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Modern Houses for Modern Life
The Transformation of Housing in Botswana

Abstract Low-cost housing in Botswana has undergone considerable change since independence. Traditional materials, building techniques and concepts of layout and use of space are gradually being replaced by modern ones. This process of modernization has entailed the deterioration of a number of utilitarian qualities in dwellings, especially the reduction of space. At the same time people regard modern-looking houses as a demonstration of being modern in a fast developing society. This view is also reflected in the government's housing policies. This housing transformation has been the subject of a series of three reports; the first documents traditional Tswana housing, the second analyses the transformation with an emphasis on qualities of utility.

This third report attempts to interpret the contradiction between the lack of improved qualities of utility in today's low-cost housing and the desire to be modern. The point of departure is in everyday life and the focus is on the relationship between gender roles and housing. While women play an important role in traditional housing, modern housing is the domain of men. A long-term perspective is adopted to trace the process of housing transformation.

The analysis is based on empirical data collected through fieldwork, various records of Tswana housing, and anthropological records. The analysis reveals that, parallel to overall changes in economy, urbanization and a change from traditional to modern materials, the responsibility for housing was transferred from the domestic sphere of women to the public sphere of men. In this process the concepts underlying the use of space and the meaning and value of housing were changed. After independence, when housing has become a political matter, these new meanings have determined the development of modern housing policies. In the final chapter an alternative process of housing modernization, based on women's approaches to modernization, is outlined.

Key words

Low-cost housing, traditional housing, modernization, everyday life, gender, use of space, building materials, Botswana

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