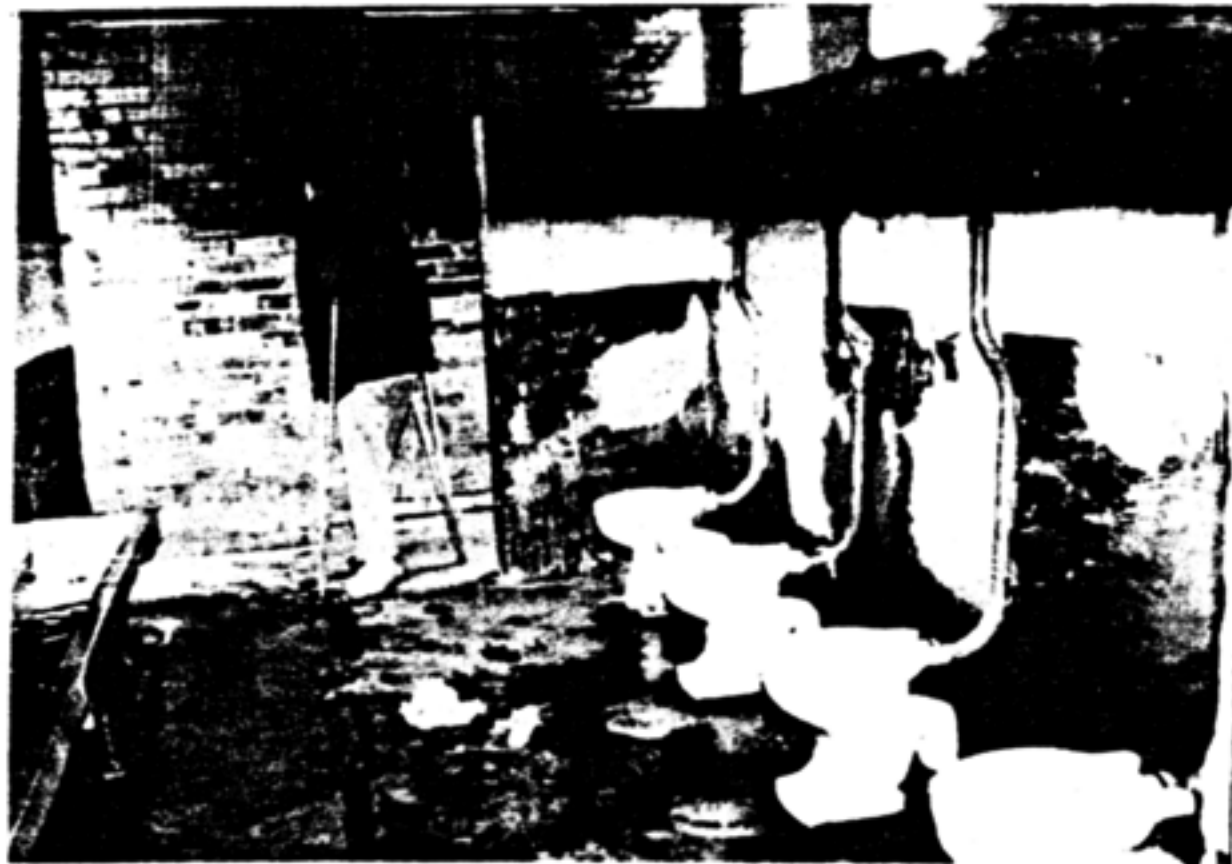


# Promises, Promises

Alexandra *reprieved, saved or uplifted* – this has been an illusion for 60 years. Almost since the beginning of the township, the promise of improvement has alternated with the threat of demolition. The following brief quotes and reports are provided to show how often this game has been played and how false the promises have always been. Alexandra is not altered because of promises or threats. It is shaped by fundamental causes; the same causes that shape all other locations in South Africa.

- 1926 *'In this year it became apparent that the position of Alexandra left much to be desired especially from a health point of view.'* (Memo from TPA)
- 1935 *'This Association (Waverley and Highlands North Ratepayers) . . . . calls upon the City Council of Johannesburg . . . to take immediate and whatever steps are necessary to have the whole Township transferred away from the European settlement . . . (Resolution passed 3 February)*
- 1944 *'Alexandra Township will probably remain where it is'* (The Star 21 July)
- 1957 *"The government's intention to lend the Peri-Urban Areas Board 100 000 to provide services in Alexandra Township means that the last slum in and around Johannesburg is to be tackled, and that all Natives working in the city will be properly housed – probably by 1960"* (The Star 4 June)
- 1960 *"Alexandra Township, one of Johannesburg's worst slum districts, is to receive a 120 000 face lift in the next few months."* (The Star 16 March)
- 1963 *The plan for Alexandra to be converted into a 'hostel city' is revealed.*
- 1969 *"The long awaited and delayed conversion of the 'unkempt city' of Alexandra into an orderly complex of single quarters for Johannesburg's Africans started this week."*(March 11)
- 1969 *"Demolition of the houses is only being done when alternative accomodation has been found"* (29 November)
- 1973 *"Figures released today show that the authorities are more than half way in their bid to wipe out Alexandra Township slums"* (January 24)
- 1979 *"Alexandra, the 'Dark City' has been reprieved."* (The Star 21 May)  
*"While Alexandra was today celebrating the announcement that they will not be moved out 3 families were told to quit their homes by WRAB. . . ." The Star)*
- 1980 *'As we finish putting up a residential district, families will be resettled there before construction workers move on the rest.'* Rev. Buti, Alexandra Chronicle 18 July)
- 1981 *"About 100 people 'squatting' in backyard rooms of an Alexandra house were yesterday left homeless when WRAB bulldozers moved in to demolish the 26 structures. . . The people, said to be illegals, were not offered alternative accomodation. Among them were families with children. Mr. Leepile Taunyane, a civic leader in Alexandra, said the place was a "termite nest". . . He said the ALC was not morally obliged to give the people shelter."* (Sowetan 16 November)
- 1980 *"Dr Koornhof yesterday asked the community of Alexandra to accept the introduction of local government as soon as possible. This would allow the administration board to adopt a lower profile in the affairs of Alexandra"* (RDM 1 November)
- 1981 *"WRAB will build 500 houses and 150 flats in Alexandra before the end of the year. . . ."4th July)*
- 1982 *"Black housing and township development are likely to suffer severely as millions of rands will be slashed off the annual allocations. . . ." (21 July)*
- 1982 *"Tenders have already been received for the building of the first 79 houses in Alexandra Township"* (Sowetan 29 March)
- 1982 *"All 79 families (between Roosevelt, London and 11th) will soon be resettled permanently in new houses complete with all facilities. The Alexandra Liaison Committee appeals to all residents who will be affected to keep calm and cooperate in the redevelopment of Alexandra."* (Alexandra Chronicle 1979)



Life in the hostel

Why don't workers take responsibility for their own housing? In the first place, they are not permitted, as we know, to live in 'white' areas. They have to live in areas set aside for them. Even if there was accommodation available, at low rent, in a white area, this cannot be occupied by a black person except under prescribed conditions. Secondly, workers have such low wages that they cannot afford to buy or rent expensive accommodation. So they are trapped, and they have to wait for housing to be provided for them.

The authorities (the city councils or the government) generally only act vigorously to build additional houses, when they are forced to do so; that is, when they can see that it is their own interests. For example, in 1899 the Cape Town city council got scared that plague might break out in the city slums, so they built Ndabeni, the first 'location' in S.A., outside the city limits. The same sort of thing happened in Joburg: after an outbreak of plague in the slums of the city, the council built a location at Kliptown and moved blacks out there.

### SOFASONKE MPANZA

In the 1940's massive squatter action forced the authorities to build houses. The success of Mpanza, Ntoi, Baduza, Khumalo and other squatter leaders, who set up squatter towns and ran their own affairs, bypassing the civic authorities, made the state try to break the movement by settling at least some of the squatters in new houses.

Houses are built when authorities are forced: they are not built because people need and want them.

We must realise also that houses are not 'provided' for workers, if this means that workers get their housing free or cheap. They don't. Houses built for workers are fully paid for out of rents. The only thing that is 'provided' is the right to live close to white towns and industrial areas: and this of course is merely a trick, because no city could survive without labour power (and the buying power) of workers.

### SOCIAL ENGINEERING

The best way to understand the character of locations and location housing, is to put the question in the form of an engineering task: how would you keep a certain quantity of workers as cheaply as possible, in the smallest amount of space, with minimum facilities, but so that they are fit for work every day? Answer — by building Soweto, Kwa Thema, Langa, Gugulethu and every other location in the republic. Locations are places to keep labour units; they are not living areas for people.

Alexandra is complicated because it has been made to solve different problems at different times over the years. At first it was a free-hold township, sold to blacks because whites did not want to live so far from town. Later it was regarded as a labour pool for areas north of the Houghton ridge.

### HOSTELS

Its most amazing use was developed in 1963, when the social 'engineers' under Verwoerd tried to convert it into a 'hostel city'.

Those planners decided that it was stupid to allow useless people to take up space in urban areas. Babies, scholars, cripples, the sick and old, anyone who wasn't working for a white boss ought not to take up space meant for workers. This was clearly the reasoning behind the decision to destroy family housing in Alexandra, and build twelve huge hostels, for single labourers — males and females separate. This would satisfy the labour needs of the north of Johannesburg; and moreover, the old free-hold Alexandra, which had given the authorities so much resistance in the past, would be tamed.

Although the state never completed this plan, it was not changed till 1979.

What we have said so far shows that housing for black workers must be seen as a policy worked out by the state and the bosses; to control workers and to keep their wages low. Now let us apply this, and ask the following question: What lies behind the present plan for Alexandra? Why has the hostel plan been scrapped, and why has the state agreed to rebuild Alexandra for family housing? Some people think that the Liason Committee persuaded the state to 'reprieve' Alexandra. But this is unlikely. There are far more pressing reasons for their change of plan.

There were big changes in government policy after the uprisings of 1976. The government began to encourage a middle-class among blacks, giving 'urban' people more stability and comfort than migrants, promising home-ownership and so on. It is hoped to develop this middle-class as a cushion against violent rebellion. Home owners are supposed to be much tamer than tenants. Secondly, it has tried to develop local puppet government, like the Urban Bantu Councils, Community Councils and so on. These are little duplicates of the homeland governments. Thebehali is a miniature Matanzima, as everyone knows. It may have seemed to Koornhof that the Liason Committee in Alexandra was a useful sort of puppet government, already in existence, and that he could use it to control the township. It has been reported in the press that "Dr Koornhof, in urging Alexandra to accept the introduction of local government in the area, said this would enable the Administration Board to adopt a lower profile in the affairs of Alexandra." (RDM 11.11.80)