

# AS HOME SPACES IMplode, place-making suffers

In the current review of housing policy in South Africa, the HSRC was asked to investigate whether low-cost housing policies had increased “access to the city” for the poor over the past 25 years. The researchers found that state-led, pro-poor suburbanisation projects have imploded, due to re-urbanisation and adverse residential involution that has dire consequences for the formation of sustainable, place-based communities. *By Prof Leslie Bank, Ndipiwe Mkuzo and Tim Hart*

In 2018, the Department of Human Settlements (DHS) asked the HSRC to do a national review of the role that state housing programmes played in access to cities and their offerings, for poor beneficiaries. The purpose of this assignment was to inform the human settlement policy for the future and it was conducted by a research group that focuses on place-making and development in the HSRC’s Economic Performance and Development programme.

The study reviewed conditions in five cities: Johannesburg, Cape Town, Mangaung, Buffalo City and eThekweni. It involved a combination of literature reviews and ethnographic research into specific RDP housing and informal settlements.

While most theories about the city emphasised the role of private capital investment in settlement formation in cities, the state had played a critical role in South Africa – delivering more than four million houses since 1995.

*Low-income houses in Philippi, a settlement on the periphery of Cape Town.*  
**Photo:** Antonio Erasmus

Next to China, South Africa has made the largest investment. However, unlike the high-rise modernist model of China, the South African model has been based on a low-slung suburban model and has involved the construction of RDP houses at scale as well as the upgrading of informal settlements. These two strategies are often followed by residents' own additions to RDP houses and shacks of two to three storeys, which we call *re-urbanisation*. Depending on which city you are looking at, this low-slung suburbia is a colourful collage of brick and mortar housing, shacks of multiple materials and shipping containers. The further away from the city, the less dense the settlement.

### Far from employment

In South Africa, the suburban landscape has not emerged as a demand-driven process, whereby families with jobs buy into suburbs to improve their lifestyles, after they have acquired cars and improved their levels of affordability. Instead, the new basic suburbs, in the form of RDP housing, have been provided by the state as a supply-side intervention, on cheap land on the outskirts of cities, to families that do not have the means to either develop their starter houses or to cover the costs of transportation into the city on a daily basis. Pro-poor suburbia has its limitations, but together with extensive, albeit often fractured, service delivery, it is the main product of the post-apartheid democratic regime. Access to an RDP house is seen as a basic right, and everyone feels that this is the very least they should be afforded to symbolise the attainment of freedom. Ideally, the house should be fully serviced and there is an expectation that the state should provide access to employment too. The RDP design did not anticipate that housing beneficiaries would struggle with employment, because no provision was generally made for local entrepreneurship in the planning of high streets with retail frontage, settlement-level small business parks, or shopping centres. The imagined RDP model was of the classic old blue-collar dormitory suburb, where shopping and livelihood

happened elsewhere. The idea that a large number of those in the RDP housing might not find jobs and have to try to make a living in their own neighbourhoods, backyards or streets never occurred to the planners.

### Urban involution

In reality, there is jobless growth, little expansion or improvement in public transport in cities (which has become worse), very poor results from basic education, and fragmented service delivery. The promise of the state-led suburban dream is collapsing. The result is widespread urban involution. In other words, people do not have the means to support themselves, so the only thing they do have to work with is the land granted to them by the state (and their houses). Using anthropological perspectives on gifting, the report unpacks the social lives that RDP houses follow as they evolve into other types of places or home spaces. Densification and re-urbanisation (informalisation) is a common outcome in well-located, state-led RDP housing projects in cities. The consequences of this are problematic for local authorities in their ability to maintain services and also for the mandate of providing access to the city through housing. Internal stratification in these settlements leads to winners and losers as the RDP beneficiaries draw rent from new arrivals, who are overcharged for access to very poor-quality places. On the outskirts of the cities, the RDP settlements do not densify but are deserted during the week as beneficiaries find alternative accommodation closer to the city centre or places of employment. A system of weekly commuting occurs, which is not very conducive to urban stability or investment. For those who are fortunate enough to find employment, much of their income is redirected to the rural communities from which they hail. Little local reinvestment of this income occurs.

### Double-rootedness continues

There are three main consequences that we need to note: (1) the new evolutionary process of urban place-making, where starter communities evolve into orderly larger non-racial

urban communities or neighbourhoods with good schools, sports facilities, social tolerance, social cohesion and local civic associations, as imagined in the policy, are few and far between. Instead we have overcrowded or under-serviced and poorly planned neighbourhoods which are full of violence, xenophobia and social dysfunction; (2) the inadequacy of new urban settlements as places where people can literally come to live and die, as the American urbanist Lewis Mumford famously described suburbs, has encouraged ongoing double-rootedness in South Africa cities, which is stimulated not only as a legacy of apartheid but as a response to the failure of place-making in the cities. The current policy applications are not delivering the conditions for urban stability and growth. Urban migration now provides for continued investment in rural housing rather than only investment in cattle and agriculture; (3) the policy of providing easy access to the city is becoming undermined by the usurious rents that are now being charged across the cities for backyard accommodation. Modest access to the yard used to be a way in which close relatives could access the city through family as a form of shared poverty but is now being commodified for profit, making the cities more dangerous and inegalitarian at the margins. The HSRC report provides the Department of Human Settlements with much to consider as they revise and update the old RDP housing policy.

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**Note:** This synopsis draws on a report, [\*Evaluating interventions by the Department of Human Settlements to facilitate access to the city by the poor\*](#), by Leslie Bank, Mark Paterson, Tim Hart, Catherine Ndinda, Justin Visagie, Nina Botha, Esther Makhetha, Liezel Blomerus, Jessica Thornton, Francis Sibanda and Ndipiwe Mkuzo, with financial support from the DHS.