

04

occupation of neglected buildings

The informal appropriation of neglected buildings in the city by the vulnerable can be perceived as a creative strategy of resilience (Ngwenya 2017: 4) borne out of hardship to “(re)claim space” (Shaw and Hudson 2009: 4), express belonging and identity, and meet physical, spatial and psychological needs. As part of research on homelessness in Tshwane, a summary of the definition, categories and causes of homelessness sets the scene to understand the illegal occupation of neglected buildings and to contextualise the issues of homelessness and informal appropriation. However, general and site-specific needs related to homelessness will be unpacked in Essay Two as part of site engagement and user analysis.

[a]

HOMELESSNESS *definition, causes & categories*

As the administrative capital of South Africa, the City of Tshwane attracts rural-urban migrants from across Africa who are searching, often unfruitfully, for employment (De Beer and Vally 2017(2): 387). The spatial separation of affordable housing and employment opportunities, without adequate transport to link them, contributes to urban homelessness. Two thirds of the homeless in the City of Tshwane are concentrated in Region 3 (2017(2): 388) due to the city’s many neglected or “abandoned” buildings that have become occupied by people who cannot afford housing (Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 20). Such occupation scenarios include the prevalence of building “hijackers”, who assume control of such sites and exploit their illegal occupants (Ntakirutimana 2015: 99).

Homelessness is a complex phenomenon; hence, a single definition may be “inappropriate” and may exclude certain vulnerable groups. A range of definitions is needed to understand the complexities of the phenomenon (Kriel 2017: 401). Nevertheless, homelessness is generally accepted as a term meaning “not having a permanent address”, which includes “people without shelter, who were provisionally accommodated, who live in emergency shelters or on the streets, or who are at risk of losing their home” (De Beer and Vally 2017: 386). This study acknowledges this broader definition that includes those who



4.1.

“live without conventional accommodation”, those living in inadequate or “sub-standard accommodation”, those with insecure tenure and those who are unable to afford adequate housing. This includes people living on the street, temporary overnight sleepers and informal dwellers (Cross et al. 2010: 7, Ntakirutimana 2015: 14, 16). Homelessness is an extreme form of economic, political and social exclusion (Kriel 2017: 401, Ntakirutimana 2015: 6).

Hartshorn’s (1992) four categories of homelessness assist in capturing the complexities of homelessness, while Ntakirutimana (2015: 81-110) elaborates on the various causes of homelessness that correlate with Hartshorn’s (1992) categories (Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 5).

Economic homelessness includes people who are homeless and unemployed, who migrate to the city in search of a livelihood, often unsuccessfully (Ntakirutimana 2015: 81, Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 5). Some may have a home elsewhere in the country that they occasionally return to (Ntakirutimana 2015: 82). Although they might have a small income, these individuals are unable to access affordable, well-located housing (Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 5).

Situational homelessness refers to homelessness as a result of precarious situations, including domestic violence (especially against women and children) (Ntakirutimana 2015: 104-110); family conflict and discrimination (including against one’s HIV status) (2015: 90); foreign nationals, refugees and asylum seekers; and people released from prison or mental institutions, often without legal documents and with no place to go (Ntakirutimana 2015: 94, Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 5). It also includes illegal occupants of neglected buildings or land who have been evicted, often illegally, without provision of alternative accommodation (Ntakirutimana 2015: 95, 98-100). These situations also include political factors such as the failure of government to fulfil housing rights and provide affordable housing, as well as the inability for individuals to apply for legal documents without a fixed address or funding required to apply for housing, social grants, education, healthcare and jobs (Ntakirutimana 2015: 84-90).

Chronic homelessness refers to homelessness as a result of disabilities, old age, chronic mental health issues or substance abuse problems that often render people unable to work (Ntakirutimana 2015: 90-94). Therefore, lack of employment leads to a lack of access to affordable housing (Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 5).

Lastly, the “near” homelessness category refers to people at severe risk of becoming homeless (Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 5). This includes people in correctional or psychiatric facilities due for release, children from child-headed households, women in “sex for money” relationships, and informal dwellers living in sub-standard accommodation, including “abandoned” buildings (Ntakirutimana 2015: 98-100, Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 5).

Fig. 4.1. Bottom left, page 12: Photograph of washing line at Melgisedek site (Author 2021).
Fig. 4.2.–4.5. Right: Hartshorn’s (1992) four categories of homelessness, illustrations collaged and edited by Author (2021).



4.2. Economic Homelessness



4.3. Situational Homelessness



4.4. Chronic Homelessness



4.5. "Near" Homelessness

[b]

TSHWANE: FIVE CASE STUDIES

The following cases located in the City of Tshwane were studied briefly in order to gain an overview of the phenomenon of occupied neglected buildings from a local perspective, for site selection purposes and with a focus on the nature of appropriation. Each building is currently or has previously been occupied by vulnerable persons unable to afford alternative (urban) housing. The cases were analysed through the lens of appropriation as a means of taking ownership of space and expressing belonging by making the space their “home” – albeit illegal, insecure and contested. These were understood from an observational perspective that allowed the author to interpret conclusions qualitatively. While observations and conclusions from the research are discussed below, see Appendix 1 for a brief description of the site and scenario of each case.

General conclusions and observations

After analysing the cases and their occupation scenarios, various general observations and conclusions were drawn (supported by Ntakirutimana 2015: 98-102). Firstly, it was concluded that buildings usually become derelict or abandoned due to the redundancy of their original use (Westfort Village) or mismanagement and neglect by the owner that causes gradual decay (all other cases). Additionally, all five cases are city-owned, indicating municipal failures and mismanagement. Furthermore, the occupation of these buildings is often in response to political, economic and socio-spatial shortcomings, such as affordable housing delivery failures, job unavailability, inadequate or unaffordable public transport between homes and employment, and exclusion by family and society.

Moreover, the conditions of these sites are usually unsuitable for habitation due to structural issues of buildings, unhygienic environments, overcrowding and criminal activities, while electrical, sanitation and maintenance services are usually cut off.

Many scenarios involve substance abuse problems and health issues among inhabitants, perpetuating their precarious circumstances. In all cases, the inhabitants and the issues they face can be categorised under at least one of the homelessness categories discussed earlier.

Lastly, it was noted that the decay of certain buildings to the point of being “hijacked” and stripped is often gradual and starts with the inhabitation of a volatile community (such as at Struben Shelter and Schubart Park).

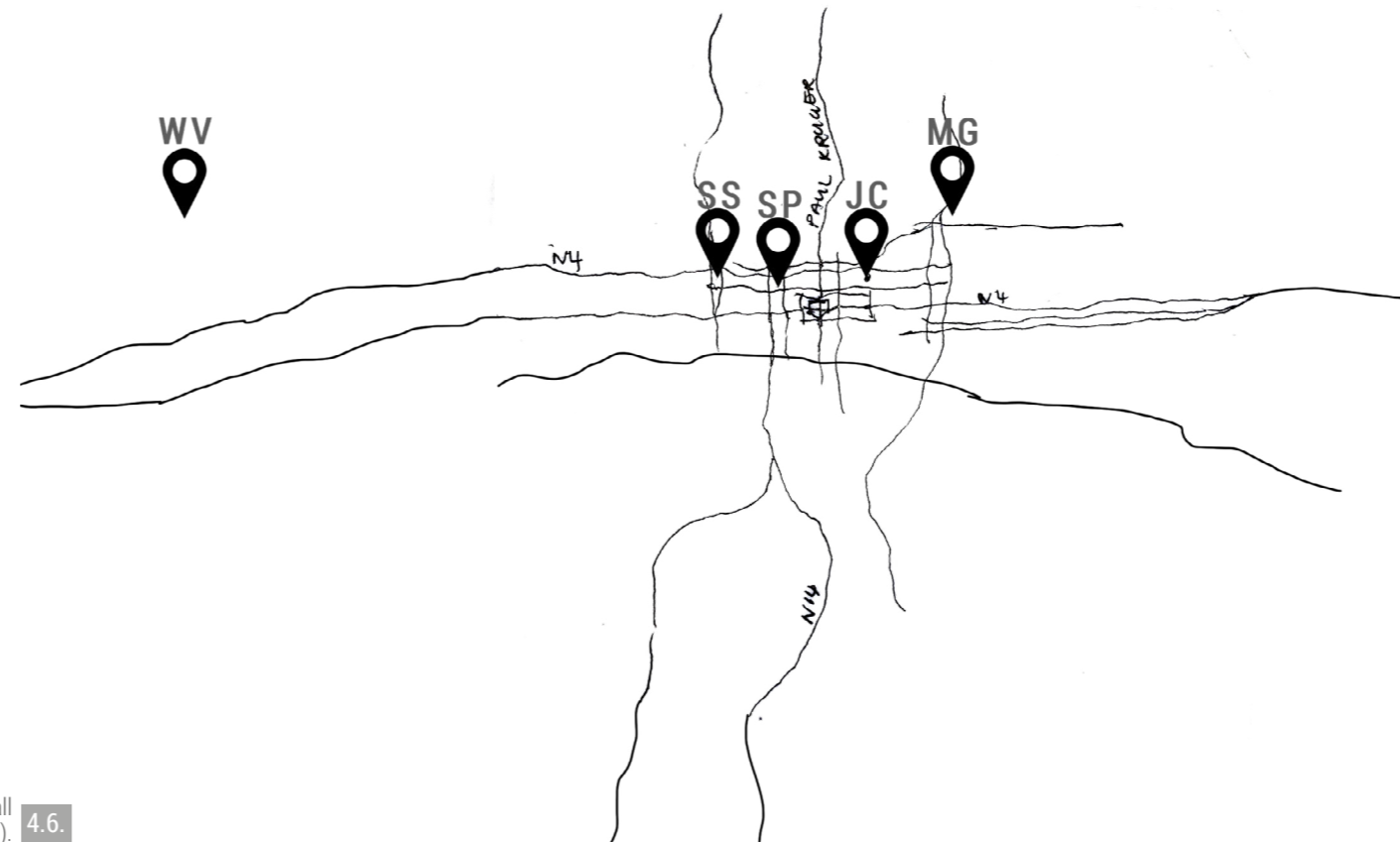
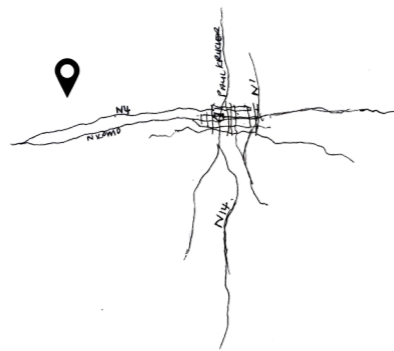


Fig. 4.6. right: Location sketch of all case studies (Author 2021). 4.6.

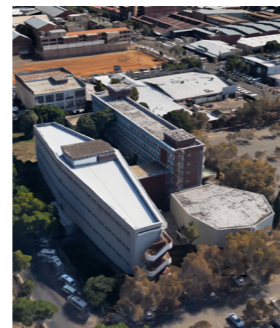


WESTFORT VILLAGE (WV)
former leprosy hospital

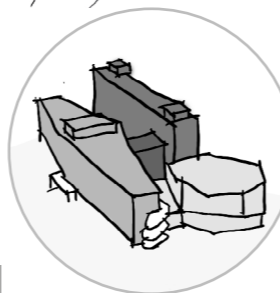


4.7.

Fig. 4.7. Top to bottom: Westfort village ID photo (Swart & Proust 2019), location sketch (Author 2021), and icon (Author 2021).



JUSTICE COLLEGE (JC)
former training centre for National School of Government (NSG) Department



4.8.

Fig. 4.8. Top to bottom: Justice College ID photo (Google earth 2021), location sketch (Author 2021), and icon (Author 2021).



MELGISEDEK (MG)
former Pretoria Technical College hostels, then NGO complex

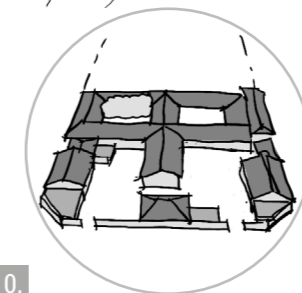


4.9.

Fig. 4.9. Top to bottom: Melgisedek ID photo (Author 2021), location sketch (Author 2021), and icon (Author 2021).

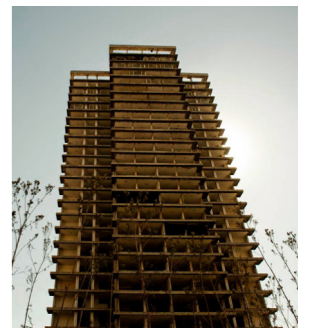


STRUBEN SHELTER (SS)
city-owned homeless shelter

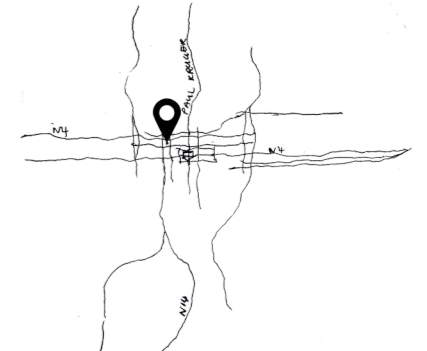


4.10.

Fig. 4.10. Top to bottom: Struben Shelter ID photo (Google earth 2021), location sketch (Author 2021), and icon (Author 2021).



SCHUBART PARK (SP)
former housing development



4.11.

Fig. 4.11. Top to bottom: Schubart Park ID photo (Verwey 2014), location sketch (Author 2021), and icon (Author 2021).

Appropriation conclusions and observations

Observations and conclusions regarding appropriation in these scenarios were also drawn. The cases were also compared on various scales to identify patterns and tendencies related to the spatial aspects of the sites (see Figures 4.12.–4.15.). It became evident that different scenarios result in different types of appropriation.

Interestingly, when comparing the high-rise, central-urban buildings (Justice College and Schubart Park) with the smaller scale, peri-urban sites housing numerous buildings (Westfort Village and Melgisedek), the latter provide more outdoor interstitial spaces between buildings to allow for the development of social activities and programmes that support community life. This allows people to gather and interpret the open spaces and existing buildings freely. Such spaces are appropriated for food gardens, self-constructed tuckshops and spaces for lingering and gathering while washing and drying clothes (see Figure 4.17.). Additionally, the view of surroundings offers prospect and refuge. These buildings are also of a more human scale, which provides a sense of comfort to appropriate external spaces between buildings.

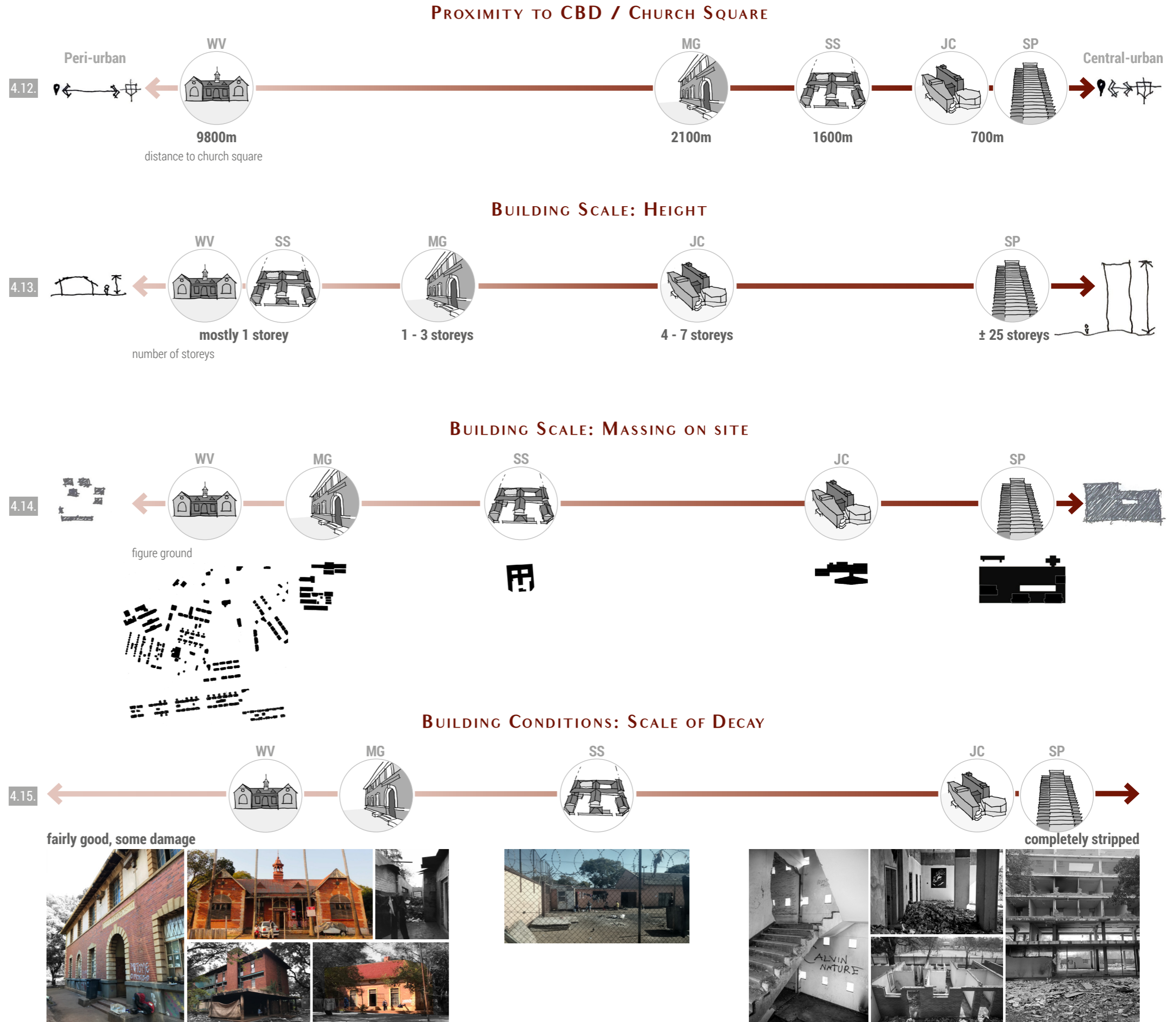
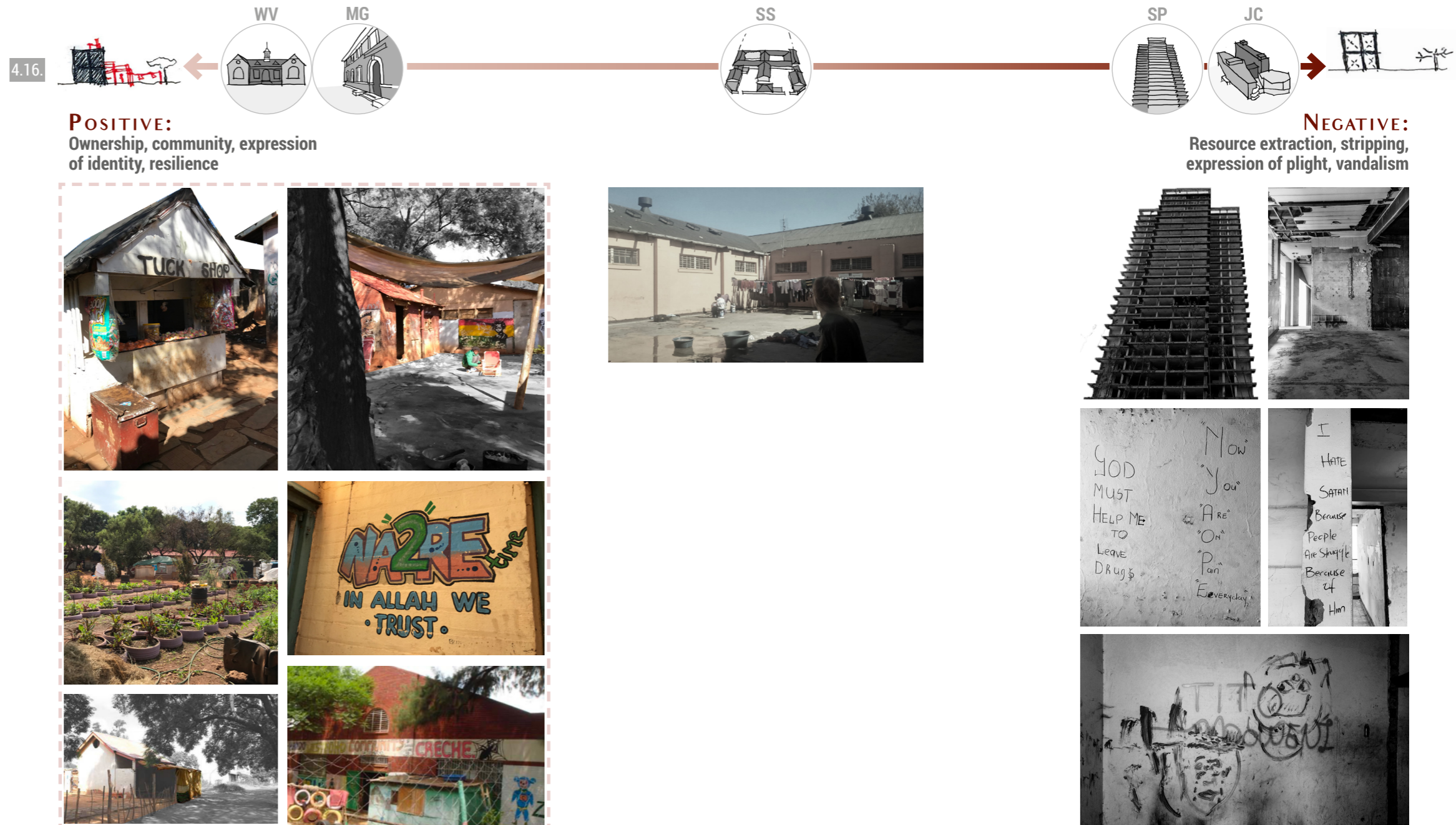


Fig. 4.12.–4.15. Top to bottom: Analyses scales comparing the cases studies according to proximity to CBD (4.12.), building height (4.13.), massing (4.14), and degree of decay (4.15.) (Author 2021). Photographs of Melgisedek by Author (2021), Struben Shelter by (Illze Wessles in Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015: 3), Westfort Village (Mollel 2018: 1), Justice College (Forder 2019, Thomashoff 2019).

NATURE OF APPROPRIATION: POSITIVE VS NEGATIVE

In some instances, communities take ownership of their surroundings (Westfort Village and Melgisedek), while in others, the buildings are looted, vandalised and stripped (Justice College and Schubart Park), depending on the degree to which opportunities to take ownership are available. Where people are unable to take ownership of a place, the buildings are more likely to be stripped and used for resource extraction (see Figure 4.16.). Sites closer to the CBD (Justice College, Struben Shelter and Schubart Park) face higher chances of forced eviction due to more police presence, taxi associations and surrounding businesses, who all contribute to a hostility towards illegal occupants in neglected buildings. This prevents inhabitants from being able to reside in such buildings for long enough to establish it as home and take ownership, resulting in a less positive form of appropriation.

However, when a sense of community occurs and ownership is taken, the type of appropriation tends to be of a more positive nature (with informal uses that support community life), providing the potential to be built on and drawn from both programmatically and spatially. Westfort village and Melgisedek were identified as examples of such sites. The buildings there are mostly used for accommodation, sleeping and privacy. Some rooms with windows into outdoor "gathering spaces" are used as tuckshops and creches for children. However, most of the "positive" communal activities and appropriation seem to occur in between the buildings. Affordable and available materials are used innovatively to create adaptable, temporary and practical additions that continue to evolve as the occupants appropriate the spaces.



Recurring typologies of informal appropriation & uses
[at sites with some sort of community life]



1. Food gardens
2. Enclosures of "yards" and 'rooms' for privacy and demarcation of 'territory'
3. Tuckshops/informal trade
4. Cooking areas
5. Areas for washing & hanging clothes, outdoor lingering spaces for social gathering & recreation
6. Children's play area/informal creche
7. Spaces of artistic expression (graffiti) & expression of identity



Fig. 4.16. Top: Scale comparing case studies according to nature of appropriation (Author 2021). Photographs of Melgisedek by author (2021); Westfort village from Grunewald (2013), Kuipers (2015), Mollé (2018); Struben Shelter (Ilze Wessles in Tshwane Homelessness Forum 2015); Schubart Park (Verwey 2014); Justice College (Forder 2019, Thomashoff 2019).

Fig. 4.17. Bottom: Diagrams of appropriation typologies (Author 2021): food gardens, tuckshops/informal trade, clothes washing and drying, communal gathering, graffiti.

4.17.