



Humanizing urban planning: acknowledging the emotional and psychological dimensions of upgrading informal settlements

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ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of informal settlements in the twenty-first century has challenged the ways in which planners envision, design and think about urban development. While I acknowledge that planning in South Africa continues to be mainly practised by technocrats, I argue this is at the expense of considering the human factors involved. Using a case study, I attempt to demonstrate the specific ways in which the overemphasis on reaching upgrading targets within a specified time frame leaves little to no room for considerations of the psychological and emotional implications of upgrading for informal settlers. This article calls for a detailed consideration of the humanising implications for present and future planning. The case study explores, the nature of the role of planners in, and their collaboration with, the management of Thembaletu Phase 1 Upgrading of Informal Settlement Programme (UISP), between 2010 and 2014, in George municipality with a focus on the space, or lack thereof, of human considerations in this collaborative process.

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Introduction

Since the 1960s planners have grappled in various ways with understanding and managing social (human) processes. They have understood the essential link between physicalist conceptions and normative understandings of planning. This tug of war between planners' attempts to retain planning's 'science/technicist' nature, whilst at the same time attempting to open up the process to more social, economic and political dimensions, has become the hallmark of planning debates. I emphasize the importance for planners to understand social processes by highlighting the need to consider the 'human' dimensions, such as the emotional and psychological needs of those affected by upgrading, and the impact of the upgrading process on them. This approach aims to illuminate a deeper and more tangible human experience and response to planning interventions. The 'burden' of 'how' to do planning to achieve socio(human)-spatial change remains

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contested amongst planners due to modernist lenses continuing to pervade ideas of how ideal communities (or communities in the process of being constituted) ought to look and function. As a result, lines between ideas of dignity and aesthetics have been blurred, while close-knit and organically formed community networks continue to be overlooked when considering the practice of informal upgrading processes. In general, for planners, ‘dignity’ in the context of informal settlements is synonymous with, and limited to, running water, electricity, and flush toilets (Brown-Luthango *et al.*, 2017). Upgrading in South Africa is presently administered through a four-phased structured approach, the Upgrading of Informal Settlement Programme (UISP). This is an incremental upgrading processes aimed at ‘formalisation’. Dignity, as understood and inferred by the UISP, is seen to be ‘achieved’ at every stage of the process, from the provision of interim services, to the ultimate – and assumed to be welcomed by settlers – provision of a neat and ordered neighbourhood. This idea that a settlement that appears from the outside to be a densely clustered ‘slum’ (but which, according to the criteria of those living there may be considered functional) should be transformed into what modern planners see as a neat, orderly, structured neighbourhood for the purpose of achieving dignity for its residents, underpins similar notions of normative planning ideologies criticised in post-war planning: the ordered aesthetic view of urban structure (Taylor, 1998). This paper takes issue with the ways in which existing upgrading policy persists in conceiving informal settlements as a physical problem to be solved solely through physical interventions. In doing so, the paper seeks to explore ‘place’-based ‘trauma’ from the South, by resituating it in an informal upgrading discourse.

The paper looks at the case of Phase 1 of the Thembaletu Upgrading Informal Settlement Program (UISP) project, a pilot *in situ* upgrading project in the secondary city of George in South Africa’s Western Cape Province, to examine its limitations/shortcomings in terms of a more ‘emotional’ approach/model. During the period 2010–2014, the Thembaletu Phase 1 UISP project became a model for upgrading in George, setting a precedent in the process. It should be noted that as a legislative tool, the UISP has been widely critiqued in South African upgrading discourses since the early 2000s (Abbott, 2002; Huchzermeyer & Karam, 2006; Smit, 2020). In the course of my quest to understand the nature of the role that planners currently play, and can potentially play, in a UISP process, (such as that of Thembaletu Phase 1) that one of the planners I interviewed made a statement that ultimately led me to write this paper:

... the UISP don’t contribute to quality neighbourhoods. If the scale is kept small ... uhm . I think there’s space for it. But it also needs to go along with some sort of programme to *facilitate upgrade within the neighbourhood or that space*. But if the layer becomes too big, you are clustering, to a large extent. uhm . poverty.... (Planner A, italics mine)

The ideas her statement sparked caused me to reflect more deeply than I had in the past on what constitutes or creates ‘quality’ in an upgrading process and the team that manages the upgrading process? If they were to be consulted, what would the residents see as ‘quality’ in relation to where and how they live? Planner A went on to suggest that upgrading should be managed in ‘bite-sizes’, and the process should include a programme of facilitation with the community within that space, with the assumption that this type of placemaking would evoke a sense of ownership and pride within the [upgraded] communities. I argue that the dynamic, clustered, diverse, temporary-yet-

permanent nature of informal settlements and their rapid growth rate calls for a more nuanced, ‘emotional’, psychological and organic planning perspective. Even with a growing bottom-up informed urban planning scholarship, I argue that there remains a need to recognise and support emotional and psychological shifts both implied and neglected in upgrading programme implementation. The psychological shift *implied* alludes to a shift away from the ways in which those involved in upgrading processes assume that the mere provision of serviced sites or formal houses effectively addresses the ‘problem’ of growing informal settlements, and which in turn directly and successfully addresses the housing deficit. Whereas a *neglected* psychological shift alludes to how, even though the UISP is under consideration in its four-phased-structured approach, it has ostensibly prioritised what the planners see as public participation. This in fact doesn’t happen in a manner that takes into account that this process is an emotional and psychological one, moreover it neglects the need for the ‘mental transitioning’ of the beneficiaries from informal to formal settlements. The transition is an emotional and mental one that requires a state of mental and emotional readiness on the part of beneficiaries for new material realities, costs incurred of this ‘new formal life’ and other considerations necessary for life within the formal settlement.

This paper uses the case of Thembalethu Phase 1 UISP to illustrate this neglected dimension, and asks whether, in accepting an existing set of priorities without question, those managing Thembalethu Phase 1 have allowed sufficient space for psychological and emotional needs of the community? This paper advocates for a greater emphasis on the ‘human’ side of planning, including the psychological and emotional needs of informal settlement communities, and the impact of the upgrading process on these communities. It explores whether and how informal upgrading could be considered a ‘therapeutic’ and/or a ‘reparative’ planning tool. To this end, the paper seeks to contribute to thinking trauma from the south and its role in planning from a decolonial perspective. Using the case study, the paper considers planning approaches that may have the potential to heal trauma.

Planning as a ‘therapeutic’ tool

Any acknowledgment of the significant role informal settlements has come to play in the urban development landscape remains deeply contested amongst scholars, policy-makers, and planners. Some scholars blame state failure for contributing to proliferating informal settlements per se (Kamete, 2009), while more recently, others applaud the ‘agency’ of the urban poor in managing poverty (Varley, 2013) and for having a ‘survival instinct’. Others warn against romanticising the conditions under which people live in informal settlements. The dynamic nature of informal settlements has fundamentally challenged planning. This transformative process includes ideas of urban form, space production, and organisation (Kamete, 2009; Cardosi *et al.*, 2015). Planning attempts to sensitively and/or innovatively address informal settlements have been ridiculed by some scholars for their ‘obsession with correcting “pathological” (disapproved spatial characteristics) urban livelihoods. . . [because fundamentally] planning is a spatial technology of domination tasked with organising and controlling space’ (Kamete, 2013, p. 640). Adopting a ‘sensitive’ planning model suggests a need to rethink the relationship between planning (structure, culture, governance, processes and decision-making) and informal

settlements and what this means for urban development more broadly. Attempts to unlearn colonial cultures of planning (explained in Porter, 2016), suggest a need to recognise how every spatial decision ‘leaves a mark on the physical body of the city, and on the psyche of its communities, creating what we may call “collective trauma”’ (Erfan, 2017, p. 34). This leaves us with the question: is there something that [collective] trauma can teach us? In particular, Poe (2022), p. 56) asks,

how place-based trauma shapes places and affects spatial processes and lived experiences [in informal settlements and in informal upgraded spaces]?

Although to date planning theory devoted to collective or place-based trauma is limited (Erfan, 2017), what theory does exist is largely generated in the global North. According to scholars, there are three overarching planning approaches in this space: (1) emotional planning (Baum, 2015), (2) therapeutic planning (Erfan, 2017) and (3) reparative planning (Poe, 2022). I use these three approaches as a way to explore ways in which these perspectives could beneficially inform upgrading discourses in the context of planning and managing informal settlements. Emotional planning, i.e. incorporating the emotional dimension, rather than, or in addition to, technicist approaches in planning, brings awareness to the relevance and importance of emotion both within the planner and the emotional response and state of those for whom they plan. Baum’s work argues for us to ‘un-see’ emotion as being irrational, and instead to see emotion as a fundamental dimension of planning decisions (Baum, 2015). However, if empathetically understanding, or ‘reading’, a space has to do with one’s own position in it (de Certeau, 1988 in Ross, 2009, p. 59), then unpacking one’s position in that space (as a professional planner) becomes a pertinent response to Baum (2015). Although Baum recognises the importance of emotion, his work does not explore implicit biases or privilege within the planner as both human (the individual) and professional. Other scholars (Ferreira, 2013; Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2015, p. 677) recognise that ‘emotion, both present in knowledge and a form of knowledge – [to be] integral to lived experience and the judgement of planners, emotion [remains] side lined [and marginalised] within [mainstream] planning practice’. This, Ferreira suggests, is because the ‘know-how’ of incorporating emotion into planning processes remains impeded by structural and institutional limitations. This ‘uncomfortable truth’ (Ferreira, 2013, p. 703) related to the emotional nature of planning calls for a more nuanced and layered approach. Osborne and Grant-Smith (2015) argue for the need to ‘examine the structural (rather than individual) factors that shape the ways emotion is included within both planning practice and decision-making’ (p. 678).

Therapeutic planning is best described by Erfan (2017, p. 37):

... not a manipulative make-them-feel better tactic, nor is it a formal cure-them-all approach, [it is] emotionally engaged planning, which intends to support a process of healing ... an embodied and collaborative process that brings community members together and creates conditions for them to work through collective trauma. (Erfan, 2017)

Erfan’s (2017) emphasis is on the therapeutic orientation and effect of planning in which planners are seen as healers in collaborative planning processes with communities. Sandercock and Attili (2014, p. 19) suggest that therapeutic planning attempts to answer the ways in which a ‘deeply divided community [can] “move toward a relationship of

power sharing, mutual respect and joint problem solving”’. While the work of Erfan (2017), and of Sandercock and Attili (2014), deals largely with indigenous settler populations in the West, it can provide insights into understanding and engaging a therapeutic orientation for a Southern African context and/or insights into collaborative planning processes related to rapidly growing informal settlements in urban areas. I elaborate on this idea later.

Lastly, reparative planning emanates as a response to discourses on reparations, geographically located within the global North and is specific to addressing racial injustices. The purpose of this paper is not to delve into these reparation debates but to briefly review the ‘planning’ aspect and explore the ways in which planning as a reparative instrument aims to ‘repair’ black or other spaces. The reparative turn relates to the ways in which planning’s entanglement with White Supremacy produces racialized spaces (Song & Mizrahi, 2023). In this process, institutional entry points become critical in assessing the degrees to which ‘repair’ is achieved. Therefore, through incorporating marginalised voices in the planning process, reparative planning seeks to embody a more activist role in promoting social justice (Song & Mizrahi, 2023). Scholars such as Williams and Steil (2023) and Poe (2022) link reparative planning to ‘a process of transitional justice, [which] seeks to not only redress past harms, but [to] redistribute resources [that] undermine dominant power structures, and honour community agency’ (Poe, 2022, p. 70). As an extension, reparative planning could be considered a decolonial approach to planning as it seeks to honour community and to un-learn planning’s privilege, both of which perpetuate and reproduce spaces of ‘Othering’ (detailed in Porter, 2021). The ‘progressive planner’, a descriptor coined by Forester (1982), could be considered to be carrying out the work of repair, because the progressive planner uses information as a source of power to both recognise power structures as well as honour the community (Forester, 1982).

Interestingly, the bulk of this trauma- related planning scholarship has not to date been theorised from the South or explored for what it could mean for informal settlements and upgrading discourses, policy and practice. Moreover, Schroeder *et al.* (2021) report that the term ‘trauma-informed neighbourhoods’ has not been fully developed within academic circles. However, what is becoming clear is that trauma-informed approaches to the built environment are increasingly needed. This is an indication of the changing and intensifying focus of concern on the psychological and emotional health of residents, and what (Schroeder *et al.*, 2021) argue is the considerable influence neighbourhoods exert on health as well as how the physical characteristics of neighbourhood can potentially either re-traumatize residents or promote healing, especially in places where many have experienced trauma. Trauma in this context is seen as the result of social and economic deprivation which ‘can also affect human brain development in ways that lead to behavioural problems, learning disabilities, and mental illness’ (Maté, 2015, p. 7). Poe (2022, p. 65) begins to theorise communal trauma in planning theory. Although she studies an American neighbourhood, her specific emphasis on racial injustice can provide insight into the way we think about informal settlements elsewhere, including in South Africa:

...traumatic conditions exist and evolve in collective memories of racialized harms and wrongs tied to a shared identity, experience, and place, and it is worked through in everyday consciousness ... Whether at the individual or collective level, trauma is always an identity informing process, and identity is always placed. Thus, communal trauma analyses trauma as a spatial phenomenon. Bertha's concern reveals the intricate relationship between identity and place. To be placed is to be located spatially, socially, and culturally (Sundstrom, 2003). Place provides kinship and belonging, critical components shaping identity ... Communal trauma fully recognizes that harmful place-producing processes do not just occur spontaneously. (Poe, 2022, pp. 65, 66, 68)

Poe's ideas point to ways in which informal settlements possess certain identity-informing processes unique to the settlement. One could argue that the conditions to which residents of many informal settlements are continually exposed are worked through in the everyday consciousness of these residents, and this has emotional, psychological and spatial implications for how these individuals recreate spaces even after upgrading. Moreover, Poe (2022) recognises the power dynamics in place-producing processes, and, for the purposes of this article, in upgrading processes. Poe (2022) describes the continuous place-based conditions (imposed by planning) in which Black communities in Jackson, USA, live as 'trauma'. When discussing ways to improve their neighbourhood, black residents express the view that 'planning has not benefitted black communities' and see planning as a violent crime, as it embodies a historic 'whiteness' that is unable to recognise black spaces or placemaking practices. McKittrick (2011, in Poe, 2022, p. 66) illustrates how this persistence of spatialized racial hierarchy within planning has induced trauma. As a result, trauma is trapped in place by defining the black sense of place as 'materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter' (Poe, 2022, p. 949). In a similar fashion, it can be argued that the legacy of apartheid in South Africa shaped and continues to shape how cities were planned in South Africa and people's experience of living in them. Historical dispossession has led to inter-generational trauma. The ongoing aftermath of apartheid induces harsh place-based conditions which for informal settlement residents include (but are not limited to): a lack of sanitation and basic services, unemployment, poverty, lack of safety. These conditions, it can be argued, induce trauma. Collective/communal trauma can be described as an event or series of events over generations that affect a community's sense of safety and wellbeing. These range from continual exposure to poverty, to various forms of violence which include Gender-Based Violence (GBV), structural violence, and racism/xenophobia.

This by no means implies that informal settlements are inherently black spaces nor that they are indicative of 'black sense of place'. However, these considerations provide some avenues for us to unpack the 'trauma' that is trapped, by looking at ways in which planning induces spatialized trauma through planning interventions.

When it comes to upgrading processes, incorporating a trauma-informed lens into an already extensive and deeply politically sensitised to-do list, may suggest an impossible challenge. However, what scholars such as Poe (2022) emphasise is that a trauma-informed approach that aims to repair requires a particular kind of mind-set and sensibility and must be seen as indispensable to planners when they engage with those communities whose livelihoods are characterised by perpetual experiences of collective trauma.

Informality in South African upgrading discourses

In developing countries, informalisation processes have acquired more depth over recent decades (Roy, 2005; UN-Habitat, 2009; Elian, 2018). This is attributed to planning ideas which have emerged in these countries, and which are continuously and increasingly engulfed by their own complex processes, or draw on 'best practices' of globalisation while simultaneously reflecting knowledge, approaches, systems and ideas borrowed from the Global North (Watson, 2009). The implications of this for developing countries have brought about forms of resistance or informal responses from informal communities. These informal responses have, over the years, driven and shaped debates on informality as scholars attempt to investigate, navigate, and mitigate the root causes of informality. Thus, in attempts to articulate these processes in simple ways lacking in nuance, scholarship to date sits within extremes of 'who is to blame' for the expansion of informal settlements. Is it the state's neo-liberal policies that exacerbate housing shortages, or the poor themselves 'managing' poverty through erecting informal settlements? Less discussed (regardless of 'who's to blame'), are the conditions informal settlement residents face, and the impact of their mental states resulting from these conditions and the management of these residents by planners and built environment specialists. This includes the use of available upgrading policy tools and processes of implementation. In addition, as discussed in previous sections, with most of reparative literature being theorised from the North, I argue for a need to understand communal trauma and an associated planning from a Southern perspective.

South African upgrading discourses have highlighted the inability of policy to capture and incorporate the heterogeneity of informal settlements. The consequence of these inadequate policy efforts has been the erosion of settlers' socio-economic networks. Policy makers and planners have in turn tended to pathologise informality (Kamete, 2013) and to normalise this process through 'formal' upgrading strategies. Scholars have also critiqued the lack or absence of a community's agency in the upgrading process. Even with this significant amount of scholarship, core modernist undertones persist in planning, and the idea that 'good design' (infrastructural upgrading) implies an orderly, contained 'good neighbourhood' continues to triumph.

Significant to the Breaking New Ground (BNG) (2004) policy in South Africa has been the introduction of the UISP, an incremental four-phased approach¹ to informal settlement upgrading. These phases consist of: application, project initiation, implementation, and housing consolidation. The UISP was originally envisaged as supporting, upgrading and maintaining community networks, as well as minimising disruption the noble intention being to 'secure tenure and access to health and security and the empowerment of settlement residents through participative processes.'² However, fulfilment of this ideal implementation of the UISP model remains a challenge throughout the country. Maina (2013) argues that, despite the progressive policy discourse, translation of the UISP has in fact replicated the RDP model. This model had provided a rationale for the removal – eradication – of [informal] settlements and the redevelopment of cleared sites. This, in turn, has exacerbated the intra- and inter-institutional and legislative complexities that inhibit policy implementation frameworks, structures, and processes. More importantly, Maina (2013) mentions that city investments are linked to

formality, and thus, when settlements remain informal, rather than being formally upgraded, only emergency services are fit for provision. Maina (2013) further highlights the rigidity of roles within different governmental and institutional spheres, roles which impede the flexible and fluid incremental progress of informal settlement upgrades. For instance, national government legislates the BNG and UISP, and, together with provincial government, is responsible for housing delivery, while local government is responsible for service delivery, settlement control and maintenance. Maina (2013) argues that both regularisation and formalisation, seek to achieve the same outcome: the upgrading of settlements through an incremental process. This process provides tenure security first, followed by the community upgrading their own settlements and only then, by the intervention of the state. Thus, regularisation was intended to speed up intervention in terms of service delivery and would lie within the domain of local government. Despite Maina's (2013) argument around the intra- and inter-institutional and legislative complexities that inhibit policy implementation frameworks, structures, and processes, we see how formality becomes the pre-requisite for state intervention. In light of planning's role as 'middleway' between the state and the market (Taylor, 1998), and understanding planning's role as the 'handmaiden' of the state (Kamete, 2009), what becomes clear is how critiques of planning which advocate moving toward flexibility are juxtaposed, or are in tension, with the state's 'formalisation' agenda. The process of formalisation is seen by the state as a way to ultimately include the informal, otherwise termed by Kamete (2018) as 'pernicious assimilation' as he debates state-led integration. According to him, the logic behind the 'dark side' of integration is 'forced conversion' arguing that 'human behaviour that is directed via state administration' (p. 19) and 'the Other's difference is perceived to be incompatible with, and a threat to the Same' (p. 20). From Kamete's perspective, informality is currently primarily necessity-driven, and this rules out eradication as a way of handling informality. Moreover, this approach shows the deep-seated misconceptions and understandings of how to accommodate different forms of informality and calls for a deeper understanding and a dismantling of 'expert-centred' approaches to governing (Kamete, 2018, p. 23). Taylor (1998) saw this as a key criticism of post war planning in the 1960s and '70s: the assumed consensus achieved around the aims of planning. This criticism alludes to principles of planning being seen as self-evident, through a 'unitary' view of the public interest. Secondly, given this taken-for-granted consensus, the task facing town planners was simply a practical one of finding the 'technical' means to achieve given objectives, rather than debating these objectives themselves (Taylor, 1998, p. 5). Thus, the 'obsession' with the role of regularization as a way to ultimately formalize the process and the settlement is not something new to planning. This approach does, however, exacerbate the shortcomings of the technicist lens of planning, especially when it appears to attempt to take into account social dynamics.

More importantly, planning as a governance practice and approach to managing informal settlements through upgrading reflects a lack of understanding regarding the roles and responsibilities of planners. Planners need to recognize the collective trauma these settlements embody and understand how their actions can perpetuate trauma-inducing spaces. The trauma experienced by informal settlement residents appears to be referred to in the

literature in more specific and immediate ways, for example, in response to fires or floods (Peters *et al.*, 2022) public health-related impacts (Hatcher *et al.*, 2019) and to gender-based violence (Gibbs *et al.*, 2018). I would argue that understanding informal settlements and their residents from a more collective and holistic stance could provide significant insights into planning interventions.

Study area: Thembalethu, George municipality

Thembalethu is a historically black township situated in the municipality of George in the Western Cape Province, with a total population reported in 2011 by Statistics South Africa (STATSA), of approximately 43,000.³ George municipality is classified as a category B/district municipality, or as a secondary city (Toerien & Donaldson, 2017), and is responsible for basic service delivery to all areas of the city among other tasks. George is located along the N2 highway between Cape Town and the Eastern Cape.⁴ In 2010, the fundamental challenge for the municipality and local government was to ensure that Phase 1 (2010–2014) of the Thembalethu Upgrading (UISP) project would be the pilot *in situ* upgrading project in George. The Thembalethu project thus became the precedent for how future upgrading would be implemented in George. Thus, one could argue that this project was emblematic for planners and policy managers of pre- and post-apartheid informal settlement growth management – both in terms of its patterns and execution.

During the inception phase, in 2010, George Municipality's response to informality was *in-situ* development. Thus, an *in situ* upgrading approach to informal settlements was adopted for Thembalethu. The project was managed by a private engineering, management, design, planning, project management and consulting company, Aurecon. The scope of the seven-year programme included the incremental development of 4 350 formal residential sites with full, permanent municipal services and ultimately top structures on 10 land parcels for identified households from the current 22 informal settlement areas. Aurecon' (2014) is responsible for providing a multi-disciplinary professional service which includes facilitation of all community-based participatory planning as well as the management of the relocation processes with minimal inconvenience to the beneficiary households.⁵

I chose the Thembalethu project as a case study because it exemplifies a process aimed at addressing informality through infrastructural design, following the *in-situ* development and upgrading model used at the time to reduce resettlements in urban areas. Since Phase 1, many other phases in this project have been implemented to address the challenge or 'problem' of informal settlements in general in Thembalethu.

Method

This research used a qualitative research design. The Thembalethu Phase 1 UISP project and its approach were explored through understanding the planning practitioners' involvement in, and perceptions of, informality. Due to the planners playing a relatively minor role in the 'upgrading' project, I sought to understand how the other professionals involved from other fields or disciplines who were involved perceived the role of the planner in this upgrading project. Key to my

research inquiry was the ‘how’. This involved questioning the ways in which a sampled group of planners, and other built environment professionals, intervened and managed the complexities and contradictions inherent in the Thembaletu UISP project Phase 1. As mentioned above, the ‘how’, or action of planning, has been key to planning debates since planning’s inception after World War 2 (Taylor, 1998). I set out to build a comprehensive understanding of the ‘how’ in order to help uncover the intent and priorities of the planners participating in the study when they intervened in the upgrading process and to understand to what extent they focussed on the desires, needs and emotional states of the residents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 professionals.⁶ These included both planners and other professionals involved in the Phase 1 project. Although the emphasis of this paper is on understanding the perceptions and priorities of the individual planners and their role(s), I was aware that teamwork was key to the UISP process: planners, engineers, municipal officials, non-governmental organisations are all actively and collaboratively involved. In this case, the project team was small (11 professionals), consisting of planners (within Aurecon, outsourced by Aurecon and within George municipality), engineers (Aurecon), municipal officials (civil engineering department, department of housing and planning), a policy manager (provincial government), and a training provider/community liaison (responsible for enumerating, setting up, and training community leaders within informal settlements benefitting from the project). In order to understand the role, of planning and of planners in this UISP setting, and their perceptions of their respective roles, it was important not simply to elicit from them their first-hand experience with the project, but also to understand the ways in which the role of each respective planner in the process was experienced and perceived by the other professionals. I conducted semi-structured interviews, which I transcribed and analysed thematically, to understand the shared experiences and perspectives of planners and other professionals involved in the case study. This approach helped me gain insights into their management and approach to informal settlements in general, as well as focusing specifically on the UISP Phase 1 project. I then framed these findings through a reparative lens to understand and explore the levels of ‘repair’ that were possible within the four stages of the UISP process under study.

I saw the UISP as a planning instrument, and the Thembaletu UISP Phase 1 project as a planning exercise. The reason for this distinction (which is central to the UISP) is that in order for a UISP project to be approved by provincial government to be implemented on a municipal level, the project must strategically align with the various planning frameworks of the municipality. These include the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), the Housing Development Plan, and the Spatial Development Framework (SDF). In addition, according to UISP precepts, the project should adhere to community-based participatory planning facilitation structures and processes.⁷

Findings and discussion

In 2010, the George Municipality Informal Settlement Master Plan (ISMP) prioritized Thembaletu as a vital start-off location for upgrading. Thembaletu, for social and

economic reasons and its historical housing role as a black township (Hill, 2023), has been (and continues to be) significant to the municipal housing agenda, as it continues to grow informally at a rapid rate.

Under the theme, ‘the apparent’, I attempt to capture what professionals assumed to be ‘apparent’ or ‘obvious’ about the UISP as a planning tool. This includes their expectations before and after the implementation of the UISP (planning exercise), their general perceptions of the role and/or influence of the planner, and their own perceptions and experiences of the challenges involved in the use of the UISP as a planning tool.

Planning ‘with’ communities: what is ‘apparent’ to planners

This section examines the practicality and perceived feasibility of ‘planning with’ informal settlements under the UISP, focusing on minimizing disruption to these communities rather than incorporating residents’ needs, desires, and emotions. Huchzermeyer (2021, p. 45), in her assessment of UISP deliberations involving all three spheres of government in South Africa, emphasises the ‘displaced’ role of planning within the UISP. She refers to planning’s role within the UISP as an ‘additional obstacle, despite the supportive clauses in SPLUMA [Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act 16 of 2013]’. Even though SPLUMA legislation was passed a decade after the UISP, the aim of this section is to explore the degree to which the UISP was flexible and able to accommodate the role of the planner as well as how transformative and relevant planning was able to be in taking into account informal residents’ present and future needs. Furthermore, this section asks whether, based on recent planning literature, it could be argued that the planners’ role needed to be radically redefined? Lastly, based on the findings, this section examines the extent to which these processes could be seen to have mirrored the core premise and priority of the UISP – addressing the challenge of informal settlements.

The UISP useful, yet unsustainable

The intention of the UISP is to ‘address’ the challenge of informal settlements. Thus, from a ‘reparative planning’ perspective, one could then say that the UISP becomes the institutional entry point, seeing to ‘repair’ informal spaces, through a process that includes the voices of the UISP beneficiaries in the four-phased-structured approach and that consequently seeks to incrementally formalise informal spaces. This section unpacks the professionals’ views and experiences of whether ‘repair’ was achieved or not.

The majority of professionals interviewed shared a negative sentiment towards the UISP tool. This had to do with the legislated and mandated overall approach to managing informal settlement development and the UISP implementation process, coupled with the communities’ expectations.

Some of the planners saw the project as ‘a quick fix’, whereas policy managers saw the UISP as a targeted approach focused on addressing the local informality ‘problem’. The implementing agent’s unequivocal view was that municipal planners were not in favour of the UISP policy and that they saw it as “not sustainable” and as a “low density sprawling type development” that would not present any opportunity for ‘people to sort of better themselves’. Additional perspectives were shared by policy and project

managers about the failure of the UISP to create room for flexibility. They saw this as an inhibiting factor in the implementation process and as needing to change. According to one participant, 'There should be different set of rules that must be applied'. Another reported that the implementation challenge had been a commonly expressed, urgent expectation on the part of informal settlement residents that formal structures would be erected for those who qualified as UISP beneficiaries.

What surfaced from the interviews was that, while the UISP was one amongst several housing programmes provided by the National Housing Code, this particular programme was targeting informal settlements, or the general informal situation, in Thembalethu. The UISP as a 'targeted' policy instrument inevitably leaves no room for sustainable principles, nor does it allow for a focus on residents and their emotional states (emerging from interviews and based on the literature). This poses two questions: 1) how does sustainability (or the lack thereof) intersect with emotional and psychological well-being? 2) To what extent can sustainability and (emotional/psychological) well-being be in conflict with each other? In this instance, planners' quest for density (as a way to promote sustainable principles) may/may not necessarily align with emotional and psychological needs of the community, given the displacement history of Thembalethu, and its origins (Hill, 2023). This in turn suggests a deeper unpacking of what sustainability means within upgrading areas and as related to the emotional well-being of residents.

Inferences suggest that, despite the UISP targeting informal dwellers, its qualifying standards make it difficult to integrate different housing policies in a context like Thembalethu – a formally established black township that has significantly expanded informally. Thus, although important considerations in the planning process include how the UISP interfaces with other housing policies, and how it clearly distinguishes which people are beneficiaries from other programmes, the qualifying criteria are not specified in the UISP.

The expectation of a 'formal structure' as a preconception widely held by informal settlement residents makes the four-phased UISP process challenging and time-consuming to explain to the community. In addition, there seemed to be a sense amongst the professionals that the UISP is presented to residents as an *in situ* upgrading project, while residents are expecting an RDP housing product.

The conflating of policy expectations was not only difficult to explain to the community but also difficult for professionals to navigate. In addition, the UISP was critiqued amongst some of the professionals as being purely a housing quick fix, one that does not take into consideration the broader scope of urban development. Furthermore, there is the issue of the UISP continuing to rely heavily on formal legislative processes, which explains the project manager's requests for 'different rules', further delaying implementation.

What also emerged was the planning department's clear perception of the unsustainability of the UISP as it promotes a low-density sprawling type of development and does not provide people with a chance to better themselves and their way of life. This is based on the assumption that the provision of different, mixed housing typologies would make people 'desire' more and want to progress socially and economically. This, as yet untested assumption, currently underpins normative planning ideas of how design can shape human behaviour.

There is a need to acknowledge the unintended consequences, which underscore the importance of considering emotional and psychological dimensions of this process/transition from the complexity of organically constituted informal settlements to formal structure provisions. The question then becomes how people make meaning or sense once they relocate to a ‘decent’ ‘formal’/upgraded settlement. An anthropological study by Ross (2009) on an informal settlement in the Western Cape indicates the complexity of the formation of social life within informal settlements. She argues that:

Anthropology’s cultural relativist approach recognises humans are meaning-making creatures and anticipates that human behaviour makes sense, even if the sense that a given set of people make, the forms of their behaviours and the explanations they offer for these, are not universally the same or accepted. (Ross, 2009, p. 9)

This complex phenomenon can be seen in what she calls the reciprocal relationship between forms of social abandonment and living with abandon:

For example, one of the ways in which some people deal with the humiliations and eroded life chances they experience is through drug use and alcohol dependence. These are temporary fixes and their effect is to reinforce lack of opportunity. (Ross, 2009, p. 7)

In her study, even though people were excited about the move to a ‘decent’ area, relocation was not accompanied by people’s economic and material improvements. Even though they obtained the ‘decent’/ordered new settlement envisaged by developer and informal residents, it was repressive for the informal residents to ‘live’ up to the expectation of living in a decent neighbourhood, one which in fact renders them more vulnerable (Ross, 2009, p. 45). If one understands that each informal settlement is unique, Ross’s account provides key insights into factors professionals should consider when providing large-scale upgrading projects. From what Planner A (whose comments originally sparked the direction of this research) pointed out, the UISP does not necessarily contribute to quality neighbourhoods or wellbeing. It therefore becomes clear that, even with housing provision in close proximity to a range of housing typologies, humiliation and eroded life chances unaccompanied by economic and material improvements do not magically disappear. This situation foregrounds the need for a deep exploration of what institutionally we regard as, and what constitutes, re-dress or ‘repair’ when it comes to informal settlements, and the ways programmes like the UISP reproduce informal settlement development.

Thembaletu phase 1: ‘Repair’ at the mercy of the implementing agent

As pointed out earlier, at the heart of reparative planning scholarship is planning’s entanglement with White Supremacy, which is the core of why social justice is a significant anchorage of reparative planning. In addition, the structural and institutional barriers to and influences on decision-making, governing, managing and reproducing other spaces are at the core of reparative planning. Thus, the heterogeneous nature of both the history of informal settlements within South Africa, and knowledge about these settlements, is a critical factor which influences how informality is perceived by

planners and urban researchers, translated into policies, and even how the ‘success’ of implementation is measured (Hill, 2023).

Even though each had their own reservations, the professionals were unanimous that the Phase 1: UISP project met all the necessary requirements according to the specifications.

While appearing to be reasonably satisfied with the upgrading, some planners reflected on the possible shortcomings of the process, in particular the lack of ongoing consultation with the community the purpose of which would be to evaluate ‘life after the upgrade’:

... what was lacking is maybe going back afterwards to the community [to] say what are your problems etc. Because you're so tied up in this next project and these deadlines and stuff, so that's probably what's lacking and to see if this is working, is this town functioning?
(Planner B)

Thus, from a planning perspective, while outcomes were seen by these professionals to have been met, there remained an unaddressed level of maintenance and protection of the formal upgraded area, which made upgraded formal areas prone to expand informally. However, now that the project is completed, what is lacking is the necessary feedback from the community which would provide the professional planners with useful information on how this project served or did not serve the community as well as feedback which could also inform future *in situ* upgrading projects. This information would include details of the experience the community had of the upgrading programme, and how, from their perspective, they think the professional team could improve the process in the future. I, and some of the professionals I interviewed, argue that this step is essential in order to foster iterative learning – of both professionals and residents – throughout the UISP and the planning process more broadly.

The engineering team (some of whom wore other professional hats) provided a more optimistic evaluation of the success of the project. While expressing their view that, in general, it was not possible to ‘eradicate’ informal settlements, they saw people having their own formal plot with basic services as a significant achievement. They considered the expectations of residents to have been met in terms of ‘a difference [having been] made’. This, they thought, was apparent in an improved quality of life, as measured by the upgrade and provision of infrastructural features. This was echoed by policy managers: even during the first three stages of the UISP, they observed how the infrastructural provision (serviced sites) evoked a visible pride within the community who were able to build their own structures on the serviced sites. This made policy managers question whether providing a formal house on each site was even necessary, thus echoing Mainia’s (2013) critique. Moreover, when the intended stage 4 of the UISP (provision of a 40-square house) was communicated to them, it disheartened communities and diminished the efforts they themselves had made to build their own houses. This could be seen as the community having already taken ownership of these sites and the development process.

One can infer from this that the push for formal structures occurs in juxtaposition with existing original informal structures built by communities, once serviced sites are provided as part of stage 3 of the UISP project. The reason for this could be that the

imposition of a 40-square dwelling oversteps or cancels out the sense of ownership acquired with the provision of serviced sites. The explanations of the professionals do not clarify, nor could they be seen to represent, the community sentiments. It was difficult to establish whether the hope and expectation of formal, project-built houses solidified residents' sense of ownership taken at Stage 3 of the UISP process, or if the building of formal houses in Stage 4 of the UISP process eroded an already established sense of ownership from Stage 3.

A Community Liaison officer who worked, and still works, with the Thembalethu community, considered the outcome set by the UISP to have been met, and thought that the hope of formal houses makes for 'happy' community members:

People are very happy that they moving into their own brick houses to put it that way. Also, I would say they did accomplish what they planned. (Community Liaison Officer A)

The professionals were in agreement that the Phase 1: UISP project was able to make a positive impact on the lives of those who occupied Areas A, B and C informally. This impact they saw was characterised by the provision of site services (in the form of storm water systems, toilets, and water pipelines) which improved residents' quality of life. The success of the project is also implied by the follow-through of the programme set out by Aurecon. This programme can be said to mirror the rigid standards of the UISP tool, and possibly, the subjective claims made by professionals involved regarding the positive difference it made in the lives of the residents. Most of the professionals saw the 'happiness' of beneficiaries to be derived from the 'benefits' they derived from the programme, whether in the form of serviced sites or formal houses. It should be noted that this was the professionals' perception, rather than a claim supported by direct feedback from the residents themselves.

According to Piazzoni *et al.* (2022, p. 4), while design in urban design justice requires vision formulation, it is 'the political uses that urbanists make of these visions that too often perpetuate injustices'. Thus, when professionals promote plans that do not centre around the voices, interests, and imaginations of marginalized groups, they become agents of domination and advance other interests. In the case of Thembalethu, local government is responsible for the implementation of the UISP. The UISP Phase 1 is then outsourced to the implementing agent, Aurecon. In this way, the implementing agent acts as a proxy for the municipality and is the one advancing the vision of the UISP and interests behind it and spatial visioning. The problem with this view arises when these imaginations are shared by both professionals and informal residents. How then do professionals intersect and make an impact on a 'humanising meaning-making' level? One could argue that the degree to which 'repair' happens is at the mercy of the implementing agent. Ross (2009) mentions, that, even though there is a desire on the part of the residents for 'decency', the repressive effect of the socio-economic conditions and expectations which residents themselves have once housing has been provided, is not always taken into account in our housing/planning approaches.

Planners' inability to 'be ahead' of informal settlement expansion

While there was consensus among the professionals that the planners play a measurable role in the upgrading process, there were mixed and often contradictory responses

regarding how much value they had added to the process. One of the planners considered them to be undervalued and was of the view that their input within the UISP could be assigned more value. One of the project managers was of the opinion that planners had played (and generally tend to play) a marginal role in the upgrading process. One of the engineers was categorical that planning was the ‘success or downfall of a housing project’.

An engineer, who acted as community liaison, recognised that the role of planners is limited by the information given to them. Amongst these reflections was that, ‘... the planners are planning with information they have’. Moreover, he recognised the different ways in which planners think, in comparison to engineers, and how planners’ ‘thinking’ can bring a positive difference to the UISP process.

However, from a professional engineering perspective, engineers often prioritize efficiency in the upgrading process. As a result, given the limited budget, the broader social context tends to be overlooked. However, planners and other built environment professionals can make all the difference in the upgrading process. A shift can be seen in the planners’ substantially more active role in recent projects in comparison with their more marginal role in the Thembalethu Phase 1: UISP project. Thus, any shift in planners’ potential contribution is significant when they are actively and consistently engaging in a project. Planners could and should be seen as the compass guiding the journey towards completion of a project.

The limits to the ability and agency of the planner, to ‘be ahead’ of informal development and growth was commented on by one policy manager:

... I think it’s a case of the tail wagging the dog, regarding planning. Because people invade, people informally do whatever, and we formalize where they going. (Policy Manager B)

My study suggests than planners’ inability to ‘be ahead’ of informal settlement expansion can ultimately force the establishment of housing or upgrading projects on the most unsuitable land.

The planners in this project, however, disagreed with this view and avoided this question while also placing emphasis on the fact that informal settlements are not the only pressing development challenge they need to plan for. Planner A took pride in having the power to say no, from the municipal side and to be able to withhold approval of certain UISP project layouts, especially when these did not comply with town planning principles. Planner, A saw planners as possessing the necessary assertiveness and power:

No, we’re the decision makers. ... So we ... evaluate that [UISP] application very much as we would an estate development submitted by a private developer. ... And in actual fact, we’ve turned down a human settlement development once. It wasn’t met with ... with joy. They need to start aligning the layout with ... the red book ... there’s proper standards for human settlement developments and we want them to apply it. If we are not going to ... hold them to it, nobody’s going to. (Planner A)

Moreover, in this context, the planners’ stated reason for their assertiveness is embedded in their mandate as municipal planners to ‘take care of the community’.

It is questionable to what degree real engagement with the community occurred: the implementing agent explained how UISP beneficiaries would come to their (Aurecon’s) offices when they needed help, because Aurecon employees were ‘on site’ and thus immediately accessible. Planner B explained that planners had to deal with information

given them by community liaison officers, thus they were forced to rely solely on secondary data in their attempts to deal with community-related issues.

The ‘wagging of the dog’ analogy demonstrates the normalising/‘okaying’ of ‘informal occupancy’ and of planners’ and municipal officials’ ignorance of realities on the ground. Some policy managers remarked on the complacency of the municipal planners toward the process of managing informal settlements. Such views of municipal planners’ lack of assertiveness are set against the other interviewees’ expressed views of the important role planners play. According to these perceptions and views, these planners add a ‘different’ contribution, and, while they could have more influence, the abiding impression is that they lack agency and play a minimal role in the UISP process. This real or imagined conflicting dynamic of planners, and their role in the upgrading of informal settlements is not new, nor is it different from other planning processes. Within the planning profession, this tension between planners appearing (or attempting to be) both ‘caring’ and agentic by being assertive has been a key issue in planning debates over the last two to three decades (Kamete, 2012; Åström, 2020).

During the communicative (or collaborative) turn in planning in the late 1980s (Forester, 1999; Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002), which saw the pursuit of ways to improve planning’s effectiveness and sensitivity during the implementation process, planning proudly proclaimed the centrality of interpersonal skills (Forester, 1982). Forester (1982) argued at the time that ‘planning is for people’ and, in Western democratic societies, planning practice is constrained by the ‘political realities’ of a ‘strongly capitalistic society’. He elucidated the interpersonal and other skills planners needed to acquire for them to be effective in the face of state power. I would argue that 25 years later, discussions around ‘social’ input, or the ‘secondary’ information planners draw on or are given, and how this is translated into action, remain limited. Amongst scholars, there appears to be a sense of frustration with the failure of housing provision strategies due to the difficulty planners have in fully understanding, and taking into account, social processes in the face of continual and rapid pace of informalisation. I argue that the opening up of the social ideas/process to trauma informed knowledge could throw light on deep-seated aspects of social/identity formation. These could give planners beneficial insights into the ways in which they decipher, more sensitively understand and use the information they are given.

The ‘tedious’ UISP process

Reparative instruments run the risk of being rendered ineffective by the entanglements of systemic and institutional limitations. The UISP in the Thembalethu Phase 1 project posed different challenges for the various professionals involved. Core frustrations related to the duration of, and delays in, the process and in the community’s response to these delays:

... it’s [UISP] a frustration for us as well. I mean, we can control the process, we suppose [to] manage it, but we also in the hands of the municipality; sometimes it delays it that take so long, so ... so long in the community on the ground, they can’t understand. It’s impossible for them to understand why it takes two years to get the plans approved you know. (Project Manager A)

Additional challenges posed in the planning of a large-scale upgrading project were linked not only to the UISP tool but to the scale of implementation and the importance of speedy implementation to keep up with the rate of influx of settlers:

... the problem in Thembalethu is the ... the sheer volume of everything and the speed, it happens. And ... and I fear that, from a [general] planning perspective, it takes it [UISP] ... takes too long. UISP and informal settlements is a thing that needs quick intervention. (Policy Manager B)

In addition, the reliance of the UISP on funding mechanisms inhibits developments and the progress of projects. These delays in turn influence land availability. Thus, the challenge becomes containing informal settlements or, if a settlement happens to be growing on a green field site, protecting the land in ways which enable the UISP project to proceed as planned. In this context, fingers point at the municipality and its inability to 'stop land invasions'.

In addition, planners find that, whilst trying to do their job as implementing agents, land earmarked for upgrading has not been protected in line with environmental legislation. This results in reports that have already undergone a long approval process having to be restarted, due to the arrival of new of informal settlers. Although protection of earmarked land is the responsibility of their client, the George municipality, planners' requests to ensure timely protection of the land are received with excuses from the municipality.

Professionals were unanimous regarding the need to speed up the UISP process. While, as implementing agent, they are cognisant of the nature of informal settlements and make concerted efforts to speed up the work of their professional team, they felt their efforts were not reciprocated by the municipality and Department of Human Settlements:

You know it's [UISP] a very good tool, but we sometimes, well not sometimes, we always struggle with ... uh ... uhm ... We as a professional team you know, us, town planners, architects, everything like that we come to a decision quite quickly, ... and we get to an end product, and then it's the internal paperwork at the municipality and at the housing department which takes very, very long. (Engineer A)

This frustration stems from a deep understanding of informal settlements and their upgrading on the part of professionals who also understand the consequence delays can have for both the upgrading process and the residents. This understanding does not seem to have carried over to municipalities and the Department of Human Settlements nor be reflected in how these organs of the state manage their teams when it comes to approvals for UISP projects. One of the professionals speculated on the failure of municipalities, after more than 10 years, to keep pace with the engineers' understanding of, and approach to, the upgrading process:

So sometimes I believe ... on the end client's side there is not always the ... they haven't made the change over yet. Like what we've done on our side. You know our town planners, our engineers, you know our way of thinking has changed drastically from what it was [in] 2009. (Engineer A)

This ‘change’ has largely to do with them as consultants having ‘mastered’ this UISP tool, and, when it comes to design, having a better understanding than the municipalities of what ‘works’. Thus, one could infer a degree of insensibility toward informal settlement upgrading design on the part of planners in municipalities. This results in a misunderstanding of what constitutes an appropriate design and layout for informal settlements, which in turn implicates approvals. Engineer A explains how, since the Phase 1: UISP project, both the thinking around design and the implementation process of upgrading programmes have changed significantly and in a developmental way:

If I would do that [Thembalethu Phase 1: UISP Project] now again, that layout would look completely different, even with the same erf sizes. . . . if I get Planner B in here, he’ll tell you exactly the same story. If we have to, with the knowledge and experience that we have picked up in the past 10, 11 years, that would look completely different now and it would be a more neighbourhood friendly design and maybe even cost less. (Engineer A)

A different slant to the speed and efficiency approach, from an implementing agent professional perspective, one which complies with the ‘tedious’ UISP process whilst at the same time managing communities’ expectations of the UISP, makes the implementation process more difficult because the provision is not ‘happening quick enough’ resulting in community protests. The greatest challenge for the implementing agent is facilitating a clear understanding and agreement between the municipality and the community. Community protest action can cause further delay to the already protracted, ‘tedious’ UISP process, together with delayed responses from both province and the George municipality. For this reason, the implementing agent’s role as facilitator and mediator becomes critical to reaching these agreements.

However, adopting a participatory process guarantees neither the desired result nor stability, since the beneficiary communities are not homogenous and their leaders may have disproportionate power to gate keep and disrupt. In the case of Thembalethu, the implementation of the UISP has sparked informal settlement growth because the community sees the upgrading as an opportunity for housing assistance. This growing ‘hunger’ for assistance has sparked a revolt amongst the backyard dwellers (who represent themselves as law-abiding citizens) group whose agenda in acting ‘illegally’ by starting to set up their own informal settlements is to receive state assistance, thus forcing the Municipality’s hand.

Built environment professionals in the study were in agreement that clear communication with beneficiaries and the project team is both a challenge and critical to the success of the UISP process.

It is interesting to note the various ways in which the contributions from the different professionals added to the success of the UISP process. However, what we see clearly reflected in these is the discord between the implementing agent and local government. This discord can be seen in local government’s reluctance to participate directly in the project/process. This is evident in their lack of responsiveness and sensitivity to the community and their lack of urgency in mobilizing their team to manage informal settlements at the required speed. The role of the implementing agent is counter-intuitive compared to how the private sector is usually portrayed in upgrading discourses. It is also apparent how the implementing agents managed the ‘speed’ of the upgrading process compared to the municipality. What these challenges related to the UISP project show is, first, the degree to which the time a project takes is essential in

securing funding, second, in order to forestall ‘invasion’ or resistance, the community must be ‘happy’, third that, housing is delivered, and fourth, that the client (local government) is ‘happy’. The findings reveal the critical importance of timing (or getting the project done within clear time frameworks). This holds a mirror up to the weaknesses of existing institutional systems around upgrading which lack the necessary muscle to design (and have the capacity to manage and ‘hold’) a more comprehensive human settlement-producing, one that moves beyond physical assistance, to address emotional/psychological dimensions of this housing transition for affected residents.

Conclusion

As we contemplate a future of rapidly proliferating informal settlements, I consider it both important and urgent that planners reflect deeply on the argument of Kekana *et al.* (2023, p. 3711) that ‘understanding the dynamics of human settlements is a pre-requisite for sustainable development and environmental management’. From this, I see the advantages of providing planners and policy-makers with the space and opportunity to acknowledge and the existence of communal trauma within informal settlements and to understand and respond to it. While this paper has focused on what a greater knowledge and awareness around what ‘repair’ can teach us about the dynamics of planning practices from the top-down, the same is true of bottom-up perspectives – both are needed if we are to humanize planning. We need to re-imagine ‘repair’ through upgrading programmes which remain outcome and delivery focused, and which are primarily driven by speed and adequate funding. A more human and sensitive approach could assist our understanding of the process of reproduction of informal settlements and how we think about urban development in more holistic and sensitive ways. This would enhance our awareness of the lack of imagination and capability among built environment professionals to make management upgrading processes meaningful and sustainable for the residents of these settlements. Thus, I would argue that informal settlement residents must be given equal voice and agency as both a pre-requisite for upgrading informal settlements and to represent a deeper consideration of our common humanity. Thus, the growing need for an interface between top-down and bottom-up requires an approach that would extend beyond tick-box participation models, to a more comprehensive approach. Such an approach requires a rethinking of our definition of ‘decency’ and of ‘quality’ neighbourhoods and brings into sharp focus the ‘human’ in human settlements. In addition, the emphasis should be placed on the institutional ‘work’ that needs to be done to improve top-down processes. Thus, a re-thinking of planning’s communicative, activist role in navigating institutional and structural limitations and developing avenues of repair becomes imperative when addressing informal settlements in the third decade of the 21st century.

Notes

1. UISP stages explained: <https://mbuisp.org/homepage/project-overview/uisp-explained/> (14 June 2022).
2. http://www.dhs.gov.za/sites/default/files/documents/national_housing_2009/4_Incremental_Interventions/5%20Volume%204%20Upgrading%20Infromal%20Settlement.pdf (8 April 2020:13).

3. http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=4286&id=240 (27 August 2021).
4. http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=4286&id=240 (27 August 2021).
5. <https://www.aurecongroup.com/about/latest-news/2014/jul/george-and-mossel-bay-receive-govan-mbeki-awards> (August 2021).
6. Due to the upgrading project being administered by a small team, I do not include a table of the professionals involved and their roles, as this would compromise anonymity.
7. <https://mbuisp.org/homepage/project-overview/uisp-explained/> (20 February 2023).

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Interviewees

Personal Communications

- Policy Manager A. (2018) Personal communication, 02 August
- Policy Manager B. (2021) Personal communication, 04 February
- Planner A. (2021) Personal communication, 02 February
- Planner B. (2021) Personal communication, 03 February
- Engineer A. (2021) Personal communication, 04 February
- Engineer C. (2021) Personal Communication, 03 February
- Community Liaison A. (2021) Personal Communication, 02 February
- Community Liaison B and Engineer B (Same person played both roles in the project). 2021. Personal Communication, 02 February