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The NE 51 Series Frontier: The Grand Narrative of Apartheid Planning and the Small Town

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The article proposes to bring the urban development of Usakos, a small Namibian town on the fringe of the South African empire, into conversation with the ‘grand narrative’ of the apartheid city. Narratives of the apartheid city were shaped by contemporary academic architectural discourses sustained by those who pioneered and promoted urban planning in South Africa. It was formulated in texts on architecture and apartheid produced in the 1980s and 1990s, which developed a strong argument about South African architects’ involvement in the creation of standardised housing for Africans. Big cities constituted the main reference for both critics and promoters of South African urban planning, and their analyses subscribed to paradigmatic notions of rapidly growing cities and inevitable housing crises, slums and chaos. The analysis of the urban development in Usakos in the 20th century allows for challenging the teleological model of such hegemonic narratives. The case of a small town also integrates otherwise separate discussions on ‘white’ and ‘black’ housing. In Usakos, the transformation of urban space was primarily ideologically driven, and part of a general attempt to create a tangible and visible experience of a homogenous imperial South African space. One of the dominant material manifestations of such an imperial space were the iconic NE 51 series houses in standardised neighbourhoods, to which Africans were forcibly removed.

Introduction

This article is concerned with questions around empire and space, and more precisely with the possibility and plausibility of identifying and locating a supposed South African empire as a distinct geographical space.¹ In order to explore this issue, I have chosen as a point of entry into the discussion two features, namely spatial design and the built environment, thereby assuming that architectural, or more generally, construction and building shape the morphology of space. In the South African context, the idea suggests itself that one of the most significant achievements of architecture since the 1950s was the creation of standardised housing, which, according to racialised planning, served to accommodate the urban African population. One of the main assets of this concern was the NE 51 series, low-cost houses developed on the basis of so-called social and physical space minima.² These houses were designed for an equally standardised new kind of neighbourhood, the ‘Non-European Township’, which became an integral part of every ‘white’ town. Even today, the NE 51

1 The research for this article has received funding from the European Union Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) under grant agreement 274167.

2 The Non-European house was promoted in a report published in 1951: National Building Research Institute, *Minimal Standards of Accommodation for Non-Europeans* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1951), hence NE 51 series.

series houses physically and visually shape and dominate African townships built since the 1950s, thanks to their seemingly endless repetition. The NE 51 series became the iconic physical manifestation of the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the subsequent transformation of urban space under apartheid rule. As an urban scheme imposed by the segregationist state on its subjects, the NE 51 housing produced a particular kind of difference: while for those in power standard houses constituted an abstract instrument of urban planning and social engineering, they became tangible, constricting parts of everyday experience for those forced to reside in them.

The following analysis will develop along two narrative threads. First, I will explore theoretical debates among contemporary South African architects leading to the invention of the standardised Non-European townships and the iconic NE 51 series houses. Historiographically, this discursive retracement ties in with a larger debate on the apartheid city, which reached a peak in an exhibition in 1998 titled 'Blank: Architecture, apartheid and after'. The exhibition somehow marked the end of two decades of intense, vibrant research aimed at understanding the making of the South African city, and it proposed ways of imagining the post-apartheid city. The catalogue to the exhibition remains a main theoretical and conceptual guideline for a critical engagement with South Africa's architects and architecture in the second half of the 20th century.³ In reconsidering this rich literature, and some of the texts it is based on, I am especially interested in understanding the common ground that modern architecture and apartheid ideology shared. In addition, my reconsideration hopes to move beyond some of the limitations in the scholarly debate, among them the focus on the major South African cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town. These two cities tend to provide the blueprint for historical understandings of the changing morphology of South Africa's urban landscape.⁴ The politics of segregation and apartheid, social engineering through delimitations of urban space, legislation and building did, however, shape big cities *and* small towns alike.⁵ The numbers of people removed, of houses destroyed and new neighbourhoods built are, obviously, much smaller in the case of towns, compared to cities such as Cape Town. In addition, small towns facilitate a perspective on the urban as a whole with all its segregated but interconnected parts.⁶

This is why the article will focus secondly on developments in a small town: Usakos in central Namibia. The choice of Usakos is grounded in two assumptions, based on two different characteristics of the town, namely its size, a *small* town, and its location, a

3 H. Judin and I. Vladislavic (eds), *Blank: Apartheid, Architecture and After* (Rotterdam, NAI Publishers, 1998)

4 See, for instance, the empirical examples in A. Mabin and D. Smit, 'Reconstructing South Africa's Cities? The Making of Urban Planning 1900–2000', *Planning Perspectives*, 12, 2 (1997), pp. 193–223. There are, though, some notable attempts to understand and discuss the implementation of urban segregation and apartheid with a broader focus that also includes smaller cities. See, for instance, Anthony Lemon (ed.), *Home Apart: South Africa's Segregated Cities* (London, Paul Chapman Publishing, 1991), in which ten South African cities of different sizes are discussed (Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Bloemfontein, Kimberley, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Mafikeng–Mmabatho), and two cities outside South Africa: Windhoek and Harare.

5 See, for such an approach that considers small towns and big cities alike, A.J. Christopher, *The Atlas of Apartheid* (London, Routledge, 1994). The detailed empirical examples provided by Christopher focus mainly on cities, although with a special focus on medium-sized cities such as Port Elizabeth.

6 In his summary of urban history in South Africa, Bill Freund lists the limitations of race as the primary category of urban studies among the main lacunae in the field: W. Freund – 'Urban History in South Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 52 (2005), pp. 19–31. At least more recent work on mega cities in Africa have started with a more nuanced and inclusive approach on urbanisation in Africa, and more specifically in South Africa. Paradigmatic attempts to write the postcolonial South African city are two edited volumes: Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (eds), *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropole*, with an afterword by Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Beckenridge (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2004); Noëleen Murray, Nick Shephard and Martin Hall (eds), *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City* (London and New York, Routledge, 2007).

Namibian town. Retracing the dynamics of urban building and town planning in a small town will serve as a means of interrogating the 'grand narrative' of the apartheid city and some of its key assumptions.⁷ Situated at the edge of the Namib desert, half-way between Namibia's capital, Windhoek, and the coastal towns of Swakopmund and Walvis Bay, the town of Usakos features as a site along the trajectories of proliferation and expansion of South African urban planning and design beyond its borders.⁸ Usakos thus serves as a template for setting out a presumed South African imperial space.

Marked by poverty and the lack of economic prospects in the present, Usakos was a thriving place that ranked in the mid 20th century among the five main Namibian towns. The railway formed the economic backbone of Usakos: the town was situated at the junction of the railway line from the northern mining area of Tsumeb and Otavi with the main line from South Africa to the coastal harbour of Walvis Bay and, hence, a small but important nodal centre in a far-reaching railway network. The local South African Railways workshop took charge of all the steam engines operating on the South West African system, which stretched from De Aar in the Karoo to Tsumeb and Walvis Bay in Namibia. While Usakos remained deeply affected by segregation and apartheid politics, its infrastructural development, traffic, trade, and economic well-being nevertheless favoured the emergence of a dynamic, cosmopolitan society that attracted people from the southern African region as much as immigrants from further away. At its peak, in the late 1950s, the town's population reached approximately 5,000.⁹

It was precisely Usakos being a railway town that triggered my initial interest in its history. As I have argued elsewhere, railways were the vehicle of South Africa's imperial expansion into the continent in general and into Namibia in particular, and it determined the ways in which this expansion was imagined and materialised.¹⁰ Railways, and later roads, were the arteries of imperial space determining the flow of goods and people, the pattern of settlement and collective experiences of space. Hence, the history of a railway town is

7 There are only a few historical studies of small towns in South Africa – the detailed historical study by Jeffrey Butler of Cradock, for example: J. Butler, 'Housing in a Karoo Dorp', *South African Historical Journal*, 17 (1985), pp. 93–119. In general, small towns remained marginal in scholarly work on urbanism in Africa, with the notable exception of some pioneering work in the 1970s, such as Aidan Southall (ed.), *Small Urban Centers in Rural Development in Africa* (Madison, Wisconsin University African Studies Program, 1979). It was only more recently that human geographers, especially, became more interested in these forms of the urban. See, for example, Deborah Fahy Bryceson, 'Birth of a Market Town in Tanzania: Towards Narrative Studies of Urban Africa', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5, 2 (2011), pp. 274–93; Deborah Bryceson and Danny MacKinnon, 'Eureka and Beyond: Mining's Impact on African Urbanisation', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 30, 4 (2012), pp. 513–37; Hugh Macmillan, 'Mining, Housing and Welfare in South Africa and Zambia: An Historical Perspective', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 30, 4 (2012), pp. 539–50.

8 Apartheid urbanisation and its legacy in Namibia is generally discussed, if at all, around the example of Windhoek, which somehow serves as Namibia's urban prototype. See, most notably, Wade C. Pendleton, *Katutura: A Place Where We Do Not Stay* (San Diego, San Diego University Press, 1974), and *Katutura: A Place Where We Stay* (Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1993). More recently, a few interesting studies focusing on small towns, all situated in northern Namibia, appeared. See, for example, Fatima Mueller-Friedman, 'Of Boers and Plaasjapies: "Resistance", Know-How and the Urban Imagination in Northwest Namibia', *South African Geographical Journal*, 89, 2 (2007), pp. 151–60; Mattia Fumanti, 'Burying E.S.: Educated Elites, Subjectivity and Distinction in Rundu', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33, 3 (2007), pp. 469–83; Gregor Dobler, 'Oshikango: The Dynamics of Growth and Regulation in A Namibian Boom Town', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 1 (2009), pp. 115–31; Wolfgang Zeller, 'Danger and Opportunity in Katima Mulilo: A Namibian Border Boomtown at Transnational Crossroads', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 1 (2009), pp. 133–54.

9 This estimate is based on, *inter alia*, Oswald Köhler, *A Study of the Karibib District (South West Africa)*, (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1958). The figures provided by Köhler are based on a combination of official census data and, especially for the first part of the 20th century, Rhenish Mission sources. These colonial data have clear limitations.

10 Giorgio Miescher, 'Arteries of Empire: On the Geographical Imagination of South Africa's Railway War, 1914/15', *Kronos*, 38, 1 (2012), pp. 22–46.

entrenched with the constitution of imperial space in particular ways. A further specificity of railway towns – that is, towns that exist predominantly because of the railways – is that they experienced a general economic decline when the railways lost their predominance in transport.¹¹ Because of economic stagnation, these towns have undergone generally only minor transformation, and historical structures and buildings are hence often preserved and visible to this day.

The Grand Plan for the Apartheid Town

The critical coincidence is that town planning in South Africa emerged at a time when the modern movement in architecture and planning was at its height ... and so was the demand for comprehensive segregation in South African cities. These two powerful strands of thought fed on each other and came together particularly strongly during and immediately after the Second World War in the context of massive growth of population and production in urban areas.¹²

This quotation, written two decades ago by Susan Parnell and Alan Mabin, two of today's leading scholars of urbanism in South Africa, summarises the complicity of South Africa's architects and town planners with apartheid, and the discipline's eminent role in shaping South Africa's urban morphology. Not without discomfort, Parnell and Mabin analyse the parallels of modernist planning as academic discipline and apartheid, which enabled the easy merger of these 'two powerful strands of thought', which resulted in a profound transformation of the morphology of the urban landscape and the creation of uniform townships.¹³ Here I would like to recapitulate some of the processes and debates that eventually resulted in one of the most significant achievements of South African architecture: the NE 51 series houses. In doing so, I hope to elaborate a bit further the common ground that the architects and apartheid apologists shared, and reflect on the presumptions and the building traditions they were based on.

At the core of the modern movement in architecture and planning was the strong conviction that the discipline possessed the intellectual ability and technical skills to transform the human via the built environment. This mentality was self-confidently expressed in the work of young graduates of the newly established architectural schools in South Africa in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In June 1938, students of architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand organised a conference titled 'On Town Planning' and an accompanying exhibition, which presented a 'radically new proposition for solving the problem of African housing'.¹⁴ A collaborative work sketched the plan for a satellite town

11 Two factors were responsible for the decline: first, the rise of private motor traffic, fostered not least by the construction of a network of national roads, which began in the late 1930s, and, secondly, the erosion of the privileged position of the railway in the competition for transportation. The gradual deregulation of transportation in favour of private road transport is reflected in reports by several commissions of inquiry, such as: Republic of South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Co-Ordination of Transport* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1969). Since the 1990s, the degradation of the South African railway system is strongly felt in railway towns such as De Aar in the Northern Cape, or Beaufort West and Touws River in the Western Cape.

12 Susan Parnell and Alan Mabin, 'Rethinking Urban South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21, 2 (1995), p. 55.

13 For example they comment on a quote from a 1944 report by the Social and Economic Planning Commission, with the sentence: 'The parallel with apartheid planning is uncomfortably clear' (*Ibid.*). In his seminal article of 1998, Derek Japha shares this uneasiness: D. Japha, 'The Social Programme of the South African Modern Movement', in Judin and Vladislavic (eds), *Blank*, pp. 423–37. After having convincingly denounced the intellectual and personal involvement of South Africa's architectural elite in the making of apartheid architecture, he somehow dilutes his findings in the conclusion by stating that '[s]pace and bricks are just two of numerous elements that came together to organize the "native township" as a site of power, and architects had little to do with many of them' (p. 436).

14 See Japha, 'The Social Programme', pp. 425–7; Mabin and Smit, 'Reconstructing South African Cities', p. 202. The authors refer to the *South African Architectural Record* (SAAR), which I also consulted (editions of SAAR are hereafter referred to by month and year of publication). The issue from September 1938 provides detailed information on the conference and exhibition of June 1938.

for 20,000 people, which consisted of ten multi-storey blocks of flats built round three sides of a rectangle, each 300 x 150 metres, each block accommodating 2,000 occupants.¹⁵ The project included community and administration buildings, such as a swimming pool and the pass office, green areas for recreation and plots for individual gardening.¹⁶ The whole concept was strongly influenced by the ideas of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, who was at the time a prominent exponent of structured, modern architecture. In Le Corbusier's view, this form of architecture claimed validity beyond specific geographical or historical contexts, and to it was attributed the capacity to uplift the life of the working class.¹⁷ The scale of the project clearly indicated that the Wits architectural project operated through a notion of big city, with slums inhabited by tens of thousands of people. Ambitiously, if not arrogantly, they proposed big answers to big questions. The architects' final statement made this ambition explicit: 'morally the natives would be able to live in a better background' (in contrast to the informal settlement or slum), and 'psychologically this scheme would provide them with some background for urban life' (allowing them to become urban instead of remaining rural).¹⁸ The students' work, though, was based on particular assumptions that dominated the planning discourse of the time: housing crisis usually meant the emergence of slums, and concurrently slums led to overcrowding, filth, and social and moral decay. Attending to the urban housing crisis accordingly implied the need to dissolve slums, to 'clean up', and 'uplift' inhabitants socially and morally.¹⁹

Regardless of questions of feasibility or conceptual appropriateness, by 1943 South Africa's architectural elite had abandoned Le Corbusier's internationalist vision and embraced, instead, a more regionalist approach, in which the neighbourhood unit became the model for spatial organisation.²⁰ This paradigmatic shift became visible at an architectural symposium named 'Rebuilding South Africa', held at the University of the Witwatersrand in August 1943.²¹ Unlike in 1938, the accompanying exhibition now focused on South Africa alone, yet it still placed the big city at its centre. The exhibition designers and architectural students made their objectives very clear: they wanted to present a vision of South Africa's urban landscape and built environment which would reflect the country's political organisation. Just as 'the compact and highly organised Hellenic cities are paralleled by the Greek concept of the state, and the buildings that remain convey a vivid picture of keen sensibilities of the people that once enlivened them',²² South African cities would have to convey a clear sense of the country's spirit to future generations.

The theoretical model based on the neighbourhood unit offered the possibility of subdividing urban space into clearly defined smaller units, and it allowed for variation in

15 The group comprised P.H. Connell, C. Irvine Smith, K. Jonas, R. Kantorowich, and F.J. Wepener. Their work was published as *Native Housing: A Collective Thesis* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1939).

16 See the richly illustrated publication of the speech given by R. Kantorowich, one of the co-authors: 'A Model Native Township for 20,000 Inhabitants', *SAAR*, September 1938, pp. 344–55.

17 The International Style and its role in South Africa are discussed in Daniel Herwitz, 'Modernism at the Margins', in Judin and Vladislavic (eds), *Blank*, pp. 405–21. The influence of Le Corbusier becomes even more obvious if one considers that he himself was responsible for four of the six projects on show at the exhibition: La Ville Radieuse, Algiers, Antwerp, and Model Farm. The remaining fifth project, presented by the South African architect Norman Hanson, proposed a radical reconstruction of the Cape Town city centre through six flat-screen-like buildings in the newly reclaimed foreshore area (N. Hanson, 'The Business Centre of Cape Town', *SAAR*, September 1938, pp. 356–72).

18 Kantorowich, 'Model Native Township', p. 355.

19 This aspect is carefully discussed by Gary Minkley, "'Corpses Behind Screens": Native Space in the City', in Judin and Vladislavic (eds), *Blank*, pp. 203–19.

20 See Japha, 'Social Programme', pp. 427–29.

21 See *SAAR*, September 1943 and October 1943. The papers presented at the symposium and a reprint of the exhibition panels are published in these two volumes.

22 'The Exhibition Objectives', Supplement to the *SAAR*, September 1943, p. i.

density and planning.²³ The actual state of South African cities was described as ‘chaotic’, and strategically visualised in a racialised choreography that displayed the ‘European’ slum-dweller without prospect of betterment, the ‘African’ man’s designated path from kraal to gaol, and the crowded living conditions of ‘Coloureds’ leading inevitably to illness and promiscuity.²⁴ Against this backdrop, the exhibition narrated South Africa’s reconstruction through planned housing for the distinct groups constituting its urban population.²⁵ Yet the most pressing issue was now considered to be the housing crisis of the ‘white’ working class.²⁶ In its visual displays the exhibition thus focused on propositions for new European townships based on the single family. The presence of Africans was conceived of as consisting of one domestic worker per unit living on the spot. However, as the accompanying texts highlighted, non-domestic workers would generally have to live ‘in neighbourhood units designed as those for the Europeans’, for which certain ‘moral and psychological’ minimum standards had to be respected.²⁷ In sum, the 1943 symposium and exhibition envisaged the solution of South Africa’s housing crisis in terms of racially segregated neighbourhood units consisting of family houses of different sizes and furnished with the necessary community services. The patron and administrator of the process was meant to be the state, as one of the conference participants declared: ‘[t]he urgency of the problem demands a clear and energetic policy and a carefully integrated plan on a national scale’.²⁸

This new generation of architects and planners, trained to think big and convinced of knowing how to rebuild South Africa, was keen to turn theory into practice. When the National Party came to power in 1948, these professionals became the ideal partners, planning and materialising the scheme of a thoroughly segregated society in which even the built environment homogeneously reflected each group’s place and status. Conversely, the architects and planners had found in the state their desired patron, which was ready to engage fully in the development and realisation of a comprehensive plan for rebuilding South Africa on a national scale by all necessary means.

The implementation of the envisaged new urban South Africa was based on the model of the neighbourhood, and was designed according to specific standards for each racial group; it thus perfectly suited the goals of the Group Areas Act passed in 1950. In planning and implementing these new neighbourhoods, especially for those groups without sufficient means to build houses for themselves, the national authorities reverted to prior experiences in public housing programmes. In fact, public housing programmes had long been under way, and thousands of houses had been built without the guidance of the academic architectural establishment, but simply by municipality engineers.²⁹ The responsibility for these housing

23 The concept of the neighbourhood unit relies on a model in which ‘the constant is the geographically isolated, self-contained neighbourhood’, as Japha underlined. The subdivision of urban areas was originally formulated by Clarence Perry and then popularised by Lewis Mumford (Japha, ‘Social Programme’, p. 428, n. 27).

24 See ‘The Exhibition Objectives’, Supplement to the SAAR, September 1943, p. i, and the respective panels in the section ‘The Problem’, *ibid.*, pp. xi–xiii.

25 Alan Mabin had underlined the importance of the term ‘reconstruction’ in South African town-planning discourse in the aftermath of the Second World War despite the fact that there was the only minor physical destruction in the country. See A. Mabin, ‘Reconstructing and the Making of Urban Planning in South Africa’, in Judin and Vladislavic (eds), *Blank*, p. 270.

26 One of the presenters at the congress made clear that the housing crisis had existed for many years, and had become an urgent issue only because ‘it is the articulate section of the community that is now affected’ – that is, the ‘European’ – and he reminded the audience ‘that a vast section of the Non-European population is also in need of good housing’. See W.D. Howe, ‘Housing’, SAAR, October 1943, p. 235.

27 See the panel ‘the plan’ in the section ‘A Plan for Living’, Supplement to SAAR, October 1943.

28 Howe, ‘Housing’, p. 235.

29 A fact deplored at the 1943 Symposium. See R. Kantorowich, ‘The Architect in Society’, SAAR, October 1939, p. 256.

programmes lay with the local municipal authority, whereas the central government had provided the necessary funds in the form of loans and, if possible, land, and had in return kept the right of technical and final approval of the local housing schemes.³⁰ The housing programmes had arranged for two main schemes under which local authorities could borrow funds, namely economic housing and sub-economic housing. Economic housing had aimed at the construction of affordable houses for rent or sale through loans at a moderate interest rate ($3\frac{1}{2}$ –5 per cent). Eligible for this kind of scheme had been people with employment and a certain income. The sub-economic housing schemes, introduced only in 1930 and gaining momentum in the mid 1930s,³¹ had been meant to provide houses for letting, at rentals that did not defray the full costs of building and maintenance. Thousands of houses had been built, and 130,000 people rehoused, through state housing programmes up to the end of the 1930s.³² Additional housing had also been provided through the biggest state-owned company, the South African Railways and Harbour, which had offered its employees houses at affordable rents or loans, without deposits and at low interest rates.³³ Up to the late 1930s, the general intention of the state housing policy had, in sum, been to ensure a certain minimum standard of living for poor urban whites, consisting of a proper house, and guaranteed social and geographical distance from urban ‘slums’.³⁴ Still, the state housing programmes had remained insufficient for the provision of affordable housing for the urban poor, especially with regard to the black population.

The spatial manifestation of the South African public housing programmes led to limited series of identical houses on identical plots in new racially homogenous neighbourhoods. The serial houses thus came to signify a modern architecture informed by cost efficiency through rationalisation in planning and building. Hierarchies of race and class were henceforth expressed in the size of the house and of the plot.³⁵ On top of the hierarchy were the economic houses for ‘Europeans’, with the biggest rooms, the best technical installations, and the largest plots. At the bottom, there were the sub-economic houses for ‘Natives’, with the smallest rooms, minimal technical installations and the smallest plot size. Somewhere in between were sub-economic houses for ‘Coloureds’ and ‘Europeans’, though the European houses remained fancier, even though some types of houses were occasionally accessible to both groups. In other words, logic and practice of the state-funded housing programmes produced housing for ‘Natives’ that constituted a minimised version of the houses for low-income ‘Europeans’.

Keeping costs low is one of the core challenges for architects and builders. The design of minimised sub-economic houses – ‘the Native houses’ – became a big challenge for the profession, particularly as large numbers of urban dwellers potentially qualified for this kind of housing. Proposals for a feasible model were soon submitted by numerous aspiring and

30 If not indicated otherwise, the following is based on L. Silberman, ‘Housing Legislation and Finance in South Africa’, *SAAR*, June 1943, pp. 113–18.

31 S. Parnell, ‘Shaping a Racially Divided Society: State Housing Policy in South Africa, 1920–50’, *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 7, 3 (1989), pp. 266, 270.

32 In the 1930s, additional programmes were launched, among them the establishment of building societies for people with low income, or housing programmes for elderly people.

33 On the housing programmes of the South African Railways & Harbours, see also G. Pirie, ‘Sleepers Beside Tracks: Housing in South Africa’s State Railway Corporation, 1910–1980’, *South African Geographical Journal*, 64, 2 (1982), pp. 144–54.

34 Parnell, ‘Shaping a Racially Divided Society’, p. 270.

35 This becomes very obvious when comparing the plans and photographs of economic and sub-economic houses in cities such as Bloemfontein, Port Elizabeth, and Pretoria. For Bloemfontein, see *SAAR*, May 1943, pp. 119–23; for Port Elizabeth, see *SAAR*, July 1943, pp. 148–58; for Pretoria, see *SAAR*, July 1943, pp. 159–66. Housing schemes in other cities are also described in *SAAR*, May 1943 and July 1943, but in these cases the plans and neighbourhood layouts are not illustrated with photographs.

established members of the profession.³⁶ But eventually it was again a public initiative that edged out the competition. The National Housing and Planning Commission and the National Building Research Institute first defined basic minimum standards for the planning of neighbourhoods and single houses in 1949 and 1951, and eventually developed the NE 51 series houses complying with these minimum standards at the lowest costs possible.³⁷ The leading role of government institutions in designing the eventual model 'Native-house' was in line with the political priorities of the new nationalist government. The development and control of housing became a national issue from 1950 onwards, with a centralised bureaucracy supervising the process from plan to implementation. The main focus was on the planning and provision of housing for the black working class according to national standards at minimum cost. Based on the work of the National Building Research Institute, a set of detailed manuals and plans were published in order to facilitate and guarantee the construction of identical, homogeneous townships.³⁸ These manuals and plans successfully synthesised years of theoretical academic thinking in South African architecture, the aspirations of local architects and town planners for real intervention, and the political will to re-order South Africa's urban landscape along racial lines.

By the mid 1950s, the control over African housing became definitely a national issue and the decision to plan and build new and segregated neighbourhoods was no longer left to the municipalities but moved to a national bureaucracy.³⁹ At this stage, the reconstruction of urban space moved beyond issues of population growth and economic production. Indeed, the reconstruction of urban space initiated by modern architecture and planning in association with apartheid likewise aimed at the creation of a strictly homogenous urban landscape in each and every town in what was considered to be South Africa. Namibia, as we shall see, was to become an integral part of this landscape.

The Dynamics of Housing in a Small Town in Namibia

In July 1955, two officials of the South West African Native Affairs Department, together with two officials of the South African mother institution, arrived in Usakos for the inspection of the local African location. The Native Affairs officers informed the town council that the inspection had revealed the need to remove the African location, as it was situated too close to the white town and was, in addition, crossed by a main road. The officials from Windhoek and Pretoria suggested, as an alternative and future site, a valley a few kilometres north of the town, and asked the town council to commission the production of a sketch plan indicating the site and boundaries of the future location. The plan was then meant to be submitted to the Ministry

36 See, for example, 'City of Johannesburg – Competition for Non-European Houses', *SAAR*, September 1944, pp. 220–28; M. Simon and L. Aronson, 'The Non-European Housing Competition', *SAAR*, February 1945, pp. 28–30; 'Architectural Competition for Non-European Housing', *SAAR*, March 1954, pp. 35–8.

37 Interim Reports were published by the National Building Research Institute in 1949. On the basis of these reports, the standards were racialised (originally not intended but also not opposed) and further optimised, meaning reduced and eventually published: National Housing Office, *Minimum Standards of Accommodation for Non-Europeans* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1951). On this topic, see, in particular, Japha, 'Social Movement', especially pp. 430–35.

38 The research of the National Building Research Institute in the period 1947–54 formed the basis of the centralised housing policy for black urban dwellers for the decades to come. For an institutional perspective, see National Building Research Institute, *Low-Cost Housing* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1987), especially pp. i–xii.

39 Since the mid 1950s, municipalities' housing of Africans was fully regulated and controlled by the Department of Native Affairs in Pretoria. See I. Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race: Native Administration in South Africa* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997), pp. 63–9, 125–30. In the decades before, municipal housing schemes often did not materialise, but stalled at the planning stage. These issues are discussed at some length by Andrew Byerley elsewhere in this issue.

of Native Affairs in Pretoria for assessment. Once approved, the town council would have to provide a topographical map, on which Pretoria would inscribe, for a small fee, the detailed layout plan of the new location, including streets and single plots.⁴⁰ The event was no coincidence, nor was the Native Affairs Department's visit and subsequent instructing of Usakos's town council unique. The procedure was part of a centralised political and technocratic initiative directed towards all the local authorities of small towns under South African control. In line with this initiative, the Chief Native Commissioner in Windhoek sent a circular to all local authorities in August 1955, titled 'Native Housing in Urban Areas SWA', which re-emphasised the directions given by the Native Affairs Department in Pretoria in February that year, and included further printed materials.⁴¹ These include two National Housing Commission publications of 1951, namely the booklet 'A Guide to the Planning of Non-European Townships' and the plan for a 'NE 51/6 house'.⁴² The former was a 57-page manual discussing all legal, environmental, technical and practical aspects of new townships planned from the scratch, on open field, complying with certain minimum criteria, and realised at minimum cost.⁴³ The construction of standardised low-cost houses, one of them the NE 51/6 series (see also Figure 4), free-standing basic four-roomed houses with no running water and toilet facilities, was integral to these plans.⁴⁴ The visit of the government officials in 1955 marked a turning point in the urban morphology of Usakos, as the settlement layout of the town was subsequently transformed according to a general national blueprint. The transformation opened a radical new chapter in the town's multi-layered history of housing.

In addition, the visit of the government and the following transformation of the town points to the consistent South African practice of applying its laws to the occupied territory of Namibia. In general, South African legislation was simply implemented in the territory by proclamation of the State President or the Administrator for South West Africa. Urban segregation in Namibia, for instance, was first based on the Natives (Urban Areas) Proclamation No. 34 of 1924, and later on the Natives (Urban Areas) Proclamation No. 56 of 1951.⁴⁵ The former reflected the respective 1923 South African Act, and the latter the South Africa's 1945 Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act. Partly in the light of the territory's contested status as United Nations' mandatory territory, not all South African laws were officially proclaimed in Namibia. The infamous Group Areas Act of 1950, for example, was never officially implemented, but nevertheless formed the guiding principle of urban segregated settlement.⁴⁶ The politics of urban segregation along the South African model, however, was limited to central and southern Namibia. It was this part of the territory, known as the police zone and separated by the Red Line from the densely populated African reserves in the far north, that the settler society claimed as their land.⁴⁷ Hence the shifting patterns of urban

40 National Archives of Namibia (hereafter NAN), BAC-154-HN9/15/3/5), Town Clerk (TC), Usakos, to Secretary for SWA (Sec.), 26 July 1955, 'Verslag oor Verskuiving van Lokasie'.

41 NAN, BAC-154-HN9/15/3/5. Circular Chief Native Commissioner (NC) SWA to all local authorities, here the TC Usakos, 20 August 1955.

42 The other material attached comprised the booklets *Owner–Builder Guide* and *Housing Brochure*.

43 First published in 1951 and reprinted in 1955, the manual was available in English and Afrikaans.

44 The NE 51/6 house was called a '3 Room Unit', designed for 6–7 persons. National Housing Office, *Minimum Standards of Housing Accommodation For Non-Europeans*, (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1951, reprinted 1956), p. 8.

45 On the implementation of South African legislation in Namibia, see David Simon, 'Aspects of Urban Change in Windhoek, Namibia, During the Transition to Independence', PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1983, for apartheid legislation, especially pp. 202–5; David Simon, 'Desegregation in Namibia: The Demise of Urban Apartheid', *Geoforum*, 17, 2 (1986), pp. 289–307.

46 *Ibid.* See also A.J. Christopher, *The Atlas of Apartheid* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994), p. 182.

47 Giorgio Miescher, *Namibia's Red Line: The History of a Veterinary and Settlement Border* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and 'Facing Barbarians: A Narrative of Spatial Segregation in Colonial Namibia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38, 4 (2012), pp. 769–86.

development in Usakos are paralleled by the developments in many other South African and Namibian towns but not by urban areas north of the Red Line, which followed their own chronologies.⁴⁸

The Early Years of Usakos, 1906–1927

When the League of Nations granted South Africa mandatory power over the former German colony of South West Africa in 1920, Usakos was still a very young settlement. Only 14 years before, the Otavi Mining and Railway Company (OMEG) had opened up the railway line between Swakopmund and Tsumeb. The company had bought the farm Usakos, situated at the edge of the Namib desert, in order to establish a major station with maintenance and repair facilities.⁴⁹ The OMEG tracks were soon connected to the older state railway line from Windhoek to the coast, and eventually all railway traffic from the Namibian highlands to the sea passed through Usakos.⁵⁰ Thus, within a couple of years, the original farm Usakos became a major railway centre with a population of approximately 2,500.⁵¹

Most residents of Usakos made a living with the railway, and workers also came from all corners of the country and from abroad. Usakos was a vibrant place, with a remarkable railway infrastructure, large workshops, a few administrative buildings, dozens of residential houses, a few shops, a police station, two hospitals, a few hotels, schools and churches, and a large number of more informal dwellings. The settlement's urban landscape was formed by a mixture of well-built plastered brick buildings, simple brick houses, wood and corrugated iron constructions of different size and quality, wooden barracks of different sizes, 'pontoks' (huts built primarily of wood and mud), and old railway wagons transformed into provisional housing. The streets were neither sealed nor tarred, they had no street signs, and only the core part of the town around the railway station was electrified.

Usakos was socially and racially stratified and so was housing. To accommodate its European workforce, OMEG had soon begun to build a hostel for single workers, family houses for married workers, and, not least, a representative building as the seat of the company's directorate.⁵² At the end of German rule in 1915, the OMEG owned most of the houses in Usakos, providing more than 200 rooms to their staff.⁵³ As long as there were not enough permanent structures, many workers lived in small, mobile wooden barracks that were originally used during the construction period.⁵⁴ In addition, workers were granted the right to build their own houses, usually small wood and corrugated iron constructions or raw brick buildings, on railway ground.⁵⁵ The railway's efforts to provide housing to the European workforce contrasted with their attitude towards their African labourers. African housing was primarily seen as a question of 'appropriate space' and not as a question of appropriate dwelling. Africans primarily lived in a couple of different locations – roughly

48 See, for example, for the history of forced removals in a town north of the Red Line, K.M. Likuwa, 'Colonial Relocations in Northern Namibia: From the Riverside Village to Nkarapamwe Black Township in Rundu', *European Scientific Journal*, Special Edition (August 2014), pp. 605–15.

49 NAN, ZBU-1973-U.V.u.16, file 'Farm Usakos'. The farm Usakos was selected owing not least to the good water supply from a strong well on the farm.

50 See E. Conradie, 'iKort historiese oorsig van die staatsbeheerde vervoerstelsel van SWA', unpublished manuscript, Transnet Heritage Library, Johannesburg (April 1979). From 1909, most of the traffic – and from 1913, all of it – went through Usakos using the better OMEG tracks.

51 At the end of German rule, the European population stood at 420 (NAN-Accession A762-1/36, 'Historiese oorsigte: Usakos') and the African population c. 2,000 (Köhler, *Karibib District*, p. 84).

52 For example, NAN, BSW-105-U.A.3/18, plan of a single worker's hostel (1907).

53 NAN, WKA-2-K.B.77, Director of Works Karibib to Director of Works Windhoek, 22 September 1915.

54 For these barracks, see, for example, Sam Cohen Library, Photo A_00S_2877 and Photo A_00W_3574.

55 NAN, LAN-0341-792, SWA Police Report, 'Encroachment on Crown Lands, Klein Uskaos', 10 August 1927.

designated spaces where they erected their own houses, scattered on the edges of the town.⁵⁶ Immediately after the capitulation of the German troops, the South African Railways (SAR) incorporated all Namibian railway systems in August 1915 and replaced the OMEG as the most important employer in Usakos. Irrespective of the change in colonial power, the general picture of the dynamics of European and African housing in Usakos persisted until the late 1920s, not least because the railway's dominant position delayed the emergence of a functional local authority that would have taken over urban planning duties.

The Making of a 'White Town', 1927–1955

A local authority, the Village Management Board (VMB), was eventually established in 1927, and its key intention was to transform Usakos into a proper 'white' town. Up to then, the place roughly consisted of three spatial entities: the railway camp south of the tracks, the small township laid out under German rule north of the tracks, and the informally settled area around it with an intermingling white and black population. The railway camp comprised the technical infrastructure of the SAR, namely 83 railway houses in the railway camp in 1927,⁵⁷ and a compound with very basic sanitary installation for African labourers.⁵⁸ The township of Usakos – that is, the 'white', non-railway part of the town north of the tracks – was basically a small rectangular grid of surveyed streets and plots, with a mixture of high- and low-quality buildings used for housing, administrative purposes and business. Out of the 600 white residents, less than one third lived there, joined by some Africans.⁵⁹

Making Usakos a 'white' town, it was felt, required the consistent implementation of housing regulations, and the spatial re-ordering of the African settlements became a priority for the VMB. Thus, in 1927, a space slightly north of the town was designated as the new and sole 'Native location'. The informal locations, as well as the railway location, were dissolved, and residents had to move to the new place. The consolidation of several residential areas into one location that would remain segregated from the rest of the town was at this stage the main and only interest the Village Board developed towards black residents. Much more attention was given to what was termed as the 'European housing crisis', coined in terms of a 'shortage of housing accommodation' and 'consequent overcrowding'. The board accordingly urged that appropriate schemes would have to be devised immediately, in order to provide more dwellings.⁶⁰ Building programmes were indeed initiated, yet the planning and building was conferred to the SAR, and in the early 1930s an entire new neighbourhood of standardised single houses, used for rental purposes and located next to the railway camp on government land, was eventually completed.⁶¹

European squatters became the main focus of attention over the years to come. Those living on government land in small self-erected houses, simple brick or wood and iron

56 Köhler, *Karibib District*, pp. 83–4.

57 NAN, SWAA-895-A72/57, SAR Divisional Superintendent Windhoek to Sec., 12 January 1927. In the same period there were 86 railway houses in Windhoek.

58 In 1918, more than 800 people lived in the railway compound. See NAN, ADM-129/5641/1, Military Magistrate Karibib to Sec., 18 September 1918.

59 According to official estimations in 1927, two-thirds of the European population was directly linked to the railways and generally living in the railway camp. NAN, SWAA-895-A72/57, Magistrate Karibib to Sec., 29 June 1927.

60 NAN, LOC-50-SWA2/7/15 v1, 'Report of Meeting Usakos Local Authority', 4 July 1927.

61 Interview with Piet and Marianne du Plessis, Okahandja, 1 December 2012. The railway was able to purchase this government trust land. NAN, LAN-0341-792, Attorney General to Surveyor General, Windhoek, 28 October 1929.

constructions were now obliged to pay leases. The lease was particularly high for those who owned houses in the new 'Native location'.⁶² The attitude of the officials towards these squatters was generally negative, as they were suspected of 'cohabitation with native women'.⁶³ The VMB was very keen to close down 'racial grey zones' by keeping European housing away from the location and, accordingly, by ensuring that no Africans lived in the European township.⁶⁴ Poor European housing, therefore, always raised official suspicion, especially when located in the vicinity of the African location.

Building regulations were another important field of activity for the VMB, aimed at uplifting the township's architecture in form and quality. Simple wood constructions with nailed walls of corrugated iron (see [Figure 1](#)), for instance, were no longer accepted for residential houses. Instead, all outer walls had to be made out of cement bricks.⁶⁵ Clay walls were not accepted either.⁶⁶ In other words, fixed solidity was meant to replace the hasty, temporary solutions which had characterised the railway town of Usakos for a long time. Henceforth wood-iron construction was no more to be associated with European housing, but would instead become the architectural marker of African housing.

The shortage of European housing remained an issue, and after the Second World War additional housing programmes were initiated (see [Figure 2](#)). Usakos acquired the status of a municipality in 1948, then with a population of 950 Europeans.⁶⁷ With the SAR still being the dominant agent and force, housing in Usakos was treated more specifically as a question of adequate housing for railway employees. The government officials in Windhoek urged the SAR to provide better and sufficient housing for the European employees, knowing that the SAR continued the practice of accommodating part of their European workforce in provisional buildings, such as pre-fabricated cement rondavels.⁶⁸ In the administration's view, the days of the European shack-dweller had definitely come to an end, and the new housing programmes of the 1950s were first of all aimed at providing decent houses for Europeans. To be a white family henceforth meant to live in a decent house. In Usakos the SAR built dozens of additional family houses in the railway camp, the so-called 'bo-dorp' south of the railway tracks.⁶⁹ These houses were mainly rented out to railway employees under very favourable conditions.⁷⁰ Once the SAR showed increasing reluctance to take over full responsibility for housing in all the big railway centres of the South West African system, namely Upington, Windhoek, Usakos and Walvis Bay, the Windhoek administration began to initiate economic housing schemes in the mid 1950s.⁷¹ But the Usakos municipality's material and economic involvement remained very cautious, keeping in mind a possible closure of the SAR workshop, which indeed was in the offing by the late 1950s. In fact, economic and demographic growth came to an end, and serious decline began in 1963, once the SAR moved all its repair and maintenance workshops for their locomotives to Windhoek.

62 NAN, LAN-0341-792, for example, Paul Piecuch to Lands, 5 December 1927; Lands to Paul Piecuch, 17 January 1927.

63 NAN, ADM-108-3370/4, for example, Military Magistrate to Sec., 7 February 1920.

64 For example, an African woman described as 'Coloured' and living with a European man and their common children in the township was forced to move to the location in 1929. NAN, LOC-SWA2/7/15 v1, VMB meeting, 29 April 1929.

65 This was decided at the VMB meeting of the 26 March 1928 and enforced on several occasions.

66 NAN, LOC-50-SWA2/7/15 v1, VMB meeting, 28 May 1929.

67 NAN, LOC-6-SWA2/3/5 v1, File 'Local Authorities. Establishment of Usakos'.

68 NAN, SWAA-906-A72/90, Minutes of Meeting of Administrator for SWA with the South African Minister for Railways, Cape Town, 20 August 1948.

69 NAN, LOC-51-SWA2/3/15 v3, Minutes of Meetings, Municipality Usakos, 7 August 1953, 9 October 1953; Memorandum re Meeting with SAR, 29 October 1953; also interview with Piet and Marianne du Plessis, Okahandja, 1 December 2012.

70 NAN, LOC-6-SWA2/3/5, Memorandum by Sec. to Administrator, 8 December 1954.

71 *Ibid.*



Figure 1. The home of J.J. Davis, railway worker, on the outskirts of Usakos, 1932. A simple wood construction with nailed walls of corrugated iron and no sanitary installations (except a makeshift outdoor bucket latrine), the house was threatened with removal because of its quality and proximity to the African location. (NAN: SWAA-1831-A382/14)

Usakos ran the risk of becoming a ‘spookdorp’ (ghost town), particularly when 300 white families, almost half of the European population, left the town in 1963. Shortage of housing was obviously no longer an issue.⁷²

The Other Side of the White Town: The African Location Since 1927

As we have seen, while much effort was put into solving the ‘European housing crisis’ and transforming Usakos into a white town, the VMB invested a minimum of energy in African housing. After having designated a consolidated space for all African residents in 1927 – a space known today as the old location – the municipal authorities turned their backs on any matter relating to life in the location for the following decades. If anything, municipal activity was confined to delimiting external and internal boundaries, providing basic sanitary installations, collecting taxes, and securing minimal control. Things moved slowly: it took a few years until the site of the location – its external borders – was surveyed, drawn on a map and legally defined in Government Notice 91 of 1932; the location was not subdivided into plots, and there was minimal internal order; and in 1935 a visiting official of the Native Affairs Department in Windhoek noted suspiciously that the huts ‘have not been built in any regular order but seem to have been dotted all over the place’.⁷³

Urged by Windhoek, the local authorities had to restructure the layout of the location by ensuring that the huts would be placed in line and numbered.⁷⁴ A basic order was introduced: the single plots were small, measuring 50 x 50 feet, and the spaces between the houses were very narrow, except along the main road, where they increased.⁷⁵ In addition, a rough ethnic division prevailed, with the biggest ‘Damara’ section on one side of the main road, and, on the other side, the ‘Ovambo’ and ‘Herero’ sections, the railway compound where the contract

72 Interview with Piet and Marianne du Plessis, Okahandja, 1 December 2012. The white population dropped from 1,800 to 1,967 after the SAR workshop closed. NAN, PLA-1034-P.84/40/3/1 v1, extracts from report of Senior Urban Areas Commissioner of a visit to Usakos on 4 August 1964. For the term ‘spook-dorp’, see NAN, LOC-51-SWA2/3/15 v3, Meeting Usakos Municipality, 26 September 1957.

73 NAN, SWAA-1830-A382/4 v1, Assistant NC to Sec., 27 April 1935.

74 NAN, SWAA-1830-A382/4 v1, Report Superintendent Usakos Native Location, December 1936.

75 NAN, SWAA-1830-A382/4 v1, Chief NC to Administrator, 30 August 1945.



Figure 2. View of an early South African Railways housing scheme in Usakos, built in the 1930s. Similar schemes of plastered brick buildings were realised, especially after the Second World War. (Transnamib Railway Museum, Antonie Swanepool Collection)

workers stayed, and, since the early 1950s, a ‘Coloured’ section.⁷⁶ Otherwise, a *laissez-faire* approach prevailed. On the ground the ethnic sections remained, in theory, aligned with the central government’s expectations,⁷⁷ and the location was never fenced in, nor was any specific section demarcated by fences. Likewise, the infrastructure continued to be absolutely minimal, and every improvement proved a tedious process. The lack of decent sanitation was notorious, and there were never more than a few public latrines and two public shower baths available to residents.⁷⁸ Water supply depended partly on wells located at the nearby river bed until a reservoir was built in 1935, and water became available at taps along a pipe that followed the main road.⁷⁹ Municipal service provision was, in sum, miserable, and only exceptionally would the authorities feel the need for action, such as in 1936, when they allocated a dipping tank and a community hall to the location, or in 1954, when a butcher’s was opened.⁸⁰ Some services, though, were provided by churches: the location’s Catholic Church and the Rhenish Mission Church were said to have been very evident in everyday life in the location.⁸¹

All state-installed infrastructural services, modest and dysfunctional as they might have been, had to be paid for by African residents. This was done through leasing fees charged for

76 See, for example, ‘Sketch Map of Usakos Urban Location’ from 1956 (NAN Map Collection No. 490); for the definition of a ‘Coloured’ section, see Köhler, *Karibib District*, p. 89.

77 NAN, SWAA-1830-A382/4 v1, Assistant NC to Sec. for SWA, 27 April 1935. The very superficial ethnic segregation was confirmed, not least in the interviews done in Usakos in November 2012.

78 In 1928 there were only six latrines with six seats (buckets) each for a population of probably 1,500 people, i.e. there was one bucket per 40 people. NAN, SWAA-1830-A382/4 v1, Magistrate Karibib to Accounting Officer for SWA, 16 February 1928. By 1955 the number of available toilets was only slightly higher, with one bucket per 30 people, Köhler, *Karibib District*, p. 108.

79 NAN, SWAA-1830-A382/4 v1, Report on Usakos Location, 31 December 1935. The water supply system was upgraded in 1954 with the construction of second main reservoir and two small distribution tanks, NAN, SWAA-1831-A382/4 v3, Memorandum on meeting of Native Affairs Department and Usakos Municipality, 15 February 1954.

80 NAN, SWAA-1830-A382/4 v1, Report Superintendent Usakos Native Location, December 1936. For the butcher’s, see NAN-SWAA-1831-A382/4 v3, Memorandum Sec. SWA to Administrator, 21 December 1953.

81 Both missions ran schools, with the Rhenish Mission church having the bigger congregation. Köhler, *Karibib District*, pp. 101–7.

every dwelling in the location.⁸² The system of levies became more sophisticated with the years, and, based on experiences made in the municipality of Windhoek, the Usakos authorities introduced a stamp system in 1936 to control the payment of taxes.⁸³ Taxes varied depending on whether someone was a house-owner or a lodger, but all residents, as well as all visitors, men and women older than 14, were subject to taxes.⁸⁴ In general, the location houses (see Figure 3) were individually built wooden constructions with walls and roofs made out of flattened tin or corrugated iron, some having a cement floor.⁸⁵

While conditions on the ground were marked by inertia, official discourse in Windhoek found fault with the housing situation in the Usakos location, and repeatedly classified it as 'quite unsuitable for human habitation'. But the critique remained mere rhetoric and usually gave way to strategic relativisation, noting that 'the same can be said of the dwellings in all the other urban locations in the territory'. In a hypocritical gesture, Usakos was even praised, as the dwellings had proved to be 'spotlessly clean'.⁸⁶ Regardless of the sophistry in official reporting at the time, neither the local municipality nor the central government in Windhoek perceived the old location in terms of urban slums, filth and moral decay.⁸⁷ It served its purpose and satisfied segregationist requirements. Nevertheless, by the mid 1950s, urban planning policies took a radically new direction.

The Making of an Apartheid Town, 1955–1970s

Let us go back to the visit of the Native Affairs Departments' officials to Usakos in 1955. Their intervention started a cumbersome bureaucratic process orchestrated by Pretoria, aimed at the establishment of a new township. The first phase consisted of defining the site of the future township. A 'Guide to the Planning of a Non-European Township' lay down the rules according to which the municipality in Usakos was asked to come forward with propositions for the new site. Once an appropriate proposal became available, it was sent via Windhoek to Pretoria, where it was reviewed and returned with comments.⁸⁸ The accurate compliance with the required minimum sizes for buffer zones, which should consider the future development of the white town, received special attention.⁸⁹ Correspondence went back and forth, but the Native Affairs Department in Pretoria eventually accepted the proposed site, and the planning of the township itself began.⁹⁰ The job was given to South African architects and town planning consultants Meyer and Hurter, who designed a 'Native Township' for 1,559 permanent residents, consisting of 215 NE 51/6 houses and a variety of administration and community service buildings.⁹¹ Yet, to guarantee consistency with official policies, the

82 NAN, SWAA-1830-A382/4 v1, Magistrate Karibib to Sec., 17 September 1927.

83 When paying their taxes, people received a stamp, which they had to glue on a card as receipt of payment. The payment was noted on a parallel card kept by the superintendent of the location.

84 On the tax system, see the various reports on the location.

85 In 1955, there were over 700 houses, of which just a few were made of bricks. Köhler, *Karibib District*, p. 99.

86 NAN, SWAA-1830-A382/4 v1, Report of a Windhoek official, probably the Chief NC, on a visit of the Usakos old location, 21 August 1941.

87 This stands in sharp contrast to Gary Minkley's narrative of the discourse surrounding the locations of East London. See G. Minkley, 'Native Space in the City', in Judin and Vladislavic (eds), *Blank*, pp. 203–19.

88 For the first revised plan (1:20,000, designed by G. Reuter, 28 April 1956) sent via Windhoek to Pretoria, see NAN, BAC-154-HN9/15/3/5, Chief NC, Windhoek, to Native Affairs, Pretoria, 5 July 1956.

89 NAN, BAC-154-HN9/15/3/5, Memorandum Sec. to Administrator, 23 March 1955.

90 The site of the new township was legally defined in Government Notice No. 313 of 1958.

91 NAN, BAC-154-HN9/15/3/5, whole file 'Locations Township/Residential Areas, Establishment and Valuation, Usakos'.



Figure 3. Cecilie Geises in front of her mother's house (wooden construction with corrugated iron walls and roof), Usakos old location, 1950s. (Private collection, Cecilie Geises)

National Housing Office in Pretoria remained directly involved in the planning process and controlled the strict compliance with its guidelines.⁹²

The actual construction of the new township began in 1960 under the control of Damaraland Boukontrakteurs, a private company based in Windhoek.⁹³ The whole project was financed through public housing programmes and was classified as a sub-economic housing scheme, with the Windhoek administration granting a loan to the Usakos municipality.⁹⁴ The construction process stretched over many years, but 170 housing units were completed by mid 1964.⁹⁵ The Usakos municipality commissioned the construction of another 60 houses, financed through an additional sub-economic housing loan of almost R150,000 (£75,000), in 1966.⁹⁶ Eventually the new township was meant to consist of 47 two-room, 61 three-room, and 123 four-room houses, making a total of 231 houses, all owned by the municipality. All the houses were constructed according to the architectural types developed in the NE 51 series.⁹⁷

In 1961, forced removals from the old location to the new township, named Hakhaseb, began, and three years later 140 of the new NE 51/6 houses were occupied, leaving one third of the 770 dwellings in the old location empty.⁹⁸ There is no archival evidence of organised resistance to the removals in these first years, but oral histories have disclosed at least some reasons why black residents were resigned to their fate. On the one hand, news of the old location shootings in Windhoek in 1959, which left 10 people dead and many more

92 For example, NAN, BAC-154-HN9/15/3/5, Native Department, Pretoria, to Chief NC, Windhoek, 4 November 1958.

93 For the final decision, see NAN, PLA-P.84/40/3/1, Chief NC, Windhoek, to TC Usakos, 23 March 1960.

94 NAN, PLA-1034-P.84/40/3/1 v1, TC Usakos to Sec., 7 April 1961. For the constructing of houses and additional buildings, such as a school, administration offices, shops, and hostels, a first loan of £52,250 was granted in 1958 and a second loan of £3,950 in 1960.

95 NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/1 v2, extract from a report by Senior Urban Areas Commissioner on a visit of Usakos on 4 August 1964.

96 This construction phase also included the upgrading of existing houses. NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/1 v2, Memorandum Sec. to the Administrator, 10 May 1966.

97 In the following decade, the new township continued to be extended, and consisted of 362 dwelling houses in 1976. NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/1 v3, Directeur von Plaaslike Bestuur to Administrateur, no date (1976).

98 NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/1 v2, extract from a report by Senior Urban Areas Commissioner on a visit of Usakos on 4 August 1964.

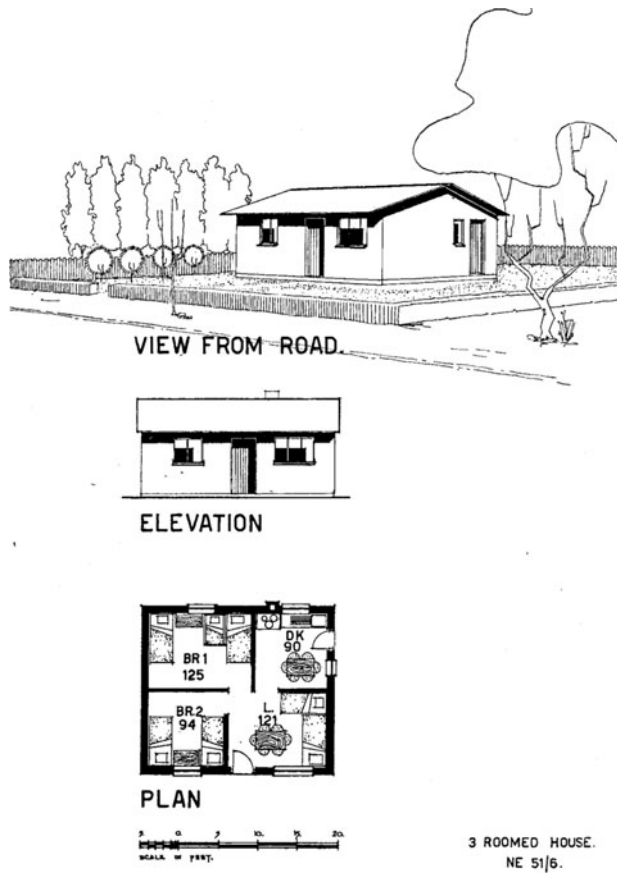


Figure 4. Sketch of NE 51/6 house for 6–7 persons, published in D.M. Calderwood, 'Native Housing in South Africa' (PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1953), and defined as 'a detached house with two bedrooms and with sleeping space for two persons in the living room. No bathroom/W.C. in the main building. Separate W.C. or E. C. required'. (National Housing Office, *Minimum Standards of Housing Accommodation For Non-Europeans*, Pretoria, 1951 [reprinted 1956], p. 8.)

wounded, had given a bitter foretaste of how the apartheid government would handle resistance.⁹⁹ On the other hand, residents had been advised repeatedly, whether from the location's foremen or the mission's side, to move to the new township, where they would be provided with better housing and infrastructure.¹⁰⁰

Still, by 1964 there were delays to the removals, as the whole project had come under serious pressure. Residents who had agreed to move – that is, those who were better off and had regular incomes – were very dissatisfied with the municipality and openly revolted against it.¹⁰¹ They refused to pay rent as long as they were not compensated for the loss of their former, privately owned, dwellings.¹⁰² Their anger was sparked by high rents and the poor standard of the new houses, all built with raw earth (instead of cement) floors and not

99 Marion Wallace, *A History of Namibia* (London, Hurst, 2011), p. 254.

100 The old church building of the Rhenish Mission Society was demolished and the new one opened in 1961. *Immanuel*, 10 October 1966.

101 Interview by the author with Gideon Hoebbe, Usakos, 20 November 2012.

102 NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/1 v2, extract from a report by Senior Urban Areas Commissioner on a visit of Usakos on 4 August 1964.

connected to electricity. The economic crisis of the early 1960s had hit Usakos as a whole. But whereas some people, white and black, had preferred to leave the town and look for jobs at the coast or in Windhoek, others stayed.¹⁰³ The crisis hit women in particular, who depended on domestic work and lost their jobs in significant numbers owing to the exodus of white families. As a consequence, the mid 1960s were marked by single households of women constituting almost half of the remaining population of the old location.¹⁰⁴ They either had not been in a position to afford, or refused to pay, the high rents for the new houses. In view of the crisis, the Usakos municipality threatened all who were unable to rent a house – the elderly, the disabled and the unemployed, and their dependants – with deportation from Usakos and resettlement in a reserve or to their country of origin.¹⁰⁵

It remains unclear how many people were eventually deported and how many moved to the new township.¹⁰⁶ But the last group of residents left in 1968, and the old location remained deserted.¹⁰⁷ It ceased to exist in 1969, after almost 800 privately owned buildings were demolished.¹⁰⁸

A few houses, occupied by people classified as ‘Coloureds’, survived around the edges of the old location.¹⁰⁹ According to the ‘Group Areas Act’, these people were supposed to live in their own homogeneous neighbourhood and could not be removed to the new African township.¹¹⁰ In the course of the forced removals in the early 1960s, the administration in Windhoek informed all the towns and villages about the obligations and rights of those classified as ‘Coloureds’, and who would be eligible to own or to rent under a housing scheme in the territory.¹¹¹ Despite the pressure from Windhoek, the Usakos municipality seemed in no rush to establish a ‘Coloured’ township, and the selection of a site alone took many years. The people concerned obviously opted for a place close to the town – that is, the old location itself or an area at its fringes, where some of them had built a few brick houses in the mid 1950s.¹¹² These propositions were rejected, partly because the sites would not have allowed for the required minimal buffer zones towards the white township.¹¹³ It was only in the mid 1970s that the municipality began to build the ‘Coloured’ township, and eventually chose a site beyond the African one. The township was called Erongosig, and consisted of at least 28

103 An indication of the crisis was a dramatic drop in the numbers of SAR contract workers in Usakos. Whereas 250 contract workers were employed by SAR in 1955, all contract workers had left Usakos by the end of March 1961. NAN, PLA-1034-P.84/40/3/1 v1, Chief NC to Sec., 19 November 1962; for the figures for 1955, see, for example, Köhler, *Karibib District*, p. 87.

104 NAN, BAC-154-HN9/15/3/5, Assistant Magistrate Usakos to Chief NC, 2 August 1962. The correspondence includes a list of 200 women living alone, with detailed information on their financial and personal situation. As the list suggests, and interviews confirmed, ‘single household’ does not mean that these women had no husband or partner, but often the latter was absent, working elsewhere.

105 NAN, BAC-154-HN9/15/3/5, TC Usakos to Sec., 5 July 1963; Chief NC to Sec., 28 March 1963.

106 NAN, BAC-154-HN9/15/3/5, Chief NC to Sec., 28 March 1963. However, there was some reluctance to displace people internally as long as the planned homelands were not established. So far I could trace only the case of Frans Thifana. Thifana, 70 years old in 1969, had come to Usakos in 1940 and was first threatened with deportation to Zambia, but was eventually sent to Okombahe. NAN, BDA-19-N3/20/2.

107 Interview by the author with Cecilie Geises, Usakos, 19 November 2012.

108 For a complete list of all house owners and the amount of compensation received, see NAN, PLA-1035-P84/40/3/1 v3, TC Usakos to Sec., 3 April 1969. The compensation did not match the previous owners’ expectation, as former residents still bitterly remembered. Interview by the author with Gideon Hoebeb, Usakos, 20 November 2012.

109 Some ‘Coloureds’ still occupied plots in the old location in 1969. NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/2 v1, TC Usakos to Voorsitter Dorpraad, Windhoek, 13 February 1969.

110 The establishment of a ‘Coloured township’ was first discussed in the town council in 1951, but did not result in a proper plan. NAN, LOC-SWA2/7/15 v2, Minutes of Meeting, 14 November 1951 and 1 February 1952.

111 NAN, PLA_1035-P.84/40/3/2 v1, Circulars by Secretary of SWA to all Town Clerks and Secretaries of Village Management Boards, 2 February 1961, 10 August 1961, 6 October 1961, and 23 November 1961.

112 For example, NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/2 v1, Usakos town council meeting with representatives of ‘Coloureds’, 26 August 1963.

113 NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/2 v1, TC Usakos to Sec., 15 April 1964.



Figure 5. Some of the NE 51/6 houses built in the early 1960s in the Hakhaseb township of Usakos; in the background on the right, the town centre of Usakos, with the area of the old location in between. (Photograph: Paul Grendon, 2013)

houses in 1976.¹¹⁴ In line with apartheid logics, the ‘Coloured’ houses were of better quality compared to the ones in the African township, as minimum standards were higher.¹¹⁵ But economic problems remained and many couldn’t afford the high rents. Eventually, the conditions of the loan for Erongosig, which had been granted to the municipality, had to be relaxed and the repayment period increased to 40 years at an interest rate of 1 per cent.¹¹⁶ When the remaining families were removed to Erongosig, the complete destruction of black-owned houses in the immediate vicinity of downtown Usakos was concluded once and for all.¹¹⁷ While there were plans to convert the area of the old location into either an extension of the white township or the construction of a new highway bypassing Usakos, they never materialised. Today, the old location remains an open space, where a few ruins recall the existence of a once vibrant African settlement and neighbourhood.

Conclusion

This article brings the development of Usakos, a small town on the fringe of the South African empire, into conversation with the ‘grand narrative’ of the apartheid city. The first part focused on South African architects’ theoretical and practical involvement in the creation of standardised townships for Africans, and the iconic NE 51 series houses. Big cities constituted the main reference for both contemporary architectural and official discourse, as well as for later historical debates. Most of the analyses proposed applied a paradigmatic notion of rapidly growing cities and their inevitable housing crises, slums and chaos. Racial categories helped to identify a ‘poor white’ and a ‘native’ housing problem in the debates between the 1930s and the 1950s, and they have remained persistent in much of the scholarship produced from the 1970s onwards.

114 NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/2 v1, Invoice from J.W. Stein & Vennote, Windhoek, 6 December 1976.

115 All municipalities and villages were reminded of these minimum standards for ‘Coloured’ townships and housing in a circular by the Secretary for SWA, 17 June 1975. NAN-PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/2 v1.

116 NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/2 v1, Memorandum by Plaaslike Bestuur to Administrator, 6 July and 21 July 1976.

117 NAN, PLA-1035-P.84/40/3/2 v2, TC Usakos to Direkteur Plaaslike Bestuur, 15 July 1977; estimation by The Trust and Estate Company, Windhoek, 30 June 1977.

The article moved on to a discussion of the mechanisms and practices of state-funded, segregated housing programmes, which had developed their own formative dynamics in the implementation of the apartheid town. In the framework of these housing programmes, the NE 51 series houses constituted the extreme end of a rationalised and standardised architecture designed for specific socially and racially defined groups.

The narrative of the spatial dynamics of Usakos's development proposed in this article relied on an integrated discussion of 'white' and 'black' housing. The history of urban development in Usakos, and its dynamic growth in the first half of the 20th century, does not lend itself to a teleological framework, in which alleged housing crises inevitably lead to discourses of slum building. The early phase of Usakos's town planning was marked by the local authorities' attempt to create a 'white' town by way of spatial segregation and minimum standards for buildings in 'white' areas. Until the 1950s, housing programmes were directed solely towards the white working class. The SAR, as the strongest economic force, was in charge of the majority of these programmes targeting white railway workers. The eventual emergence of housing programmes for Africans was the result of a centralised and co-ordinated intervention by Pretoria in 1955, and it aimed at the creation of a uniform urban morphology, regardless of conditions on the ground. Usakos was thus not exceptional, but simply an example of apartheid town planning, as the very same urban transformations were forcibly implemented in small towns all over the regions considered as primarily 'white' settlement areas in South Africa and Namibia.

The construction of the new black townships was in line with the dominant model of the state sub-economic housing scheme. Local officials, however, did not legitimise the establishment of the new township as a strategy against slum building and in favour of improving African living conditions. Rather, they seemed simply to apply the model prescribed by Pretoria in full compliance with its requirements and guidelines. The forced removals in Usakos in the 1960s were not economically driven and they did not imply the control of privileged access to prime inner-city real estate, as was so often the case in other settings throughout Namibia (for example, Windhoek) and South Africa (for example, Cape Town). The forced removals that happened in this small Namibian town were first and foremost ideologically driven, and served as one element in the construction of a uniform apartheid urban landscape. The construction of a 'Coloured' township in the 1970s left no doubt in this regard.

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