

Re-thinking our approach to providing student housing in 2021

 By [John Schooling](#)

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During the last year, South African students faced some of their greatest challenges yet. On top of the usual academic pressure and issues of affordability, many were forced to leave their on-campus accommodation and adjust to an entirely new style of learning. Across the board, these conditions are not conducive to academic success - especially for those living in under-resourced or stressful home environments.

Moving forward, universities need to ensure students can remain safely on campus in extreme circumstances. This is an important opportunity for us to explore innovation and re-think our approach to providing student housing in 2021, here's how:

Pandemic-proof

In the same way that buildings are designed with fire-safety in mind, even though there is never intended to be a fire, pandemic-proof aspects will become non-negotiable given the certainty of future outbreaks. This cannot be achieved through tacked on and ad hoc contingencies, but will require innovative, intentional design aspects. For example, residences that limit personal interactions, functional quarantine living quarters, and providing space for a live-in nurse when required.

Technology and education

Spurred on by the rapid integration of technology and learning during the Covid-19 lockdown, technology has become increasingly inseparable from learning, and this trend is guaranteed to continue. In the near-future, students won't just need Wi-Fi on site, they'll need Wi-Fi with fast download and upload speeds for video lectures and online tests. This also ensures they can remain connected to friends and family across the country in uncertain times – a vital aspect of coping during stressful times.



John Schooling, director, STAG African



Designing student housing to manage spread of Covid-19, future pandemics

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Flexibility

2020 has taught that flexibility and adaptability are key to survival, and it is imperative that we apply these lessons to our buildings. It is no longer sufficient to build solely according to the minimum norms and standards since these don't take into account the need for flexible spaces that can evolve over time. In order to design for a future that we know nothing about, we need to think beyond square metres and focus on functionality – sometimes students will require communal workspaces, and other times they might require isolated spaces. It is in our best interests as developers, as educators and as a country to leave room for future uncertainties.

Affordability through sustainability

The pandemic has had a long-term impact on the spending capacity of universities and students alike. Affordability – already an ongoing issue in terms of South Africa's student accommodation crisis – will continue to be a key factor. It is crucial that affordable housing is made available. This doesn't mean cheap – rather, it means building accommodation that is high-quality, but uses innovative methods to reduce construction and lifecycle costs. This includes sustainable aspects, such as grey water systems, energy-saving lightbulbs and recycling programmes, which can reduce operating costs considerably.

ABOUT JOHN SCHOOLING

John Schooling is the founder and MD of STAG African - a multi-dimensional green property development, student accommodation and renewable energy group.

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