

THE BLACK SASH.

TRANSVAAL REGION.

FACT PAPER ON THE ALEXANDRA HOSTELS FOR THE BLACK SASH CONFERENCE, 1972.

Alexandra - an African township just beyond the municipal boundaries of Johannesburg - has fallen victim to the Government policy of Apartheid, which labels Africans working in white urban areas as temporary sojourners, to be used but not recognized as people with rights and needs of their own. One aspect of this policy is the determination not to allow Africans to sleep in the white urban areas, and as early as 1955 the "Locations in the Sky" legislation was passed, limiting the number of Africans living on the roofs of blocks of flats where they were employed. In order to make the urban areas "White by Night" it was necessary to provide alternative accommodation, and this led to the Orwellian concept of demolishing Alexandra and turning it into a vast Hostel complex to house "single" men and women, the domestic, industrial and commercial workers so essential to the smooth running of the metropolis.

The Government announced its intention of proceeding with this scheme, but with its usual capacity for turning blind eyes and deaf ears to what it does not want to see or hear, the general public simply forgot about it until, at the beginning of this year, the residents of Johannesburg, Randburg and Sandton were suddenly faced with the fact that two enormous structures had reared their ugly heads in Alexandra, that large areas had been bull-dozed, that most of those families who were legally entitled to live in Alexandra as families had been moved either to Thembisa or Meadowlands, that those who remained were to be forced to live in the Hostels as single men and women while their children were to be sent out into limbo, and that the time had come for domestic servants living in the "locations in the sky" to be moved into the Hostels.

There is nothing new in the idea of Hostels as such. African mineworkers have always been housed in them, sometimes under appalling conditions, more latterly, in some of the mines at least, under far better ones. And it should not be forgotten that mine workers are temporary sojourners with limited contracts. There have been Hostels in Diepkloof and Soweto for many years, as there have been in Langa and Nyanga and other townships. For those who are working and single and have no other accommodation, hostels have fulfilled a need, though the living conditions have, for the most part, left much to be desired.

What is new, however, is a whole city composed entirely and solely of mammoth hostels, of which the two already erected in Alexandra, one for men and one for women, are merely a beginning. These hostels are huge concrete structures, divided into identical wings, built around courtyards, designed to hold 2,700 inmates each. There is one main entrance to each hostel - a large grilled gate through which each of the 2,700 inmates will have to enter and leave. There are only 40 single rooms in each, the rest being 2- and 4-bedded for the women and 4-, 6- and 8-bedded for the men. Each dormitory/

dormitory has only one small window at eye level, the other windows running the length of the dormitory but being 6 feet high and well above eye level. There is one, single overhead light with no additional plugs and no heating. Each inmate has for his or her own private use a 2'6" bed, a narrow mattress and a locker, 1 foot wide by about 6 feet high, which must hold all possessions. Space is so limited that there are about 40 square feet per person. There are no tables and no chairs, and although the present supervisor of the women's hostel has said that she will allow the women each to have a table and a chair it is difficult to imagine how they will all be fitted into the dormitories together with other private possessions. Apart from one bar-lounge holding 300 people no other provision was made for inmates to be anywhere but on their own beds.

Cooking facilities consist of gas rings, one for every five inmates, on which each of their meals will have to be cooked before and after work. Ablution and toilet facilities consist of one bath or shower and one toilet for every 14 inmates and one washbasin for 11 inmates - all cramped together in one small ablution area. There is an 150 feet long passage between the ablution and the cooking areas, lined with dormitories. 70 people will be living, cooking, eating, washing in this one wing, and the passage is only 4 foot wide. It may be possible to live in this manner, but there will surely be much uncomfortable congestion in the passages and interminable queues waiting to cook or bath. There are limited laundry facilities - three troughs and one ironing point for 70 people, and drying laundry will have to be constantly watched. Each passage is controlled by an electronically-operated riot gate, which works from a central point. There will be no privacy ever except for those few fortunate enough to have a single room, no comfort and no security of person or property, certainly no opportunity for men and women to co-habit - be they married or single.

There is one small shop where 2,700 people must buy their food before and after work, unless they are able to do so during their working hours, and although each inmate is provided with a small food-locker in the cooking and eating area there is no refrigeration.

And this is one hostel, housing 2,700 people. If the total Alexandra plan is put into effect there will eventually be approximately 60,000 people housed in this manner - 60,000 people who have to be transported to and from work every day - whether in their own cars or in buses - 60,000 queuing endlessly for transport after they have already queued to wash and to cook - 60,000 herded together in the greatest proximity while being segregated sexually - 60,000 living an enforced unnatural existence in a city which has no married couples, no families, no children. It is a fantastic concept - something entirely new in the field of town-planning and sociological environment.

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When the general public finally woke up to what was happening the Citizens' Hostel Action Committee, which had originally been formed to combat the removal of domestic servants South of the Houghton Ridge to hostels at Diepkloof, resuscitated itself and called a public meeting, which was very well attended by hundreds of concerned citizens. It was the unanimous decision of this meeting that the Committee should take whatever action it saw fit to try to persuade the Government to change its policy on hostels. It is significant that as soon as there was a public outcry, announcements were made about plans to instal heating and provide more recreational facilities.

The Citizens' Hostel Action Committee consists of representatives of the Church, the Progressive Party, the Black Sash and citizens of Johannesburg, Randburg and Sandton. It was decided to give the protest and the appeal to the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development a wider base by organising a petition before approaching him. This was accordingly done, and over a period of two weeks, 40,000 signatures were collected in Johannesburg, Randburg and Sandton. The Minister was approached to receive a deputation, which he delegated the Deputy Minister, Dr. Piet Koornhof, to receive. There having been a change in the Cabinet in the interim, the deputation was finally received by both Dr. Koornhof and Mr. Janson.

The deputation did not achieve very much. The government will adhere to its policy of removing Africans from the White areas into Black Areas. The Minister conceded that Africans with 10 (1) (a) or (b) rights in Johannesburg would not lose them when they moved to the Alexandra hostels (another prescribed area).

The Petition requested the Minister to reconsider Government policy on hostels, to stop building hostels for married men and women, to convert the existing hostels into liveable accommodation for voluntary occupants, to build family accommodation and to permit those people presently accommodated to remain where they are. This last point is very significant, firstly because many of those living in "locations in the sky" are reasonably comfortable and do not want to move; and secondly because there is presently a waiting list of 15,000 families in Soweto for family accommodation and one of 19,000 people for hostel accommodation. These are to be left unhoused while others are to be moved from existing accommodation leaving their original rooms empty.

The Deputation took with it a memorandum dealing in principle with the negative aspects of hostel life and in particular with the shortcomings of the Alexandra Hostels. Attached to the memorandum was an appendix of papers prepared by experts in various fields, and a few of the most cogent points are included here, with the consent of the Citizens' Hostel Action Committee.

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The planning of the buildings and layout of the Alexandra area are not acceptable in terms of current Town Planning thinking, being regarded as the worst type of high-density planning with little regard to human needs. The massing together of 60,000 people introduces a new qualitative factor not experienced in previous hostels, which will both magnify present problems in hostels and create new uncharted problem areas.

Psychologically it has been found that all total institutions deny individuals freedom and dignity in both the political and physical sense - a comparison with prisons is relevant. Hostels ignore the fundamental rights of the individual, in that there is no freedom of choice. People are deprived of a clearly defined concept of social identity, self-worth and personal integrity, which leads to the development of anti-social and irresponsible behaviour. The lack of privacy leads to depression, apathy, listlessness, tensions, frustrations and resentments, grossly affecting adjustment to work and life. Institutional tyrants may control all the facilities because these have a scarcity value. This will be difficult to control and will lead to the introduction of totalitarian measures which will breed hostility. Human life in hostels will be impoverished, with possibly dire results.

Sociologically hostel housing is at variance with the cultural needs and expectations of the occupants. Africans value their privacy, as does everyone, and hostels deny adults this right. The best of hostel conditions are only acceptable if temporary. Hostel life is culturally incongruous to African family life, and the resultant frustration may lead to violence and other anti-social behaviour, including vandalism. No free association of males and females is allowed for, and deviate behaviour will be actually facilitated by the design of the hostels. The overcrowded, high density living conditions can be correlated with morbidity, a high mortality rate, crime, delinquency, prostitution, and are likely to cause faction fights, sex crimes and other misdemeanours. Disorder and violence are well-known in hostels; Dube, Germiston, Durban, Paarl, Langa and the Rhodesian riots at Harari are proof of this. Hostels are a fertile ground for crowd hysteria.

Healthwise, the lack of privacy, family, marital relationships, social roots and lebensraum have demoralising, dehumanising and brutalising effects. Extra travelling time leads to fatigue and lowered resistance to disease. Continuous noise causes inadequate sleep, and the inevitably unacceptable standards of hygiene will result in rodent breeding and the spread of disease. There may be epidemics which are likely to spread to the whole of society. A 1971 medical paper showed that the highest alcoholic rate and the/

the poorest nutrition were to be found amongst the inmates of hostels, in Soweto, and these were responsible for many medical and social disorders, including cardio-vascular ailments which are reversible with the correct diet.

To all these contra-indications must be added the facts that the hostels are to be filled, not voluntarily, but by order; that rents are inordinately high - R7 for a single room, R6 for a 2-bedded room and R5.70 for a 4-bedded room - and that this money will have to be found either by the workers themselves, who will then have that much less to send to their families in the homelands, or by their employers thus unproductively sending up their costs; that facilities are not provided on the basis of peak usage and should not have been equated with those required in factories, for they are in no way comparable; and that no provisions have really been made for "living", only for "existing", yet this is a more or less permanent way of life.

All in all, there is little to be said in defence of hostels, either in principle or as a way of life. They have been adopted as a principle because hostels appear to be the only way of housing the rootless thousands who flock to the cities as a result of the operation of the iniquitous migrant labour system. If workers are not to be permitted to live permanently at their place of work, if they are not to be permitted to have their families living with them, if they are not to be recognised as human beings but as so many cogs in the white industrial, commercial and domestic machine, then they can be housed as so many numbers in barracks - and they are. Every inmate will bear the same number as his bed, his mattress, his locker. Living arrangements for them are so minimal that they could only be acceptable at all if they were strictly temporary, yet the vast majority of migrant workers will have to spend their entire lives living under such conditions, for there is no hope of their ever gaining permanent status in the white cities, and there is no employment for them in their own homelands. Conditions have been designed not to provide some sort of a home for them but merely to provide the basic essential of some place to put their weary bodies at night. The installation of riot gates are a sure indication that the authorities were aware that they were themselves actually creating a situation which would be expected to lead to riots. This beggars understanding.

Migrant labour is a by-product of Apartheid, and hostels are a by-product of migrant labour. The Black Sash condemns all three.

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