CHAPTER 7

When shacks ain’t chic!
Planning for ‘difference’ in post-apartheid Cape Town

Steven Robins

7.1 Introduction

Walking through Joe Slovo park, a low-income housing scheme situated in the historically white middle-to-upper income suburb of Milnerton, Cape Town, provides a rude reminder of the failure of planners, policy makers, and developers to acknowledge the complexity and heterogeneity of everyday social life and lived experience. In the early 1990s, an ambitious housing scheme had sought to transform the ‘chaotic’ shack settlement of Marconi Beam into an orderly low-income suburb, Joe Slovo Park (JSP). However, instead of the anticipated neat rows of brick houses with grassed front lawns, this housing scheme is now barely distinguishable from the informal settlement that had been demolished to make way for Slovo Park. Peering behind the high walls surrounding Slovo Park reveals the full extent of the disjuncture between the planners’ idealised model of ‘suburban living’ and the actual lived reality of this low-income housing scheme. While planners and developers envisaged a highly regulated formal housing development devoid of backyard shacks, shebeens, and spaza shops, Slovo Park’s core brick structures (‘RDP’ subsidy houses) have been swamped by informal structures built from corrugated iron and a mixture of other improvised building materials. It appears as if these brick and mortar houses have been re-colonised by corrugated iron, plastic, and wood. In other words, the ‘formal’ suburb of Joe Slovo Park seems to have reverted back to its original ‘unruly’ state. While there are significant improvements in the living conditions, infrastructure, and amenities at Joe Slovo Park as compared to the former informal settlement, elements of informality have nonetheless come back to haunt planners who envisaged a neat and orderly low-income suburb. Why is it that the desires of city planners for socio-spatial order so often collide with the desires and realities of those who walk the streets of planned cities? Is this simply a case of the ‘clashing cultures’ and ‘conflicting rationalities’ (Watson 2003: 395)
of planners and citizens, and is multicultural planning part of the solution or part of the problem? The following section addresses these questions by interrogating dominant theories of cultural difference that animate much contemporary planning discourse on ‘culture’ and multiculturalism. This discussion begins with a brief historical account of the cultural politics of an informal settlement in Cape Town. It focuses on changing forms of state intervention in urban residential areas in terms of planning and tenure.

7.2 Changing state discourses on urban planning and tenure

In June 1986, I witnessed the South African Defence Force (SADF) arming Xhosa-speaking vigilantes in a bloody battle against anti-apartheid activists in Crossroads, a shantytown settlement on the outskirts of Cape Town. I was working with an international television crew determined to obtain incriminating footage of security force complicity in fuelling inter-community violence in Crossroads. The SADF and South African Police had clandestinely armed a large group of Xhosa-speaking vigilante elders, referred to in the media as the witdoeke or ‘fathers’, in an attempt to violently purge Crossroads of ANC activist organisations that had established strongholds in the informal settlement in the early 1980s. Divisions had emerged in Crossroads as a result of struggles over access to housing, development resources, and growing tensions between militant youth who took control over the Peoples’ Courts, and who enforced consumer boycotts and work stay-aways. These actions alienated and antagonised many of the elders who participated in the neo-traditional headmen structures (izibonda) that existed in many of the migrant hostels and informal settlements in Cape Town’s townships. The security forces exploited these tensions between ‘fathers’ and ‘sons’ by supporting these conservative elders in a violent struggle against anti-apartheid youth activists in Crossroads. Driving through Crossroads on a misty morning in June 1986, we managed to film police and witdoeke collaborating in the torching of hundreds of corrugated-iron shack homes. We also filmed the charred human remains of ‘necklacings’ and the dozens of corpses lying alongside the road, the casualties from the previous night’s fighting between the witdoeke and the ANC comrades or amaqabane. A day later, the South African-based journalist George D’Ath was killed by machete-wielding witdoeke.

A decade later I spent four days at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings into the role of the military in the Crossroads violence. I heard one of the elderly witdoek warlords of the 1980s, Sam Ndima, telling Advocate Dumisa Ntsebeza, the TRC’s head of the investigations unit, that he was simply a victim of the apartheid state’s duplicitous machinations and manipulations.
Ndima was now wearing an ANC T-shirt instead of the widely feared white head-scarf (*witdoek*) he had worn in the 1980s. Ndima spoke about how the youth had usurped power, ‘necklacing’ *impimpis* (police informers), and undermining their traditional authority by setting up their own Peoples’ Courts. He also claimed that his *witdoeke* soldiers had been manipulated by the apartheid security forces. Ndima managed to reinvent himself as both a victim of apartheid and a loyal ANC member. He had created a new political identity for new political times. Clearly, Ndima and residents in informal settlements in South Africa and elsewhere are often ‘moving targets’; they are seldom straitjacketed into the moulds of liberal democratic citizenship and subjectivity that planners imagine, but neither are they so fundamentally ‘other’ that they cannot participate in modernist planning interventions and the liberal democratic game. It will be argued that the urban poor, whether in South Africa or elsewhere, are not necessarily locked into development encounters characterised by clashing cultures and conflicting rationalities. Instead, their capacity to engage with these processes is usually limited by the material resources at their disposal rather than ‘cultural’ factors.

*How deep is ‘deep difference’?*

Writing about the continuation of violent patronage politics in Crossroads after apartheid, Vanessa Watson (2003) draws attention to the conflicting rationalities of modernist planners and Crossroads residents. She argues that conventional understandings of ‘multicultural planning’, as a rational and consensus-building process that encourages cultural tolerance and the accommodation of difference – cannot account for the politics of ‘deep difference’ which, she argues, accounts for the continuing violence and political culture of patrimonialism in Crossroads. Whereas planners envisage ‘proper’ and ‘responsible’ citizens who arrive at rational planning solutions through consultation and consensual politics, the realities on the ground suggest that alternative political rationalities exist in places like Crossroads that are inherently incompatible with the liberal democratic conceptions of citizenship and civic participation. Watson’s analysis of conflict in Crossroads in the post-apartheid period implies that there is an insurmountable impasse between liberal and illiberal political rationalities. But how deep is this ‘deep difference’?

My brief account of Sam Ndima’s appearance before the TRC suggests that political cultures, rationalities, and identities can be deployed situationally. In the 1980s, Ndima and his neo-traditional lieutenants had aligned themselves with the apartheid security forces in a violent campaign to reassert ‘traditional’ authority. By 1996 Ndima had changed his tactics, allegiances and political identity. Ndima’s wearing of an ANC T-shirt at the TRC hearings in the mid 1990s suggested that he
had switched his political affiliation. He now identified himself with a democratic political organisation that was busy reassessing the place of traditional leaders within a modern constitutional democracy. Switching sides was relatively seamless for Ndima and his lieutenants. It would seem that people living in Crossroads, and elsewhere, are not necessarily trapped within the straightjacket of political identities and rationalities, but are instead usually capable of switching registers, repertoires, and identities depending on the specific contexts, audiences, and political objectives. If this is indeed the case, what then are the implications of this for planning and for theories of multicultural planning?

The trouble with multicultural urban planning
Writing about cultural diversity in Sydney, Sophie Watson (1996) draws attention to the homogenising impulse of the modernist legacy of a predominantly British planning tradition. It is a tradition that, she argues, disavows difference. Despite occasional contestations of public spaces in Sydney by Aboriginal groups and non-Anglo migrants, Watson argues, contemporary Australian planning discourses and practices seem to have been affected only marginally by multicultural debates. South Africa, as a former British colony, has also inherited this homogenising modernist planning and architectural tradition. However, in the 1990s we have witnessed the arrival on our shores of a global discourse of multiculturalism alongside calls for Africanisation in all spheres of South African culture. Architects, for instance, have sought out vernacular African architectural styles and aesthetics, while heritage professionals have been called upon to identify and conserve African ‘sacred spaces’ such as initiation sites. In 1996 I was commissioned by the Cape Town city planning department to identify precisely such places of African cultural significance. Although the urban landscape has been profoundly shaped by the more mundane and banal apartheid spatial legacies of racialised segregation and poverty, there seems to be an extraordinary degree of interest in more ‘exotic’ urban spaces. While this exotic notion of African culture does not by any means reflect the perspective of the entire Cape Town city planning department, it is nonetheless foregrounded in debates by culture and heritage policy makers and planners at both national and city levels. It is also within this multiculturalist milieu that ethnic tourist villages and township tours are flourishing in various parts of the country.

South Africa’s embrace of the rainbow nation metaphor is perhaps the most visible sign of the significance of multiculturalist discourse in the post-apartheid era. However, as many cultural critics have pointed out, multiculturalism tends to become a homogenising strategy that defines and demarcates the limits within which difference is permitted. Watson (1996) points out that multiculturalism is generally regarded as benign by Anglo-Australians as long as the exotic ‘Other’
can be packaged and transformed into folkloric spectacle and tourist dollars: Little Italy, Little China, the Jewish Quarter, the Malay Quarter, and so on. However, difference is viewed with less appreciation if it threatens homogenising notions of national identity. Similarly, there tends to be tolerance for cultural diversity and multicultural planning as long as the uniform built environment of suburbia is not compromised or ‘polluted’, for instance by informal building materials and mixed land use such as the running of informal businesses from suburban homes. In South Africa, black South Africans have managed to evade all such regulations as long as these activities have taken place in the townships. Yet, as the case study discussed in this chapter demonstrates, these informal building practices ‘sometimes spill over’ into the historically white parts of the city. The following section investigates the historical legacies of contemporary urban planning discourses and suggests reasons for forms of popular resistance to these interventions.

**Back to the future: The perennial quest for urban order at the Cape of Storms**

In the early decades of the last century, South African urban planners drew inspiration from Le Corbusier’s ‘Surgical Method’ in their attempts to radically reconfigure the urban landscape. They appear to have shared Le Corbusier’s modernist faith in rationally conceived ‘master’ plans and urban designs that would create social order by means of ‘proper’ zoning of land use and the segregation of different social groups. In the name of social order and racial harmony, South African urban planners appropriated Le Corbusier’s notion of planning as a rational, technical process that could be divorced from politics. It is worth quoting at length from Norman Hanson’s introductory remarks made at the 1938 Town Planning Congress in Johannesburg:

> It is possible to achieve this radical reorganization by drastic methods only, by a fresh start on cleared ground. This ruthless eradication directed towards a revitalizing process we have, following Le Corbusier’s lead, named the Surgical Method … through surgery we must create order, through organization we must make manifest the spirit of a new age … (Hanson, cited in Jensen & Turner, 1996: 85)

This modernist utopian faith in the capacity to dramatically transform ‘disorderly’ urban environments reflects the thinking of influential planners and architects going back to Baron Haussmann’s mid nineteenth-century renovation of Paris. These ideas emerged in the nineteenth century in response to the problems of social disorder and threats to public health that came to be associated with the working-class neighbourhoods of industrial cities. These planning interventions all share the
assumption that it is possible to radically redesign the built environment in ways that improve the social fabric of ‘dysfunctional’ communities and neighbourhoods. In other words, planners believed, and continue to believe, that social behaviour could be strongly influenced by urban form. The case study in this chapter draws attention to the limits of such ‘physicalist’ thinking, which continues to animate post-apartheid planning discourses. This will involve interrogating some of the underlying assumptions of urban planning in relation to questions of housing and built environment, and citizenship and governance.

In the late 1930s, Le Corbusier’s (1929) *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* was hugely influential in planning circles in South Africa. This modernist manifesto called for radical intervention in the urban landscape:

> The city is dying because it is not constructed geometrically. To build on a clear site is to replace the ‘accidental’ layout of the ground, the only one that exists today, by a formal layout. Otherwise nothing can save us … Surgery must be applied to the city center … We must use the knife … (Le Corbusier, 1929, in Steinberg, 2004: 111)

In Cape Town in 1940, ‘surgery’ took the form of the Foreshore Project that sought to modernise and ‘sanitise’ the inner city. This involved three slum clearance projects in the predominantly coloured areas of District Six, the Malay Quarter, and the Docklands. Coloureds were resettled in the bleak and windswept Cape Flats. Jonny Steinberg (2004) eloquently describes the devastating impact these modernist ideas had on tens of thousands of coloured people forcibly removed as part of ‘slum clearance projects’. It is worth quoting at length from Steinberg’s account of these spatial legacies:

> Flying over the Flats on the descent into Cape Town International Airport, you can see … concentric layers of streets, turned in upon themselves, forming tight, hermetic circles, each surrounded by a barren wilderness of no-man’s-land … Driving through Manenberg, or Heideveld or Hanover Park, one feels as if one has been locked into a maze, as if the ghetto is a dense universe … The satellite towns are 15 minutes from downtown. But this is premised on the universality of the family car; [many of] the working class families of the Flats have no cars. Moving in and out of the satellites is a costly expedition … Most important of all, perhaps, the Flats neighbourhoods were built on the premise that coloureds lived their lives in nuclear families. Indeed, it was the conceit of modernism that the nuclear family was synonymous with the twentieth century, that other forms of kinship were the residues of more primitive times. Yet the coloureds of the inner city had lived their lives in extended families … And so, between 1966 and the early 1980s, tens of thousands of people were wrenched from their lives in the inner city and dumped in the satellites on the edge of town. Extended
When shacks ain’t chic

families were dispersed to all four corners of the Flats, and everybody shared their cramped streets with strangers … (2004)

Planners sought to create new spatial orders as an antidote to the disorder and unruliness of modern urban life. However, their interventions were only partially successful. In Cape Town, for example, tens of thousands of poor and unemployed coloureds (and Africans) have indeed become virtual prisoners of the Cape Flats ghettos. Yet, the Cape Flats is also home to powerful gangs such as the Firm, the Americans, and the Hard Livings, whose drug, taxi, sex work, and abalone enterprises stretch out from the Cape Flats to include Cape Town’s inner city and plush suburbs as well as the small rural towns and fishing villages of the Western Cape (see Steinberg, 2004). Notwithstanding these messy urban realities, post-apartheid planners and policy makers continue to fantasise about creating ordered urban environments. At the heart of these fantasies are the following: home ownership, the idea of the nuclear family, and the dream of virtuous citizens living in suburban order.

What these Cape Flats planners failed to take cognisance of was the extraordinary power of ‘alternative’ social, economic, and cultural realities. For example, Jonny Steinberg’s *The Number* (2004) shows how members of prison gangs create all-consuming rituals of commitment and belonging that take on life-and-death meanings and consequences and which, over a period of many decades, have become deeply embedded in the streets of the coloured townships of the Cape Flats. Steinberg (2004) suggests that, in the absence of formal employment opportunities, these gang cultures are unlikely to be dislodged by dreams of home ownership and suburban living. It is precisely street realities and underground economies of this kind that tend to be elided in planning processes.

Planners in the Development Action Group (DAG), an NGO, were responsible for facilitating and coordinating the implementation of the private-developer-driven Joe Slovo Park upgrading scheme. They comprised a group of progressive planners who were acutely aware of the need to consult with communities. They were also aware of disastrous modernist legacies of apartheid state housing development interventions, and sought to distance themselves from these top-down technocratic interventions. Despite this awareness of the traps of modernist planning, they unwittingly found themselves reproducing certain key assumptions of this planning tradition. The following section examines the seductive power and longevity of these ideas and practices. These planning discourses, I argue, persistently underestimate the social and cultural consequences of historically produced conditions of poverty and inequality.
Fantasies of suburban living for a new South Africa: Modernist state interventions and the magic of title

One of the most sweeping policy visions for such projects of urban transformation has been put forward by the much-celebrated Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto. De Soto (2000) has boldly claimed that Third World poverty can be eradicated by transforming ‘extra-legal’ ownership of property – i.e., illegal informal housing – into legal ownership, with the Deeds Registry proposed as the vehicle. De Soto’s recipe for promoting people’s capitalism and empowerment throughout the developing world relies upon ‘the magic of title deed’ (see De Soto, 2000). This strikingly seductive idea – that title provides collateral for poor people to access bank loans and thereby convert ‘dead capital’ into business opportunities – has been embraced by donors and government-sponsored think-tanks throughout the world. De Soto’s ideas about title have been around for at least two decades. In post-apartheid South Africa, De Soto’s magic formula is seen to offer an instant solution for creating a formal secondary housing market in South Africa’s black townships. Title, individual home ownership, and access to a suburban housing market are seen as the key for creating a stable, upwardly mobile, and virtuous citizenry. This suburban model is also seen as a way of eradicating informal settlements, which are seen to represent spaces of disorder and stagnation.

De Soto’s magic bullet solution seems highly plausible and desirable to South African housing policy makers despite the existence of a body of research indicating that there are numerous financial, legal, social, and cultural obstacles to the creation of a viable township housing market, and that most owners of old township stock built in the 1960s are reluctant to sell their homes for economic, social, and cultural reasons (Robins, 2004).

These obstacles include the following: Owners of these houses are unlikely to find buyers with access to cash or bonds, and, even if they could, they would struggle to find another affordable home. The lengthy struggle of many township residents for urban rights and access to a house during the apartheid period means that, even if they have title deeds, they are unlikely to want to sell. Houses are often part of a family’s social and political biography. Also, township houses are often a family asset rather than individually owned. To unilaterally sell such an important social asset could unleash serious family conflict. In addition, township houses are often part of ‘stretched households’ that straddle urban and rural areas and have a role in multi-sited livelihood strategies. Finally, selling a township or RDP house can be risky, as sellers and buyers could be caught in a debt trap when they buy a replacement house. Clearly, title deed and home ownership is far more complicated than De Soto and market fundamentalists assume. Title deeds may, under certain circumstances, provide collateral for loans. Yet, as millions of unemployed and workers know, having title deeds in a redlined urban township can be meaningless as collateral.
Despite this growing evidence of the limits of title as the vehicle for the creation of a secondary housing market, De Soto’s argument remains seductive precisely because of its elegant simplicity and millenarian promise to eradicate global poverty. It claims that legal reform can magically solve Third World urban poverty with minimal disruption or cost to the owners of global capital. Not surprisingly, many government officials, planners, academics, and NGOs desperate for instant solutions to grinding poverty and massive unemployment have fallen under his spell.\textsuperscript{12}

The case study discussed in this chapter follows the implementation processes of low-income housing schemes based on an individual home-ownership model. It examines the underlying assumptions of models of housing delivery in relation to broader national questions of governance, citizenship, and ‘the formalisation of the informal’. The chapter takes as its starting point the view that houses are much more than bricks and mortar; housing development is highly political and deeply embedded in ideological processes aimed at building good and virtuous citizens out of the raw material of ‘the unruly masses’ (see Robins, 2002). In fact, it would seem that planners, policy makers, city managers, and activists have always conceived of housing in relation to broader issues of citizenship and governance. Informal settlements are generally viewed by planners and the state as the antithesis of modern and virtuous urban living. These also tend to be perceived by city managers and planners as dangerous and ‘unruly’ spaces that defy state surveillance and the ‘rectangular grids of civilization’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991; Crush, 1995; Dubois, 1991, Escobar, 1985, 1988, 1995; Mitchell, 1988; Robins, 1994; Scott, 1998). Tim Mitchell’s Colonising Egypt (1991) and James Scott’s Seeing Like A State (1998) show how urban planners have sought to render these ‘unruly’ urban populations more visible and legible by creating a system of regular, open streets and re-ordering space and the surveillance and control of its occupants (Mitchell, 1991: x). Similarly, colonial administrators and planners sought to spatially reorder and regulate what were perceived to be essentially unruly African landscapes. In Southern Africa, colonial spatial planning interventions such as ‘betterment’ and centralisation schemes – which attempted to re-order African land-use practices and establish linear and grid-like residential settlements – provoked intense anti-colonial resistance and political opposition to colonial rule (De Wet & McAllister, 1984; De Wet, 1986; Drinkwater, 1989; Robins, 1994). In Joe Slovo Park there were also signs of evasion and popular resistance to planners’ conceptions of the neat and rectangular grids of suburban built environments.

7.3 Post-apartheid planning: The case of Joe Slovo Park, Cape Town

Planning interventions tend to elide difference in the name of a homogenised ‘target
population’ (see Ferguson, 1990). This will become clear in the case study (see below) of Joe Slovo Park, a low-income housing scheme in Cape Town’s historically white suburb of Milnerton. Planners and administrators waged a losing battle to enforce building and trading regulations, and residents continued to build corrugated iron shacks and run informal businesses (e.g., spaza shops and shebeens) from their Slovo Park homes. Housing schemes such as Slovo Park tend to be designed and implemented with a range of homogenising assumptions about ‘proper’ citizens based on the suburban property model. It was assumed at the Slovo Park project, for instance, that the ‘target population’ of shanty-town squatters who qualified for the government housing subsidy would in fact want to settle in small low-income houses. Planners were shocked when some home owners began selling their houses and moving back into shanty settlements where they could continue living in shacks and running informal businesses without having to pay taxes, licences, rates, and levies. This case study demonstrates that it was largely material constraints, rather than ‘cultural difference’ or conflicting rationalities, that prevented ‘beneficiaries’ from living out planners’ fantasies of suburban order in Slovo Park.

Given the size of their extended families and their limited household income, the majority of residents could not afford to build brick and mortar extensions to the tiny core structures at the formal housing scheme of Slovo Park. Therefore, they could either build their extensions in corrugated iron or else move back into informal settlements where they were able to accommodate all the members of their large households. Instead of having to pay large sums of money to build brick extensions to the core houses, they could simply extend their shacks with limited costs using cheap (informal) building materials. In addition, many ran shebeens and spaza shops from their homes and some were involved in illegal activities such as gun smuggling and dagga (marijuana) dealing. In other words, there were sound material reasons why the new Joe Slovo Park settlement was ‘re-informalised’. It was largely as a result of chronic poverty and limited access to income, rather than cultural difference, that Slovo Park was so dramatically re-informalised. Yet, multicultural planning discourses often end up reifying and exoticising cultural difference in ways that obscure these more banal and mundane material realities.

While there seems to be growing concern amongst planners to address cultural difference (Sandercock, 1998) and ‘conflicting rationalities’ (Watson, 2003), these concerns have often been de-linked from the more material consequences of poverty and the informalisation of everyday life in shantytown settlements and urban ghettos. Addressing cultural difference and ‘conflicting rationalities’ in South African cities, I argue, needs to take cognisance of these more mundane material legacies of apartheid. These material realities may in turn be the ground upon which Vanessa Watson’s ‘deep difference’ lies. Without such attention to materiality, however, planners will continue to flounder in their attempts to re-
imagine urban futures in South Africa and elsewhere.

**When shacks ain’t chic: ‘Reinformalising’ Joe Slovo Park**
In addition to the ‘return to informality’ – the endless shacks built next to formal brick houses – that is so evident at Joe Slovo Park, the planners’ utopian vision of a harmonious ‘multi-cultural’, multi-economic class and non-racial housing scheme is contradicted by socio-spatial segregation and the tensions that have emerged between the mostly Xhosa-speaking lower income Slovo Park residents and the predominantly coloured and white residents of the middle-income Phoenix housing development adjacent to Slovo Park. Although Phoenix was planned as an integral part of the upgrading scheme, tensions along race, ethnic, and economic class lines surfaced, culminating in the erection of high concrete walls between Slovo Park and Phoenix. How did this planners’ vision of multicultural planning and integrated urban development collapse like a pack of cards? Did planners imagine that individual home ownership alone could extract poor residents from ‘thick’ social ties and kinship and patronage networks, and recreate them as autonomous and virtuous citizens committed to all the trappings of suburban living?

**7.4 Selected problems with state interventions in planning and tenure**

Development interventions often fail precisely because they are based upon planners’ fantasies and utopian visions, and misplaced conceptions of homogeneous ‘target populations’ (see Ferguson, 1990; Robins, 1994; Crush, 1995). Such assumptions draw upon the notion of a decontextualised group of individual beneficiaries with similar circumstances, needs, and aspirations. Whether one is talking about housing or literacy provision, rather than imagining a static and uniform ‘target population’, it would make more sense to think of residents of informal settlements as ‘moving targets’, constantly making and remaking their lives and circumstances in relation to the contingencies of the present and the future. This ‘ethnographic’ approach also draws attention to divergent identities and practices, and the competing understandings of ‘development’ held by planners, community brokers, and ‘beneficiaries’.

**‘Target populations’ and ‘moving targets’: Some of the challenges to urban planning**
Planners seldom acknowledge the complexity and heterogeneity of communities and actual social practices in their standardised policies and ‘one-size-fits-all’
master plans and blueprints. Investigating the actual lived experience of these communities could bring to the surface submerged or hidden forms of social differentiation and everyday practices that are so evident in informal settlements. It could also draw attention to the limits to state-led efforts to ‘formalise the informal’.\(^\text{13}\) The building of informal structures at Slovo Park – despite community agreements that this would not be allowed – draws attention to the disjuncture between the world of planners and that of the urban poor. It was therefore not surprising that city officials fought a losing battle to enforce regulations that prevented people from running informal businesses (e.g., spaza shops and shebeens) from their homes in Joe Slovo Park. In addition, planners and housing officials were taken aback when some home owners sold their new houses for a fraction of their value and moved back into shanty settlements where they could continue living in shacks and running informal businesses without having to pay taxes, licenses, rates, and levies.

Soon after people moved into their new houses, building inspectors and housing officials abandoned the impossibly difficult task of monitoring and regulating building standards at Slovo Park. This meant that spaza and shebeen owners were free to build corrugated iron structures next to their brick houses and run their businesses from home. Many poorer households sublet backyard shacks to people seeking accommodation close to the city centre and employment opportunities. For example, significant numbers of African immigrants and refugees moved into Slovo Park because of its geographical location and to avoid growing xenophobia in the established African townships. These unintended outcomes draw attention to the limits of planning interventions.

Rick de Satge (1997), an urban development consultant who worked with DAG, in a study of the upgrading of informal settlements in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces, comments on the striking mismatch between housing policies and actual social realities. De Satge identifies the problem of policy inflexibility that is built into the private ownership tenure regimes (‘suburban property models’) that underpin housing upgrade interventions.

Effective strategies for upgrading informal settlements demand policy flexibility and the recognition of informal systems developed by ordinary people with great experience of survival on the margins … There are informal tenures systems [that] have been developed around a recognition of transience, of the need to move on, which the systems facilitate while simultaneously trying to cushion some of the negative effects of this instability. The upgrading of informal settlements has to intersect meaningfully with these realities. An inflexible approach premised solely on the suburban property model is doomed to failure. (De Satge, 1997: 4, emphasis added)
The Joe Slovo Park housing development encountered similar problems to those identified by de Satge in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. For example, the lack of information and understanding of tenure issues, the high land-registration costs of the private property model, and a maze of legislation and regulations were all significant obstacles. Informal property markets – as opposed to the ‘normal’ housing market – may be able to reduce costs and unnecessary red tape, but they are nonetheless generally unstable and prone to contestation and conflict. Obstacles to ‘formalising the informal’ include migration, mobility, and the fact that growing numbers of residents (including ‘illegal aliens’, criminals, gangsters, shebeen owners, and shacklords) are dependent on the weak state surveillance and poor policing of informal settlements, and therefore have ‘vested interests in the status quo’ (de Satge, 1997: 6).

During the course of fieldwork in Joe Slovo Park, I came across ‘tsotsis’ and ‘skollies’ (gangsters) who appeared to be completely invisible in the neatly drawn plans and blueprints of developers, NGOs, and officials. These individuals were part of a subterranean underworld of informal operators who live their lives beyond the reach of formal political and state development discourses and institutions. The civics, ANC branches, NGOs, and local government agencies seldom factored these elusive and shadowy figures into their plans. Yet, given the disproportionately large number of unemployed people in informal settlements, these underworld figures probably constitute a significant minority. The interests, agendas, and lifestyles of these individuals and the gangs they belong to do not generally conform to planners’ imagined communities of virtuous citizens. Although these people are seldom seen or heard at local meetings and development forums, their invisibility vis-a-vis the state, civics, and NGOs does not mean that their actions do not significantly impact upon the outcomes of development projects. Yet, these informal social actors and illegal economies can make or break development projects. While wishing to avoid both romantising these individuals as ‘social bandits’, or characterising Joe Slovo Park as a space saturated with social pathologies (e.g., crime, illegality, and violence), it is nonetheless necessary to take cognisance of the existence of these subterranean activities, violent economies, and counter-cultures. It is perhaps time that such shadowy figures, and numerous other aspects of everyday social life in poor communities, find their way into the neat and orderly sketches of planners and architects.

**Dreaming of suburban order, living in poverty**

The planners’ conceptual sketches of the new suburb of Joe Slovo Park reveal a utopian vision of a neat and orderly built environment diametrically opposed to the images of anarchic and ‘chaotic’ informal settlements such as ‘Cukutown’ (Marconi Beam). Nowhere in these planners’ drawings of the future Joe Slovo
Park do we see the informal structures and corrugated shacks that have come to characterise the built environment at the new housing scheme. Instead, the sketches convey the image of an idyllic suburb comprising neat rows of houses, three-storey walk-ups with tidy shops. As Rick de Satge, a former member of the Development Action Group (DAG), the NGO that was responsible for the implementation of the Marconi Beam upgrading scheme, put it:

The planners focused on spatial design and assumed that these planned spaces and architectural forms would shape how people actually lived. But nobody at DAG really understood the complicated social dynamics and livelihood strategies of the community. We made some effort to research these issues but we never really came close to understanding the social complexity. Perhaps the DAG project leaders did not really want to be held back by these complications. They simply wanted to get on with implementation, even if this meant getting the community to buy into the project by means of patronage networks and community brokers who did not fully represent all sectors of the community. Perhaps some of the planners felt that if all this social complexity was fully revealed it would blow away political and public support for the project. Everybody desperately wanted to believe we could create this model low-income suburban development. (Rick de Satge, personal communication)

It would seem that if it were widely known that Joe Slovo Park would undergo a process of ‘re-informalisation’ characterised by corrugated iron shebeens, spaza shops, and shacks, as well as drug dealing and gang activities, it would have been difficult to find buyers for the middle-income homes at the neighbouring Phoenix development. The image of a disorderly Joe Slovo Park would also have generated considerable unease and opposition from the neighbouring (mostly white) middle-income ratepayers associations of Milnerton, who were in any case against the Marconi Beam development scheme from the start. The Local Authority was equally uneasy about initiating a low-income scheme in the middle of an upper-to-middle income suburb. It was therefore perhaps not strategic, nor in the interests of Marconi Beam beneficiaries and their NGO allies, to publicly disclose the complex character and problems facing this community. This was meant to be a post-apartheid showcase of how to do integrated multi-income-level and multi-racial housing development. What was required was nothing less than a suburban dreamscape.

Internally circulated DAG reports did, however, draw attention to some potential difficulties. The report identified the following potential obstacles:

From the perspective of Milnerton as a whole the fundamental problem is one of integrating a new dimension of society into existing ones. It is expected that the 50 hectares designated for houses in Marconi Beam [i.e., Joe Slovo Park] are likely to
accommodate over 3,000 households. The population is likely to have a very different profile to that of the existing [upper-to-middle income] areas. It will be more dependent on walking and public transport to get to work. It will require substantial education and health and welfare facilities and services. It will require new work opportunities at a low level. All of these are perceived as a threat by the [mostly white, middle-to-upper income] Milnerton residents. (Development Action Group, 1994a)

The report also noted that none of the ‘appalling’ physical conditions at the informal settlement could be addressed without a dramatic improvement of the economic base of the community. It was these problems of livelihoods and affordability that would come back to haunt DAG planners’ visions of an orderly and standardised suburban built environment.

Whether DAG and the planners anticipated the extent of the re-informalisation process or not, it is clear that the dominant planning discourse within which the NGO operated did not allow for any serious contemplation or official acknowledgement of such a future scenario. As a result, the planners’ sketches represented the future Slovo Park as an idyllic suburb, much like any middle-income suburb elsewhere in the world. The 20-hectare site was to be a mixed-use development, with a one-third residential component, while commercial, industrial, and recreational uses would make up the balance. This would provide the opportunity for small-scale and home-based industries and enterprises. According to a DAG Project Description Report (1994), ‘There will also be a mix of house types to suit incomes at the lower income levels ranging from R0 to R3 500 monthly income with a bias towards the lower end, thus avoiding both monotony and the ghetto syndrome’ (Development Action Group, 1994b: 10). However, this planners’ vision was unrealistic given the specific socio-economic needs and livelihood strategies of the people living there. For instance, a 1992 Urban Foundation survey discovered that, of the 70.7% of the people in the economically active age group, 47% were unemployed. How were unemployed Marconi Beam residents going to afford the high costs of living of suburbia? Would they not need to rent out backyard shacks and build shebeens and spaza shops in order to survive economically?

7.5 Conclusion

Planners often fail to realise their utopian and technocratic plans and blueprints in the face of everyday struggles by the urban economic underclasses. Instead of planned, formal development based on home ownership and dreams of suburban living, housing schemes are often captured by informal housing and economic
activities that deviate dramatically from ‘the plan.’ While both planners and many of the ‘beneficiaries’ may share these dreams of suburban living, there are a variety of reasons why poor communities are generally unable to realise these utopian visions of ‘modern’ urban living.

Despite the hybrid and improvisational nature of the building styles of brick and corrugated iron of poor communities in the developing world, South African planners and policy makers continue to have fantasies of dramatically transforming and standardising the everyday urban spaces of ‘the poor’. For example, the current Minister of Housing, Lindiwe Sisulu, stated in 2004 that she was determined to completely eradicate informal settlements, a goal that no developing country has yet managed to achieve. The South African government, it would seem, is reluctant to fully accept the long-term realities of informal settlements because these spaces are perceived to be places of endemic poverty, disease, crime, violence, and instability. These settlements also question South Africa’s vision of itself as the quintessential modern African state. Informal settlements are also perceived to constitute a challenge to the state’s authority and control over its population, land uses, and the built environment. This explains the undying commitment of the South African government to the bureaucratic dreamscape of properly planned and ordered suburbs with neat houses, fenced lawns, and virtuous citizens. But where do the millions of very poor South Africans fit into this fantasy of suburban living?

Joe Slovo Park can be seen as a monument to the problematic nature of utopian and rationalist tendencies of planning that fail to anticipate the unintended and unexpected (Ferguson, 1990; Holston, 1998; Scott, 1998). In this particular case, it ought perhaps to have been anticipated that many ‘beneficiaries’ would have to continue to rely on informal economies and corrugated-iron building materials once they moved to Slovo Park. This sociological blind spot perhaps represents the folly of the masterplan that ‘excludes social conflict, ambiguity and indeterminacy characteristic of actual social life’ (Holston, 1998: 46; see Scott, 1998). As James Holston notes,

modernist planning does not admit or develop productively the paradoxes of its imagined future. Instead, it attempts to be a plan without contradictions, without conflict. It assumes a rational domination of the future in which its total and totalizing plan dissolves any conflict between the imagined and the existing society in the imposed coherence of its order. (Holston, 1998: 46)

Holston suggests that these masterplans attempt ‘to fix the future … by appealing to precedents that negate the value of present circumstances’. What is required, according to Holston, is the inclusion of the ‘ethnographic present’ in planning.
In other words, planners need to anticipate the possibilities for change in actually existing social conditions. I would argue that what is also needed is that planners recognise the highly improvisational and fluid character of everyday life, especially amongst working-class and poor people. Whereas the middle- to upper-income classes may be able to plan and routinise their lives and built environment in ways that can be more readily anticipated, predicted, and captured by master plans and standardised solutions, this is generally not the case with poor people who are constantly on the move, seeking out ad hoc solutions to everyday problems of shelter and livelihoods.

These ‘solutions from below’ tend to draw upon whatever materials happen to be available, thereby creating an aesthetic of the improvised ‘ready-made’ that defies the planner’s totalising vision of a neat, orderly, and predictable suburban landscape. These highly improvisational and situational practices of the urban poor are not adequately captured by notions such as ‘deep difference’, ‘culture’, or alternative political rationalities. Resorting to static, bounded, and essentialist conceptions of multicultural planning that valorise exotic otherness will not help either. Instead, the Slovo Park case study highlights the need to recognise the recurring mismatch between utopian master plans and the mundane material realities and everyday practices of the poor. It draws attention to the situational character of the cultural politics of ‘informality’ in ways that go beyond notions of multiculturalism, conflicting rationalities, and ‘deep difference’.19

Notes
1  This housing scheme was named after the first ANC Minister of Housing, Joe Slovo, who in the early 1990s introduced the National Housing Subsidy Programme. By the late 1990s, the scheme was well under way in terms of its target of 2 000 housing units.
2  Marconi Beam is a 256 hectare site located in the centre of Milnerton, five kilometres from the Cape Town CBD. About 900 households moved onto the land during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first ‘squatters’ to settle at the Marconi Beam Transit Area were the families of the workers at the adjacent Cape Turf Club (Milnerton Racecourse) who were only provided with single hostel accommodation. This Transit Area site, referred to as ‘Cukutown’ by local residents, was eventually cleared of shacks when ‘squatters’ moved into new houses in the adjacent Joe Slovo Park housing scheme in the latter half of the 1990s.
3  A shebeen is a ‘speakeasy’ or illegal drinking club. In informal settlements, these drinking spots are usually in shacks.
4  Spaza shop is the term for small, informal, ‘general dealer’ stores that can be found in large numbers in South Africa’s townships. See Andrew Spiegel’s (1996) analysis of the elusive etymology and contemporary meanings of the word ‘spaza’.
The national housing subsidy is R16 000, plus an additional amount of R2 400 addressing locational, topographical, or other geotechnical difficulties. This applies to households earning between nought and R1 500 per month; the subsidy is less for higher income earners (Kecia Rust, personal correspondence).

Marie Huchzermeyer (personal correspondence) suggests that this obsession with orderly built environments is not simply an expression of a planner’s vision of suburban living, in terms of which there would be a need to cater for consumers’ individual choices. Instead, these interventions are generally more concerned with the imperatives of social control and the standardisation of housing products and built environments. Huchzermeyer also suggests, quite rightly, that these rigid and orderly housing interventions tend to be strongly supported by poor and low-income communities that are driven by a sense of individualised entitlement and a desire for freehold title and ownership of a ‘proper’ house. It would appear that ‘beneficiaries’ of housing subsidies are ‘seduced’ into certain ‘modern’ and ‘civilised’ modes of consumption, including the desire to own a ‘proper’ house. This insatiable desire for the fruits of ‘modern’ suburban living is evident in the fascinating research findings of Helen Meintjes (2000). As Meintjes notes, ‘whatever the preferences of people in all the areas sampled, those living in formal housing structures experience the greatest pressure to conform to the principles of proper living, despite not necessarily being financially better-off than those living in shacks … In effect, it appears that people’s expectations about the equipping of houses varies with the nature of house structures, which in themselves are also symbolically significant’ (Meintjes, 2000: 66–67). For instance, Meintjes found that, unlike those living in shacks, most of the households in formal housing displayed four-plate ovens and large colour television sets, whether or not these were functional. This, and other studies, suggests that this voracious appetite for ‘modern’ commodities and ‘proper’ appliances and lifestyles is often unsustainable, and poor people soon discover that they cannot afford the hidden costs of formal suburban living, hence the process of ‘re-informalisation’.

These were the forms of popular justice that emerged in many townships in South Africa as a result of the attack on the legitimacy of any apartheid state institutions. The People’s Courts sometimes alienated elders by inverting ‘traditional’ generational hierarchies and delving into the domestic sphere. Many male elders were publicly flogged as a result of allegations of domestic violence and this contributed towards a backlash against these community policing and popular justice initiatives.

Xhosa traditionalists of the 1980s such as Ndima managed to reinvent themselves as loyal members of an African nationalist organisation that had once labelled traditional leadership as an outmoded, anti-modern, anti-democratic, and sexist institution whose incumbents had collaborated with the colonial and apartheid authorities. These dramatic shifts in political identity and allegiance became increasingly common as South Africa settled into its new democracy. Former enemies, including members of the Afrikaner National Party, joined the ANC, and traditional leaders who had participated in the Bantustan system
became card-carrying members of the organisation that they had fought and denounced during the apartheid years. It was equally intriguing in 2004 to hear President Mbeki and former President Mandela praise the late Transkeian Paramount Chief Keiser Matanzima at a funeral in which the former Bantustan collaborator and ‘enemy of the people’ was represented and eulogised by the ANC leadership as a ‘man of the people’.

9 A secondary housing market is seen from this perspective to provide the necessary conditions for the upward social and economic mobility of the urban poor: With title, they can obtain bank loans by using their house as collateral, and this creates business opportunities which in turn enable households to buy into better neighbourhoods. This economic mobility, it is believed, facilitates greater political and social stability and economic growth.

10 For example, for township residents and communal farmers to take advantage of title and benefit from trading and accumulating assets, measures would be needed to facilitate easier access to credit, information about markets, and a sufficient supply of marketable and affordable housing.

11 Legal recognition of the houses and shacks of the poor can, in certain circumstances, provide secure tenure. The return of District Six residents to their homes shows that title deeds can provide security for citizens dispossessed under apartheid. What is needed is a realistic assessment of the transforming power of legal title in a situation where millions of South Africans are jobless and chronically poor. Title, it would seem, is not a sufficient condition for the creation of new economic opportunities and a vibrant secondary housing market in townships and communal areas.

12 Critics like Alan Gilbert and Peer Smets remain deeply sceptical of the sweeping claims, providing compelling counter-evidence from developing countries that little formal finance is forthcoming after legalisation. Latin American governments have given out hundreds of thousands of land titles, but this has not necessarily improved security of tenure, facilitated access to formal credit, or stimulated the emergence of vibrant secondary land and housing markets. Also, the housing needs of the poorest in developing countries are generally not addressed by formal market mechanisms – housing is usually self-supplied. And residents of slums and informal settlements are generally priced out of the formal housing market. These obstacles are evident in South Africa’s informal settlements and townships.

13 After having been mugged by gun-wielding youths in Joe Slovo Park in November 2004, I realised that even the ‘formalised spaces’ of Joe Slovo Park had been captured by gangsters.

14 In this chapter, the words tsotsi and skollie (gangster) reflect respondents’ own usage of the term to identify themselves. I am not suggesting that tsotsis and shebeen-owners are representative of the Marconi Beam or Slovo Park community. These are not homogeneous communities with uniform common cultural practices, identities, and understandings. They comprise individuals and groupings with distinctive agendas,
needs, and understandings. I draw on the voices of cultural brokers and *tsotsis* to encourage planners to acknowledge that social and cultural identities shape orientations to and away from ‘development’, and that this heterogeneity needs to be addressed when planning interventions.


16 Reports spoke of the need to begin long-term sustainable economic development. To achieve this, it was necessary to do the following: ‘Create formal jobs through industrial and commercial developments within the Trust site and in the area generally. Create self-employment opportunities through training and small business support. Build real construction capacity in the community and in the black construction sector broadly through the initial house building process. Ensure community control over housing, industrial and commercial land to internally subsidise the housing’ (Development Action Group, 1994a: page number not available).

17 Although significant commercial and industrial developments did take place in the area surrounding Slovo Park, in many instances these jobs did not go to members of the beneficiary community. In addition, there was substantial training of local construction workers, and local contractors were appointed by CONDEV. However, in most cases, such jobs were of a short-term nature. The Development Action Group (1994b) was, however, extremely optimistic that long-term jobs would be created on a ‘significant scale’ in the construction sector. The report went on to claim that ‘the housing project will be used to train people from the community in both artisan skills and business management. Those who meet the required performance standards could become sub-contractors or even contractors in their own right. There will be at least R0.5 billion investment in construction over the next ten years in Marconi Beam so opportunities will not end when the housing project is completed’ (Development Action Group, 1994b).

18 An Urban Foundation survey done in 1992 found that Marconi Beam was in many respects a typical Western Cape informal settlement. The survey covered 820 out of 834 households in a total population of 2,835 people. The survey found that 70.7% of the people were in the economically active age group. Of these, 47% were unemployed, 32.7% were permanently employed, and 20.2% were casually employed. Of the employable people, 18%, or 360, were employed as grooms at the Cape Turf Club (Milnerton Racecourse) and most of the remaining employed people worked as domestic workers, gardeners, and casual labourers. In addition, of the 820 households surveyed, 122 (14%) had a regular income, 533 (67.4%) earned less than R1 000 per month, and 165 (17.6%) earned more than R1 000 per month. The average household income was R576.80 per month, while the average individual income for those employed was R462.35 per month. Finally, of the 2,835 residents, 55% were found to be ‘functionally illiterate’, 30% of children of school-going age did not attend school, the average level was standard 4 (grade 6), and only four residents were at university. The survey went on to note that community
organisations were generally weak and that very few people attended general meetings. This was attributed to a number of factors, including the lack of credible and prominent community leaders. It was also observed that there were large numbers of commercial enterprises, including sophisticated provision stores and shebeens. Alcohol and drug abuse and violence against women were identified to be widespread (Development Action Group, 1994a).

The research in Marconi Beam was done over a period of five years. It began in 1994 when I was involved in an ethnographic research project in Marconi Beam on the social uses of literacy. This project was initiated by Martin Prinsloo, Department of Adult Education, University of Cape Town. The research involved interviews with residents, planners, and officials, as well as observations at development and planning meetings. Some of the interviews were done together with Amon China, a researcher at UCT’s Department of Adult Education. I also benefited from discussions with Robert Mongwe, a social anthropology student at the University of the Western Cape, and later at Stellenbosch University, who did his post-graduate research at Marconi Beam/Joe Slovo Park.