A Review of Literature on Transformation Processes in South African Townships

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Abstract The paper provides a literature review of research published on South Africa's black townships in order to answer certain questions: how have the townships changed? In what directions are they changing? Which groups in the townships benefit from these changes? Which groups of actors who push for change in the townships can be identified? To what extent are these residential areas becoming multifunctional, shifting from their role as dormitory settlements to providing their residents with a higher quality of life than in the past? What new social and ethnic antagonisms arise in turn? The paper reviews township literature in four periods: up to the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s and 2000s (the bulk of the review is however on the last 20 years).

Keywords Urban transformation · South African black townships · Urban reconstruction · Research agenda

Introduction

Nearly 20 years after the end of apartheid, the mosaic of ethnic and social space in South Africa between 'black and white' and 'rich and poor' appears to have taken on a new form. Many variations in this transition from apartheid to post-apartheid cities can be observed: from almost European-looking to a very African cityscape, from urban centres with merely a local or national resonance to those of global significance. New forms of living together by people previously forced to segregate by law

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have emerged; new migration dynamics have made their mark on the cities of South Africa, and, above all, new, especially social, contradictions have crystallised. Further, new forms of urban self-organisation and civil self-help (governance) have developed where the state has withdrawn. In contrast to the more monolithic spatial structures of apartheid based on skin colour, the post-apartheid city is marked by small-scale and contradictory developments that have rapidly and radically changed the face of the city. Economic returns and informal survival strategies have taken the place of orderly, state-directed urbanisation in guiding the development of the city, which has emerged from a phase of 'Afrikaner socialism' via a short period of radical neo-liberalism, to become an entrepreneurial urban centre. Many inner cities and city fringe areas have changed to such a degree that they are virtually unrecognisable from their situation two decades ago—particularly their inhabited spaces, population structures, physiognomy and functions.

The townships, on the other hand, on the margins of the cities and home to formerly disadvantaged groups, have experienced a much slower transition. Our scanning of the literature on townships over the past two decades yielded just over 400 published journal papers of which the biggest focus of research relates to housing and health-related studies. Since the inception of *Urban Forum* in 1990 until the first edition of 2012, a total of 327 papers were published of which a mere 31 (9.4 %) have addressed township-specific issues. Elsewhere, the contribution of urban geographic scholarship also remains relatively limited within the bigger picture of urban research. In this paper, the trajectory of research questions on townships is reviewed: How have the townships changed? In what directions are they changing? Which groups in the townships benefit from the changes? Which groups of actors who push for changes in the townships can be identified? To what extent are these residential areas becoming multifunctional, shifting from their role as dormitory settlements to providing their residents with a higher quality of life than in the past? What new social and ethnic antagonisms arise in turn? The paper reviews township literature in four periods: up to the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s and 2000s (the bulk of the review is however on the last 20 years). We do acknowledge that it is impossible to refer to or accentuate all the research and themes on townships over the past 20 years. The selected material 'short-listed' for this review is that which fits into our categories of observed new and interesting material that has emerged.

Period 1: Townships—*Terra Incognita*

Until well into the 1970s, the townships were a largely unknown quantity in research in and on South Africa. The few exceptions include Kuper et al. (1958), Lewis (1966), Smith (1974), Hlophe (1977) and Western (1978), who incorporated the townships into the context of urban and social development, instead of understanding them to be architecturally cheap housing solutions for so-called non-whites, or as mere appendages to the white-dominated apartheid city. Issues of social and spatial justice became increasingly urgent as part of a humanistic, welfare and radical geography. Considering the rudimentary nature of sound data, small-scale empirical studies and 'inside' views on the township population, conclusions were based primarily on mere chance observation and description (Hannig 1980). The growing revolt against apartheid in the townships, which culminated in the 1976 uprising

starting in Soweto, led in turn to a 'radicalisation' in (white-dominated) South African scholarship. This opened the door to studies of holistic, non-racial urban development, the functional linking of white and non-white residential areas, the improvement of living conditions and new governance structures that it was believed would meet the demands of protestors in the townships. Townships henceforth became a trendy research theme of study, especially among scholars of the more liberal English-speaking universities.

Period 2: The Turbulent 1980s

Formative in the emergence of a new human geography in South Africa were Beavon and Rogerson (1981) and Beavon (1982) who asked new questions and presented new theoretical contexts and interpretations (drawn from the international mainstream)—thereby breaking the isolation of apartheid-dominated South African scholarship and laying bare the self-imposed bounds of the discipline in a search for 'holistic' explanations. They still viewed the black townships as 'terra incognita', but by doing so they initiated a vast amount of research that would take place in the 1980s (Cook 1986). Empirical surveys and small-scale sociological studies over longer periods continued to remain scarce (i.e. Keenan 1988), since quantitative data was still lacking, incomplete or not to be trusted as a result of propaganda influence—the decade was marked by many years of unrest, some townships becoming 'no-go areas' for whites. Thus, these studies were often historical (re)interpretations of people, spaces, structures and dynamics that to a certain extent anticipated post-apartheid trends. They returned to these people, spaces and objects a meaning that was denied them in the apartheid period, or not reflected critically. Among these were Pirie (1984) on the naming of Soweto; Rogerson and Beavon (1980, 1982) and de Montille (1987) with their surveys on informal trading in the otherwise 'economyless' structure of the townships; Christopher (1986, 1987a, b, 1988) with his evaluation of large-scale datasets and cartographic processing in the pre-GIS period; and Pirie (1988, 1990), Parnell (1989, 1991a, b) and Pirie and Hart (1985, 1989) with their historicising approach. First, publications followed which today would be called governance studies, examining the informal (and, during apartheid, illegal) power structures in the townships (i.e. Cole 1986; Jochelson 1988). The 1980s would also see the publication of several works on the model of the South African city (Davies 1981; Western 1981, 1986; Hofmeister 1983; McCarthy and Smit 1984; Bähr and Jürgens 1990), among them, both descriptions of the status quo of the race-class dichotomy in South African society, as well as descriptions of the role of space and spatial separation in the materialisation of power and domination structures. Part of the grand apartheid scheme was bringing higher education into the townships in the 1980s with the establishment of the multi-campus Vista University (campuses were developed in the townships of Pretoria, Soweto, East Rand, Bloemfontein, Port Elizabeth and Welkom). Ideally suited to interrogate the system of oppression it failed to instil any critical scholarship within this institution to engage with issues on their doorsteps. Instead those appointed had strong allegiance with the Broederbond and were perfectly positioned to spread the propaganda of the apartheid regime in the townships. Not surprisingly the university unbundled in the early 2000s, as it was seen as an albatross around the new government's neck.

Period 3: Celebrating Democracy and the Beginning of Reconstruction

The democratisation and pluralisation of South African society in the early 1990s opened completely new perspectives for the study of the townships. The state of emergency 'blanket' was lifted, and they were now open to anyone, no longer subject to isolation as they had been during the apartheid regime. The pragmatic problems of everyday life in the townships thus came more strongly into focus, and these issues were taken up by the new political actors and parties, becoming a part of South African public discourse. The fact that the previously disadvantaged groups could now freely engage in 'white academia' and contribute their personal experience of township life, led to new questions about work on the townships. In particular, this influenced six broad research themes. Firstly, questions arose on the management of cities, new planning ideals beyond the apartheid city and problems in the coordination of planning processes within the framework of governance discourses (i.e. Mayekiso 1992; Abrahams et al. 1993; Bell et al. 1993; Abbott 1994; Ahmad 1996; Botes et al. 1996). In terms of the country's broader political history, this phase is characterised by a period of multi-party negotiations, policy formulation (in line with global trends), reconciliation (the desegregation of society in all spheres), and urban reconstruction (development and upliftment of underdeveloped areas such as townships). Local government restructuring provided the impetus for all other restructurings that followed. It is indeed the restructuring of governance that prevented logical integrated spatial development planning taking place later on. The re-engineering of governance was a tedious process, involving lengthy negotiations, and the outcome is still being contested today. Secondly, questions on local living conditions which could now be analysed on the basis of sound qualitative and quantitative empirical data emerged (Barbarin and Khomo 1997; Coetzee 1997; Beukes and van der Colff 1997; Mears 1997). For the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to be focussed, empirical evidence was needed. However, the RDP was replaced by the GEAR policy and privatisation debates became the new enemy of the poor in the townships. Thirdly, there were questions that took into account, more than ever before, the diversity and aspirations of the township population, including gender issues and seniority (Møller 1992; White 1993). Fourthly, research on the human-environment relationship, which identified resource use, resource conservation and environmental design as criteria for quality of life (McDonald 1998a; Ballantyne and Oelofse 1999; Goldblatt 1999; Hooper-Box 1999) had a brief spell of interest. Fifthly, there were questions which addressed issues of conflict resolution, reconciliation and negotiation processes in local communities and thus traced the trickle-down process of democratisation (Bolnick 1993; Botes et al. 1996; Bozzoli 1998; Cherry 2001). Lastly, questions addressing the growing problem of the housing shortage and construction during the apartheid period, in the context of new living ideologies, a free property market and freedom of movement, reappeared as main research concerns (Abrahams et al. 1993; Gilbert et al. 1996; Ginsburg 1996 and even in the 2000s: for example Bank 2007; Ndinda 2007; Del Mistro and Hensher 2009; Huchzermeyer 2009). The transformation process produced new winners and losers (Gilbert and Crankshaw 1999; McDonald 1998b; Beall et al. 2000), squatters and the homeless on the one hand and an emerging black middle class on the other. Only a few rare studies focussed on this first decade of transformation on the economic basis of the townships,

which, as a result of discriminating planning practices during apartheid, with the exception of the informal sector, remained in any case largely nonexistent (Morris and Pitt 1995; Malunga 1995; Randall 1996).

Period 4: Tensions Brewing Amidst the FIFA 2010 World Cup Euphoria

The post-Mandela era was always to be seen as an era of rebuilding the country. For the Mbeki government, townships became a laboratory for exploring urban renewal with the introduction of the Urban Renewal Programme (URP). The announcement of the URP came shortly after South Africa had completed a structural reform process at the subnational level, which resulted in the creation of nine provinces and 284 local governments, followed soon after in 2000 by the municipal elections. Considering the fact that townships emerged as a priority area of urban government restructuring, it is worthwhile questioning the absence of a national policy directive on township renewal. The current policy remains at programmatic level. The three most prominent of these plans of action since the advent of democracy are the Special Integrated Presidential Projects initiated in 1994, followed in 2001 by the national URP, and more recently the Neighbourhood Development Programme of 2004/5. More alarming is the fact that scholarly engagement on the urban renewal project in townships remained limited to only a few studies (Donaldson and Du Plessis 2012; Siyongwana and Mayekiso 2011).

The South African apartheid city's spatial structure was not expected to disappear overnight. The national government's yearbook of 2007 proudly boasts how far the country has advanced in providing houses (if they can be viewed as houses) and infrastructure in townships and addressing economic and social inequalities in all spheres of life. Broader political intrigues within the ruling ANC government boiled over into the streets of the townships again, reminiscent of the turbulent 1980s, and the phrase 'there is a crisis brewing in the townships' emerged. The country's then President Mbeki, who alienated his own constituency, especially during his second term in office, became synonymous with the expression, 'what crisis?' Yet underneath the 2007 yearbook's gleaming statistics, and the President's apparent ignorance about what was really happening in the country, there lurked untold unresolved tensions of social distrust, hatred, disadvantage, corruption, poverty, crime, xenophobia and government's inability to create habitable sustainable settlements—and those living in townships bore the brunt of this social malaise. Urban South Africa was again in a state of revolt, even perhaps experiencing an urban pseudo-revolution when, in moments of 'madness', township dwellers turned on foreigners in a spate of attacks, violence and murder, which left the government red-faced a few years before the 2010 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup. Growing discontent in townships over service delivery and corrupt government officials have again become the norm in townships from the first few years of the 2000s onwards: a stark reminder of the state of emergency era during the 1980s.

Further, the early 2000s ushered in several new research agendas. Firstly, the growing importance of South Africa in the world and thus the possibility of (at least the most popular) townships to develop an economic foothold in the traditionally white tourism sector. Developments in this sphere and its potential (including South

Africa's unsuccessful bid for the 2004 Olympic Games and being awarded the FIFA World Cup 2010) led to a series of studies which examined potential target groups and how these might be addressed, who would benefit and how such marketing might be carried out (Rogerson 2004a, b, 2008; Kaplan 2004; Nemasetoni and Rogerson 2005; Booyens 2010; Butler 2010; Rogerson 2012; Visser 2012). Further economic impulses emerged merely in the tertiary sector (and in some rare cases in the primary sector of so-called urban agriculture), although many of these met only basic infrastructural needs which had been neglected during the apartheid period (Klemz et al. 2006; Bradford 2007; Skuse and Cousins 2008; Chao et al. 2010). As a rule, the townships jumped from a non-industrial (dormitory space) immediately to a post-industrial economy where leisure facilities such as shopping malls, hotels and museums were becoming regular features. Secondly, the increasing importance of informal and self-help initiatives became clear where the state, if it had 'arrived' at all, had withdrawn due to lack of funding, resulting in new forms of social fragility, the development of new survival and resistance strategies, new actor networks, discourse patterns and governmentalities (Butchart et al. 2000; Baker 2002; Arnall et al. 2004; Bähre 2007; Huchzermeyer 2009; Pienaar and Visser 2009). The spark to ignite entrepreneurship and stimulate local economic growth within townships has lost its momentum and is in desperate need of applied scholars to find solutions to alleviating poverty. Thirdly, the admission of the HIV/AIDS crisis after long years of denial by official policy-makers resulted in a series of investigations arguing for radical state and policy interventions, especially in townships where the epidemic is most severe (Naidu and Harris 2006; Simbayi et al. 2007; Boulle et al. 2008; Cloete et al. 2008; Cluver et al. 2009). Fourthly, a small but growing body of literature is now emerging on the development of lifestyles that cannot necessarily be considered new, but appeared for the first time in township academic literature. Such studies are exploring social identities, geographies of music and gay spaces (Donham 2005; Ellapen 2007; Hammett 2009; Hurst 2009; Tucker 2010).

Conclusion: Towards a New Set of Research Agendas

The 2010 FIFA World Cup, the world's biggest sporting event (and in essence marketing event), kicked off and concluded in South Africa's biggest township, Soweto. This symbolic moment in the history of townships, it was hoped, inspired a new research agenda. We are of the opinion that the following issues are clearly unrepresented in scholarship to date, and suggest five themes worthy of further exploration in the immediate future:

1. Social environment: ever-increasing numbers of black people have greater access to higher incomes and realise higher standards in housing, mobility and consumption. The gap between affluent and poor blacks has grown and the social geography has spilled over into the creation of a binary discontent, perhaps best mirroring the dual nature of the post-apartheid city of today. On the one hand are the affluent (of whom a significant proportion is now categorised 'Black Diamonds') who have retreated into new laagers, this time gated, fenced and protected by private security firms—and on the other hand, the indigent, those who have yet to experience a spatially apartheid-free urban living, those living in

the informal settlements, RDP estates, the unemployed and homeless. New residential areas are being built, transforming the townships into attractive property markets. Gentrification and social differentiation can be observed ever more frequently in the townships, in which an emerging black middle class (or Black Diamond) is developing. What keeps them in the townships? What role will they play in the further development of their neighbourhoods? What form of spatial competition do they pose to other social groups?

2. Consumption environment: new shopping centres and supermarkets are being built, challenging the hegemony of traditional spaza shops and informal merchants. This competition between modern and traditionally survivalist leads to completely new distribution and consumption patterns and contributes to the displacement of many economic activities based on manual labour and small businesses. Are the concomitant conflicts taken into consideration in local urban planning? What is the role of the spaza shop in ensuring the fulfilment of basic consumption needs in the township? Is there a local discourse on the (post-) modernisation of supply structures?

3. Demographic environment: More and more non-South Africans are moving to the townships. This affects both the resident population and foreign business people, whose commercial success has led increasingly to xenophobic violence on the part of the local population. How will these ethnic and cultural conflicts affect coexistence within the community and the future of a democratic South Africa? So too, residential desegregation is taking place slowly in townships—mostly poor whites and coloureds moving into RDP housing areas—but how will this impact on the broader social transformation of society and what will be the social identities of these new emerging communities?

4. The 'pleasure periphery': As peripheral space to the broader pleasure industry, townships are slowly positioning themselves as emerging niche markets for growth in leisure and tourism. How sustainable are these initiatives? How does it encourage low-middle income township dwellers' leisure patterns?

5. Outside the urban centres: Several model townships have to date benefited more than others as a result of the post-apartheid transformation, primarily those in the largest South African cities. What can be learned about potential new problems for the development of other townships in small and medium-sized cities?

6. Towards a greener townscape: Green urbanism and the creation of sustainable living spaces in townships can be seen in the introduction of renewable energy practices in many townships, such as the recycling of materials (albeit informally done). The unsustainability of township developments since 1994 has to be turned around, and new models of urban design and green living are needed. How should this be done? How can the townships benefit from modern information technology? How will the provision of free access to the internet and other IT infrastructure improve the livelihoods of township dwellers?

In the first edition of *Urban Forum*, a paper was published with the title 'What Now in the Townships?' More than 20 years later we are still asking: what now in the townships? However, this time round, we are asking this in a democratic society which shows signs of vulnerability, tensions, a re-emergence of draconian legislation and major societal challenges in the fields of health, education and housing service

delivery. We are hopeful that together with this edition of *Urban Forum* which is solely dedicated to township research as well as a forthcoming special edition of *Habitat International*, urban scholars will once again be enticed and challenged to put the townships under the microscope.

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