

# Housing in the Apartheid City

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The article was originally written in 1999 as part of a report by students of architecture at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. The report was a result of a course on third world housing given by Prof Vestbro and included a fieldwork in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. In 2012 the paper was slightly revised.

In this chapter a description is given of the South African “Bantu” housing policy during the reign of the white minority regime. The racist character of apartheid housing and town planning is analysed. Motives are searched behind the various types of housing developed for blacks in urban areas. It is shown how South Africa in the 1950s, at the cost of a repressive system, became the only African country to eradicate the shanty towns. It is also shown why the shantytowns came back in the 1980s. A special analysis is made of South African housing as a result of modernist doctrines, and to what extent this doctrine contradicts the apartheid ideology of ‘separate development’.

## How the housing problem started

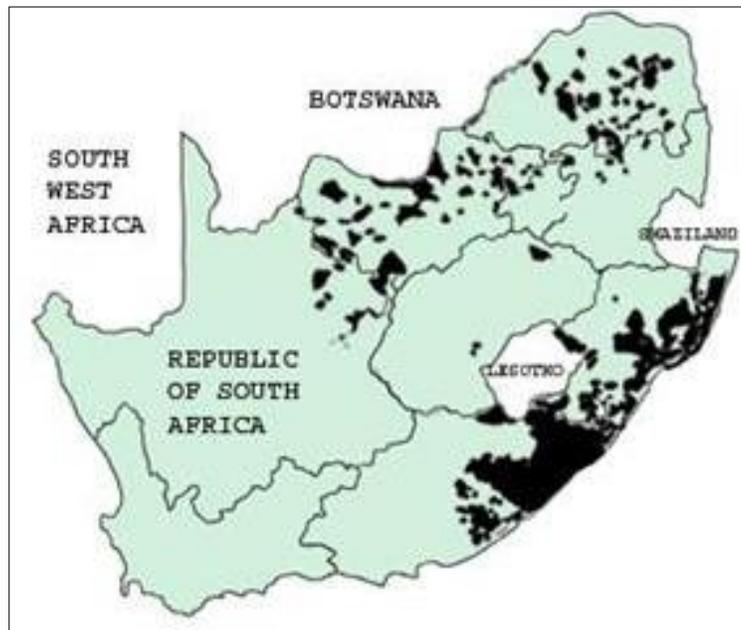
The urban housing problem in South Africa occurred as a result of the rapid urbanisation that took place after the gold and diamond mines were established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The extraction of valuable minerals brought with it the construction of railroads, roads and harbours, which in turn lead to the recruitment of manual workers taken both from rural areas and from other colonies in the British Empire. There were also poor white workers who had difficulties in finding urban accommodation.

The Land Act of 1913<sup>1</sup> gave the urbanisation process further impetus. Through this law 75 per cent of the population was restricted to only 7.5 per cent of the land in South Africa (in 1936 the proportion increased to 13 per cent). The major parts of the land - the most fertile rural areas and all urban centres - were allocated to the white population. The implementation of these laws lead to forced removals of the black population and to aggravated living conditions in rural areas. Because of the difficulty to recruit cheap labour the mine owners had a direct interest to reduce the supporting capacity of the black rural population.

Figure 1. *Division of land in South Africa during the apartheid years. The Land Act of 1913 allocated 7.5 % of the land to the vast majority of the population. In 1959 the Bantu Self-government Act transformed the reserves into quasi-independent ‘Bantustans’.*

(Source: [www.xtimeline.com](http://www.xtimeline.com)).

At the beginning it was mainly men who came to the cities. In 1910, for example the ratio of male to female workers in Johannesburg was as large as 23 to 1 (Welch 1963:4). At this time the South African authorities took virtually no responsibility for housing the poor urban population. Therefore the workers came to live in temporary mining camps. Some



<sup>1</sup> The African National Congress (ANC), the oldest national liberation movement in Africa, was formed in 1912 to fight the proposed Land Act of 1913. The law could not be stopped, but ANC continued its liberation struggle.

of these housing areas were given official names such as 'Kafir Location', 'Malay Location' or 'Coolie Town'<sup>2</sup> (Lewis 1966:47). These racial names were given despite the fact that a mixture of ethnic groups usually inhabited these settlements: black Africans, mulattos (euphemistically called 'Coloureds'), Asians and even poor whites.

The temporary camps, where the first mine workers lived, were usually referred to as 'shanty towns' or 'slums'. With exception of activities in opposition to the government the white rulers showed no interest in the kind of life the inhabitants lived in these areas. In some places the authorities provided corrugated tin sheds for the inhabitants. These shelters were considered to be temporary solutions, but they sometimes became permanent houses, partly because of the high quality of the corrugated iron they were made of. In Port Elizabeth the 'Red location' and the 'White location' constitute remaining examples of this type of housing (their names stemming from the fact that the corrugated metal walls were painted red and white respectively). In other cases slum clearance was carried out without providing the residents with new shelters, which meant that informal settlements continued to expand (Lewis 1966:47).

## **An emerging housing policy**

Just as in industrialising Europe the epidemics emanating from the poor working class areas became reasons for introducing town planning legislation and an official housing policy. In South Africa a bubonic plague in 1904 and an influenza epidemic in 1918 are mentioned as major factors behind the establishment of the first planned 'native locations' in the country. Such epidemics could spread to the wealthy parts of the cities. In 1923 the South African Parliament passed the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, giving local authorities a responsibility to provide housing for black workers in urban areas. In Johannesburg the task was given to the 'Native Affairs Department' (Lewis 1966:46, 48). 'Native housing' and 'Bantu housing'<sup>3</sup> became official terms for government and company housing for the black population of South Africa. The areas were called 'locations' or 'townships'.<sup>4</sup>

The formation of the first black trade unions in the 1920s became another reason for using housing and town planning as an instrument to achieve control of the black urban population.

One of the first planned housing areas for black workers was the Western Native Township (later South Western Township, Soweto) built on top of a refuse dump in the outskirts of the then fairly small city of Johannesburg. Just after the First World War 227 small one-family houses were constructed here. More land was acquired and developed for 'Bantu housing' in other parts of the Johannesburg area in the 1920s.

In a review from 1966 by Patrick Lewis, one of the white Councillors in charge of the development of Soweto, the author mentions that in 1927 the Johannesburg City Council was responsible for accommodating a 'native population' of 96 000, excluding those housed by the mines. Only 15 000 had been housed through the efforts of the City, leaving the rest in unhealthy and overcrowded conditions. By 1930 a total of 2 625 houses had been built, a figure which had grown to 8 700 at the time of the outbreak of the Second World War (Lewis 1966:48-49).

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<sup>2</sup> 'Kafir' is a derogatory old-fashioned word, used by the Boers for Bantu people who had not been Christianised. 'Coolie' is a concept used by Westerners for unqualified Asian workers, shipped to other parts of the world to work on slave-like contracts. In South Africa Chinese workers were imported when difficulties occurred in recruiting blacks during the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> The word 'Bantu' was introduced by the apartheid ideologists as an alternative to 'African' because the white South Africans, especially the Boer settlers, considered themselves to be righteous owners of African soil (and speaking not Dutch but 'Afrikaans'). Not all blacks in South Africa are of Bantu origin, however. With the Boer logic the word 'Native' should apply also to white South Africans, but because of the derogatory connotations the word was used only for the black population.

<sup>4</sup> 'Location' literally means a place where something is situated and indicates that it does not have a quality of its own. 'Township' means 'little town', which may sound idyllic, but in fact it refers to something which is separate from the 'real town' - the city, dominated by whites. Many black housing areas are too big to be called 'townships'. The biggest of all, Soweto, was planned for 500 000 inhabitants, but still it was called a township. Both concepts should be seen as part of a racist ideology.

During the war the pro-British United Party ruled South Africa. South Africa participated on the side of the allied forces (while the Boer-dominated Nationalist Party sided with Nazi Germany). It was a period of large-scale industrial development, coupled with the recruitment of large quantities of African workers. Many more than those getting jobs moved to the industrial centres.

According to Lewis South Africa's manpower and materials were concentrated on the war efforts and this in turn meant that house production was interrupted. The result was a substantial growth of squatter camps. In Johannesburg, the main industrial centre, no less than eleven illegal camps sprang up during and just after the war, which meant that *"the health and safety of the whole City was threatened. Men rose overnight to assume leadership and prey on the ignorance and latent violence of the Bantu who lived in these camps"* (Lewis 1966:50). The formulation reveals that no right of opposition to the apartheid system was accepted. Instead such opposition was blamed on 'latent violence' considered to be inherent in the black race. It is also interesting to note that the informal settlements were associated with activities of opposition. For the apartheid ideologists this became an important reason to eradicate the squatter camps.

## A new housing policy after 1948

The openly racist Nationalist Party<sup>5</sup> won the 1948 all-white elections. As part of its plans to establish a fully-fledged apartheid state the new government immediately started to introduce a number of measures affecting life in urban areas. Between 1948 and 1966 the Parliament passed no less than 87 laws with an effect on 'Non-European Affairs' (Lewis 1966:77f).

The Group Areas Act of 1950 provided for the division of urban areas into totally segregated districts. This type of segregation differs from that existing in other parts of the world in that it was implemented by law and that no exceptions were allowed. The only deviation tolerated was that domestic servants were allowed to live on residential sites of their white employers. These 'back shacks' were among the first types of housing for blacks in urban areas. Only two servants were allowed on each plot. Usually black Africans, Asians and Coloureds were moved far away from the White areas. This procedure could, however, not be implemented for those domestic servants who were not accommodated on the plots of their employers. Therefore a few black townships were accepted close to the white upper class areas. Alexandra in Northern Johannesburg is one example. Walmer Township in Port Elizabeth is another.

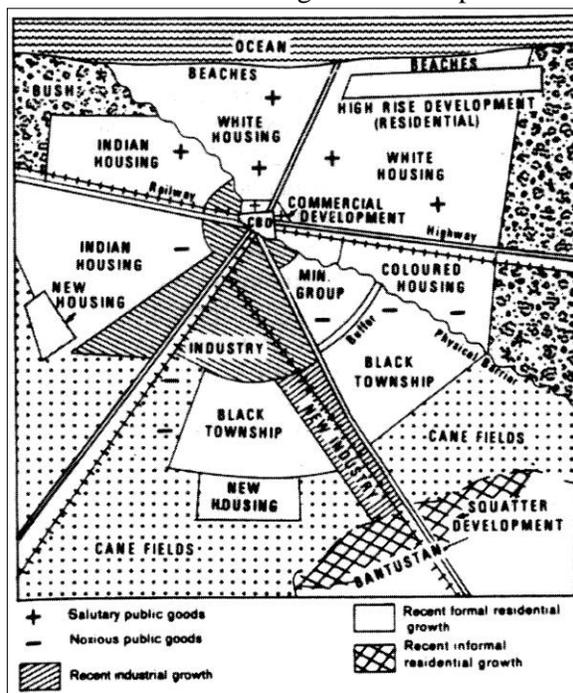


Figure 2. *Graphic model of the ideal apartheid city. Note that 'black townships' are located near the industrial areas, and that buffer strips are arranged between ethnic groups. Squatters were not allowed in the city, but could be tolerated in a Bantustan area outside the city boundary.* (Source: Beavon 1992)

Areas where racial groups were mixed and participated in common activities, such as Sophiatown in Johannesburg, District Six in Cape Town and South End in Port Elizabeth, were especially objectionable in the eyes of the apartheid politicians. Therefore they had to be eradicated. All three were subsequently razed to the ground and developed for white residential uses (Uduku 1998:238).

In 1950 a law was also passed against illegal squatting. It was used to bulldoze a large number of informal settlements. This was combined with 'influx control', which prohibited blacks from living in cities unless they had an employment there. The first law on

<sup>5</sup> Since the Boers and other whites had settled for good in South Africa, it was logical from their point of view to consider themselves 'nationalists'. Many of them had a hostile attitude to the mining companies and other 'foreigners' who were engaged in extraction of natural resources from South Africa.

‘influx control’ was introduced already in 1923. An official commission then stated that:

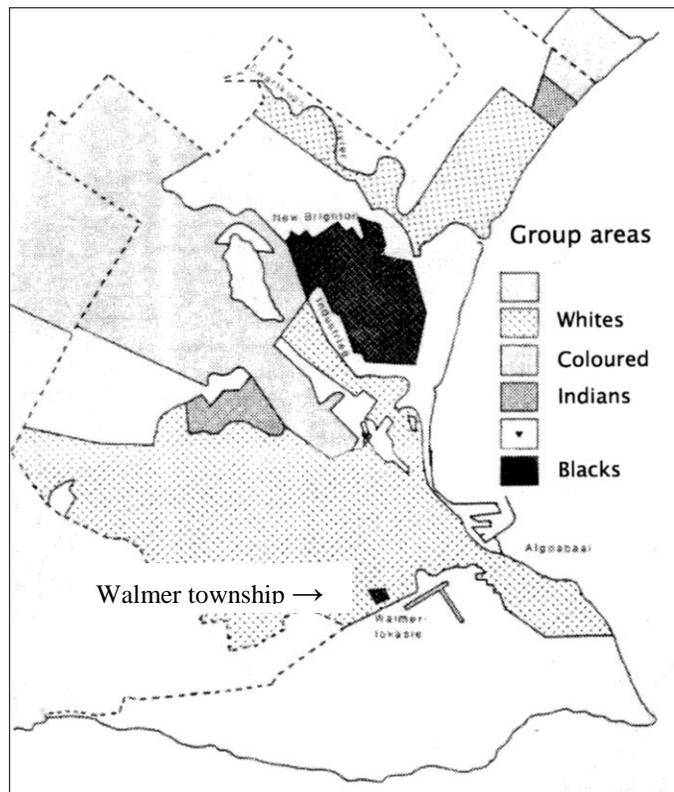
*/The Native/ "should only be allowed to enter urban areas, which are essentially the white man's creation, when he is willing to enter and to minister to the needs of the white man, and should depart therefrom when he ceases to administer". (The Stallard Commission, quoted from Soni & Maharaj 1991)*

In the 1950s new acts were passed to impose stricter control of movements to urban areas. Black workers could be deported to rural areas when their contracts expired, or if they engaged in trade union or other undesirable activities. In order to acquire full control of the movements of the blacks the infamous pass laws were used. To qualify for permanent residence in urban areas, and for bringing one's family into the city, black employees had to fulfil a number of requirements, such as documenting secure employment and immaculate living during a large number of years. These rules were applied only to blacks. The racist aim of these rules was openly admitted, as is shown in the following statement by the Minister of Bantu Affairs in 1972:

*"It is accepted Government policy that the Bantu are only temporarily resident in the European areas of the Republic for as long as they offer their labour there. As soon as they become, for some reason or another, no longer fit for work, or superfluous in the labour market, they are expected to return to... the territory of the national unit where they fit ethnically if they are not born and bred in the homelands". (from Soni & Maharaj 1991)*

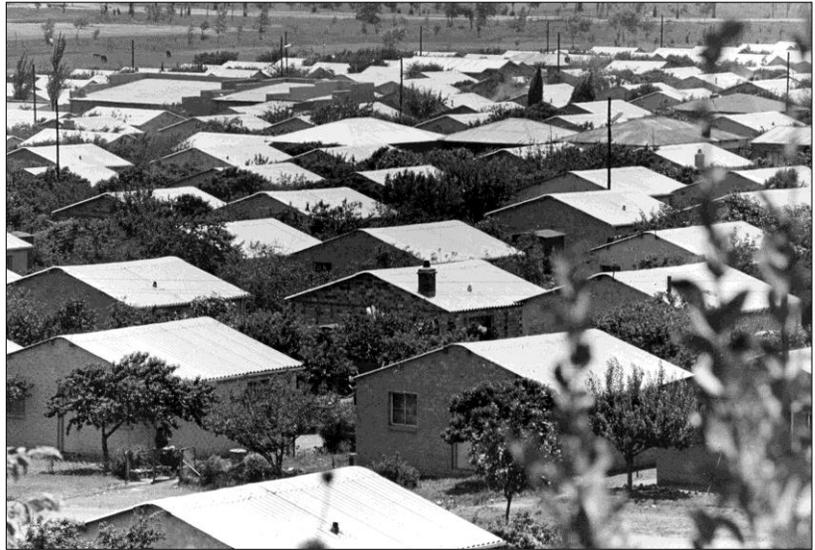
By the use of increasingly repressive measures the government stopped the flow of blacks to the cities. Every black person had to be registered as belonging to a ‘homeland’. This was done also for people who were born in town by parents from different tribes. A large number of black Africans were in fact just dumped in a ‘homeland’ without prior knowledge whether they could make a living in that area or not.

Figure 3. Map of Port Elizabeth showing the racially segregated ‘group areas’. Note that Walmer Township is situated in the midst of an upper-class district of the city. In order to avoid time-consuming and expensive travels, black domestic servants had to live close to their white employers. (Source: Sundelin 1998:44)



The political leader commissioned to “deal with” the “Bantu slum dwellers” was the Minister of Native Affairs, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, who later became Prime Minister of the apartheid state. A National Housing and Planning Commission was set up. State loans for housing were given at an interest rate of 3/4 per cent. In 1953 a Bantu Services Levy Fund was established, which forced those employers, who did not already provide accommodation for their workers, to make monthly contributions to services such as roads, electricity and sewage disposal works. Lewis remarks: “Thus the employers, who had attracted the Bantu to the cities, were to bear portion of the costs” (Lewis 1966: 52). The government attitude was that shelter should be provided for this labour force only as long as it fulfilled the task of serving the white society. This attitude was also reflected in the type of housing that was provided.

Figure 4. *Standardised house types in South Western Township (Soweto) Johannesburg 1967.* (Photo: Dick Urban Vestbro)



### House types for ‘natives’

To be able to provide ‘appropriate’ housing standards, and to reduce building costs, the National Building Research Institute of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) was commissioned to work out house types and simplified construction techniques for ‘Bantu housing’. The architect D. M. Calderwood was made head

of the Architecture Division of the Institute. He wrote his doctoral thesis on "Native Housing in South Africa" (Calderwood 1955) and became a professor at the University of Witwatersrand. The present author made an interview with him during a visit in Johannesburg in 1967. His lectures on the same subject, given to town planning students in 1962, was published under the title "Principles of Mass Housing" (Calderwood 1964).

The main house type worked out for ‘natives’ in urban areas was a small single-storey one-family unit built in the middle of a plot of standardised measures. In the most famous of the black townships, Soweto, the measures were set to 40 by 70 feet, i. e. 12.2 by 21.3 = 260 m<sup>2</sup>. Standpipes were provided every 500 yards. Access roads and refuse removal services were also provided. In order to save money it was decided to apply the principle of site-and-service, which means that only a site and some services were provided, leaving the house constructions to the residents (Lewis 1966:53; Uduku 1998). House constructions were organised by the authorities, however. This meant that house types were selected from a limited number of worked out prototypes, and that self-building was supervised and controlled by supervisors appointed by the authorities. The same standardised one-family units were used all over the country. No consideration was taken to climatic differences or cultural traditions. This procedure was actually in stark contrast to the apartheid ideology, which preached that each racial group should develop according to its own cultural heritage.

Assuming that houses were 40-70 m<sup>2</sup>, and that streets, impediments and public open spaces accounted for 30 to 40 per cent of the land, the floor area ratio can be estimated at 0.1 to 0.25. This is almost ten times as low as in European inner city areas. The neighbourhood model chosen for Bantu housing explains the tremendous urban sprawl from which South African urban areas suffer today. The urban sprawl contributes to extremely high costs for infrastructure, for transportation, and to the strengthening of the spatial segregation (Mancheno Gren, 2006). How to overcome the anti-urban character of South African city development is one of the major challenges in post-apartheid planning.

It is often maintained that living in a one-family unit in the middle of a plot ‘suits the African way of life’. This argument is based on the assumption that blacks belong to the countryside and should not be urbanised, an argument which must be seen as a remnant of the apartheid ideology. A more rational argument is given by one of the main apartheid town planners, Tod Welch of the South African National Building Research Institute. In an article from 1963 he wrote that "*single-storey development fitted well with the extent to which the building industry had developed at that period, and it allowed for the introduction of self-help schemes and on-the-site training of the Bantu themselves*" (Welch 1963:4). The training of self-builders was worked out following the conclusions of the experts at the Building Research Institute. A special law, the Native Building Workers Act of 1951, was passed to provide a legal framework for the efficient production of cheap housing. Africans were given special training as bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, etc. Teams of bricklayers were specialised in laying corners, frames around windows, fill-in walls, etc. Because of these limitations in tasks, the educational value of the on-site train-

ing was somewhat reduced. Because of the strong control, the element of individual choice in building design was also limited.

Organised self-help housing in Pretoria was introduced at the beginning of the 1960s. The house types worked out by the South African Building Research Institute were standardised and spread all over South Africa with no consideration for cultural traditions or local conditions. In this sense it was typically modernist and did not follow the apartheid ideology of 'separate development' (Pretoria City Council 1965).

The urban 'Bantu housing' units have no resemblance with traditional architectural forms. There was no attempt to give them an 'African identity'. High-rise blocks of flats might have been an even more rational expression of the need to accommodate cheap labour. Single-storey one-family units were, however, preferred by the planners, because they could be combined with organised self-help construction, for economic reasons. The fact that multi-storey blocks were built for single workers shows that this prototype was among the possible choices. This option was considered less attractive since the hostels had become known as hotbeds of political violence.

Figure 5. A 'native hut' placed next to a small cafeteria only for Whites in the middle of Soweto in order to show how well the apartheid government provided accommodation for urban black workers, despite the obligation to carry passes. Note the vast fields of standardized housing units in the background. (Photo: Dick Urban Vestbro, 1967).



## Housing as a taming instrument

By accommodating poor workers in one-family units, and allowing them to bring their families to urban areas, it was hoped that political stability would be achieved. The idea to use housing as an instrument to tame rebellious urban residents is not unique to South Africa. In his classical book "The Origins of Modern Town Planning" (1967) Leonardo Benevolo provides examples of prominent European statesmen, who, in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, implemented solutions with the explicit aim to promote a sense of individual ownership, and home-centredness among workers in order to take their interest away from collective political actions. Another example is Ronald Frankenburg, who, in his book "Communities in Britain" (1965), criticises modernist housing in Britain for destroying socially well-functioning urban communities in poor working class areas (although in sub-standard houses).

At the end of the colonial period there was a considerable interest in colonial circles to study how housing and town planning could be used to create a stable indigenous urban élite in the colonies in order to prevent black nationalism from turning radical, and to facilitate a smooth transformation to formal independence without economic interests being threatened (Vestbro 1975:18). This method was not used in South Africa, however. The apartheid ideology prescribed that no black person should have a higher position than the lowest among the whites. Thus the formation of a black élite was not on the agenda (except in very exceptional cases when some blacks were appointed from above as leaders of Bantustans or Urban Bantu Councils).

## Modernism versus apartheid housing

It might seem that apartheid politicians carried out policies contradictory to the apartheid ideology. Such contradictions were in fact not exceptional. If the idea of separate development would have been taken seriously, then blacks should not have been allowed into white areas at all. But since the mines and the manufacturing industries strongly needed cheap labour, blacks were permitted into the urban centres. This means that the idea of 'separate development' was practised when economic interests coincided with the

ideology. Some even argue that *"the main aspect of apartheid was not racial segregation, nor even racial domination; it was to enrich the ruling class"* (editor Ken Owen, quoted in Mead 1997:173).

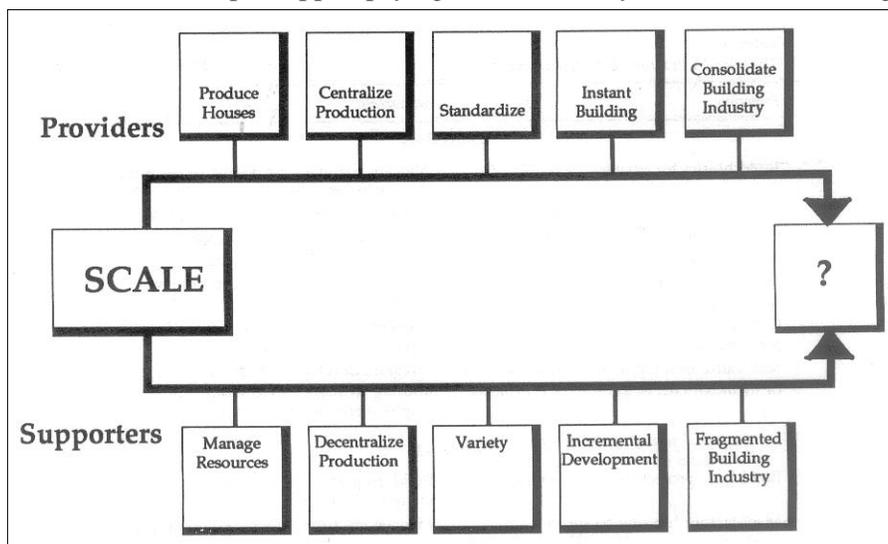
The analysis above shows that 'Bantu housing' was typically modernist. It was based on central government organisation, expert assessment of requirements, far-reaching standardisation, instant planning and mass production – all central components of modernist town planning (Hamdi 1991; Vestbro 1998). At the same time, apartheid does not recognise the concept of universal human needs, which is also central to modernism. While individual differences were not exactly denied, it was the difference between races that the apartheid ideologists were concerned with. As we have seen above, black Africans continued to be regarded as the carriers of rural lifestyles irrespective of their educational level or length of stay in urban areas. White urban residents were never classified in the same way, despite the efforts of many of them to preserve their rural (Boer) traditions.

South African 'Bantu housing' was based on the idea that blacks should be in urban areas only to serve the white man. Since their 'real homes' were in the rural areas, it was logical that urban housing should have a temporary character. Therefore they could be standardised and minimised. The fact that the apartheid planners, for economic reasons, decided to go for site-and-service schemes and for self-help housing meant, however, that a non-modernist, incremental, element was introduced. Site-and-service and core housing means by necessity that self-help constructions supplement state-organised mass housing. Individual variations are difficult to avoid even if efforts are made to maintain strict building regulations. In his article on 'Urban Bantu Townships' (1963) apartheid planner Tod Welch provides many examples of individual additions in Johannesburg planned housing areas. This does not conceal the fact that South African 'Bantu housing' constitutes an example of the most paternalist kind of modernist planning. An interesting question is whether paternalist 'Bantu housing' has influenced township dwellers to the extent that imposed lifestyles are no longer questioned but taken for granted.

## The provider or the support model?

The 1976 Soweto uprising started a new period in South African political development. The formation of trade unions, school boycotts, demonstrations, and other forms of opposition could no longer be contained by the apartheid regime, despite its 'total strategy' for survival. In the 1980s the opposition movement, under the leadership of ANC, made it part of its strategy to 'make South Africa ungovernable'. This policy was quite successful. Inhabitants in the townships stopped paying rent, electricity bills, etc. The strategy also meant that 'influx control' was weakened. Large amounts of new migrants came to the cities. Since existing Bantu housing was far too insufficient, people again settled in shantytowns (Uduku 1998: 239).

Figure 6. *Elements of the provider and support model in housing according to Hamdi 1991.*



After the downfall of the apartheid regime the more neutral concept 'informal settlement' has replaced terms such as 'slums' and 'shanty towns'. The term 'informal' implies that the settlement is unauthorised, either because it is not (yet) legalised, or that it is not provided with enough services or built in durable building materials. In 1990 it was estimated that 7 million people were living in urban informal settlements (Beavon 1992:234). That figure has increased substantially since then.

When the new ANC-lead government took over after the first democratic election in the history of South Africa in 1994, there was a situation of choice between what Hamdi calls the provider and the support model (see figure 6). The former means centrally planned mass production of standardised units, based on expert-assessed designs, built at one point in time by technologically advanced contractors. This model is in contrast to the support model, where the state, instead of producing ready-made units, allocates resources for residents, and by them employed small-scale contractors, to locally produced houses, which provide for adaptations to changing needs in a long-term process of continuing transformations. With reference to failures of the pure self-help model, Hamdi advocates a compromise between the provider and the support model by proposing that a top-down approach should be combined with bottom-up approaches. He also shows that self-help is seldom successful if carried out in opposition to municipal authorities (Hamdi 1991).

In a low-income country the provider model is impossible to implement since preconditions are not available (Vestbro, 2008). there is usually not enough funds available for housing, no functioning state apparatus to carry out modernist planning, and no technically advanced building companies. In South Africa all these factors are there, however. Therefore the modernist provider model could be an attractive option. It remains to be seen how successful the new South African housing model will be.

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