



Appropriating Modernism: Apartheid and the South African Townships

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During the 20th century Modernism was embraced as a vanguard giving expression to political ideologies. The avant-garde of the 1918 Russia revolution co-opted Modernism to showcase their classless socialist mission in architectural and planning projects. The first Labor government in New Zealand (1935-1949) promoted itself as being 'modern' by briefly rejecting a prevailing suburban model in favor of Modernist urban visions for their State housing program, promoted by émigrés architects fleeing Europe to New Zealand at that time.

Although South Africa shares a colonial history of racialised attitudes and policies with many other countries, it was the 1948 election of the Verwoerd-led National Party that resulted in the ideology of apartheid and its subsequent brutal enforcement. Built on a myth of early white settlers encountering an empty land and their fear of Black domination, Verwoerd conceptualized 'separate development' for the majority Black South Africans outside of territory designated as 'white', in what he called 'Bantustans'. Apart from the inhumanity involved, there was also the 'problem' of how to meet the demand for cheap Black labour in the urban areas, while at the same time maintaining cities as the preserve of 'whites' and white capital. The 'solution' was found in two main ways. The first involved the deployment of spatial planning models and legal instruments that enabled effective racial segregation. The second was the appropriation of modernism in the construction of 'townships'. The expenditure and effort involved was justified by Verwoerd's Secretary of Native Affairs, W Eiselen, when expressing the view that 'only with the provision of adequate shelter in properly planned Native townships can full control over urban natives be regained'.

Providing 'adequate shelter' to regain such 'control' became the responsibility of the National Building Research Institute (NBRI) and they too appropriated the modernist agenda. Just as Ernst May had argued that standardization, mechanization and rational planning was necessary to minimize the cost of his modernist housing projects in pre-WW2 Germany, so the NBRI perceived their task to be technical problem. They produce the NE51/9 model house (an acronym for 'Non-European 1951 version 9'), subsequently rolled out in the State's mass housing program. Clarence Stein's 'neighborhood unit' was co-opted to demonstrate a modern approach to the resulting racially segregated residential areas. The forced removals of Black South Africans in what became designated 'white' areas were implemented under the rubric of 'urban renewal' projects. Remote townships on urban peripheries were conceptualized as 'satellite towns' reflective of the British New Town Movement.

The outcome was the formation of a unique urban typology - the apartheid city - justified on the grounds of being informed by modern planning theories and practices. This paper expands and explains the historic process of appropriating these theories and practices in creating the apartheid city and the mass housing program in South Africa. It is this legacy that now confronts urban administrators of post-apartheid South Africa and their goal of urban reconstruction. Conclusions will be drawn concerning the extent to which these issues frame the current challenges to reverse the resulting urban fragmentation.

KEY WORDS: Modernism, apartheid, townships, South Africa.