

Research Proposal

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A Cultural Survey: Understanding the use of public and private spaces for social and cultural practices in informal settlements

Background

The 2001 UN report “Istanbul + 5” characterizes South African Housing Policy as an effort of ‘operationalizing the right to adequate housing’ (UN, 2001:2). Over 15 years later, Department of Human Settlement statistics show that nearly 13 percent of South Africa’s population or approximately 2 million people still live in informal settlements (RSA, 2017). After years of building millions of houses and chasing overwhelming numbers on urban housing waiting lists, there is a growing recognition that the country’s method of housing the urban poor needs to change but not its goal of providing adequate housing. South Africa’s definition of adequate housing is aligned with the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which was updated by general comment in 1991 to state that: “adequate housing” is measured by certain core factors: legal security of tenure, the availability of services; materials, facilities and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; location and cultural adequacy’ (UN, 2001:2). Key to this study is the phrase “location and cultural adequacy”.

As South African cities struggle to address rapid urbanisation, they are at the same time grappling with such urban models as Smart Cities, Sustainable Cities, Green Cities and so on all of which advise putting a stop to sprawl to reduce cities’ “footprints” and create resiliency in the face of climate change. But what does this mean to the housing stock? Cities such as Ekurhuleni have drawn a line on their planning map to show that the city will stay inside that perimeter (Kornienko, 2013). Johannesburg has created a peri-urban greenbelt to control its land hungry growth (Zivhave, forthcoming). Given these conditions, it’s not surprising that informal settlement upgrading is in many areas moving away from the RDP housing typology of a single family dwelling on a stand to the denser living of multi-story flats. In response, there has been significant anecdotal clambering from informal residents that this form of housing is “against African culture” or “does not allow for cultural practices” (personal communication, 2018 among other organic sources). But what in fact does this mean?

While work done by Yose (1999) and more recently Ross (2010) evaluate the social impact of moving from informal to formal housing, the basic typology of a single family home on a stand in those cases remained the same. There has yet to be adequate understanding of the consequence of the drastic shift in housing typology from house and stand to flat. This change will take away private space which is currently used for livelihood activities such as recycling, food security in the form of small scale urban agriculture, medicinal plant gardens to name a few (Kornienko, 2013). Given the City of Johannesburg’s rapidly unfolding model of “re-blocking” many informal settlements in an effort to provide what many feel is a temporary measure to supply much needed basic services with the long term goal of formalization through rebuilding these communities with a much reduced stand size and other plans underway to densify providing higher numbers of units by building up there is a real need to understand if and what cultural value exists in these informal community fabrics before they are lost.

Aims

The basis of this study is the premise that the socio-physical fabric of a community contributes greatly to residents' wellbeing, in the forms of social capital and livelihood efforts. Using that as a starting point, the study asks whether there is in fact a loss of cultural identity through the current practices to formalize Johannesburg's informal settlements, as many residents claim.

To explore this further this study will document the cultural activities practiced on the individual and communal stands of the informal settlements because although I hear the residents' raised voices claiming loss of culture, to date I've seen no empirical data to substantiate their claims. I want to make it clear that as a white Canadian researcher this work does not intend to *judge* the cultural value of these practices but rather to *document* the practices themselves, producing a body of data which will be a constructive contribution to the City of Johannesburg's housing process allowing for better informed decision making throughout their informal settlement upgrading practices.

Research Methods

The research is funded by the my RINC funds and is affiliated with the Centre for Urban and Built Environment Studies (CUBES) in Wits School of Architecture and Planning where I am a Visiting Research Fellow. But it also draws on parallels from my experiences in western Canada where I am based. Canada recently borrowed South Africa's model of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission to evaluate the government's role in the devastation to indigenous cultures across the country through colonial and post colonial assimilation practices (TRC, 2015). The Canadian government was found guilty of cultural genocide (Benvenuto, 2010; TRC, 2015).

A few weeks ago I was invited to participate in a community theatre play written by the knowledge keeper the Splat'sin Band (an indigenous tribe) of the Secwepemc Nation on whose traditional lands I live and work. This play explores the loss of cultural identity as a result colonisation, specifically through the loss of locational names and access to significant places of cultural practice (through institutionalised assimilation policies and the spatial control of the Indians Act with its reserve system).

In South Africa, I have worked with the informal settlement of Harry Gwala in Ekurhuleni for twelve years (Kornienko, 2013; 2014; 2017) and in that time assisted the community to develop a proposal for *in situ* upgrading following the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Plan (DHS, 2009; Kornienko, 2017). That plan was rejected by the city. In the last year "Phase 1" of the community has been bulldozed and four-story flats are under construction. There, among other places, I have repeatedly heard the residents raised voices stating the inappropriateness of flats to support cultural practices.

Bringing these two experiences together, I can't help but wonder if South Africa's current housing drive to densify through flats as low-income housing stock is inadvertently but effectively becoming yet another mechanism of loss of identity and assimilation. One could argue that in this era the coloniser is capitalism and neoliberal driven land use and real estate development pressures.

This will be an ethnographic study with an action research methodology. Recent decisions to replace informal dwelling/stand housing types with formal multi-story flats has been met with an outcry by residents of a loss of space (and therefore ability) for everyday and celebratory cultural practices as discussed above. It is this identification of the issue by the residents themselves and a collaborative response between those residents and academic research that will shift the understanding of these cultural practices from anecdotal to empirical.

I have chosen not to situate this study in Harry Gwala because emotions are very high with the ongoing changes and construction there. Instead I have chosen Kliptown informal settlement, where I also have a history of research activities (Kornienko, 2016), because of its rich historic and multicultural character, because it is facing re-blocking for the implementation of electricity infrastructure and because flats are being built as a formalisation practice in that area but as yet not for that community. And I've chosen Slovo Park informal settlement because of the ruling of the High Court of South Africa ordering Johannesburg Municipality to apply for funding to operationalise the UISP in order to implement *in situ* upgrading (RSA, 2016; Zondo and Royston, 2016). This is an old, well established community developed with low density having been laid out by residents to mirror the adjacent urban grid and the residents have the security in the belief that they will be remaining in that community as it is incrementally upgraded - making it more likely that their social and cultural practices are intact.

In the same vein as the play at Splat'sin discussed above, storytelling by the residents of their dwellings and everyday lives in form of semi-structured interviews will form the foundation of the study. These "stories" will be supported by observation and mapping data collected on site, together they will shed light on the *de facto* cultural importance of these places. To this end I argue that the study will prove both insightful to the larger body of literature around informal settlement and useful to the City's dialogue on and practices of upgrading, serving both academic and pragmatic ends.

Outputs

A survey document of cultural practices and culturally significant locations in Kliptown to be compiled with residents and given to the City of Johannesburg Department of Human Settlements, specifically the Region D offices. A journal article entitled: *A Cultural Survey: Understanding the use of public and private spaces for social and cultural practices in Kliptown and Slovo Park informal settlements*. Where there is interest, work with the residents and/or city planners to develop proposals to preserve places of culture where new development or changes are planned.

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