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Housing at the margins: Rethinking ethics, informality, and planning philosophy in Mthatha, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the ethical and philosophical dimensions of housing resilience in informal settlements, focusing on Polar Park in Mthatha, South Africa. The purpose of the research was to explore how current urban planning systems and housing policies fail to adequately recognise the lived realities and rights of residents in informal settlements, thereby reinforcing spatial injustice and weakening long-term housing resilience. A conceptual review methodology was employed, drawing on interdisciplinary literature on urban informality, resilience, spatial justice, recognition theory, and the ethics of care in the Global South. The analysis revealed that prevailing planning approaches often treat informality as a temporary or illegal condition to be eradicated rather than acknowledging it as a site of human agency and survival. This misrecognition perpetuates structural inequalities and undermines the dignity and resilience of informal settlement residents. The findings suggest that housing resilience should not be understood solely in terms of physical infrastructure but also as an ethical process that recognises informal dwellers as rights-bearing citizens and active co-producers of urban spaces. The study recommends that urban planners and policymakers adopt human-centred and ethics-driven planning frameworks, strengthen participatory governance, and incorporate recognition and care-based approaches in informal settlement upgrading initiatives. The study contributes to scholarship by integrating philosophical perspectives with urban planning debates, offering a normative framework that reframes housing resilience as both a material and ethical practice in the context of rapidly urbanising cities in the Global South.

Keywords: Informal settlements, housing resilience, planning ethics, spatial justice, urban informality.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's history of apartheid is a major contributing factor to the country's housing inequality problem. South Africa's urban spatial organisation was systematically altered by apartheid policies following the implementation of the Group Areas Act, which came into effect in 1950.[1] The concept of

[1] J. Saru, "Analysis of the Residential Space in the Informal Settlement of South Africa in the Post-Apartheid Era: A Case Study of the Capricorn District in Muizenberg Town," *Journal of Sociology and Ethnology* 7, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.23977/jsoce.2025.070208.

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informality is often framed in terms of two opposing viewpoints: on the one hand, it is viewed as problematic and characterised by unregulated activities that impede urban planning and governance and need to be controlled through regulation; on the other hand, it is viewed as a pro-poor economic strategy that has the potential to create livelihoods to combat unemployment and poverty.[2] Rapid urbanisation, specifically the informalisation of South African cities, has made life a "nightmare" for many local governments as they fight to control, preserve, and meet the demands of their residents in terms of housing and infrastructure.[3]

South Africa's towns and cities are becoming increasingly informal, which is a reflection of the country's overall urbanisation process. It has strong roots in the nation's colonial and apartheid history.[4] The history of informal settlements and the development of efforts to address them reflect both international commonality and place-based specificity. Thus, South African experiences are as valuable to global and theoretical discussions as they are to regional policy and practice. In South Africa, about 1.2 million households reside in informal settlements where they lack access to proper housing, basic services, or secure tenure.[5] The Eastern Cape Province's Polar Park, an informal settlement in Mthatha, is a prime example of the conflicts and inconsistencies that characterise urban informality, particularly with regard to accessing safe, respectable housing.

Moreover, national housing policies, exemplified by the Breaking New Ground (BNG) initiative, and global frameworks such as the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 11, consistently emphasise the urgency of the establishment of inclusive, resilient and equitable communities. Despite this, the ongoing reality of informal settlements, as evidenced by Polar Park, highlights the persistent gap between the aspirations outlined in policies and the actual urban conditions faced by residents, thereby raising crucial ethical issues related to recognition, justice, and access to adequate water and housing.

The paper explores the idea of housing resilience in the context of Polar Park from an ethical and philosophical standpoint, based on our conceptions of urban life, citizenship and the human condition, in addition to material and infrastructure aspects. It makes the case that conventional planning paradigms, which are frequently based on formalist presumptions and technical reasoning, ignore the lived realities and ethical claims of informal people. Rather, by highlighting the necessity of housing systems that respect human dignity, agency and justice, the study presents an understanding of informality that acknowledges its philosophical depth and ethical complexity. The study critically examines the normative presumptions that underlie contemporary housing policies by drawing on planning theory, urban studies and philosophical literature through the use of a conceptual review technique.

By situating Polar Park within both local and global debates on informality, spatial justice, and ethical planning, the paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship calling for more humane, context-responsive approaches to housing policy. This is particularly important in cities like Mthatha, where rapid population growth, infrastructural strain and persistent socio-economic inequalities make informal settlements enduring features of the urban landscape.[6]

The article further examines how informal settlements, such as Polar Park, are locations of contestation where issues of ethics, recognition, and resilience are played out on a daily basis rather than being merely geographical oddities or administrative failures. Using Polar Park as a case study, this paper investigates the manner in which informal settlements act as spaces for resilience, moral claims,

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[2] Temitope Olufolahan Olaniran and Thomas Terna Aule, "Systematic Approach to Sustainable Urban Development: Reviewing Challenges of Informal Settlements and Peri-Urban Growth in Sub-Sahara Africa," *Urban, Planning and Transport Research* 13, no. 1 (December 31, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1080/21650020.2025.2495660.

[3] R A Hayangah, "The Planning Dilemma in Upgrading of Informal Settlements in South African Cities: A Practitioners Perspective on the Inclusivity Paradox," *Journal of Inclusive Cities and Built Environment*, February 7, 2022, 29–34, https://doi.org/10.54030/2788-564X/2022/cp1v2a7.

[4] Hayangah, "The Planning Dilemma in Upgrading of Informal Settlements in South African Cities: A Practitioners Perspective on the Inclusivity Paradox."

[5] Liza Rose Cirolia et al., *Upgrading Informal Settlements in South Africa: A Partnership-Based Approach* (UCT Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.58331/UCTPRESS.63.

[6] Ivan Turok and Jackie Borel-Saladin, "The Theory and Reality of Urban Slums: Pathways-out-of-Poverty or Cul-de-Sacs?," *Urban Studies* 55, no. 4 (2018): 767–89; Cirolia et al., *Upgrading Informal Settlements in South Africa: A Partnership-Based Approach*.

and spatial justice. It suggests a shift towards a planning philosophy of the practice, rooted not only in ethics but also in human dignity, recognition and agency within the urban housing context. Part of this work seeks to do so by encouraging a more compassionate and inclusive attitude towards housing issues among marginalised communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Housing Resilience: Beyond Infrastructure

Urban resilience is the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, enterprises, and systems within a city to survive, adapt, and thrive, no matter what kinds of chronic pressures or acute shocks they endure. The current situation in the majority of South African cities is one of ongoing stress. In this context, urban resilience refers to the process of strengthening community capacities and systems to generate a resilience dividend, enabling a city to withstand, adapt to, and grow in the face of severe shocks. This further strengthens the status quo in the city. According to the South African Cities Network, achieving the universally agreed frameworks and Vision 2030 targets beyond 2015 depends on urban resilience.[7] These frameworks include the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR), and the New Urban Agenda (NUA). Together, the four frameworks provide the groundwork for improving informal settlements and fostering urban resilience within sustainable human settlements.[8] Resilience in informal communities like Polar Park also involves negotiating legal exclusion, precarity and the continuous fight for acceptance and legitimacy.

Urban Informality as Human Condition

Informal settlements have their roots in fundamental socioeconomic inequality, fragmented land governance, and the inability of formal planning systems to accommodate low-income residents. They are not just the results of rapid urbanisation. Although they are frequently informal, customary land tenure systems and traditional social institutions are crucial in regulating access to land and settling conflicts, underscoring the urgent need for governance frameworks that are sensitive to context and acknowledge legal heterogeneity.[9] In African cities, the practice of informality through housing development, land administration, and economic activity is essential to urban survival. This study demonstrates how informality is essential to African urbanism and how state organisations' acknowledgement and encouragement of it may hold great promise for resolving issues with urban development.[10] This study takes the stance that informality is a type of urban agency, a survival strategy, a socio-political statement, and a claim to space, rather than pathologising it. In addition to creating room for different epistemologies and ethical relationships in the city, informality questions the normative presumptions of modernist urban planning.

Ethics of Care in Urban Planning

In the context of cities, the concepts of duty and care are both involved in maintaining common urban areas. According to the place-based ethics of care, humans have a duty "to each other and the places we inhabit". In contrast, loving cities emphasise our collective interdependence and responsibility toward one another. The concept of care in urban planning and design refers to an obligation for individuals who utilise the area.

Embodying care in urban planning entails a more positive, caring attitude that "directs designers to engage with people dependent on the built environment and to discuss, evaluate and respond to their

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[7] South African Cities Network, *Urban Resilience in South African Cities* (Johannesburg: South African Cities Network, 2022), https://www.sacities.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SACN-Cities-Network-2022-EBook.pdf.

[8] Collins Muhame, Alice Ncube, and Yonas T Bahta, "Toward SDG-11: How Social Resilience Affects Urban Settlement in South Africa?," *Journal of Sustainability Research* 5, no. 4 (2023).

[9] Olaniran and Aule, "Systematic Approach to Sustainable Urban Development: Reviewing Challenges of Informal Settlements and Peri-Urban Growth in Sub-Sahara Africa."

[10] Patrick Brandful Cobbinah, "City in Africa I: Urbanism and Informality," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 45, no. 3 (March 16, 2023): 297–301, https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2023.2171616.

vulnerabilities, desires, and needs", in addition to legal and professional requirements.[11] Planning theorists have spent decades delving deeply into ethical issues, such as whether and how they influence the ideals of professional planners. Planning associations, for example, have codes that reflect those values. Establishing foundational frameworks to guide professional practice, planning considers how resources are allocated and how procedures can generate more equitable and sustainable outcomes. Choosing which frameworks to utilise raises ethical concerns because these decisions affect people's lives, their means of subsistence, and how we maintain and coexist with fragile ecological systems.[12] An ethics of care in the context of Polar Park calls on planners, legislators, and academics to take into account the lived realities of informal residents rather than just abstract regulations. It demands attributes that are frequently lacking in traditional planning processes, such as mutual regard, attentiveness, and responsiveness.

Spatial Justice and the Right to the City

In the current discourse and scholarly literature, the term "spatial justice" is frequently used (for example, in the domains of urban studies, planning theory, and human and political geography). David Harvey was the first to coin the phrase "territorial social justice" in the 1970s.[13] Henri Lefebvre called the right to the city a "cry and demand" in 1967. A significant portion of the renewed interest in Lefebvre's assertion focuses on the nature of this privilege and its potential for fulfilment. These are varied voices that periodically express scepticism that the phrase “right to the city” may be more than a helpful catchphrase. In Brazil, activists have cited a right established in 2001 by amendments to sections of the 1988 constitution that allows them to defend housing rights for the urban poor.[14]

The South African government has worked diligently over the last 20 years to change the country's skewed geographical layout brought about by previous apartheid laws, regulations, and planning. The transformation and development outcomes that the administration had promised in 1994 were not entirely realised by the many laws and programmes that were created after that year. The Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act 16 of 2013 (henceforth referred to as SPLUMA) was signed into law in 2013, ushering in a new era of land use management and spatial planning. The National Development Plan 2030 also highlights spatial justice as one of its overarching principles for spatial development. Although many people value and support the inclusion of spatial justice as a new principle, it has sparked debate about what spatial justice actually is, what it aims to accomplish, what it would take to achieve it, what a spatially just city is, and what is ultimately required to create one.[15] In South Africa, informal communities like Polar Park occupy isolated, underfunded, and frequently stigmatised regions, where the legacy of apartheid is still felt.

Recognition Theory and Human Dignity

Over the past 20 years, growing geopolitical tensions and the emergence of hostile, reciprocal antagonistic blocs have undermined the legitimacy of human rights.[16] The recognition of subjects inside institutions and their purported coherence based on the ethical preservation of individuality can be argued to be mediated by reification, according to Honneth's recognition theory. Honneth's thorough rethinking of Hegel's theory of intersubjectivity places a strong emphasis on showing how socialised identity formation underlies people's desire to be accepted by society. Stated differently, solidarity comes before individuality as a requirement of individuation because individuality can only be gained

[11] Riina Lundman and Päivi Kymäläinen, “The Suburban Ethics of Care: Caring for Shared Spaces in Suburban Regeneration,” *Cities* 141 (October 2023): 104528, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104528.

[12] Crystal Legacy et al., “Proposing an Ethics of Care: Tracing Victoria’s Transport Planning History,” *Geographical Research* 62, no. 3 (August 12, 2024): 389–401, https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12663.

[13] Stefano Moroni and Anita De Franco, “Spatial Justice: A Fundamental or Derivative Notion?,” *City, Culture and Society* 38 (September 2024): 100593, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2024.100593.

[14] Loren King, “Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of the City* (Routledge, 2019), 76–86, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315681597-7.

[15] Adefemi Adegeye and Johnny Coetzee, “Exploring the Fragments of Spatial Justice and Its Relevance for the Global South,” *Development Southern Africa* 36, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 376–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2018.1495062.

[16] Chris Allsobrook, “African Recognition of Dignity as a Basis for Universal Human Rights,” *Acta Academica: Critical Views on Society, Culture and Politics* 55, no. 1 (July 28, 2023): 20–40, https://doi.org/10.38140/aa.v55i1.7268.

through social relationships.[17] Human rights include housing. Human dignity can be viewed as a foundation for rights or as a right in and of itself. Human dignity is rarely mentioned when evaluating the right to housing in national and international jurisprudence.[18] In urban settings, informal residents may face misrecognition as being inferior, invisible, or illegitimate. According to this viewpoint, resilient housing must fulfil people's needs for identity, respect, and social esteem in addition to providing material sufficiency. As a result, planning transcends its technical aspects and takes on moral and symbolic significance, confirming the humanity of those marginalised.

Together, these concepts frame the ethical questions explored in the paper:

- What does it mean to have a home that sustains not just physical survival but human dignity?
- How can urban planning account for informality without undermining it?
- What ethical responsibilities do governments and societies hold toward those living at the urban margins?

CONCEPTUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

In today's urban planning and design discourse, the concept of "urban informality" has emerged as a central theme, igniting discussions that cut across many sociopolitical and geographic domains. Both supporters and critics have turned the concept into a focal point, and the debate around it is shaped by differing viewpoints.[19] Placing the discussion in a larger conceptual and philosophical framework is critical to understanding housing resilience in Polar Park and, more generally, in situations of urban informality. The dual theoretical frameworks of urban informality and housing resilience inform the paper. They are embedded in three interconnected philosophical schools of thought: recognition theory, ethics of care, and spatial justice. The combination of these concepts enables us to reconsider housing as a humanistic and ethical duty rather than just a technical requirement.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative conceptual research approach grounded in a critical review and interpretive synthesis of interdisciplinary literature. The aim of the study was not to generate primary empirical data but rather to examine the ethical and philosophical foundations of housing resilience in informal settlements through engagement with existing scholarship in urban studies, planning theory, and social philosophy. A conceptual review methodology was appropriate for research that seeks to clarify theoretical debates, interrogate normative assumptions, and integrate insights from multiple disciplinary traditions. In this study, the approach enabled a critical examination of how prevailing urban planning frameworks engage with informality and how such approaches shape the recognition, dignity and resilience of residents of marginalised urban spaces.

The analysis draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy documents, and international development frameworks addressing urban informality, housing governance, and spatial justice in the Global South. Literature was identified through targeted searches of academic databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus using keywords including informal settlements, housing resilience, planning ethics, recognition theory, ethics of care, and spatial justice. Priority was given to studies that engage with debates on informal settlement upgrading, ethical dimensions of urban planning, and housing inequalities in African and other global South contexts. This approach ensured that the conceptual analysis was grounded in both theoretical scholarship and policy debates relevant to contemporary urban governance.

The study employed an interpretive thematic analysis to synthesise insights from the selected literature. The analysis focuses on three interconnected conceptual lenses: recognition theory, the ethics of care, and spatial justice. These frameworks provide a normative basis for examining how housing

[17] Roland Theuas D S Pada, *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition: Freedom, Normativity, and Identity* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

[18] Michael Kolocek, "The Human Right to Housing Through the Lens of Human Dignity as Non-Humiliation," in *Probing Human Dignity* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 103–15, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42437-3_6.

[19] Lakshmi Rajendran, Nezhapi-Dellé Odeleye, and Aysegul Can, "Informality, Resilience, and Dialogue," in *Resilient Cities in the Global South* (London: Routledge, 2025), 1–12, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003336709-1.

resilience is conceptualised in existing planning discourses and how informal settlements are frequently framed in policy and institutional responses. By applying these philosophical perspectives, the study investigates the extent to which current planning approaches recognise informal residents as legitimate urban citizens and participants in the production of urban space.

Polar Park in Mthatha was used as a contextual reference point to ground the conceptual discussion. Rather than functioning as a conventional empirical case study, the settlement serves as an illustrative context through which broader debates about urban informality, housing precarity, and planning ethics can be interpreted. Situating the analysis within this context helps demonstrate how theoretical discussions about recognition, justice, and care intersect with the lived realities of residents in informal settlements.

A conceptual study does not rely on primary data collection, such as interviews or surveys. While this approach limited the ability to present first-hand accounts from residents, it allowed for a more profound engagement with the normative and philosophical dimensions of urban planning that are often underexplored in empirical studies. The study therefore contributes to urban planning and housing scholarship by offering a theoretically informed perspective that reframes housing resilience as both a material and ethical process in the rapidly urbanising cities of the Global South.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Contextual Background: Mthatha and Polar Park

A contextual understanding of Mthatha's urban environment and the sociopolitical forces that have influenced the growth of informal settlements in South Africa is necessary to comprehend housing resilience in Polar Park. This section consequently outlines the urban history of Mthatha, traces the emergence of Polar Park, and examines the structural conditions that continue to drive marginalisation and housing insecurity in the region. These contextual components establish the foundation for understanding and interpreting the ethical, spatial, and philosophical dynamics explored. An outline of Mthatha's urban history, the creation of Polar Park, and the systemic factors that have fuelled the region's persistent marginalisation and housing insecurity are given in this section.

Mthatha: Urbanising Through Exclusion

Tsheleza et al. posited that in the northeastern region of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province sits the rapidly expanding town of Mthatha.[20] Rural areas surround Mthatha, making it the only medium-sized town within a 230-kilometre radius. As a result, the town is a regional powerhouse that serves as a social and economic centre for eight functionally lower-order towns and the rural communities that surround it. King Sabata Dalindyebo (KSD) Local Municipality and OR Tambo District Municipality are home to Mthatha town. Mthatha, despite its population of only 150 000, caters to the needs of nearly 1.5 million people living within a 50-kilometre radius. Since 1994, the town's population has significantly increased as a result of urbanisation. This rapid development of the urban population is spurred by the migration of the rural poor to the metropolis, drawn by perceived chances of obtaining income and a job, and limited options in rural areas. Many people move into informal settlements after arriving because they cannot afford decent homes. As a result, Mthatha has two settlement systems: formal settlements and rapidly expanding informal settlements.

The Emergence of Polar Park

Polar Park emerged in the late 1990s as one of many informal settlements in Mthatha, primarily due to the formal housing system's failure to accommodate low-income residents. Over the years, it has developed into a densely populated area, characterised by shacks constructed from corrugated zinc sheets, wood, and, in some cases, mud. Many of these housing units are overcrowded, with more than six people, including children, often living in a single room or flat. The high density of the settlement has resulted in a lack of privacy, with families living in extremely close proximity to one another. The

[20] Vuyayo Tsheleza et al., "Household Solid Waste Quantification, Characterisation and Management Practices in Mthatha City, South Africa," *International Journal of Environment and Waste Management* 29, no. 2 (2022): 208, https://doi.org/10.1504/IJEWM.2022.121212.

settlement struggles with inadequate sanitation, as residents rely on pit toilets or shared facilities that are often in poor condition. Drainage systems are largely absent, leading to makeshift solutions that contribute to unhygienic conditions and health risks. Access to water is limited to communal taps and, in some cases, illegal connections, forcing households to wait in long queues. Similarly, electricity is accessed through informal connections, which expose residents to frequent outages and an ongoing risk of fires. The recent Mthatha floods exacerbated these vulnerabilities, inundating large parts of Polar Park, damaging homes, and displacing many residents.[21]

Livelihoods in Polar Park reflect the structural challenges of the settlement. While some residents operate small spaza shops, engage in street vending, or find temporary labour, many households primarily depend on social grants for survival. However, a significant number of residents are excluded from such support due to a lack of official identity documents, making them more vulnerable to hunger and poverty. Children are particularly affected, with many seen begging for food on the streets, while others may resort to petty crime as a means of survival. High levels of crime, combined with weak policing and inadequate lighting, contribute to a constant sense of insecurity within the community.

Despite these challenges, residents of Polar Park have developed informal coping mechanisms and forms of resilience. Community-based initiatives, such as street committees and informal leadership groups, work to negotiate with municipal authorities, mobilise water deliveries and address safety threats. These collective actions demonstrate the agency of residents in shaping their environment, even when the state fails to engage with them meaningfully.[22]

Structural Conditions and Housing Precarity

The situation in Polar Park illustrates several broader patterns in South Africa's post-apartheid housing landscape:

Policy disconnects: South Africa is an excellent illustration of a nation that has shifted from an emphasis on eradication to one of upgrading in discussions on international informal settlements. The changing housing policy in South Africa has played a key role in this shift. However, there are still gaps between purpose and implementation since the linkages between policy and practice are not linear.[23]

Land tenure insecurity: Informal settlement governance is complex, with multiple actors using either cooperative or competitive tactics to wield authority. Customary leaders become significant when secure tenure options and efficient service provision are unavailable because they need power and act as intermediaries for a governing elite that must demonstrate support for informal residents, who in turn must influence a geographically remote governing elite.[24]

Service delivery gaps: At the city level, other political parties may be in power, which could lead to competition between the local and federal governments; yet informal settlements typically continue to be neglected and receive only a portion of the services provided.[25] Municipal administrations in South Africa have had difficulty delivering quality services due to a lack of human resources, financial limitations, and corruption. Inadequate service has occasionally led to unrest and property damage. Large-scale demonstrations against South Africa's service delivery system have increased since 2008 due to disgruntled individuals.[26]

[21] G Skosana, *Mthatha Floods Expose Failures of Eastern Cape Government* (TimesLIVE. , 2025).
[22] African Cities Research Consortium, " Informal Settlements: Research Summary," 2024, https://www.african-cities.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ACRC_Informal-settlements_Research-summary_February-2024.pdf; Cirolia et al., *Upgrading Informal Settlements in South Africa: A Partnership-Based Approach*.
[23] Cirolia et al., *Upgrading Informal Settlements in South Africa: A Partnership-Based Approach*.
[24] African Cities Research Consortium, " Informal Settlements: Research Summary."
[25] African Cities Research Consortium, " Informal Settlements: Research Summary."
[26] Percyval Siyabonga Chili et al., "Assessing Service Delivery Challenges in a South African Municipality," *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law* 28, no. 2023 (2023): 36–47.

People who live in Polar Park are not helpless victims of these issues. They actively contribute to the development of their surroundings through advocating for recognition, community-based upgrading initiatives, and informal leadership. However, the state fails to engage with their lived reality in a meaningful and moral manner, constantly testing their fortitude. The next section, which examines how the ethical and philosophical frameworks previously addressed can be used at Polar Park to shed light on the more profound aspects of housing resilience and moral responsibility, is set up by this context.

Analysis: Ethics and Housing Resilience in Polar Park

This section examines Polar Park's lived reality via the conceptual and philosophical perspectives previously described. The objective is to investigate how ethical negligence, structural marginalisation, and geographical injustice interact to compromise housing resilience, going beyond traditional measures of housing adequacy. This investigation also highlights the active role that locals play in battling invisibility and establishing respectable living conditions through unofficial means.

Planning Gaps and Ethical Blind Spots

Social housing greatly aids in the revival of metropolitan areas by addressing spatial inequality and offering low- and middle-income households inexpensive homes. Additionally, social housing programmes address problems like deteriorating infrastructure and insufficient public services, helping to improve metropolitan areas physically. Despite these advantages, there are still difficulties in including social housing in urban renewal plans. The management of social housing units, political will, and financial limitations are some of the problems that can make these initiatives less successful.[27] The implementation of the progressive and flexible policy tools has mostly followed previous reconstruction and development programme (RDP) logics. For instance, Upgrading of Informal Settlement Programme (UISP) projects are not in place in the vast majority of situations. Rather, they have used traditional methods for the creation of townships and suburbs. The majority must relocate to far-off Integrated Residential Development Programme (IRDP) projects, while a small minority of locals stay in the original location.[28] This disconnection is evident in Polar Park. Service delivery promises, or relocation, often go unfulfilled, and when planning interventions occur, they frequently adopt a top-down approach that excludes participants. This results in areas of decision-making that violate residents' rights to agency, co-determination, and voice, which are known as ethical blind spots. In this case, the ethical dilemma encompasses not only the actions taken but also the methods employed and the individuals involved.

Resilience through Informal Agency

Creating a framework for urban resilience that is in line with one for disaster risk reduction and management would help establish standards for resilience strategies in both urban and rural areas. The local government has a two-pronged strategy for improving informal settlements and creating urban resilience within sustainable human settlements. First, the strategy involves promoting and improving the official residential housing market. This can be followed by the recognition of informal housing markets and settlements, which require attention in terms of basic services and necessities, functional security of tenure, and value addition through retrofitting projects in both urban and non-metropolitan locations.[29] Families construct and expand their homes using recycled or improvised materials, showcasing their adaptability in challenging circumstances. Informal committees have mobilised to request water tanks from the municipality during times of scarcity, while others have organised community efforts to secure electricity and sanitation, albeit through informal means.

Residents express their frustration with unfulfilled promises regarding relocation or upgrading projects, noting that announcements from municipal officials often fail to come to fruition. Mothers, in particular, emphasise the difficulties of raising children in overcrowded and unsafe conditions, where

[27] Noxolo N. Ngema, Ahmed Bokhari, and Sijekula L. Mbanga, "Assessing the Impact of Social Housing on Urban Regeneration in South African Cities," *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities* 7 (February 27, 2025), https://doi.org/10.3389/frsc.2025.1468964.
[28] Cirolia et al., *Upgrading Informal Settlements in South Africa: A Partnership-Based Approach*.
[29] Muhame, Ncube, and Bahta, "Toward SDG-11: How Social Resilience Affects Urban Settlement in South Africa?"

limited space hinders opportunities for study and play. For many families, their resilience is evident in their determination to remain in Polar Park and enhance their living conditions on-site, rather than risk relocation to distant housing schemes that could sever community ties and disrupt livelihoods.[30] These insights emphasise the argument that housing resilience in informal settlements cannot be reduced to mere physical infrastructure; it also involves recognising how communities organise, adapt and negotiate for survival amid state neglect.

Spatial Injustice and the Right to Belong

Urban residential segregation and spatial injustice are important aspects of the historical evolution of South Africa's urban poor's settlement patterns, which are closely associated with colonialism and apartheid. Several political, economic, legal, and social elements have contributed to the legacy of socioeconomic exclusion and spatial inequality that defines modern towns and cities.[31] Under apartheid, the South African government formally established divisions based on the racial segregation imposed by colonial oppressors. These divisions were spatial constructions of displacement and brutality. Large-scale displacement had already taken place as part of a broader colonial agenda before any geographic displacement was legalised.[32]

Polar Park is a prime example of spatial injustice due to its remote location and lack of amenities. Some communities are materially and symbolically excluded from full urban citizenship due to political decisions and historical legacies, not merely geographic facts. Its peripheral location, lack of services, and recurring exposure to hazards like floods and shack fires underscore the structural exclusion faced by residents. Poverty, unemployment, and hunger drive many children to the streets, where they beg for food or become involved in crime. These circumstances demonstrate the exclusion of marginalised groups not only from essential infrastructure but also from the dignities and rights associated with urban citizenship. The absence of identity documents for many residents further entrenches misrecognition, as it denies them access to social grants and other state resources, leaving them invisible in official planning processes. Such conditions underscore the importance of framing planning as a practice of justice and recognition, ensuring that those living in places like Polar Park are acknowledged as rights-bearing citizens.

Misrecognition and the Ethics of Visibility

Cities in the Global South typically exhibit an irregular, dense, and small-grain urban morphology in their informal settlements. People from the official city rarely access these neighbourhoods, and their prominence in the urban environment can greatly influence decisions about whether and how they should be renovated or removed. Negative symbolic capital, or stigmatised place identities that may also be connected to ethnicity, is thus present in informal communities. When visible, they appear as a disgrace to the state and the city on the cognitive map. The presence of informal settlements, which are a symptom of poverty and a lack of law and order, embarrasses governments.[33] Residents of Polar Park often complain that the lack of basic services, evictions, and bureaucratic procedures has dehumanised them. These encounters signify a failure to acknowledge informal residents as respectable members of the urban community and a denial of moral visibility. According to this analysis, the main barriers to housing resilience in Polar Park are philosophical and ethical in addition to being technical. They reveal shortcomings in respect, care, justice, and acknowledgement. From this perspective, informality functions both as a lens into the broader deficiencies of post-apartheid urban initiatives and as an opportunity to fundamentally rethink planning.

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[30] Rebone Maputla, *Exploring the Prospects of Informal Settlements Upgrading in Johannesburg: A Critical Review* (University of Johannesburg (South Africa), 2023).

[31] Margot Strauss, "A Historical Exposition of Spatial Injustice and Segregated Urban Settlement in South Africa," *Fundamina* 25, no. 2 (2019), https://doi.org/10.17159/2411-7870/2019/v25n2a6.

[32] Susan Forde, Stefanie Kappler, and Annika Björkdahl, "Peacebuilding, Structural Violence and Spatial Reparations in Post-Colonial South Africa," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 3 (May 27, 2021): 327–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1909297.

[33] Hesam Kamalipour and Kim Dovey, "Mapping the Visibility of Informal Settlements," *Habitat International* 85 (March 2019): 63–75, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2019.01.002.

DISCUSSION

Rethinking Planning Philosophy for the Human Condition

The investigation into Polar Park reveals a significant tension at the core of South African urban planning: the struggle between the intricate, human-centred reality of informal living and formalistic technological techniques. This section makes the case that improving housing resilience in areas such as Polar Park necessitates a philosophical shift in planning principles rather than merely changing laws. Planning needs to be rethought as a moral and ethical activity based on acknowledgement, justice, and concern rather than only as a technical field.

From Control to Care: Reframing Planning Ethics

The dilemma brought about by past planning practice outcomes led to spatial inequities that now exist in practically all South African cities. Even though there are several rules and regulations in place to address historical injustices, both planners and municipal authorities have had difficulty in devising a solution. Planners may genuinely aspire to enhance the informal settlements within their purview as a sincere effort to render cities more hospitable to marginalised populations residing therein; however, they will occasionally face challenging decisions.[34] Thus, an ethic of care that emphasises relationality, responsiveness, and attentiveness must be the direction of the new planning philosophy. By demanding that planners and legislators recognise the existential, social, and emotional stakes of housing for marginalised people, care ethics undermines the dispassionate impartiality of professional planning. This entails viewing housing in Polar Park as a basis for social well-being, identity, and dignity rather than just as infrastructure.

Embracing Plurality: Recognising Multiple Urbanisms

It is imperative that the process of upgrading informal settlements be pluralistic, diverse, and supported by a culture of cooperation. The state, communities, households, NGOs, and the formal and informal private sectors are all brought together by such processes, and each of them needs to be empowered to carry out its responsibilities. The gradual process of establishing trust between the various groups is a crucial aspect of this approach; it is based on greater openness among all parties involved, which helps each group better comprehend the goals and strategies of the others, as well as the development of opportunities for the various partners to behave in predictable and reliable ways.[35] The incapacity of traditional planning to take into account diverse urban conditions is one of its primary shortcomings. Although informal communities like Polar Park do not cleanly fit into modernist development paradigms, they represent alternative urbanisms that are rich in local knowledge and social significance.

Planning as Recognition: Affirming Human Dignity

South Africa currently employs the Upgrading of Informal Settlement Programme (UISP), a four-phase organised strategy, to manage the upgrading process. The goal of this gradual upgrade procedure is "formalisation". According to the UISP, dignity is perceived as being "achieved" at every step of the process, from supplying temporary services to eventually providing a tidy and orderly neighbourhood that settlers presumably welcome. Similar critiques of normative planning ideologies, first raised in post-war planning contexts, are echoed in the notion that a settlement outwardly appears to be a densely clustered "slum"—but which, based on the criteria of those living there, may function effectively—should be transformed into what modern planners see as a neat, orderly and structured neighbourhood in order to achieve dignity for its residents. This reflects the well-organised aesthetic perspective of urban architecture.[36]

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[34] Hayangah, "The Planning Dilemma in Upgrading of Informal Settlements in South African Cities: A Practitioners Perspective on the Inclusivity Paradox."

[35] Cirolia et al., *Upgrading Informal Settlements in South Africa: A Partnership-Based Approach*.

[36] Danielle Hill, "Humanizing Urban Planning: Acknowledging the Emotional and Psychological Dimensions of Upgrading Informal Settlements," *Planning Practice & Research* 40, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2024.2404749.

This revised planning philosophy must also have a strong foundation in upholding human dignity, according to recognition theory. Polar Park inhabitants refer to acknowledgement as being seen, recognised and respected by the organisations that govern their lives. It is about getting housing assistance as a right based on citizenship and humanity, not as charity. Planning that acknowledges informal residents as co-creators of the city fosters social respect and a sense of community. Their efforts and hardships are given legitimacy, changing the narrative from one of reliance to one of empowerment. Therefore, recognition is not merely symbolic; it is a prerequisite for inclusive, resilient housing systems.

Reclaiming the Humanities in Urban Practice

Understanding the process of informal settlement reproduction and how we view urban development more holistically and sensitively should benefit from a more humane and sensitive approach. The lack of creativity and skill among built environment specialists is becoming increasingly evident; consequently, the need to make management and upgrading processes both sustainable and meaningful for settlement residents is also becoming clearer. As a result, it is contended that giving people in informal settlements equal voice and agency is necessary for improving these areas and serving as a deeper reflection of our shared humanity.[37] Polar Park serves as an example of why the humanities must play a major role in 21st-century planning. The question of what kind of cities we are creating has evolved to include who we are building them for, with whom we are building them, and on what moral grounds, as we face global issues like housing instability, urban inequality, and displacement. This section underlines the paper's primary argument: that housing resilience in informal settlements is not merely a technical or logistical matter but a deeply philosophical and ethical one. We must rethink planning as a humanistic process that is adaptable, inclusive, and based on moral responsibility in order to promote unofficial communities like Polar Park.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Comprehensive policy changes

A significant priority for this sector right now is coordinating housing policy with broader goals for urban renewal. It entails a thorough examination of current frameworks with an emphasis on advancing economic inclusiveness, sustainability and spatial justice. Leading this initiative should be the Social Housing Regulatory Authority (SHRA), working with the Department of Human Settlements and the provincial administration. A year should pass at the end of the review process to guarantee prompt implementation. Urban planners and academic specialists should be involved in this project to guarantee that policies are both consistent and flexible enough to meet local demands.

Community Engagement and Participation

Residents in informal settlements should be actively involved in the decision-making process for community interventions by policymakers and urban planners. Residents' priorities may be determined through such engagement, local expertise can be utilised, and ownership of development projects can be fostered through engagement, all of which contribute to more sustainable results.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Establishing strong monitoring and evaluation systems is crucial for determining the impact and efficacy of initiatives aimed at informal settlements. This entails monitoring progress toward important metrics pertaining to housing, livelihoods, health, and community well-being, as well as applying data-driven insights to guide resource allocation and decision-making.

Promote In-Situ Upgrading Over Relocation

In-situ upgrading represents a relatively recent approach to addressing urban informality, emphasising improvement rather than the eradication of informal settlements. This strategy seeks to secure land

[37] Hill, "Humanizing Urban Planning: Acknowledging the Emotional and Psychological Dimensions of Upgrading Informal Settlements."

tenure through the regulation of informal settlements while simultaneously recognising and reinforcing existing interpersonal bonds and collective solidarity. Ultimately, the objective of in situ upgrading is to progressively enhance the quality of life for residents by legalising land tenure and improving infrastructure.

Collaboration between government and NGOs

To provide suitable housing and poverty alleviation aid, such as assisting inhabitants with skill development, government action is required through the Department of Human Settlements, collaborating with non-governmental and community-based organisations. The Department of Human Settlements must interact with the community to pinpoint and identify issues that the residents face to guarantee that the impoverished have access to essential services and a decent standard of living. Therefore, the Department of Human Settlements needs to foster an atmosphere that allows NGOs and CBOs to step in when necessary to address issues of substandard housing and access to essential services. The community should meet with non-governmental organisations to discuss their concerns about the inadequate quality of informal settlements and devise ways to enhance their quality of life. To address community needs, CBOs and NGOs must collaborate with the municipality.

CONCLUSION

Through conceptual review methodology, this paper shows how re-imagining the humanities, integrating notions of care, recognition and spatial justice, can transform the planning process into an ethical and human-centred approach in informal settlements like Polar Park. This paper has maintained that a fundamental rethinking of urban design from an ethical and philosophical perspective is necessary to address housing resilience in informal settlements such as Polar Park, Mthatha. In post-apartheid urban administration, informal housing reflects deeper systemic imbalances and moral blind spots than just a spatial oddity or policy failure, as marginalised urban groups build and maintain lives on the periphery of infrastructure, institutional recognition, and legality. Polar Park exposes their everyday resilience as well as their ongoing fragility. The investigation has shown that housing resilience cannot be attributed solely to physical infrastructure through a conceptual evaluation based on recognition theory, ethics of care, and spatial justice. Human dignity, moral acknowledgement, and the right to belong must all be considered. The study urges a shift in planning philosophy to see informality as a necessary and permanent aspect of urban life in the Global South rather than as a departure from the norm.

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