

Housing for control

There are thousands of people in South Africa for whom housing is a serious problem. Either they do not have a house at all, or they live in cramped conditions, or they fear that their house will be bulldozed, or they have to live away from their families. As everywhere else, this is a central issue in Alexandra. The threat of demolishing houses leads to despair: the promise to build houses leads to excitement. Many times in the past Alexandra has been threatened with destruction and then reprieved. Now, at this stage of its history, it is very hard to see clearly what is going on. What is the status of the township, and what will happen in regard to housing?

For three years the Liaison Committee has presented itself as the representative of the people of Alexandra: consequently the confusion surrounding such things as housing has meant also that there has been confusion about the Liaison Committee itself. Have these men 'saved' Alexandra? Are they to blame for certain injustices, such as the removal of free-hold rights, and the persistent shortage of houses? Whose side are they on?

Such questions, about housing and about leadership or representation, cannot be answered simply by looking at current events, or by taking anyones promises. Events and promises change from day to day. They cannot be trusted. What we need to do is try to understand the main forces that lie behind events. We must look at the background and at the history of townships and of housing policy. We must also recognise that Alexandra is not isolated or special. It is part of the same repressive system as all other black townships in South Africa.

HISTORY

Alexandra was not overcrowded in its early days. Only 7 000 people lived here in 1930 and there was a lot of open space. It is true there were health problems but they were under control. 5 years later there were 20 000 people; and by 1940 there were 40 000. The stands were now

crammed with buildings, shacks, barracks, zinks. Health conditions were terrible. In 1947 Alexandra was 'the most densely populated square mile in Africa.' (The Star 7.3.47)

What caused this crowding and these bad social conditions?

SEGREGATION

The Urban Areas Act of 1922 provides for segregation between black and white residential areas. Johannesburg was declared 'white' in 1933, which meant that every black person living then in Johannesburg became suddenly 'illegal'.

The city council began to house these people in locations, or to boot them out altogether. Many people preferred to move to the free-hold townships of Sophiatown or Alexandra. Only later they filled up the municipal locations, like Orlando. The manager of 'native' affairs in Johannesburg, G. Ballenden, commented in 1936 "500 people had left slum areas that I was cleaning of Natives in Johannesburg, and had gone to Alexandra. . . . The effect at Alexandra has been very recent, when we got into the central area of Johannesburg where we forced out 4 000 Natives in the last 3 or 4 years."

At the same time that this was going on, there was also a massive influx of people from farms and from the reserves, moving into the cities.

Two questions must be asked: Why were so many Africans entering the urban areas; and why were they made to live in separate locations?

INFLUX

The answer to the first question is that people go where they can earn a living. At this time people were being forced off farms, and they were leaving the reserves because there was not enough food produced there. Meanwhile industry was developing rapidly, from the early 1930's, and it was to these industries that people came to look for work and wages. Their labour was welcomed by industry and by

business people in towns. After all, production does not take place unless there are workers. It is workers who produce value.

CONTROL

The second question, about separate areas, is more difficult to answer. It seems that the South African state (the various governments) realised quite a long time ago that a large mass of workers was needed for the mines and for industry and commerce, and that these workers had to be controlled. Urban Areas policy is one link in the chain of that control. It is a policy that serves several purposes. Firstly, locations can be controlled by municipal police, SAP, and the army.

LOW WAGES - HIGH PROFITS

Secondly, costs of labour are kept down by providing low-cost housing, low-cost sewage removal, low-cost roads, low-cost water provision (stand taps), low-cost education, sport and medical facilities. These minimal living conditions make it possible for workers to live on very low wages. Black townships have developed as a method of controlling workers, and keeping their wages low. The bosses make super high profits, because wages are low. It is to their advantage that workers are controlled and that they live in poverty.

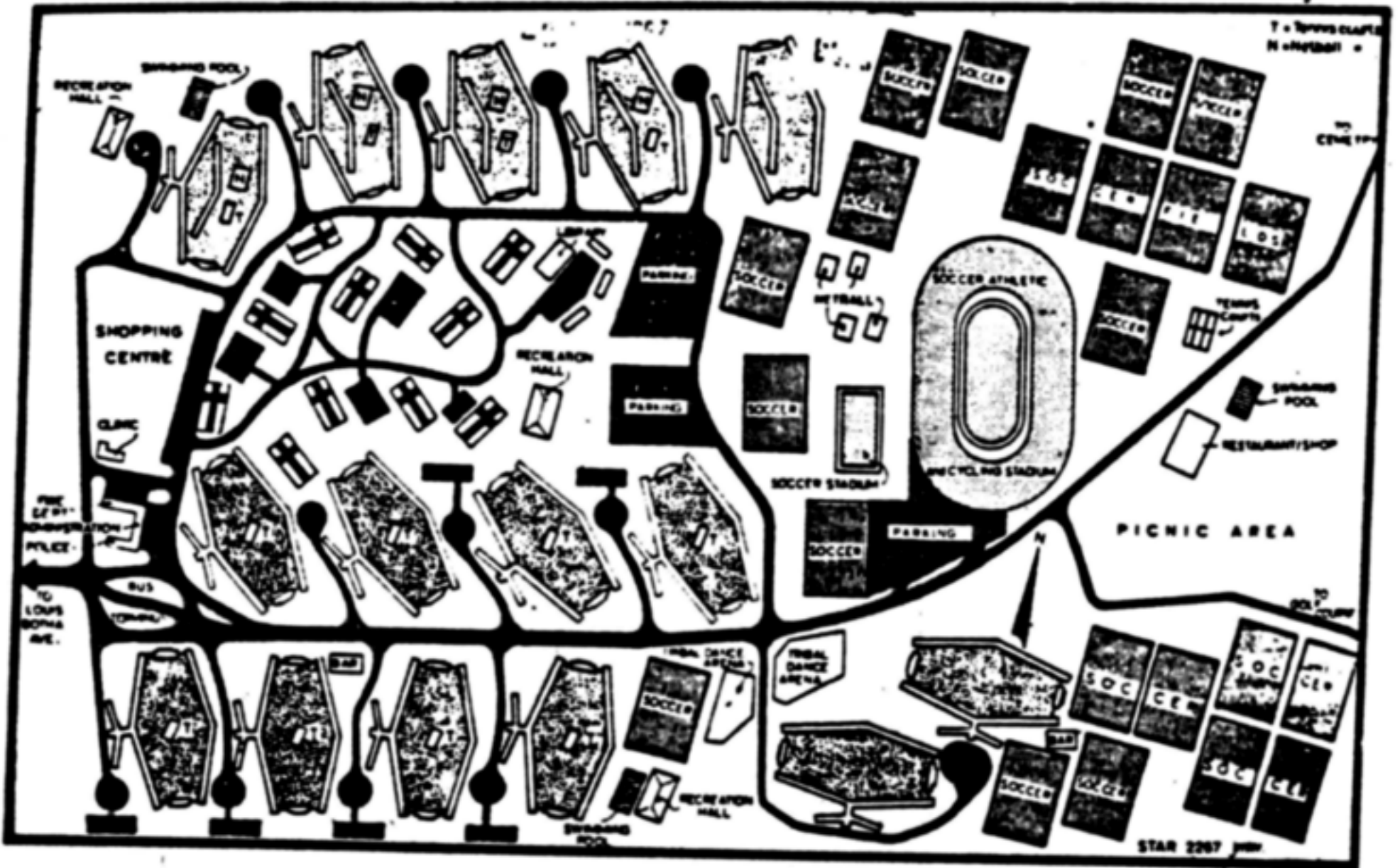
A HOUSING PROBLEM

The housing shortage is a problem for the workers, but it is not necessarily a problem for the bosses. To them it is a solution - a solution to the problem of making high profits.

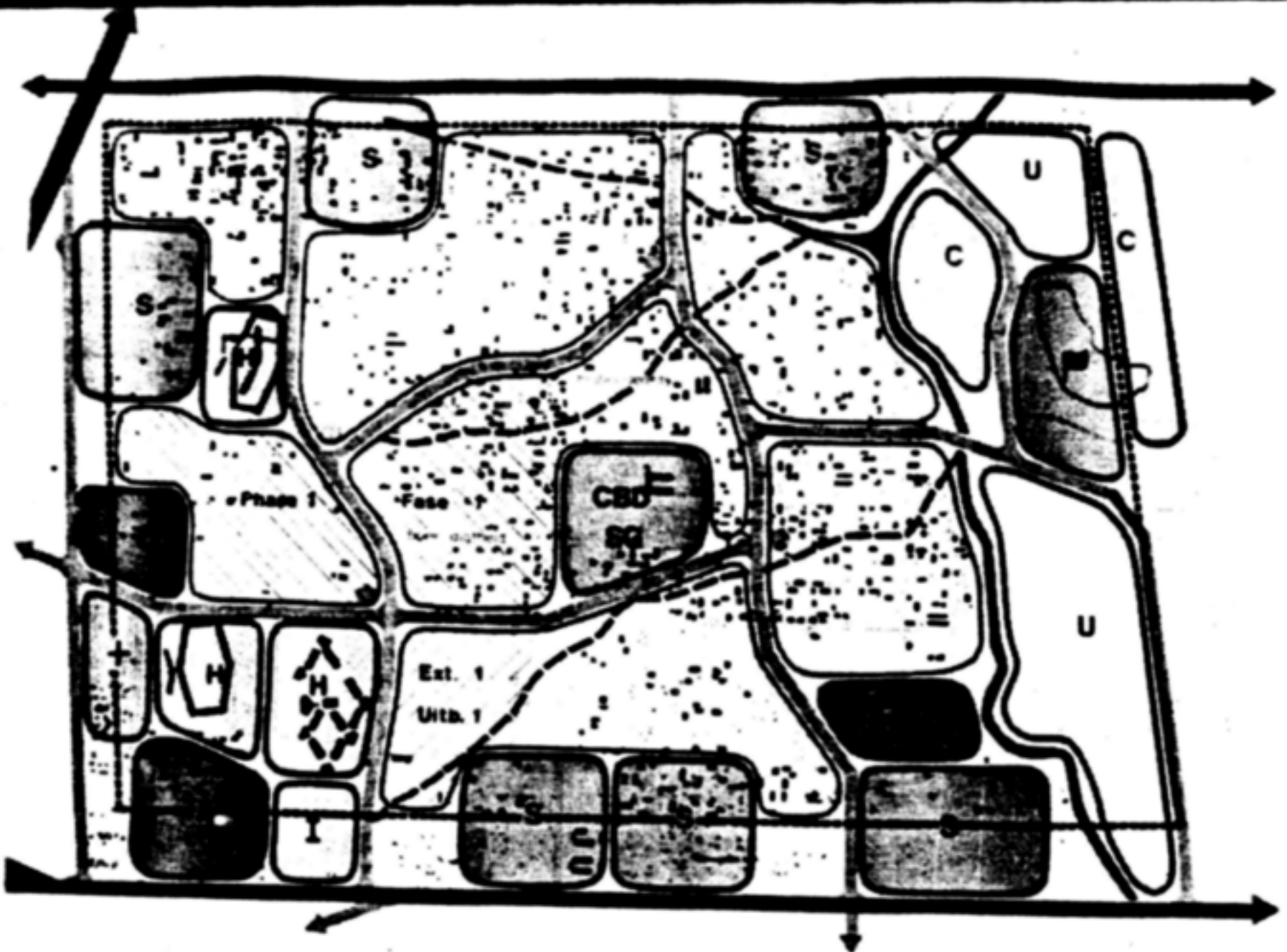
This situation has a long history. It was reported in 1919 that 114 000 extra dwellings were needed for urban blacks. Today the number may be more than 300 000. If anybody has wanted to, or has tried to solve the problem, they have not managed very well over these sixty years. In fact, there has never been any intention to solve this at all; and there won't be in the future either.

Plans, plans

The state is fond of drawing plans. In 1963, it was a plan to make everyone in Alexandria live in hostels.



The 1979 'urban renewal' plan was drawn by the social engineers.



What will their next plan be? Hostels again?