

Urban space is political, nowhere more blatantly so than in Soweto, vast incarceration camp and hotbed of resistance. One can no longer expect to find beauty or comfort in cities as one did in the past. Soweto is a household word, prototype, a symbol of an increasing number of similar places elsewhere, the 'suburb' or 'slum' that takes over and co-determines the main city, a political arena for the poor and the dispossessed. Yet it has its own unique, powerful identity, valiantly turning its tragic past into strength for survival in the present.

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Soweto

The Dis-Location

Until a few years ago, an outsider whose knowledge of South Africa arose solely from the consumption of international media may have been forgiven for thinking of Johannesburg as a suburb of Soweto, which is where the real action is. Yes, Johannesburg is near Soweto. It's right over there, behind the mine dumps. Yes, over there, where you can see the bright lights.

But Soweto itself is no longer simply what it is, it is a symbol. Its name encapsulates many Sowetos all over the world, it embodies so many other places and systems and ideas.

Soweto is an idea of an environment, a model. Though Soweto is typical of many such places, it is also its own place. Only one of many townships near Johannesburg, it has its own story.

If you speak of the urban landscape of Johannesburg, you have to speak of its shadow cities, of those other places just visible on the horizon, behind the mine dumps. In the foreground is Johannesburg, e-Goli, City of Gold, born of opportunity and greed, a grown-up gold rush frontier town, the metropolis of the Southern hemisphere - once 'the principal white city in Africa', now the arena of a Euro-African urban cultural synthesis. But behind Johannesburg there lurks the other city, the city more notorious, more violent, more populated, more problematic, more short-lived and more self-confident: Soweto.

Soweto seems to many to have been born in June 1976, when it exploded into the world's conscience through the violence of the student demonstrations. The events of those weeks focused world attention on South Africa and the struggle against apartheid, and Soweto became synonymous with resistance to the system that shaped it and perfected its form.

Apartheid (Afrikaans for separate-ness) as a system of spatial order was all about control over people and material in space. Apartheid: an enforced, statutory way of delineating territories, placing bodies, directing economics, channeling production, restricting contact, dividing groups, policing people and emphasising ethnicity. Even the town's name conjures no Zulu rhythms but originates from this official spatial ordering system, simultaneously evil and banal: SoWeTo - South Western Township. At the height of the apartheid oppression in the eighties, a ministry was established that dealt with policing, known as the Ministry of Law and Order. At an abstract level, apartheid was a type of spatial practice, in essence, 'Raumordnung' (spatial order). Part of the perverse parlance of the apartheid regime was that the ministry for enforcing state repression carried a name with strong planning connotations.

And one of its primary devices was control over the urban black population through the layout and design of the townships.

It is easy to equate the townships of South Africa with the system of apartheid. However, Johannesburg's urban layout has a somewhat longer history. As a fully developed and institutionalised system, apartheid came into existence only after the National Party came to power in 1948. The spatial practice of townships had by then been long established, indeed, apartheid merely formalised and perfected a pre-existing spatial construct entrenched since the 19th century. Forcible removals of the black population started in 1906. The Urban Areas Act of 1923/24 formalized this trend. A systematic evacuation of black people to subsidized housing south of the city began, to the area that became known in the 60s as Soweto. So in order to understand Soweto, we need to look further back to the forces that shaped Johannesburg as a whole, and then at its form.

South Africa is basically a non-urban country, as anyone who has traversed it will testify. 'City' is the exception in the landscape. But where 'city' occurs in this land, it impacts dramatically on the order of life. Johannesburg, of desperate hope and violent exploitation, was invented in a mad rush of industrial activity after 1886. It would be too easy to dismiss it, as many do, as characterless and uncultivated. It has always devoured people, and has always held a fascination for those viewing it from a distance. The story of the growth of Johannesburg is also the story of urbanisation in South Africa. And Soweto is a part of that chain of events.

From the very beginning the mines relied on cheap labour, since the gold deposits were not concentrated. By 1897, half of the population of Johannesburg was made up of blacks who had come to the city directly from the land. The labourers were never treated as full residents of the city and were always relegated to 'temporary' settlements on the city fringes. Parts of Soweto, such as Moroka Township, started out as shack settlements with such names as 'Amasaka', meaning 'sack shelter'. Soweto has always struggled to become a 'real' city, struggled against a never-ending stream of migrants, against impermanence and against attempts to deny its very existence.

Urbanisation is, of course, not unique to South Africa. But the structure of South African society, long before apartheid, certainly added its own impetus to the development of cities like Johannesburg. The 1913 'Natives Land Act' effectively deprived blacks of land ownership, giving 87% of the land over to white ownership. The result was impoverishment of the rural communities, a constant stream of migrant labour into the cities, and a growing class of urban poor who lived on the fringes of society. Rural families participated in the urban economy by selling the labour of one or more family members in the mines or the expanding factories.

Uncontrolled urbanisation had become common by the outbreak of World War Two, and the institutionalisation of apartheid in 1948 was in part a (racist) response to the previous failure of the State to develop and implement a coherent urbanisation policy. There never was security of tenure, and long before the forced removals of apartheid, health legislation was used to control the growth of 'non-white' urban areas. In 1904, the so-called 'coolie' and 'kaffir' locations were burnt to the ground after an outbreak of bubonic plague. The area was replanned and renamed as 'Newtown', and its residents were relocated to Klipspruit Location. This, the first project of 'urban renewal' in Johannesburg barely 18 years after its birth set the pattern for all subsequent attempts at controlling the urban black population, moving it further and further away from the city centre.

By 1923, the 'Natives (Urban Areas) Act' formalised what was to become known as the practice of 'influx control'. It was based on the strategy of total residential segregation of the races, and the absence of security of tenure for blacks. "The Native should only be allowed to enter the urban areas, which are essentially the white man's creation, insofar as he is required to minister to the needs of the white man and should depart therefrom when he ceases so to minister" - this from the report by the government commission appointed to investigate urbanisation in 1922. There is a particular strangeness to the way that South African urbanisation has occurred: while the process itself may be universal, the management of it in these urban areas has its own strange logic and results in its own strange political geography.

"'Home' is an appropriated place; it does not exist objectively...The notion of 'home' is a fiction we create out of a need to belong. Home is a place most people have never been to. Home serves a function similar to zero in mathematics. It provides us with a beginning or a basis from which to evaluate other spaces..." says the Johannesburg photographer Santu Mofokeng. The 'Group Areas Act' of 1950 formalised segregation even further and formed the cornerstone of the 'Homeland' system. Under the notorious 'Pass Laws', permits regulated the access, movement and location of each and every black citizen of the country. The 'homelands' acted as labour reserves and as decentralised industrial nodes, in an attempt at slowing the influx of blacks into the urban areas. The system set up to control the urban black population bore in it the contradictions which led to the ultimate demise of apartheid. The logic of the consumer society was denied to these disenfranchised urban dwellers who enjoyed only temporary status in their place of residence, but who were expected to show allegiance to an abstract, ethnically-defined 'homeland' in the rural areas. The system of 'labour bureaux' in the homelands was perhaps the most transparent part of a system that perpetuated the accumulation of capital based on cheap labour in the cities, with the 'excess population' being shunted to the peripheries.

The planning of townships, then, was undertaken in conjunction with the requirements of industry. The insecurity of the township residents, coupled with the attempts at a peculiar form of central government planning and management, prevented any coherent and structured urban planning for places like Soweto. The more the miners worked, the more they contributed to the transformation of the veld into a job-creating, income-generating city. Johannesburg generated its wealth from the township residents during the day, relegating them to the outlying 'dormitory cities' at night, where they were forbidden to run businesses.

The status of 'dormitory city' bestowed on Soweto led to an artificial imbalance in the normal distribution of urban functions and activities. The 'social engineering' of the townships before and during the years of apartheid had its economic consequences: lacking its own businesses, the city of Soweto had no tax base from which to generate income. As a purely residential settlement, commercial functions in the sprawl of houses were restricted to the bare minimum. To this day, Johannesburg city is the shopping centre for Soweto's residents. Soweto had no legal industries, commercial or service infrastructure of its own, and the wealth generated by its workers was predominantly diverted to the betterment of 'white' urban areas. The 'Separate Amenities Act' ensured the provision of separate services for different ethnic groups, from schools to clinics to libraries to recreation facilities, although the distribution clearly favoured the 'white' group areas. This inevitably led to resentment and to the increasing politicisation of the issue of official service provision.

As a result of its controlled dormitory city status, Soweto could never develop into a 'normal' city as may have happened in a 'slum' anywhere else in the world. Added to the imbalance of income and concentration of the poor in Soweto was the high cost of transport in relation to wages. The apartheid urban system is perhaps the most wasteful ever devised. Putting

distances between people was a fundamental principle as opposed to the practical 'city of short distances' that existed elsewhere and that has recently reemerged as a concept of desirable planning. The ideological State separated communities to the maximum degree, doubled on every category of public service provision for every single ethnic or "racial" group, and then proceeded to subsidise the resulting wasteful system from State funds. Transport provision became one of the major structuring factors of the urban landscape, and Soweto's residents have always been part of a daily army of millions of commuters who have to cross the artificial functional and racial boundaries of South Africa's cities.

One could say that at an abstract level, the townships were culturally and socially 'invisible'. So complete was the segregation that even today, you will find few Johannesburgers who have ever been to Soweto. The two groups were "tourists in each other's worlds", as Lindsay Bremner, professor at Witwatersrand University and former chair of the Housing, Urbanization and Environmental Management Committees in Jo'burg Metropolitan Council after the change of regime, puts it. She states that the divisions between people have been blurred since 1994 not so much through the efficacies of a moral urban administration but rather through new, less normative logics – those of necessity, speculation and crime. The culture of the townships is only now beginning to be revealed and recorded. The social engineering project of South African society has probably nowhere been more successful than in this respect. While black residents of Soweto worked in Johannesburg during the day and were at least able to observe 'white' life, the white residents of Johannesburg could not be more ignorant about Soweto than if a physical wall had been erected between the two places.

Soweto is 'known' through grainy black-and-white images of houses huddled under a hazy sky, of demonstrating school students, of inscrutable violence, murder, destitution - seldom a positive image. The material reality and the daily human experience of township life is hidden behind a transparent screen - a screen constructed by ideology and fear, by difference and the inability to deal with 'otherness'.

The urban 'Native Housing Policy' was a cornerstone of the apartheid project. While it would be easy to dismiss this policy as a set of wild, irrational punitive measures carried out by an insane authoritarian state, this is too simple an interpretation of the actions of an almost perfectly organized, if morally suspect, system of government. Instead, the housing programme formed part of a deliberate, carefully constructed framework of domination enacted through political and technical strategies. Soweto served as an arena for the enactment of ideology in the form of bricks and mortar. The urban framework of apartheid was already entrenched in the spatial layout of Johannesburg. The technical framework was created through the co-option of professionals, including architects, in a 'scientific' research programme aimed at optimising the production of living space within the existing ideological construct.

If we were to read the urban landscape of Soweto through the discourse of Michel Foucault, we could uncover something of the power/form relationships that guided the management of black urban areas. Whilst it is too simplistic to equate Foucault's carceral city of disciplinary institutions with places like Soweto, the barrack-like order of houses and the constant, prison-like policing of the township populations by agencies of the State were clearly physical manifestations of exclusive urban political power and domination.

The problem of housing the growing urban black population has been debated and addressed since the late 1930's. The social agenda of European modernism such as the La Sarras Declaration of 1928, which focused on the social implications of architectural practice and stressed the construction of housing over that of prestigious buildings, provided the

intellectual background. However, local planners were already critical of le Corbusier's 'City of Tomorrow' and the Ville Radieuse in 1941, politically suspect due to their basis in environmental determinism.

The discourse then shifted towards generating a formal model for housing. Social validity was to be regained through 'science'. A belief in value-free architectural engagement at the technical level was sought through an 'accurate' analysis of existing context and 'practical' solutions for implementation. An ideal of non-idealistic practice was posited for the profession. Idealism in practice was relegated to a secondary position, to be pursued in times of 'lesser social stress'.

The ideological trap in this line of argumentation led the profession to accept, as a 'given' restraint, pre-existing 'contextual' conditions such as racial segregation. It was this ability to remove the political dimension from the realm of professional action that allowed architects to be co-opted into supporting the ideology of the regime.

Another pre-existing condition was the basically anti-urban focus of modernist town planning, imported by European-trained town planners in local government after the Second World War. Soweto is a case study in the application of an anti-city ethos. In formal terms, the free-standing building in open space is seen as the basic building block of the urban system. The pavilion type on an open plot is seen as the basis of 'good' urban life. The approach to development promotes suburban rather than urban values.

Coupled with the scientific method of deriving housing solutions is the arithmetic derivation of urban functions. Groups of individual units give rise to programs of standardised infrastructure, whereby X number of units gives rise to a primary school, Y number to a high school, and Z units substantiate the provision of a clinic. Activities are separated into monofunctional areas in order to reduce conflict between functions. Urban growth occurs through the addition of complete township units to the urban pattern, rather than through incremental growth. In practice, the modernist constructs of town planning fitted smoothly into the ideological programme of apartheid. Urban space functioned solely as a buffer between races and classes and allowed the pursuit of the ideal of separation.

The government euphemistically labelled apartheid as 'separate development'. The central building block for urban growth was the 'neighbourhood unit'. In Soweto in particular, these principles were subverted by the apartheid administration to the point where ethnic groups were accommodated in separate neighbourhood cells, with separate schools, community facilities, clinics - optimising the spatial and cultural separation between groups in the urban areas.

If we take a look at Soweto today we can clearly see the ideology in the plan. Buffer strips of open land separate the ethnic areas within Soweto. The roads are neatly laid out in a police-friendly fashion. Visible in the plan, too, is the strident belief in the power of technology to transform the nature of society. Thus the road network, the pattern of engineering efficiency. The European bias in the spatial models is clearly visible. It is surely perverse to structure and scale a settlement around the motor car where the population is not, even today, individually mobile. The inward-focusing, convoluted road network supports the aim of spatial segregation and division according to racial and ethnic groups at the expense of environmental quality.

There is something strangely romantic about the drawings published at the time, which show the bucolic garden setting of a pavilion house amongst trees. Perhaps these are the closest reminders of the anti-urban ethos of the Garden City movement. There was never any question

that the state would subsidise 'African' housing that was not 'economical'. This, against the background of the impermanent status of urban blacks, led to the increasing focus on the individual unit as the measure of production. The social element was in theory still part of the programme, but did not form part of the realisation. The proposed community centres, shopping facilities and parks were never developed. In their place, desolate left-over pieces of land separated one set of monotonous houses from another. Houses were constructed, but not communities. The spatial arrangement of free-standing houses placed in the middle of open 'gardens' did lend itself to control and policing in times of conflict and protest. In that sense, the Foucaultesque reading of Soweto's layout is not entirely misplaced.

These faceless, featureless, polluted, anti-social environments, devoid of any real social infrastructure, are monuments to apartheid. Soweto has been described by the architect and activist Clive Chipkin as the 'City of Stress'. The social abnormalities that were part of the system, like the single-sex hostels for migrant workers, injected enormous conflict into the lives of its population. Alienation, physical insecurity, hostility, depersonalisation and lack of identity were symptoms of social failure that characterised daily life.

In retrospect, one can say that predominantly white architects and planners colluded in the creation of the physical form of Soweto. Their social and intellectual failure lay in the attempt to approach the provision of housing as an aesthetic and technical discourse, artificially separated from political and economic issues, though of course this is also familiar from other places and periods.

What will become of Soweto and what is it like now? What remains is a 150 square kilometre area which harbours anything between two and four million people. Most of the literature on Soweto stems from the time of oppression, when it was notorious as a hotbed of opposition. Most writings mythologise and caricaturise the city. It is a distorted image of reality, both in resistance and oppression. Experiencing it today - yes, Soweto is an environmental failure. There is no point in denying that. It is also a city still plagued by the artificially constructed abnormalities of a finally expired regime.

South Africa has been liberated. Johannesburg has been liberated. Apartheid has been replaced by new systems of government at national and local level. But Soweto will be with us for a long time. The townships did not empty overnight, the homes of millions will continue to be just that: homes in which daily life continues. Urbanisation hurtles on, even more chaotic than before. The economic base of Soweto is still unbalanced. Housing policy is now a tool of development rather than oppression, however, the spatial model of the township still holds. The free-standing single-storey house is the type demanded by those who have been promised shelter by the democratically elected government. The land around will be overrun by thousands of small, free-standing houses, in practice no better than the apartheid patterns that have made up Soweto since the 1950's. The low-density urban sprawl continues, compounding the problems of the urban poor, stretching limited resources and necessitating ever-increasing commuting distances.

A new terror reigns the night. Horrifying killings, rapes and robberies are but only part of the picture. What is striking today is how 'normal' everything is. Beyond the old black-and-white photographs, here is life in full colour. Normal people, shopping at the local 'Spaza Shop' or getting an outrageous hair-do. Because of the lack of commercial infrastructure, individual entrepreneurs have opened up hundreds of shops in garages, houses, front and back rooms. Anything goes, from car washes to rickety taxi stands to hairdressers with fantastic illustrations to bread and milk corners to drinking holes to exhaust repair workshops. The territorial restrictions are ignored, the functional separation subverted. The street becomes inhabited.

Lindsay Bremner notes that today largely illicit ways of controlling, managing and using urban space challenge its rules: “Necessity has driven the urban poor to reinvent the city and so challenge the utopianism of modernist planning. People live in cracks, cook on the streets, bed down on the pavements; shops appear on street corners; warehouses shelter families; office blocks become factories; houses turn into shops; chickens, goats, mealies appear on inner city curbs; Taiwanese watches are displayed next to Nigerian bags, next to local tomatoes. The old oppositions between urban and rural, public and private, residential and business, black and white merge in indistinguishable new combinations; boundaries are porous; peoples merge; the city is vitally, colourfully grey. The normalization of this spontaneity, in the interests of good governance, is no longer possible – the scale of the intervention required and the management of its consequences lies beyond the scope of the democratic, neo-liberal state; and even if it were possible, it would bring to the surface hosts of networks, upon whose invisibility the fragile economic survival of the city’s poor depends”.

Noticeable is the sense of community, the friendliness. People everywhere are exchanging greetings, waving, hooting. The traffic is chaotic, somewhat different from Johannesburg. Tiny houses, stacked close together. In the quieter streets, meticulous care has been taken to domesticise a garden: trimmed hedges, a car tyre is cut in half to make a plant stand. A nice suburban setting for your NE 51/9 house.

Along the busier roads, more shops crowding the front gardens, spilling onto the street. Everywhere, building activity. The existing building systems are often difficult to convert. An incredible inventiveness comes into play. How does one add on to such impossibly minimal houses? Often, the existing house disappears inside the shell of a new one that is built around it. The outer wall becomes an inner wall. One house swallows another, one political identity another. Space is reclaimed, the monotony is broken. New and different forms, materials, functions invade and replace the programmatic township scene.

“Are we evolving a split personality which may generate its own forms of creativity?” asks the author Njabulo Ndebele. The stranglehold of the planned monotony and rigidity has been broken. A society in transition is asserting itself. The residents of Soweto are making the city their own. They are making it liveable, they are giving it a face. What would seem like a stark, oppressive pattern from afar has a finer, more lively texture at close range. People have made space for themselves in the official grid.

Soweto is not a great place to be in. It is basically flawed in many ways, and it is so by design. That is the terrifying realisation. It was constructed for a very specific purpose which it served well. It is the showcase city of apartheid’s urban programme, and the scars of that strategy are visible everywhere. However, hope lies here in comparison with the ‘white’ suburbs around Soweto. None of this community spirit exists there. Fear has walled the suburbs in. Neighbours do not know one another. “Invest in your future! Country style Highveld living in a secure natural environment with perimeter walls topped by electric razor-wire fences, radio links to security control centres, 24hr single-entry control guardhouse, intercoms, lockable ‘Hollywood’ garage, eco-sensitive architectural styles, completely self-contained!” scream the opportunistic developers advertisements. Crime, real and brutal as it is, serves as a new business opportunity. If you can’t flee the grim reality, dig in deep. We race from our Italianate palazzo-style offices in hijack-secured MRVs to the American Colonial shopping mall to our Mykonos-style suburban village. Five o’clock, change your clothes, change your lifestyle. The multiple dislocation is complete. Paranoia as lifestyle. Cultural myopia as *raison d’être*. Separate-ness on a new footing.

Cars are needed to get to even the most basic provisions of daily life. Public transport in the affluent suburbs is less regular or convenient than in Soweto. And one begins to wonder whether if, after all, beneath the surface, Soweto does not carry in itself more hope for a better environment than many other places. People have taken control of that which was made to defeat their spirit, and are turning it around. As we leave Soweto, the silhouette of e-Goli beckons beyond the shining golden mound of a mine dump. Johannesburg's shadow will always be itself - but at the same time, Soweto will always be a part of Johannesburg and inseparable from its history and future.