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Research Reports

Experiencing Space and Place in Grahamstown's Informal Settlements

Jan K. Coetzee

Research Report Series No. 1
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by

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Institute of Social and Economic Research
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August 1999

Research Report Series No. 1
ISBN No. 0-86810-361-6
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The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development (Pretoria) and of the Joint Research Committee (Rhodes University) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this report and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development or to Rhodes University.
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1. **Physical space and cultural expression**

The spatial settings within which people live their everyday lives play an important role in the way they experience their lifeworld. Space and place influence human life; physical space shapes some of the characteristics of a given society. It provides a framework of possibilities among which individuals as well as societies exercise choices. Space influences human life because it is one of the basic factors in terms of which one masters the world.

Space and access to space are things fought for, because they also mean power. To deny people free access to space or to confine people in a defined area is a common manifestation of power. Michel Foucault’s studies on the socio-political implications of a spatial layout illustrate this point. In his book on the *Grand Enfermement* (dealing with the incarceration of lunatics in the XVIIIth century and later, Foucault, 1972:9), he deals with the relations between power and knowledge, the discourses they generate and the spaces they create. Several other issues are related to the discourse on space, such as inequality with regard to class, race and ethnicity, gender and other statuses.

Cultural expressions of space are not restricted to the political level and to power. All over the world physical space has been integrated into full-blown cosmologies. For instance, in the case of the Vanuatu Islands the mythical history of the creation of the world and all its contents (people, animals, spirits or stones) is embodied in the landscape (Bonnemaison, 1986:2). A rock on the beach stopped there to rest during the chaotic time of the creation of the island. Today, this is where people and spirits rest. Thus, to follow one of the paths circling the island is to tell and re-enact the story in which it was created. Bonnemaison applied this conception of space to other societies as well. While not as exotic and evident as in the Pacific Islands, the conceptions which European nation-states have of their territory are often also of a sacred nature. Another example of the rich content of the concept space comes to the fore when one looks at the relations between people and nature in most of the Western world. Here space is often a cultural construct and it draws, amongst others, from history and from religion. People, for instance, collectively proclaim that God gave them their country.

Geographers have for a long time devoted themselves to an analysis of physical space, of
spatial patterns, of spatial repartition of phenomena and innovations. Some have turned towards a more culturally-oriented approach (Claval, 1992:5; Cosgrove, 1984:7), underlining the interaction between space and culture, and the embodiment of this interaction in the landscape. This is also true with regard to other social sciences - they emphasise the cultural dimensions of space and place. After millennia of human occupation - going back to hunters-gatherers - the landscape is not entirely natural any more. It is a product of the natural conditions and of the choices people have made, according to their needs, habits and beliefs - in short, it reflects their Weltanschauung. For this reason we incorporate the cultural dimension into our analysis of conceptions of place and space in the informal settlements of greater Grahamstown.

This project deals with all the issues mentioned so far: physical space, perceptions of place and space, as well as the cultural context surrounding these. An analysis of informal housing needs to draw from different disciplines within the field of social sciences. Some of the main political and ideological conflicts this country has known centred around competition for space. This applies to both physical and cultural space.

In South African township areas the cultural reading of space is obvious. The very idea of a township comes from a culture where segregation between different "races" was once seen as essential to the survival of a specific group (White people). A specific space was created for the purpose of segregation: town planners designed separate residential areas, complete with buffer zones in-between to enforce the separation. Some referred to this as "policeable town planning" to control people. Apart from the obvious political factors, cultural influences are clearly visible in the township landscape. The systematic use, by town planners as well as by squatters, of detached individual houses is a cultural phenomenon. In several European countries, collective and/or rented housing is preferred. In some areas in West Africa, people tend to build several separated rooms or even houses on a big fenced plot, creating yards (Gervais-Lambony, 1994:10).

Another cultural phenomenon is the specific kind of ornamental gardens as well as vegetable gardens in informal settlements in and around Grahamstown. Ornamental gardens may have their origin in importing ideas from other groups in South Africa (for instance the importance of flower gardens for many White English- and Afrikaans-speaking communities), or in personal tastes. Vegetable gardens may be the result of urban poverty forcing people to
grow crops, or the importance of informal businesses, or old habits of people coming from rural areas and now in transition between two lifestyles. It is clear that the hilly landscape around Grahamstown has been shaped by such cultural ideas as well as by the soil and climate.

The culture of a society is the way of life of its members. It is a collection of ideas, a design for living. The culture of a society provides guidelines in terms of which people’s living together can operate effectively. A shared culture enables members of society to communicate or to cooperate. Without it there would be no effective human society because culture defines accepted ways of behaviour. It provides the members of society with a framework within which they can live their everyday life. This everyday life, in turn, takes place within a particular physical context, space or landscape. The relationship between landscape and culture is a dialectical one: on the one hand the landscape bears the mark of a particular culture (or of particular cultures), on the other hand it contributes to it. The landscape can be the mould of a particular culture.

In this research the relationship between people and the space they occupy will be looked at. In doing so, we shall see how people enter into a relationship with their environment in order to create out of material at their disposal, a shelter wherein they can live. By erecting a structure which serves as a house, the people involved in this project do essentially the same as other people in other parts of the world, who create a dwelling that provides protection against the climate and the elements in nature.

A question to be raised, is to what extent their (i.e. the people involved in this project) entering into a relationship with their environment, was forced into a particular direction because of a set of political and economic factors. What are the political and economic factors which impact on the manner of building houses in the informal residential areas of Grahamstown? Traditional housing in France, for example, differs from region to region and has been shaped over long periods of time by the climate, family structures, the availability of land, modes of production, etc. One finds that large vine-growing families from the Mediterranean South of France live in fairly big villages; individual farmers of Brittany dwell in small, slate-roofed houses which are isolated among enclosed fields; pastoral communities in the Alps undertake seasonal moves up or down the slopes of the mountains and share their space during winter with
their cattle. The way in which these families and/or communities have come to shape their lifeworlds, was not exposed to the same kind of determining factors as, for instance, in South Africa in general and in Grahamstown in particular. Notwithstanding political and economic determinants, it is clear that residents of informal houses in the Grahamstown area draw to a large extent from tradition with regards to the kind of shelters which they build (cf. the many mud-and-stick constructions).

Similarly the settlement of people impacts on nature. Elements of the environment inform certain choices, but people interpret their natural environment and will erect shelters in terms of these interpretations. In addition there are the issues of how people orientate themselves in terms of important landmarks, what kind of representation they have of the future they are moving towards and which values do they draw from or attribute to their physical environment. The landscape surrounding people, contains and reflects cultural information. Important landmarks express aspects of life: the past, the present and the future.

2. What shall we call their houses?

This research focuses on perceptions of space and place among people who have been occupying land illegally within the greater Grahamstown and who have erected informal houses on this land. We use the concept “informal houses” in those cases where shelters were constructed outside of formal housing delivery structures or mechanisms (cf. Harrison, 1992:14 and Crankshaw, 1993:31). Since the land on which the informal houses were erected, was occupied illegally, people often refer to those who erect these structures as squatters. They regard themselves as permanent residents, although they do not rule out the possibility that they might be relocated at some stage. All the informal houses included in this research are free-standing structures and should be distinguished from those illegal and informal shacks or outbuildings to be found in the backyards of formal township stands.

Homelessness amongst Africans in the Albany Region of the Eastern Cape Province is not a recent phenomenon. For decades a shortage of houses lead to the building of illegal structures in the backyards of formal township stands. After the abolition of influx control laws in the middle of 1986 the number of people squatting in these backyards increased even further.
More and more people left the "homeland" territories of the Transkei and Ciskei in search of employment and a better life and some of these ended up in what was known as Rini.

An equally significant number of Africans, born on farms around Grahamstown, left these farms or were forced off the farms, and ended up in the Rini area. The processes of urbanisation and squatting should, however, not be related in a direct, causal way. There is no sufficient basis to say that those who come from former homelands or from other areas, make up the majority of those who occupied land illegally and who built informal houses on this occupied land. As will be seen later, the majority of those included in this project, who illegally occupied land in order to erect informal houses, have lived in the Grahamstown area for most of their lives.

They have all been affected by previous stages of official housing policy. The decision of the National Party Government in 1967 to freeze all township development outside "homelands", resulted in the emergence of informal settlements in so-called White South Africa's township areas. This stage of the housing freeze and the emergence of informal
settlement can be dated between 1967 and 1979 (Harrison, 1992:16) and was followed by a gradual acceptance of black urbanisation and of the concept of self-help housing (ibid:17). The 1986 White Paper on Urbanisation of the then Department of Constitutional Development and Planning finally saw urbanisation as an economically beneficial and socially desirable process, but emphasised very strongly the need for a policy of “orderly urbanisation” (ibid:18). In terms of this principle, squatting had been regarded as downright undesirable.

When South Africa entered a new phase in its political development on 2 February 1990, it impacted directly on land reform in general and housing in particular. With the ANC and other groups entering the policy debate on urbanisation the dilemma between trespassing and taking over land on the one hand, and the responsibility towards the homeless on the other, ended up being at the centre of the issues raised concerning democratisation. In the Grahamstown area the plight regarding housing was one of the first issues to be taken up at the dawn of democracy.

A degree of triumphalism accompanied the land invasions in the township areas of Grahamstown. A legitimate leadership, commonly referred to as the Street Committee, organised and administered the occupation of unoccupied land in Rini. This took place in the period 1991-1993. It was the first “constructive” project for a long time. Most of the Street Committees’ energies, efforts and programmes had previously been directed towards protest, defiance, boycott and stayaway. Now they could provide something tangible. In general the Street Committees ensured that relatively low residential density occurred. They also did not interfere in any major way in the daily lives of squatters. None of those whom we spoke to, mentioned any levies that needed to be paid. There was mention of continued involvement of the Street Committees in overseeing life in the informal settlements, although this involvement had been relatively small.

Due to the widespread awareness of the plight of people living in overcrowded conditions in Rini, humanitarian groups as well as religious movements were in general sympathetic towards those who occupied land for informal housing. Even the press ensured that the plight of squatters was publicised. The fact that the unoccupied land that was invaded consisted mainly of empty spaces within the Rini area, contributed to the fact that the invasion had taken place without uproar. No land in private hands was affected and the invasions did not in any significant or direct way have an effect on the lives of people residing in what used to be exclusively white
residential areas. In the end sanity prevailed. No bulldozing of houses took place - probably because authorities realised that by bulldozing the structures, the occupants would not disappear. They would simply put up new structures, probably more dilapidated than the first ones. And they would have been more angry, more hostile.

3. Talking to the squatters

It was our desire to listen to the voices of some of those who decided to move onto land that was unused up to that point and to build their own homes on the stands which were allocated to them. We are referring to a few hundred of squatters who took up the offer of the Street Committees in Grahamstown’s township, Rini, during the early years of the 1990s. These people moved onto stands made available to them and started to build their own homes - without submitting building plans, without notifying any inspector. Their occupying the land coincided with a single movement in space and a single movement in time. But given the fact that this movement coincided with various other factors (such as defiance against existing laws and practices, desperation to have their own place, having been evicted from their previous living place) this relocation implied crossing some important personal borders. The purpose of this research was to hear more about this act of crossing.

The experience and effects of occupying a stand, building a house and living a life in this structure that one calls a home, are long-term and do shape aspects of one’s individual and collective identity. It is part of a greater, dynamic concept. This project sets out to gain an understanding of life in informal settlements. By exploring the accounts given to us in the form of life histories, we hope to move closer to a reconstruction of the different layers of individual and collective identity of those living in informal settlements.

The use of life stories highlight individual experience. It focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences. Their narratives provide us with constructions and reconstructions of aspects of their experiences. Knowing something of the uniqueness of a particular individual’s experiences can also enhance the possibility of generalising about group experience. The main aim of this research is not to reconstruct history or specific sequences of events; it is to reconstruct aspects of the experiences behind the historical facts. This does not
mean that the evidence presented to us should not be weighed carefully. In the training of the
interviewers' special care was taken to emphasise the importance of interviewing and questioning
techniques. By drawing up a comprehensive interview schedule we attempted to guide the
narrative of the person telling us his/her story.

Our interviewees were not selected in order to be statistically representative of the
population at large or of any particular segment of it. They did not qualify for inclusion into the
research because they represented some statistical norm. We approached individuals living in
informal houses because they clearly typified certain historical processes. The material collected,
reflected our active intervention as researchers. The interview schedules were created collectively
as a result of reading on the topic, formulating research questions, operationalising issues which
were deemed to be important, selecting a number of fields, interpreting aspects of the
phenomenon under review.

Guided by the interview schedule, the interviewers set off to collect the conversational
accounts from the interviewees. These accounts were recorded onto tape and, at a later stage
transcribed. Since the interviews took place in the mother tongue of the interviewees, namely
Xhosa, the interviews were translated into English. During the conversations between interviewer
and interviewee, the former requested the latter’s permission for photographs of the house and
of its interior to be taken. These visual accounts of the homes further served to provide
information about the physical space occupied by people as well as their experience of their
lifeworld. The photographs of the houses, of their interiors and of the aspects of the surrounding
landscape and landmarks served to complement the oral accounts of the experience of space and
place.

4. Who told us their stories?

During the first week of May 1997 we visited houses in the informal settlements of Rini.
We approached inhabitants, requesting them to tell us about aspects of their life histories, in
particular in as far as these aspects relate to their living in these informal settlements. A total of

1We express our gratitude towards Pumeza Ngxiki, Daliwonga Nxakala and Welile Jack who acted as interviewers.
40 people from the settlements of Vukani ("Wake up"), Hlalani ("Let us stay"), Xolani and Phaphamani told us their life histories. The informal settlement areas covered in this project are indicated on the enclosed map (cf. page 12).

Almost two thirds of the life histories come from women. This gender imbalance reflects the situation in these areas during daytime. More men leave these settlements during the course of the day - to go to work, to meet with others or to go to the formal part of Grahamstown. The average age of the 16 men included in this research, is 50 years whereas the average for the 24 women comes to 41 years.

Three quarters (75%) of this group of 40 people hail originally from Grahamstown: 40% were born in Grahamstown, 27,5% on a farm near Grahamstown and a further 7,5% in the Albany district. The rest (25%) came from elsewhere in the Eastern Cape Province. This finding refutes the argument often raised, namely that the majority of squatters occupying informal settlements had migrated from the former homelands in search of a future in what used to be "White South Africa". Not only were 75% of this group born in or around Grahamstown, but as much as 80% of them have grown up and lived here ever since. This will probably be the case with most of the people living in informal settlements within the city of Grahamstown: most of them are from here.

Not unexpectedly, a high rate of unemployment (35%) was registered. Most of the data collection was done during the day, when there might be less employed people in the respective informal settlements. A further 30% receive pensioner or disability grants and one respondent is a student. Only 2 respondents are fully employed (5%), a further 10% have part-time or odd jobs and a further 17,5% are involved in selling fruit, vegetables, sweets and liquor (including one who runs a spaza shop from his home and 2 others who are doing tailoring and shoe repairs on a small scale). All 7 in this last group of 17,5% describe themselves as unemployed, not regarding their activities as "regular jobs." Several members of the 40 households included in this project, are presently away (mostly sons and/or daughters) and live in Port Elizabeth or elsewhere in the Eastern Cape. These members often contribute in one way or another to the household's income.
5. Their migration histories

Except for 5 of the respondents, all the others lived in Grahamstown immediately before coming to this site:

47.5% (19) lived in Tantyi
22.5% (9) lived in Fingo Village
7.5% (3) lived in Joza
10.0% (4) lived in other places in and around Grahamstown (the Coloured Township and farms)
12.5% (5) came from Peddie, Manley Flats, Salem, etc.

The average period which they had lived at their previous place of residence was 11 years. For those coming from Tantyi, the average period which they had lived there was 13 years. Most of the 35 who came from Grahamstown before living in the informal settlements, had also lived in other places in Grahamstown prior to their previous living place. Their migration history is largely restricted to Grahamstown itself.

Most of the group mention the fact that they wanted their own stand as the reason for coming to the site on which they have built their present house:

“It is because I wanted to have my own site and I saw people occupying the land. Then I decided to occupy the land as well so as to have my own site.”

“We wanted to be independent.” (Photograph 2)

“I wanted a place of my own and I also could not afford to pay rent. We haven’t paid rent ever since we came here.”
In conjunction with wanting their own site, most of them mention that they cannot afford to pay rent. One out of 4 had been evicted (probably because of their inability to pay rent) from previous places or had to move from accommodation tied to their (or their parents') employment when they (or their parents) had retired. Almost all of the respondents indicate that they did not leave any of their belongings behind when they moved to the present site - a sign that they regarded the move as a permanent one.

6. “This is the place where I live now”

Following an earlier question as to why they left the place where they lived immediately before coming to this site, we asked them more specifically why they decided to come to this place:

“I decided to come and stay here because this is the place where I can stay cheaper because I am not working and here we are not paying rent. So if I was working
I would have chosen another place where I would pay rent. So this is the place where we are not paying rent and here I can try and do something so that I can feed myself.”

One out of 4 confirm that they want their own place; a further one out of 4 say that they like the place. Others give as primary reasons financial considerations; that they heard about the occupation; that they have relatives living in these settlements and that there were no other viable alternatives.

Most of the occupation of these informal sites took place in the period 1992-1994 (the pre-election phase) and 57.5% of this group of respondents arrived in these places during this time. The organised way in which the occupation of sites took place is confirmed by the fact that almost three out of four (72.5%) stated that their sites were allocated to them by the street committee:

“I got this from comrades at the street committee.”

“I gave my name to the street committee members who were responsible for the allocation of sites through street committees who are running the place. People were told to approach street committees for them to get a site. They had to write their names and submit these to the street committee. The street committee takes responsibility of showing them a piece of land after they had waited for a little period.”

Three of the respondents bought their sites - an indication that as early as late 1994 there had already been a market in sites (with existing houses on them):

“My daughter bought this site from a person who was selling it. This person sold the site because he was leaving for Port Elizabeth. I also contributed money for paying for this site.” (Photograph 3)
"My daughter bought this site from a person who was selling it. This person sold the site because he was leaving for Port Elizabeth. I also contributed money for paying for this site."

The overwhelming majority (90%) indicate that the site on which this house is built belongs to the family head. Only one refers to a landlord:

"This is Novanishi's site. We are renting it."  (Photograph 4)
Most (80%) declare this house to be their permanent home. As reason they simply state that they have no other place to go to. Of the 20% who do not regard this structure to be their permanent home, a large proportion state their parents' home as their own permanent home. From their narratives it is clear that particularly women reflect the belief that as long as the parents are alive they have to remember their family:

“I am just a wife here, my parents are still alive. This is my children’s home ... the home where I am married.” (Photograph 5)

“My mother’s home might be my home, but I want my own home.”

“This is my home. I have my feasts here. I needed a home because my mother stays in Extension 8.”
“Burials and feasts take me back to my permanent home because I want my forefathers to remember me.”

“When you are married anything can happen, so you must have a place to go. So all in all, one should not forget his home.” (Photograph 6)

Photograph 5

“I am just a wife here, my parents are still alive. This is my children’s home ... the home where I am married.”
"When you are married anything can happen, so you must have a place to go. 
So all in all, one should not forget his home."

Notwithstanding them regarding this house to be their permanent home, almost three quarters of the group (72.5%) confirm that they fear that they might be removed from here:

“If I will be removed I won’t be removed alone but I will be removed with other people.”

“Maybe people may come and take us somewhere else and use this place for other purposes.”

“I do have such a fear but if we have to be removed there must be a place ready for us to settle.” (Photograph 7)
"I do have such a fear but if we have to be removed there must be a place ready for us to settle."

The word "fear" is somewhat ambiguous though. Some do not fear removal because they feel there is nowhere they can be removed to, or sent back to. Others don't fear it because they are used to removal. One respondent doesn't fear removal because he feels it could not be worse:

"I am staying in water here."

The large percentage of respondents indicating that they fear removal might be the result of rumours about possible removals which are circulating in the community:

"I do fear because there were some rumours that we might be removed."

Some indicate that the street committee tries to reassure people that they cannot be removed, but with limited success.
When asked who they think might want to remove them from this site, almost one half proclaim that they do not know. Once again the answer is somewhat ambiguous. The answer appears to mean:

"I do not know that we can be removed."

For all kinds of practical reasons (for instance a lack of other sites) as well as based on serious doubt as to who has the authority to do it, many say that they do not know who might remove them from this site:

"The government said people must stay wherever they like."

"No, I don’t think there is anybody who would want to remove us because we were given this site officially."

We asked the respondents if they could select a place that they could describe as the place from where they are, where would that be? We wanted to see to what extent they associate themselves with the place where they currently live. From their responses it is clear that many of them understood the question as “Where would you like to live?” Half of them indicate that they can’t really say where this place will be, or that they think their present home is the place from where they are, or where they would like to live:

"I don’t think of any place because I am satisfied with this place." (Photograph 8)

"I don’t want to move. I want to be a permanent dweller of Vukani." (Photograph 9)
"I don't think of any place because I am satisfied with this place."

"I don't want to move. I want to be a permanent dweller of Vukani."
The other half mention several other residential areas (all in greater Grahamstown) of which Joza is the most common. They single out especially Joza Extensions 6 and 8 where there are brick-built houses, tarred roads and running water and electricity in each house:

“I would select Hooggenoeg location, which is a coloured township because I grew up in a coloured township but when I went to receive circumcision the relationship between me and the other coloured guys changed.”

“I can select a place where there are decent houses, taps, electricity and tarred roads. At least I can choose Extension 8 or 9 (Joza) because there are cement houses.”

By far the majority (82.5%) feel that although their house might be in bad condition, they nevertheless like it because it belongs to them:

“I am proud of this house because we built it ourselves.” (Photograph 10)

“I am feeling very happy about my house because it is not leaking so I see the rain through the window. I like the way it was built and the way it looks. Everything I collected for this, I collected because I like it.”
Perceived ownership is very important in most of the respondents' positive assessment of their home. It shows that the meaning of an actual physical place such as a home is the result of a process built up over time. The one issue singled out by most as a negative factor in terms of which they dislike their house, is the dampness and the exposure to rain and storm water - a factor to be expected since the areas occupied for informal settlements was mainly unoccupied land in the first instance because of its unsuitability as residential areas.

For most of those who told us their stories, this house in which they currently live is their first own home. Despite them not owning in a legal sense the site on which their house is, they regard it as theirs. Almost all of them (87.5%) confirm that this is a home for their family and that they want their children to regard this as their home. A similar percentage (87.5%) express no problem with neighbours or with the neighbourhood in general.
In conclusion a few remarks:

- Although the squatter areas are fairly new, the residents typically have long associations with Grahamstown. The migration histories do not reflect any widespread influx from the rural hinterland of the Eastern Cape Province.
- The organised manner in which the different areas were squatted, is striking.
- In general there is a sense of permanency among the residents. When they say they do not know who can remove them from their sites, they mean they do not believe anyone can.
- There is a strong emphasis on how much people like to live where they are and how much they like their neighbours. Their problems centre around the poor construction of the houses and the lack of facilities (in particular water, toilets and tarred roads), not so much around the place where they live.
- Owning their sites, although they have not paid for it, is a major issue when reflecting on their place or residence. This is not just a matter of not having to pay rent, but also a celebration of the fact that they are free from the control of others - free to live their lives and free to have their traditional feasts. A person's place of residence, obtained by defiant occupation, can become an important part of her/his identity.

7. Life in general

We asked the respondents if their lives had changed over the last five to seven years. Two thirds (65%) replied that no changes had occurred:

"I haven't seen any changes in my life. My life is still the same, because I was suffering since my early childhood until today."

Among the two thirds who said that no changes had occurred over the last five to seven years, there are several who acknowledge the fact that they now have a home of their own:

"No, except for the fact that we have a place of our own."
"I haven't noticed any changes except our moving from Limbo to this place."

One out of ten (10%) even argue that things have changed for the worse, whilst one out of four (25%) are of the opinion that the changes have made life better. Most of those who think that things have changed for the better, link their positive assessment to their living in their present houses:

“It is better now. I am no longer a tenant. I am no longer suffering like before when we had to ask permission to build a house from local authority. You simply go to elected structures of the people.” (Photograph 11)

“My life has changed because I am now doing what I want at home - unlike when we were not having our own site. Because the owners of the yard where we were staying were having things which they didn’t want us to do. For example, that children cannot come inside the yard.” (Photograph 12)

“Yes, it is nice to stay here. We don’t have to pay rent. Sometimes we had to borrow money from the people to pay rent.” (Photograph 13)

“Yes, I don’t fight with anyone over land. I am very happy.”
"It is better now. I am no longer a tenant. I am no longer suffering like before when we had to ask permission to build a house from local authority. You simply go to elected structures of the people."

"My life has changed because I am now doing what I want at home - unlike when we were not having our own site. Because the owners of the yard where we were staying were having things which they didn't want us to do. For example, that children cannot come inside the yard."
"Yes, it is nice to stay here. We don’t have to pay rent. Sometimes we had to borrow money from the people to pay rent."

The question as to whether their lives have changed over the last 5 to 7 years, was followed by a more specific one: Did the political changes since 1994 make a difference to your life? More than half (57.5%) state that these changes made no difference to their lives:

"I don’t see any changes. I am not working and even men are not getting work but it is said that it is democracy now. Although we don’t know anything about democracy. What we want is that our children must get jobs because that is one of the problems - that of not having somebody working for you."

"No change at all. Even at work apartheid still exists. We are still being ruled in the same fashion."

"No, we have always lived like this and I think it was meant for us to live like this." (Photograph 14)

"No, because I am still struggling the way I was before political changes took place in 1994. Because even now I lost my job because my employer didn’t want to give me enough money." (Photograph 15)
"No, because I am still struggling the way I was before political changes took place in 1994. Because even now I lost my job because my employer didn’t want to give me enough money."

"No, we have always lived like this and I think it was meant for us to live like this."
Those who do think that the political changes since 1994 make a difference to their lives (42.5%) often link their perception of the difference to the fact that they now have their own homes:

"I would say 'yes' because in the past you'll never see a black person allocating sites without the approval of the mayor. We would be removed from this place there and then."

"Just a little because for the first time in my life I've got my own house."

"Yes, because I am living in a squatter area which was illegal under the white regime but now under Mandela we are not chased away by the government."

These statements further underline the fact that place imagery (and in particular the imagery associated with access to an own home) contributes to people making sense of their personal lives. Having a place of their own can help them to deal with other issues related to day to day survival, such as the need for employment. Second to having one's own home, respondents indicate that having a job will reflect real change. Employment would have given substance to the political changes since 1994, but in the absence of work, they are of the opinion that their lives have not really changed.

Photograph 16

"I wanted to have a place to stay happily with my children ..."
In response to the question “How could your living conditions here be improved?” almost all list a number of facilities which they regard as essential to a better life. These include tarred roads, running water for each house, flush toilets, electricity, telephones, rubbish removal and an ambulance service. Expectations in this regard are very unrealistic and nobody refers to the logistical problems of providing services in occupied areas which are not suitable for residential development. The topography of areas where informal settlement took place is not conducive to infrastructural development given the nature of the soil, the steepness of slopes and/or the presence of streams.

It also seems that there is an inability and in some cases an unwillingness to pay for services:

“We would like to have roads, telephones and electricity. We get big rubbish bags and the next thing is we’re told to pay R30. We can’t pay R30 for rubbish bags (rubbish removal).” (Photograph 17)
Without exception respondents feel that the government should provide the improvements:

"If the government can build decent houses, put tar on the roads, water to be put nearer, electricity ..."

In addition to the widespread feeling of entitlement, combined with an unwillingness to pay for services, there are still elements of an expectation that is deemed to belong to South Africa's unfortunate past:

"We need proper houses; the white man can improve this place."

8. Household details

We asked the respondents to give details of their households. We completed with them a household chart containing the names, ages, gender and occupation of each person living in this household. They also gave us the relation to the head of the household, of each person living there, as well as each person's main activity during the day and his/her contribution to the household income. They gave similar information for those regarded as part of their households, but living elsewhere at the time of the interviews. These comprehensive household charts contain much on who live in the respective informal houses included in this project:

- A total of 196 people live in the 40 houses - on average 5 per house. Of these 111 are adults (21 years and older) and 85 children (of which 40 are between thirteen and twenty years old).
- There are 23 male-headed households (of which 5 are single-headed) and 17 female-headed ones (of which 16 are single-headed).
- Only 21 of those living in the selected 40 informal houses are fully employed, with a further 10 informally employed, 58 unemployed and 29 receiving a pension—(giving a total of 118, which include the particulars of the 111 adults as well as the particulars of 7 children under 21 years of age who are employed or who receive a disability pension - thereby contributing to the household income).
- In addition to the 196 living in the 40 houses, a total of 50 others (mostly sons and daughters) are presently living elsewhere, but are regarded as part of the households of the 40 who told us their life histories. Four out of ten of those away
are working. Most of those living away (78% of these absentee) visit the household occasionally and 12 of them (24%) send monetary contributions from time to time.

9. Details of the dwellings

No fewer than 7 of the dwellings which we visited, consist of only one room (17.5%) and a further 17 are two-roomed dwellings (42.5%). With 60% of the dwellings consisting of either one or two rooms, the severity of the space problem is quite clear. The respondents (assisted by us) made drawings (plans) of the layouts of their dwellings. The actual measurements of these drawings were added. The smallest house included in this project is about 12m² and the average floor space of the 24 one- and two-roomed dwellings is less than 20m².

Photograph 18
When considering the average household size of 3 adults and 2 children per dwelling, one suspects these one- and two-roomed informal structures to be inadequate. This is confirmed by the fact that the average household size for one- and two-roomed dwellings in this project is just under 5 (4.5 people per one- and two-roomed dwelling). The largest house included in this project (one with 7 rooms) is home to no fewer than 10 people!

Just about one half of the dwellings (52.5%) have a room which can be described as a kitchen and 40% have a room which the owners use as a lounge. Only about one out of four dwellings included in this project (27.5%) has a kitchen as well as a lounge. Most of the informal houses are built in different stages - mostly because of a shortage of building materials at the start of the building operations. When asked about what they regard as the problems with their house: 85% point towards the lack of a proper toilet; 72.5% indicate a lack of running water; 62.5% reckon the lack of electricity; 57.5% complain about the size; 52.5% find the structure of the house unacceptable; 30% are of the opinion that the garden is too small and 20% refer to the lack of tarred roads and street lighting.

10. Contacts with others

Most of the respondents (85%) seem to have good relations and frequent contact with their neighbours:

"Yes, I do visit my neighbours. Most of my neighbours are my friends and I visit them regularly."

"We have very good contact because we are all staying here as a family. We do things together - sharing ideas about this place."

"I see them everyday, in the morning, in the afternoon, anytime, even now."

(Photograph 21)

"We have regular contact, sharing all facets of life as black people."
"I see them everyday, in the morning, in the afternoon, anytime, even now."

Many give a need for help as reason for the contact with neighbours. All the respondents state that they have contact with relatives - three out of four describe their contact with relatives as regular and many mention "the need to discuss family matters" as reason for their contact.

When asked about membership to community organisations, no fewer than 82,5% proclaim to have some association with a religious group. Half of the respondents mention an allegiance to the ANC. Besides these 2, no other form of community organisation receive any significant mention.

Only one out of ten claim that there are no public meetings in their informal settlement - an indication that participation in community issues seems to be occurring frequently. Almost half of the respondents (47,5%) make mention of public meetings in open spaces, a further 22,5% refer to meetings in open spaces and in people’s houses and a further 15% tell of meetings in people’s houses. Almost everyone was able to give a description of what happens at these meetings. By far the most popular topic for discussion at these public meetings is the issue of
facilities such as water and roads (55%), followed by social issues/problems (17.5%) and crime and justice (12.5%).

As can be expected in an informal settlement, there are very few meeting places where people can relax and mix socially with others. Almost half of the respondents mention that there are no such places near their dwellings. Those who do mention meeting others on a social basis, do it in open spaces between the houses, at residents’ meetings and, in a few cases, in shebeens or at church or political meetings. Only one person refers to her house as a popular meeting place where people relax with others. Given their size, informal dwellings cannot easily serve as a venue for social meetings.

11. The space surrounding my place of living

In this section the focus is on the broader spatial settings within which the respondents’ social relationships take place. Apart from the informal dwelling in which the respondent lives and the immediate contact with neighbours, there is a wider geographic space. The role of this wider geographic space in creating a context, locale or region for everyday life, will be briefly looked at. It contributes towards the lifeworld within which respondents find themselves. The region represents the space for action and choice, for structure and constraint in as far as the everyday life of people is concerned. This is true for every individual, irrespective of her/his position in society and irrespective of her/his type of dwelling. In this section we want to see to what extent more specific as well as more general aspects of place and spatial settings are present in respondents’ everyday lives. With this in mind, we asked people about their contact with Grahamstown as well as about their place imagery.

Grahamstown plays an important role in the day to day household economic survival strategies of those living in informal houses. The responses about shopping which include references to “town” (the central business district), when analysed in terms of the names of shops or other facilities, reveal that “town” does not stretch beyond Old Market Square for most people. Only a few mention other shops beyond the bazaar setup around Old Market Square. More than a half of the respondents (55%) claim to do most of their shopping in town (albeit that “town” implies Old Market Square), with a further 17.5% saying that they shop most of the time in town as well as in the neighbourhood (at “spaza” shops, at “Muza” or “Jury” or “Kulati” or at other shops in the township). The remaining 27.5% claim to shop exclusively within their
neighbourhood - possibly suggesting a condition of scarcity of money or material resources. This group can probably be seen as largely trapped within the informal settlement, not in a position to visit frequently the central business district.

Those who do shop in town, do it only occasionally. Almost three out of four (72.5%) of the respondents indicate that they seldom go to town (at most once a month). The average household in this project is in receipt of 0.75 of a welfare pension and 0.5 of a wage. In addition, one out of four per household is engaged in informal sector trading. Although it is not possible to determine accurately the actual income per household, it is doubtless very little. With very little or nothing in the pocket, it makes little sense to visit the central business district on a regular basis.

Photograph 22

Not only are several of those who told us their life histories, largely confined to the informal settlement in as far as shopping is concerned. But most of those who do go to “town” for shopping, make no mention of using any of Grahamstown’s facilities. Nobody mentions the occasional visit to the Post Office, or to the Public Library, or to any advice office. There is no reference to the occasional (or regular) visit to look for a job either.
It appears as if many of the inhabitants of informal houses are trapped within an environment of deprivation. They find themselves on the margins of society. In the concrete sense of the word, being on the margins implies that they live on land which is beyond the parameters of the proclaimed residential areas and they live in a situation of real poverty. In the figurative sense of the word, marginality refers to the fact that they are isolated from the activities of Grahamstown and are as a result of this, powerless and vulnerable. One can refer to their situation as a cluster of disadvantages:

- They experience a lack of assets and have no collateral security.
- They are isolated from many forms of exposure to information such as the mass media and education.
- They are largely without power in that they have little or no ability to effect any outcome of events.
- They spend most of their time and energy on keeping their households going - leaving them with little or no way to strengthen or improve their household's position.

Photograph 23
In order to get a glimpse of how respondents experience their immediate surroundings and to see which landmarks figure in their perceptions of the physical world around them, we asked them to draw a map of their neighbourhood and to add to this map all the elements which feature in their everyday life. We encouraged them to include on this map drawings of the most important places in their physical environment.

Looking across Grahamstown’s township areas from the top of Sugar Loaf Hill one sees a number of hills, and it is not surprising that these hills feature strongly in the maps. The hills are not perceived just as physical features but also as places of historical and/or religious significance. There are several references to Mount Zion (where the Zionist religious movement used to meet) and to hills which are simply regarded as “historic”.

See “NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LANDMARKS” of respondents 11 and 5 on page 46.

The maps are generally drawn from the perspective of where the respondent is sited, rather than in any conventional North-South fashion. Features are sometimes upside-down and in some instances the maps reflect respondents’ emotions:

See “NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LANDMARKS” of respondents 12 and 25 on page 47.

Where “Town” figures, it is usually as a named shop or a number of shops. Landmarks such as the Cathedral and the University do not often appear, the more dominant Settlers Monument getting a few mentions:

See “NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LANDMARKS” of respondents 16 and 28 on page 48.

If one could put together/deduce a typical map, it would be one which shows the respondent’s house, a neighbour’s house, a hill, some trees, the neighbouring township, Shoprite (at Old Market Square), and perhaps a river or road, or the school which the children attend, or one of the tall streetlights.

See “NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LANDMARKS” of respondents 30 and 36 on page 49.
The maps rarely show the respondent’s house at the centre, systematically enclosed by its neighbourhood. On the contrary, only 14 maps depict the respondent’s house, and in only 5 of these is it dominant. In many of the maps there is no indication of where the respondent might be living. This brings up the question: To what extent does the house of somebody living in an informal settlement constitute the centre of her/his lifeworld? Isn’t it in many cases more a matter of “I find myself somewhere between the landmarks around me” than “The house in which I live is the centre from where I relate to the landmarks around me”? Perhaps residents of more formal parts of the Grahamstown townships, where more relatives might be working in town businesses or for white families, might tend to see their house at the centre of their lifeworld.

The maps might strike one as being like pictures from a parallel world, which barely acknowledges the existence of “white” Grahamstown. One doubts, if white Grahamstonians were asked to draw a map of their area, whether the boundaries would go beyond Old Market Square (in the direction of the township). The bulk of “town” would most probably comprise of “white” Grahamstown. It might therefore be argued that it is to be understood that people will focus on their own region/neighbourhood when asked to draw a map of their lifeworld. The main difference between “white” Grahamstown and the informal settlements in and around the township is that “white” Grahamstown contains all the infrastructure (such as services, shops, facilities) essential for living one’s life in the modern era.

Photograph 24
A fascinating map of the neighbourhood and its landmarks is the (historical) one drawn by an elderly woman, depicting the Battle of Grahamstown. The event to which this map/drawing refers, had taken place almost one hundred years before she was born.

See “NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LANDMARKS” of respondents 33 and 32 on page 50.

There is no indication in any of her other responses that her mind is not firmly on the present, on her poverty, on the bad condition of her house and on the lack of change since she voted. But perhaps the map/drawing is her explanation of why her situation is as it is.

The maps do not provide as much information on the respondents’ everyday lives as we hoped it would. The limited reference to greater Grahamstown probably reflect the fact that their physical situation (and survival) dominates their daily existence. Their day to day lives revolve largely around their dwellings - that is where they spend most of their time. But how do they spend their time? Many refer to visits to friends/neighbours “when they have time”, but there is little information on what are they busy with. For many being unemployed seems to be an occupation in itself. One might think from this that the people in informal settlements are leading drab, featureless lives, but this might be an unfair and inaccurate assessment. The maps of their neighbourhood with its features often depict details the respondents take pleasure in: trees and grass, the garden, the sun rising over the hill, places they have been happy in, visions of the future.

Photograph 25
22. Concluding remarks

It is not possible to attempt a full explanation or analysis of informal housing by means of one data collection exercise, conducted in one area. This research merely attempts to contribute to the understanding of a complex issue. Its contribution lies mainly in emphasising the need to go beyond an examination of long-term, structural issues such as housing shortages, overcrowding, unemployment and issues related to affordability. All these issues form part of the explanation or provide elements thereto, but they do not provide the sufficient answer or explanation.

For this reason we decided to add to the analysis elements of the conjunctural relationships and struggles obtained through ordinary life histories. The place and space within which people find themselves have an effect on their lives. The landscape and the broader location contribute to the way in which people approach reality. Most of the people focussed on in this research are former township dwellers (mostly from the Grahamstown township) and the question arises: was the possibility of illegally occupying land seen as an easy way out of their situation of deprivation? It is important to raise this question because the majority of the respondents indicate that the major political changes in the country since 1994 have made no difference to their lives. For significant change to occur, there is a need to engage actively in day-to-day affairs and for people to take a pro-active stance. The majority of those living in the informal houses in Rini, have unrealistically high expectations regarding the provision of services and facilities. Furthermore, there is little indication of self-help initiatives and community projects aimed at improving the situation.

In this research the focus is on the effect that people have on place, space and landscape. People attribute meaning to their environment and ascribe historical, social and religious significance to landmarks around them. The place, space and accompanying landscape are the outcomes of processes. In this sense they have an effect on people. Even in the informal settlements there are clear, territorial rules about what is in or out of place. The place itself exercises a particular power in that territorial and social rules have originated over a period of time. Most of those who told us their stories, indicate that they have good relations and frequent contact with their neighbours. Most of them have associations with a religious group and most of them participate in community issues. Out of their living together have come about some general rules, acknowledgements of property as well as a communal jurisdiction.
It seems, however, as if these rules, acknowledgements and communal jurisdiction operate mainly on a surface level. There is little (if any) indication of a deeper level of meaning in terms of which a stimulus for community participation and constructive communal engagement can develop. Only when such a level exists can one expect to find a sufficient number of active participants (agents for change) in order to bring about the cumulative effect of change.

REFERENCES


NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LANDMARKS: RESPONDENT 11

- Neighbours House
- Hill
- Shoprite
- Shoprite
- OK Bazaar
- OK
- LG
- Old Cemetery
- Valley
- Cold wind during night

NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LANDMARKS: RESPONDENT 5

- Neighbours house
- Lounge
- Bedroom
- Kitchen
- Bedroom
- Hill
- Historic landmark
- Shoprite
- House
- Dumara
- OK
NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LANDMARKS: RESPONDENT 16

- Checkers
- Gitown Market
- Coca Cola
- Apostolic Church
- Yellow Township (My brother's house)
- Sales House
- Neighbours (Nebvuka)
- Rhodes
- Monument

It is a big building.

NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LANDMARKS: RESPONDENT 28

- This is the hill which is in front of my house
- This is the place at the back of my house
- Tonyi Lower
  Primary School
  Where my children are studying
- Mountain
- Rhodes University
- REP Store
- Cashier

2m Neighbours house
3m Roomed house
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