

## International focus: rent and regeneration in old Johannesburg

*As South Africa's largest city struggles to house its growing population, a new apartheid is opening up in the social sector*

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Over the course of two decades, the once middle-class areas of Hillbrow and Yeoville in central Johannesburg have become synonymous with crime, drugs and prostitution. White flight to the suburbs and overseas appears irreversible and many architectural highlights, such as art-deco and 70s tower blocks, are in a shocking state of repair – yet the dire need in South Africa means most of these substandard homes remain in use.

Downtown buildings have been hijacked by organised gangs, offering reduced rents to [tenants](#) and vigilante-style crackdowns on crack dealers and prostitutes. These gangs collect rent money directly from tenants and withhold it from absentee landlords, gradually wresting control over the properties on the premise of redevelopment.

Authorities have seemed powerless to intervene in these civil matters, and there has been a lack of clarity as to ownership of these buildings. The housing system made it easy for people to fraudulently register the title, making legal enforcement difficult.

But the [Johannesburg Social Housing Company](#) (Joshco) is one of a handful of organisations aiming to turn around areas like Hillbrow. "We are part of the inner-city regeneration charter, providing decent affordable housing in the inner-city, giving people a choice," says executive assistant Lindy-Anne Steeneveld. She is not daunted by the scale of the task: "It's very possible," she says.

### **The Joshco project**

Joshco's mandate is to provide subsidised housing for working people earning between £300-600 a month. Free council homes are available to people on lower wages. The problem is a familiar tale of sluggish delivery and long waiting lists. "We always have more people [waiting] than what we can cater for," explains Steeneveld. "Preference is given to families."

Joshco has delivered more than 7,000 units since 2004, focusing on renovating illegally occupied buildings, both squatted and hijacked premises, and developing greenfield sites.

When buildings are refurbished and taken over by Joshco, tenants are moved into temporary dormitory-style accommodation then given the option of moving back into their old properties once completed. Joshco tries to gain the trust of tenants by transforming their squalid living conditions into safe homes for families.

"There's a zero tolerance of crime in our buildings, there's a high level of safety, and that's how we've turned these buildings around," says Steeneveld. Tenants receive several warnings for antisocial behaviour. The threat of eviction is a last resort. "A lot of education goes into it," he adds. Joshco also runs a tenancy training programme advising new tenants of their rights and obligations.

## **A hostile climate**

A formerly hijacked property renovated by Joshco, La Rosabel in Hillbrow, sits across the road from a brothel. From the illegally occupied building next door, Vannin Court, a stream of sewage runs down the middle of the road. Piles of rubbish rot in the adjacent alleyway.

Individual rooms in the La Rosabel building are small, with communal cooking and washing facilities. Joshco's tenants are generally self-employed. "Some are street hawkers, night walkers, some of them are informal traders, and yet they still can meet the rental payments and they now have that sense of pride in their new surroundings," Steeneveld says.

Joshco is in the process of taking control of the neighbouring building through a combination of consultation with tenants and legal moves to secure control over the property. All existing Vannin Court tenants will be able to apply to live in the building once again once it is refurbished. Steeneveld says that most people want to remain in the communities where they have put down roots.

## **Migration**

In South Africa, only nationals qualify for social housing. Refugees and economic migrants from elsewhere in Africa must rely on charity. Across town Paul Verryn, minister of the Central Methodist Mission, has transformed his church into a homeless hostel, initially for Zimbabweans and other people who fall between the gaps in provision.

Verryn believes the spirit of the constitution should not allow for discrimination against foreigners. "You've either got to adhere to what your constitution says, or you've got to reintroduce a prejudicial system. And at the present moment the system is prejudicial. So the system of apartheid is not white and black, it's now foreigner and national."

Every night up to 800 people sleep in the church. "Everywhere you've walked is somebody's bed at night," says Verryn. He encourages people to leave the building during the day to work and get skills. "It's a very old tradition of the church to be a place of safety and protection."

More recently there has been an influx of people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where violence has plagued the run-up to the elections. "It's a little bit like a barometer, I often can tell you what is cooking in the rest of this continent by what comes through my door," observes Verryn.

Having opened the doors, "you are going to get every conceivable problem that you can imagine. People don't always respect the building, and so it gets damaged. Last Monday we had a murder," Verryn explains. A deaf and mute man had been kicked to death. It was the fourth murder in his church, all of which have been alcohol related.

Verryn's work also involves championing the rights of evicted tenants across the city. In one memorable case, a group of residents were thrown out by the fire brigade due to apparent breaches of fire safety. Verryn called a firm of human rights lawyers and by nightfall all the tenants were back in their building.

"What tends to happen is that your landlords are also wily, so they get into the buildings, divide the committees and the communities, and then lawyers are very loath to continue their representation, because who do they listen to? So it's the old policy of divide and rule."