

# THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS (SAIA) RESPONSE TO THE KZN FLOODS

22<sup>nd</sup> April 2022

KwaZulu Natal has been devastated by the recent floods.

As the days progressed from the torrential rains of the weekend of the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2022, the extent of the damage became more evident. A “sadness” experienced similar to that, that had overshadowed the region during the July 2021 riots has been expressed.

The loss of life has been catastrophic. Many had to struggle for days without water or power. As always, this kind of crisis, like the COVID-19 crisis before it, has exposed the levels of disadvantage and spatial inequities of our cities. Climate change will continue to wreak havoc with weather patterns, especially in coastal regions, and the long-term vulnerability of communities will continue – unless systematic and targeted programmes are put into place to increase the resilience of those regions and communities.

***A recent UN report says, that what was once considered a one-in-a-hundred-year flood event could end up happening several times a year by 2050. Another article states how, in one day, several months’ worth of rainfall fell with catastrophic effects.***

The built environment professions in general, and architects specifically, need to mobilise to support KwaZulu Natal in assessing the damage to structures and infrastructure, assist with the expertise needed in reconstruction, as well as the provision of temporary shelters and assisting with relief efforts.

Architects have been feeling a need to intervene, participate and be heard. **Yes! Architects need to be heard.** Architects must also work with communities, harnessing local knowledge systems in developing context-specific solutions. Some claim that more research is needed but it is argued that there is sufficient knowledge and research to guide the profession. Many of the principles contained in the constitution and policy documents will help achieve more resilient, safe, equitable, beautiful and functional human settlements. Reference is made to BNG, NDP, SPLUMA, IDPs, etc.

Implementation of the principles in these documents and creative translation into real projects is a major hurdle, in addition to the lack of facilitation of delivery and on-the-ground implementation. This is where the architectural profession has an important and vital role to play. If architects do not take up this challenge, the survival and relevance of the profession is at risk. Having said that, the profession will also not be able to innovate in the field of housing and human settlements unless there is political will to make these policies a reality with a positive and tangible impact on the daily lives of people. Administrative and financial bottlenecks need to be removed and innovation must be actively funded and encouraged.

***This is not only a solution for “the poor” – this is a change in thinking and practice in the built environment that benefits every sector of society.*** Our segregated cities disadvantage everyone. An integrated and transformed city benefits everyone. Many are still hung up on designing house units. The most ideal, economic, weather and fire-resistant and beautiful individual, stand-alone, detached house unit will not solve the housing problem. South African cities need well-located, multi-family, mixed-income units that are integrated with commercial and work opportunities and social services.

The way our cities are structured has been, and still is, soulless and soul destroying. Our cities and housing exacerbate disadvantage across generations and leaves citizens angry and humiliated.

The manner in which housing is conceptualised, designed and delivered must change. Isolated, easily identifiable and peripheral housing for the poor must become a thing of the past. Solutions for specific income groups must be stopped, rather aiming for holistic and integrated housing solutions where everyone benefits and different income groups inhabit the same spaces. The polarisation of formal and informal processes must also be addressed. There are design, technical and economic mechanisms to make this a reality. Being the most unequal country based on its ***GINI coefficient***, South Africa may yet become a pioneer in reversing this situation through innovative interventions and the architecture profession may be at the forefront of this process.

**Issued by SAIA President Ruben Reddy on behalf of the SAIA Management Committee.**