

# Inclusivity inspires more thoughtful rural home designs

By [Olebogeng Manhe](#)

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South Africa is celebrated for its diversity, and our approach to home design should reflect that - homes are made for people, after all. But, when construction developers assume a large-scale project, such as is common in more rural areas, the challenge becomes creating homes that meet the usual construction standards and government expectations while ensuring that a wide variety of unique individual needs are addressed.



Source: Chairman of the Gap Infrastructure Corporation (GIC), Olebogeng Manhe.

Inclusive design is an approach to housing construction that embraces human diversity by including construction elements that recognise differences in age, gender, physical and mental ability, and cultural norms, and pack them into a well-defined design that can be replicated at scale.

At the Gap Infrastructure Corporation (GIC), for example, we often consider the needs of elderly residents as a baseline when designing homes. The needs of the elderly can often be representative of the needs of many other vulnerable figures in the community, and they make up a sizeable portion of rural community populations.

So, with every new element we include in the design, we ask: how will an elderly person with diminished mobility move around in the space? Will they be able to ascend different levels in- and outside of the home? Will they be able to keep their footing on surfaces confidently, and will they be able to access any area in the home?

Once a design meets these and other prerequisites that apply to the elderly, we can further consider the additional needs of children, people living with disabilities, and other people who may make use of the home. The idea is to implement proactive solutions that are suited to the needs of rural communities by packaging these into a design that can be rolled out at scale and in accordance with construction standards and government expectations.

## Inclusivity goes beyond accessibility

When analysing community needs and deciding which elements to include, it's essential to understand the distinction between accessibility and inclusive design. Accessibility is the minimum requirement that ensures people living with disabilities can access and function unimpeded within the living space by, for example, installing ramps or grab bars. Inclusive design is a broader approach that considers a diverse range of demographics such as age, income brackets, cultures, and more, acknowledging that people have different needs and preferences.

When developers such as GIC design more inclusive homes, we account for five main considerations:

- **Adaptability:** The home should be able to adapt to the changing needs and preferences of its occupants over time. This includes incorporating a flexible floor layout into design plans that will make it easier for people to change their living space and move around in it with ease. Another is including easily adjustable lighting and temperature controls to meet people's different sensibilities.
- **Affordability:** Houses, especially in previously underserved rural areas, should be built with affordability in mind, and cater to people from many different income groups and backgrounds. For this, the home can be built from low-cost yet high-quality materials, and make use of energy-efficient systems.
- **Accessible design:** These designs go beyond adaptability to create spaces that are usable by anyone with any need. Features such as lever-style door handles, curbless showers, and open floor plans are easily implemented design options that enhance accessibility and allow people to move around their homes with little difficulty.



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Other limiting elements to avoid include steps and narrow doorways or hallways which could be a barrier for people with mobility impairments; avoiding slippery floors which could be dangerous for everyone; poor lighting that would make it difficult for people with visual impairments; and high shelves and cabinets which also make it difficult for people with mobility impairments or who are short of stature to reach.

- **Cultural sensitivity:** Inclusive homes are designed with an awareness of various cultural norms, aesthetics, and lifestyles. Developers consider factors such as religious practices and spatial preferences to create living spaces that resonate with a wide range of cultural identities.
- **Multigenerational living:** Inclusive homes recognise diversity in the African family structure and dynamics. Developers create spaces that cater to multigenerational living, where extended families or multiple generations live under one roof. These small, but relatively easily implemented solutions should be standard in all new homes going forward, and there is no reason not to implement these concepts into rural construction projects as well.

When working with local governments on new housing projects, GIC emphasises inclusive design techniques, and encourages decision-makers to give these the necessary attention in the application and initial design phases.

Ultimately, inclusive designs ensure that those who need it the most have safe and practical environments for their needs. Having comfortable, easily accessible, and intelligently designed homes, therefore, promotes greater socio-economic inclusivity and cohesion among rural residents, promoting sustainable development and a brighter future for all South

Africans.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olebogeng Manhe is the chairman of the Gap Infrastructure Corporation (GIC).

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