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PREFABRICATED TIMBER HOUSES - A GUIDELINE TO THEIR PLANNING
PRODUCTION AND MARKETING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI
HOUSING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT UNIT

Preface

The authors, Charles C. Bengough, Managing Director of Economic Housing Group (E.H.G.) Ltd., P.O. Box 24996, Nairobi, and Per Houlberg, Architect and Senior Research Fellow at the Housing Research and Development Unit, met originally in 1969. As members of Kenya's Timber Development Committee, in the respective posts of Forest Utilization Officer, and designer for HRDU's contribution to the Kariobangi Timber Housing Pilot Scheme, we cooperated in a team of Government and Council officers, Engineers, architects and timber industrialists towards a common goal: to utilize the abundant forest plantations of Kenya to provide much needed houses for Kenyans. Against our expectations, the breakthrough for timber housing did not materialize at the public level. Wooden houses remaining in official disfavour, the problem for the designers arose of how to utilize the extensive development work on which the Kariobangi Scheme had been based. This problem was solved for the HRDU by the establishment of EGH Ltd. in 1972, and by the continuation and realization of HRDU's preliminary research work by this company. The mutually beneficial collaboration, between the private company and the research institution, continued throughout the intermediate years, until today when we feel we have accumulated some experience which may be useful to others, in Kenya and abroad.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the contributions of information and advice given to us by HRDU staff, Forest Department Officers and private individuals. Mr. Bruce Creager of the Department of Architecture, University of Nairobi is especially thanked for generously having made available to us his unpublished study: Casestudies in Technology Transfer, which forms the backbone of chapter 1.5.

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INTRODUCTION

A Ghanaian farmer once complained to a European visitor about frequent shortages of essential commodities and nutrients. When asked: "Why don't you milk your cows?", The farmer's answer, polite but definitive, was: "Because we don't drink milk".

For visitors to foreign continents with foreign cultures, the problems related to social acceptabilities can sometimes be bewildering. As for the expatriate builder in Kenya who, having discovered papyrus ceilings in one of the posh hotels of this country, tried to introduce these as a savings device in a low-cost housing estate in Nairobi East and promptly was informed of their social non-acceptability in that context.

Kenya, as indeed most countries in the tropical third world, is one hand blessed with a surplus of timber, on the other hand cursed with an increasing shortfall of shelter. Visitors from Northern America, Scandinavia, the Soviet Union or Japan, countries with a tradition for wooden housing, may ask: "Why not build houses of the timber?".

To tell why this proposition is too simple, i.e. to analyse the strong consumer resistance against and the apparent social non-acceptability of timber housing in African countries, specifically Kenya, is beyond the scope of this publication. If one may be permitted to speculate, however, certain observations may be valid:

- a) A lack of technology may cause certain materials to be misused, which in turn may breed prejudice;
- b) In a transitory era when minds are tuned towards 'progress', anything remotely related to tradition is likely to be rejected as regressive;