cities of refuge social organization : design problem

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cities of refuge framing the refugee experience

social organisation : design problem

01. Image inside Ghanian restaurant in Yeoville (Kurgan 2008)

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design problem

The meaning of place, home, and identity and the remaking of home

The importance of housing and homelessness in people's lives, and for refugees particularly, can be understood by looking at the meanings of place, home and identity and their interconnections. In order to understand the human existence and experience we need to understand place and locality. By understanding how people are tied to places we can begin to appreciate the condition of being uprooted from one's home, culture and homeland and the challenges Refugees face in resettling in a new country. (Malpas 1999:186-187) People and places have an inextricable relationship. Place is an important aspect of human existence and an important source of security and identity. Place is defined as an open yet bounded space or region, where objects, other people, and the self can appear, be recognized, interact, and events take place. (Malpas, 1999:186-187) Our views and perceptions are shaped by the structure of the places that surround us. Places shape our memories, feelings and thoughts and in turn people shape the landscape around them through their experiences and actions. In this way place is also tied to cultural history and identity. Cultures are imbedded in places and lands become the storehouses of ideas. In any inhabited region one will find stories that define the culture of the people living there.

One of the challenges in designing a temporary housing for refugees is dealing with the issue of multiple identities and multiple senses of belonging. The idea of belonging in one location is foreign to many cities in Africa and is more clearly illustrated when dealing with the issue of refugees and asylum seekers. These people's idea of belonging are tied to the maintenance of multiple links between multiple sites. (Bremner 2005:47) Many links are still maintained with their places of origin and remain present and active over extended periods of time.

Home is the quintessential place and is similarly tied to one's personal and cultural identity. Home is defined as the place of ones development, a place, region, or state to which one properly belongs, in which one's affections centre, or where one finds refuge and rest. (Porteous & Smith, 2001:25) So the home is a reflection of one's culture and society, ones outside world, as well as one's inside world (family). For refugees, the disjunction between outer and inner worlds is one reason why refugees may feel homeless. So refugees who have been uprooted from their homes and countries due to war, famine, persecution become 'homeless' on a global scale. Looking at the social realities of refugees who find themselves in South Africa, refugees (as individuals, families and communities) are simultaneously engaging in the process of making 'home' in a new society and recreating and re-establishing personal and cultural identity. A key aspect of this process is to re-establish social networks and build new informal relationships with people, both other newcomers and South Africans alike. The shifting idea of home can be understood in how refugees in Johannesburg explain the making of home.

"If I don't know the people around me, how they think, how they live, then how could it be my country, my home?"

"Once I live in a country and I know the people there, when people are almost like a new family, and I am able to bring my family – my mother – then it's my home. When I have the freedom to bring my family, this is my country."

"When I know the language and start to know the people then yes this is my home."

"This is my home when first of all, my family is around me, the people around me, then home is my school, my job..."

"In my country or Egypt [country of asylum], I worked [and] I knew what I was doing. Here I don't know what I'm doing. My dream is to know what I'm doing, to do my own will... I would love to be working, to have a car and to have a house... This is my country when I can do whatever I want, when there is no racism."

What is evident from these statements above is that the notion of home is only attainable once people can begin to engage in different aspects of society.

social organisation in an exposed position

Another important question that this thesis will need to explore is how refugees and Asylum seekers in a state of transition deal with problems of marginality, disparagement and exclusion. It also needs to understand how they construct and retain a fundamental sense of themselves in this context. In essence it is how people are able to survive and adapt to living in Johannesburg. This analysis will be located in the close knit migrant communities and enclaves at the level of present survival and future movement towards permanence and the idea of 'home'. (Madsen 2004:10)

The formation of migrant communities and enclaves in the city is closely related to previously discussed problems of legal status and fear of persecution, marginalisation through xenophobia and discrimination. Since even a minor incident with a South African citizen could jeopardise their entire existence migrants try to reduce interactions with South Africans to a minimum. Given this potential danger of engaging with exclusive migrant communities emerge as a foundation of their invisible lives. (Madsen 2004:77) These are almost exclusive communities of neighbours forming a series of enclaves within a larger immigrant community.

When refugees first arrive in Johannesburg they are either already acquainted with or establish a connection to 'home' grounding them to a neighbourhood. The establishment of communities is an effort to mobilise social connections creating support structure for people in a foreign hostile environment. Within these communities, notions of mutual understanding and obligation are established as necessary preconditions of survival. This obligation persists even when a stranger arrives, providing he can establish himself as a 'neighbour' and guaranteeing him a sense of inclusion. This grants people a sense of security even before arrival. These enclaves are based on social relations and are intimately connected to a shared idea of home. (Madsen 2004:78)

Being cut off from social institutions, exclusion from government policies and fear of hostility refugees begin to rely on livelihood and survival strategies from within these close knit communities. People within the community help each other find jobs in the markets in the CBD, help each other start up small businesses along hawking belts and find accommodation. The community is also about the integration of strangers and newcomers. The migrants teach each other English and copy each others ways of acting in public spaces.

This creates a sense of safety and promotes a feeling of belonging despite isolation. The community also provides financial backing when people are in trouble from the authorities or in the stating of or maintaining businesses. So migrant communities unite these points and emerge as a fixed point in an inherently unstable environment and enables people to regain a sense of themselves. (Madsen 2004:79) So it is in the forming of these communities that create a collective sense of belonging that helps people move from a transient state to one of permanence. They also provides a means to cope with the hardships faced making them more bearable.

02

02. Wall of internet cafe in Yeoville (Kurgan 2008)

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Segregation and Urban Sprawl

South African cities are largely inadequate as a result of repressive apartheid planning which distorted the urban modernist movement. Racial segregation became the tool of the political vision of the apartheid state. It was used as an instrument of political and social exclusion of African people. Modern planning guidelines were used as an ideal vehicle for racial segregation and were used as strategies to control the population. The separation of functions and misuse of buffer zones had the obvious intention of separating people. Diversity which is the essence of urbanism was sterilised during the apartheid era.

Some of the residual spatial patterns that still persist and have come to define the South African urban landscape are the haphazard urban sprawl, fragmentation and separation. (Bremner 1998:50)In the post apartheid era these persisting patterns have led society to be further socially and spatially disconnected. Although these spatial boundaries are no longer politically dictated they aid in creating segregated society of exclusion. Fear of the unknown and the 'other' has reinforced the need to keep these social boundaries. (Bremner 1998:50)

As discussed earlier there is still a massive backlog in the provision of housing. Even though South Africa has provided more than 2.4 million houses over the last 12 years the need to provide housing is still as great now as it was in 1994. The concern however is not only about the delivery of housing anymore but about the quality of the neighbourhoods being created in
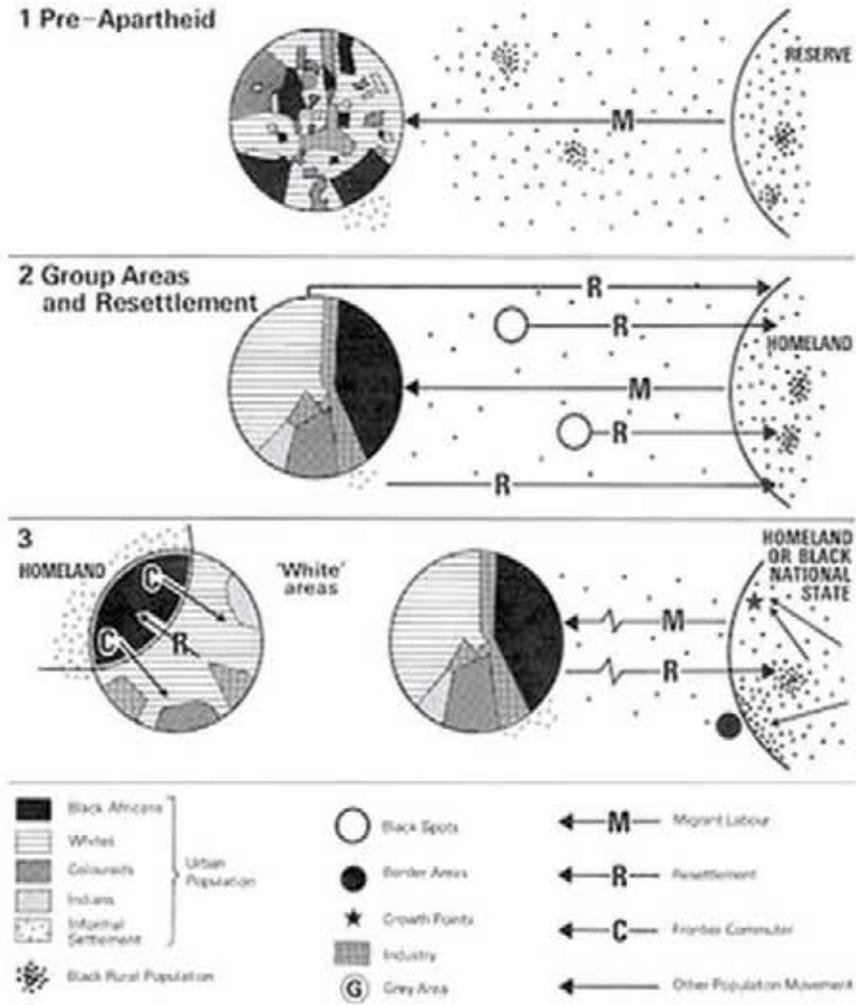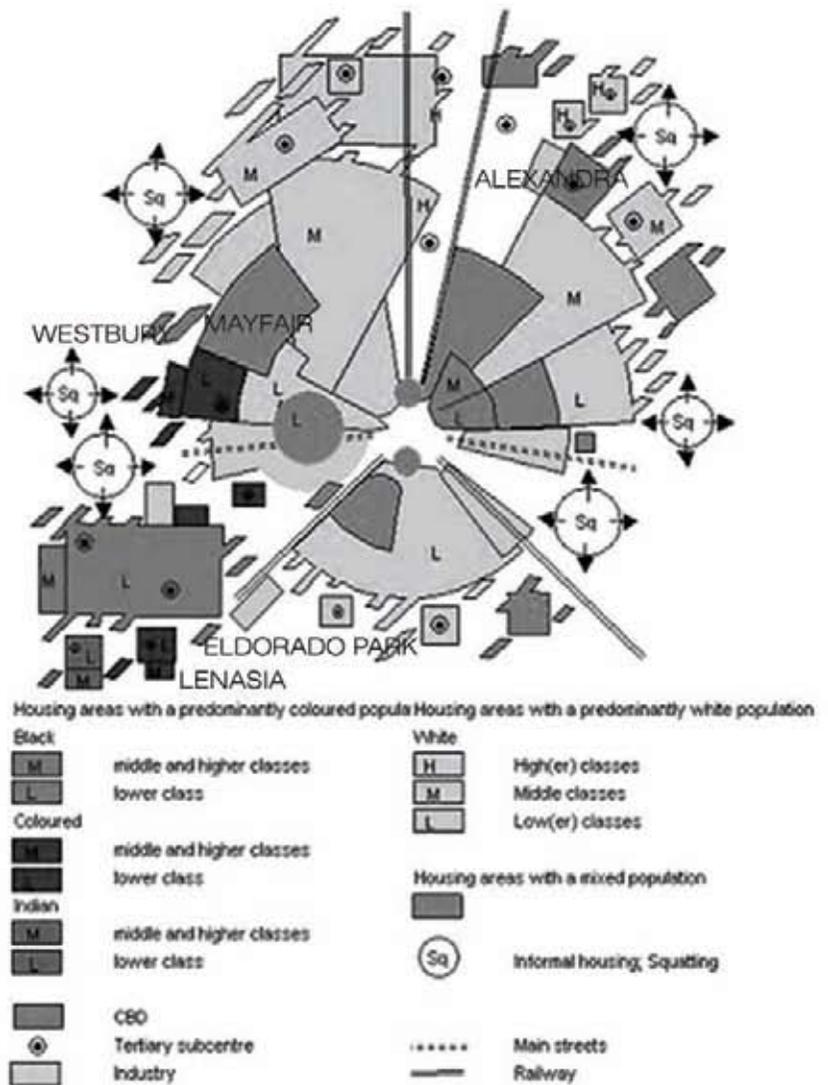

03

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IMAGES **03, 04** . Images of Soweto in 1950's from the Apartheid Museum (Getty Images 2008)

Segregation and Urban Sprawl

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05. Diagram showing the segregation of Johannesburg during Apartheid
06. Diagram of post apartheid Johannesburg - still segreated as a result of apart-heid planning (http://impulse.kulak.ac.be [cited September 2008]
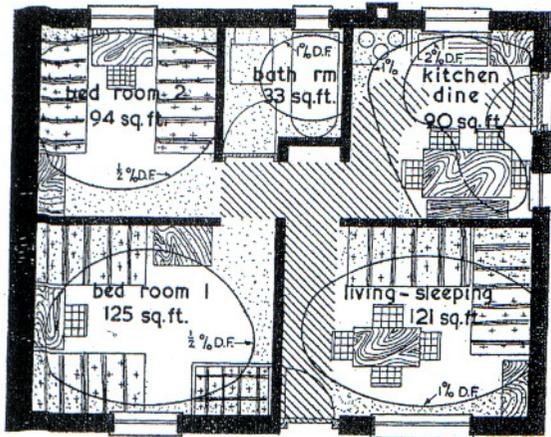
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the recycling of the modernist planning model reminiscent of the apartheid era. The majority of the houses delivered over the 12 year period are almost a carbon copy of the solutions developed in the 1950's and 1960's under apartheid when the built environment was dominated by free standing 51/9 houses in a repetitive urban pattern. This creates a sterile environment which lacks any sense of humanity. The monotony of these singular boxes creates settlements which are unsustainable. They continue perpetuate the already existing problems of fragmentation and low density sprawl. The placement of low density 'box' housing pulls inhabitants further away from social activities, potential livelihoods and increases travel distances to various amenities.

There is a need for need for alternative solutions to be developed to address these concerns to increase residential densities and improve the urban environment. Urban theorists suggest that the prevailing low density developments in South Africa lead to the creation of unsustainable environments. Some of the major problems that these settlements lead to are inadequate population numbers to support viable transport, retail and social facilities, vast distances between places of employment creating a reliance on motorised transport and high costs to municipalities in providing services due to long distances. These problems are compounded by the separation of functions and land uses. (Poulsen and Silverman 2005:1)

The other challenge with the existing model of housing being provided is the poor quality of neighbourhoods being created. The monotonous layout leads to undefined street space and a sterile environment. There is very little design attention given to the type of housing and how the initial house which is meant to be a starter unit can be developed and can grow incrementally over time. Theses houses are also designed with a nuclear family in mind while ignoring a wide diversity of household arrangements and varying needs. The ideals of home ownership has also excluded and inhibited other choices in the housing market and excluded many people looking for rental options. There is an increasing concern about the affordability of this 'suburban dream' with many recipients being unable to afford the upkeep of their new homes being forced to sell them. This as discussed earlier is one of the leading causes of the growing xenophobic violence as foreigners are able to get access to housing meant for South African citizens. Finally the model only focuses on housing as shelter and ignores the income generating possibilities that exist. (Poulsen and Silverman 2005:2)
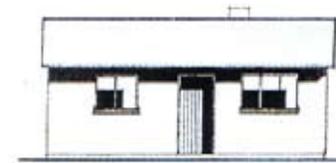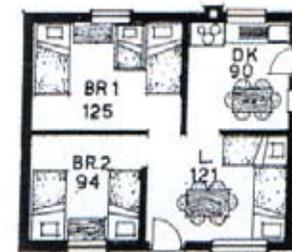

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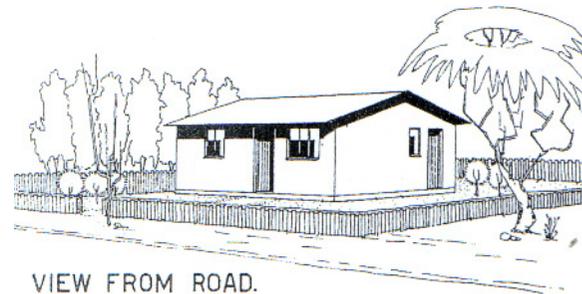
VIEW FROM ROAD.

08

ELEVATION

PLAN

09

IMAGES **07, 08.** Standard 51/9 with 3 sleeping areas and a separate kitchen and bathroom (Chipkin 1993:215)
09. Standard 51/6 house with 3 sleeping areas and a separate kitchen (Chipkin 1993:215)

Main disadvantages:

- Standard 30m2 freestanding houses located on 250m2 plots which are accessed by wide roads with low densities of 40 units per hectare or 160 people per hectare.
- Low densities leading to poor delivery of urban services such as electricity, water, public transport, roads and social amenities.
- Residents become reliant on motorised transport leading to high use of fossil fuels and pollution.
- Large portions of land required leading settlements to be on the periphery of the city where lands cost are lower disadvantaging the residents.
- Poor architectural quality and limited potential for growth and expansion creating monotonous environments. (Poulsen and Silverman 2005:2)

However there are some positive aspects that need to be retained:

- Generous amounts of outdoor space and contrast to overcrowded environments
- Facilitates ease of construction with the possibility of mass production
- Allows for the demarcation of legal boundaries
- Allows for some growth and expansion
- Has some potential for flexibility as one room can be used for trading
- Has the potential to accommodate a diversity of household arrangements. (Poulsen and Silverman 2005:2)

Users Response

Ironically ordinary people without government assistance have begun to respond to the problems addressing the problems of affordability, quality,

diversity and even density over a long period of time. Some of the most alarming organic responses to these social conditions have been the sporadic development of land invasions, shack settlements, shack renting, slum lording in the inner city and the illegal conversion of inner city offices, factories and warehouses into residential accommodation. These forms often lead the decline of the inner city and are serious health and safety risks. They are characterised by overcrowding, crime and the exploitation of the residents by slumlords.

However other organic processes have also occurred at ground level where housing provided has been adapted with the people employing a series of innovative strategies to improve and customise their homes over time. Residents begin to personalise their homes with improving the various finishes to their houses. Rooms are added to better accommodate household arrangements while others choose to transform their houses into spaza shops, hair salons and home businesses. In some cases people have also added backyard rooms for rental purposes. These rooms are part of a South African Urban tradition with these rooms being built on countless plots in old townships. Examples of these were in the erection of the 'Alex yard' typologies in 1906 where homeowners built rooms with open courts on their large plots and illegal additions that were built onto houses in the 1950 in African townships.(Poulsen and Silverman 2005:3)

The backyard room can be a useful tool in providing for housing for the continued migration of people into the city. Often people come to cities to work but maintain links to their families elsewhere creating the need for rental option
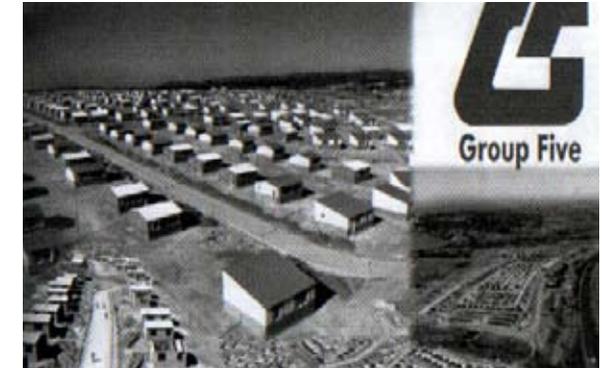
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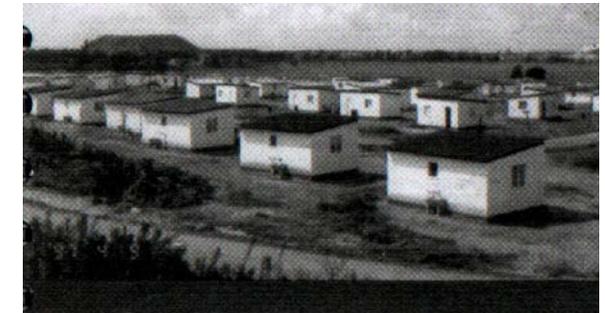
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10,11,12. Houses that have been provided in the Post Apartheid era as part of the RDP program. (Orso 2002:41)

IMAGES

in the city. These rooms are also capable of accommodating extended families. Finally it also provides a source of income for the landlord. Some of the benefits backyard rooms for can bring are better location to social amenities and employment opportunities, provide affordable accommodation with access to services, accommodates extended family, developed incrementally, business opportunity, increase densities, provide rental stock and helps to define outdoor living space a social gathering spaces. (Poulsen and Silverman 2005:3)

The need for rental stock

With the rate of urbanisation in South Africa it becomes clear that there is a greater need for a variety of rental options. Many urban dwellers are migrants coming from other countries or rural areas who have come to cities looking for economic opportunities. These people still retain strong ties to their places of origin. Many urban dwellers need to maximise the money they send home creating a high demand for rental housing. There are various rental stocks which make up low income medium density stock. Some of these are transitional housing, communal housing, social housing, council flats, privately developed single rooms in olds office blocks and warehouses and privately developed backyard rooms. Many people can afford to rent an entire flat and turn to single room rental or communal housing. The highest deficit lies within 49% of the population who earn between R0 and R1500 monthly. So it becomes clear there is a need for single room rental and backyard rooms to accommodate the needs of people moving to the city. However there is also the need to provide for mixed communities of any particular form housing so that development aren't stigmatised as being only for the poor.

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13,14,15. Image of houses in Orange Farm which have been customised and adapted to suits users needs providing backyard rental and home enterprise.

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