Chapter 11

The politics and pathology of place: Student protests, collective consumption and the right to the city in East London

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The Battle of East London

The battle came to the streets in October 2015, when students from the University of Fort Hare (UFH), Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and the University of South Africa seized and occupied the centre of East London in the Eastern Cape for a full week, bringing the city to a standstill. They built barricades and lit bonfires along Fleet Street, a main access route through the city centre. They stoned vehicles, pelted passers-by and emptied the contents of litter bins in the road. They toyi-toyied up and down main thoroughfares as parts of the inner city burned for days. Police chased the rioters through the streets. In the aftermath, more than 100 students were arrested for public order offences, 51 of whom were studying at WSU, while the others were from UFH (Daily Dispatch 22/10/2015). The location of the demonstrations – the street rather than the campus, which was generally the focus of student protest actions elsewhere that year – had a symbolic value indicating the target of the students’ anger. Clearly, the actions were directed as much against the city and the wretched living conditions suffered by the students as they were against the university. They also represented a moment of unity, with many of the 15 000 students in the city centre either directly affected by, or connected to, the protests.

On the Monday after the week-long city shut-down, the local Daily Dispatch newspaper ran a one-word headline: ‘Disgraceful’ (Gowa 2015). Local business leaders and Buffalo City’s mayor, Alfred Mtsi, as well as other officials voiced their disapproval of, and apparent shock at, the protests, while the vice-chancellor of UFH, Mvuyo Tom, lamented a lack of student leadership. The outrage echoed and reinforced a long-standing view among residents in the inner-
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city Southernwood and Quigley areas, where many of the students’ residences were located, that the breakdown in the social cohesion of East London’s inner city could, in large part, be attributed to their presence. Research by the Fort Hare Institute of Social and Economic Research (FHISER) found that many local residents, particularly the older ones, claimed that the students in their neighbourhoods were responsible for deteriorating environmental conditions and an increase in crime (see FHISER 2017).

For their part, the students said that local residents blamed them for the areas’ social ills because they were perceived as outsiders (ibid.). The students blamed the crime rate in the city centre on the police’s failure to manage the area. They also pointed the finger at exploitative local landlords, as well as the universities for failing to appreciate and take some responsibility for their plight. Their complaints, many of which were subsequently substantiated by campaign journalism conducted by the local newspaper (Linden 2017), also included being forced to live in dangerous inner-city neighbourhoods with inadequate street lighting, paying high rents to unscrupulous landlords who crammed them into dirty, sub-standard accommodation lacking basic amenities in order to extract maximum rent. They were further deprived of access to safe public spaces; affordable cafes or food shops; necessary communication services (such as high-speed internet); appropriate sports and cultural facilities; and relevant academic-related work opportunities – in short, the services that facilitate the reproduction of student life at the neighbourhood level. The students said that the responsible parties – local authorities, landlords and the educational institutions – would continue to do nothing to remedy the situation ‘as long as they got their rent’ (FHISER 2017). In the years that followed, the struggle between the students and the administrations of UFH and WSU over residences and neighbourhood conditions continued with the protesters again blockading roads.

In addition, the street protests in East London leveraged and were amplified by the discontent at UFH and WSU’s ‘mother’ campuses in the Eastern Cape towns of Alice and Mthatha, respectively. Hostels and lecture theatres at Alice were seriously damaged. Students also looted the university bookshop, stealing most of the books. The protests mounted in 2016 after bursaries provided under the National Student Financial Aid Scheme were not paid as had been promised. As new funds poured in with the approval of the cabinet of the national government to repair the old historic core of the Alice campus for UFH’s centenary celebrations, assertions by the university’s management that
the institution had no money rang hollow. The unrest climaxed over one weekend in May 2016 when heads of state from across southern Africa, including then president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, were invited to the Alice campus to celebrate the university’s legacy as the alma mater of the region’s liberation struggles. Students tried to burn down the university gates before the dignitaries arrived and subsequently raided the hospitality tents that had been pitched for an official reception, eating the food that had been prepared for the VIPs. The police were called in as the students transformed what had been intended as a celebration of solidarity into a fiasco, turning the great university of African nationalism into something akin to a war zone (Daily Dispatch 16/5/2016).

At the beginning of the 2018 academic year, a series of student actions closed down UFH and WSU campuses in East London. At Fort Hare, striking students asked to be accommodated in university residences in the city and demanded an end to the practise of having to source their accommodation on the open market. The protesters accused the university of corruptly administering residential accommodation in the city. By April 2018, the UFH campus in East London had reopened after weeks of disruption. Shortly after, the new Minister of Higher Education and Training, Naledi Pandor, the daughter of admired Fort Hare struggle stalwart and African National Congress (ANC) leader, ZK Matthews, declared that her department would release ZAR 120 million for new infrastructure at the university, providing some relief for the funding of accommodation there (Daily Dispatch 10/4/2018). Generous as this may be considered, it represented a missed opportunity. At no point during the decision-making process, which occurred as the students from both UFH and WSU were on strike in East London, was it considered a worthwhile exercise to consider their place-based infrastructural challenges in tandem, and offer a common, spatially based solution to the problems they faced in the city.

This chapter considers the student protests in East London in the context of their struggle for a right to the city. It reflects on the conditions under which students have been incorporated into the city and the accommodation crisis that has been brewing in the two inner-city suburbs, Quigney and Southernwood, where students have taken up residence in large numbers over the past decade. The chapter considers these protests as a struggle over collective consumption that has emerged in a context of inner-city degeneration, which neither the universities nor the state has been prepared, or able, to address.
By taking to the streets to protest rather than staying at their campus sites, students from a number of campuses were able to present themselves as a unified front, based on their shared experiences and asserted expectations of a form of urban citizenship that the city and the universities refused to acknowledge. Their protests targeted what they perceived as a crisis of social reproduction of student life and, by extension, their capacity to achieve the qualifications they needed for future upward social mobility and economic opportunity. In reflecting on these issues, the chapter presents findings from a set of student surveys undertaken by the Fort Hare Institute of Social and Economic Research shortly after the October 2015 protests (FHISER 2017).

The quest for a right to the city

The case of the students’ struggle for what may be termed their ‘right to the city’ in East London indicates a series of contradictions that may illuminate both the nature and effectiveness (or otherwise) of their protest movement and its politics, as well as the kind and limitations of the engagement that they have sought with the city and, by extension, the role (or lack of one) that they have proposed for the university in the city. A relatively impartial consensus view of the nationwide student movements which emerged in 2015 would be that the #RhodesMustFall protests, which started at the University of Cape Town in March, focused on rejecting colonialism – specifically in terms of the curricula and the ethnicity of the academic staff. When the student protests morphed into #FeesMustFall later that year, the new movement, instead of being primarily concerned with the nature of African knowledge production as part of a wider rejection of a culture of ‘whiteness’, took up cudgels over the accessibility and affordability of higher education for black South Africans. At the historically black universities, such as UFH and WSU, the protests further focused on the standard of available facilities, rather than on the racial composition of the senior academic and management staff complements, which were, in most cases, almost entirely black anyway.

1 The surveys formed part of the Ford Foundation funded project, ‘City, Campus, Region’, which explored the role of UFH in place-based development on the eve of the university’s centenary celebrations of 1916 (see FHISER 2017). The grant number for the Ford project is: 0155-0533. The authors would like to thank the FHISER students Sipho Sibanda, Zaza Fazzie, Siphamandla Rumsha, Bonginkosi Masiwa and Khaya Mabuto for assisting with the administration of the 2015 surveys discussed in this chapter, as well as Dean Peters for producing the charts included below.
Anti-colonialism was now expressed as opposition to the financial burden borne by black working- and middle-class students (see Booysen 2016; Hodes 2017). The protestors advanced a set of demands seeking subsidies and improved support for disadvantaged and debt-ridden students, looking to the state as a guarantor of future black upward mobility and middle-class formation. As a result, the new movement found a wider student base. Poorer South African students across the higher education system, including in East London, now took centre stage, leaving many of the wealthier white and black students at the elite institutions in the wings.

The French Marxist scholar Henri Lefebvre, who was disturbed by the marginalisation of citizens in the post-war redevelopment of European cities, noted that capitalism and the institutions of state often conspired to deny citizens their ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre 1991, 2002; also Harvey 2005, 2012). He noted that only those who had access to sufficient capital – and hence power – were able to acquire full rights to the city. In the context of this idea, the student protests in East London may be viewed as a response to the kind of disengaged tenancy practised there by the universities – as exemplified by the institutionally sanctioned exploitation of student accommodation needs by the private sector. By taking over the city centre, rather than focusing their actions against their campuses, the students were expressing their right to the city, and implicitly offering a critique of the universities’ refusal to embrace that right and protect their interests accordingly. However, the form of access to the city – and, more broadly, to postgraduate economic and employment opportunities – sought by the students was of a particular, limited kind that may best be described with reference to the idea of a crisis in ‘collective consumption’, which was conceived by Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (1977, 1978).

Castells argued that, by the 1970s, as fuel prices rose and overproduction put pressure on industrial jobs in the global North, there was a growing problem of social reproduction for at least a section of the working class, whom capitalists no longer wanted to employ. Castells noted that, since big capital in the cities depended heavily on the state for incentives and subsidies to cut costs, the working class increasingly turned to the state to meet the gaps in their own reproduction, which capital was no longer prepared to bear. He noted the rise of social movements which targeted the state in the space of the city to extend its welfare support to meet working-class consumption requirements. The crisis of the reproduction of capitalism, in his analysis, became ‘the
urban question’. In the context of Castells’ analysis, the #FeesMustFall protests in East London may be viewed as a response to the overall challenge of ‘collective consumption’ faced by the students at a cash-strapped university, in an inner-city context featuring relatively high rental and food costs and a dearth of part-time jobs. The students decided that, since the city and the university lacked the will and the means to enable their social reproduction at the neighbourhood level, they would turn to the central state as a source of redistributive welfare provision and an agent for class advancement.

In this regard, the students have been accused of pursuing parochial class interests through the #FeesMustFall movement. For example, it has been acknowledged that many of them want their qualifications to carry greater kudos in order to help them to compete more effectively for relatively well-paid jobs, especially in the private sector, as a rapidly decreasing number of new civil service vacancies were being posted. At UFH in particular, graduates felt their prospects of employment were being damaged by the university’s failure to keep pace with the historically white institutions (Rogan & Reynolds 2016). Accordingly, they sought guaranteed entry into the middle class that would enable them to repay the debts they had incurred while studying. The nationwide student movements have further been accused of failing to address the developmental role of universities in any substantive way. In some institutions, students pursued a battle against science itself (Muller et al. 2017). Meanwhile, in public debates and interviews, students have generally seemed to adopt a narrow view of the purpose of universities in society, describing them as places set apart from the surrounding community which are primarily charged with little more than catering to the educational, accommodation, food and even entertainment needs of their student cohort. In addition, the identity politics of many of the protesters, while finding justification in the exclusion of historically disadvantaged groups from the ‘ivory tower’ and the ‘settler town’, have also been lambasted for seeking to establish cultural comfort zones that may insulate students from questioning their own received ideas. ‘A university is not meant to be a home; it is supposed to challenge your mind and confront you. If you are comfortable at university you already part of the bourgeoisie, living the good life’, South African higher education expert Prof. Nico Cloete told a public meeting of academics, students and practitioners in April 2018, as he urged students to take greater intellectual responsibility for decolonising their institutions and themselves (Paterson 2018).
Beyond the campus gates, the view that the state can act as a guarantor of access to the good life has further constituted a popular belief since the introduction of democracy in 1994. For the parents of many poor families, the expectation is still that the education system can lift their children out of poverty (Paterson 2016a). This has been regarded as an important aspect of universities’ public-purpose mandate since massification was introduced after the end of apartheid. Since the global financial crisis in 2008 and the consequent downturn and relatively stagnant growth in South Africa, the popular pressure on universities as one of the few ladders to economic opportunity has increased. However, although students from poor backgrounds often bear the freight of parental expectations for a better life, their success or otherwise – despite its symbolic value to their families and communities which is often joyfully expressed at graduation ceremonies – is individual, and their protest movement may be viewed as a bourgeois one, failing to spark solidarity among other groups seeking social change. In this context, the relatively fluid forms of organisation employed by the movement – self-proclaimed leaderless groupings coming together on the hoof and expressing themselves through interactive social media – have also tended to atomise its impacts, as well as make it susceptible to external interventions and (mis)representation.

From 2015, increasing influence was wielded on campuses in the Eastern Cape, and nationally by opposition political groups such as the Democratic Alliance through its student organisation, which won control of the student representative council at UFH in 2015; the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania through its student movement, which campaigned to rename the institution after the party’s founder Robert Sobukwe; and the Economic Freedom Fighters. The engagement of these parties in the movement has also been analysed as indicating a larger political vacuum created by a crisis of legitimacy in the ruling ANC (Everatt 2016).

Interpreting the struggle for the city

Public coverage of the protests by government officials and the media exhibited many of the characteristics of a ‘moral panic’ as described by Stanley Cohen (1972) in relation to dominant societal responses to youth movements in Britain. Within this theoretical framework, the insurrectionary South African students were often characterised as deviant and a threat to established social norms – modern day ‘folk
devils’ – particularly in their use of violence and fire to achieve their goals. In this narrative, establishment figures – including government officials, police and private security forces, and senior university managers – produced simplistic symbolic images of the protesters as agents of chaos, at times employing and fanning a discourse of crisis as they sought to set the policy agenda in response to the students’ actions. For example, former vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State, Jonathan Jansen (2017), noted that higher education institutions had lived ‘as by fire’ since student protests erupted in 2015, and went so far as to suggest that the demonstrations had actually heralded the death of the South African university. Another former vice-chancellor, Max Price, who is a qualified medical doctor, sought an explanation of the actions of leaders of the student protest movement at the University of Cape Town in their emotional and psychological states, describing their behaviour as irrational. At the same time, the objectification of the protesters by state and establishment figures became something of a badge of honour for the students themselves, conferring credibility within the context of a country in which resistance to state oppression acquired moral legitimacy in the struggle against apartheid. The subjugation of black bodies by physical and socio-economic brutality constituted a recurring theme in the protesters’ discourse (Paterson 2016b), finding particular justification in the violence of security forces against them.

As rebels sited on the interface of deviance and righteousness, the protesters’ defiance referenced both the virtue of resistance as well as a kind of desperate vulnerability. Such a characterisation may be found in an historical analogy drawn by then vice-chancellor, Mvuyo Tom, at a gala dinner held as part of Fort Hare’s centenary celebrations in the Great Hall in Alice in July 2016. Decrying the ongoing, violent destruction of university property at campuses, he referenced the infamous Xhosa Cattle Killing of the 1850s, when rural communities across the eastern half of the Cape Colony destroyed their cattle and sources of livelihoods in the hope of freedom from white domination, only to be left destitute and starving as colonial troops marched through their territories. Tom suggested that just as cattle had lain at the heart of the prosperity of Xhosa homesteads and polities more than 150 years ago, so contemporary higher education represented a new form of wealth as a bastion of progress and achievement for African people. Accordingly, he said he was saddened at the way student protesters were destroying property at, and undermining the viability of, their own African institutions, such as Fort Hare, and
playing politics with the very resources they needed to overcome the legacies of apartheid and colonialism (see Massey 2010).

Notwithstanding the disquiet expressed in the audience at the analogy – particularly in relation to its assumption that Xhosa people were responsible for their own downfall, despite claims that the disaster was engineered by British colonialists – it placed the students’ struggle in the context of a long history of dispossession and failed efforts to reclaim ownership through violent action aimed at displacing those in control of the political and economic order. A similar argument was made by another vice-chancellor, Adam Habib (Paterson 2016b), who, citing Antonio Gramsci’s theory of the relationship between political and civil society, argued that the student protesters had fatally underestimated the state’s willingness to use force, as well as the traction of hegemony. The comments of both vice-chancellors – Habib and Tom – emphasised the failure of the students’ actions to achieve a revolutionary outcome against an assumed ideal of liberation. However, an alternative view of the nationwide student movement may broadly characterise its inherently limited impact as an expression of the kind of claims made by the students on the city and the university as these have been shaped in response to the exclusion historically suffered by the country’s black and coloured population under colonial and apartheid rule.

In East London, black and coloured residents had historically sought to lay greater claim to the whole city, including the ‘settler town’ (Fanon 1961) beyond the boundaries of the locations of East Bank and West Bank where they lived, only to be forsaken by the English-settler city fathers in the 1940s and 1950s and later, from the early 1960s, forcibly removed under apartheid policies that sought to deny the black population a place in the city. The historical experience of denial and the city’s economic stagnation shaped the subsequent ‘occupation’ of East London by a nascent black bureaucratic class after the introduction of democracy in 1994 (Bank 2018a). The members of this new bourgeoisie, who were employed by the municipality and the provincial government which had offices in both nearby Bisho and, increasingly, East London, bought up real estate in many formerly white suburbs and asserted their cultural presence along the promenade, which had historically provided a holiday playground for the region’s white settlers. At the same time, the value chains that had previously supported the city’s development were destroyed as the regional economy was successively torn apart by the introduction of a decentralised economic model.
under apartheid and its destruction after 1994, exacerbating East London’s de-industrialisation and the process of slumification in its inner city.

However, the new economic model for East London largely failed to address the city’s economic plight directly, rather finding sustenance in state disbursements in the form of welfare payments to the urban poor, wages to an expanded bureaucratic elite, and income from the allocation of state-funded tenders. In this context, many of the new black bureaucrats whose sense of belonging in the city was anyway shaped by a history of exclusion from the ‘settler town’, as well as the double-rootedness forged under the country’s migrant labour system, identified themselves somewhat diffidently as in but not of the city. The phenomenon has been described as ‘occupy urbanism’ (Bank 2018b).

Notwithstanding East London’s economic plight and the failure of its new ruling class to engage comprehensively in its development, a substantial appetite for the city was clearly revealed in a large scholar survey undertaken among matriculants in township and former model C schools across the Eastern Cape in 2015. In the survey of over 3 000 scholars (FHISER 2017), over 80% of young black school-leavers reported that they wanted to go to university, with virtually all of them indicating a preference for urban campuses in larger cities. The most popular destinations were the major cities of Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. Within the Eastern Cape, Port Elizabeth, which houses the Nelson Mandela University, was favoured over East London, followed by Grahamstown, Alice and Mthatha. It was clear that young black school-leavers would prefer to move to, live and be educated in urban centres that offered opportunities and facilities to support their studies, as well as future job-hunting. Interestingly, the respondents did not want to be restricted to jobs in the civil service in their future employment searches. In addition, respondents from the areas around East London and King William’s Town heavily criticised the state of East London’s inner city, which they deemed unfit for higher education and safe living.

From 2015, the analysis of Martinican political philosopher Franz Fanon (1961) was deployed by student protestors to indicate how poorer black students had been left to rot in stinking ‘native towns’, while corrupt new black elites, led by then president Jacob Zuma, had assumed the roles formerly occupied by colonial and white-settler masters, lining their pockets at the expense of the impoverished majority. In the case of UFH, which was on the
 verge of celebrating its centenary as an institution in the vanguard of the black liberation movement, the sense of betrayal by the political ruling class was particularly keen. In addition, as part of the nationwide protest movement, the Fort Hare students became increasingly aware of their straitened circumstances by comparison with the relatively high quality amenities and services enjoyed by their peers at the historically white institutions.

The #FeesMustFall protests in East London may accordingly be viewed as part of a hidden class struggle for the city, which sought a reform of university house-keeping and state subsidy practises to enable the reproduction of student life in the inner city. The organisation of the protests largely took the form of ‘encounters’ – a concept developed by Lefebvre which proposes that chance meetings can converge and transform tentatively expressed, localised, sporadic, social and political concerns into a movement of much greater significance and momentum than had been imagined at the outset. (In this context, it is noteworthy that, given the particular class concerns at stake – that is, the bourgeois interests of students residing in the inner city – no political alliances were forged with other city-based social groups and formations.) The headline-grabbing anarchy wreaked on the streets of the inner city may also be viewed as a justifiable expression of pent-up frustration at the long-term marginalisation of the students’ interests by the municipality, as well as Fort Hare and Walter Sisulu, which had adopted the model of the ‘austerity university’ (Mowitt 2017) – that is, a cash-strapped higher education institution employing a managerialist approach in order to produce the outputs required by a particular market (in this case, the state).

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, South African-born author Rob Nixon (2011) argued that society has a programmed obsession with the spectacular – especially spectacular violence. It was always the ‘fast violence’, he noted, that made the news and grabbed the attention of the public and politicians. But insufficient attention was paid to what he called ‘slow violence’ – the insidious, hidden, relentless and often lethal structural violence embedded in greed, short-term interests and unsustainable development policies. In this context, the student protests in East London may be viewed as a ‘fast violence’ response to the ‘slow violence’ of their exploitation in the city and their continued confinement to the ‘native town’ – albeit a new one comprising the slums of inner-city Quigney and Southernwood.
The student ‘invasion’ of Quigney and Southernwood

A great number of students took up residence in Quigney and Southernwood following the arrival of the ‘austerity university’ in East London from 2004. Neither Rhodes University, nor UFH, nor the new WSU possessed sufficient funds to erect student residences, so they developed a strategy of engaging local landlords and owners of blocks of flats to convert their premises into student accommodation. The student market in the inner city grew exponentially from 2004, when the former Border Technikon campus was taken over by WSU; the former Rhodes University campus was taken over by UFH; and the former home of the East London technical college was taken over by Buffalo City Further Education and Training College, the former home of the East London technical college. Quigney housed mainly UFH students, while Southernwood housed mainly students from WSU and Buffalo City College.

The universities were in a desperate state because they had so few assets in the city and were not in a good position to bargain. Administrators at both UFH and WSU have complained that they had little option but to sign relatively unfavourable, long-term deals for the provision of student accommodation with dominant property developers in East London. The landlords held most of the cards and struck deals under which the universities promised a supply of student tenants providing a guaranteed minimum rent (ZAR 2 800 a month per head in WSU’s case), while the landlords provided them with basic accommodation to a certain standard. Long-term lease agreements were signed which made the universities responsible for upgrading the accommodation to meet student needs, but which failed to transfer property rights to the institutions as they had originally sought. Nevertheless, the blocks that were governed by these longer-term deals were sign-posted as ‘university residences’ and the universities implemented monitoring of the accommodation provided by approved landlords to ensure that it complied with national government standards. However, the system for providing appropriate accommodation failed to keep pace with the rising demand for rooms as student numbers rose. For example, at WSU, rooms that had been intended for two or four occupants came to house eight or more students. In the absence of university funds to address the accommodation crisis, the residences turned into a kind of

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2 Personal communication, interview with Rob Midgley, July 2018.
3 Ibid.
ghetto, although WSU subsequently managed to reduce occupancy to between four-and-a-half and five students per room.

Additional opportunities for homeowners and landlords to exploit student tenants arose when it became clear that these so-called ‘university residences’ could not house all the students in need of accommodation. Speculators bought into the market to milk the demand, sometimes building backyard shacks or flattening the old wood-and-iron houses of Quigney to construct mini-labyrinths of rooms and alleys, into which they squeezed students without any reference to university guidelines, since such accommodation was offered outside the officially sanctioned system. It was alleged that side deals were brokered between university officials and profiteering landlords.

The model for the student housing market, in which accommodation was either licensed but failed to meet standards or was unregulated, led to the delivery of inadequate services and facilities. In many cases, adequate cooking, washing, internet and other facilities were not provided; household equipment that was broken was not fixed; and security measures at many of the blocks failed. WSU struggled to afford wardens for its residences and outsourced the service. A subsequent lack of accountability to the university for the gatekeeping led to inadequate supervision and unacceptable levels of crime at the residences.\textsuperscript{4}

The new influx of students into Quigney and Southernwood came at a time when these inner-city districts were changing from being a predominately white residential area for office workers and young professionals, into a black residential area with many younger, black single-parent and other families moving there. In 2001, Southernwood was 59\% black and 34\% white – a similar demographic to that in Quigney. By 2017, over 80\% of residents in both districts were black. In interviews conducted by the Fort Hare Institute for Social and Economic Research in 2015 (see FHISER 2017), many poorer whites in Southernwood said they felt ‘trapped’ in the suburb because they lacked the means to move out and were frightened by unruly youth and crime on the streets. They further reported that the condition of these inner-city districts had deteriorated since the 1990s. Many blamed the students, whose assumed negative impact on social cohesion was highlighted in many interviews with older residents.

In both Quigney and Southernwood, the residents noted that ‘slumlords’ had moved in to capitalise on the student demand for accommodation, and that their interest in maximising returns with

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
minimal investment had damaged the social fabric and the built environment of the area. The owners of the student accommodation were often absentee landlords, they noted, and failed to control and manage their tenants properly. The presence of a number of illegal boarding houses, some with multiple owners, as well as party houses, illegal shebeens and drug dens was highlighted. A total of 88% of the residents considered the area to be ‘unsafe’, while 72% said that they ‘did not trust’ the people in the neighbourhood. In general, the local residents did not cite race as an important factor contributing to the suburb’s perceived deterioration. Rather, they indicated that irresponsible, often absentee property owners and unruly students were the main problem. Many also blamed the city council for apparently failing to police and manage the neighbourhood properly and complained of a general absence of law and order.

However, the FHISER (2017) research indicated that the residents tended to blame the students in their neighbourhoods for environmental conditions and issues of crime and public order over which they actually had little control. In general, the students living in the inner-city precinct were strapped for cash. Rather than spending time on the streets, or in taverns socialising, they were mainly confined to their rooms and residences. They said that they too often feared the streets. They complained of robbers stealing their laptops and cell phones. Female students spoke of their fear of rape in Quigney and Southernwood. One said that she feared for her life whenever she walked to and from campus after dark because there were no street lights in the area. Many said there was no police presence. They also complained that there was no internet in the residences, so they had no choice but to go to the library on the downtown campus after dark if they wanted to access their study materials. They complained of being particularly vulnerable to robbers on this walk. Some sacrificed studying for fear of street crime.

One male student who was interviewed had swollen tissue around his eyes and a number of bruises on his face and body from a recent beating. He and his fellow students regularly walked from the Fort Hare campus through the city centre at night in order to get home to Southernwood. He said robbers in cars cruised the inner-city suburbs at night, waiting to prey on students with money and technology. He said that his family had mortgaged their house to send him to university and that if his family had learned that he had been robbed of his laptop, they would never have forgiven him. So, he had decided to fight the robbers. He came off second best and was lucky to be alive as the assailants had been carrying guns and knives.
Students also said that they were often blamed for social problems that had nothing to do with them, for example mounting crime. They attributed the rise in crime in their neighbourhoods to young criminals from the townships coming to the area to steal from vulnerable residents and students. They also said that the prostitutes on the streets were not students but women from the townships, who loitered along the beachfront and Southernwood in search of custom. The students said that local residents blamed them for the areas’ social ills because they were perceived as outsiders. The students blamed the crime rate in the city centre on the police’s failure to manage the precinct. They also pointed the finger at exploitative local landlords, as well as the universities for failing to appreciate and take some responsibility for their plight. They said that the responsible parties – local authorities, landlords and the educational institutions – would continue to do nothing to remedy the situation ‘as long as they got their rent’.

By 2015, an estimated 15 000 students were living in Quigney and Southernwood and parts of the city centre. Most attended UFH and WSU but the number also includes trainee nurses, commercial college students and some high school students from rural areas. Figure 10.3 (on page 199) maps out where the students were living. The two larger circles cover the two inner-city suburbs – Quigney, which is closer to the sea, and Southernwood. The two smaller circles indicate student accommodation in the city centre close to Fort Hare’s East London campus and the commercial colleges on Oxford Street.

The 2011 census results showed that East London’s inner neighbourhoods were nevertheless generally better off than the city’s sprawling former townships and informal settlements. A total of 21% of those in the inner city earned more than ZAR 6 400 a month compared with 14% in East London (including the main townships) and 6% across Buffalo City as a whole. The inner city was, however, poorer on aggregate than the formerly white suburbs, comprising the poorest part of the former white city of East London (i.e. excluding the townships). A total of 44% of respondents in the inner city claimed to have ‘no income’ at all, which also suggested inequality in the inner city. This figure would have included many students, who were not wage-earners but had income; some of the floating population in the neighbourhoods; and the unemployed. It should be noted that the 2011 census figures for East London and Buffalo City as a whole included the increasing number of poor residents living in a number of large, growing townships (see FHISER 2017: 80–85).
The 2011 census results further revealed that almost half of Buffalo City’s population was under 20-years-old in 2011. East London had a smaller proportion of children, especially in the townships close to the city, since parents often send their children to live with relatives in the countryside in order to shield them from shack life. However, some of these children were captured in the wider Buffalo City census, which included the city’s rural fringe. There were a small number of children in the inner-city zone. This means that most of those claiming to have ‘no income’ in the precinct at the time were students or unemployed adults. Taking this into account, the percentage of residents earning more than ZAR 6 400 a month should be estimated at over 30%, while the percentage of those in the lower ZAR 1 600 to ZAR 6 400 would rise perhaps from 20% to 30%. Accordingly, the overall per capita income levels in the inner-city zone would have been significantly higher than the income figures taken in isolation suggest. This would appear to be confirmed by the finding that only 7% of those living in the inner-city area regarded themselves as ‘unemployed’, which was much lower than in the other areas surveyed. Further, most of those without work in the inner city said they were ‘not looking for work’, indicating they were either students or the partners of household breadwinners. It is also noteworthy that 34% of residents in the inner-city precinct area said they were employed, compared with 20% in Buffalo City and 32% in East London as a whole (FHISER 2017).

The students’ plight

To find out more about the experience of students in the inner city, FHISER also conducted an online survey in 2015, asking city-based students at UFH about how much debt they held; their levels of satisfaction with the academic programme and facilities at the university; and their perceptions of the inner city as a place for students. The results of the survey revealed that only about 25% of the students were born and brought up in the city. The remaining 75% was split between students from the Eastern Cape and South Africa, and those from other African countries, notably Zimbabwe. Overall, it was found that about three-quarters of the students who were not from the city were South African and the rest came from other African countries. When asked to classify themselves in terms of their class position, most of the South African students said that they came from lower middle-class or working-class families, while
those from Zimbabwe and elsewhere were more inclined to classify themselves as middle class. Tuition fees and rising debt levels were a major issue for all students, who said that their parents could not afford the fees and living expenses incurred in the city. The survey found that only 15% of students on the East London campus had no debt at all, while almost 60% said that they had accumulated debts of more than ZAR 50 000. The latter students had all been on the campus for more than one year. The former, who were mainly first-year students, reported having accumulated debts ranging from ZAR 10 000 to ZAR 50 000.

Figure 11.1: Distribution of debt among University of Fort Hare students in East London surveyed in 2015

The cost of accommodation within the inner city was another burning issue for students. Survey results showed that 44% of students said they were paying more than ZAR 2 000 a month for accommodation. Only 10% of the students who rented their own accommodation said they paid less than ZAR 2 000 a month; 44% of students paid between ZAR 2 000 and ZAR 3 000 a month for their room or a place to stay; while 28% said that they paid over ZAR 4 000 a month.

The high cost of fees and accommodation left students with little to spend on groceries. Most students were trying to survive on ZAR 1 000 or less a month (the equivalent of about ZAR 30 a day). Many complained that their financial burden had been increased by a failure to issue the student loans they were due. They noted that they would be able to spend more
on food and entertainment if they did not have to pay such high tuition fees and had been paid the student aid they were owed. Many said they were hardly able to leave their places of residence to socialise because they did not have the money – suggesting that the image of students spending their lives hanging around at taverns and drinking and socialising in the inner city projected by some Southernwood residents was exaggerated.

On the question of accommodation, the students in university-supported residences reported higher levels of satisfaction than did those outside this system. However, most students complained that they were paying too much for too little. They complained of neglect and cockroaches, of overcrowding and dysfunctional toilets, of a lack of laundry facilities and a lack of internet access, as well as a host of other shortcomings. The students felt trapped in a system in which they had been abandoned by the university and were being exploited by service providers and landlords. They spoke a great deal about feeling insecure in their residences and on the streets and blocks where they lived. Two-thirds said they did not feel safe in their neighbourhoods. They said the street lighting was inadequate and the local security guards and police were failing to keep them safe. A total of 82% of students also complained about a dearth of recreational facilities for students in the inner city, although the area boasted dozens of gyms, sports facilities and recreational options.

On the issue of safety and crime in her neighbourhood, one student explained:  

5 Interview 21 November 2015.
Quigney is one of the top areas that have high crime and I cannot just walk from school to my place at night, even in a group. These thugs are not afraid of people walking in groups. I am neutral about safety in this town; it really depends where I am because at Oxford Street I am not safe and then in Vincent maybe I tend to be more relaxed. Not much can be done actually – police can patrol in places like Quigney and Southerwood, places where students live – because at times in fact we are victims because of our gadgets.

Another said: ‘There is a lot of crime in the residence that goes unnoticed. I do not feel safe, and usually we get off late from campus and a lot of students have been robbed on their way from the library to their residence. I think there is a need to have police patrolling around residences and there should be a shuttle service.’ Yet another explained that: ‘The crime rate in my neighbourhood is quite high and has impacted my life in that I live in fear as people get robbed day and night. So, I don’t feel safe in the city. The school and the municipality should ensure that the police and safety authorities do their job.’

Most students noted that the areas in which they lived had high crime rates and that they were afraid to walk at night with their electronic gadgets and devices as they could be targeted by criminals. The students generally said that they lived in fear and perceived crime as an insoluble issue in the city because no-one seemed to be willing to address it.

*Figure 11.3: Students’ perceptions of campus facilities, 2015*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facility</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Non-existent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student centre</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>260</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture halls</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residences</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports recreation centre</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>128</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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6 Interview 19 November 2015.
7 Interview 26 November 2015.
While perceptions of the environment were generally negative, there was a general feeling that the quality of the education offered at the university was of a good standard. This may be viewed as reflecting the improved academic performance of the university as a whole during this period. Over 60% said that they felt they were receiving good academic training at the university, while a further 10% described it as excellent. Around 20% of the students were not satisfied with the quality of teaching and the overall academic standard of the university. The students were asked to rate various student and university facilities. Their responses are summarised in Figure 11.3 above. Broadly, they were happy with the services provided by facilities such as the university’s libraries and were generally positive about the academic support on offer. Significantly, students were most negative about the quality of their urban residential neighbourhoods. They felt that they were not being given their due compared to students on other more privileged campuses – with the high fees they were paying adding to the perceived sense of injustice.

Many students remarked that there was nowhere for students to meet on campus except in the small university library – and that this was doubly problematic since the students who came there to socialise disturbed those who came there to work. The university was blamed for not providing an alternative safe, decent place for them to socialise, such as a student centre. One student said:  

8 Interview 18 November 2015.

According to me, there is really nothing interesting about the campus. A city needs a common place for all varsity students in East London to meet beside the library, a place where we can walk freely without thinking about thieves (but that is inevitable). The university should listen to the demands of the students because at the end of the day the university management, they are parents themselves.

Another said that ‘the library is the only decent place at the university; it is the best asset on campus, and it is just about acceptable.’ 9 Another said: “The best assets in the university are the library and the computer labs. What is lacking are proper lecture venues, bigger library and residences”. 10 Students were consistently critical about the limited campus facilities and the dangerous and poorly serviced inner-city precinct. Another student noted: 11

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8 Interview 18 November 2015.
9 Interview 12 November 2015.
10 Interview 15 November 2015.
11 Interview 13 November 2015.
There is nothing attractive about the elements of this city campus. It is unattractive because it does not present students with much of an opportunity to experience a proper university life. The ideal city campus for students has to be a city that provides students with more than education only, but also a social life. I do not see myself settling in East London in future. I want to settle down in a city that will provide my children with better opportunities than East London can.

The uneven, chaotic management of the residences, and especially of some of the digs in the city, was a common cause of concern. Students said that some residences were relatively decent and well-managed but others were unsafe to live in, which made focusing on their academic work difficult. The issue of neighbourhood and campus facilities featured in all the petitions sent by the students to the university for its attention. In this context, the protests that erupted in the city in October 2015 may be viewed as being a long time in the making, a product of the ‘slow violence’ of exploitation to which the students had been subjected by a residential system rigged against their interests in hostile neighbourhoods.

Responding to the student protests in East London

Poorer black students from working-class and lower middle-class families seeking to access university have faced formidable impediments. According to figures published by the Department of Higher Education and Training in 2015, almost 48% of students nationwide were not graduating; while figures released in 2017 by the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (Tswanya 2017) indicated that about 68% of those who are eligible for National Student Financial Aid Scheme funding were failing to complete their studies within five years. At the same time, national growth has remained marginal – about 0.3% in 2016 – which is inhibiting plans to transform the economy and to address the socio-economic, including employment, needs of South Africa’s majority black population. In this regard, national policy-makers have acknowledged that while growth without transformation only reinforces the inequitable patterns of wealth inherited from the past, transformation without economic growth is narrow and unsustainable (Paterson 2016a).

In this context, it is noteworthy that urban planners across the world have sought to confront the role that may be played by anchor
ANCHORED IN PLACE

institutions – facilities such as hospitals and universities that have, literally, nowhere else to go – in fostering local socio-economic development and, in the process, improving the lives of their students and staff. According to this view, campuses should no longer be regarded as discrete university spaces, but rather as common urban spaces. In addition, in pursuit of genuinely equitable public purpose mandates, universities have a duty to address the needs of all their students – not just those of wealthier students who can afford to live in pricey, privatised digs.

At the beginning of the 2018 academic year, senior UFH administrators described the student protesters’ demands as unreasonable, claiming that the university’s management had fulfilled its institutional responsibilities through existing open-market arrangements. Throughout the dispute, the leaders of the universities in the city failed to meet each other or coordinate with the municipality to address how they could collaborate to address the students’ concerns. Similarly, the municipality failed to intervene by bringing the parties together in the quest for a solution – for example, through development of a large sleeper site in the inner city near UFH, WSU and the University of South Africa campuses.

The failure of the city or the university in East London to initiate a broader engagement with stakeholders may be seen as a symptom of the occupy urbanism that currently defines the orientation of the new black urban middle class. Nevertheless, for East London to grow as a city it needs to retain youth talent, as well as regenerate parts of the city which have good infrastructure and opportunity for investment. From a development point of view, every student who fails to graduate represents a waste of critical talent that could be helping to build the country’s knowledge economy. From an equity point of view, the historically advantaged students from wealthier backgrounds at better institutions are still tending to become the winners while the rest suffer – deepening rather than remedying socio-economic inequality. This is both economically and politically unsustainable, given that the ANC-led national government and many local authorities recognise the importance of building a growing, vibrant black middle class that can lead the way to higher economic growth and development.

However, city building cannot simply be a matter of channelling government funds to the industrial development zone, where jobs are expensive to create, and extending basic services and building low-cost houses on the urban edge. The city has to seek revitalisation in
precincts and places across the urban fabric, and especially in the
centre of the city where transport and other infrastructure is already
in place. In addition, the social reproduction of student life in the city
is fundamental to the capacity of the city to be able to regenerate itself
socially and economically and, by extension, to offer opportunities to
those who are currently excluded from the urban economy. The fact
that students feel so passionately about their right to the city, and
express themselves on this issue in the streets of the city, should be
seen as an opportunity for the city to implement place-based urban
reform and policy review.

By permitting the continuing ‘slow violence’ of urban neglect in
the inner city to persist, and refusing to exploit the student protests
as an opportunity to review the role of the inner city in the urban
development process as a whole, the city, the state and the universities
merely invite the perpetuation of the kind of ‘fast violence’ that
ultimately undermines the capacity of South African rust belt cities,
such as East London, to imagine alternative futures and find new
opportunities and sources of regeneration outside of their current
realities of industrial decline and dependence on state transfers
and welfare.

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