

Governmentality, Housing Design and Township Planning: Reconfiguring the Urban Order in South Africa

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During the inter-war period, the colonial world in Africa entered its crisis period which was shaped by the contradictions between maintaining effective political control with limited coercive force and ensuring the profitable articulation of metropolitan and settler capitalism with African societies. One of the key issues that emerged from this contradiction was the need to develop an effective method to control the social and geographic mobility of African workers and their families without directly resorting to coercive force. A consensus emerged among colonial administrators, municipal officials, architects and town planners about the need to build “native housing and townships” with considerable state subsidy that would also meet rigorous standards of minimum housing design and urban planning criteria for the rapidly expanding African urban population. This article seeks to elucidate the effectiveness of this strategy by drawing on a case study from South Africa.

This article is concerned with two set of overlapping and intertwined issues. First, it suggests that the design of “native housing” was not just an architectural experiment dictated by the political and economic circumstance of the interwar period. As the paper argues, the design of “native housing and township” was primarily a cultural productions and a site of considerable struggle cover the degree to which both architecture and town planning technologies were deployed as part of a wider strategy of social control and racial domination in South Africa. Second, the article is also concerned with how the domain of everyday life of African workers and their families in the newly constructed “native township” became a domain of public debate and governmentality as the state became involved to control through various regulatory and advisory bodies in dealing with the “Native problem”. The building of townships occupied one area of new social interaction in which various institutions were created by the state and new disciplines of knowledge emerged within the field of housing design and urban planning domain to legitimate and develop a new visions of regulating the daily life of African workers and their families in the urban areas. This vision was translated into a wider arena of regulating the social and geographic mobility of African workers and their families reinforcing the emerging new special order of apartheid in South Africa. The reconfiguration on the urban spatial order also accelerated the formation of new social forces which ultimately eroded the power of the apartheid state.