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*Iain Low*

**CONTESTING THE MAINSTREAM:  
RE-PRODUCING THE LOCALITY  
OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIP**

**BIOGRAPHY**

Iain Low is Professor of Architecture at the University of Cape Town where he convenes Post-Graduate Research Programmes in Architecture. He was Fulbright Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, a Pew Fellow in the Arts in Philadelphia, and a Visiting Fellow at the American Academy in Rome. His research interest is 'Space and Transformation' and the architecture of the post-apartheid city.

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Of the numerous problems facing the globalising world, urbanisation is probably one of the most challenging. This is a condition that has become exacerbated by the rising levels of gross inequality that characterise the condition of late western modernity. Whilst its effects are ubiquitous, they are most visible in the habitation of the most vulnerable. In response, governments, and those with power, have been quick in presenting proscriptive policies with the intention of effecting orderly urbanisation.

Informal settlements are generally portrayed in a negative light, as they do not conform to the normative values of society. On one hand, the spontaneity of their production has presented a practical solution to rapid urbanisation, yet, on another, issues such as health and safety, factors which arise from their 'disorderliness' present significant challenges for authorities.

One manner of conceptualising the so-called informal is that they represent 'contemporary vernaculars' wherein the necessity of survival has produced extraordinarily resilient forms of habitation. Built with limited resources, these settlements have proven to be a viable means of providing housing at a rapid rate. When viewed from this light, it becomes imperative to review contemporary policies and thinking around informal settlements.

In making a claim for the production of local urbanisms, I argue for a pluralisation in the form of urban delivery to confront certain realities of the emerging megacity. Basing my argument on historic and everyday practices of the marginalised majority, I identify a range of design tendencies which are accommodative of local initiatives whilst being simultaneously supportive of the larger imperative of orderly urbanisation. My intention is to contribute a strand of knowledge that might assist in the ongoing evolution of contemporary housing policy, delivery and sustainable urbanisation.

I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. (Appadurai 1996:178)

If the city and architecture are to be at the service of society, they need to be accepted and understood by society. However, if architecture is an art, a cultural effort, it must be an act of innovation towards the future. (Bohigas 1999: 91)

Of the numerous problems facing the globalising world, urbanisation is probably one of the most challenging. Urbanisation has led to a condition that is exacerbated by the rising levels of gross inequality that characterise the condition of late western modernity. While its effects are ubiquitous, they are most visible in the housing situations of the most vulnerable. In response, governments, and those with power, have been quick to present proscriptive policies with the intention of effecting orderly urbanisation.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, this phenomenon posits a site of potential; in fact, the question of (rapid) urbanisation presents a situation for both innovation and destruction. Slums, shantytowns, *favelas*, squatter camps and informal settlements are generally portrayed in a negative light. They do not conform to so-called normative values of society, but are construed as blights on the landscape. While the spontaneity of their production has presented a practical solution to rapid urbanisation, health and safety, quality of

the environment and balance between private and public amenities have become 'disorderly', and hence a source of significant concern for governments.

Despite this, they represent 'contemporary vernaculars' wherein the necessity of survival has produced extraordinarily resilient forms of habitation. Built with exceptionally limited resources, these settlements are (universally) socially rich and imbued with profoundly high levels of community and neighbourliness. In addition, they have proved to be the only viable means of providing housing at a rapid rate.<sup>2</sup> Seen from this viewpoint, it becomes imperative to review current local thinking about informal settlements.

In making a claim for the production of local urbanism(s), I argue for pluralisation in the form of urban policy and delivery at scale, in order to confront certain realities of the emerging megacity. Based on historic and everyday practices of the marginalised majority, I identify a number of tendencies which are accommodative of local initiative, while simultaneously supporting the larger imperative of orderly urbanisation. The challenge presented is one of interpretation, that is, not of literal application, but rather of seeking a contemporary local counterpart and locating this capacity within the formal structures that constitute so-called urban governance.



### **The South African city: Production of localities – practices at the periphery**

My interest in the South African city lies in its complexity. Predominantly located in the conflict between the multiple extremes that identify most developing, post-colonial contexts, this complexity may be somewhat reductively simplified to a number of dual phenomena, which are:

- Haves and have nots (economic)
- Traditional and western/modern (cultural/religious practice)
- Insiders and outsiders (urban versus rural/ South Africans versus Africans or foreigners).

### **The spatial legacy of apartheid**

Within a society such as South Africa, these extremes have become exacerbated by our colonial past; situated in the legacy of racial discrimination one's position within these dualities is predominantly determined by race. Consequently, despite the fact that it is comparable with other African cities, the South African city possesses its own uniqueness.

Whereas it has been comparatively easy to rewrite the legislation that regulated apartheid's grand plan, its spatial legacy is embedded within a planned 'brick and mortar' urban fabric, secured by buffers and tenure patterns. This has entrenched segregation and radical (spatial and other) inequity, and poverty is ingrained through what effectively constitutes a sustained racial zoning. Surprisingly, this situation has also effected what may be termed a positive density profile, effecting generally low urban densities that are evenly spread over the metropolis. This affords unique advantages and opportunities for re-imagining South African cities by careful and considered interventions within this density field.

### **The sociology of post-apartheid**

The contemporary South African city can be described by multiple and overlapping translocalities. Whereas apartheid destroyed the extended nature of traditional (family/tribal) structures in African societies, its policies prevented the establishment of even the 'normative' western nuclear family. Segregation enforced a perpetual state of migrancy for the disenfranchised, and came to define an existence of mobility: between centres and peripheries, between home and work, and between urban and rural. Today this condition remains and has

greatly expanded. The collapse of apartheid saw huge urban influxes of people from the previous so-called independent 'homelands'. Predominantly poor, under-educated and in search of economic opportunity and security, these influxes have placed a huge demand on local authorities and their fiscus. The concomitant pressure to deliver on infrastructure, housing provision and so on has been compounded by government's incapacity to cope.

This situation has been further exacerbated by a relatively new phenomenon for South Africa: namely the influx of foreign nationals. The relative political stability and economic opportunity presented by the post-apartheid South African condition has attracted foreigners from the entire African continent. One consequence of this has been in the social construction of 'family life'. This has seen 'amplification' to include numerous new formations, ranging from single individuals and heads of households to 'double extended families'<sup>3</sup> and complex new arrangements of multiple unrelated 'family units'; single household renters in backyards; children as heads of households and large 'semi-hospice type' units composed of orphans and other displaced individuals.

Associated with this explosion of family type/structure is internal migrancy. Often people will maintain a house in the old apartheid townships while renting a room/space in the inner city, and yet remain committed to investing in a rural homestead from where a family originated. This results in flexible spatial arrangements that are productive of emergent contemporary social units, and represents what may be termed local global practice.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) or single-family residence on its own plot is not an adequate response to these unstable complexities. The production of new and spatial relations, which afford opportunity for interpretation and growth in time, are required to address both the legacy of the past as well as possibilities presented by a developing future.

### **The capacity for innovation**

Historically, Africans living on this continent have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to respond to difficult conditions.<sup>4</sup> Contingency is often the source of a productive transformation. Extensions to apartheid housing units, backyard rental accommodation, not to mention the incredible settlements constructed without

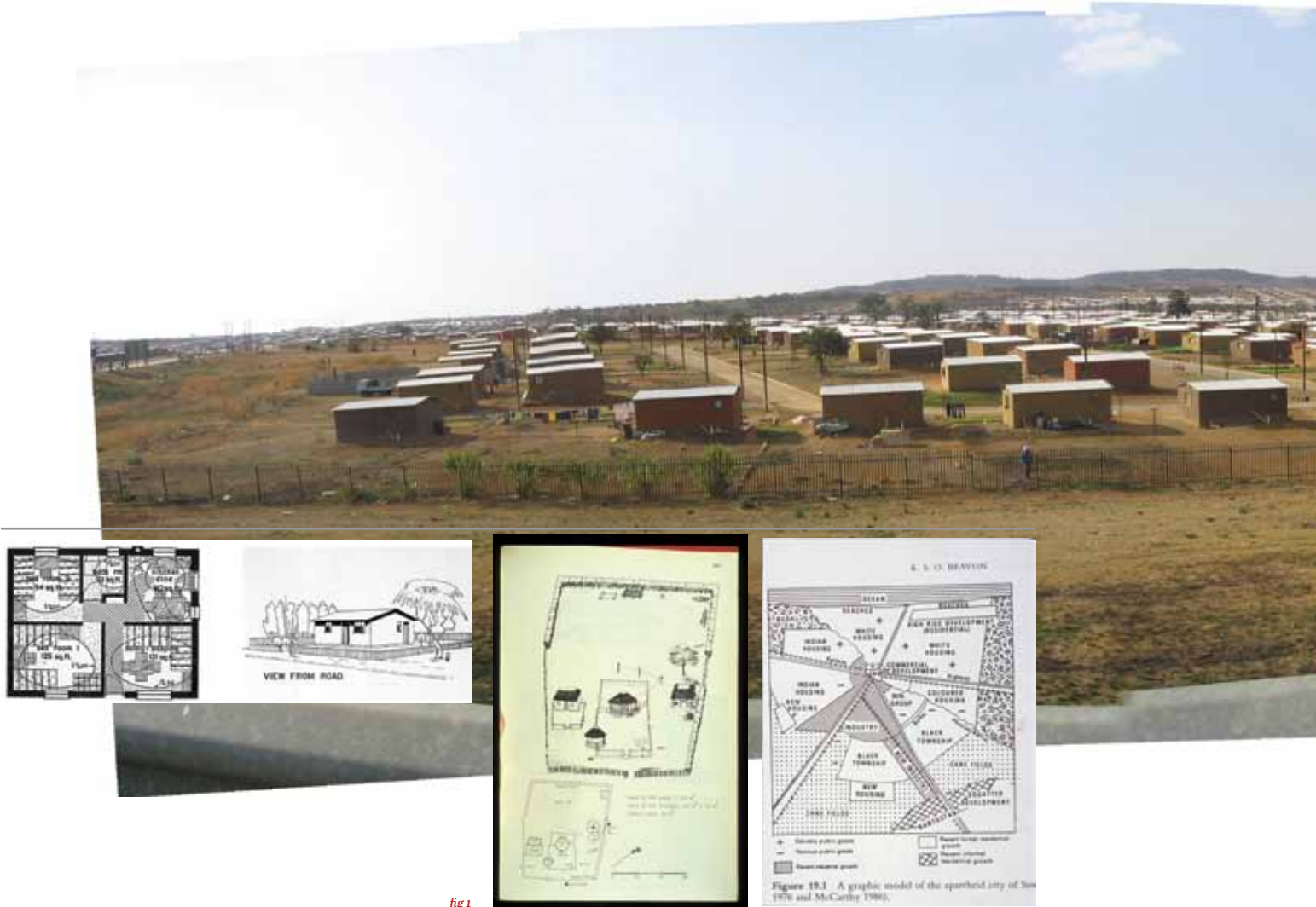


fig 1

any assistance from government – each represent a form of local capacity, and constitute both economic and social value. This is a quality that Achille Mbembe describes as a value of ‘life producing’.<sup>5</sup> It can be identified throughout the African continent, taking on a particular identity in relation to the exigencies of the local specific. Unlike the negotiated imposition of the ‘modernities’ of Europe and the west, the African construct is one generated from within, from the ground up, and therefore capable of producing greater innovation and contributing broader knowledge to the field of contemporary housing in the South African context.

**The failure or limitations of apartheid housing**

Under apartheid rule, the Afrikaner National Party introduced a new form of agency, the National Building

fig 1 Space is the physical manifestation of a set of power relations. As such, it serves to represent the ideological position of ruling classes. In South Africa, until relatively recently, this was most forcibly realised by the Afrikaner National Party (NP) through their policy of apartheid. Apartheid produced a landscape of radical segregation whereby racial classification informed a socially engineered environment of radical inequality. The NE51/97 emblemises this as reductive utilitarian Modernism.

Apartheid planning =  
Apartheid township =  
NE51/97 = RDP = GEAR =  
BNG = N2

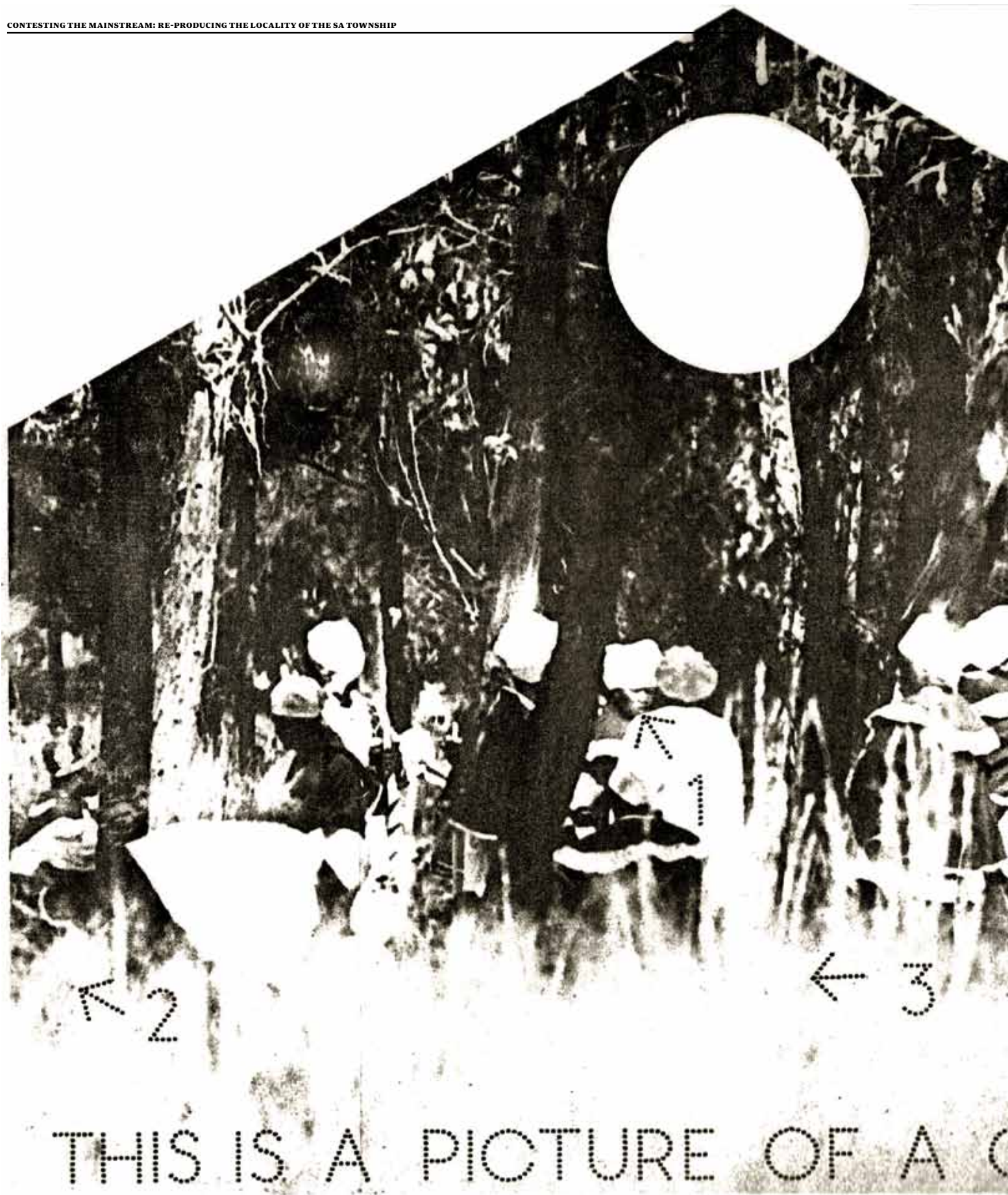


fig 2

Research Institute (NBRI). This institute was constituted to interpret segregation policies and translate them into built form. As an agent of the state, its role was to transmute the new power into space and was consequently identified as pivotal to apartheid's success. This primacy ensured it the best support in terms of human, capital, material, and technological resources. Its measure of success was both quantitative (numbers of units per townships) and qualitative (segregation of lived realities). The NE51 prototypes that resulted from this initiative are what formed the substance of South Africa's townships. It is commonly recognised that the scientific rationalism that underpins their design reduced the products of that initiative to inflexible models of housing arrangements that are unfit for human inhabitation. They afford little or no opportunity for difference in the form of individual expression, or growth and expansion in and through time for 'homesteading'.<sup>6</sup>

fig 2 RDP Housing  
Development, Tswane,  
Gauteng, 2002  
RDP House extended





### Other ways of seeing

There is an image in the undergraduate architecture thesis of Stanley Saitowitz,<sup>8</sup> presented to the University of the Witwatersrand in the mid-1970s. It contains a unique exploration composed of two related pictures. On the left-hand side we see a group of trees. He titles this picture *Forest*. On the right-hand side we see the same setting, this time with a group of Zionist church members clad in their distinctive regalia, titled *Church* (Figure 3).

This twin set of images identifies a critical difference between tradition and modernity. In presenting lived experience, in the form of a communal ritual, it privileges the (collective) experiential above the (autonomous) material. The concomitant absence of architecture (built



fig 4

SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE / [DIALECTICS OF FORM AND [VS.] EXPERIENCE]	
MATERIAL CULTURE built environment	EXPERIENTIAL CULTURE practices (celebratory + everyday)
SOLID + FORM buildings and their configuration	VOID + MOVEMENT people / programmes / events
<i>The dialectic between these extremes is what constitutes the essential struggle for an architectural organisational order</i>	

form) in this twin set points to a time of pre-settlement wherein the spectre of the temporal relegated permanence within a horizon of interactivity. Permanence initiates both the boundary, that is public/private, inside(r)/outside(r), self versus other and consequently hierarchy. Supremacy, or position, in the form of class, presenting tools that seem fundamental to the ordering of settlement, is one enduring result. Consequently, it might be argued that is probably only under conditions of nomadism that experiential culture was truly practiced, and that settlement, or permanence, constitutes the only, or most profound, Foucauldian shift.

It is common knowledge that different cultures project themselves into the world in fundamentally different ways, depending on their perspectival vantage point.

fig 3 'Church'  
Stanley Saitowitz



## The production of locality in South Africa (1)

What can be observed when we examine the periphery<sup>9</sup> is evidence of the possibility of the production of a vibrant critical difference. While form plays a part in constructing this difference, it is more as a result of a set of formulations synthesised from the deliberate incorporation of practices of everyday life, than from any *a priori* aesthetic predilection. Lived reality, in the shape of a pluralisation in the projection of possible narratives of dwelling, is an originator of form. Trajectories of possible use (lifestyle/family structure) have been utilised to inscribe architectural positions that are responsive to 'abnormal' situations. Frequently these have been originally produced by reflective local practice of ordinary people and as such demonstrate a capacity for great imagination. Arising out of necessity, they are not recognisable for their design image as much as for their design affordance.<sup>10</sup>



fig 5

**fig 5 The production of locality in South Africa: the 'formalisation' of the so-called 'informal' 1/** Harber Noero-Wolff Savage-Dodd Hostels PWD/PAWC Weltevrede Valley, vertical horizontal extension front rear expand commerce rental functions.



fig 6

**fig 6 1a /** Mansell Road urban integration experimental neighbourhood: Ethikweni Metro Council, Durban, 1999. Harber Masson & Associate Architect planners. Innovative live/work options - collaborative effort to formalise in response to inner-city land invasions.

**fig 6 1b /** Johannesburg Housing Company (JHC) Social housing development, downtown Johannesburg, 2001 Savage Dodd Architects. Live/Work options within a new inner city infill perimeter block.

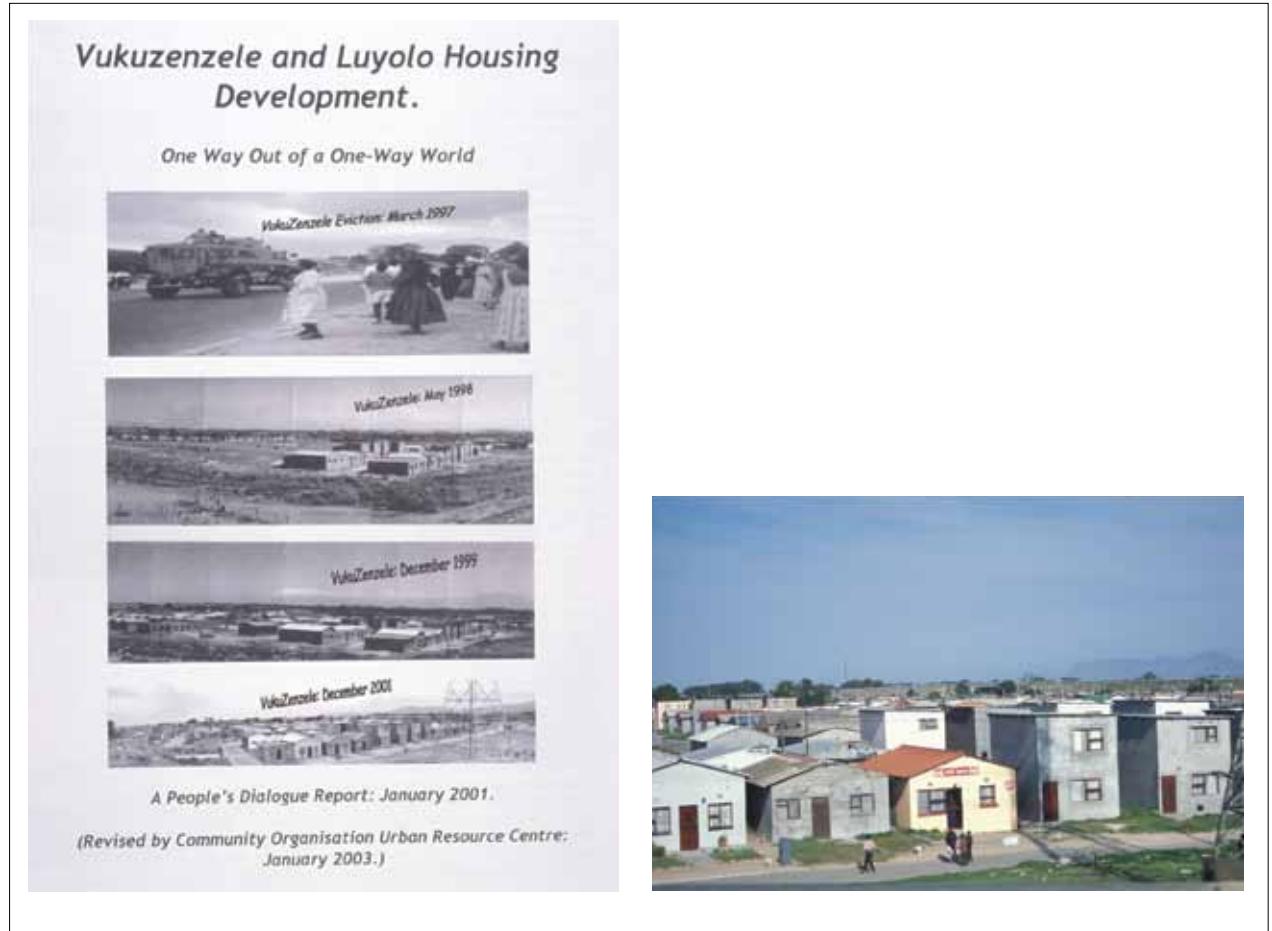


fig 7

### House/Home

One of the primary observations that emerge from investigations of the conflict between the material and the experiential is in the unsettling dialectic that exists between these 'opposing' conditions. Under conditions of scarce resources, rapid development, and historic inequity, it is inevitable that the imperative of the lived, as defined by the everyday need to dwell, and that of the built, as defined by the housing unit or investment, construct conditions of contradiction. A primary challenge of future housing development is to find a means of reconciling these extremes, while simultaneously attending to the exigencies of delivery at scale.

Despite the seeming difficulty presented by the autonomy of RDP and NBRI housing types, the need to survive has prompted local innovations to accommodate additional people and families; to include extended family members; or to raise income. This activity is realised predominantly through the activation of front and rear areas of sites, and occasionally in expanding to an upper level. In recent years a number of architects have attempted to engage this condition through their work in housing projects. This work lies in townships and cities throughout South Africa, but presents a coherent body of work that challenges and contributes alternative design propositions.

fig 7 1c / Community-based organisation-assisted housing development, Lansdowne Road, Cape Town. Vertical, extensions: land, optimisation and the quest for densification and extended family.



fig 8



fig 9

fig 8 **1d** / Weltevrede Valley: PAWC/PWD: Department of Housing. Alternative neighbourhood formation and the building of community; internal pedestrian- and child-friendly environment. Rear expansion (commercial) potential, vertical dimension pre-established on delivery.

fig 9 **1e** / PELIP Experimental housing: Red Location, Port Elizabeth. Noero Wolff Architects, Multiple extensions (3D) established through configuration of vertical and horizontal expansion and combinative options.





fig 10

### The production of locality in South Africa (2)

The stated intention of National Department of Housing is to effect a situation of 'no more slums' by the year 2014. Considering the existing housing backlog, and the rate of delivery that the country is capable of, it will require a different paradigm of design and implementation to affect such delivery. One of the most significant forms of delivery has been through self-initiated efforts of groups of individuals who find themselves in collective situations, as well as through the co-ordinated efforts of existing communities who are keen to enter the urban economy. This phenomenon is a basis of community global practice whereby people take care of their own housing needs, and has led to settlements throughout South America, Asia, and other developing parts of the globe. It is messy, illegal, and neglects to consider the need for public infrastructure and other temporal dimensions of settlements. Nevertheless it represents both an incredible investment of human effort and therefore capital, as well as a huge percentage of global settlements, and raises the issue of the role of public and other authorities in the mainstreaming of illegal community initiatives.

#### (Re) occupying (state) land

This implies a strategy whereby formal and informal delivery systems find a productive co-existence. This

suggests a hybrid form of design and implementation that recognises the dual imperatives of government to provide orderly urbanisation and citizens to build community. The outcome is likely to contribute towards the building of a stable civil society and has multiple spin-offs for economic development.

The key lies in creating genuine platforms wherein the design, management, and delivery of housing settlements are conceived of in an integrated and balanced manner. Herein lies the success of apartheid's NBRI/NE51's. In contemporary South Africa, focus would be on the temporal, that is, understanding of and designing for a process of delivery that recognises of the phased dimensions of housing and family structures and foresees design opportunities for orderly upgrades over time.

#### Imagination: the South African city in context

In general, the binding character of the above strategies is in the recognition of, and demands for, a synthetic interrelationship between specificity and indeterminacy, one that lends itself to careful management. In order not to replicate the overt formalisation that has resulted in the predominantly reductive and homogenised environments of recent times, we need to confront questions such as: What are the institutional arrangements<sup>11</sup> that support such conditions? Or, rather, what does it mean for built

fig 10 2a / Occupation of state land, Stellenbosch, Western Cape, MayDay -1990. SHAC: Stellenbosch Housing Action Group; DAG: Development Action Group, 1989. The co-existence of organised delivery with community action, affording temporal advantage and orderly urbanism.

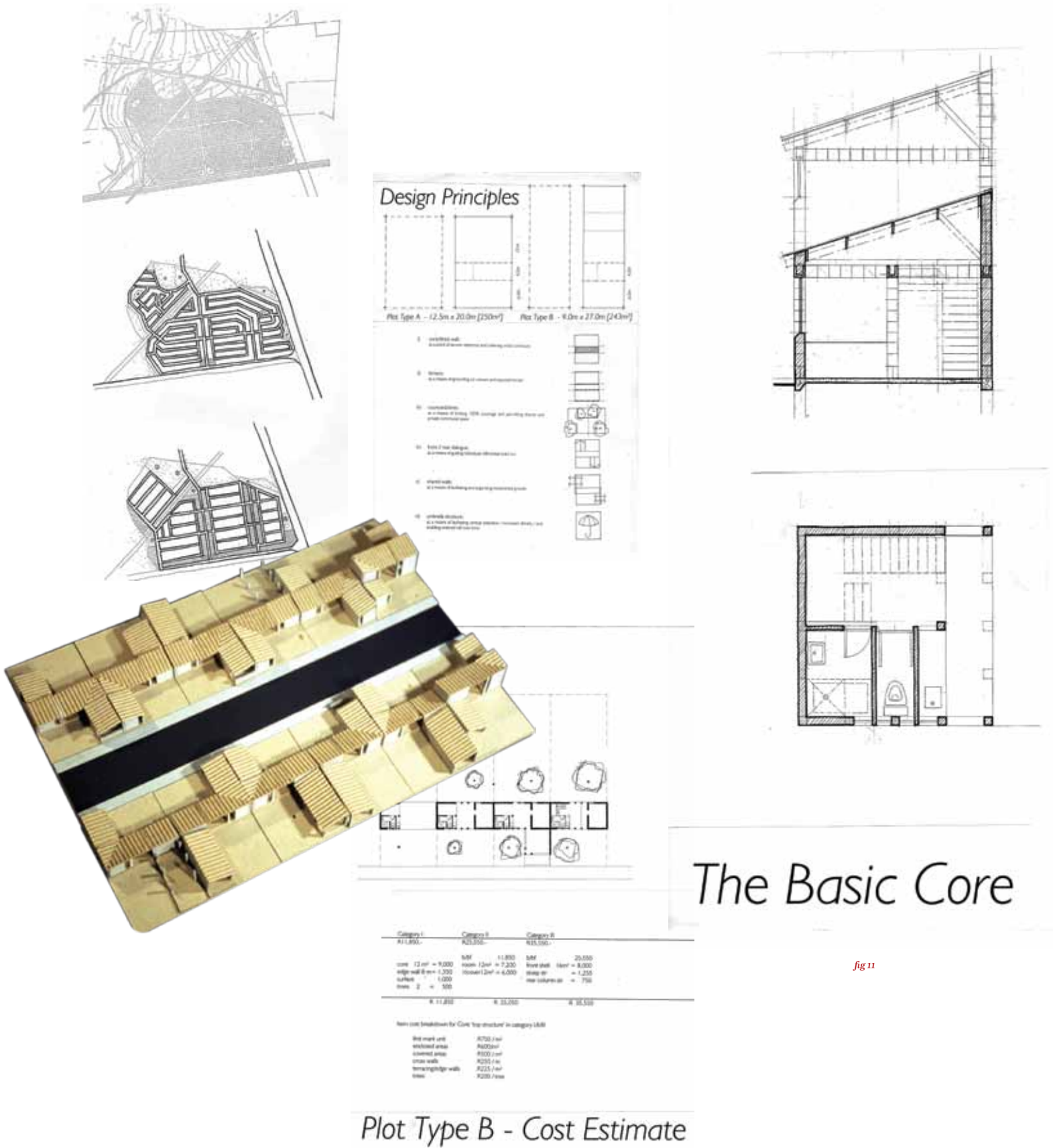
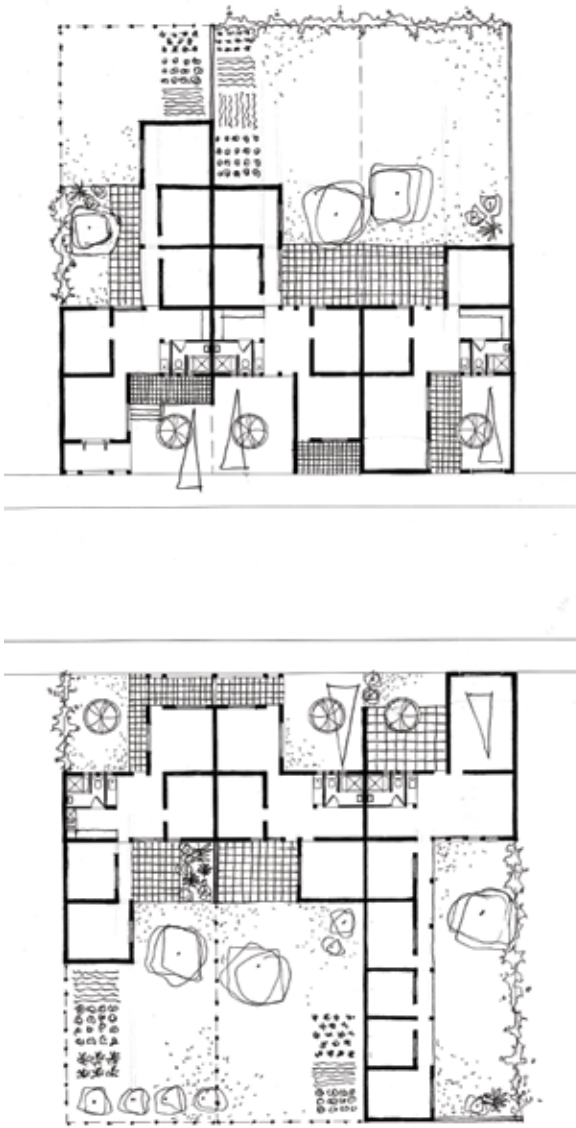


fig 11

Plot Type B - Cost Estimate



## Design Options Type B

fig 11 2b / RLDP: Rapid Land Development Project; GJTMC: Greater Johannesburg Transitional Metro Council, 1998. Maximising opportunity: Preparing the urban surface for community activation and orderly settlement.

environment professionals to engage local practice in South Africa's globalising world?

Architects and educators need to recognise that it is never through design alone that one can engage these issues. Nor do we require a new set of altered relations to inform the production of the built environment. Consequently, one issue that should be confronting our developmental capacity is what new instruments, besides the obvious public/private, state market, can complement and support these local practices?

In reflecting on the efficiency of apartheid's NBRI, we might consider whether we require a new form of agency, one that supports radically altered forms of production. Or whether any alternative modes of operation exist, perhaps with a better relation to the struggle for freedom and equity in South Africa. Probably the closest we have had in South Africa were Professional Service Organisations, such as PLANACT / DAG / BESG<sup>12</sup> that fostered built environment activism in combating apartheid's relentless spatial inequity. Is there a contemporary counterpart to these organisations, and where could such initiatives be located?

One possibility is academia. The university in the context of development has a unique role to play in supporting the state. As a site of teaching, research and service, it is uniquely situated to engage society without the partisanship that inevitably constrains the public/private partnership. As a space/time that is mandated to privilege research, it has both legitimacy and the potential capacity to re-think and nurture methodologies that are supportive of innovation and transformation.

This is not a new idea. SAAL<sup>13</sup> in post-revolutionary Portugal and, more recently, 'Elemental' in liberated Chile, has demonstrated the possibility that arises from collaboration between the transforming state and civil society. Even in the neo-liberal north, the Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA), set up to expedite Berlin's 750th anniversary as a built exhibition, resorted to 'careful urban renewal' and provided a relevant paradigm for sustainable urban redevelopment by structuring housing.

Diversifying our approach to housing delivery and settlement presents a challenge, but is also a necessity. A considered approach to this challenge can develop essential knowledge that identifies our situation in South Africa and contributes knowledge to global practices. What may result is the establishment of a 'critical practice' that is located in new models of settlement design and delivery. While these would necessarily be predicated upon the highly



specific and varying conditions that identify our local condition, their flexible arrangements would present an approach that is nationally replicable and globally relevant. Careful analysis and attention to the specificity of individual and community needs within the pre-existent phenomenon of particular situations can produce resilient alternatives. This may be termed the practice of critical difference. It is necessarily reflexive and non-linear, yet capable of producing local identities which cut across the homogeneity that is inevitably produced by modernity's reductive and utilitarian predilection for massification.

Such an approach becomes even more important given the context of the contemporary emergent 'post-urban' condition. Failure to confront this reality is already evident in the disorderly urbanisation of societies undergoing rapid change. The concomitant disruption of civil society is similarly evident in the collapse of healthcare, education, and welfare systems. The anti-colonial, local logic is both reflective and inclusive of values and belief systems as embedded in local practices. This is particularly relevant given the flexible arrangements endemic of temporal dynamics<sup>14</sup> that promote the improvisational arrangements of the poor. We ignore these urban phenomena at our peril; the consequences could be:

- **(Serviced) scarcity of land**, which could lead to land invasion and uncontrolled densification.
- **Extended and complex family structures**, resulting in innovative self-development and uncontrolled extensions.
- **Economic advantage**, which could lead to commercialisation of residential front yards and rental capacity in back yards.
- **Communal culture**, resulting in in-situ accommodation of local traditions and rites of passage relating to birth, initiation, marriage, and death.

In taking the above into consideration, the prospect for design of the environment is to evolve a unique fit of user community with site, need, and resource. This demands both imagination and appropriate new institutional resources to enable the necessary rigour to produce a desirable outcome.

## Conclusion

The creation of order in a mutable and finite world is the ultimate purpose of all man's thought and actions. (Perez-Gomez 1985:3)

In a society where there are no longer any absolutes, everything inevitably becomes negotiable. There are no fixes, so civil society and orderly existence becomes threatened. Yet, it also appears that as long as the certainty associated with scientific rationality and economic utilitarianism predominates, the human project of dwelling on earth will be a marginal one.

Thinking of the megacity, through the phenomena of housing, as defined by the lived experience of others, brings a fresh perspective to the global exigencies of urbanisation. However, today it seems that Form and Use are in disjuncture. The sustained inability to comprehend this<sup>15</sup> has become the prime *raison d'être* for a failure of urbanisation in the so-called African city.

In designing settlements we configure worlds as opening up or closing down opportunity for interaction. The city or settlement is a manifestation of those values, and as long as it is not representative of the cultural predilection of its inhabitants, it will fail.

The opportunity presented by the possibility of megacity phenomena is in rethinking the relations of production that inform the construction of the city – one thing that is sure is that the improvisational nature of the African city works in a manner that contradicts the certainty of the colonial/western construct. Specifically, it does not recognise the fixity of the conventional boundary, and in the context of the African urban, it can be argued that architecture and design no longer exists within the conventions of a professionally constructed reality. Not dissimilar to the African city itself, the architect/designer working in these contexts, must operate with a resourcefulness that interprets local knowledge by incorporating improvisational arrangements to effect the temporal dynamic and social networks that are characteristic of its lived condition. And herein lies the clues for imagining the new architectural/urban order(s).

The greatest challenge is to realise this while affecting a modicum of order that is productive of civil society and urban governance, and to do this at a scale that begins to address the housing backlogs and projections that accompany the second wave of urbanisation that constitutes the megacity. This will require an imagination that transcends existing urban orders, and presents a reconfigured order that is capable of mediating between haves and have nots, traditional and western-modern, insiders and outsiders - all together and on a scale that we have never conceived of before.

## Endnotes

1. The Breaking New Ground (BNG) of the South African Department of Housing's new Sustainable Human Settlement Housing policy is one such example.
2. Despite the progressive housing subsidy formulation that underpins current policy in South Africa, the housing backlogs have grown exponentially since 1994. This is attributable to the skewed spatial legacy of apartheid whereby housing authorities have to confront a 'triple legacy' of spatial segregation, urban immigration, and globalisation.
3. The term 'double extended' refers to different permutations of horizontal (the inclusion of a sibling and their family) and vertical, the inclusion of grandparent(s), not uncommon in traditional societies.
4. See for instance, Bernard Rudofsky's publications on African vernacular practices; *The Prodigious Builders*, ia.
5. Achille Mbembe commenting in the first session of the *Johannesburg and Megacity Phenomena* conference.
6. By this I am referring to the Heideggerian sense of dwelling - this being the active engagement with being in the world that leaves traces of inhabitation that are directly associated with the temporal dimensions of inhabitants' occupation. This is most obvious in early / traditional settlements comprising 'homesteads' whose built fabrics represent integrated socio-economic structures as reflections of a deep cultural construction.
7. NE 51/9 refers to the ninth prototype for Non-European housing produced in the year 1951 by the NBRI, the then state funded National Building Research Institute, tasked with realising/translating the spatial agenda of the apartheid government.
8. Saitowitz, S. 1997. Undergraduate BArch thesis submitted to the Department of Architecture, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
9. 'Practices on the periphery' refers to non-main-stream housing initiatives; these may either be in townships and informal sectors, or for that matter, in located centres but subscribing to non-conventional forms of delivery or spatial organisation.
10. Design affordance refers to the capacity of a built artifact to accommodate a range of situations as functions and uses that are locally conditioned in and through time variations.
11. Various needs for new forms of agency, not dissimilar to apartheid's NBRI, are being inferred here.
12. PLANACT (Transvaal/Johannesburg); DAG – Development Action Group (University of Cape Town/Cape Town/Western Cape); BESG – Built Environment Support Group (University of Kwa-Zulu Natal/Durban/Natal).
13. SAAL is the 'Ambulatory Local Technical Support; an agency set up by the 1975 post-revolutionary Portuguese government to oversee and expedite a people-based housing program for the entire country. In a sense it is the equivalent of the apartheid government's NBRI.
14. See also de Boeck, F. 2002. Kinshasa: Tales of the 'Invisible City' and the Second world, in *Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*. Documenta 1 Platform 4; Hatje Cantz, Kassel.
15. A failure on the behalf of policy makers and government agencies responsible for framing implementation

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