An Imaginary Elsewhere: Mapping Occupancy in the South African Informal Settlement Dwelling.

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Abstract: The South African shack dweller/informal settler, lives like a nomadic post colonial drifter searching for his sense of place and rootedness, seeking solace and pride in the interiority of his space, creating an internal tableaux of wish fulfillment and desire for a better life; an internal dreaming space. The interior space of the informal settler is in a sense a utopic space: a mental and physical construct and state of mind amidst and in direct contrast to the exterior world of the informal settlement, which exists like a dystopic world of chaos, brutality and violence. This paper aims to explore the concept of occupancy of the interior of the informal dwelling as an "emotional cartography" (Bruno 2002:203) that maps objects and the manner in which they are displayed as signs of migration, temporality, aspiration and as nostalgic markers of home and the notion of hope. Furthermore images will be explored as examples of the manifestation that exists in the representation of the occupancy of the informal settlers dwelling: specifically in the photography of Zwelethu Mthethwa, Craig Fraser and Ronnie Levitan. This paper will demonstrate that occupancy is an ever-expanding network of connections and links from a colonial and Apartheid past that move outward and inward as an oscillation and reflection of the interior as both self and space.
Key Words: Informal dwelling, occupancy, transient, migration, exclusion and dreaming space.

Introduction – Masikeng

These walls,
thin as membranes,
Keep nothing outside.
They are here
To keep our beauty inside,
Away from that
Solitude
Out there

These poignant words of the poet Sandile Dikeni aptly describe the dichotomous and paradoxical nature of occupation and life in the informal settlement. It is a space that is both powerful and fragile and one that expresses two realities: The "outside " as a condition of metaphoric and physical exclusion   and the inside as a state of hope and grace. The interior space of the informal dwelling is in a sense a utopic space: a mental and physical construct and state of mind amidst and in direct contrast to the exterior world of the informal settlement, which exists like a dystopic world of chaos, brutality and violence.

This paper aims to explore the concept of occupancy of the interior of the informal dwelling as an "emotional cartography" that maps objects and the manner in which they are displayed as signs of temporality and migration and as nostalgic markers of home and the notion of home. Occupancy of the dwelling for the informal settler is a private dreaming space of wish-fulfillment and is a manifestation of an ever-expanding network of connections and links that move outward and inward as an oscillation and reflection of the interior as both self and space.

In order to explore these ideas, it is important to firstly, give an insight into the motivation for such a paper. The intention of the paper is not to give evidence of vast empirical data nor is it the result of statistical field work but rather it was initiated by my response to photographic representations of the dwellings of the interiors of informal settlements, specifically in the photography of Craig Fraser, Ronnie Levitan, Zwelethu Mthethwa and my own documentation and experience of informal settlements.

This paper represents in the subject much that is open to controversy, why study the interiors and occupancy of the poor? What draws one to aesthetics of poverty? As Wright so aptly states:

> "The informal has become a popular term in Architectural discourse. Post-structural theorists are drawn to its improvisations; artists and scientists are fascinated by the order that prevails beneath apparent formlessness…" [1]

It is not my intention to create a discourse of "othering" the poor as objects for voyeuristic self-aggrandizement, but rather to see this discussion in a wider context where as Lewis suggests that

> " we are all social subjects and to acknowledge this should be central to our understanding of the conditions of others' existence". [2]

Furthermore, Wright cited in Briiembourg states that:

> "One could moralize, but why not turn instead to the Cuban poet Alejo Carpentier and his belief in" lo real marvilloso"? Often translated as magical realism…" the marvels of reality". [3]

The intention of this paper is to present other possibilities and to unveil and interpret the representations of the informal dwelling in a more positive light and to reveal the pockets of *marvelloso* that do exist amidst the hardship and reality of urban informal settlements. This is especially relevant within the African context, where the perception of Africa is seen "as a metaphor par excellence for physical ugliness and moral decay."   This paper will examine the representations of dwellings primarily in the informal settlements in Cape Town.

The Lay of the Land: Occupancy in Context

In order to explore the internal domain of occupation of the informal dwelling itself, I think it is important to firstly clarify and contextualize the concept of occupation from a wider South African political and colonial perspective as it has a direct influence on the manner in which the informal settler, occupies, inhabits and conceives of his interior that he calls home.

The term occupation is an emotionally charged word that is like a scar on the land, a wound whose origins is as old as its colonial past. Beginning with voyages of discovery by the Portuguese in 1488, and followed by the Dutch and the British occupations. All claimed and contested land and its occupancy. More importantly the nature of occupancy is marked by certain fundamental concepts: exclusion, migration and transience.

Exclusion and migration was the legacy bequeathed by the separatist policy of Apartheid to the new democracy, with urban maps clearly demarcated by race and racial exclusion. When the Nationalist party came to power in 1948, black "home –lands" were created as reserves

and a pass was required for black people to enter the wealthy economic enclave of white South Africa. As the Apartheid regime crumbled in the 1980s, so more and more people flocked to the margins of the cities to find work and to build a tenuous future for themselves amidst the enormous influx of human traffic and inadequate provision of sanitation, electricity and water. This forced migration formed an illegal labyrinth of homes constructed from the detritus of the urban environment. Nadine Gordimers novel *The Burghers daughter* (1979) cited in Smith gives an insightful description of the informal settlement environment:

> *"These restless broken streets where definitions fail -…the litter of twice discarded possessions, first thrown out by the white man and then picked over by the black- is this conglomerate urban or rural? No electricity in the houses, a telephone an almost impossible luxury: is this a suburb or a strange kind of junkyard of the whole white city, where categories and functions lose their ordination and logic…*
>
> *.., a place: a position whose contradictions those who impose them don't see, and from which will come a resolution they haven't provided for."* [4]

Prophetically, today thirty years later the situation in many of the informal settlements remains unchanged. It is estimated that informal settlements around cities house" 7 million or a quarter of the African population " in South Africa*.* The complexity of the informal settlers existence is further exacerbated by migration from rural to urban areas. Smith states that many households in the informal settlements have urban-rural linkages whereby extended family from rural areas reside and or visit   the urban dwelling. It is estimated that 52% of households in informal settlements had rural homes. Thus the informal dweller can have both a rural and urban home.

Mkhukhu - Topia

This cursory overview of the external South African political topography exposes and raises complex issues as to the nature of the interior of the informal dwelling. Mikhail Bakhtin refers to "chronotypes" as "spatiotemporal structures where stories take place" It is useful to explore specific concepts of occupation that emerge within the interiors of the informal dwelling as a series of chronotypes or themes of spatiotemporal narratives of occupation. This gives a meaning structure to an understanding of occupation within this context. Therefore occupation of the interiors of the informal settlement dwelling will be explored from three narrative themes: Firstly the examination of imagination, emotion and hope as a context and manifestation of occupation as well as the notion of home. Secondly, the migratory concept of occupation will be discussed both in the physical and metaphoric sense. Furthermore the interior and its objects will be examined as an expression of transience and temporality, assemblage and faith. Finally the aspect of exclusion as an element of occupation will be explored as it too manifests within the interiors of the informal settlement dwelling.

However before an exploration of these themes, it is important to clarify the notion of the object and its symbolic representation within the interior space. Lefebvre refers to space as "directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'…"It is my contention that the informal settler occupies their space through multifaceted and complex associations of emotion, image and symbol, that manifest as a Utopic world view. Baudrillard makes several important insights into the relationship between human beings and objects. He states:

> *"…the primary function of furniture and objects …is to personify human relationships, to fill the space that they share between them and , to be inhabited by a soul. The real*

> *dimension they occupy is captive to the moral dimension, which it is their job to signify…. Human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion, in which the objects take on a certain destiny, an emotional value…"* [5]

Thus objects transcend their mundane functionality and a dynamic new spatial "presence" is created through the emotional investment that the object embodies. Hence the nature and position of these displayed objects reflect as Stewart cited in Brunosuggests: "the arrested life of the displayed collection finds unity in memory and narratives"

Cartographic Narrative of Emotion

Occupancy of the informal dwelling is a mapping of an internal Utopic emotional landscape. The dwelling becomes more than just a physical construct, but a domain where lived experience and feelings are enacted. Bruno refers to the house, as an "emotional-architectural container" .The house thus becomes the emotional repository of narratives borne out of lived experience. Baudrillard states:

> *"What gives the houses of our childhood such depth and resonance …is clearly this complex structure of interiority, and the objects within it serve for us as boundary markers of the symbolic configuration known as home."* [6]

The internal space of the home becomes a safe place to dream, where external realities can be contested without threat and where the power of the dream can be nurtured. Bachelard stated "That if I was asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say the house shelters day dreaming, the house protects the dreamer and the house allows one to dream in peace." The conscious act of dreaming becomes as a mode or vehicle for imagination, transcendence and hope. Freud referred to dreaming as an act of wish fulfillment." Dreams are physical acts of as much significance as any others: their motive force is …a wish seeking fulfillment." Hope is the dreaming space that bridges internal imaginings into potential realities and is defined as:" the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals" It is the mark of human strength in the face of adversity. Therefore hope enables one to imagine and create a better reality. Snyder compares hope to a rainbow; an apt analogy if one considers South Africa to be the so-called " Rainbow Nation". He states:

> *"A rainbow is a prism that sends shards of multicolored light in various directions. It lifts our spirits and makes us think of what is possible. Hope is the same- a personal rainbow of the mind."* [7]

 A photograph (fig 1) depicts a bedroom of a home in one of the informal housing settlements in Cape Town and represents a wishing and dreaming space. The interior appears to reflect two layers of perception. One depicts the everyday and mundane function of the space as a sleeping and washing space, but on another level the room is an idealization of a perfect haven, where love, hope and aspirations can flourish. A bed is the focal point in the room and becomes a sacred-sexual setting adorned like an imaginary body, with brightly coloured floral covers. Several heart shaped cushions and soft toys are heaped on the bed and become the symbols of childhood, comfort and innocence. Other symbols of love are evident in the artificial red rose, photographs of loved ones and sentimental paraphernalia such as wrapping decorations and cards of endearment. It is this innocent romanticism and sentimentality that denies the abject and celebrates joy. Konate reiterates this sense of joy when referring to the interiors of informal dwellings, he states: "…the symphony of colours and vivid tones … proclaim the inhabitants need for joy" The colorful space becomes an almost celebratory

theatrical tableau of desire. It is through objects that the resident can mediate this yearning for a better life and in a wider sense to a nostalgic connection to home. Coombes cites Stewart stating that the "nostalgic's utopia is prelapsarian, a genesis where lived and mediated experience are one…" [8]

Figure 1 Fraser C. Colour photograph (2002) Bedroom, Chic Shack

Other objects in the room such as the photographs are connections to memory. A photograph could be a representation of absent others and usually reminds a person of his or her past experiences that could be a manifestation of love and friendship. In this room photographs are placed directly above or very near the bed. This proximity to the bed like the cushions and soft toys is a symbolic indicator of comfort and consolation. The red rose in its artificiality and sentimentality heightens the perception of a simulated reality, a simulacra of an idealized world, filled with emotional attachment to family and future. Baudrillard comments:

> *"In their anthropomorphism the objects that furnish [the home] become household gods, spatial incarnations of the emotional bonds and permanence of the family group." [9]*

In the light of the reality of rural and urban migration, the photograph becomes the mediated object that emotionally links the subject to family and others and hence to the concept of home.

Migratory Oscillations

An ink drawing by the artist Louise Bourgeois depicting a nude woman carrying her home on her head entitled "Femme-Maison" (1947) is one that resonates with my perception of the informal dwelling and its occupant. It depicts a woman carrying a house over her head, in fact her face is obscured and her head and torso becomes the house. She is subsumed by the house, the occupant and the house are one, not static, but able to move, her legs the tool for mobility. This image is analogous with the migratory life of the informal settler.

The occupant within his or her own domestic space and home is in a continual psychological and physical oscillating migration between the territories of poverty of the heterotopic informal settlement space and dwelling, the rural home and the wider terrain of the economic wealth of the city that beckons like a cruel illusion in the distance of the urban scenery.

This geographical continuum of migration, back and forth as personal and economic realities dictate results in as Trinh.T.Minh-ha refers to [being] "simultaneously rooted and rootless". This is precisely the paradox of occupancy for the informal settler; to be at once both fixed and unfixed to place and space. Thus is the occupancy of the informal settler in a continual state of becoming, a paradoxical transience. Ironically some residents have been known to live in informal settlements for many years in the hope of finding a better life for themselves, living in limbo and waiting for a more permanent abode through the security of land tenure by being on the list for a government house. Lozanovska further reiterates these sentiments and suggests" migrants have the sense that they are fragmented or not fixed" Evidence of this paradoxical transience is also found in the luggage of migrants in the interiors of their homes (fig 2). All manner of baggage and suitcases are neatly stacked against fragile corrugated walls. Rogoff cites Ayden, who suggests that luggage is a metaphor for the 'sadness at leaving'. For the South African migrant this "sadness at leaving" is also at the same time one of excitement and promise of new beginnings. Not unlike as Rogoff proposes that in " …the material realities of the daily wretchedness of migration and exile there exists a certain process- of movement, of memory, of learning new things, of repressing old knowledge, of forbidden nostalgias and of material exchanges and cultural circulations…" [10]Luggage thus becomes the trope for that suspension of becoming.

Figure 2 (left) Kopping, J. Colour Photograph (2008) *Luggage*
Figure 2 (right) Kopping, J.Colour Photograph (2008), *View of Informal settlement; Klip Town, Soweto.*

Furthermore the South African informal settlement context is marked by the bricolage of disjointed and seemingly fragmented parts that form a tapestry of assemblage of self and space within the periphery of urban marginalization and displacement. The city is the mimetic utopia that is played out in the interior space. The lure of the city to the rural dweller is the promise of a better life, even the name "city of Gold*"- Egoli*, for South Africa's largest city, Johannesburg alludes to a path of fortune. Considering the statistics for rural poverty this enticement to the city's promise is undeniable. A photomontage by the Rodney Place, entitled *Jo'burg. An African Metropolis* presents as an allegory of the city .The skyline of Johannesburg is represented as brightly coloured consumer goods and packaging, their labels

and brands decorating the building forms. Its significance is that it represents Johannesburg as a "friche waiting to happen" A space that is filled with potential and promise and where its true identity is still in the making. Where spaces can be re-invested with new possibilities freed from their previous symbolic ideological meanings. It is possibly this "friche" spirit as depicted in this postcard that represents the enticement and the potential promise of the city as a Utopian illusion or fantasy created by the media as a Mecca of materialism that is so alluring to the migrant in his/her quest for a better life. In spite of the harsh reality of urban poverty, the informal settler makes the attempt to fulfill that illusion of an anticipatory promise and potential in the interior spaces of their homes through this bricollage of materiality. Lozanovska refers to the migrant as a"bricoleur, collecting …fragmented identities" The interior space becomes a metaphoric collation of the self and the city through the physical assemblage of colour, textures, pattern and materials. The (fig 3) interiors are comprised of over runs of printed labels, patchwork bedcovers, patterned fabrics, brightly painted furniture, magazine posters and news papered ceilings. This visual sensorial overload is not just the result of survival and necessity, but becomes a mirror and reflection of the city. The wallpaper, patterns of fabric and vibrant colour reflect a sense of abundance and excess. The interior represents a *friche* space full of dreams and possibility against the realities of the informal settlement itself as a dystopic site.
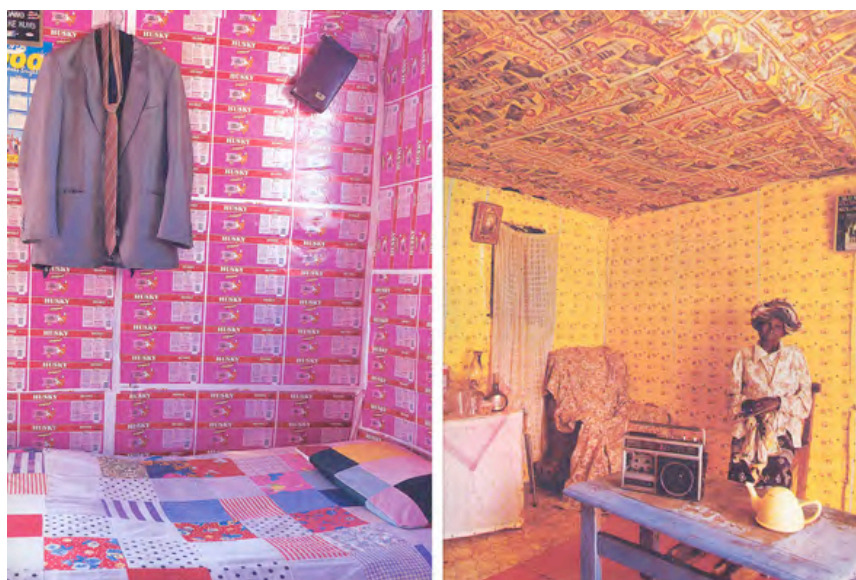

Figure 3 (left) Fraser, C. Colour photograph (2002) *Bedroom*, Chic Shack
Figure 3 (right) Levitan, R. Colour photograph (1989), *Living room*. ADA

Lefebvre defines Utopia as a space "occupied by the symbolic and the imaginary ". Interior walls become the panoramas of dreams that extend beyond the fragile boundaries of the walls of the home. A detailed image (fig 4) of an interior wall of a dwelling reveals the symbolic connection of objects to migration and dreaming. This "wallscape" depicts several objects that allude to this; a bag, and traveling suit cover, a framed motto, a photograph of a loved one, a copper curio relief, a framed textile tablemat of the Eiffel tower, a reproduction of Gainsborough's Blue Boy and a speaker are all laid out in a sequential narrative of journey to an imaginary elsewhere. These objects form an itinerary to an imaginary destination, where the curio copper relief of an African warrior beating a drum is mounted next to the Blue Boy and the Eiffel tower picture which are aligned in a strange post colonial juxtaposition that alludes to another place not on a map, but a geographical imagination, an imaginary universe. The informal settler creates and moulds the interior space as a projection of the aspirations of

the city, the external, and the outside, the porosity of which ironically penetrates the interior through these markers of imaginary travel. Even the speaker alludes to invisible oscillations, rhythms and connections to an external reality. Bruno citing Quintillion states that we "require therefore places real or imaginary, and images or simulacra which we must, of course, invent for ourselves…as Cicero says,' we use places as wax'" [11]

Figure 4 Fraser, C. Colour photograph (2002) *Wallscape*

The interior space becomes a kind of curiosity cabinet reminiscent of optical boxes of the 1800's in Europe used as an imaginative vehicle for travel. The informal settler literally lives in a box. These panoramic wallscapes become an antidote to the confines of the actual room and allow the occupant to mentally escape the claustrophobia of the architectural space and to travel to a utopic place. A photograph by the artist Zwelethu Mthetwa depicts a man reclining on a bed. His gaze is directed at the viewer in an expression of quiet self-containment. The background of the room features large posters that are repeated as a serial pattern on the walls of the dwelling. These posters depict bottles of alcohol that form a vertical pattern and break the space into window forms. This formal arrangement reinforces the concept of the window that is created artificially, through the repeated forms of the bottle as symbol once again of escaping the interiority of the space. The window becomes the crevice to an external utopia.

Peripheral Exclusion and the Abject
The informal settlement is usually situated on the margins of the city. Subiros has commented that the " townships are the servant quarters, the stables, the rubbish tip of the lord's mansions" , and as has already been explained is a dystopic site. Associated with this dystopia is the concept of the abject. Sibley cited in Miles refers to the revulsion that is embedded in the construction of social space, which he terms" geographies of defilement". In medieval European cartographic mythology, the grotesque and deformed were banished to the edges of the map, thus creating a boundary between the ordered, whole and the defiled. Those not deemed whole or perfect were perceived as "other**".** Sibley states, "those threatening people beyond the boundary represent the features of human existence from which the civilized have distanced themselves-close contact with nature, dirt excrement, overt sexuality".[12] Thus the site of the informal settlement can be perceived as a site of defilement, diseased, dangerous and unstable. In nineteenth century urban planning the bourgeoisie were separated from the working class, who were deemed as unclean and odorous. Thus within the South African context, the concept of defilement and exclusion are connected to the site of the informal settlement as a space of exclusion and abjection as a result of the political and colonial mapping of occupation. The interesting point of occupation in relation to this aspect of defilement is the manner in which the interior space is occupied is in exact contrast to the external space.

It has already been discussed that the use of print run-offs are a reflection of the utopic vision of the city and as a bricollage, but the use of the print run-of is also used symbolically to represent and articulate a function or a particular message. For example "kitchen" areas within the interior of the informal dwelling have food and cleaning product label print runoffs as wallpaper and insulation material to reflect the functionality of the purpose of the space either as an eating or washing space. Moreover, billboards and advertising of washing brands are a common sight in the townships and informal settlements, especially evident at the many taxi ranks and stations where the informal settler makes their way through the city. The association of the product is always one that reflects personal hygiene, cleanliness and reflects secure black middle class homes, where the product promises an idealization of stability and good family values. The choice of these print –run offs as wallpaper become in a sense wishing pictures or messages that reflect an associated lifestyle. Thus the abject as found in the external environment is negated.

The sense of cleanliness is also one that is reflected in the neatness and ordered stacking and placement of furniture and objects. It has been my experience when visiting the homes of informal dwellings that there is always a sense of neatness and pride in the home and this is reiterated in a spiritual and religious sense as well. The use of framed religious mottos, become affirmations and wisdoms that enable the occupant to find meaning in the hardships of life. One particular motto (fig 5) reads;" Ngeba Ndiyazama Kodwa Umlingi Akaphezi" Translated this means, "I can try even though the struggles and woes do not end". Another motto commonly found is "Hlala unathi nkosi usisikelele", which means "Thanks be to God who is with us". These wisdoms too become talismans for the occupant as a means of protection from the abject.

Figure 5 Fraser, C. Colour photograph (2002) *Framed motto*

Conclusion

The occupation of the informal settlement interior is a complex and multifaceted area of research and one that goes far beyond the parameters of this paper. Furthermore in the African context the cartographic terrain of the informal settlement is like a large ever-expanding urban cloth that envelopes the landscape patched like a quilt from the rusted corrugated iron and the plastic throwaways. It calls to mind the famous lines of a poem by W B Yeats:

But I being poor have only my dreams:
I have spread my dreams under your feet:
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams. [13]

Much work is needed in exploring these informal settlement sites, not only from an empirical vantage point, but to reveal the humanity that exists in such spaces, and as designers the fruits of our dreams can become reality for others.

Endnotes

[1] Brillembourg,A. (2005) Informal city. p 82

[2] Lewis,D. (1992) The politics of feminism in south Africa. p 21.

[3] Brillembourg,A.(2005) Informal city p 82

[4] Smith, D, (1992) The Apartheid city and beyond. p1

[5] Buadrillard, J (1996) The system of objects p14

[6] Baudrillard, J (2005) The system of objects p 14

[7] Snyder,C.R (2002) "Hope theory" p 269

[8] Coombes,A. (2003) History after apartheid .p 124

[9] Baudrillard, J (2005) The system of objects. p 14

[10] Rogoff,I (2000) Terra infirma:geography's visual culture p 97

[11] Bruno, G (2002) The atlas of emotions p 417.

[12] Miles,M (2003) cultures and settlements p169

[13] http://theotherpages.org/poems/yeats01.html

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