents indicated that they provided assistance on the size of the house and 43% of the respondents indicated that they had to guide the client through the design process. Additional areas relating to issues like materials, typology, energy efficiency, and method of construction were also noted by the respondents as areas for guidance. The lack of client knowledge on PHP projects does create a dilemma as it calls into question the purpose of the briefing phase and begs the question whether a pre briefing phase should not be added to PHP projects. This pre briefing phase can then be used to provide the community empowerment aspect of the PHP project.

### **Briefing procedures on PHP projects**

The most common medium of communication used in the PHP briefing system is verbal (100%). It was explained that this is due to the client generally being illiterate. Drawings come in a close second place (86%). Specification sheets and minutes weigh in equally at 57%. It was noted that other forms of communication which include 3D-models, virtual designs, physical setting out on site at full scale, and the use of show houses can also be used. Nearly half (43%) stated that they host mass workshops with the client during the briefing and design stages. These workshops explain to the client how the PHP process is to be conducted, the options available, the process of changing the house, costs involved, and so on. One respondent shared that a step-by-step building manual was used as a communication device with the client.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the aspects considered above and through investigation of the necessary literature and the survey, the following conclusions were drawn with regard PHP housing. The facilitators involved on PHP projects have the relevant experience and follow formal procedures when engaging with the client. That although the majority of the clients can be classified as inexperienced they do indeed contribute in the briefing process through decision making of major aspects of each house. The clients

appear to be given a choice and control and they have embraced that and engaged in the process. The main problem identified however is that the briefing process is reversed on low income housing projects with the design team briefing the client rather than the client doing the briefing. This is a result of the lack of understanding of the housing process by the client and that a possible intervention could be the introduction of a pre briefing phase prior to the commencement of the project. This can be included in the function of the NGO. The medium of communication used in the briefing process is verbal and this seems to correspond with formal projects although it is clear that more effort is required on PHP projects as the majority of the clients are illiterate and more visual forms of communication like models or even show houses need to be used.

It is clear therefore that the formal briefing process can be applied on low income housing project but that cognisance must be taken of the current situation and more attention must be given to empowering the community to be more participative during the briefing phase of the project.

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