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Housing for the people, housing for the needy: public housing across continents

BILL FREUND AND ALAN MABIN

ABSTRACT

Response to need, or providing for the requirements of social reproduction, form two apparent causes of public housing action. In both cases, the state intervenes in response to market failure. While these may be underlying truths, it is equally valid and important to look at the ideological context which motivates and powers the process; a context which is bound to reflect in the impact of the housing once constructed. This paper points to several different 20th century contexts for large-scale housing projects in Europe and in Africa. Turning to South Africa, the paper looks at the changing ideological context of public housing and the impact of societal goals going far beyond the provision of worker accommodation and also raises more questions than just the familiar racial separation issues. The paper seeks to integrate findings from different periods and locational spaces, making use of research over many decades.

INTRODUCTION

Why has public housing been so significant across continents? A first assumption could be that states may construct housing on a large scale in response to need. Second, it responds to the wish to replace inadequate housing; shelter that seems deficient in providing for the requirements of social reproduction. In both cases, the state intervenes in response to market failure, partly examined by Potts in this issue. While

these may be underlying truths, it is equally important to look at the ideological context which motivates and powers the process; a context which is bound to reflect in the impact of the housing once constructed. This paper first points to several different 20th century contexts for large-scale housing projects in Europe and in Africa. Two motivations are highlighted in the changing ideology that has lain behind the bricks and mortar. One perspective is Michel Foucault's view of the Enlightenment state as being carceral and obsessed with control, one-sided as it is. Another perspective lies in the politically idealist emancipatory views of Henri Lefebvre with a partial relation to Marxism – the right to the city. One test lies in observing what the inhabitants of public housing make of this built environment in human terms. In this article, our focus is on the moral economy of public housing in terms of the ideologies and views of those who plan and arrange its building. Both elements of control and of expanding access recur through many projects.

Reflecting on experiences elsewhere, the paper turns to South African public housing. In common with so many other social features that have been investigated and discussed to a high degree in isolation from its contemporaries in other parts of the world, the purpose of this article is to provide pointers from diverse experiences for consideration in further research and writing on the material and social features of state-funded shelter particularly in this country, but also in the context of the continent and the world as a whole. The article offers no single narrative but intends to enrich discussion through drawing attention to some of the global, including African, approaches to public housing and their results. The paper is based on close reading by both authors of a large volume of literature on public housing in many countries.

EUROPE - CLASSIC HOUSING IDEOLOGIES: RED VIENNA, SOVIET UNION, BRITAIN, FRANCE

A quest to explore the origins and intentions of public housing is not unique to South Africa. Before looking at African, and then South African cases, this article points to four different 20th century contexts for large-scale housing projects in Europe which have been well articulated by different studies over a long period: some detail is given on Red Vienna, brief comments on Soviet Union approaches and more information on both British and French cases. The purpose is to set out a variety of *intentions and trajectories* of public housing in each case – not to argue that some approaches may be judged 'superior'.

The first example is associated with the political left, which in the excellent research of Helmut Gruber (1991) comes to life in *Red Vienna*, set in the Austrian capital city under Social Democratic administration. This party won every election in Vienna outside the Nazi years from the last days of the Austro-Hungarian empire (1918) to the early 21st century, and at first sight it had a kind of Gramscian hegemony. Between 1919 and 1934, 63,924 new domiciles were created in 377 projects of which more than 90% were apartments (Gruber 1991, 46, 52). At the time, the housing (apartments) produced were a source of great pride for the party and considered a model for socialist admirers all over the West. They were quickly produced making use of the city's autonomy as a tax-raising *Land* (province), and the new housing tenants benefited from strict rent control with 3% of their wages being the upper limitation of payments. Gruber questioned the need for this housing. Vienna had a great deal of deteriorating old housing which could rather have been rehabilitated. The overall city population, after the defeat of the old Empire, began to fall; a decline which would not be arrested for almost a century.

The goal was not just to house workers but to provide the basis for the construct of *Neue Menschen*, new socialist people with socialist values. These were 'people's palaces.' The brains behind the projects tended to believe that ordinary Austrian workers 'existed at a brutish level subject to alcohol, sexual excesses, and the manipulations of a capitalist society – a dark image which only the party could turn into one of light' (Gruber, 1991, 115). Only the party, committed to a national transition to socialism by democratic means, could create 'total worker environments' (180) where values could be turned around. The denizens would be transformed into an *ordentliches Arbeiterklasse*; a proper and desirably motivated working class. Admission to these new people's palaces seems often to have depended on evidence of loyal party support, not really on need.

There was to be massive managerial intervention. In Foucauldian fashion, building rules were severe and relatively complex. Sub-tenants were not allowed. Only women could access the communal laundry and do so under supervision, flats were inspected monthly, children forbidden to play on the grass, and surveillance could result in taking children away from families if it was felt that they were not growing up in the desirable way (the state had the right of *loco parentis* in the case of all children born out of wedlock). Tenants' committees existed, but Gruber felt they had little power (Gruber 1991, 64).

In common with public housing more generally, tenant access policies strongly favoured families. The association of housing and families as social glue was an assumption. Yet the flats were deliberately very small, suitable only for families with one or two children, itself considered a social good. There was an obsession with small rooms as opposed to the all-in-one-room tenement flat. These socialist apartments were provided with a separate bedroom and a separate kitchen. The standard apartment had electricity, running water, a gas connection for cooking, a toilet and hardwood parquet floors (Gruber 1991, 58) – but no central heating or hot water. Although a 58 square metre model was eventually introduced in some places, the tiny model generally applied; a mere 38 square metres.¹ These features today seem negative, yet the point was rather to bring people together in socialist fashion to collective facilities; something distinct from many other much more individualistic public housing initiatives.

Here the Viennese were perhaps closer to the spirit of Lefebvre than Foucault. The bigger complexes were provided with a ‘wide array of communal living facilities. These included mechanised laundries, bathhouses, kindergartens, playgrounds and swimming pools, meeting rooms, medical and dental clinics, libraries and lecture halls, shops of the consumer society and youth and mothers’ consultation clinics’ (Gruber 1991, 60). There were communal kitchens for mealtimes as well. All that was missing was popular spontaneous activity! Gruber was sceptical about how tenants would react to this new sort of environment – always a challenging question for housing research.

Architecturally some of the complexes are remarkable with their massive walls and giant archways that led to large communally available courtyards, and indeed they served as defensive fortifications in the so-called Austrian civil war of 1934 when the socialist democrats were driven from power. Before that, once people crossed the community threshold, they announced exit from the besmirched existing city into a brave new world. The architecture harks back to the central European historicist/*Jugendstil* (‘youth style’ – a German and Austrian version of Art Nouveau: Bony 2012, 55–57) and was not remarkable from the point of view of the use of new materials. However, construction became a major source of working-class employment; according to Gruber perhaps its most popular feature, again an issue of significance in many situations.

The long-term consequences of the period described here are profound. Even today, ‘Vienna is among the European capitals with the lowest levels of inequality and it is

characterised by a strong corporatist welfare regime with a high degree of income redistribution and a widely decommodified housing market' (Premrov and Schnetzer 2023, 755). The era of Red Vienna ended with the political rise of fascism in 1934, but the construction of social housing accelerated after World War II and its provision remained a key element of Viennese welfare policies (Friesenecker and Kazepov 2021; Kadi 2015). In contrast to other cities like Berlin, Vienna has not pursued comprehensive privatisation of its municipal housing stock. 'Yet, the Vienna housing model is not unchallenged. Despite its resilient tradition dating back a hundred years, the regulatory framework of the housing market has changed in recent decades' (Kadi 2015). The deregulation of the private rental market and 'tendencies of recommodification [meant that] rent levels have been rising rapidly' (Premrov and Schnetzer 2023, 765).

While Vienna was perhaps a special case, other central European municipalities had housing programmes not dissimilar in outlook. The new Soviet Union had enormous shortages in the wake of rapid industrialisation and controlled movement to cities by means of passes. Yet Owen Hatherley defended the idea that the massive public housing constructed there and elsewhere in Eastern Europe after World War II was not entirely different in intention from the Viennese experience:

... the immense housing estates, however much they were a negation of the Marxist idea of the "self-activity of the working class", were nothing if not egalitarian, if not a total attack on the notion of urban hierarchy, with all the architectural compositions based on the refusal to let any one object take primacy at any given time, and surrounded with a sea of completely public, free space (Hatherley 2015, 512).

The shared apartments, often lambasted by visitors from wealthier regions before the war, were not entirely a marker of poverty and the housing shortage; they were in part intended to build towards a new socialist consciousness. Yet the typical very extensive green spaces around the huge blocks constructed during the Soviet premier Khrushchev years and after, related to modernist design, which we examine further below.

An example with some analogies to Vienna but also some major differences, was the British case, which of course had direct influence in colonial and post-colonial Africa —

specifically in South Africa. In Britain the beginnings of public housing were infused with moralism and ideas of social transformation. The economist Alfred Marshall signalled a change of significance when, in the land where the Industrial Revolution began and the seedbed of individuation and liberalism, he wrote that 'extreme poverty ought not to be regarded, not indeed as a crime, but as a thing so detrimental to the State that [it] should not be endured' (evidence to Royal Commission on the Aged Poor 1893, cited by Ravetz 2001, 18). The slums, the back-to-back little terrace houses that typified the rapidly expanding industrial towns but also the congested and uncontrolled housing that appeared earlier, began to be identified as the breeding ground of moral turpitude and disease. Here too the goal was to build entirely new communities clearly separated from the sources of degeneration. Communities for some became the desirable sites of 'a distinctly "improving" agenda of working-class respectability and rational recreation' (Boughton 2018, 59).

Britain was also the site of some remarkable urban model villages constructed by employers such as Bournville, created by the chocolate maker Cadbury; Robert Owen's New Lanark, the pet project of the famous utopian thinker; and Port Sunlight, created by Lever Brothers whose fortunes were strongly linked to imperialism in West Africa. Port Sunlight typically offered greenery, parks, and curved roads, that suggested rural idylls by their names, and allotment gardens with lawns in front of houses where residents were forbidden to keep chickens. Here as in Vienna, extensive paternalistic or perhaps maternalistic supervision governed residents' lives. Here too one found extensive concerns with physical appearance and architecture and a 'cult' of 'family' and 'home' (Ravetz 2001, 36). One can regard this regulation as significant motivation in workers' housing projects – public or corporate – and the latter frequently provided models for the former.

Housing ideologues were individualistic liberals who actually disliked the city and looked back to English villages for models built in the spirit of Ebenezer Howard (1902). 'Council housing' which was municipally planned, entirely low-rise, and quite extensive well before World War II, embodied much of the same ideal and tried to regenerate working class slum dwellings by recreating in some architectural way an idealised version of an older English way of life. When housing was constructed for munitions workers early in the World War I, the garden city ideal was upheld as the desirable model (Ravetz , 2004, 74-75). While the burgeoning suburban ideal of a

private sector emerged, similar emerging initiatives by local councils played a large public sector role, simultaneously promoting decent construction and maintenance standards through the enforcement of municipal by-laws. In parallel came the rise of town planning as a profession.

Council housing, a distinctive aspect of British state construction and urbanism, took off relatively early, parallel to developments in Vienna. London had already built 10,000 units by the start of World War I in 1914 (Boughton 2018, 9). By 1939 when the World War II began, approximately one million units existed in Britain, subsidised by the local state (Ravetz 2001, 89). A big contradiction that this orientation faced was cost. The new housing attracted people and, perhaps in contrast with Vienna, was by no means out of line with what large numbers thought of as desirable. It actually appealed to the lower middle classes but was realistically only sustainable for the top layers of the working class. The 'submerged tenth' about whom much ink was spilt, were economically excluded from this arcadian planning (Boughton 2018, 23).

To a large degree, *modernism* attempted to address this problem. In Britain, Aneurin Bevan, left-wing Labour Minister of Labour, who presided over the beginning of the massive construction project of public housing in post-World War II Britain, also believed in new housing as the foundation stone for the creation of a new type of *community*. Bevan called the new towns 'townships' and wanted to see public housing as the national norm creating a new sense of British identity and community, especially with private rentals dying away. He particularly disliked the idea of the latter type of housing as the distinctive home of the working class segregated from the rest of the population, which he described as 'a wholly evil thing' (Boughton 2018, 98). The adoption of practical new materials allowing for rapid construction and the rise of tower blocks resulted in a scale which was massive, not only because of the destruction of 750,000+ housing units bombed during the war, but more so because of a determination to eradicate the slums.

After almost a century of council housing, more recent circumstances differ greatly as much, or most, public housing has been privatised or commodified.

The long-term trend would seem to be ... towards a more than quasiprivatization of social housing driven largely by the increasingly

commercial interests of the landlords, albeit regulated by inspectorates and partnerships with local authorities ... but the notion of universally accessible, comprehensive, affordable and electorally accountable rented housing as a public service is disappearing (Ginsburg 2005, 133).

In France the situation also differed somewhat from Britain. French urbanisation tied to industrialisation came later. Notoriously, in wartime under the Vichy government which collaborated with the Nazi occupation, a new stage of planning appeared in blueprint, and post-war years saw the expansion of big firms producing automobiles and other commodities associated with mass consumption. Tied to the use of new materials and possibilities, in modernist vein, France built a very large amount of high-rise housing, much of it in enormous complexes called *grandes ensembles* (Dufaux and Fourcaut 2004). Here the state and 'championed' big businesses worked together to reconstruct French political economy (Loriaux 1999). It was commonplace for such firms to reserve numerous apartments in the French HLMs (*habitations à loyer modéré* or low-income housing) for their employees. Housing requirements increased as millions of newcomers moved to the cities. There was a need to move people out of ancient rented accommodation of poor quality and to replace shacks which started to proliferate, especially in places around Paris and Marseille after large-scale migration to France – perhaps first of Portuguese and Spanish workers, then those of Algerian origin – with intimate connections to France's colonial past and practices (De Barros 2012). For example, at Nanterre immediately west of Paris, huge areas became occupied by *bidonvilles* or informal areas which were 'cleared' with new high-rise construction (Cohen 2011).

Some utopian capitalists such as Jean-Baptiste Godin in the *Familistère* at Guise in the industrial northeast (Lallement 2009) and others, conducted early experiments in France; previously there had been very little in the way of a model for public housing. In French tradition, money was instead spent on public facilities and on beautifying and maintaining prestigious city centres, which in some respects is the vision to which Lefebvre subscribed – for him the 'right to the city' did not mean only for the 'creative' class. Modernist public housing thus meant a radical turning of the coin. The massive switch involved expanding transport links that brought whole regions within reach of city centres. Relatively easy access to available land in the vicinity of cities made for rapid construction (Power 1990).

Unsurprisingly, the Corbusian idea of tearing down the old and constructing giant dormitories with clean architectural lines surrounded by extensive greenery was particularly influential. A Foucauldian critique of Corbusier emphasises the social control present in the (in)famous architect's thinking (Nay 2018).

In the 1970s, in both France and Britain, public housing began to see an exit of working-class families, increasingly able to afford homeownership. With the arrival in Britain of the Thatcher Conservative Party government in 1979, residents began to receive far stronger encouragement to buy flats, and thus buy out of public housing. Today perhaps a tenth of the British population live in public housing where once it was a third. The consequences of the policies that these states pursued through the 1980s and beyond remain very much with us and are addressed by Potts in this issue of the journal.

Public housing began to be considered the home of last resort for those who were excluded from effective privatisation—new immigrants, asylum seekers, single mothers and their children, individuals who would previously have been placed in homes for the psychologically disturbed, the homeless, or the single elderly. In Europe, there was subsequently not very much new construction of public housing, but the question of who logically should live there started to come to the fore. Boughton calls this *residualisation* (2018, 211). Public housing remains; some of it is ghettoised, and in dramatic contrast to the Bevan image, is no longer seen by officialdom or commentators as the logical home of the majority of the population and still less of the working class but rather of residual groupings.

PUBLIC HOUSING IN AFRICA

Colonial state intervention created a domestic built environment everywhere in Africa, sometimes on a considerable scale. A wide variety emerged, though usually a small proportion of total housing stock. In this part of the paper, we provide some snapshots of the diversity on which there is a large literature but with which researchers on housing in South Africa seldom engage.

Apart from South Africa, the largest volume of African public housing is situated in the countries that border the Mediterranean. For example, in the case of Algeria, for the colonial as well as different post-independence phases, a large literature can also be found (Çelik 1997 chapter 5; Madani 2012; Benlakhlef and Bergel 2019). Thus the (French)

Constantine Plan in Algeria from 1958 prominently included urban construction and renewal. Algiers was gifted high-rise blocks of flats (though Le Corbusier's proposal to tear down the entire old Arabic Casbah area was not realised). To a degree these projects imitated the case in contemporary French cities where public housing was at its expansive peak –but with the unusual feature of separate buildings for Arabs and Europeans. The Europeans were given views of the ocean; Arabs were supposed to be indifferent. The buildings for Arabs were often poorly finished and unattractive. However, the practical features and prestige of these flats make them desirable up to the present (Deluz-Labruyère 2004).

Here, however, our emphasis is on illustrations from the continent south of the Sahara. Early colonial depictions of towns on the West African coast focus on cathedrals and fortifications. But from the later 19th century, the question of how to house Africans, who were necessarily urban residents, became gradually more important to colonial authorities (Le Bris et al 1987). In most of Africa the expanding colonial state employed Africans, notably soldiers, but over time also a wide range of civil servants who had to be on the spot in cities and towns where they did not have ordinary family dwellings. At the same time, and using the excuse of health considerations, it became increasingly important to create a system of racial segregation. An extensive zone of greenery and recreation thus pushed Africans away from the business and best residential areas in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa) in the then-Belgian Congo; Belgian paternalism pre-1960 is also evident in Lubumbashi (Waldburger 2020). In French West Africa (and this system was copied by the Belgians in the Congo) the answer lay in *lotissements* – parcels of land where streets had been laid out and basic sanitation facilities introduced. It was then up to the beneficiaries to plan constructions and improvements at a suitable distance from where European families could be found. Where houses were built, Africans remade the spaces so that what was once public sector housing began to merge in form with private sector units constructed from scratch. Such incremental processes are often described, for example in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, as family compounds or *côté cours*, which are gradually constructed as money becomes available and needs alter (Antoine et al 1987).

Across the continent, Mombasa became the chief port of the British colony of Kenya and briefly its capital. Stren (1978) writes that British administrators saw the ancient town as a little Bombay; dangerous, alien and difficult to penetrate. As in many other parts of

Africa, colonial urban policy evolved to include removals and sanitary campaigns. By the 1920s Mombasa began to witness both the laying out of land for site and service schemes, the equivalent of *lotissements*, and of public housing construction. The latter was critical for individuals who were not in a position to construct or maintain traditional merchant homes. The government itself needed to house its employees who often worked on the railways far from home in Mombasa (Cooper 1987, 191), and also to cater for big companies such as Shell Petroleum and East African Breweries situated in Mombasa.

There was a sense that inhabitants did not really take possession of the rental habitation complex; it was rather a '*shauri ya serikali*'— a thing of the government which was responsible for a fundamentally colonial sense of public order (Stren 1978). The public housing programme, which was advanced after World War II, was renewed following independence —something that occurred in many parts of the continent (Barker-Ciganikova et al 2020). African nationalists such as President Jomo Kenyatta considered 'respectable' housing (by European standards) to be a striking mark of African dignity and development (Stren 1978, 224). Given the cost of market rentals and upkeep, however, these publicly built houses could not meet the demands for residential space on their own. Rent collections were problematic and evictions hard to effect. Government expenditure was allocated to health or education rather than housing. From 2016 onwards tenders for public-private 'renewal and redevelopment' of several older public rental 'estates' such as the largest, Port Tudor, were called for (County Government of Mombasa 2022). The fate of residents remains uncertain as the existing thousands of public rental houses become privatised. The withdrawal of the state has become ever more noticeable and parallels the situation in Dakar.

In contrast with Mombasa, Nairobi, the successor Kenyan capital, was a new city created in the 20th century and intended above all for the habitation and convenience of a white settler population. It also had an important Indian population. The African population grew in part in response to the labour needs of colonial government, and the housing situation became problematic. In the 1930s the colonial government began to provide rental properties consisting of hostel space as well as some family habitation, constructed on a significant if not very large scale. Further areas of public housing were added rather piecemeal (Martin and Bezemer 2020). Luise White describes one public housing area, Marurani, as a distinct settlement that the authorities sought to control in

detail; however, over time it developed 'a vibrant social life of brewers and antipolice riots' – and was demolished in the 1950s (White 1990, 141). The British were wrong to imagine that such a space would of itself fend off unwelcome popular politics, and their ideas of control proved somewhat ineffectual. In fact, Marurani was often highly politicised and rebellious, which also proved to be the case in later squatter shack settlements in the era of the Mau Mau revolt (1952-60).

Nairobi today is characterised in part by apartment buildings often adjacent to large informal areas (Huchzermeyer 2011). State involvement is minimal except for assistance to government employees and to 'clear' what are in some cases shack areas that came to be described as 'slums'. The growing prevalence of blocks of flats shows two tendencies. The flats are desirable for middle class owners who set up services and businesses just outside the premises and on balconies while subletting rooms (Schramm 2017, 130). Both flats and some shacks are owned as investments. Yet for many the city remains a foreign kind of space for residents: '... a place they pass through but by no means a place they want to settle down in' (Schramm 2017, 136).

Post-independence Tanzania adopted rather more state-centered policy approaches but found that efforts to address housing questions fell far behind social and urbanisation changes. Thus, in its first 20 years from 1962, the National Housing Corporation managed to build less than 14000 units; in 1978 the deficit was estimated at 300 000 houses and by 1992, 600 000; site-and-service approaches provided much more for a wide range of people than public housing schemes (Kombe 1994) even where supported by sympathetic countries such as the then East Germany.

A feature of another previous British colony, Zambia, was the emergence of towns to serve miners of copper and other metals, in the absence – unlike much of West Africa or the Swahili Coast – of an urban tradition that preceded colonial towns (cf. Mabogunje 1968). Thus, a large amount of housing for Africans had to be constructed in towns such as Luanshya and Kitwe. This also became the case for the newly founded capital of Lusaka in the 1930s.

Karen Hansen considers Lusaka a classical colonial city, that is to say one where spatial form was intended to follow function but also took for granted spatial segregation between races (Hansen 1997, 27). From the 1930s Africans were given plots on which

they could build houses (and the same occurred across the border in the Congolese province of Katanga). The beginnings were modest: round windowless huts with basic shared sanitation and bathing facilities such as were also constructed slightly earlier on the other side of the Zambesi in Southern Rhodesia (Hansen 1997, 24). A few government workers obtained something better and there was often the opportunity to cultivate food crops in a garden. However, as the copper boom took off and revenues flowed, the new capital became the site of extensive public housing. In 1948, the Northern Rhodesian administration broke with the South African model by passing the African Urban Housing Ordinance. This granted Northern Rhodesian Africans the right to live in cities if they were employed and the right to rented houses – for males, if they were married. The pass system, a classic feature in South Africa, was done away with a little while later. The new townships could boast recreational facilities, beer halls (which following the South African model, paid revenues into the urban services that existed) and churches. In 1957, 3,1542 were living in public housing, as opposed to 8,917 in private employer property out of a total of 64,757 (Hansen 1997, 37). Perhaps 100, 000 houses had been constructed and rented to copper mine employees and their families by the corporations that owned the mines up to 1964 (Ferguson 1998, 66).

Both on the copper belt and in Lusaka, 'housing is an important asset in the effort of low-income residents to establish a socioeconomic foothold in the city and improve the life situation for themselves and their children' (Hansen 1997, 70). This is an interesting comment on the Lefebvre idea of a right to the city, and for Zambian women today it is largely the city which offers the foundation of the household and access to resources (Hansen 1997, 106ff). After independence in 1964, the demand for housing stretched the budget which prioritised civil service. Thus, a system developed of so-called 'squatter compounds'; site and service schemes constructed with some state involvement. These are much appreciated by residents, although as in West Africa, such housing is built piecemeal, furnished and then extended; Schlyter (1998) provided a long-term analysis of George, perhaps the best known of these schemes. These compounds mushroomed in what was for Africa in the 1960s a relatively well-off new nation, albeit one keen to first and foremost help its new elite. But from the 1970s copper prices collapsed, the nationalised mines became unprofitable, and the bottom of the Zambian economy fell out; new corporate or public housing became a much rarer phenomenon.

To the west of Zambia in the Angolan capital Luanda, Chloe Buire takes us back to Lefebvre from a different angle (Buire 2017). She makes a fundamental distinction between the real historic relationship of 'conceived' space – the world of politicians and planners – and 'lived' space: the human experience. As Luanda moved to being a rapidly growing and horribly congested boomtown at the time of the best oil prices – and faced a housing crisis in the 1980s and 90s – the Angolan authorities decided to make a deal with the Chinese who would construct a large peri-urban housing project along Chinese lines, efficiently and quickly, to be called Kilamba City. This was in a sense a multinational form of partly public housing involving at least two states plus profit-making companies involved in the construction. The 'modernist aesthetics' of Kilamba appeal to the self-image of the Angolan elite. It is billed by the government as a 'showcase satellite city' distant from the congested shacks that overrun so much of the space of Luanda. Construction began in 2011. However, the project was problematic. Kilamba is far out and hard to reach. It had infrastructural problems in a context where maintenance was neglected and the essential maintenance allowance hard to collect (Buire 2017, 27). Above all, it was too expensive. The lower middle class for whom it was intended could not afford the prices of the flats which were sold off at very reduced rates in some cases.

However, for some Kilamba was a plausible investment rented out and/or shared. Some 35% of residents actually have a home elsewhere, and complicated domestic arrangements govern who lives where. Here also in a different conjuncture, Africans have taken a planned physical entity and started to reshape it to their own requirements. The appeal of prestige modernism recurs; in Kilamba, new residences are favoured by civil servants who have connections to authorities that allow them to acquire accommodation there. The poor squat elsewhere.

A very different kind of adaptation has been noted in Maputo by De Pacheco Melo. She studied families who have been pushed out of squalid housing in the centre of the Mozambican capital into self-built areas. This peripheralisation has one particular advantage; the plots are big and allow for cultivation. They give the new inhabitants a sense of ownership and control (De Pacheco Melo 2017, 57) plus considerable freedom to take initiatives, and after a time the houses become unrecognisable. This is a positive form of provision for unprivileged African residents. It represents minimal public involvement – though in many cases the land and some services are publicly provided,

also typical of many African circumstances and not at all unknown in South Africa. Yet across the continent as elites appear to place themselves far ahead of large parts of the population, 'approaches to housing are used to gain political legitimacy (both through the ideas that the built environment can encapsulate and through improved access to housing)' (Mitlin 2022, 1). In Nairobi where new citizen expectations and mobilised civil society groups are demanding delivery (Mwau et al., 2020), 'the government has switched emphasis from eviction to upgrading and has made a commitment to build affordable housing' (Mitlin 2022, 9). The futures of public housing in Africa remain open and dependent, as everywhere, on social and political as well as economic circumstances and struggles of the times. The literature on housing and other features of cities in Africa is burgeoning and further studies may for example be found in a recent book which examines 8 cities in 6 countries by Rubin, Charlton and Klug (2023).

In thinking about housing in African cities let us return to Lefebvre. Africans too want a right to the city. But can one really understand the 'right to a city' especially for families and for women, without factoring in housing – and where will state intervention feature in this picture? Indeed, can state intervention achieve this? The African examples tend to suggest that public provision only goes some of the way, and thus what may be important is understanding how people use what is provided and 'stretch' it to accommodate their needs and aspirations.

AND SOUTH AFRICA?

Is South Africa entirely different? As is commonly claimed, South African social research is often presented as something exceptional and little related to other parts of the world. Yet past approaches to public housing have drawn on and indeed sometimes influenced policies and projects elsewhere. This section of the article explores aspects of varied histories of public housing in the country mindful of the experiences of other countries. It also brings the story up to the present, providing some detail on features which are perhaps less known to most researchers and writers, about housing in the country. Recent state-generated housing in South Africa competes with social grants and healthcare as being a signal element in the emergence of a distinctive kind of welfare state (cf. Seekings 2008). What the state can deliver for the general voting population now has enormous power as a drawing card. African experience indicates that what people do with public housing and its intentions, plays a critical role in accomplishing better urban lifestyles.

The history of public housing in South Africa can be seen in part through the three strands we have looked at above in European cases and in part in African cases too. We summarise (and compress) these as a Viennese creation of collective life, British rural idyll, and high modernism particularly in the French example. To these the significance of segregation must be added, as has been the case in many colonial African situations.

Public housing approaches in South Africa have gone through distinct historical phases – although there is some continuity between them. The first, which we can associate with the pre-apartheid period before the National Party took power in 1948, particularly shows the influence of British thinking. The earliest public housing in the country appeared in 1904 in several cities – as the then colonial and municipal governments created Ndabeni in Cape Town, Red Location in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, and Pimville, an early element of what much later would be called Soweto in Johannesburg. All of these cases involved forced removals of a racialised – that is, black – population from older inner city areas (Saunders 1984, 145; Baines 1989, 18; Kagan 1978, 25), and can be compared with many events in other colonial African towns and cities of the period.

After the double impact of World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic, the Housing Act of 1920 laid the foundation for central government funding of much more housing (Mabin 2020). By 1940, after two decades of subsidies under the 1920 Act, over 25,000 units had been completed by municipalities with a further 14,000 under construction or approved: 28,000 intended for ‘non-European occupation’ and almost 11,000 for ‘European occupation’ (Union of South Africa 1941, 54; Mabin 2020, 463). Segregation remained a key element of public housing projects for decades. Although most houses built were intended for black populations, more than half of the funding went to create usually larger units for whites, which in time became a striking difference compared to much of the rest of the continent. Indeed, it helped to solidify and police the boundaries between whites and the ‘others’. Public housing for whites responded to the failure of the market to provide shelter for whites but was also a response to the powerful urge to uplift so-called poor whites, who of course had the vote.

Paternalist and controlling practices, which were common in pioneering social housing days in Britain, were imported to South Africa and were notably heavy-

handed and pervasive. In fact, it was not really possible to evict undesirable or non-paying tenants, but it gave the authorities justification for other forms of public housing control. Pre-World War II public housing in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg was tied to the vigilance of a growing battalion of social workers and to what those in power considered the threat of racially mixed slums that defied the good order desired by the middle class (Robinson 1998). The Slums Act of 1934 provided for vigorous state intervention, and according to Parnell (1988) it was carried out largely to the benefit of whites, with housing subsidies to support rehousing those who moved from condemned areas. Epping Garden Village (EGV), for instance, a partly non-government yet funded project at the edge of the Cape Flats, was inaugurated by opposition leader (and later first apartheid prime minister) Rev. D.F. Malan in 1938; it became associated with the ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church and the National Party, both obsessed with potentially 'losing' the 'poor white population'. EGV and other white semi-public or public housing projects were equally aimed at subsidising industrial wages insufficient to meet the prices required for purchasing suburban dwellings. Indeed, EGV in its earliest days actually provided inhabitants with free butter, milk and orange juice as well as inexpensive subsidised furniture and 'radiograms' (Teppo, 2004, 175). Its 'civilising mission', thick with cultural assumptions, thus also aided employers in continuing to pay lower wages.

EGV was not unique. In Johannesburg the non-profit Johannesburg Housing Company worked with the municipality to create 'model' housing in the form of small apartments in Fordsburg, a project that was graced with a name borrowed from London – Octavia Hill Flats, in honour of a social reformer who gained financial support to establish and manage housing for the least well-off, with great attention given to the management of both tenants and houses (Krut 1979). Jennifer Robinson traced the training and employment of 'Octavia Hill managers', women who visited and surveyed public housing for whites and also Coloureds in Port Elizabeth and Cape Town, on a weekly basis to collect rents and supervise the state of social behaviour among tenants. The first were appointed in 1934 in Cape Town and were considered to demonstrate 'value' in both senses of the word, to the city's ratepayers (Robinson 1993).

Their role in maintaining state property and ensuring that housing estates were economically viable was frequently mentioned and they also were

seen to offer hope of transforming slum dwellers into 'responsible citizens' who could be employed, live in stable family situations, contribute to community life, avoid crime, abide by the rules of tenancy and adequately maintain their homes (Robinson 1998, 467).

The nature of South African public housing changed radically over time. After World War II white wages increased substantially, and the expanding gold mines and parastatals mopped up white unemployment. Kenneth Gardens in the more 'English' Natal, which opened in 1948, aimed particularly at war veterans in Durban. Most residents were, for many years, households of male factory workers (Marks et al, 2018). Women were not generally expected to work beyond the home, and not much attention was paid to their overall life cycles and what might happen to ageing people.

By the 1940s a larger issue loomed: economic growth and rural dispossession brought about rapid urbanisation and a general housing crisis. This affected whites but on a far bigger scale Indians in Durban and the Coloured majority in Cape Town, plus a rapidly expanding African population. Johannesburg slum yards were matched by shantytowns on the edge of all the bigger towns. This situation confronted an intensely racialised mentality of the white political leaders. In the National Party the dominant idea was that black Africans did not belong in cities despite their century-long residence in, among other cities, Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown and Bloemfontein. Moreover, Indian people (only after 1961 recognised as South Africans who would never 'return' to India) and Coloureds, some of whom still had the vote, were also massively affected. Large housing settlements, carefully defined by race, were erected. Pravasan Pillay's (2018) Chatsworth was a large township created for Indians in South Durban. Chris van Wyk's (2004) Coloured Riverlea families in Johannesburg were sustained by male industrial workers but very often supplemented by a second income from factory-working wives. Here the attempt at Foucauldian social control, or at least of paternalistic guidance, was present but less heavy-handed than for whites. As Van Wyk (2004) writes, housing for Coloureds was considered by rights inferior to that of comparable whites but better than that of comparable Africans.

It is widely thought that apartheid tended to weaken class lines and definition, in favour of four recognised racial 'groups'. However, public housing for all of these 'groups' was equally sub-divided by class with class lines, promoted by the state, and certainly

recognised by the residents for whom they continued to have important identity significance. Van Wyk's (2004) description of Coloured housing in Johannesburg shows clear and important differences in the sizes of plots and houses even if most were defined as 'sub-economic' and effectively subsidised. Riverlea had internal differences but was also differentiated from Coloured middle class suburbs where it was possible to purchase homes from the start – such as Bosmont not very far away but on the 'better' side of the mining and industrial belt. Such suburbs also existed for Indians (Umhlatuzana was the first in Durban).

In both Indian and Coloured townships people could own freehold property, which tended to distinguish owners from tenants. Without the right to buy, residential differentiation existed across African populations too, notably in parts of Soweto. For example, in the Dube section of Soweto leasehold plots allowed individuals to build their own middle class houses (cf. Parnell 1991). The result was a complex pattern of differentiation but also a strong positive or negative sense of suburb identification. The so-called 'Beverly Hills' part of Orlando West, Dube, and finally Diepkloof Extension in what became Soweto, were progressively defined as elite sections for the designated bottom race.

In common with other large cities, the port city of Durban where industrialisation expanded rapidly from the later 1930s, had an extensive public housing system which reached perhaps 1/10 of the white population at the time, a considerable minority. The extensive Kenneth Gardens estate was laid out with the best type of contemporary British council housing architecture, and the flats were relatively spacious with communal lawns and gardens. On the one hand (as with other smaller estates) it was possible to walk to many sites of industrial and transport employment. On the other hand, the estate lay in middle class suburbia with the possibility of social integration through school, church and other associations not too difficult to achieve. In the first years after World War II when housing shortages made access to desired suburban lifestyles challenging, 'Kenneth Gardens offered the opportunity for returnee servicemen (the preferred first tenants) to lead a decent life and for civil servants to get a foot in towards upward mobility' (Marks et al, 2018, 60).

The laissez-faire conditions that had marked the housing situation of the 'others' – overcrowded slum warrens, shacks and poorly-built housing, lack of any enforceable

equivalent of British by-laws and severe health and sanitation problems – were more and more obviously a shocking side of South African urban life. After the war, squatter movements demanding space and housing made headlines in Johannesburg (Stadler 1979). At this time public interventions began to become evident, though the scale was modest and inadequate. The authorities were responsible to a racist electorate that was hostile to redistribution-based spending, and black township expenditures relied on the colonial expedient of municipal beerhalls for revenue.

Early ideas about a solution tended to revolve around the stereotype of ‘native villages’ in the city, perhaps far out but not too far from places of employment and with a South African twist. The native village ideology echoed British nostalgia for a pre-urban past. Alan Paton’s anti-urban *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948) is a poignant evocation of this juxtaposition of healthy rural ways and the evil of big city life for the poor. ‘Native villages’ were explicitly called for in ‘Native Affairs’ departments of both municipalities and national government from the time of post-Boer War reconstruction. The report of the segregationist Stallard Commission in 1920 recommended well-separated locations and migration controls as core urban policy in the 1920s (Davenport 1991), followed by the Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923, which required municipalities to create locations for their black populations (Parnell 2002). The supposedly liberal Fagan Commission report, accepted by the Smuts government as part of its unsuccessful political platform in 1948, again argued for ‘native villages’ – albeit linked to a willingness to admit that blacks were in the cities to stay.

Port Elizabeth, midway between Cape Town and Durban, had a longer history of black urbanisation, relatively near as it was to Eastern Cape Xhosa communities – many of them violently dispossessed. Robinson (1993) saw Port Elizabeth as a relatively enlightened case where ‘progressive’ anglophone city officials organised what they thought of as a ‘native village’ or two, unlike pre-colonial Xhosa homestead settlements which they actually were. In line with current British ideas at the time (Morange 2006), there was a central open space, curving rather than straight streets, street lighting, and every house had a reasonable size lot. In effect tiny homes with at most two bedrooms – ‘gay little houses and clean gardens’ (Robinson, 1993, 12 – were designed for family living and were electrified. They were undoubtedly far better than the barracks-like constructions that had typified the first attempts to house Africans or laissez-faire shacks on the urban periphery. The cost and scale again meant that only

better-off and more stable households could be housed, and the growing numbers of destitute faced inadequate provision.

THE TOWNSHIPS ARE CONSTRUCTED

Really large-scale housing for black families in the big metropolises (Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town) appeared in the 1950s. In the new black 'townships' as they would be called, there was also an element of surveillance/improvement under watchful paternalist eyes. Paternalist controls could not easily be escaped (Torr 1996). The logjam that stood in the way of a solution to the housing crisis of the post-World War II years was resolved (at least for the time being) by the National Party in power from 1948 (Piggott 1985). As Mabin (1995), Sparks (2012) and Freund (2019) have argued, apartheid, unlike perhaps segregation that preceded it, was married to a straightforward vision of modernity and was accompanied for a lengthy phase by rapid economic growth. In Soweto, large numbers of people were dumped into temporary shelters for a phase, but the phase itself gave way to rapid elevation of standard 51/6 and 51/9 houses (to use the names of designs by the National Building Research Institute in 1951) which were widely accepted as the model to apply. It could be argued that the rapid provision of large segregated townships related to matters of social control that were an integral part of the particular modernist vision of the time. Perhaps 70,000 houses were built in Soweto alone between 1955 and 1965 (Mabin 1995). In the first post-apartheid census, Soweto was estimated to have a population of 1 067 637 of whom 611 650 lived in municipal housing (Crankshaw et al 2000). Equivalent townships were created in every South African city and town, as the Cradock case in this issue illustrates.

The construction of black townships in South Africa was a massive response to the needs of 'modernisation'; of rapid economic growth in which heavy industry was taking an important place. In this sense, the townships could be aligned with what we have simultaneously observed in Britain and particularly France. For instance, township planners took advantage of the availability of cheap – often otherwise undesirable – land on the outskirts of cities, as in France. Other African countries, where significant construction of public housing seems mainly to have been intended for growing numbers of urbanised civil servants and their families in the late colonial period, as a kind of elite accommodation with a strong drive at socialising European-like family units, were to an extent the opposite of what unfolded in South Africa. Despite close comparisons in some respects, South African townships were in several ways very

distinctive. The lack of integration into the broader urban integument was not simply tolerated but a policy goal.

The secretary of 'Native Affairs' in the early fifties, Werner Eiselen, propounded that '... only by the provision of adequate shelter in properly planned Native townships can full control over urban Natives be regained, because only then will it be possible to eliminate the surplus Natives who do not seek or find an honest living in the cities' (Piggott, 1985, 167). For the National Party that came to power in 1948, the giant housing programme could only be justified as an interim measure. The new approach incorporated research led by the National Building Research Institute into 'minimum standards of accommodation'; a process that led to what were labelled 'matchbox houses' by the year 1951, when the project produced standardised designs like the more or less ubiquitous 51/6 and 51/9 units (Mabin 2021, 214-218). Township construction went together with stricter supervision of pass laws which demanded that blacks in urban areas, and also women who had not previously been affected, possess documents authorising their residence and application during the 1950s (despite famous protests).

There were no tower blocks but rather rows of small individual houses. Eiselen's boss, Minister of Native Affairs, Hendrik Verwoerd –Prime Minister after 1958– also disapproved of the earlier 'native village' way of thinking. While numerous such villages survived and can still be still seen today (Hammanskraal, for example), his view was to create large, multi-municipality townships where African residents would live far from the sight of white residents.² No land could be sold to black owners in these new townships. Within the townships 'ethnic' or linguistic division was attempted, despite increasing formation of multilingual households (Pirie 1984). At most, 30-year leases were permitted. This was central to the logic of keeping the townships mostly free of legal economic activity beyond the basics. A former official stressed that Soweto itself was virtually 'without economic infrastructure' (Grinker 1986, 16, 74). The problem of work was solved by constructing rail links and subsidising bus services to the centre city, at least in the metropolises.

Early efforts at social direction and assimilation into Western standards of satisfactory urban citizenship were largely and quickly abandoned. Instead, an element of social control reminiscent of Foucault's observations, anticipated and was meant to preclude the possibility of mass resistance to the state; this was a powerful aspect of township

planning. The authorities seemed particularly concerned to maintain women's dependency and limit their autonomy (Cherry 1988). The socialisation efforts so typical of early public housing planning were universally largely replaced by what was more or less policing; pass raids and raids connected to liquor laws were launched at dawn or in the middle of the night when the curfews were in force. The question of the right even to live in the city was a constant source of tension and fear.

Such were the main elements in official ideology in the prosperous modernising times of the 1950s and 1960s, filled with pride at eliminating slum yards and shantytowns. This perspective can best be observed in official films of the period celebrating the success of township building programmes and ignoring the hardships of forced removals, such as *Order out of Chaos*, *The Condemned are Happy* and *A New Horizon* (Mabin et al. 1994). However, it would be a mistake to think that this was entirely a straightforward path even if, as is true of this paper, we confine ourselves to the minds of the authorities. The paternalistic side of state intervention did not die away but continued, particularly among English language bureaucrats in city administrations hostile to the national ruling party (Maylam, 1982; Grinker 1986). They continued to try and make genuine entry into urban citizenship – on a segregated basis – an aspect of township construction. This formed part of the training of township administrators and planners (Robinson 1996, 73).

Mia Brandel-Syrier, an anthropologist who sympathised with the township project, reported that African tenants on the East Rand '...entered their houses with tears in their eyes so Mr. Jones told us ... the long-awaited chance to begin a civilized way of life had finally come true' (Brandel-Syrier, 1971, 21). Other researchers found similar reactions (cf. Bank 2011). In a study of the major Durban township of KwaMashu, Molefe (2009) stresses the liberal orientation of those who 'surveyed, divided and fenced' the new township and who were strongly orientated towards shaping 'family virtues' as KwaMashu took in a myriad of shack dwellers, often the victims of overcharging landlords.

In Indian and Coloured townships, there was little question of homelands although ideologues within the National Party ranks did on occasion call for such notions. There were thus homes for sale in distinct middle-class townships closer in character to white suburbs albeit far less characterised by amenities and economic activities. The newly

constructed townships were often also internally marked by class divisions noticeable in the quality of the houses on offer (Van Wyk 2004, Hansen 2013, Desai and Vahed 2013). Social workers tried to impose ideas about hygiene and nutrition on an apparently ignorant population (Hansen 2013, 67).

Some cities abutted 'homelands' or reserves, which allowed for more permissive continued construction under the apartheid philosophy, which intended to confine Africans to (supposedly) self-governing bantustans. These included Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria and East London. And in some cases, the state had no choice but to offer housing where vital new mining or parastatal industrial activity was emerging, such as the gold mines in the Orange Free State. Where space was allocated to self-constructed houses of greater substance for Africans, it was seen, notably in Johannesburg, as a poor substitute for the previous ability of a very small elite to own houses outright – a feature of Sophiatown for example.

Massive conflicts rocked the townships in the later 1970s and brought about growing division of opinion within the state bureaucracy. Slowly and reluctantly, ideologies were bent. Whereas in the early 1970s the first steps towards amelioration were often accompanied (as Freund 2019, 150-151, found in the Vaal Triangle) by pleas to avoid spoiling the Natives with luxuries, there was also growing pressure to tolerate and encourage social differentiation in the townships. Behind this lay a political will to establish links to junior black partners. In terms of the built environment, this led on the one hand to more possibilities for middle class living of an expanding professional and business class, and on the other hand to general improvements for the majority in the form of electrification, street paving and sewage installations. Squatter settlements and particularly back yard shacks again rapidly expanded out of control of the senior authorities – given years with no new construction.

A final important fact is that little was done to support community life. When communal life and vitality, at first much missed by those removed from older city areas, gradually returned to the huge new townships, it stemmed not from 'civilising' impulses from well-meaning authorities but from human desires and needs, from the population itself. Whatever attempts were made to control people, they found ways around them. Community became a key feature for the declining ability of the state to hold on to township space except through force, but also to the beginnings of a

new political system to this day dominated by the African National Congress that came to power in 1994.

PUBLIC HOUSING IN A DEMOCRACY

Post-apartheid state housing ventures have created the biggest stock of new housing yet, the more remarkable for coming at a time when public housing has become unfashionable and abandoned in many countries. There remain some continuities from earlier eras. The first relates to the fate of the existing stock of public housing. Here processes taken up previously in this paper in European and other contexts can be mentioned: privatisation and residualisation. The state became anxious to abandon its role as landlord of the massive townships constructed under apartheid. During the final years of the apartheid system, the 30-year lease became a 99-year lease, and individuals gained permission from 1986 onward to build houses that they then owned. The bantustan fantasy became threadbare. From 1983, commercial building societies (that became banks in time) began to provide home loans for the middle class in black townships. The state initiated the Great Sale: residents could purchase houses at bargain prices; the private sector had been angling hard for a commodification of township housing (Mabin and Parnell 1983). There was uptake in the early stages of the process and the first payments were made.

The Great Sale proved to be a flop. People had a strong sense of possession; they considered the houses to be their family property and effectively refused to pay mortgage bills (Merrifield 1994; Morange 2006). The last struggle years had in any event witnessed effective payment strikes and numerous land invasions. The defining weight of the problem shifted. During the interregnum years from 1989 to 1994, much attention was focused on housing and urbanisation more generally. As Ann Bernstein of the Urban Foundation said, 'urbanisation must be managed' (Bernstein 1991). In 1990 an autonomous Independent Development Trust was created, and the National Housing Forum began to meet (Palmer et al 2018), eventually outlining the housing policy that the democratic government would implement from 1995.

The ANC regime went further; many township houses were transferred to occupants (albeit with disputes about rights to particular houses). Charges including property rates (taxes), notably in Soweto, are generally still not paid. The market value of houses in Soweto and elsewhere, especially bigger ones that have been maintained,

have risen considerably but sales and purchases are not common. These properties remain family households like domiciles of rural ancestors and legacies for the next generation. This highlights the lack of wealth of any sort amongst the vast majority of black South Africans; house properties, when available, take on significant meaning.

Even before the end of apartheid, the state had given up, after some acute conflict notably in Cape Town, on blocking new black urbanisation. Territory, often at some distance from the existing urban infrastructure, was bought and marked off for new settlements, presumably for poor to very poor tenants (Motherwell, Khayelitsha, Diepsloot in various cities). This was the second inheritance from the past. Use of such land was inevitable if the priority was for cheap housing quickly built, despite the African National Congress's (1994) Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) call for convenient locations. The new RDP housing developments, as they were called, are often massive and in total may reach several million houses, a remarkable contrast to what has been happening in countries with already well-developed public housing (Palmer et al 2017, 248-49).

However, social scientists and planners who write about these matters generally give the developments the thumbs down. The houses are truly tiny. Sometimes the plans never get off the ground due to corruption (Myburgh 2019), and the system of lists for owners in waiting can be doubtful. The quality of construction is frequently quite poor, and the RDP houses are largely located far from employment, far from the establishments and homes of the lighter-skinned part of the population as well as from health and educational facilities of any quality. One of many critiques, satirising the ambitions of idealistic planners, can be found in Robins (2002). The little houses violate the thrust of public housing in realising a village ideal and also the modernist thrust in Britain and France and the former socialist world. This modernism went together not only with urbanisation but with industrialisation and the growth of an employed workforce. In South Africa, the context has been industrial stagnation and very high levels of continuous unemployment or phases of temporary work at best. What pervades state ideology is the positive notion of black personal dignity connected to bricks and mortar rather than to self-built shacks.

Some policy reorientation was signalled in the Breaking New Ground document (2004) of the Department of Human Settlements (Palmer et al 2018, 231). The biggest

shift has been towards ‘megaprojects’; big settlement schemes that would contain some economic activity and a mix of occupants, not merely an array of impoverished unemployed people. Cosmo City north-west of Johannesburg is a reasonably successful example as is Cornubia north-west of Durban and adjoining sites to where business and affluent people are moving. There is less to hope for Lufhereng or Syferfontein, well to the west and south of Johannesburg (Ballard and Rubin 2017, Charlton 2017) despite the government fantasy that they would ‘catalyse’ development and continued pious hopes for ‘social cohesion’. Small-scale experiments are to be found in rented apartments in renovated and occasionally new properties. Yet there has been a general turn towards public-private megaprojects for which some of the inspiration, far from the social democracy of Red Vienna or some interpretations of the RDP, lies in ‘the international paradigm of New Urbanism. In addition to the principles of New Urbanism integration, nodes, and corridors are also influential concepts, and Cornubia demonstrates a turn to a “growth focus”’ (Cooke 2014 p. ii).

As observed by many architects and others, RDP houses may represent miserable professional planning, but they do minimally answer the demands of the mass of poor South Africans within the realm of the non-revolutionary possible.³ For millions RDP houses, however flawed, are an important asset when they have little or nothing. How unlike the classic socialist construction of Social Democratic Vienna! However, for a population that otherwise experiences a ‘highly improvisational and fluid character of everyday life’ (Robins 2002, 523) the miniature house, electrified, with indoor plumbing, capable of being locked up (if not entirely securely), offers a small anchor of stability and a potential source of income. The question then becomes not whether these houses are desirable but whether this gifting is sustainable, which probably depends on the direction of the whole economy and its capacity to provide decent work.

IN CONCLUSION

As Potts argues in this issue, whilst contemporary economic situations render adequate shelter increasingly unaffordable to many around the world, there remains potential for public roles to shift the situation. The present article provides a panorama of public housing approaches in several European contexts and in a range of African situations. In this light it outlines and questions public housing history and present practice in South Africa and provides a background for the following six papers that report case studies of public housing and related endeavours in the country. The motivations and

consequences vary, yet elements of control as well as broadening access to the city are evident in all these cases, as implied by readings of Foucault and of Lefebvre. Much more research on the past and present of public housing could enrich debate and future endeavours in this arena in a country where so many remain inadequately and sometimes indecently sheltered.

Experienced social researcher Paulus Zulu asked very pertinently of the large Cato Manor project in Durban whether or not it is taking people out of poverty (in Robinson et al, 2004, 249). One could ask, when on its own has public housing ever done, or could ever do, that? Perhaps conditions will emerge whether in European countries, African cities, or even South African spaces, for public housing to contribute to addressing the awful crisis of shelter that confronts so many. As Frédéric Dufaux and colleagues (2012) put it, 'let's be utopian!' and continue to strive for these conditions to emerge.

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NOTES

1. These figures compare closely to the space in South African state-built houses in various phases.
2. Freund (2019) contrasts the pre-apartheid construction of Bophelong and Boipatong outside Vanderbijlpark with the huge 'Soweto of the South', Sebokeng, planned in the Verwoerd era; similarly several municipalities run by whites were forced to plan together either for grouping townships in one zone (KwaThema, Tsakane, Duduza) or even one common township (Tembisa for both Germiston and Kempton Park) 'replacing' old locations in almost all cases, and involving forced removals.

3. 'South Africa confronts a tough urban policy challenge: the more the state increases its redistributive investments in the form of free public housing for all households below a pre-defined income threshold, the more spatial inequality and economic marginalisation intensifies.' (Simone and Pieterse, 2017, 163).

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