



MINISTRY

**HUMAN SETTLEMENTS
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

ADDRESS BY

THEMBI SIMELANE, MP, MINISTER

**OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS ON THE OCCASION OF THE
SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL FOR THE ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION
EDUCATION CONFERENCE**

VIA VIRTUAL PLATFORM

11 SEPTEMBER 2026

Programme Director,

President of the South African Council for the Architectural Profession, Mr

Charles Nduku,

Members of the SACAP Council,

Architectural educators and researchers,

Professionals and candidates,

Students,

Representatives of professional bodies and government,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

It is a privilege to join you at the South African Council for the Architectural Profession Education Conference, and particularly at a time when you have chosen to reflect on “Architecture in Changing Times.”

That theme could not be more relevant. Because the question before us is no longer simply: What kind of buildings are we designing? The more important question is: What kind of society are we designing?

For the Department of Human Settlements, architecture cannot be separated from the national project of transforming where and how South Africans live. Our constitutional responsibility is not simply to put roofs over people’s heads. It is to progressively build dignified, sustainable, and integrated human settlements. And that means confronting one of the most enduring legacies of apartheid: spatial injustice.

SPATIAL JUSTICE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Spatial justice is not an abstract academic concept. In South Africa, it is a constitutional and human-rights imperative. Apartheid did not only divide people politically and socially. It divided us spatially.

Geography and the built environment were deliberately used to determine who could live where, who could access opportunity, who had to travel long distances to work, and whose communities would benefit from quality infrastructure and public services.

More than three decades into our democracy, those spatial patterns have not disappeared.

We still see communities where a person's prospects are influenced profoundly by their postal code. Where a child lives can still influence the quality of education available to them, how safely they travel to school, how much time they spend commuting, and ultimately the economic opportunities available to them.

That is why spatial transformation cannot be the responsibility of one department, one profession or one sphere of government. It must be a collective national project.

And architects have a particularly important role in that project.

THE SCHOOL CANNOT BE AN ISLAND

When we think about educational infrastructure, we must look beyond the four walls of the classroom. For too long, we have sometimes planned public infrastructure as though individual facilities exist independently of the communities around them. We build a school. We build housing somewhere else. Transport infrastructure is planned separately. Economic activity develops somewhere else again.

And the result can be a fragmented settlement in which the individual pieces may exist, but they do not necessarily work together.

A beautifully designed school does not, on its own, deliver spatial justice. If a learner must walk through unsafe and poorly lit areas to reach that

school; if a child travels for hours from an underserviced settlement; or if families live far from schools, employment opportunities and basic services; then we have not solved the underlying spatial problem.

This is precisely where the Human Settlements mandate intersects with architecture and educational planning.

A school must form part of a living settlement. It must connect to homes. It must connect to safe mobility routes. It must connect to public spaces. It must connect to economic opportunity. It must connect to the broader social life of the community.

That is what we mean when we speak about integrated Human Settlements.

WHAT DOES THIS REQUIRE FROM ARCHITECTURE?

I would like to suggest four areas in which architecture can become an even more powerful instrument of spatial transformation and spatial justice.

- *First, we need multi-purpose civic anchors*

We must increasingly move away from designing public institutions as isolated, fortress-like facilities.

A school should not necessarily become a locked public asset when the final bell rings. We should be thinking about educational facilities as part of the wider community infrastructure. Imagine a school library that supports learners during the day but also becomes a community learning

resource. An ICT centre that serves pupils but can also support young people, entrepreneurs and jobseekers. Sporting facilities that become community assets. Spaces that enable community activities, interaction and social cohesion.

The original briefing notes correctly make the point that shared community infrastructure can maximise the value of scarce public land, strengthen social ownership and help protect public assets.

This requires architects to think beyond the individual building. We must ask how that building relates to the settlement around it. How does it connect? Who can use it? What happens there after school hours? What value does it create for the broader community? Architecture must increasingly help us turn public infrastructure into anchors around which stronger communities can grow.

- *Second, we must design for dignity*

Architecture communicates.

The quality of the spaces we create tells people something about the value we attach to them. When poorer communities repeatedly receive poorer-quality infrastructure, we reproduce inequality not only materially but psychologically. Spatial justice therefore requires us to reverse that logic.

Some of our most innovative, resilient, and inspiring public architecture should be found precisely in communities that were historically denied quality investment.

A child attending school in a township, a rural community or an informal settlement should never receive the message that excellence, beauty and quality belong somewhere else.

Dignity must be visible in the infrastructure we provide. It must be visible in classrooms. It must be visible in sanitation. It must be visible in public spaces. It must be visible in safety. And it must be visible in the care with which we design the places in which people live and learn.

The quality of architecture communicates value. Our built environment should tell every South African child: You matter. Your community matters. Your future matters.

- *The third area is local economic inclusion*

The construction of public infrastructure must leave behind more than a physical asset. The process of building must also contribute to the economic development of the community in which that infrastructure is located. Where appropriate, our development models should create opportunities for local labour, artisans, small contractors and SMMEs.

We should continue exploring innovative and locally appropriate construction methods and materials. We should use infrastructure projects to build skills. And we should think deliberately about how public investment can support local economic activity. In other words, how we build matters just as much as what we build.

The construction of a school or a Human Settlement should not simply result in a completed structure. It should, wherever possible, leave behind skills. Experience. Economic participation. Opportunities for small businesses. And greater resilience within the local economy.

Development should not merely happen to communities. We must increasingly find ways for development to happen with communities and through communities.

- *Fourth, we must transform architectural education and professional formation*

And this brings me directly to the importance of this conference. The transformation we seek in the built environment must also begin with the way we educate and prepare the professionals who will shape it.

The architects we train today will influence the spatial form of South Africa for decades to come. They will influence how our cities grow. How settlements connect. How scarce land is used. How public spaces function. How communities respond to environmental and climate pressures.

And whether the built environment continues to reproduce historic patterns of exclusion, or becomes an instrument for deliberately dismantling them.

Architectural education must therefore equip professionals not only with technical competence, but with a deep understanding of place, inequality, sustainability, community and spatial justice.

We need professionals who can look at a drawing and understand that behind every line is a human experience. A route to work. A child's journey to school. A family's access to transport. A woman's safety in a public space. A young person's access to opportunity. An elderly person's ability to move through their community. Architecture is therefore never simply technical. It is profoundly social.

And this is why stronger alignment between architectural education, professional practice and national development priorities matters.

SACAP's invitation to this conference recognises precisely this relationship between the architectural profession and government's responsibility to advance housing delivery, skills development and spatial transformation.

We must therefore continue building stronger partnerships between institutions of higher learning, professional bodies, government and the built-environment professions.

Because the professionals we educate today will help determine whether tomorrow's South African settlement is fragmented or integrated, exclusionary or inclusive, unsustainable or resilient.

A SHARED MANDATE

Ladies and gentlemen,

Spatial transformation cannot be achieved by the Department of Human Settlements acting alone. Nor can Basic Education, Transport, municipalities, planners, engineers, or architects achieve it independently. Our planning must become more integrated from the outset.

Residential development cannot be planned separately from the social and economic infrastructure that makes a settlement viable. Schools cannot simply be added after communities have already been established.

Transport cannot be an afterthought. Economic opportunity cannot remain something people must travel hours to reach. And public space cannot simply be what is left over once everything else has been allocated.

INTEGRATION MUST BEGIN ON THE DRAWING BOARD.

Our plans must speak to one another before our buildings are constructed.

Our investments must reinforce one another. And our professions must increasingly understand themselves as contributors to the same national objective:

- building places in which South Africans can live with dignity and participate fully in the social and economic life of our country.

That is the challenge I would like to leave with this conference.

Let us use architecture not simply to construct facilities, but to reconstruct the spatial relationships of our society. Let us build communities in which a child's future is not determined by where that child was born.

Communities in which public infrastructure communicates dignity. Communities in which schools become civic anchors. Communities in which housing, education, mobility, public space and economic opportunity are deliberately connected. And communities in which development itself creates opportunities for the people who live there.

Because ultimately, architecture is much more than the design of buildings. It is the design of possibility. And in South Africa, it must become one of the instruments through which we build a more integrated, more equitable and more spatially just democratic society.

I look forward to the ideas, partnerships and commitments that will emerge from this conference, and to strengthening collaboration between government, SACAP, institutions of higher learning and the architectural profession as we pursue this shared objective.

I thank you.