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Just housing: Constructing a theological praxis-agenda in a (South) African city

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Against the backdrop of Africa's urban revolution and the vastly unequal housing patterns in most African cities, this article argues for just housing to be a theological praxis-agenda. Drawing from a very local journey in one South African city, it considers David Korten's four generations of development as a possible framework to guide such a theological praxis-agenda in (South) African cities.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: It proposes simultaneous actions of relief, development, advocacy and global solidarity, grounded in an immersed faith, if the church is to contribute to housing justice in African cities.

Keywords: Housing justice; a praxis-approach; *oikos*-theology; relief; development; advocacy; global solidarity.

Introduction

'Africa's urban revolution' (eds. Parnell & Pieterse 2014) raises enormous challenges for constructing liveable, lovable, healthy and sustainable human settlements (cf. Aguilar Ramirez 2020; Osman 2021). The rate of urbanisation in Africa, for the first time in history, surpassed all other continents. By 2050, 3 of the 10 largest cities in the world will be African, and by the end of this century, 7 of the 10 largest cities (cf. Fleck 2023; Satterthwaite 2016). One can hardly imagine cities of 40 and 50 million people, and adding to that the reality of very challenged infrastructure, it certainly presents a daunting task.

Homelessness, landlessness and precarious housing are the norm in many African cities; and urban planning and design generally favour the few. African cities are seldom the deliberate and consistent focus of theological enquiry, and the creation of affordable, sustainable and aesthetically pleasing housing and human settlements, in solidarity with the urban poor, even less of a theological focus.

In this article, I trace a journey of constructing a theological praxis-agenda for housing and spatial transformation in one (South) African city. Using David Korten's (1990) four generations of development – relief, community development, advocacy and policy-making, and global networks for systemic change – I describe a theological agenda that is praxis-based, and, simultaneously, at work in all four generations, in an attempt to contribute to *just housing* for the urban poor.

Just housing, or housing justice, is when conditions are created that ensure fair access to appropriate, accessible and affordable housing to all people, regardless of ethnicity, gender, race, economics, and so forth. It includes secure tenure, protection against exploitative housing practices, fair spatial distribution of housing and inclusionary housing policies.

It is an unfolding praxis-agenda and methodology that fuses (1) immersions of solidarity with (2) critical socio-ecclesial-spatial analysis, (3) fostering alternative social imaginaries and (4) proposing and/or enacting liberatory interventions, while (5) being grounded in 'lived faith' (or a spirituality of urban space) (cf. De Beer 2012:251–277; 2023a:85–114; cf. De Beer 2023b).

In constructing such an agenda, it moves continuously between crisis interventions, advisory services, housing design and development, planning and policy processes, land and housing advocacy and activism, and citizens' education. It is not just (about) housing, but it is a response to a cry, for housing, living and cities that are just. I propose this as a possible framework for theological consideration in African cities everywhere.

Note: Special collection: Just housing. The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Just housing: Transdisciplinary perspectives from theology and the built environment', under the expert guidance of guest editors Stephan F. de Beer and Thomas Wabel.

The challenge

Sixty-two per cent of African urban dwellers live in informal settlements (eds. Pieterse & Simone 2013:19–35), with the associated challenges of limited infrastructure, lack of access to urban resources and often precarious legal arrangements. Migration into African cities constantly outpaces the ability of local governments to create new urban settlements, sufficient housing and related physical and social infrastructure. Are African cities literally ticking time-bombs, or are they also places of great potential and innovation, that could usher in urban forms never before imagined?

In South African cities in the past decade or so, the number of backyard dwellings on formal properties has started to surpass the number of informal dwellings in informal settlements; and in the City of Tshwane, apart from its 231 informal settlements, the number of backyard dwellings has grown by 393% between 2001 and 2016 (Hamman, Mkhize & Götz 2018).

What is from a theological point of view of concern, is the relative silence of African theologians and the African church on issues of African urbanisation, and, specifically, the development of sustainable and flourishing human settlements, in the form of housing and related infrastructure.

There are relatively few churches on the continent known to engage the housing challenges of African cities in proactive, constructive and contextually sound ways; or, if they exist, their work is seldom well-documented and disseminated.

I assert the necessity for a faith-based housing agenda in African cities, or, to discern a theological praxis-agenda that centres the task of just housing.

Discerning a theological praxis-agenda

Ignatius Swart and I co-edited an edition on urban public theology in South Africa in which we advocated for an urban theological praxis-agenda (Swart & De Beer 2014). Here, I focus this agenda specifically on urban housing in a (South) African city.

Oikos-theology

Already in the early 1990s, Sallie McFague (1991:12–15) spoke of the necessity of earth theologies, urging for action as time was not on our side. She reflected on the pending climate crisis, natural degradation of natural resources and human exploitation of the earth. Although she spoke of oikos-theology in the broadest sense of the word, I suggest that such theologies should include attending in deliberate, systematic and pragmatic ways to the concrete housing situations of people everywhere. And here, in particular, the housing conditions of African urban dwellers, also recognising the close proximity between the effects of climate change and the housing vulnerabilities of the African urban dwellers.

A praxis-approach

McFague (1991:12–15) emphasises a theological shift to a praxis-approach, containing 'an element of the prophetic' which at times could be a 'dangerous' enterprise. It is not neutral, apathetic or aloof theological work that McFague, Segundo (1976) and others had in mind, but a theological praxis expressed in concrete concerns and commitments:

> [*T*]heological reflection is a *concerned* affair, concerned that this constructive thinking be on the side of the well-being of the planet and all its creatures. (McFague 1991:14)

McFague (1991:12–15) speaks of how theological constructs have sometimes been liberating, but often, if not mostly, been 'oppressive, patriarchal and provincial'. McFague (1991) continues that the challenge of theological work lies in it being 'a prophetic activity, announcing and interpreting the sacrifice love of God to *all* of creation', with a:

> [*P*]lanetary agenda … that beckons and challenges us to move beyond nationalism, militarism, limitless economic growth, consumerism, uncontrollable population growth and ecological deterioration. (p. 15)

A search for a just housing agenda in urban Africa will need to contend with the reality of nationalism, consumerism, population growth and ecological deterioration. What McFague (1991) clearly articulates, is that these are not constructs far-away from ourselves. To the contrary, she holds:

> In ways that have never before been so clear and stark, we have met the enemy and know it is ourselves. (p. 15)

A theological-praxis agenda committed to just housing, will be exactly that: concerned, committed and praxis-based, which is to be immersed, deconstructive, imaginative and constructive, constantly fuelled by a 'lived faith' insisting that the redemptive work of Christ includes the transformation of our own minds and hearts; and our ecclesial and institutional structures; while it is also about the regeneration of African cities in ways that will ensure just dwellings for all people. It is at once deeply personal, recognising our own need for safe spaces and secure dwellings, and our own complicity in dealing housing exclusions; and deeply political, as we acknowledge the forces that deny many from accessing such.

Fusing horizons

A theological praxis-agenda for just housing should never remain a conversation theologians have with themselves alone. With Swart (De Beer & Swart 2014), we tried to argue that an urban public theology will by definition have to fuse various horizons in how it articulates itself. We spoke of five intersections: (1) southern urbanisms and the factor of unprecedented urban migration; (2) a 'right to the city' and urbanisation from below; (3) a reclaiming of the commons; (4) the making of 'good cities' and (5) actors of faith and urban social life.

Locating our theological work in this way, places it in a trans-disciplinary mode of collaborating and discerning with a wide range of other disciplines, publics and communities.

Edgar Pieterse (2014) asks critical questions from the perspective of southern urbanism, which should apply to our urban theological work:

> How best can meaningful knowledge about the city be produced? What should we produce knowledge for? And what do these questions mean for the politics of knowledge production in the global South? (n.p.)

How best can meaningful theological knowledge about the city be produced, that could impact upon the quest for just housing, and shape the politics of knowledge production, in South African cities, but also in the Global South? A starting point would be to locate our theological work in and with precarious housing contexts – informal settlements, abandoned inner city buildings, housing occupations and street-based populations – to be re-educated, and to allow questions and contestations from these spaces to inform the discourses and commitments we engage in. The work of socio-ecclesial-spatial analysis is not only enhanced by deliberately locating ourselves in such contexts, but also gain new depth.

According to De Beer & Swart (2014), there exists a tension globally:

> [*B*]etween approaches that seek to eradicate slums and informal settlements on the one hand, through urban management and technocratic approaches, and 'right to the city' approaches … that advocate for management and development 'from below', not necessarily eradicating slums and informal settlements, but providing land rights and secure tenure … whilst affirming people's right to the city. (n.p.)

Swart and I asked, 'how to activate and mobilise actors of faith as solidarity partners of "right to the city" movements in the present-day South African context?' (De Beer & Swart 2014). This will require close dialogical relationships with social movements, grass-root activists and public interest lawyers, who are actively working towards concretising a right to the city for all people, but particularly for those currently denied such a right.

How do we understand *the commons* from an Oiko-theological perspective? Who is included in the urban commons, and how radical do we dare to be in contemplating the just distribution of urban land and resources to ensure full participation of the urban poor, including migrants from beyond the boundaries of nation-state? If the production of dominant theological constructs remains shaped by their positionality in neoliberal capitalist institutions of higher education, is it even possible to consider the commons that will truly honour every living being on earth?

Can we ever think of the city as '*good*' in the way conceptualised by geographer Ash Amin (2006:1009–1023) or theologian Elaine Graham (2008:7–26), if the majority of the city's population live in overpopulated and underserviced urban slums? Amin (2006:1021), for example, considers the good city to be a city that exemplifies 'an ethic of care' that incorporates 'social justice, equality and mutuality'. Yet, what is the relationship between the 'good news' and the fact that the urban majority in African cities rarely experience the city as good? Or, can we discern traces of the good, resilient and creative city, in those parts of the city that are too often criminalised, vilified and devalorised: the 'zink forest', as Vuyani Vellem (2014:207–221) spoke of the informal city, offering prophetic clues of a different kind of urban imaginary?

Considering the work of authors such as Christa Kuljian (2013), Carole Rakodi (2014:82–109) and others, who trace *religious actors and their impact on urban environments*, it seemed clear to Swart and myself that this should be a significant thematic contour for a South African urban theological praxis-agenda – 'how actors of faith … are influencing and shaping urban social life in South Africa but also Africa' (De Beer & Swart 2014). More precisely, in relation to the question of housing justice, it needs to be explored how actors of faith are shaping urban land and spatial arrangements, and the built environment, if at all. Although religious discourse often centres the importance of family and the imperative of healing, these categories, as often, get reduced to personal moralism and individual well-being. And yet, the well-being of individuals, families and communities is compromised in the face of severe forms of housing precariousness.

A theological agenda that takes housing justice seriously will need to expand itself beyond the ways of doing theology it has been accustomed to. As Swart and I noted (2014), an urban theological praxis-agenda is 'to notably expand its methodological scope and expertise, and to show a new willingness to, in a learning mode, involve itself in new spaces of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarship'.

De Beer and Swart (2014) asserted, and I echo it in the context of the housing question:

> Ours is not a neutral contribution but locates itself very specifically in a praxis-approach that endeavours to engage the city through an on-going dance of action and reflection, asking: Whose city is it? Who has a right to the city? Whose knowledge shapes the city? And how do people and institutions of faith – particularly those of us who seek to embody Jesus – participate with a wide range of other partners, to reclaim the commons and make space for all, in order to make good cities that resemble good news in rather concrete ways? (n.p.)

In relation to the challenge of housing, it surfaces questions of the relationship between theology and the built environment; theology and spatial justice; theology and human settlement development; theology and housing, shelter or home. It prompts us to reflect ethically on informal settlements, slum upgrading projects, homelessness and urban gentrification. It inevitably lands us in the land-debate from which we cannot escape theologically – whether in South Africa, Palestine or the United States – as it concerns one of God's most basic resources, which is finite, and how best it should be managed, stewarded, shared or returned.

From local relief to global solidarity: An unfolding praxis-agenda

In the next section, I describe an unfolding praxis-agenda engaging issues of housing and spatial transformation, using

David Korten's (1990) four generations of development. It is an agenda that has evolved in the City of Tshwane (Pretoria) over the past three decades, in response to attempts to work with many others to undo the apartheid city and to create signs of socio-spatial transformation.

We live in a city that historically dictated where people could live, according to their racial classification; and the poorest sectors of society usually lived on the furthermost ends of the city, lacking affordable and fair access to the city's resources and opportunities. Post-apartheid, new and creative housing and settlement forms had to be discerned and constructed, to help overcome the severities of our unequal past. Although remarkable progress has been made in some ways to overcome our exclusionary urban past, we are still very far from undoing the apartheid city to its core.

Considering access to secure and dignified housing, which for many might mean the difference between life and death, is not just a humanistic, human settlement or social justice imperative, although it is all these things. Theologically speaking, however, working for housing justice should be embraced as an extension of our pastoral care. If the 'flock of the shepherd' lacks safe, secure space to dwell in, this becomes a theological and pastoral imperative.

A praxis-agenda for housing justice should be seen as a diaconal and pastoral imperative (cf. De Beer 2023), but should also take centre stage in our liturgies, preaching and ministries of discipleship, acknowledging the homelessness or precarious housing of some among us, as critical issues in the household of God.

I will now attend to four elements in such an unfolding praxis-agenda.

Relief

In the context of housing, relief refers to short-term interventions such as crisis support, referrals, overnight shelters or temporary transitional housing.

My own journey with housing started with the creation of shelters for boys living on the streets around 1991, and then for girls coming from difficult circumstances and finding themselves at risk, a few years later.

In 1993, the organisation[1] I was then a part of started the first non-racial shelter for women who found themselves homeless or in some sort of crisis. In the latter part of the 1990s, we started both a palliative care facility for terminally ill persons living on the streets, and a transitional housing facility for people living with chronic mental illness, being deinstitutionalised but with nowhere to go to.

Not only did these different expressions provide immediate relief and transitional support, but in most cases they helped to facilitate an immediate arrest of a downward spiral of vulnerability for people, offering access to housing options people ordinarily would not have had by themselves.

These expressions, even though being of a short-term nature, made visible some of society's invisible fault lines – the fact that young girls had to fend for themselves on the streets or in notorious inner city buildings; that homeless persons with low CD4 counts were allowed to die of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) on the streets, as public hospitals discharged them; and the lack of institutional care that is appropriate and long-term for people with psycho-social illnesses.

All these short-term interventions were both expressions of care and of justice, as they mediated access to care for people who ordinarily lacked such access, and made visible some hidden societal fault lines. Care in itself became an expression of justice.

When hard lockdown for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was announced, South Africa's President instructed all municipalities to create temporary shelters for homeless persons to be able to protect themselves from the virus. What Mr. Ramaphosa failed to realise was the absence of a national policy with budget allocations for homelessness, leaving municipalities to their own devices to try implement what the President required of them.

In our city, we were able to create 27 temporary COVID-19 shelters in only 10 days, serving 2000 people, through providing shelter space, access to psycho-social and primary health care, and counselling support, in safe and caring communities. Physical distancing and personal isolation were made possible in these facilities, when it was required (cf. De Beer & Hugo 2021).

Local communities, churches and faith-based organisations opened their facilities, and local and provincial governments, Islamic relief organisations, and many other individuals supported this initiative through allocating resources.

Where churches opened their doors, it stemmed from a theology that embraced the 'least of these' as expressions of Christ. It was surprising to see which churches welcomed unhoused people into their spaces and which not; which leaders and bishops encouraged it and which not.

It also accentuated that relief and/or care, instead of being discarded as short-term actions that might maintain the status quo, gave visibility to invisible and/or shunned populations; enacted care as justice; and insisted on the right to care for everyone regardless of whatever status they held.

Development

Early on in the work of inner city churches and the Tshwane Leadership Foundation, we realised that people 'graduate' from shelters or temporary facilities, given the right support

1.Tshwane Leadership Foundation is a faith-based organisation that was started in 1993 with the support of six inner city churches in Pretoria, South Africa.

and secure employment, but then often found it impossible to consolidate their lives, due to limited access to secure and affordable housing options.

A lack of affordable housing in the open market rendered people homeless, left them stuck in temporary housing, or resulted in people staying in over crowed buildings where landlords often exploit the urban poor. The lack of affordable housing in strategic economic nodes, with access to good quality schools, affordable public transport and possible employment, remains a lingering effect of the apartheid spatial fabric which persists to this day.

The faith-based movement I was a part of acknowledged this housing challenge, and we created a social housing company,[2] with a vision to construct and develop affordable and special needs housing in good locations, integrating low-income people well into urban neighbourhoods.

We also learnt that housing should not be developed in isolation from other infrastructure and social services. In our largest development of 738 units, we rejoiced in the fact that families who could never live in close proximity to their jobs were now within walking distance. However, more than 700 children moved with their families into this complex, often struggling to access schools as government failed to invest in new inner city schools, despite densification of the inner city, and quasi-private schools of dubious quality emerged in response. Children often commuted out of town to be able to access decent schools.

It became clear that housing should be part of a more holistic neighbourhood regeneration strategy – including housing options that are affordable enough for low-income urban households, to prevent displacement through exclusivist urban renewal programmes; but also attending to appropriate socio-economic and physical infrastructure that complement the housing product – safe streets, decent parks, recreational facilities, affordable shops, good schools and access to affordable health care. Without such holistic interventions, housing provision will fall short of providing optimal living environments. Furthermore, housing provision that fails to engage the wider aspects of community or social well-being, might result in such housing being located in neighbourhoods experiencing a downward trajectory, while the housing provider fails to participate in arresting such negative trends.

A recent development was to create housing for older persons who came from homelessness or risked finding themselves on the streets, unless there was a housing product aligned to their only form of income, which was a government grant. Instead of being short-term relief, this intervention mediates long-term infrastructure to arrest homelessness of older persons. It now needs to be asked how such an intervention can translate into policy imperatives, supporting replication of what is a good practice, in ways that will end homelessness for all older persons in the city.

2.Yeast City Housing was created as a faith-based social housing company in 1997/1998 by the work of the Tshwane Leadership Foundation.

Without a properly articulated theology that understands the church's possible role as a broker of local resources and a facilitator of transformational development processes, churches will not embark on pro-active interventions beyond their own liturgical walls. Old persons will have no access to decent housing; unhoused persons will experience the indignities of the streets; and the spatial fabric of the city will remain biased towards people who are resource-rich.

The prophetic injunction to be 'repairers of streets with dwellings in them' should be understood as a concrete mandate for urban spatial intervention that translates prophetic imaginaries into an ethical and justly shaped built environment. The prophets did not waste time on rhetorical metaphors, nor should we.

Advocacy

In the process of engaging with housing processes, it became evidently clear that spatial development, land use and housing delivery are never neutral. These are contested political processes, determining the future shape of a city, who is included and who not, and who is benefiting from the development of certain parcels of land and who not. Even though it should be the norm, especially in post-apartheid South Africa, ensuring well-located and affordable housing for the urban poor remains an exception, and is almost a miracle whenever it happens.

To prevent people from becoming homeless, or to secure affordable housing options out of homelessness, or to inform land arrangements that include housing for low-income families, or to work against displacement that results from gentrification, the postures of relief or development are simply inadequate. Up next, I illustrate two areas in which our collective actions in Tshwane, and now beyond, had to become intentional about advocacy, including awareness-raising, coalition-building, policy work and advocacy education. The one area is homelessness and the other area is housing activism.

Homelessness

Realising at some point that the absence of a policy on homelessness in our city would continuously render persons on the streets very vulnerable, not only to the elements, but also to abuse by law enforcement agencies and the city itself, we advocated for policy, and eventually drafted a research-driven policy for the City (cf. City of Tshwane 2019). More recently, we drafted a strategy to help implement the policy more optimally. Yet, the existence of a policy in itself is no guarantee for changed practices, the allocation of appropriate budgets or smarter ways of working in disparate municipal departments. Effective implementation requires on-going advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, and public accountability.

Even the rather incredible COVID-19 response to care for homeless communities in the City of Tshwane, only happened

after a short but very public and vociferous advocacy campaign, calling the city and province to account to offer appropriate support (De Beer & Hugo 2021). At the same time, COVID-19 revealed the fault lines at all levels of government and had us engage the policy unit in the National Presidency to advocate for a platform to craft a national homelessness policy. This led to the National Department of Social Development recently commissioning a consulting team to draft a Green Paper on homelessness, with the hope that it would eventually result in legislation.

A National Homeless Network (U-Turn 2024) was established in 2017, to share lessons learnt, to broadcast promising practices, and to inform local, provincial and national policy processes. It is rather telling that at least 50% of the members of this Network comes from faith-based organisations committed to care for the urban poor.

Ironically, the general public and government officials in South Africa often delink homelessness from housing, which seems to require a deliberate educative process to make the links clearer. The lack of sufficient spatial transformation post-apartheid led to low-income workers opting for homelessness, as a livelihood strategy, saving their small incomes and sending it to their families, while they live precariously in the open.

Housing activism

Out of our transdisciplinary engagement in various contested urban sites, where people live informally or in particularly precarious circumstances, we recognised the need for more intentional capacity to be developed among grass-root urban activists. These activists are often passionate about their housing futures, but their advocacy is often non-strategic, uncoordinated and lacking that which could trigger change.

A university-based research unit, a faith-based non-profit, and a human rights law non-profit organisation (NPO) created the Tshwane Urban Activist school as a collaborative, now working with nine communities across our City, providing support as local activists contemplate integrated housing solutions and strategies to secure such housing futures. One of the outcomes of this process is that communities that never had contact with each other before, are now finding solidarity with each other, learning from each other's struggles, but also building agency together. It is hoped that the confrontational politics that often characterise urban housing activism can find more frequent expressions of constructive dialogical spaces, where concrete urban futures can be co-constructed by those most affected in local neighbourhoods, and those officially tasked with the planning of the city.

One of the factors that contributed to the Activist School is the anti-eviction work that was done over the past two decades in a more ad hoc manner by local community-based organisations, with support from the same human rights non-profit that specialised in land, housing and migration matters. This work is grounded in the imperatives, protections and provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (cf. South Africa, 1996), granting a right to decent housing to all who live in South Africa.

In a context where landlessness, homelessness and inequality are rife, an advocacy mandate would include encouragement of churches to consider the use of their own land and property for purposes of housing justice. Concretely speaking, through a faith-based housing company, three churches were physically converted to include a social housing component, and a fourth church is now preparing itself for a similar journey.

The aforementioned considerations will not make sense theologically, without carefully crafted theologies of socio-spatial justice, that try to understand the interface of land, settlement development, housing and human flourishing. Such theologies need to be expressed in raising up ethical faith-based leaders who will stand in deep solidarity with communities and movements that work for housing justice, and a broader right to the city.

Global solidarity

Issues around land and housing, homelessness and settlement development are not isolated local issues, but pervasive across the globe, in different but also in strikingly similar manners.

Ending homelessness

In 2021, the United Nations (UN) for the first time adopted a resolution on homelessness, which makes a clear link between ending homelessness and access to affordable housing. In 2023, the General Secretary of the UN had to report to member states about the global status of homelessness and affordable housing with a view of mobilising global commitment to end homelessness.

The Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH 2019) works closely with UN Habitat to make homelessness a much more visible imperative on the global political landscape. Their aim is to drive 'a global movement to end street homelessness'. As a Vanguard City of IGH, our housing praxis is not only locally grounded but globally connected. It is probably no coincidence either that the IGH is located at DePaul University in Chicago, deeply shaped by the Vincentian theology of incarnation and Christ's deep solidarity with humankind.

Slums, informal settlements and housing justice

Different slum and shack dweller movements internationally started to connect with each other to form a global solidarity movement for land and housing justice. Slum [*or shack*] Dwellers International (SDI) (2023) recognised the necessity to foster a global movement to voice the concerns and aspirations of the almost 1 billion urban dwellers living in urban slums and shacks.

Sem Terra in Brazil (Movement Dos Trabalhadores Rural Sem Terra, 2024) and Abahlali baseMjondolo (n.d.) in South Africa are progressive landless movements that not only capture the imagination of socially progressive people in their home countries but also globally. At the same time, public opinion of these movements varies considerably, with many branding them illegal occupiers, while only some religious leaders stand in clear solidarity with them.

Sem Terra has built its movement around the convictions of liberation theological teachings, and organised themselves using Paolo Freire's approach of conscientisation. This happened through slum dwellers developing the tools to analyse their own contexts; understanding the systemic ways in which they are excluded from a right to the city; but also claiming their own agency in determining their own housing futures. Progressives in the Catholic Church in Brazil often stood in solidarity with Sem Terra.

Abahlali, mostly in Durban, KwaZulu Natal, but also in other parts of South Africa, has sympathy from some faith-based activists, but the institutional church at-large has been silent in its support, even in the face of more than 27 activists of Abahlali being assassinated over the past decade or so by politicians of the ruling party. One exception was always Bishop Robin Philip of the Anglican Church, who remained solid in his solidarity with this movement during his tenure as bishop, awarding them regularly with peace prizes for their work to ensure justice for the urban poor.

Reclaim the City (2023) in Cape Town, with whom some of us in our city have strong bonds, is a local social movement that organises displaced inner city people and advocate for their rightful inclusion in well-located affordable housing. They don't function in isolation but in close relationship with social movements in other parts of the world. Over the past few years, exchanges of leaders between Tshwane and Cape Town solidified our solidarity with each other's struggles and aspirations.

In our own praxis, we are being shaped through continuous dialogue with and learning from collaborators in the networks formed by the IGH, and the struggles and strategies of movements such as Reclaim the City, Abahlali, and others. Our dialogical partners often give expression to an authentic cry for urban justice from below. Just housing or housing justice in (South) African cities require intensified collaboration between local movements standing in global solidarity.

Theologies that are concerned with the integrity of the oikos, will need to immerse themselves also in the struggles for housing justice, as they are fought by social movements, grass-root organisations, and, often, vulnerable local families. This is where pastoral, public and prophetic could intersect.

Conclusion

Constructing a theological praxis-agenda in a (South) African city – towards just housing – is an imperative.

I propose a theological praxis-agenda:

- Immersing itself in the struggles of the urban poor for just housing – that is, secure tenure, prevention of eviction and informal settlement upgrading.
- Engaging in continuous social analysis to understand spatial processes and forces at work, but also ecclesial analysis to understand the church's complicity in exclusionary urban practices and potential to mediate the opposite.
- Fostering very deliberately – liturgically, pastorally and through concrete action (physical and political) – an urban imagination of a good city that is inclusive and just for all.
- Facilitating and supporting concrete local interventions, that demonstrate expressions of just housing, through relief, development, advocacy or global solidarity.

The apartheid city is still alive and well in our context, and reproducing itself in new ways today, even though it no longer occurs only along racial lines. A clear and decisive agenda for spatial transformation is critical if we are to foster cities that are inclusive, healthy, vibrant, sustainable and just. The (South) African church is mostly absent from public processes that shape housing, land development or spatial conversations.

In African cities, the distance between a relatively small political and economic elite, and the urban majority, is often stark, with urban futures being planned, officially at least, by those not living in majority communities. Too often, lingering colonial theologies uncritically accompany the ways in which African cities are shaped, unable to dismantle colonial urban patterns.

Yet, at the same time, African cities are shaped from below by the daily strategies of the urban poor to create their own informal housing and economies, complemented by mushrooming churches and vibrant forms of cultural expression. Despite attempts to curb its growth or displace it, there is a city across Africa, that is growing organically from below.

Do we find ourselves theologically protective of a dominant status quo, or in solidarity with organic expressions of city-making, that are utterances of struggle-hope, found in urban slums and informal settlements?

The theological praxis-agenda that I outline here is an organic response to local urban challenges, and not a result of setting out systematically to implement the framework of someone like Korten. As we continue in our search for housing, the need for more liberative and reconstructive actions – including the building of housing prototypes, influencing housing policy, and being in local and global solidarity with movements aspiring for housing justice – has become apparent. Korten's work provides a framework and language to that which we seek to engage in.

Seeking to provide access to housing is an expression of our faith and an ethical response to the exclusivist city. The persistent obstacles to housing the urban poor are reminders that just doing housing alone is impossible at worst, and insufficient at best, without working deliberately for housing justice and systemic change. The ways in which resources are distributed, and the unjust valorisation of land, favour the few. And that makes sustainable housing provision of the majority an impossible task. Working for just housing requires a faith equal to the task.

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Disclaimer

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