Unhousing the Rainbow - South Africa's Long Walk to Dignified Shelter

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In 2022, I was a victim of a violent attack that left me disabled. The physical toll, and adjustments to my new adaptive lifestyle, necessitated a period of healing and reflection.

During this time, I reflected deeply on the systemic issues facing South Africa, and I rediscovered the purpose that once ignited my passion for justice.

I Immersed myself in the very communities that first inspired my commitment to human rights. By listening more than speaking, observing more than acting, I witnessed firsthand the persistent struggles for equitable housing and land rights in South Africa. These experiences reaffirmed my belief that the fight for dignity and justice is far from over.

I have walked these streets. I have argued in the courts. I have buried the victims of neglect.I never left the struggle - I simply needed time to find the right words. Now, I have written them.

'Unhousing the Rainbow' is not just about land or laws. It is about dignity. It is about who we become as a nation. This is my long-form piece on housing and hope in South Africa.

From Land Act to Group Areas: A Legacy Written in Brick and Blood

South Africa's housing crisis cannot be divorced from its history. In 1913, the colonial regime passed the Natives Land Act, confining the Black majority to just 7% of the country's land - later expanded to 13% by 1936. This legislation marked the beginning of systematic dispossession. Black families were uprooted from ancestral lands and herded into "native reserves" and later, dusty townships on the fringes of cities.

The apartheid government doubled down with the Group Areas Act of 1950, which enforced strict residential segregation. Over the next few decades an estimated 3.5 million Black South Africans were forcibly removed from so-called "white" areas in one of history's largest mass removals - a figure that does not include the thousands of Indian and Coloured South Africans that were also uprooted from places like Cato Manor and District Six under the same brutal laws.

Entire thriving neighbourhoods - like Magazine Barracks in Durban - were demolished,

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their people scattered and their histories erased in the name of racial planning. But these policies were not only about physical separation. They engineered apartheid's spatial economy.

Black, Indian and Coloured communities were deliberately placed far from city centers and stripped of access to quality schools, hospitals, and employment. By design, they endured disparate levels of service provision and opportunity. In these neglected townships - roads went unpaved, water and electricity were afterthoughts, and commuting to work meant long, costly journeys.

The scars of this spatial injustice remain deeply etched. Sober brick houses with neat yards may stand in one area - while just across an invisible line - crowded informal settlements sprawl without sewage, greenery or recreational space. The Group Areas Act did not just segregate communities it entrenched a hierarchy of opportunity.

Generations grew up knowing that one's address could determine one's destiny.

In "have" enclaves, there were tree lined roads and playgrounds. In the "have-not" townships, everyday life was a fight for basic dignity. Such was the pre-1994 housing landscape - a landscape deliberately designed to deny Black, Indian and Coloured people proper land ownership, and the simple human comfort of a secure home near life-sustaining amenities.

As we examine housing needs in South Africa we must confront an often ignored reality - chronic homelessness.

Chronic homelessness is not just, or only, or even about poverty or addiction - it is deeply linked to mental health. In city centers, like Durban and Johannesburg, many of those sleeping on sidewalks are not simply "vagrants" or "drug addicts". Often, these are individuals living with mental and psychosocial disabilities, for whom housing cannot be addressed in isolation from healthcare and social support.

Even if provided accommodation, many would return to the streets, not out of choice, but because of the lack of mental health interventions and inclusive care systems. South Africa, despite its progressive Constitution, does not have a single truly free homeless shelter. All require payment - often R30 to R40 - a fee which is inaccessible to those with no income and no support.

In Durban, the Denis Hurley Centre on Cathedral Road, stands out as one of the few places offering compassionate care, meals and dignity to the homeless without judgment. But this is not enough. If we are serious about the right to housing, we must

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expand the definition to include supportive housing solutions for people with mental disabilities, and begin treating chronic homelessness as a public health and human rights issue, not just a social burden.

When apartheid formally ended in 1994, the walls of Group Areas were expected to crumble. Legally, South Africans of any race could live wherever they pleased. Many Black, Coloured and Indian families seized the chance to move into suburbs and city centers from which they had long been barred. At the same time, formerly whites-only neighborhoods witnessed an uncomfortable transition as the “Rainbow Nation” idea was put to an early test.

In some cases, wealthier Black, Indian and Coloured professionals bought homes in areas like Durban North or Johannesburg’s formerly exclusive enclaves, fulfilling the legal right to relocate and integrate. Yet new tensions simmered in these integrated spaces. Even a routine dispute over loud music or a property boundary could bare the teeth of old bigotries.

Still, the overall arc bent toward progress. Slowly, South African cities began to un-ghettoise, with an emerging middle class of all colours claiming their piece of the urban mosaic.

But even as some escaped the townships, poverty itself remained largely unmoved. For millions who could not afford suburban real estate, the end of racial zoning offered only a symbolic freedom.

They remained trapped in squalid informal settlements or crowded government flats, watching gleaming malls and office parks rise at a distance. The inequality in access to land and housing persisted, now more clearly cut along economic lines even as overt racial barriers fell.

Nowhere were these frictions more tragically evident than during the unrest of July 2021. What began as protests over the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma in KwaZulu-Natal spiralled into looting and violent mayhem that exposed deep social rifts.

In many townships of Durban, residents formed armed vigilante groups to “guard” against “looters” when police failed to respond. In the chaos, racial profiling and hatred exploded. “Roadblocks” manned by community members were set up and some vigilantes began targeting Black passersby solely for the color of their skin. Over thirty people, mostly Black, were killed by these patrols and in brutal acts that authorities later confirmed had a “partially racial nature”.

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The so-called “massacre” shocked the nation, underscoring that apartheid’s embers of mistrust still smolder between communities living side by side. It was a painful reminder that desegregation on paper does not automatically translate into social cohesion on the ground. As one local columnist provocatively observed, the scenes felt like KwaZulu-Natal was racing headlong back to 1949 - conjuring memories of the anti-Indian pogroms that scarred a darker past.

The Rainbow Nation vision suffered in those dark days of 2021.

Yet, in the anguish, there were also voices of reflection. Many citizens recognised that the true divide fueling the unrest was not simply race, but the shared desperation of poverty. Black, Coloured, Indian and White small business owners alike, saw their shops ransacked, by people of all races, who had been pushed to the margins economically. Years of unaddressed inequality, unemployment above 30% and the pandemic’s hardships fed the explosion.

South Africa learned that genuine reconciliation demands more than repealing racist laws, it requires uprooting the structural inequities those laws left behind, especially in housing and land. The promise of 1994 remains unfulfilled so long as a person’s prospects in life are dictated by whether they grow up in a leafy suburb or a corrugated iron shack.

And yet, even as unrest laid bare the fragility of our social fabric, South Africa’s Constitution still stands as a beacon of hope - at least in principle.

The Constitution is one of the first in the world to enshrine socio-economic rights, including housing.

Section 26 of the Bill of Rights proclaims: “Everyone has the right to have access to adequate housing”. Importantly, it also obliges the state to take “reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of this right”. In plain terms, housing is not just a policy goal but a constitutional duty, and the government must show it is moving forward - step by step, year by year - to extend housing to all. Furthermore, the Constitution protects against inhumane evictions: “No one may be evicted from their home, or have their home demolished, without an order of court… No legislation may permit arbitrary evictions”.

This elevated housing and secure tenure to fundamental rights, reflecting the nation’s new commitment to dignity after so many had been deprived of a home.

Translating these lofty principles into reality however proved challenging and

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sometimes paradoxical. The Constitutional Court, in seminal cases like Government of South Africa v Grootboom (2000), grappled with what “adequate housing” and “reasonable measures” really mean.

Mrs Irene Grootboom was one of hundreds of destitute people, including many children, who had built shacks on private land after being evicted from an informal settlement. Their plight forced the Court to confront the chasm between abstract rights and on the ground suffering. In a landmark judgment, the Court affirmed that socio-economic rights are justiciable and intertwined with human dignity. It held that the state’s housing program fell short of its constitutional obligations, notably because it lacked provision for those in urgent crisis, in other words - people with “nowhere else to go” like the Grootboom community .

The government’s housing plan was deemed unreasonable to the extent it did not provide at least temporary relief for those in desperate need. Yet, tellingly, the Court stopped short of declaring an individual right to immediate housing on demand, instead, it assessed whether the state’s overall program was reasonable.

This approach created a nuanced legal standard - progressive realisation. The state must show steady progress and cannot neglect the most vulnerable, but courts will generally not order it to hand over keys to a new house for each claimant.

In practice, the constitutional right to housing has been a powerful tool for advocacy and litigation. It has led to important precedents refining how evictions are handled.

Under laws like the Prevention of Illegal Eviction (PIE) Act 19 of 1998, no eviction can occur without a court considering whether it is just and equitable, taking into account the needs of vulnerable groups (such as children, elderly, female-headed households) and whether alternative accommodation is available.

Courts have repeatedly emphasised that evictions should not render people homeless.

In one notable case, the Constitutional Court blocked the eviction of hundreds of poor residents from inner city Johannesburg buildings until the city provided them with a viable alternative, so-called “meaningful engagement” and interim housing. This jurisprudence tries to balance property rights with human rights in a society marked by extreme inequality.

South African law now arguably gives stronger protection to unlawful occupiers than many other countries, precisely because it recognises the historical context of land dispossession and the constitutional mandate to care for the poor. As Justice Albie

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Sachs wrote in the landmark Port Elizabeth Municipality v Various Occupiers (2005) case, “we are not dealing with antagonistic sovereignties… but with a single society” - suggesting that evictions must be handled not as mere legal disputes but as social justice problems requiring compassion and consensus.

Still, there is an undeniable tension between ideals and implementation. Declaring the right to housing was the easy part. Delivering on it? That has been painfully slow. Even the Grootboom victory was bittersweet - Irene Grootboom died in 2008, still in a shack home, and waiting for a proper home - years after winning her case.

The Constitution’s promise remains a distant dream for those millions in informal settlements. A right on paper means little when children are still born and raised in mud, mold, and shack fires. The lofty language of the law must contend daily with the grit and grind of poverty.

To meet its constitutional obligations, the post-apartheid state launched one of the world’s most ambitious public housing programs. In 1994, the new government unveiled the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which included a plan to build millions of houses for the poor, subsidised by the state. These homes, often simply called “RDP houses”, typically are modest 40m² structures with two bedrooms, a living area, and basic services to qualifying low income families.

In the first decade after apartheid, delivery was rapid in numerical terms, by 2001 about 5 million people had received formal houses through government efforts and by 2014, roughly 2.9 million houses had been built - the government prefers the term “housing opportunities” which includes not just newly built houses but also serviced sites and rental units. As of 2022, over 4.8 million housing units or subsidies had been delivered since 1994 - an impressive output by any measure, one that has given concrete meaning to the idea of a “roof over one’s head” for a significant share of the population.

Indeed, about 12 million citizens, which is nearly one-fifth of South Africa’s population, now live in state subsidised homes.

Yet, numbers tell only part of the story. Early housing policy was not without flaws.

In the rush to address the backlog, many RDP houses were built on cheap land far from city centers - essentially continuing apartheid’s peripheral spatial planning - and were often of poor quality due to shoddy contractors. Rows of identical, hastily built boxes sprang up on the urban periphery - barren, desolate developments that critics said echoed the spatial logic of apartheid both in style and in isolation. Moreover, the allocation of these houses quickly became a contentious issue.

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In the 1990s, housing waiting lists were maintained by municipalities, hopeful beneficiaries would apply and wait their turn. This system soon grew unwieldy and mistrusted. Scarce housing stock and ever lengthening lists were a recipe for frustration. Accusations mounted that local officials were taking bribes to push certain names to the top of the lists, or that politically connected individuals were “jumping the queue” ahead of those who had waited patiently for years. In some small towns, the housing officer - the clerk who kept the list - wielded inordinate power and sometimes succumbed to corruption or nepotism.

Communities frequently protested, believing that outsiders or latecomers were being given homes ahead of them by dishonest means. The very phrase “waiting list” became synonymous with broken promises as people found themselves waiting not months but decades. By the early 2000s, the government acknowledged the system was failing.

In 2004, a new comprehensive plan called “Breaking New Ground” (BNG) was adopted. It aimed to create more integrated, sustainable human settlements, rather than just mass brick and mortar units. Along with this shift, the administration moved to phase out the old waiting lists in favor of a more dynamic Housing Demand Database. Provinces like Gauteng and Limpopo led pilot projects in 2008-2009 to register all housing applicants into a centralised database that could track needs more systematically. The idea was to update and verify applications regularly, incorporate people seeking not only free RDP houses but also those needing rental accommodation or serviced land, and to make sure no beneficiary could get a second subsidy.

The new demand database was intended to improve fairness and transparency. Provincial housing departments would select approved beneficiaries for each project from this database according to clear criteria (such as oldest application date, priority categories) rather than a simple linear queue. It also sought to prioritise the most vulnerable, for example it explicitly flagged people with disabilities, the elderly or those in emergency need, so they could be fast tracked under certain housing programs.

However, re-engineering a bureaucratic system did not overnight dispel the public distrust. To this day, many South Africans speak of “the list” as something quasi-mythical, suspecting that it is manipulated behind closed doors.

A 2013 research report, by the Community Law Centre (CLC) and Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI) , aptly titled ‘Jumping the Queue’ found that the terrain of housing allocation is riddled with myths and misinformation, fueling community anger. The notion of a neat, first-come-first-serve queue, the report argued, was in fact a myth that obscures a much messier reality of fragmented databases, policy changes, and ad-hoc adjustments. For example, when a housing project is completed in one area, the

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beneficiaries might be chosen not simply by oldest application, but by a mix of factors - such as how long they have waited; their income; whether the project is for a particular category of people like military veterans or disaster victims; and also local community inputs. Perceptions of unfairness nevertheless remain high. The report noted that confusion over who gets houses and when has even led to protests, “illegal” land occupations and xenophobic violence in some cases.

In poorer neighbourhoods it is not uncommon to hear allegations that foreigners are stealing RDP houses or that one must grease the palm of an official to ever see a house key. These beliefs are often not grounded in fact but powerful enough to stoke resentment. Government has tried various measures to improve integrity in housing allocation. These measures include external audits of beneficiary lists; public verification exercises - where preliminary beneficiary names are posted in communities for objections before final allocation; and digital systems to eliminate duplicate or fraudulent entries. There have been crackdowns on what are euphemistically called “ghost beneficiaries” non-existent people or those who did not qualify but somehow got approved.

Despite these efforts, corruption and clientelism persist.

In her 2022 budget speech, the then National Minister of Human Settlements acknowledged “decades of complaints about manipulation and corruption” in the beneficiary process. It is a bitter pill - while the state has built nearly 5 million homes, millions more of South Africans still languish in poor housing conditions, and they know that if funds and houses had not been siphoned off through graft, many of them could have been living under better roofs by now. In 2023, a Mail & Guardian analysis concluded that the National Department of Human Settlements had uplifted millions of lives, with 4.8 million housing units delivered since 1994, but went on to state that “millions more could have been uplifted” had it not been for “the immense theft and wastage”.

To understand these housing policies in practice, one must walk the footpaths of the communities they intend to serve. In my own journey across South Africa, I have visited countless neighborhoods where the grand promises of the Constitution meet the grit of everyday survival. One such place is the Bottlebrush Community in KwaZulu-Natal, an informal settlement tucked behind Crossmoor and Shallcross in Durban’s Chatsworth area.

Bottlebrush sprang up in the 1980s, when floods displaced people, mainly Indian, in nearby formal townships, and desperate families grabbed a patch of vacant land rather than be shunted to distant government camps.

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Today, Bottlebrush is a sprawling shantytown of an estimated 19 000+ residents, many drawn from rural South Africa and even neighboring countries by the magnetic hope of the city. The settlement sits cheek-by-jowl with the formerly established Indian suburbs, a poignant symbol of apartheid's fading geography and with an invisible line separating formal homes from informal homes. As you step off a paved road in Crossmoor onto the dirt road of Bottlebrush, the world changes, you enter a maze of RDP homes, shacks assembled from plastic and election boards, timber off cuts, iron sheets, anything that can keep out the rain. Narrow pathways wind through this hill of humanity, some live electrical wires - some illegally connected - dangle perilously overhead and the smell of wood smoke mixes with refuse in the air.

Nearby, in the Crossmoor Transit Camp, one of the most ethnically diverse spaces you will find in South Africa, I saw true leadership in a Mozambican national named Paul Manhica. A community once rocked by xenophobic violence, Paul, married a South African woman and was elected unanimously as the Camp's chairperson. This was not just an act of tolerance, it was a triumph of Ubuntu. His leadership helped bridge divides and reminded me that belonging is about contribution, not birthplace.

Walking through Bottlebrush on an early morning, I witness scenes of resilience regardless of hardship. Women walk long distances balancing buckets of water on their heads, collected from communal Jojo tanks located on roadsides, since many shack homes lack running water. Children in crisp school uniforms pick their way around mud puddles, determined to get an education that might one day allow them to move out of here. One young man, Phineas, tells me he came from the Eastern Cape in 2007, lured by relatives who said jobs were plentiful in Durban. Within two weeks, he did find a job at a local mall. This is proof that opportunities do exist in urban hubs. "I'm happy living here," he insists, "My shack is not a palace, but good enough for my needs. Work is nearby, my family back home depends on my earnings". His words echo a sentiment I hear often, location can matter more than housing quality.

Many Bottlebrush residents value being close to jobs and transport over having a larger house in a far off settlement.

The once vacant land was invaded under the tenure of a politician who served as the Councillor for the area initially as a member of the Minority Front and later under the Democratic Alliance. He said the pursuit of a "better life" into this land of milk and honey had enticed many to make Bottlebrush home.

Paradoxically, even though living conditions are harsh - shack homes get flooded in heavy rains and electricity theft causes frequent fires - people see it as a place of hope, a foothold in the city economy.

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However, the idyll of informal settlements as a “promised land” is tempered by stark challenges basic services are a constant struggle; illegal electricity connections - as mentioned - weave a dangerous web, electrocutions and shack fires have occurred and neighbors in formal houses also suffer outages from the now overloaded grid; water tankers service Jojo daily to supplement the trickling standpipes; there is no formal sewage system for part of the settlement, many rely on pit latrines or makeshift toilets; waste removal is infrequent, trash accumulates in piles, attracting rats. These are not just inconveniences, they are daily indignities that erode health and morale. Service delivery protests erupt with depressing frequency, as residents barricade roads and burn tires to demand the basics of modern life. Often the response from government is a mix of promises and temporary fixes, but the underlying issue is that the hundreds of informal settlements throughout South Africa are still considered “temporary”, even though they are decades old.

Government hesitates to fully install infrastructure on land that was originally invaded, fearing it might encourage further land grabs. And indeed, land invasion is part of the DNA of South Africa.

Bottlebrush expanded over the years through new waves of occupations. The settlement now covers over 250000 square metres and has offshoot settlements like the nearby Ekupholeni - which was born when shack dwellers became aware of a government housing development and decided to invade the development site, in the desperate hope of being given preference to the “to-be-built” homes.

Many believe informal settlements are occupied by the destitute and unemployed. My work, particularly during the COVID-19 vaccine outreach, shattered that illusion. I struggled to find people over 60 years old in these communities because most residents are working age economic migrants.

Informal settlements are hubs of mobility, people rent close to industrial areas, stay during the working periods and return home during festive or year end holidays. Poverty, here, is not always about laziness, it is about proximity to opportunity - And this particular point requires an investigation into wage payments from employers, if this investigation is overcome then we must turn to the discussions of a minimum wage versus a living wage.

The phenomenon of the “shack lord” deserves mention. In many informal areas, a few enterprising (or rather exploitative) individuals stake claim to sections of land and then rent out shack homes to others, effectively becoming slumlords in an extra legal property market. In the Lusaka settlement, which is also located in Chatsworth, for example, some who were allocated formal RDP houses in a nearby project simply moved

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tenants into their old shack homes at about R500 per month. These micro-landlords often provide illegal electricity as part of the deal, which makes their shack homes attractive to desperate tenants. While this rental housing fills a need, the working poor who cannot get an RDP house or afford formal rent, it also concentrates power and wealth in the hands of a few in the community and can lead to intimidation and violence.

I am one of those that has had a shack lord threaten me when I took the issue up directly with the shack lock and the authorities.

It is a feudal dynamic playing out in the ashes of apartheid planning, land that was initially seized by the poor to meet their housing needs ends up commodified again, albeit informally, perpetuating inequality even within these settlements.

At 26 years old, I was elected as a Councillor, and to the area which encompassed the Bottlebrush community. I recall the disastrous April 2019 mass floodings in KwaZulu-Natal. The night before the floods, I had to make a choice - go to bed or stay up to follow the warning updates and reports. At the time, the extent of the damage we would experience and loss of life was not expected, predicted or foreseen. The next morning, I joined volunteers in assessing damages and in digging through mudslides which had destroyed and covered homes. Unfortunately, I was the first person to surface bodies - that of a mother and her child. They had passed away, the mother had a tight grip on her child and a cemented look of horror on her face. The image has never left me, and has permanently changed my sleep patterns.

In the aftermath, 195 people had lost their homes and all of their belongings. To provide for the victims and as is ‘the burden of command’, I had the duty of overseeing the development of the Crossmoor Transit Camp, an emergency housing initiative.

Although unplanned, it was symbolically built on the very site first dedicated to the M Padavatan brothers, who had decades earlier risked their lives to rescue flood victims by boat. It felt almost poetic that a piece of land, once a symbol of rescue, would again be used to give shelter to the vulnerable. The transit camp today stands strong, despite initial reservations by a very few, it is built next to an informal settlement on one side, ownership housing on the other side and directly across government flats. This shows how disaster can birth dignity when met with purpose and planning and could be an example that through guided, and extremely extensive and continuous engagement, people can find each other, communicate and live together in peace - regardless of the ‘home’ that they come from.

And then there are the xenophobic undercurrents. Bottlebrush has a significant

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population of foreign nationals, perhaps 35% of residents are migrants from other African countries. Many run small businesses such as spaza shops, barber stalls and taverns. While they contribute to the local economy, they also become scapegoats when frustrations boil over.

In 2008, Bottlebrush experienced a flare of xenophobic violence, part of the nationwide attacks on foreign nationals that year. Several shack homes of Malawian and Zimbabwean families were torched by locals who blamed them for “taking jobs” and housing opportunities. The irony is cruel, a community born from the solidarity of the working class battling apartheid’s property laws turned inward on itself, targeting even poorer outsiders. Researchers who later studied the incident noted how competition over scarce jobs and houses, combined with misinformation like claims that foreigners jump the housing queue, fueled the violence. As one resident told me, “When you’re hungry and your name isn’t coming up for a house, you look for someone to blame. The easiest target is the guy who speaks Xitsonga or Shona next door.” Such tensions underscore that housing scarcity is not just a technical problem, it can become a spark in the tinder of communal relations. Yet, in these same places of poverty and insecurity, I have also witnessed remarkable community initiatives. I have seen residents tired of waiting for the municipality, form a cooperative to start a waste collection system; I have seen people establish an NGO to work with youth and turn a dumping ground into a tennis court - a small patch of hope and normalcy amid chaos.

Across KwaZulu-Natal, I have met dedicated housing activists, such as Thabiso Mbensa, an attorney who works with community organisations to educate people on their rights under the Constitution and laws like the PIE Act. I have seen civil society help people fill out housing subsidy forms, lodge complaints about corruption and even take the government to court when necessary. Through such civic action, the powerless strive to hold the powerful accountable. Each little victory - a corrupt official suspended here; a batch of title deeds issued there; an illegal eviction stopped by a court interdict; adds to the slow bending of the arc toward justice.

Informal settlements are evolving – doubling upward in height, stretching outward in density. But how much more can they take? I fear we are nearing a tipping point. Families are growing, needs are multiplying, and we risk implosion unless bold interventions come soon. What happens when there is simply no more space? What happens when an economic migrant becomes a generational resident in a structure never meant to last?

One often overlooked aspect of housing is its intimate connection to mental health and social well-being.

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Generations of apartheid spatial planning not only deprived people of land and amenities but also of beauty, leisure, and calm. In the townships and settlements, every square meter is fought over for housing, often leaving no room for parks, sports facilities, or community centers. Today, South Africa's poorer areas are notably starved of green spaces. This exacts a psychological toll – children grow up on cramped plots with little room to play or dream; adults return from grinding jobs to monotonous rows of houses or the relentless density of shacks, with hardly a tree or field in sight. Studies in urban planning note that access to green spaces is linked to lower stress and better mental health outcomes. But in many RDP developments, the only greenery is an occasional scrubby field or a few weeds along the roadside.

Overcrowding is another stress amplifier. In old township two-room government flats, like those in Shallcross, Durban, it is not uncommon to find three generations of eight or ten people crammed together - because the housing backlog forces extended families to consolidate. Privacy is nonexistent – a quarrel between spouses in one flat can become the whole flat blocks entertainment, and a baby's midnight cries ensure everyone else is awake too. This constant lack of privacy or respite can breed conflict and despair. People cannot easily find peace in such environments, and minor disputes can quickly escalate. Indeed, many social ills - from domestic violence to substance abuse - have environmental stressors as contributing factors. The architecture of apartheid created pressure-cooker communities and we are still living with the results.

In some notorious instances in townships (as seen in Phoenix, Durban) parks or sports grounds have been sacrificed to make way for more housing.

While the need for homes is acute, the loss of communal space further chips away at quality of life.

I visited a government subsidised flat complex in central Durban - a refurbished building meant to provide decent affordable rentals. It was safe and clean, yet many residents complained of loneliness and anxiety. One woman, a single mother, pointed out that unlike in the government flat that she had lived in, here nobody knew their neighbor. Doors stayed shut, people feared each other or had nothing to do with each other. This was an interesting contrast - in a dense area such as a government flat or informal settlement, people might have too little personal space yet a strong sense of community interdependence, whereas in a formal but impersonal housing block, people had walls between them and their neighbors, sometimes leading to isolation.

Housing is about community, not just units.

A truly holistic housing policy must think beyond the physical structure – it must ask:

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does this neighbourhood have a soul? Is there a playground, a garden, a community hall? Are we building not just houses, but homes in the richer sense of the word?

Urban planners and housing officials are slowly recognising these qualitative aspects. The latest thinking in human settlements emphasises integrated development – combining housing with parks, clinics, schools, and economic opportunities nearby. But implementation is uneven. The pressure to meet numerical targets (how many houses built) often overshadows the softer objectives. As a result, we risk creating new ghettos of poverty, which are government built enclaves that check the box of shelter but reproduce the social isolation and monotony that apartheid's planners perfected.

The challenge now is to retrofit and invest in these areas - plant trees, build sports grounds, support community-led beautification projects – to foster an environment where the human spirit can thrive, not just survive.

As South Africa's democracy matures, a subtle but profound shift is occurring in the nature of its societal divides. The rigid racial categories that defined the 20th century are softening around the edges, giving way to an emergent stratification by "class" and income.

None can deny that race and economic status are still tightly wound together in our country - the black majority remains disproportionately poor - but we are seeing spaces where poverty is increasingly multiracial.

In truth, shared suffering is forging a new solidarity, even if it often goes unacknowledged in our national discourse.

Consider the growing phenomenon of poor white communities. In the Crossmoor Transit Camp, one now finds a white South African family living in informal conditions, something virtually unheard of during apartheid. The family of three live alongside black and Indian poor, sometimes forming joint survival strategies.

In inner-city Johannesburg, mixed groups squat in abandoned buildings - a far cry from the days when pass laws would have segregated them. These instances force us to confront poverty unmediated by race, the sight of an Afrikaner grandmother queuing for a social grant in the same line as Zulu gogos is jarring to old assumptions, but it is real.

An aging white brick layer in Malvern, Durban now finds himself just as housing insecure as his black neighbours. The existence of such multiracial poor communities raises uncomfortable questions about privilege and identity. It also presents an opportunity to build cross-racial alliances focused on economic justice rather than perpetuating racial mistrust.

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I visited a white elderly couple, who sustain themselves on their government pension grant. They live in a large house in Seaview, Durban. After paying for their monthly rates, electricity and water charges - they are unable to afford anything to eat except for soup made from cabbage, meat bones and water. It was humbling, despite everything, they insisted that I sit down and share their meal. That moment reminded me - poverty does not wear a single face.

If we continue to racialise hardship, we miss the new growing divide that is quietly reshaping South Africa.

On the flip side, a multiracial middle and upper income class has also emerged and retreated behind gates and security walls, in many ways insulating themselves from the daily realities of the poor.

In wealthy suburbs and fashionable mixed neighborhoods, South Africans of all hues share the comforts of luxury apartments, suburban golf estates, and trendy cafes - a world apart from both the townships and the transit camps. Thus the “Two Nations” thesis once articulated by former President Thabo Mbeki - one rich and one poor - is increasingly visible. The rich enclaves are no longer exclusively white. The poor zones are no longer exclusively black. This complicates the simple narrative of race, forcing us to confront economic class apartheid as the next frontier.

Is South Africa drifting into a Brazil-like scenario, where favelas and penthouses coexist within blocks of each other, with race a secondary factor?

In some respects, economic class is a more hidden divider than race. Race you can see; economic class you often infer.

Post-apartheid rhetoric sometimes glosses over economic class, focusing on racial redress, which is of course necessary, but not grappling fully with the widening gap between haves and have-nots, regardless of color.

The rise of gated communities and private security - a booming industry - means that the prosperous (black, white alike) can sever their daily interactions with the poor. This feeds a kind of social detachment or even indifference.

Meanwhile, among the poor on the ground, there is a slow recognition: “We are all in the same boat.” I often sit in shack dwellers meetings where Indian and African residents of a settlement strategise together on how to demand toilet blocks from the government . I have seen coloured and black backyard dwellers from Cape Town unite to occupy unused land to build themselves shack homes. These are small harbingers of a potential new national identity, one that transcends race and is rooted in shared material conditions.

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Yet embracing this multiracial solidarity is not easy - old wounds and prejudices linger.

A poor coloured family in a Cape Flats council flat might still harbor stereotypes about their black counterparts in a nearby informal camp, and vice versa. Mutual mistrust can sabotage collective action.

Moreover, the political system often reinforces racial lenses - parties and leaders frequently mobilise support by tapping into racial grievance or loyalty. We see it when service delivery protests in a township devolve into blaming the Indian home owners or the immigrant shopkeeper instead of the policies and politicians truly responsible.

So the question stands - can South Africa forge a new sense of “us” that is not defined by racial categories but by common humanity and citizenship?

If our identities remain locked in apartheid-era thinking, we may fail to recognise who our real allies are in the quest for a more just society.

I have seen the extremes. In India, I walked past entire families sleeping under plastic sheets beside storm drains, rebuilding their homes each morning after monsoon rains. In the United States, I felt the cold stares in sanitised streets where greeting strangers felt taboo. Despite our challenges, South Africa remains a place where human connection still lives. Where you can still pass someone your phone and say, “Can you take my picture?” That is something worth preserving.

South Africa’s housing challenges, while immense, are far from unique. Across the globe, nations grapple with providing shelter for growing populations with limited urban land and resources.

Looking outward offers both humbling and heartening perspectives. For instance, in India, a country with a population twenty times larger and urban slums on a scale that dwarfs ours. The infamous Dharavi slum in Mumbai houses perhaps a million people in two congested square kilometres.

India’s constitution does not explicitly guarantee a right to housing, but its Supreme Court has interpreted the right to life to include a “right to shelter”. Decades ago, Indian courts began insisting that evictions of long-settled slum dwellers without rehabilitation violate fundamental rights. This judicial philosophy mirrors South Africa’s in spirit - acknowledging that people need a roof over their head to live a life of dignity. In practice, Indian cities have tried various approaches - in-situ slum upgrading, where slums are provided infrastructure and residents given some form of tenure, and resettlement schemes where slum households are moved to new flats, often in high-rise buildings on city peripheries.

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The outcomes have been mixed. Some upgraded slums become thriving neighborhoods, whereas many resettlement colonies suffer from isolation and lack of jobs, causing people to drift back to the city.

One striking contrast is that India seldom gives housing away for free as South Africa does - even subsidised units usually require some payment or sweat equity. Thus, despite our problems, South Africa's state delivery of fully-subsidized houses to millions is virtually unparalleled.

A common refrain in international housing circles is that South Africa's housing program is the largest of its kind in the world in proportion to population. Few countries have attempted to build this many homes for free distribution.

In the United States, the housing question takes a different form. There is no right to housing in the U.S. Constitution, and housing is largely treated as a market commodity. The world's richest nation has millions of homeless or precariously housed people, a fact that shocks many South Africans who assume wealth translates to social welfare.

In American cities, one finds families living in cars or crowded motels, and sprawling tent encampments of the homeless under freeway bridges - visible reminders that extreme inequality can exist in a developed economy.

The U.S. government does have housing programs, but they reach a limited portion of those in need. Public housing projects built in the mid-20th century provided some relief but gained notoriety for concentrating poverty and crime (the "ghettos" of New York, Chicago, etc.). Many of those high-rises were eventually demolished.

Today the emphasis is on housing vouchers, so that low-income tenants can rent from private landlords and subsidised mixed-income developments. Yet, only about one in four eligible low-income households in the U.S. actually receives any housing assistance. The rest languish on interminable waitlists or fend for themselves in an unforgiving market. The affordable housing shortage in the U.S. is estimated at over 7 million units, and over 30% of American renters pay more than half their income on rent - a level of rent burden that inevitably forces trade-offs with food, healthcare, and education.

These comparisons are sobering, while South Africa's housing backlog, officially around 2.2 million units, is daunting, the U.S. and others also struggle despite far greater resources. However, one might argue that poverty in wealthy countries is at least cushioned by stronger safety nets in other areas (like education, healthcare).

In South Africa, the home is often the only stable asset a family has – hence the intense focus and pressure on housing delivery.

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Other countries offer instructive examples too. Brazil has its favelas and a landmark "City Statute" that recognises the social function of land, legalising long-occupied informal settlements and giving communities collective tenure. Ethiopia experimented with condominium apartments for low-income residents in Addis Ababa, essentially vertical mass housing. China managed to eliminate its urban slums via massive public housing construction, but of course under an undemocratic system with forced relocations and strict population control - methods no free society would accept. The United Kingdom and Canada include housing as part of their welfare states to varying degrees, yet still face homelessness issues and long waits for public housing.

What stands out in the global context is that South Africa's constitutionally guaranteed right and its extensive state-subsidised housing program are quite extraordinary. International observers have lauded South Africa for its progressive vision, even as they (and we) lament the gaps in execution. It is a poignant fact that some of the poorest squatter communities in places like Nairobi or Karachi would consider an RDP house - however small - a dream come true.

We have at least built millions of such dreams; our task is to build millions more, and faster, and build them better.

No discussion of housing is complete without addressing the flip side - evictions and security of tenure. Owning or legally occupying a home is supposed to provide security, yet many South Africans live in constant fear of eviction. This affects not only those in informal settlements or inner-city squats, but even tenants in formal rental housing, and families in rural areas under traditional authorities. The Prevention of Illegal Eviction Act (PIE) and the constitutional clause against arbitrary evictions are crucial safeguards. They have prevented countless forced removals that would echo apartheid-style injustices. For instance, when a private developer or municipality seeks to clear an informal settlement for a new project, PIE forces them into court where judges often demand that alternative accommodation be provided. This has given leverage to communities to negotiate better outcomes - like relocation to land nearby or being first in line for new housing.

The law, however, is frequently flouted. Illegal evictions - either without court orders or in abuse of court orders - happen with disturbing regularity. We have seen "red ants" (security teams) tearing down shack dweller homes at dawn, sometimes in defiance of pending legal proceedings. Each such incident is a human tragedy, a family's belongings strewn in the street, a tenuous life shattered. While NGOs and legal clinics try to intervene, the wheels of justice can turn slowly. It is a cat-and-mouse game; by the time an urgent court interdict is obtained, the settlement may already be ashes.

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For those lucky enough to have an RDP house or government Flat, another set of issues emerges - ownership and its burdens. Beneficiaries receive title deeds- eventually, though delays of many years are common, hence the backlog of 439,000 title deeds mentioned by the Minister.

That title is both treasure and temptation. Officially, an RDP house or government flat cannot be sold for a prescribed period (initially 8 years, now often 5 years) to prevent instant cashing-out. Unofficially, many do sell informally or rent them out immediately. Drive around any township and you see RDP houses converted into spaza shops or barber salons, or hear of people who “sold backroom space” on their plot to a tenant. This low-income housing market is largely unregulated but thriving. There are also instances of fraudulent sales: scammers “sell” an RDP house or government flat that they do not own to an unsuspecting buyer using forged papers. Later, when the state tries to hand over the real title to the rightful beneficiary, they find someone else in occupation, and a legal mess ensues.

Inheritance is another thorny area. Many original RDP or flat owners have died - given the program is nearly 30 years old. Without a will, their homes fall into intestate succession which can be complicated in polygamous or extended families. Siblings, spouses, children may quarrel over who has the right to the house. In some cases, “informal wills” or family agreements are made, but if a dispute arises, it can lock the house into limbo for years. Meanwhile, properties can deteriorate or be taken over by opportunists. There is growing awareness that housing delivery must be paired with education on estate planning - encouraging beneficiaries to write wills and register them, so that the asset they struggled to get does not become a source of conflict or get lost after their death.

The nature of “home” itself is diversifying.

Not everyone wants or can maintain a standalone house. Backyard dwellings, for instance, have proliferated. In many townships, almost every yard has one or several shack homes or Wendy houses rented out to individuals or families. This is a massive, grassroots response to housing needs that is seldom acknowledged in official stats. It provides income to the homeowner and shelter to the tenant, but often in overcrowded conditions without proper amenities. Local governments sometimes try to upgrade backyard rentals by providing separate connections for water and electricity, recognising they are a permanent feature.

Social housing (government-subsidised rental flats for low-moderate income) is another model that has grown in cities like Durban. These usually take the form of renovated buildings or new medium-rise apartments run by Social Housing Institutions. They help

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gap-market people (too rich for a free house, too poor for private market) and also contribute to inner-city renewal. Yet demand far exceeds supply.

In South Africa's rural heartlands, the question of land ownership remains both complex and urgent.

Much of the land in KwaZulu-Natal falls under the custodianship of the Ingonyama Trust, a body established in 1994 to hold land for the benefit of Zulu communities. For years, rural residents lived on this land under Permission to Occupy (PTO) arrangements, informal, often unwritten acknowledgments of occupation issued by traditional leaders. But in practice, these PTOs conferred no real legal security. People could be evicted, their land reallocated, and their rights trampled without formal recourse.

This precarious arrangement came under scrutiny in 2021, when the Legal Resources Centre, on behalf of rural women and community organisations, challenged the Ingonyama Trust Board's practice of converting PTOs into lease agreements - forcing residents to pay rent for land they had long regarded as their own. In a landmark ruling, the Pietermaritzburg High Court declared the practice unlawful and unconstitutional, affirming that the Trust had no right to impose leases or collect rent from occupiers. The court emphasised that these residents were de facto owners, and their security of tenure is protected under Section 25(6) of the Constitution, which guarantees legally secure tenure to those whose rights to land were previously insecure due to racially discriminatory laws and practices.

The ruling underscored a profound truth - that customary land rights are not inferior to formally registered ownership. It also exposed the need to overhaul land administration in communal areas. While the Ingonyama Trust was originally intended to protect traditional landholdings, it became a mechanism through which rural people, particularly women, were disenfranchised, excluded from decision-making, and extorted for living on ancestral ground.

While we have seen strides like the Ingonyama judgment, much of land restitution in South Africa remains mired in bureaucracy. Claims that were filed decades ago still wait. The backlog is staggering. Although a Land Claims Court and a Legal Aid land division exist, few lawyers are adequately trained in this complex terrain. I was fortunate to have worked at a NGO law firm that focused largely on land matters and I learned that justice is not just about court victories - it is about getting people their land while they are still alive to use it.

In my work on land matters, I have seen firsthand how rural communities were coerced into signing leases they could not read or understand, often without legal advice. I have

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also witnessed how traditional authority and political interests colluded to undermine the very communities they were meant to serve. Now, with this judgment, we have an opportunity to create a more just and transparent rural land tenure system, one that recognises customary rights, facilitates legal title where appropriate, and protects vulnerable occupiers, especially women and the elderly, from exploitation.

There are innovative and progressive human settlement experts in our mist that understand both the task of housing and the duty to people, such as former KwaZulu Natal MEC for Human Settlements and Public Works, Ravi Pillay, who spearheaded a program to upgrade the Shallcross Flats and simultaneously provide ownership of these homes to people.

The Shallcross Flats were government housing blocks which were originally built as temporary accommodation. Through sheer persistence by Pillay and the tireless advocacy of local leaders like the late Bob Abhrams, Mogie Naidoo, Ronnie Pillay, Olean Naidoo, Picky Naidoo, the flats transformed from temporary occupancy into permanent ownership and people were given a flat upgrade and their very first title deeds. This was not just a housing upgrade - it was a dignity upgrade. It showed what is possible when the government and community work as partners. I am glad that I also had the opportunity to play a part in this process.

Sadly though, that momentum has since stalled under new Councillor leadership. The community's hope now sits in limbo, a reminder of how easily progress can be lost without accountable and visionary local government.

In African philosophy, Ubuntu - often translated as "I am because we are" - encapsulates a spirit of community, mutual care, and humaneness. South African communities, especially under hardship, have long embodied this ethos. Neighbors look after each other's children; strangers share water from a common tap; a family is hungry and the whole community pitches in to help.

This spirit was a key survival strategy through apartheid and remains so in impoverished areas today. There is a certain beauty of neighborliness one witnesses in places like Bottlebrush or the Shallcross Flats, a social fabric that can be torn but not easily destroyed. People know each other by name, they celebrate and mourn together, they develop informal systems of exchange -borrowing sugar, lending tools - and conflict resolution. In some areas, I found that residents had created committees to mediate disputes, essentially a form of local self-governance born of necessity.

However, as South Africa modernises and urbanises, there is a risk of losing this communal spirit, especially in more formal or economically mobile settings. In affluent suburbs and even many middle economic class areas, the way of life is more

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individualistic. High walls, electric fences, and alarm systems underscore a mentality of ‘each family unto itself, guarded against the world’.

People commute by car from the secured home to the guarded office park or mall, often not knowing the name of the person living next door. Ironically, sometimes material progress seems inversely proportional to social cohesion - the more comfortable we become, the less we rely on our neighbors. It is a pattern seen worldwide but in South Africa it is especially poignant given our history, the apartheid regime intentionally tried to break Ubuntu by sowing distrust and division, yet Ubuntu survived in the townships, now consumerist culture and fear of crime might succeed where oppression failed, by boxing us into private enclaves.

That said, Ubuntu is far from dead. We see it in the spontaneous solidarity of communities facing disaster - like the previously mentioned flooding in KwaZulu-Natal in 2019 - Families, NGO’s and people from all backgrounds mobilised to feed and care for the displaced. We see it when middle-income communities step up to enhance efforts against crime and join movements like CPF’s (community policing forums that are all inclusive), or lawyers provide pro bono legal help to those facing evictions. South Africans have a complicated relationship with one another, but time and again we prove that empathy runs deep. There is an innate recognition that in a nation with our interwoven destiny, “your pain is my pain.”

Housing, in particular, can be a site for rebuilding trust and community. Initiatives where people collectively contribute labour to build one another’s homes (a bit akin to the barn-raisings of old) have been tried in programs like People’s Housing Process. In some cases it has been empowering, in others, disagreements derailed the process. The concept though, that a neighborhood could come together and physically create its own improved living environment, is powerful. It turns housing into a community project, not an individualised chase for a commodity.

Similarly, co-housing models or cooperative housing, common in places like Scandinavia, could be adapted to our context, fostering closer bonds among residents who share common facilities and management of their housing complex.

A philosophical reflection emerges - what is the meaning of “home” in South Africa? Is it merely an address or shelter, or is it the nucleus of community life?

In many traditional cultures here, a home was not isolated - it was part of a umzi (homestead) or a broader village. Modern housing, especially Western-style suburban living, is more atomised.

Some lament that we are moving from “batho pele” (people first) to “each one for

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himself.” The challenge and opportunity is to infuse modern housing developments with traditional values of community. Simple design considerations can help include a stoep or veranda for socialising, design houses facing each other around a courtyard, ensure there are communal spaces to meet. Encouraging resident WhatsApp groups not merely to complain about service delivery, but to organise social events, neighborhood watch in a positive sense, support networks - all these can regenerate Ubuntu. In the end, cement and mortar build a house, but people build a home. If we forget that, we may achieve the former and lose the latter.

Housing and urban form have direct implications for crime and safety, two persistent concerns for South Africans.

The layouts of our cities and neighborhoods can either mitigate conflict or aggravate it. Consider the notorious case of the Cape Flats in Cape Town - a vast expanse of townships and tenements where apartheid dumped removed non-white communities.

Decades later, the Cape Flats have become synonymous with gang violence, drugs, and social despair. Is this a coincidence of culture or was it partly architectural fate? Many experts point to how rows of monotonous “barracks-style” flats and paucity of economic opportunities created fertile ground for gangs. Youth growing up in crowded two-bedroom apartments, with unemployment rife and schools under-resourced, found belonging and identity in gang culture. Turf wars turned courtyards and public spaces into battlefields. Two people are killed in gang violence in the Western Cape every day, according to recent statistics, and a large share of that is concentrated in certain Cape Flats neighborhoods.

The design of those environments - alienating high-density blocks with little recreational space and poor surveillance - likely contributed to the social breakdown.

In contrast, research suggests that “eyes on the street” deter crime. A well-lit, busy street with active storefronts and residents who know each other can naturally keep a lid on illicit activity.

Sadly, apartheid designs often did the opposite: curved culs-de-sac that isolate, or towering flats that turn their backs to the street. In some newer low-cost housing projects, the lessons have been taken to heart - for example, breaking up long rows of houses with through-streets and mixed uses. But many existing areas remain problematic.

Furthermore, the proximity of extreme wealth and poverty in our cities also fuels crime. Gated communities adjacent to shantytowns almost invite criminal exploitation, it is a daily temptation for a hungry have-not to breach the border of the have-everything next

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door. Spatial justice, creating more gradation and integration between rich and poor areas, could ultimately reduce crime born of desperation and resentment.

Housing arrangements can also be the stage for neighborly conflicts. Anyone who has lived in dense housing knows that small issues (noise, parking, cultural practices) can escalate.

In the Raffia Road municipal flats in Durban, I found a microcosm of the Rainbow Nation under one roof - Zulu, Tamil, Xhosa, English speakers all in a single block. It was heartening, but it also led to comical and tense misunderstandings, one resident complained that another was performing slaughter rituals of goats in the common yard (a sacred custom for the one, a horrifying sight for the other), while another quarrel was over someone braaiing on a balcony and smoking out the upstairs neighbors. Intercultural friction is perhaps inevitable as previously separated groups now share walls. But over time, these interactions can breed tolerance.

I met a young man of Indian descent living in the Shallcross flats in KwaZulu-Natal that had recently seen a black family move in. He admitted initial apprehension, fearing crime or feeling soon being outnumbered, but now he laughed, saying, “My baby’s nanny is a Zulu lady next door; we teach each other recipes.” In some respects, these close proximities are accomplishing what broad social engineering could not, genuine integration in daily life.

Intermarriages across racial and ethnic lines are on the rise and many began as next-door neighbors or classmates. A new South Africa is being built in these seemingly mundane interactions, an unsung benefit of the housing shuffle that has taken place post-apartheid.

Yet, we must acknowledge darker episodes too.

Close proximity without trust can erupt badly, as we saw in 2021’s unrest or prior flashes of communal violence. Building safer, cohesive communities is not just about bricks, it’s about facilitating understanding. Urban design can assist, by creating shared communal spaces where residents mingle rather than hide in their units. Social programs in housing complexes, like youth clubs, cultural exchanges, can actively break down prejudices. In the Shallcross Flats, some former gang members have started community gardening projects, turning disused land into vegetable gardens that bring former rival families to cultivate side by side. Such efforts seem almost too simple to dent the enormity of crime, but they do have an effect - they humanise neighbors to each other.

Finally, it is worth considering how fear shapes our urban landscape. Wealthier South

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Africans have responded to crime by fortifying their environments – private security, boom-gates closing off public streets, CCTV cameras on every corner of the road. This creates an atmosphere of siege and further separates people. If instead, resources were invested in inclusive safety measures - like improving street lighting in townships, supporting community policing forums, and fundamentally addressing the social causes of crime (through jobs and education) - the city as a whole would be safer for all. No amount of electric fencing can bring the comfort that a more equal, caring society would, where the gulf between rich and poor is not so stark as to breed endless criminal opportunity.

South Africa stands at a crossroads on the journey to housing justice. We have traversed a brutal past where land was the currency of oppression, to an era of rights and possibilities where a house can be the foundation of a new life. Yet, as this exploration has laid bare, great challenges remain. How do we ensure that the right to housing is more than an empty slogan for those still waiting in shack homes? How do we heal the spatial wounds that make our cities patchworks of privilege and peril? These questions demand answers not just from the government, but from every sector of society - private business, civil organisations and communities themselves.

Policy reform is crucial. We need a bold, new social compact on housing. Firstly, the government must recommit resources - housing cannot slip down the priority list. Creative financing - leveraging private capital without sacrificing affordability - can augment the state's capacity. Public-private partnerships might build more rental stock, and inclusionary housing policies can ensure that new private developments allocate a share to low-income units. Secondly, we should pursue urban land reform. This means freeing up well-located urban land for affordable housing. The expropriation of idle land should be on the table to prevent speculators from holding cities hostage while the poor are relegated to far peripheries. The law now allows expropriation in the public interest, using it to create integrated communities would fulfill the Constitution's transformative intent.

Thirdly, the housing allocation system must be overhauled for transparency and fairness. One option is a clear-point scoring system for housing beneficiaries - balancing waiting time with vulnerability (disability, age, emergency need) - that is publicly known and applied uniformly.

Publish the lists - let communities witness who is being approved and why. Sunlight is the best disinfectant for corruption.

Where fraud or "queue-jumping" is uncovered, there must be consequences and wrongly allocated houses returned to rightful claimants. The current Ministerial review

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of the process is a step in the right direction, it should involve civic watchdogs like Corruption Watch or the Legal Resources Centre to lend credibility.

Community-based housing ethics should guide implementation. This means involving residents in decisions from the start. Instead of parachuting in a project and deciding beneficiaries from afar, adopt a participatory approach, let local forums help map out who needs housing most, let future residents contribute to design elements, even to construction - sweat equity.

When people feel ownership of the process, they are more likely to guard the outcome of their new homes - jealousy and responsibly. It also builds community cohesion, as people literally build together.

Balancing rights with inclusion is a delicate art.

The rights of existing residents in an area, who fear influx when new low-cost housing is proposed nearby, must be weighed against the rights of those who need a place to live. This calls for enlightened leadership - leaders who can mediate dialogues between groups and dispel myths. Often, when middle-class communities oppose a social housing project, it is due to fear of crime or falling property values. Empirical evidence can help here, show that well-managed affordable housing does not cause crime waves, and integration can even boost local economies. South Africa will need a spirit of generosity from those who “have” - a willingness to accept a more mixed neighbourhood, a more diverse school for their children, a more egalitarian city. In return, the “have-nots” must commit to being stewards of the opportunities given - maintaining their homes, respecting community rules and striving to uplift themselves.

On land restitution, we should expedite remaining claims and also consider innovative approaches like urban land restitution. The fact that 92% of land claims have been settled through cash compensation rather than actual land points to the need to give land back where it can truly empower communities - not just cut a check that is soon spent. Where claimants prefer money, fine, but where they want land, bureaucracy or budget limits should not stall them for another decade.

South Africa needs to ask itself hard questions.

We now offer free higher education through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) - a groundbreaking shift in human capital investment. But if the government equips you with knowledge, must it also build you a house?

As I have often said, “If we are giving you free education, maybe it is time to expect that you will now uplift yourself.” This does not mean we abandon the poor. It means we

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revisit how we define empowerment - and challenge ourselves to see state support as a launchpad, not a lifestyle.

I believe South Africa stands at a policy crossroads. When we committed to free higher education, that should have been the moment we put a stake in the ground and said: “This is it. We are investing in your mind so you can invest in your future.” It was (and maybe still is) an opportunity to shift from a dependency model to one of mutual accountability. If you have a degree, access to opportunity, and a network built through education - should the state still carry you all the way into a free home?

We need to start differentiating between generational need and generational potential. That is not cruelty - it is strategy.

In the end, housing is not just about houses. It is about the kind of society we want. As I have learnt through my work, we cannot escape our history and we cannot run from each other. We must look hard in the mirror and be honest about the injustices that persist, be critical, honest, and bold in confronting them. Indeed, we must call out incompetence and prejudice wherever they impede the goal of a home for every family. I have also learnt to recognise human capacity for change - just as individuals can transcend their past, so can a society.

As the famous quote goes “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”. Provided we pull it with all our might. We, the people of South Africa, are the ones to bend that arc. Together, we can redefine our national identity from the ashes of division to the dawn of unity.

Picture a South Africa where a child’s future is no longer predestined by the GPS coordinates of their birth, but by their talent and effort, where the suburb, the township, and the settlement are all part of one continuous, vibrant cityscape, where a house is not a status symbol allocated by race or party patronage, but a sanctuary earned by one’s citizenship and need.

To get there, we must each play our part.

Government must lead with vision and integrity, yes - building more and building smarter. But communities must also lead from below, proving that Ubuntu is alive by how we treat our neighbors and welcome newcomers. The private sector must innovate to deliver affordable housing at scale and universities can help with research and new models (like environmentally sustainable building for low cost). If we all commit to the principle that everyone deserves a dignified home, then arguments over budgets and bylaws become opportunities for problem-solving, not grounds for cynicism.

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I am reminded of the Freedom Charter's proclamation that "There shall be houses, security and comfort!" It was a dream then, it need not be a dream deferred now. In the richness of our land and the resilience of our people lies the capacity to make it real. Let us summon the courage of critique and the compassion of appeal. Let us confront our failings without fear, and then join hands across old divides to fix them.

We have come a long way, but the journey is not over until the day every South African can say, "I have a place where I belong, a place of my own, and it is home".

With unity of purpose, with policies grounded in justice and hearts grounded in Ubuntu, we will build that day - brick by brick, community by community - and ensure that the long walk to freedom finds its culmination in the warmth of a lighted window, in a house that truly becomes a home for all.

About the Author:

Previn Vedan is a South African lawyer, political activist, and advocate for social justice. Known for his ability to connect with individuals across racial, social, economic, and international divides, his work is shaped by a blend of legal expertise and deep-rooted activism, guided by principles of integrity, equity and justice.

Vedan's perspective draws on his personal experiences - from the unique real-world engagements of his youth activism to travelling the length and breadth of South Africa as a human rights lawyer, to being elected as one of South Africa's youngest ward councillors. He has navigated international platforms, won awards, negotiated peace in times of conflict, and recently faced violent crime that has altered his life and left him disabled.

Through it all, he has remained committed to bridging societal divides, amplifying marginalised voices, and offering innovative solutions to some of society's most complex issues.

Vedan's aim is to champion justice for all - particularly those whose voices have long been silenced.

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