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**‘It’s not a place I like, but I can live with it’: ambiguous experiences of living in state-subsidised rental housing in Johannesburg’s inner-city**

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## **‘It’s not a place I like, but I can live with it’: ambiguous experiences of living in state-subsidised rental housing in Johannesburg’s inner-city**

### **Abstract**

Based on extensive qualitative research in inner-city Johannesburg, this paper documents the contradictory experiences of tenants living in state-subsidised social and affordable housing. It shows that this form of housing is assisting in improving integration and undoing some of the spatial legacies inherited from apartheid, and thus enhancing some elements of urban citizenship. However, it also demonstrates that tenants have to endure harsh conditions and financial pressures in order to remain in the inner-city, and live in the area not out of choice but because they feel they do not have any better alternatives. Combined with the strict regulations imposed on them by housing companies, these conditions mean that they generally come to feel detached from the area they are living in and resigned to making the best out of far from ideal circumstances. However, whilst hardships feature prominently in their narratives, they are also not passive or lacking agency. Through the new friendships and support networks they forge, they transform the ways in which inner-city buildings and spaces are experienced. The paper thus concludes that experiences of urban citizenship and housing in the inner-city, like the post-apartheid period itself, do not cohere into a single narrative, but represent moments of change, optimism and possibility, as well as difficulty, inequality and hardship.

Keywords: Rental housing, transformation, endurance, agency, citizenship, ambiguity

## **Introduction**

Like the other contributions to this edition, this paper adds to the literature about people's lived urban experiences. It focuses on the situations of tenants living in social and affordable housing in inner-city Johannesburg and seeks to understand what their experiences reveal about the changing urban and social landscape of the post-apartheid city. It will demonstrate that these tenants' experiences are ambiguous, as they represent some positive moments of improved integration, new opportunities to exercise urban citizenship, communal solidarities and societal transformation, but are simultaneously restricted, difficult and require constant negotiations and endurance. Their experiences mirror the ambiguities of the post-apartheid period itself, as new societal formations are arising, opportunities for social mobility are being created, and new urban identities are emerging, but severe structural inequalities and social barriers remain in place. However, people are not passive in the face of these obstacles, and through everyday practices and forms of associational life, create new homes, spaces, ways of getting by and experiences of the city.

Discussion proceeds as follows: after some brief notes on methodology, the paper outlines the process of regeneration and housing provision in inner-city Johannesburg. Following this, the ways in which housing provision undoes apartheid spatial legacies and creates opportunities for low-income households to access urban amenities and enjoy urban citizenship are highlighted. Whilst recognised as a notable and positive development, the paper then discusses the ways inner-city housing is experienced by tenants. Discussion illustrates how residents, although enjoying enhanced urban centrality, have to endure difficult living conditions in the inner-city and choose to live in the area as they regard it as

the only viable option in a fragmented and unequal landscape, rather than a desirable location. I argue that these difficult conditions and limited options frequently create feelings of despondency and resignation in tenants, as they view themselves as trapped in a harsh environment, and thus curtail their experiences of the city and feelings of urban citizenship. Furthermore, the economic pressures which tenants face, despite living in subsidised accommodation, mean that the bulk of their time and agency is devoted to working, leaving them with little desire or capacity to engage in other activities or expressions of citizenship, and thus compounding their detachment from the inner-city milieu. These feelings of despondency, the following section argues, are exacerbated by the legally dubious disciplinary regimes inside residential buildings, which are designed to enforce rental collection and remove possibilities for tenant mobilisation. However, rather than painting an entirely bleak picture and constructing tenants as passive, the paper then describes some of the everyday forms of solidarity, resilience and cohesion which are emerging in inner-city residential buildings and changing people's experiences of the space.

The paper's narrative is thus not seamless and does not cohere into one singular account, but rather tries to acknowledge the diverse and contradictory lived experiences which research revealed. In doing so, it seeks to advance theorisations about everyday experiences, urban life and agency. Tenants' experiences demonstrate how agency is exercised in a variety of ways. Traditionally, instances of resistance stand out as expressions of agency; but enduring and adjusting to difficult circumstances, securing livelihoods, raising families, and finding everyday ways to survive and make viable lives are also acts of agency. Although the paper sometimes paints a harsh picture of life in the inner-city, it also attempts to demonstrate how tenants' constantly exercise agency, and, through the lives they are able to construct in this challenging environment, also reinvent spaces and change the way the city is experienced. The paper also attempts to expand on what citizenship means in contemporary

South Africa – it shows that new opportunities are being created and people have access to spaces and mobility they were denied under apartheid. However, gaining this access entails difficult trade-offs and having to tolerate far-from ideal circumstances. Thus the benefits of urban citizenship remain uneven, difficult to realise and characterised by stubborn inequalities.

### *Notes on methodology*

The paper is based on nine months of qualitative research conducted in the inner-city. Research entailed semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a variety of actors, including housing providers, their security personnel and housing supervisors<sup>1</sup>, government officials, and civil society groups. In addition, interviews were conducted with 57 tenants spread across seven renovated buildings (two social housing and five for-profit). Due to the demographics of the tenant populations in these buildings, all participants were black and the majority were South African citizens. However, several foreign nationals from countries including Zimbabwe, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo were also included in the sample. Whilst their experiences did not differ greatly from South African tenants', and several made encouraging references to improved feelings of belonging and inclusion<sup>1</sup>, it is important to note that levels of xenophobia in the inner-city do remain high (Landau 2009). Interviews were supplemented by ethnographic observation, including attending community events and the planning meetings which preceded them and observing security shifts and street patrols. Below is a map depicting the central regions of the inner-city and marking the locations of residential buildings in which research was carried out. A table listing the buildings and the numbers of interviews carried out in each one is also provided:

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<sup>1</sup> Housing supervisors are employees of social housing companies who live inside the buildings and are responsible for day-to-day management and maintenance, security arrangements and relationships with tenants.

Map 1 Locations of buildings in which interviews were conducted, and their management companies



Table 1: Inner-city buildings in which interviews were conducted

Building Name	Housing Type	Number of Tenants Interviewed	Location
Cavendish	For-profit	5	CBD
Constantine	For-profit	4	Hillbrow
Gaelic Mansions	Social	18	Hillbrow
Greatermans	For-profit	6	CBD
Lake Success	Social	9	Hillbrow
Ridge Plaza	For-profit	6	Berea
Rochester	For-profit	9	Jeppestown

Of course, it is not easy to gain access and insights into people's experiences, particularly when the researcher is socially distant from those whom s/he is studying. As a white, middle-class male who grew up in Johannesburg's suburbs, there were various difficulties I encountered and issues of privilege I had to be sensitive to when conducting research into the lives of black, working class inner-city residents. Whilst fully aware that it is not possible to simply access other people's worlds, I tried to familiarise myself as much as possible with the inner-city environment, and spent six months living in an apartment in the area, volunteered at various community events and spent time socialising in a local park in order to gain more acquaintances in and direct experiences of the area. These methods are in some ways superficial and cannot overcome the barriers which social biographies inscribe, but did assist in shaping my insights into the area and the different issues and dynamics which characterise it. Because I approached the area and the people who are living in it from a distance, I had to remain careful to not impose a preconceived narrative or set of perceptions onto them, and to rather build one inductively out of the descriptions, details and experiences which people shared with me. These experiences are multi-faceted, and defy explication into one account or narrative. Hence this paper deals with contradictory details and assembles them together into an account which tries to do justice to and accurately reflect the complexity and ambiguity inherent in people's everyday lives.

### **Urban regeneration and the provision of state-subsidised housing**

The shortcomings of post-apartheid housing provision are well-documented. Many scholars have demonstrated how state-provided housing has exacerbated the fragmentation and sprawl of South African cities and contributed to, rather than alleviated, the marginalisation of the urban poor (Huchzermeyer 2001; Harrison, Huchzermeyer, and Mayekiso 2003; Charlton and Kihato 2006; Charlton 2009). Government has not been oblivious to these failings, and has begun to explore alternative delivery options and housing typologies, including the expansion



of social rental housing (Tissington 2011). Johannesburg's inner-city is a location which has been able to facilitate the provision of this form of housing on a significant scale. Extensive capital flight and residential change in the 1980s and 1990s left the inner-city in a severe state of disrepair and anomie. For a variety of reasons (Beall, Crankshaw, and Parnell 2002; Beavon 2004; Crankshaw and White 1995; Goga 2003; Leggett 2003; Morris 1999a; Morris 1999b; Murray 2008), the area came to be characterised by slumlords, derelict buildings, many which were disconnected from water and electricity services and severely overcrowded, high rates of violence and crime, a prevalent drug trade and general dysfunction and decay. Whilst these conditions were harmful for the area's built environment and social fabric, they also created opportunities for new forms of low-income housing to be provided.

#### ***State assistance in keeping housing affordable***

Whilst exact figures are not readily available, thus far approximately 55 000 affordable and 4000 social housing units have been provided (RebelGroup 2016). The collapse of property values created a large supply of cheap commercial and residential buildings. The low prices at which these buildings could be purchased and renovated made it possible for several investors to acquire buildings cheaply, allowing them to charge low rentals and still make returns on their investments. Because commercial financial institutions continue to be reluctant to invest in the area and support housing developments which cater to lower income brackets (Pillay and Naudé 2006), finance for urban renewal and housing provision has come predominantly from state institutions. The National Housing Finance Corporation (NHFC) and the Gauteng Partnership Fund (GPF), as well as the private company the Trust for Urban Housing Finance (TUHF), which receives the money it operates with from both the NHFC and commercial partners, are the primary financiers behind inner-city housing development.

These institutions impose conditions on the clients they lend money to to ensure that affordable housing is provided. For instance, housing developers obtaining loans from both the NHFC and GPF cannot charge initial rentals above R4500 (\$320) per month and can then only increase rents by up to 8% annually. Furthermore, they also grant loans with lenient repayment conditions, which help ensure that affordable housing is delivered. The City of Johannesburg also supported the conversion of derelict buildings into social and affordable housing through the Better Buildings Programme (BBP). Under this programme the City Council repossessed buildings whose arrears amounted to more than their market value and sold them to pre-approved developers at reduced rates (Zack et al. 2009). The Johannesburg Housing Company (JHC), the largest social housing provider in the inner-city, acquired several of its buildings through this programme.

Social housing caters to households earning between R3500 (\$250) and R7000 (\$500) per month, whilst affordable housing targets the ‘gap market’ – households earning roughly between R7000 and R15000 (\$1070), according to current measurements (Centre for Affordable Housing Finance in Africa 2015). Social housing companies are run as independent, non-profit entities, but are extensively subsidised by the government and its associated finance agencies (HDA 2013). Combined with the top-up finance available from agencies such as the GPF, it is possible for social housing institutions in the inner-city to get up to 70% of the initial costs of a housing project subsidised. However, these grants are once-off payments and only cover the up-front development costs. Social housing companies subsequently have to recoup their operating costs and fund their day-to-day activities through the rents which their tenants pay. Thus, although social housing is state-subsidised, it is still run on strict commercial principles.

Private sector companies providing affordable or ‘gap’ housing are not subject to the same levels of regulation and have not been supported as extensively by the state, although

some did acquire properties through the BBP and the first affordable housing projects in the inner-city were financed almost entirely by the NHFC. Other agencies such as Agence Francaise de Developpement (AFD) have supported affordable housing projects and tax breaks available through the Urban Development Zone contribute to keeping rentals at reduced rates. Thus, even in a largely market-driven approach to urban renewal and housing provision, the state has maintained a regulatory and proactive role and is helping to subsidise and facilitate housing provision in the inner-city.

### ***Limitations of the regeneration process and new exclusions***

However, whilst substantial amounts of housing have been created, significant improvements have been made to areas of the inner-city and state agencies and housing companies have made concerted efforts to cater to households in the low-to-middle income range, the regeneration process also has several significant flaws which have to be noted. As the drive for urban regeneration has gathered momentum, many communities have been evicted from buildings. These evictions have frequently been brutal, and scenes of people being tossed onto the streets alongside their belongings were all too common in the early 2000s (COHRE 2005). Even when not overtly visible and violent, indirect displacement has also been common as property costs and rentals have increased and many of the most vulnerable and in-need people have either been forced out of the area or into derelict properties on the periphery of the inner-city (Murray 2011).

As authorities and property owners have tried to bring stability and commercial appeal to areas such as the CBD and Braamfontein, there has also been an expansion of private security and heavy-handed policing. Informal traders and homeless people have borne the brunt of these efforts and human rights have frequently been violated (Clarno and Murray 2013; McMichael 2015; Tissington 2009). All of these extremely problematic aspects of regeneration have been dealt with elsewhere, and are therefore not the focus of this paper.

Nevertheless, they do need to be highlighted as serious concerns and immediately show that efforts to extend benefits to some people trample on the rights of others. At the same time, some of the more positive aspects of the regeneration process also need to be acknowledged, particularly the ways in which opportunities for providing social and affordable housing have been provided and capitalised on, and the effects these are having on integrating people who were previously denied opportunities to live in centrally-located housing into the urban core.

### **Integration, improved access and urban transformation**

In the context of Johannesburg's enduring geographies of fragmentation, inequality and segregation, integrating people into central areas is a significant step towards realising urban citizenship. Whilst social housing is more expensive and supports households in higher income brackets than those qualifying for free state housing, it is promoted because of the more extensive benefits it affords recipients and the contribution it makes to realising aspects of urban citizenship and government's densification and integration priorities. These priorities inform the way loans are made and projects are approved by agencies providing finance.

### ***Access to amenities, employment and services***

Residents living in social and affordable housing in the inner-city are benefiting extensively from this more holistic approach. In Johannesburg, employment opportunities are concentrated around the CBD and in the northern regions of the city (Gotz and Todes 2014). Several interviewees thus explain how their lives are made easier by being close to transport connections which take them to their places of employment. For example, one tenant notes,

'It's easy for me to get taxis and the shops are around me. If I knock off late at work I just take one taxi, instead of two or three to get to the lokshin [township].... It's very easy here in Jozi. I don't have stress' (Tenant Four, Cavendish Court, CBD, 09/05/2013).

Many others tenants repeat this narrative and emphasise how they are able to save money, despite the relatively high costs of accommodation. For example, another points out ‘In Thembisa [a township situated in Johannesburg’s East Rand] we spend too much on transport but now we can save, expenses are gone. We are saving a lot’ (Tenant Two, Cavendish Court, CBD, 09/05/2013). Several younger interviewees moved to the inner-city to study and 19 out of the 57 tenants interviewed explicitly stated they chose to reside in the area because of the nearby employment opportunities. Many of those in the interview sample who were in formal employment (some interviewees were studying, some were not working because their partners did) were employed in jobs located in or around the inner-city, including working at government offices or banks or as security guards or domestic workers in the near-by suburbs.

Interviewees also enthuse about the facilities and infrastructure available in the inner-city, and contrast these starkly with the townships, which for many still represent places of hardship<sup>2</sup>:

‘I just take my bags and go to the shops. I don’t travel. By the location I must take transport [to do basic shopping]’ (Tenant Two, Lake Success, Hillbrow, 01/03/2013)

‘My needs are so close to me when I’m here. When I’m at location I have to catch taxi when I want to go to town – actually everything I want when I’m around [the inner-city] I can get it. It’s very better’ (Tenant One, Rochester, Jeppestown, 26/06/2013).

It thus becomes clear that access to housing in the inner-city is aiding in changing residential patterns, improving spatial integration and thus helping to realise some of the promises of the post-apartheid period, for some households at least. Opportunities to live centrally, to access jobs, services and to make something of the city are crucial elements of

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<sup>2</sup> The townships’ ongoing association with deprivation and apartheid-era forms of segregation is illustrated by tenants’ retention of the term ‘location’ or ‘lokshin’, terms used during colonial and apartheid times to refer to areas which were designated as black urban settlements. Whilst depictions of the townships in abject terms have rightly been challenged and alternative narratives have been provided (Dlamini 2009), the tenants involved in this study persisted in painting them as unpleasant, impoverished and remote places.

urban citizenship (Huchzermeyer 2011; Simone 2008). They are not end points in realising the right to the city, but vital initial steps towards achieving this ideal (Parnell and Pieterse 2010), and the provision of social and affordable housing in the inner-city should be thought of as part of this process.

### *A more sociable and welcoming inner-city*

Beyond access to resources, urban citizenship also entails being able to make a life out of the city and live in ways which people find meaningful (Purcell 2002; Gilbert and Dikeç 2008). As more people are becoming integrated into the central areas the apartheid past is being left behind and experiences of the city and ways of residing in it are starting to change. A once racially-exclusive area has become a landing point for immigrants from across the country and wider African continent, a site of short-term social mobility for working-class black households and a place of communal and family life for people who were previously denied presence in it.

After the end of apartheid, inner-city neighbourhoods such as Hillbrow and Berea were in severe states of decay and anomie, with extremely high levels of crime, broken infrastructure and tense social relations. As the regeneration process has taken hold, however, areas of the inner-city are stabilising and becoming more welcoming to families. The way JHC's residents' households have changed over time illustrate this: whereas in 2006 46% of their tenants were single people, either living alone or sharing units, in 2012 34% of tenants' households consisted of nuclear families; a further 33% of households were made up of couples who did not have or live with children, whilst only 21% were occupied by single adults sharing units (JHC, n.d.). This pattern is repeated in my research sample, where, out of the 57 tenants interviewed, 42 were living with their families, whilst only 10 were living alone or with people they were not related to.

Housing providers, although utilising strict management practices and often harsh measures to enforce rental collection (as will be detailed later) make concerted efforts to cater for the new family living arrangements in their buildings. Social housing companies provide extensive tenant support services, including social work and counselling services, extra-curricular programmes and supervision for children. Some private companies have also invested in educational and child-care facilities in their buildings or the wider area, and together private and social housing companies support the eKhaya Project. This is a non-profit Residential Improvement District (RID) which focuses on community-building, social support, security, urban management and infrastructure maintenance (HDA 2012). Through eKhaya, events for children are organised during school holidays, cultural programmes are provided for residents of the district and one of the few green spaces in Hillbrow, eKhaya Park (located on Claim Street), is maintained and monitored. Whilst not all residents participate in these activities and many continue to feel the area lacks social cohesion, those who do make use of these services and facilities are able to enjoy new possibilities for and experiences of urban citizenship, belonging and inclusion in the city.

### **Everyday endurance and restricted urban lives**

However, even as transitions are occurring and new opportunities for integration are being realised, significant limitations remain in place which affect the ways in which tenants experience life in the inner-city and the wider urban fabric. In the South African context, experiences in space not only symbolise, but also continue to reproduce the daily struggles and ongoing inequalities which characterise city life in the aftermath of apartheid. There has been undeniable social progress and improvement in the democratic era. Notably, state welfare has been dramatically expanded and, as the black middle class grows, people are enjoying new experiences of residential choice and opportunities for both physical and social mobility (Chipkin 2012; Southall 2014). A progressive human rights regime which defines

access to decent accommodation, basic services and education as rights the state is obligated to progressively realise has also been established and rigorously defended (Wilson 2010). However, despite these positive changes, South Africa remains deeply divided and unequal. Employment rates, income distribution and human development indices are still deeply racially skewed, with white people enjoying the best living conditions by far (Seekings and Natrass 2005; Everatt 2014). Residential patterns also continue to replicate apartheid-era geographies, with millions of black people still living in economically marginalised townships or informal settlements, if they reside in urban areas, or former homelands in the rural parts of the country. In Johannesburg, there are disturbing correlations between poverty, informal housing and population distribution by race, with the bulk of the black population concentrated in the southern parts of the city, which also have the highest proportions of people living in informal housing and the highest rates of unemployment and deprivation (Harrison et al. 2015; Everatt 2014). An inclusive city, equality and shared experiences of urban citizenship thus remain elusive (Harrison, Huchzermeyer, and Mayekiso 2003).

### ***Temporary geographies and limited alternatives***

Because of the stubborn endurance of these patterns, Oldfield and Greyling (2015) argue that poor communities who are waiting for formal housing to be delivered by the state live in conditions of permanent temporariness. They construe this condition as both disabling and agentive, as citizens are reliant on a largely indifferent and opaque state, but simultaneously make 'quiet encroachments' (2015, 1100) which allow them to counter state inactivity and secure footholds in the urban space economy. Likewise, the tenants I interviewed in inner-city Johannesburg also live in conditions of temporariness and inhabit what Kihato (2013) terms 'in-between' geographies. Whilst they gain social mobility by choosing to live in the area, and their agency and resilience are evident in the ways in which they create new forms of community and cohesion (discussed in more detail in the latter sections of the paper),



hardship, endurance and marginalisation also feature prominently in their experiences. Their pursuit of the gains of urban citizenship are thus not without perils and sacrifices.

Despite the positive changes which have been made, the majority of tenants interviewed were not enthusiastic about living in the inner-city, and, as other studies have found, regard it as a temporary destination (Landau 2006; Winkler 2008; Kihato 2013). Tenants' decisions to move to the area, and consequent relationships with it, are results of the difficult quests to secure livelihoods and reflections of the ongoing spatial fragmentation and inequalities which characterise contemporary Johannesburg. When asked why they chose to move to the inner-city, tenants frequently cited the lack of other affordable options and the ongoing difficulties living in the townships present. As one tenant explains, 'Hillbrow is the only place, the only solution. If you stay in the location the money spent on rent and transport is equal to what I pay here' (Tenant Three, Lake Success, Hillbrow, 01/03/2013). Furthermore, another explains that he came to live in Hillbrow because 'It was the cheapest place I could find, I can't go to Sandton or Morningside [upmarket suburbs in the northern region of Johannesburg]' (Tenant Seven, Lake Success, Hillbrow 01/03/2013).

The majority of tenants therefore draw geographies for themselves which divide Johannesburg into three: the poor and underdeveloped townships, the expensive and beyond-reach formerly-white suburbs, and the unpleasant but accessible inner-city<sup>3</sup>. On the one hand this emphasises the importance of affordable inner-city accommodation and reaffirms the positive development that more housing options are being created in the area. On the other hand, the harsh and difficult realities of Johannesburg's inner-city mean that tenants have to endure conditions which are far from ideal and have tendencies to regard themselves as stuck in a place they do not want to be in. Despite improvements, the inner-city remains troubled

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<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, other residential areas and options across the city. What is important here is that these descriptions and geographies are being drawn by the tenants being interviewed. They are therefore not presented as factual descriptions of the city, but as indicators of the subjective experiences and ways in which tenants have constructed the post-apartheid city.

by physical decay, poor levels of service and maintenance, overcrowding, inadequate social amenities and high levels of crime. Tenants living in the area therefore have to constantly negotiate these conditions and adjust their everyday realities to suit them. Negotiations, trade-offs and compromises are part of urban life for people in other parts of the city, or cities everywhere, too. However, the difficulties people face take on a particular form in the inner-city, and signify how it represents upward mobility and improved urban access, but is also a place of violence, vulnerability and privation.

For example, one tenant relates how she was witness to extreme violence and this has affected how she navigates the city and makes use of its public spaces:

‘I saw a person being shot back there at Tudhope [one of the main streets in Berea] so...It’s difficult but you have to learn to deal with it and take care of yourself, you need to put yourself in order; certain time such things they make you stay in the house’ (Tenant Three, Ridge Plaza, Berea 30/05/2013).

Another (somewhat hyperbolically) also emphasises how proximity to violence is an all too real part of life for people in the inner-city, but that it is something they are willing to endure due to the locational advantages they accrue: ‘It’s not safe here, people get killed every day. But it’s nice, you can get everything for cheap, it’s near everywhere, schools and taxi ranks’ (Tenant One, Cavendish Court, 09/05/2013). The benefits of urban citizenship thus do not come cheap.

### ***Agency, endurance and accepting difficult circumstances***

Tenants have generally become inured to these circumstances and accept them as the way things are. As one reflects, ‘For now I’m stuck here, but I don’t have a problem’ (Tenant Seven, Lake Success, 01/03/2013). Putting it more starkly, another states, ‘I’m not staying in Hillbrow because I like drugs and crime – it’s affordability’ (Tenant Nine, Lake Success, Hillbrow, 01/03/2013). Indicating that they have accepted their conditions, and consequently

have adjusted to them, another tenant explains, 'it's just that you have to accept the condition, the way of living where you are. You have to accept' (Tenant Two, Ridge Plaza, 30/05/2013), whilst another sums up the way many relate to the inner-city by stating pragmatically, 'It's not a place I like, but I can live with it' (Tenant Six, Rochester, 26/06/2013).

Despite not necessarily wanting to live in the area, tenants in the inner-city work hard to continue to be able to afford the housing they are in, and this constant economic struggle plays a significant role in shaping their experiences of the area and the forms of sociality they engage in. Whilst the accommodation being provided is partially state-subsidised, the commercial imperatives of housing companies and escalating costs of basic services mean that rentals remain relatively expensive. Although some are able to save money, others complained about the expenses they accrue. One tenant in for-profit accommodation points out, 'the main problem that we are having is the rent issue, it's affecting us big time; it's putting a strain on our lives' (Tenant One, Ridge Plaza, Berea, 30/05/2013). Another tenant also exclaims, 'I'm paying too much, the money is too much! The rates are too high here. Times are expensive' (Tenant Three, Constantine, Hillbrow, 29/05/2013). These problems are also shared by social housing tenants, as this interviewee indicates: 'Every month people move out because of rent and electricity' (Tenant Two, Lake Success, Hillbrow, 05/03/2013).

In addition to creating stress and forcing some people to move, these financial burdens also have effects on their experiences of the city and the ways they interact with its spaces. Because tenants are predominantly concerned with their economic survival and getting by in stressful circumstances, their abilities or desires to engage actively with the spaces in which they live are limited. Many complained about and were frustrated by the lack of social amenities and recreation facilities and were unaware of or unable to participate in the activities offered by social housing companies or eKhaya. Consequently, most tenants'

energy and agency is directed towards working and finding ways to get by. As one bitterly complains, 'it's like you are working only for paying the rent. What next about life [sic]? Nothing you can do' (Tenant Three, Ridge Plaza, Berea, 30/05/2013). Another also complains, 'There's no space here, there's nothing, just for your own living, just to come sleep, eat and go to school, that's the space that we have here' (Tenant One, Cavendish Court, 09/05/2013).

Thus the inner-city for many tenants is experienced as a place where financial concerns, limited means, difficult living conditions and endurance prevail. Although their lives are not without instances of friendship, hope, solidarities and forms of resilience (as will be shown later), their experiences are largely characterised by feelings of detachment and resignation, and their agency is shaped by having to endure a harsh, far-from ideal living environment.

Findings from the Gauteng City Region Observatory's Quality of Life survey emphasise this. According to the latest survey, residents living in the two wards where the bulk of my interviews were conducted experience higher levels of resignation, alienation and despondency than residents in other parts of the city. For instance, 32% of residents in Berea and 24% in the ward containing sections of Hillbrow and Jeppestown agree with the statement 'Nobody cares about people like me'. Furthermore, 47% of residents in Hillbrow and 36% of residents in Berea feel that they cannot influence developments in their communities. In contrast, across Gauteng as a whole 31% of respondents felt that they could not influence developments in their communities, whilst the total percentage agreeing with this sentiment in the City of Johannesburg is 27%<sup>4</sup>. The post-apartheid inner-city is thus a place which, although providing options and possibilities for upward mobility and better

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<sup>4</sup> Gauteng City Region Observatory, Quality of Life IV, 2015, retrieved from <https://gcro3.wits.ac.za/wardprofileviewer/>

living conditions, also comes with difficulties and challenges which affect people's social relations, horizons of possibility and experiences of space.

### **Regulation, surveillance and everyday solidarities**

Tenant's experiences of detachment and disengagement from the areas in which they reside are augmented by the conditions inside renovated buildings. Although housing companies have made substantial improvements to the built environment and take proactive steps to cater to the needs of tenants, they also engage in disciplinary practices which affect the lived reality of residential buildings and the types of communal engagements which happen in them. These restrictions, whilst not removing all sense of agency and frequently necessary to enable diverse people to live together in relative harmony, compound feelings of resignation and reinforce feelings of passivity amongst tenants. They also inscribe tenants into a hierarchy in which property owners and commercial considerations dictate living conditions and social experiences and some of the rights afforded to tenants are negated.

### ***Security and surveillance***

All renovated housing developments are tightly controlled and highly secured. The entrances are fortified with metal turnstiles which can only be opened using electronic tags or fingerprint readers, and are watched by security guards 24 hours a day. Visitors seeking entrance to buildings have to sign in with security guards and the people they are coming to visit must come downstairs to collect them. It is therefore impossible to gain entry to buildings without tenants' and security guards' consent.

*Image 1: Entrances to social housing buildings, Hillbrow (photographs by the author)*



*Image 2: Entrance to a communal housing building, Jeppestown (photograph by the author)*



*Image 3: CCTV surveillance equipment inside social housing buildings, Hillbrow (photographs by the author)*



Whilst these arrangements appear draconian, residents tend to welcome them and point them out as the features they are most enthusiastic about. However, housing companies also use security to regulate their tenants and create restrictive environments. The numbers of people living in apartments are tightly controlled and housing companies (both social and for-profit) do not allow guests to stay overnight without pre-arranged permission. Whilst this access control is generally welcomed by tenants, it can also restrict their abilities to assist friends or family members who need temporary places to stay and is at odds with the fluid circumstances of many people living in the inner-city (see Mayson and Charlton, 2015).

### ***Exercising housing companies' authority***

The emphasis on access control is also part of a regime which is at pains to enforce rental collection and ensure that the commercial principles which define housing provision in the inner-city are not challenged. Prospective tenants are screened very carefully. In order to secure accommodation tenants have to provide proof of employment or proof that they have regular incomes. In the absence of letters from an employer, an affidavit signed by the police specifying the amount a prospective tenant earns per month has to be provided. New tenants must also pay one-month's rent up front as well as a deposit, which is usually equivalent to

another months' rent; all companies insist that payments have to be made through banks and do not deal in cash. In addition, tenants must have official South African identification documents or asylum seeker or permanent residence permits. These measures not only exclude large sections of the inner-city community, who survive on much smaller and sporadic incomes and who frequently lack formal identification documents and access to bank accounts, they also create a situation where commercial arrangements and housing companies' authority are not challenged.

There have been intense struggles around housing and control of buildings in the inner-city. In recent years landmark court rulings governing eviction processes and ensuring that people cannot be evicted if adequate alternative housing is not available have come into force (Tissington and Wilson 2011; Wilson 2010). There has also been an evolution in the framework governing rental arrangements and protecting tenants from unlawful eviction (SERI and CUBES 2013). Prior to these developments, rental boycotts, active tenant committees, illegal evictions and building hijackings were widespread and shaped the spatial politics of the inner-city (Beavon 2004; Morris 1999b; Murray 2008). Building hijackings, in particular, continue to haunt the imaginations of housing providers and play prominent roles in the shaping their management practices.

The term 'building hijacking' is a contentious and confusing one. It broadly speaks to processes whereby landlords lose control of their buildings, particularly their ability to collect rental income. In the early and mid-1990s there were instances of armed gangs taking over buildings using violence and forcing tenants to pay rent to them rather than the legitimate owners. In most cases, however, 'hijackings' took place when tenants resolved or were convinced to withhold rent from landlords and pay monthly fees into trust accounts set up by other parties who promised to look after maintenance on the tenants' behalfs. Many of these trusts were illegitimate or were taken over by criminal syndicates who pocketed the money



and gained de facto control of the buildings<sup>5</sup>. In other instances they led to conflicts over ownership and management, and led to many owners abandoning their properties and buildings falling behind on their payments to the City, and subsequently being disconnected from water and electricity services.

Housing companies have formulated their management strategies according to these 'institutional memories' and make sure that they have close control over what happens inside their buildings. Housing supervisors live in the buildings and interact constantly with tenants. They are generally chosen for their interpersonal skills and abilities to relate to, but still exercise authority over, the tenants and they keep close watch over the mood and levels of satisfaction inside buildings. In addition, companies use strict measures to ensure that rent collection is continuous and tenants have no option but to pay. Individual evictions are relatively difficult and timely to secure and have to go before a court or the Rental Housing Tribunal. They are, therefore, the measure of last resort. To avoid getting to a stage where evictions are necessary, housing companies institute a variety of punitive measures to make sure their rent is collected. Tenants who fail to pay their rent are first issued with a written warning, then have their lights switched off as further warning and are 'locked out' of their apartments if they still fail to pay after receiving a final letter of demand. According to one interviewee, on average the company he is employed by switches off lights in approximately 100 apartments a month (07/08/2012). The legality of these practices is dubious, as the Rental Housing Act stipulates that a landlord may not cut off water and electricity without a court order (SERI and CUBES 2013). However, tenants interviewed did not complain about or query them, indicating that the housing companies enjoy high levels of authority inside their buildings and that citizens' rights remain difficult to realise and defend.

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<sup>5</sup> The film *Jerusalem: Gangsters Paradise* (Ziman 2008), provides a dramatised, but relatively accurate portrayal of this activity and was cited frequently by property owners and managers when they were asked to describe what the inner-city was like in the early stages of the regeneration process.

Access control is also used to enforce rental collection, discipline tenants and single out those who are behind on their rent. Again, with little regard for the law (which specifies that landlords may not lock tenants out of their apartments without first obtaining court orders (SERI and CUBES 2013)) some companies employ strategies where, if a tenant is behind on their rent, their access to the building is deactivated. Once this happens, they have to go to the company's rental office and start making payments on the outstanding amounts before they will be let in. Although tenants are not expected to settle all arrears immediately, the process makes sure that the company is monitoring the tenants and ensuring that they pay. This not only helps avoid evictions and allows rental collection to carry on relatively seamlessly, it also makes each individual tenant subject to scrutiny by the company and places companies' commercial considerations ahead of legal procedures and tenants' hard-won rights.

### *Negating spaces for tenant mobilisation*

The drive to individualise tenants and impose housing companies' authority is pursued further by prohibiting tenants from forming committees inside the buildings. Aside from one, all the companies in whose buildings interviews were conducted do not allow tenants to form committees and insist on dealing with them as individuals. This also is a violation of the rights afforded to tenants as spelled out by the Gauteng Unfair Practices Act (SERI and CUBES 2013). Whilst companies are open to suggestions about ways to improve the buildings, they are adamant that committees will not be recognised, particularly if they venture into challenging the commercial arrangements in the buildings. As one private developer explains,

'We don't encourage tenant committees because they tend to flare up when there are service interruptions or difficulties in the buildings and it becomes a platform for a whole variety of a shopping list of issues and it often becomes very political and polarised. Obviously everyone wants to have free housing and accommodation for nothing but

commercially the building needs to be viable financially and to run at a profit because it is a private sector enterprise' (14/05/2013).

Although the majority of tenants interviewed were unconcerned about the lack of avenues for voicing complaints collectively and may prefer anonymity, not having to engage with their neighbours and strict management which keeps the buildings peaceful and running smoothly, some tenants did complain about being prevented from organising inside the buildings and note that these practices contribute to feelings of estrangement and passivity. For example, one tenant complains that 'Everybody minds his business in this building. We are not united as tenants, we don't even have tenant meetings' (Tenant Four, Greatermans, CBD, 24/05/2013). Similarly, another bemoans the way the management company running the building he resides in refuse to deal with tenants on a collective level: 'Trafalgar, they don't want us as tenants to meet, converge, convene, compare notes and go to them as a team; they want us to come individually. And that's something I don't like' (Tenant One, Ridge Plaza, Berea, 30/05/2013).

### ***Solidarity, friendship and everyday agency***

Therefore, the management approaches inside residential buildings actively negate some significant rights and contribute to reducing levels of engagement and collective mobilisation amongst tenants. Of course, tenants are not passive in the face of this authority, as demonstrated by those who questioned these arrangements. However, the general air which was shared amongst most interviewees was one of despondency or disinterest. There is also nothing to prohibit tenants from meeting outside of their buildings. However, the knowledge that their grievances will not be listened to and their committees not recognised discourages them from doing so.

However, experiences, social dynamics and everyday life are never reducible to one narrative or line of analysis. Processes of making homes and forms of habitation re-invent

spaces (Lefebvre 1991; Stanek 2011) and ordinary actions are assertions of agency, citizenship, rights to the city and claims of belonging (Staeheli et al. 2012; Purcell 2002). Small acts of friendships, concern and kindness too make urban life viable and shape the affective structures of cities (Thrift 2005).

Although experiences of alienation, social distance and despondency were the predominant narratives which emerged in the interviews, some tenants did draw attention to the ways in which they have been able to cultivate relationships with one another. For example, although most responded in the negative when asked if tenants in the building socialise, two social housing tenants reply:

‘Quite a lot – there are sports teams in the buildings, courses to bring teenagers together, in-house sports, pre-school and a crèche. I support the netball teams and do talks and career advice with teenagers’ (Tenant Six, Lake Success, Hillbrow 01/03/2013);

‘We all know each other, we can play soccer together, children can do anything. People participate; we elders have two hours playing on Sundays’ (Tenant Three, Lake Success, Hillbrow 01/03/2013).

Whilst these responses were not the norm, and, as mentioned earlier, some tenants were not even aware of the social programs and childcare facilities available, they do point to emerging forms of everyday cohesion and communal solidarities. These solidarities, improved conditions created by urban regeneration efforts and the new-found mobility and choice afforded to people are allowing them to establish more settled, stable and comfortable ways of being in the inner-city. Indicating the break with apartheid-enforced geographies, one tenant reflects, ‘I’ve tried going and living in Soweto and came back. I only feel comfortable here in this area’ (Tenant Two, Greatermans, 24/05/2013). Another emphasises that the ways in which people are able to forge new personal relationships in the spaces in which they are living assist them in feeling at home and dealing with the harsh environment they find themselves in: ‘Ja it does [feel like home], even though my family is not here but with the

people that we live with, I have friends around, I think it feels like home' (Tenant Nine, Rochester, 26/06/2013).

Urban regeneration and housing provision are thus assisting some black working class households in acquiring forms of stability and cohesion in the inner-city, facets of life which were severely damaged and disrupted, first by apartheid influx control laws and then by the severe decay and social breakdown which areas like Hillbrow and Berea experienced. As people have become more settled in residential buildings, they have also been able to find new forms of belonging, community and ways of being resilient in the face of hardships and challenges. Another example is provided by a housing supervisor, who remembers a time when a couple living in his building were taken ill. He recalls how their neighbours took it upon themselves to cook and clean for them, look after their children and even raised money to pay for them to travel home to the Northern Cape. He reflects on how this surprised him and changed the way he felt about the area and the people living in it:

'I got that sense that there is a community here, because I had only been here for eight months or something, but that sense of community, that sense of wanting to help each other, I saw it that time and I said 'People, they are living in a community here'' (P 22/02/2013).

Moments such as these reflect the constant reinvention which happens through everyday life, and demonstrate how tenants exercise their agency in small but significant ways. Whilst many tenants can be regarded as having tenuous relationships with the inner-city, these activities and the bonds which are emerging are allowing them to make homes for themselves and are recreating it as a sociable environment, even in the face of structural challenges. Tenants are able to make homes because of the improvements which have been made to the housing stock and built environment, but are also able to do so because of their creative capacities to inhabit and appropriate spaces. As they do so, they invent new forms of belonging and social solidarity for themselves and inscribe the inner-city with new meanings, as it becomes a site of mobility, integration, associational life and racial transformation. They

show that ordinary forms of urban belonging and citizenship, whilst not negating larger structural inequalities and deprivations, can help compensate for areas of lack and make life bearable, and even enjoyable for those who remain marginalised.

## **Conclusion**

It is, therefore, not possible to subsume tenants' experiences under a single narrative. Life in the inner-city represents a variety of things – it is a site of possibilities, opportunities, social advancement and transformation, but is simultaneously a place of hardship, endurance, marginalisation and resignation. It is therefore, a mirror of the post-apartheid situation, in which progress, new experiences and change sit alongside old and new forms of dispossession, marginalisation, struggle and inequality. The marketised approaches to housing provision which predominate ensure that tenants' rights are easily violated and that they remain in marginal positions. Financial pressures and the costs of accommodation also drive them to devote the bulk of their time and concerns to working and enduring difficult conditions, and limit their capacities and desires for engaging with the spaces around them.

However, whilst in some respects tenants' capacities to be active participants in their urban environments and to enjoy the fruits of inclusive urban citizenship are being restricted, in others it becomes clear how state-subsidised housing is furthering lower-income households' access to the city, integration into urban society and abilities to participate in transforming a formerly racially-exclusive area. Securing stable, comfortable and affordable housing is allowing lower-income households opportunities to live in spaces they were previously denied and to find forms of safety and belonging which were lacking in the decades when the area was in a severely decayed and anomic state. Through urban regeneration which has focussed on and been made possible by the provision of social and affordable housing, buildings once reserved for white residents have now become fulcrums of black family life. These buildings are thus physical manifestations of the racial and social

transformations which are being lived out on an everyday basis in the post-apartheid period. They are also sites in which tenants, although restricted in troubling ways, also exercise their agency and assert the creativity inherent in everyday forms of co-existence and habitation.

The case presented here thus not only affirms the complexity and ambiguity of both citizenship and agency, but also calls attention to the importance of centrally-located, affordable housing and the role the state can and should play in enhancing urban dwellers' rights to the city and inclusion in urban society. In a context defined by urban fragmentation, segregation and uneven or incomplete citizenship, this becomes an ever-more pressing issue and one that needs to be accelerated in more inclusive, less market-driven ways. The expansion of the supply of affordable rental housing is a crucial step towards integrating South African cities and overcoming the legacies of apartheid. Whilst the process documented in this paper is not without its shortcomings or limitations, the positive results it has engendered also need to be recognised and practical measures need to be introduced to build on these in both government policies and the ongoing regeneration process.

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