

# **The breakdown of community: an examination of the social effects of low-income housing developments in Johannesburg and Cape Town**

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## **Problem**

Although the South African government has delivered millions of subsidized houses, several challenges remain in order to more fully integrate low-income residents into the mainstream of urban life. Many new arrivals to housing developments in South Africa come from informal settlements, where they have developed social capital, networks of trust, and livelihoods. A great concern with slum clearance and relocation projects is that new housing developments disrupt the pre-existing sense of community, which is crucial for quality of life.

## **Objectives**

My research examines the ways in which low-income housing approaches, specifically the government subsidized housing programs in South Africa – the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and People’s Housing Process (PHP) – influence residents’ sense of community. This paper focuses on the lived experiences of low-income residents, which are indeed linked to housing and the built environment. I will examine residents’ sense of community in the RDP section of Cosmo City and Diepsloot (sites in northern Johannesburg), the PHP housing in Freedom Park (in Mitchell’s Plain, a western township in Cape Town), and apartment walk-ups in Springfield Terrace close to the Cape Town central business district. Three of these housing sites are located along the urban fringe (with the exception of Springfield Terrace), estranged from social services and job opportunities.

## **Methods**

Sense of community refers to an individual's feeling of belonging to a group with a shared connection and attachment to place, as indicated in social trust, community participation, neighborliness, and emotional connections to place (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). This paper asks: What factors have contributed to the breakdown in sense of community within housing developments in Johannesburg and Cape Town? This question is important because it examines the interdependence of housing and residents' sense of community – an understudied issue in urban planning literature. I draw upon qualitative and quantitative evidence to support my view that there has been a breakdown in the sense of community as a result of relocation to new housing developments. My primary data includes: 190 household surveys, 71 resident interviews, and 11 focus group community mapping sessions. I conducted these data collection activities in June 2013, January 2015, and May 2015.

## **Background**

Cosmo City is a mixed-income development that incorporates three housing typologies: RDPs, social housing rentals, and market rate houses. The 1970 ideas for Cosmo City were formed under an apartheid spatial vision to create a township of the north (NOWETO) (Murray, 2011; Haferburg, 2013). Diepsloot also makes up NOWETO as a post-apartheid relocation site for informal settlement residents displaced from settlements such as Alexandra and Zevenfontein. The history of Freedom Park dates back to 1998 when a group of informal settlers constructed their own shacks on vacant land that had been zoned for a school that was never built. The Legal Resource Centre (LRC), Development Action Group (DAG), and the Mellon Housing Initiative have been active in the site to represent the residents and provide legal representation against eviction. Constructed in 1998, Springfield Terrace is an inner city, infill housing development promoting more compact housing to middle to low-income residents. Springfield Terrace was an urban experiment seeking to overturn the idea that low-cost accommodation needed to be constructed along the urban fringe in South African cities.

## **Findings**

The findings reveal that residents are proud of their housing and rely on neighbors to watch their houses when they are away or alert them of crime in the area.

The majority of residents surveyed in Cosmo City, Diepsloot, and Freedom Park feel unsafe walking at night or allowing their children to play outside. Springfield Terrace residents indicated that they enjoy the close proximity to the CBD to access jobs and amenities. The findings indicate that government programs to re-house low-income residents do so with little attention to the pre-existing social fabric. Residents reported feeling uprooted when arriving to their new housing because they no longer live near their former neighbors. The necessity of feeling safe has significant implications for the longevity of a housing development. Furthermore, the estrangement from the city center results in limited access to employment opportunities. As a result, residents have devised numerous adaptive strategies such as renting out backyard shacks attached to their RDP houses and operating informal businesses from their homes.

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