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Urbanism



NASA astronaut Doug Hurley captures a photo from the International Space Station (ISS) of Johannesburg South African cities at night
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Ngaka Mosiane

*Urbanism (noun) /3..bðn.l.zðm/*¹

- the type of life that is typical of cities and towns

- the process by which more and more people leave the countryside to live in *cities and towns*

Gauteng City-Region Observatory²

In urban studies, urbanism traditionally refers to a particular social form defined by the characteristics, personality traits and viewpoints associated with cities and towns³. That quality of being urbane, refined and elegant gets complicated in the context of the global south, where it is not accidental. It is an outcome of political, economic and social processes produced over many decades. In particular, the extended South African urban areas host hundreds of thousands of people, who have historically had limited economic centres. Through state policies, accordingly, the African population decreased in urban South Africa from 31.3% in 1960 to 20.6% in 1980⁴. This is while it increased in the 'homeland'⁵ towns in 1960 from 33,500 to 595,000 in 1970, and to 1,5 million in 1981⁶. In general, while 4 million black Africans (39%) lived in the homelands in 1960 (which partly came to later constitute the extended metropolitan areas⁷), their number rose to 11 million (52.7%) in 1980⁶.

That process of halting the urbanisation of black Africans in the South African towns and cities, instead redirecting them to the bantustans, was called 'counter-urbanisation'⁸. It meant mass ruralisation of black Africans, which was at once a process of rural urbanisation due to their large population concentrations. Having said that, the continued existence of townships⁹ near white South African cities and towns meant that in the context of controlling the influx of black Africans into cities, instead relocating them to the bantustans, there was also a process of 'dislocated urbanisation' alongside white South African cities. Both the counter- and dislocated-urbanisation processes would be replaced with 'orderly urbanisation' in 1986, through which influx and pass controls were abolished and new measures were put in place to control (1) movement between the bantustans and the rest of South Africa, and (2) movement and settlement within the non-bantustan areas. These processes of dislocated and orderly urbanisation and rural mass urbanisation effectively gave rise to a spatial phenomenon known as 'displaced urbanisation'. These are city-sized populations forced by past policies into inefficient and inappropriately located not-quite-urban and not-quite-rural settlement forms, which in 2011 were part of 60% of occupied land not registered in the Deeds Office¹⁰.

Those areas of displaced urbanisation have over the last three decades been changing into landscapes of 'displaced urbanism' characterised by public as well as formal and informal investments. The ordinary people use those areas for survival or even for self-realisation as they overcome their marginality¹¹. Some of the residents make significant property investments that imitate the city's material and symbolic objects by constructing suburban-style houses in a predominantly 'rural' context, while maintaining a deep connection to land, tradition and custom in the design of their houses¹² (figure 1). Thus, in the face of the continued underdevelopment of these displaced urban areas, their residents are developing their own forms of urbanism in ways that fuse modernity and tradition, poverty and relative well-being¹³.

The traditional definition of urbanism – a social form of cities and towns characterised by sophistication and civility – is, in South Africa as elsewhere, biased towards a middle-class and a private, contracted service provider; a

1 Cambridge Dictionary. © Cambridge University Press 2020.

2 Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) is a partnership of the University of Johannesburg, the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, the Gauteng Provincial Government and organised local government in Gauteng (SALGA).

3 Pacione, 2009

4 Murray, 1987

5 The label homeland refers to all black, ethnic territories and administrations formed by apartheid. Some academics and practitioners have historically used the term 'bantustan', often uncapitalised to delegitimise the official homeland label.

6 (ibid)

7 The idea of 'extended urbanisation' captures the urban spaces located outside the apparent edge of cities. Those spaces are not only functionally linked to their metropolitan core areas, but they are also potentially developing into self-sustaining peripheral centralities.

8 Bakker et al., 2016

9 A township is an area of land divided into erven, including public places and roads in a general plan. In South Africa, however, a township is not designed according to those modern town-planning principles of land-use, where specific areas are laid out for residential, commercial and industrial units (Mahajan, 2014; Phillip, 2014; Pernegger and Godehart, 2007). As part of apartheid spatial planning, townships were built for black Africans as dormitory labour reserves located away from major economic centres and without adequate infrastructure for basic services and amenities.

10 Cousins, 2016

11 Mosiane and Götz, 2022

12 Bank, 2015

13 Jensen and Zenker, 2015

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‘growth’ entrepreneur; a tourist; a manufacturer and an industrialist. It does not capture a global south subject who dominate the city and its extended urban areas – an ordinary resident, a petty rentier, a tavern owner, a participant in voluntary associations, an informal trader and a tuckshop owner and operator. The development interventions by city managers in the global south do not cater for these urban dwellers and they do not respond to this southern urbanism. They tend to use those interventions as tools through which they control the ‘visual images’ of the city, constructing a particular social homogeneity where everyone appears to be middle class, strolling, looking, eating and drinking.

For the reasons articulated above, and elaborated in Mosiane, et al.¹⁴, a southern urbanism that characterises much of the global south is not accidental. It is an outcome of political, economic and social processes enacted over many decades. Given those historical processes of city making, the result is an urbanism that expresses not only good life, status and wealth, but also poverty and survival. Those processes also gave rise to an urbanism that is intriguing, without clear definition; but pointing to a generative and vibrant urban landscape as the state, private sector and ordinary people make formal and informal investments, with residents making meaningful improvements in their lives (figures 2 and 3).

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01 Mhlanga Mountain View
Owned by the GCRO
Captured by author: Ngaka Mosiane

01



02 KwaMhlanga
Owned by the GCRO
Captured by author: Ngaka Mosiane

02



03 Phola Park
Owned by the GCRO
Captured by author: Ngaka Mosiane

03

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