

City of Stress

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An extract from a talk given by Mrs Henderson to the Albany Black Sash

THE whole world is becoming increasingly urbanised — the movement from the country to the big city begun during the Industrial Revolution is gaining momentum today, especially in the developing and Third World countries. Most cities are not evolving in a slow orderly process — they are coping with great migrations coupled with population explosion.

In Soweto 700 000 registered tenants and, at a guess, 300 000 illegal tenants are housed in 96 000 houses spread over 34 sq miles. Average occupancy is 10 per house. Average density is 30 000 per sq mile.

The houses vary a little in size but not in shape. They range from two to five rooms. They are dull and monotonous little boxes and stretch out on a flat barren landscape and look grey from a distance. Tenants have no choice of house or neighbourhood.

No spirit of community develops as communities are not natural. There are people of different cultural backgrounds, different standards of living, different educational levels, interests and aspirations. As a result tensions often run high.

First new occupants of brand new houses receive them unplastered — four to five room houses have front and back doors, but others only one door leading to the outside, usually through the kitchen.

These are the only doors that can be closed. The other openings have door frames but no doors and the occupants are expected to provide the doors themselves. The five-roomed houses are the only ones with an inside toilet. These also have space for a bath to be fitted.

No houses have ceilings and the rooms are 9x12 or 9x9. Sitting, moving and sleeping space is often a nightmare. People sleep everywhere — under kitchen tables, on top of wardrobes, etc.

If an occupant wishes to lead a civilised life he has to add, at his own expense, plaster for the walls, floorboards, doors, ceilings, stove, bath, handbasin, hot water system, electricity. The house itself is nothing more than an empty shell.

Most houses have coal stoves and paraffin lamps. A pall of smoke hangs constantly over the area, the streets are dusty, rutted and dangerous, litter is everywhere and the smell of poverty is ubiquitous, caused by rotting garbage and the bucket system in some areas.

Clashes between hostel dwellers and Soweto residents last year caught most people by surprise, but the reasons for the hostility are explicable: By and large the hostels are little pieces of rural South Africa transplanted into the city — predominantly contract workers from various homelands and mostly semi-literate or illiterate. They share neither the political aspirations nor the social life of the urban dweller who looks down on hostel dweller (izicasa, a Zulu work akin to country bumpkin).

They are unaware of the real issues of township life. With no children at township schools many are unaware of the unrest in the schools. Their lives centre on their jobs and keeping their jobs, so they met the stay-at-home campaign with resistance.

There are 10 single-sex hostels in Soweto, accommodating 40 000 inmates. Each hostel accommodates between 4 000 and 10 000 people.

They are dull, dreary places providing only the barest basics — bed, bare cement, locker, overhead light, stove. Sixty per cent live four to a room, 1 per cent six to a room and 20 per cent eight to a room. Facilities consist of kitchen, common room, beerhall, five baths and three showers per 100 people, one lavatory per 17 people.

The rent is from R3 to R5 a month.

By building these places the Government condoned the migratory system, favoured hostel accommodation over house accommodation, encouraged the social evils pertaining to single sex accommodation for thousands of married adults in dormitories. They are designed to produce sociological and psychological symptoms of emotional and physical insecurity, hostility and antisocial behaviour, depersonalisation and frustration, lack of identity and homosexuality — and all leading inevitably to violence.

Overcrowding is the most serious aspect of life in the Black urban areas. People live in crowded trains, in the schools the classrooms are full to overflowing, in the cities and on the stations, at the footballstadia, in the stores, on the buses — they are constantly in a crowd.

What effect does overcrowding have on people? We do not know exactly, but zoologists and behavioural psychologists are suggesting we learn a lesson from the humble Norwegian lemming. These little creatures breed at a prodigious rate.

Every few years millions of them set off in a suicidal rush across the plains of Scandinavia into the sea.

Zoologists believe that this is due to overcrowding brought on by over-reproduction. In their research, psychologists have shown that the most marked result of stress caused by overcrowding amongst animals is the increased growth and activity of their adrenal glands which regulate the metabolism of the body.

Where stress is sustained over long periods it results in physical weakening, such symptoms as extreme rage and violence or extreme passivity or docility, sexual aberrations and a collapse of what we call "normal group behaviour".

This could explain the social disintegration of so many Black communities, also the enormously high rates of crime.

In Soweto there are nine police stations, 1 000 African policemen, 150 White policemen.

Fourteen months before the riots The Star put Soweto under the microscope in its series entitled "The Shadow City".

It examined the festering wounds of social disintegration and deprivation and warned of a developing "witches brew of racial hatred". Leaving the politics of the situation aside, a scientific survey was undertaken to determine the social disabilities of Sowetonians and what they themselves saw as their most urgent need.

The following priorities emerged, all of them relating to quality of life.

- The people of Soweto have a unanimous desire to own their own houses.
- They want more houses and better quality ones.
- More schools and creches — one million toddlers have 38 creches. Classes in schools are 50-70 in size and many children cannot get into school.
- More street lighting to penetrate the shadows where tsotsis lurk; more homes with electricity.
- University. They reject homeland universities as residential life is costly.

- Free choice of where to live instead of arbitrarily being allocated housing on an ethnic basis.

- Better roads and pavements, transport, shopping and sporting facilities — there still are no supermarkets in Soweto and so residents have to shop in central Johannesburg.

- More cinemas. There are still only two cinemas plus a hall used as a cinema.

Other major grouses were insufficient police protection against thugs, the shortage of restaurants and hotels, the need for bathrooms in the houses.

It is obvious from this survey that the growth and encouragement of a stable middle class with stable home ownership was the surest way to reduce tension. But nothing was done and the toll has been tragic.

There have been two positive responses to date:

The language issue was settled and the 30-year lease on home ownership was dropped.

On August 19, 1976, the Government dropped the time limit on the lease granted under the *Urban Home Ownership Scheme* — a move regarded by the Blacks as significant recognition of their permanence in the urban areas.

Africans will now be able to buy or build homes in urban townships on "indefinite" period leases. Also homeland citizenship is no longer necessary as a prerequisite to buying a home.

Two schemes are available for people who want to build their own homes and for people who want to buy their existing homes.

Those urban dwellers who work for affluent or *enlightened employers will benefit.*

Several large companies have already indicated they will help their employees to build or buy their homes.

The urban dweller has proved conclusively to be the achilles heel of the grand plan of separate development. The Black Sash and opposition parties have consistently warned the Government who, in their wisdom, have ignored all the danger signals.

IT is with deep regret that we record the death of two aged members of our local branch of the Black Sash in East London, namely MISS BRUTON and MISS FALES.

They were lifelong friends, passing to rest within a month of each other, sharing the same convictions in matters of justice and truth as revealed to them.

Their lives devoted to the Sunday School movement, they gave time and all they could spare specially to the children of the poor in our community.

In seeking a tribute to their long life of service to others in the simple definition "fond faithful". Surely in these times when injustice and inhumanity are rife, this is not to have lived in vain.

Miss McFarlane