



2025

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## **The strategic use of land in the fight against gentrification. The case of Reclaim the City in Woodstock (Cape Town)**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the spatial dimension of the repertoire of action employed by Reclaim the City, an urban movement located in Woodstock, Cape Town. Based on interviews and ethnographic observations, it analyses the occupation of a large public building in a gentrified area of the district as a crucial socio-geographical resource for the struggle against tenant evictions. In addition to curbing some of the mechanisms of gentrification, the occupation emerges as a means of redressing past spatial injustices embedded in the family histories of many coloured residents of Woodstock. By shifting territorial claims to the city centre, taking their claims to court and challenging the municipality, the movement seeks to transform spatial production in Cape Town and to disrupt the segregated spatial structure inherited from apartheid.

**Keywords:** urban movement, repertoire of action, gentrification, right to the city, South Africa

### **Résumé**

Le présent article explore la dimension territoriale du répertoire d'action utilisé par le mouvement Reclaim the City à Woodstock, au Cap. Fondé sur des entretiens et des observations ethnographiques, il analyse l'occupation d'un bâtiment public situé dans une partie gentrifiée de ce quartier comme une ressource sociogéographique dans la lutte contre les expulsions locatives. En plus de freiner certains mécanismes de

gentrification, l'occupation s'impose en tant que moyen de redresser des injustices spatiales passées, ancrées dans l'histoire familiale de nombreux habitants *coloureds* de Woodstock. Les actions menées par ce mouvement ailleurs dans la ville montrent comment les revendications des personnes expulsées montent en généralité. En se déplaçant vers le centre-ville, en saisissant la justice et en interpellant les pouvoirs publics, Reclaim the City tente de transformer la structure spatiale ségréguée du Cap héritée de l'apartheid.

**Mots-clés :** mouvement urbain, répertoire d'action, gentrification, droit à la ville, Afrique du Sud

Deeply marked by the apartheid model of segregation, South African cities are textbook examples of spatial injustice (Soja, 2010; Chapman, 2015). Despite the efforts made since the advent of democracy in 1994 to curb racial fragmentation, the public authorities have had little success in eradicating the "ghost of apartheid" (Pieterse, 2006). Public policies favourable to the real estate market (Miraftab, 2007; Didier et al., 2009), rising property prices and barriers to land redistribution have exacerbated social and spatial inequalities (Pieterse, 2002; Lemanski, 2007). Woodstock, a district on the outskirts of Cape Town, is a disputed area. Subject to a process of gentrification, Woodstock is a focal point for tensions and divergent interests between public authorities, private companies, middle-class and affluent residents and their working-class counterparts. In 2016, some of the residents who had been evicted or threatened with eviction formed the Reclaim the City (RTC) organisation and occupied the former Woodstock hospital.

This contribution focuses on RTC's repertoire of territorial action, understood as the set of forms of action deployed in one or more spaces to oppose their appropriation (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Territory, characterised as a delimited portion of space over which an authority is exercised, then comes to constitute a locus of struggle from which the legitimacy of this power can be challenged.

The goal here is therefore to explore both the appropriation of the neighbourhood by the social movement and the way in which that movement made the transition from specific demands, centred on the occupation, to more general claims relating to the right to remain in the neighbourhood and challenging the post-apartheid urban development model, thereby upsetting the segregated spatial and racial configuration of Cape Town. How does the RTC movement use urban space to challenge its appropriation by real estate developers and make its demands visible? How is the use of certain spaces diverted and employed to promote spatial justice? As

a contribution to the literature on the links between space and collective action (Auyero, 2005; Cossart and Talpin, 2015), this article aims to examine the way in which mobilisations for, by and from the territory play a part in the recomposition of territory.

This study is based on 22 in-depth interviews—with leaders of the movement and with residents of the occupation—and numerous ethnographic observations. The fieldwork was conducted between September and December 2018 and again between April and May 2019.

### **Box 1: Conducting research in an environment of activism**

Investigating in an activist environment often means engaging with the group and espousing its cause (Broqua, 2009). RTC's leaders encourage researchers to join the movement (by becoming a sympathising member and paying a subscription [around €2.60]) and to be engaged, while respecting the tacit limits of moderate participation. To prove myself and be accepted into the group, I took part in occasions of mobilisation, accompanied evicted residents to court and spent time with the occupiers in their daily activities. However, I refrained from making speeches or participating in the development of strategies. Maintaining this distance made me feel more at ease and reduced the mistrust felt towards me by some of the leaders. In this way, I was able to conduct my research freely and without being obliged to report findings that were favourable to the organisation.

To contribute to a better understanding of the mobilisation of the residents of Woodstock, I will structure my account into three parts. The first looks back at the transformation of the district and shows how the social and spatial changes brought about by gentrification hampered the formation of a social movement. The second delves into the various meanings of the occupation of the former hospital for its 950 inhabitants and for the leaders of the movement. As an emergency solution and a fighting strategy, the occupation maintains a continuity with earlier anti-apartheid mobilisations. The third section looks at strategies for action beyond the former hospital. Legal action and street protests shifted the movement's representations to the city centre and turned them into a fight for the right to the city.

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## From space as an obstacle to space as primary resource: the formation of Reclaim the City in Woodstock

### *Gentrification, a barrier to collective action*

The gentrification process began in Woodstock in the late 1980s. Although it has been documented since 1993, the district's working-class population did not mobilise against it until 2016, under the aegis of the RTC social movement. Why this delay in mobilising?

In 1991, the promulgation of the end of the Group Areas Act<sup>1</sup> led many middle-class *Coloureds* and whites<sup>2</sup> to move from the Cape Flats, townships a long way from the city centre, to Woodstock (Teppo and Millstein, 2015). Local landlords became aware of this replacement of working-class by middle-class tenants (Visser and Kotze, 2008) and renovated their homes to increase the value of the rents. Previously centred on the port and textile industries, the district's economy became increasingly service-oriented, particularly around the creative sector, which attracted artists and young graduates but excluded the low-skilled. Some families made vulnerable by the closure of factories and rising rents were forced to move to more affordable accommodation or leave the area. Urban landscapes and residential forms changed: Victorian houses were renovated, fitted with security systems and surrounded by high walls.

Figure 1 shows the socio-spatial divisions created by the gentrification process in Woodstock. It sheds light on the development of the tertiary sector (retail, luxury leisure), particularly in the lower part of the district (Lower Woodstock), the most working-class section where property investments are concentrated. Albert Road, the axis linking this district to the city centre, is lined with renovated industrial sites that are now home to antique shops, art dealers and upmarket shopping centres.

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1. An apartheid public policy passed in 1950, the Group Areas Act established the separation and racial allocation of different urban areas.

2. Racial categories established by the South African apartheid regime and which remain in use by South Africa's public authorities. They are in no way used to reflect approval of these categories, but to examine their effects on social agents.

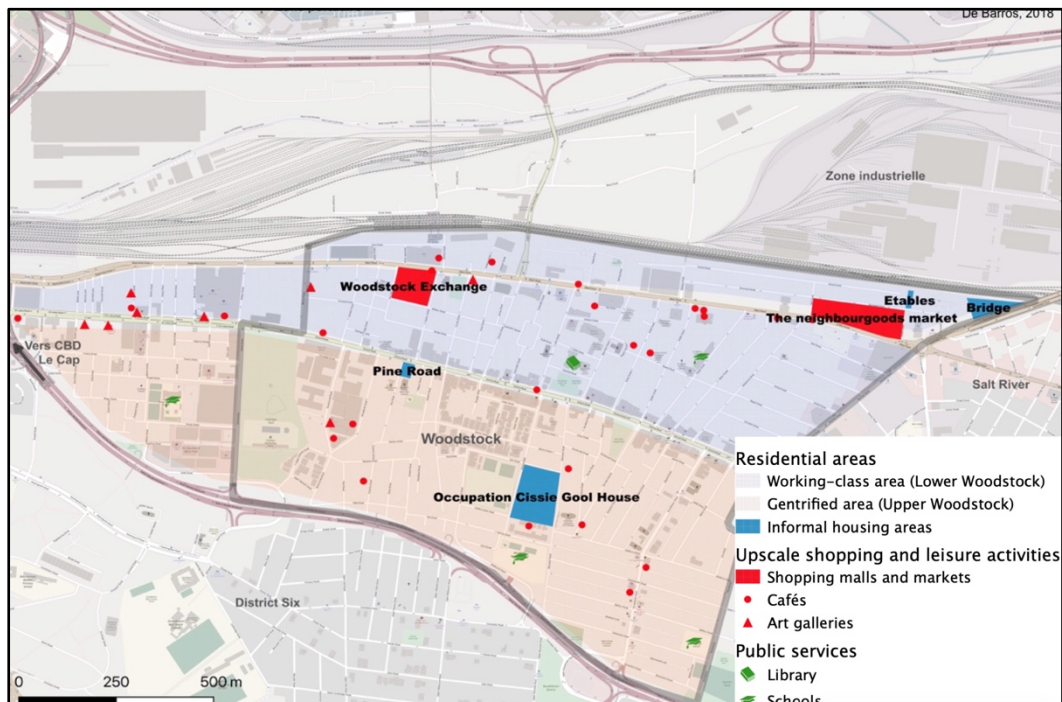


Figure 1: Gentrification in Woodstock  
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The gradual rise in the cost of housing in Lower Woodstock led the working-class households living there to look for precarious and often unstable solutions: moving to other, already over-occupied housing, living in informal accommodation in order to stay in the district, accepting any offers of out-of-town rehousing made by the council, living temporarily in a vehicle or on the street, as was the case for several research participants. Gentrification thus led to the juxtaposition of highly socially segmented areas. The social distance between residents of the same neighbourhood was exacerbated by the growing number of evictions, the survival difficulties experienced by working-class people (particularly in informally-occupied premises, shown in blue in figure 1), the fact that disadvantaged social categories stayed put and the increase in the number of well-off households. The Temporary Resettlement Areas, built on the outskirts in 2007 to house victims of natural disasters or the homeless, were the only housing option made available by the authorities and were heavily criticised (Ranslem, 2015; Levenson, 2017).

Unlike the inhabitants of many townships who could count on a relatively dense community and activist network born of the struggle against apartheid (Tournadre, 2014), the working-class population of Woodstock could hardly rely on this type of solidarity. Three main reasons, linked to the spatial configuration of this neighbourhood and the socio-economic conditions of the people interviewed, help to explain the time it took for residents to begin to protest against evictions.

The first was the timing and dispersed nature of evictions in the neighbourhood. While residents affected by collective displacement can capitalise on shared experiences of injustice to take collective action (Erdi Lelandais, 2016), residents of gentrified neighbourhoods are not threatened in the same place, at the same time, or by the same actors. Some of the agents involved in gentrification, such as real estate developers (as well as landlords), are difficult to identify. It was therefore more difficult to bring residents together than in the case of mass evictions.

The second reason relates to the residents' economic situation and the isolation caused by eviction. Those affected by rent rises bore the burden of their financial situation, and were both blamed and blamed themselves for their eviction. Indeed, many residents spoke of the shame and guilt they felt at not being able to pay their rent. Moreover, the arrival of new neighbours of higher social status changed the make-up of the neighbourhood and made it harder to create a network of solidarity, as Rosa<sup>3</sup> testified when I asked her about the potential help provided by her neighbours when she was evicted:

"No. I don't usually walk around and talk to people because all that homes in our street is now privately owned. The owners are in the houses. It was only our house that was rented." (Rosa, 47, mother of 3, a shopworker in a bakery)

For more than two decades, the weakening of neighbourhood ties, combined with the blame directed at the poor (Piven and Cloward, 1979), hampered the development of collective action.

The third reason relates to the low visibility of gentrification. Although the phenomenon of gentrification had been documented in Woodstock as early as 1993 (Garside, 1993), it received relatively little attention from social science researchers before 2010. After apartheid, the research imperatives dictated by public bodies and NGOs focused on areas of exclusion such as the townships. Research focused on identifying social problems in the peripheral areas in order to improve living conditions there, but shied away from the gentrification processes underway in the vicinity of city centres (Visser and Kotze, 2008). However, the mobilisation of outside agents can be crucial to the emergence of collective action in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Jack reports on his NGO's shift of focus:

"And we realised: 'but if we put all our energy into the periphery, we will never transform the power that replicates the inequality in our city!' [...]. So we made a conscious decision that instead of focusing on the periphery we would shift our

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3. To preserve anonymity, all first names have been changed.

attention to the centre and we would try to challenge and disrupt their land, which has much more value!" (Jack, RTC leader and head of Ndifuna Ukwazi)

By focusing on the periphery, state bodies and NGOs reproduced the mechanisms of exclusion imposed on working-class South Africans. This emphasis on assisting the townships helped to make the living conditions of the urban poor bearable, but it was also, sometimes unwittingly, a means of keeping them on the outside, preventing any profound challenge to the segregated centre-periphery model drawn up by the apartheid regime.

For all these reasons, the mobilisation of working-class people against evictions could be seen as a marginal phenomenon. Numerous authors (Smith, 2002; Clerval, 2016; Desmond, 2019) have shown how in the Global North it is more often the middle classes and homeowners who come together to tackle urban issues. Given these various obstacles to mobilisation, the occupation of a former public building proved crucial in the formation of the Woodstock movement.

*The Reclaim the City campaign: evicted residents and Ndifuna Ukwazi activists join forces*

The Reclaim the City campaign was launched in 2016 by the NGO Ndifuna Ukwazi<sup>4</sup> (NU) and former members of the Rainbow Housing Group, which brought together domestic workers from the Sea Point neighbourhood, some of whom were affiliated to the African National Congress (ANC) in the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The campaign was initially launched to oppose the sale of the Tafelberg School, a former public school located in Cape Town city centre, and to demand the construction of affordable housing.<sup>6</sup> These two groups occupied the site for forty-eight hours, launching the slogan "Land for people, not for profit". The success of this campaign and the enthusiasm generated by the initial protests encouraged the movement to step up the fight.

At the same time, the growing number of evictions in Bromwell Street in the Woodstock district attracted the attention of NU. The RTC campaign focused on the evictions then underway in this working-class street. In April 2016, NU researchers

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4. The goal of Ndifuna Ukwazi, created at the end of 2000, was to improve health conditions in the townships. From 2016, its workers began to focus on the issue of housing in the city centre. The NGO was made up of eleven South African professional activists—including two urban planning researchers from local universities—hired for their social skills, their history of previous engagement and according to racial and gender criteria of positive discrimination.

5. Formerly an anti-apartheid movement and a social-democratic party, the African National Congress has led the country since 1994.

6. In 2012, a feasibility survey conducted by the Western Cape Province concluded that 270 housing units could be built there. However, the province sold the land in 2015.

launched a social media attack on the eviction process. NU's Law Center provided legal assistance to forty Bromwell Street families threatened with eviction by property developer Woodstock Hub.

Two concerns shaped the emerging organisation: stopping the sale of public land in the city centre and inner suburbs in order to push for the construction of affordable housing, and putting an end to evictions. The movement depended in particular on the expertise of NU researchers: the aim was to publicise both the controversial sales and the social movement's demands for an end to the evictions.

In March 2017, taking advantage of the shooting of a horror film made by students in the old Woodstock hospital, which had been rented by the municipality for the occasion, members of the NGO posed as film crew and infiltrated and occupied the premises. Initially conceived as an awareness-raising stunt, the occupation became permanent. After a week, they were joined by homeless people, members of NU and their university friends. A joint meeting was organised after ten days: the majority of the homeless residents or those facing eviction wanted to stay and convert the site into a living space. They cleaned, repaired, equipped and subdivided the spaces to convert them into homes and spaces of activism.

The RTC campaign was transformed into a social movement, independent of NU. Leaders were elected to draft the movement's constitution, which defined its demands and the rules of life inside the occupied site. The group also carved out a place for itself on the Cape Town protest scene. It joined the Unite Behind movement, a coalition of more than twenty local movements created in 2016 to collectively pursue social justice. This convergence of struggles enabled RTC to acquire new resources in terms of logistics and expertise, which were essential if it was to gain greater visibility.

## **Occupy to fight and stay: the movement's territorial embeddedness**

### *Occupation as a socio-geographic strategy and resource*

The occupation of Woodstock hospital became the home base of the social movement. It was crucial both to its formation and its long-term future. It was also a means of righting the spatial injustices experienced by the residents and their families during and after the apartheid era.

The movement's spatial embeddedness was initially a response to the emergency situation in which the evicted residents found themselves. They had lived in the area for a long time and had built up a large network of acquaintances. Wanting



to remain there to preserve their social ties and access to public services and jobs, they turned to RTC in the hope of resolving their housing problem. They would submit an application for accommodation in the occupied former hospital, which would be examined by the leaders. Once settled in, they had, in return, to take part in the movement's activities, such as demonstrations, meetings or popular education courses.

The presence of 950 residents in this part of the district not only represented a symbolic show of strength, but was also a way of jamming up certain gentrification mechanisms. Indeed, the existence of residents with informal lifestyles and a working-class street presence helped to prevent gentrifiers from taking over the neighbourhood (Giroud, 2007; Clerval, 2011). In this way, by reclaiming a portion of space in the most gentrified area of Woodstock, the movement was participating in the social recomposition of the area and working to maintain working-class fringes.

Occupation provided the movement with a spatial anchor and a stable base from which to organise the struggle and engage local residents. Fabrice Ripoll (2008) has shown how important it is for protest movements to have their own space in which to hold events and meetings. Two large rooms were made available for these activities. The first was set aside for celebrations, funerals or religious services, while the second was used exclusively for meetings and popular education courses. These spaces thus helped to strengthen links between residents around events that punctuated each person's routines, to plan protest actions and to develop the residents' political culture. Acquiring the social movement's ways of thinking and enjoying social events together contributed to group cohesion.

By joining in with local events, some of the residents developed their political awareness. Although they differ in their engagement in activism, the majority of them take part in everyday tasks (DIY, communal gardening) and use their skills to improve their quality of life on site. As several researchers have observed in other political squats (Yates, 2015; Nez, 2017; Caciagli, 2019), these practices strengthen the bonds between residents and boost their self-esteem, which had been undermined by the evictions.

### *Spatial memory as the basis for collective action*

For the leaders and some of the residents, staying in the neighbourhood is also a way of fighting against injustices that are spatially and historically rooted in Cape Town. In recounting their experience of expulsion, they are revisiting their entire family memory. This is what I observed at the Heritage Day Memory Walk, organised in Lower Woodstock by RTC on 24 September 2019. This event brought together nearly

80 occupation residents. Around twenty of them (mostly children) carried signs that read: "Gentrification stole my house", "I used to live here", "Woodstock is ours too". They stopped in front of the homes from which many of them had been evicted, told their personal stories and then sang anti-apartheid songs. Yvonne, who had been evicted from her family home in 2009, stood in front of a tall building under construction. Accompanied by her daughters and granddaughters, she spoke out and expressed her emotion:

"I lived here for 34 years [...]. It wasn't as violent as people think. It was a very nice place to raise a family [...], we couldn't stay because the rent was too expensive so we had to leave and they finally kicked us out. And now this is what they are building, a huge new building that we don't fit in. I lived in District Six, I'm living District Six again." (Yvonne, 68, retired)

The nostalgic tone of Yvonne's speech likens the evictions to the end of a golden age, which runs counter to the negative images associated with the neighbourhood ("It wasn't as violent as people think"). The expulsion thus reactivates identity-based processes, as evidenced by the words "we don't belong here", which reflect a feeling of exclusion that is both racial and social, in direct reference to the traumatic experience of District Six<sup>7</sup> (Houssay-Holzschuch, 1998; Adhikari, 2005). Susanna continues this reference to apartheid expulsions:

"We are here to say that we exist. Gentrification is just a modern word to say Group Areas Act. It is still the Group Areas Act and we need to stop that now. How can the city and the government sell public land to private developers? Public land should remain public. I lived in two houses in that street, and I feel that it is my right and that it is OUR right to live in Woodstock." (Susanna, RTC leader)

Coming forward to speak after a long emotional moment, Susanna tries to transform the pain into political grievances. She points the finger at the public authorities and exalts a feeling of unity by insisting on a "we" that refers to the people evicted, the working-class population and, more broadly, the coloured community that was once the majority in this part of the city.

By organising this event, the members of RTC transformed this day of national celebration into a local commemoration, intended to give a voice to the evictees, to celebrate their experiences in the neighbourhood and to affirm their presence. Shared nostalgia reinforces a certain collective fervour, a feeling of having to fight together

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7. District Six is an area between Cape Town city centre and Woodstock that was declared a "white zone" under the Group Areas Act. The municipality organised the eviction of over 60,000 people between 1968 and 1970. Most of them were classified as "Coloureds" and sent to the townships in the Cape Flats reserved for people classified as coloured.

around a shared identity to preserve the neighbourhood. This staging of a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, which arouses strong emotions of anger and nostalgia, helps to bind the group together and predisposes residents to commit themselves (Traïni, 2010; Portelli, 2014) to the same cause. This use of space as an instrument of engagement is all the more necessary in that most of the residents are not politically socialised. A shared sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, and the transition from a sense of exclusion felt as individual and humiliating to a community experience of injustice, are thus facilitated by the instigators of the mobilisation, who have clearly understood that an emotional relationship with the neighbourhood stimulates a sense of community and shared purpose to the group.

Finally, this sense of belonging to the neighbourhood is correlated with the shared sense of a coloured identity, itself founded on the spatial injustices experienced by many of the occupiers. As Elaine Salo (2018) and Christiaan Beyers (2005) showed, the traumatic experience of the 1965 evictions and confinement to the townships allocated to them are an important component of the sense of possessing shared coloured identity. Before that, coloureds was a normative category with which individuals did not identify. It was partly through the story of the evictions and the sharing of this traumatic memory in the townships that the coloureds began to assert their identification with this group in the early 1970s. By drawing upon the injustices experienced under apartheid as a way of interpreting gentrification, the aim was to associate the neighbourhood with the coloured identity born of the systematic oppression exercised against them under the apartheid regime.

In 2017, the initiative to rename the occupation “Cissie Gool House”, after a coloured activist who opposed the National Party during apartheid, underlined the movement’s leaders’ desire to situate their action in continuity with the struggles against segregation.

## **Taking ownership of the city by mobilising**

### *From occupation to the right to the city*

It was necessary for the residents to mobilise beyond the walls of the occupied site in order to push forward their demands and give visibility to the movement. As mentioned above, one of the main demands was for affordable housing to be built in the city centre. It was correlated with the campaign to put an end to evictions and sought to ensure that working-class populations would be able to live close to the main job catchment area. For RTC, the construction of affordable housing in the areas

in and around the centre of the city constituted a viable solution for dealing with the evictions and transforming the homogeneous social and racial composition of these areas, which had remained virtually unchanged since the end of apartheid.

The fragmentation of the city of Cape Town was scarcely affected by the housing programmes introduced from 1994 onwards. Fiscal austerity was enforced and the economic and social restructuring of the city was entrusted to private companies and public-private partnerships (Oldfield, 2002). In order to build affordable housing on a massive scale, real estate companies selected land on the outskirts of the city (Dubresson and Jaglin, 2011), thereby intensifying urban sprawl and perpetuating the spatial organisation of apartheid. Land close to the urban centre was too expensive, and Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality refused to use the little land it had to build affordable housing.<sup>8</sup> Most Woodstock residents were on a waiting list for affordable housing, in some cases since 1994.<sup>9</sup> The residents were exasperated by the lack of transparency in the processing of these lists and by bureaucratic inertia. Access to housing was closely linked to the experience of waiting, common to all the respondents. This “perpetually temporary” state (Yiftachel, 2009) forced the inhabitants to opt for intermediate, precarious and informal housing solutions (Oldfield and Greyling, 2015), such as the occupation of the old hospital.

RTC’s aim was to hold the public authorities, in this case Cape Town municipality and province, to account and force them to rapidly implement the constitutional measures decreed in 1995 on fairer access to housing and public services. There were two axial components to the movement’s activity: legal action and open protest. Like other movements working for spatial justice (Zhang, 2021), RTC entered the legal arena to assert the right to housing. The movement supports victims of eviction in the courts and takes legal action to prevent the sale of public land in the city centre. These legal moves were combined with protest actions. On several occasions, RTC members occupied land put up for sale by the municipality and called for the construction of affordable housing.

This link between cause-lawyering<sup>10</sup> and protest means that the struggle is not confined to the courts, that constant pressure is exerted on the municipality and that the problem of access to housing remains on the political agenda.

By challenging urban production in the city centre and the white, affluent, “insider” nature of these neighbourhoods, the movement challenges the racial shaping

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8. Certain areas of the city centre were also owned by the Cape Province or parastatals.

9. In Cape Town in 2016, around 350,000 people were on the waiting list for social housing in the city (Meregele, 2016).

10. Advocating a social cause in the courts.

of this space, which was sanctuarised before and during apartheid as the white area par excellence (Western, 1996; Houssay-Holzschuch, 1997). The demands ranged from the right to stay in Woodstock to the right to own a home and live in the town centre and adjacent affluent areas. This widening of the demands illustrates the more global quest for a right to the city, which “legitimises the refusal to allow oneself to be excluded from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organisation” (Lefebvre, 1968, p. 21). By gathering in central locations to assert their right to housing, the activists were opening a breach. The temporary appropriation of one place led on to a lasting appropriation of urban space in general. The aim of protesting against the commercial exploitation of central areas was also to propose and impose other purposes for these areas, more in line with the needs of city dwellers.

### *Temporary occupations and escrache as forms of collective action*

Temporary occupations of public buildings and land in the city centre are the movement’s preferred form of external action. Their aim is to appeal to the authorities and to publicise their claims for recognition. The presence of large numbers of activists in the same space brings visibility to the movement and constitutes a form of collective reappropriation (Bleil, 2011). These temporary occupations are a continuation of the long-term occupation of the former Woodstock hospital. They take place in three types of space: those representing public power (the municipality), those managed by public companies providing failing services (the headquarters of the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa, the national railway company), or central public spaces intended for leisure activities and whose recreational use is considered abusive (golf courses, bowling alleys) since they are rented out at low prices to private entities. During the occupation of the bowling green on 1st May 2018 in Greenpoint, activists put up a wall with the words “Cape Town Municipality, build affordable housing here!” on it. By occupying these areas, they divert them from their habitual use by the more affluent and assert their presence in the area.

In addition to these occupation events, the RTC leaders borrowed the practice of *escraches*, developed by the anti-eviction activists of the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca in Barcelona. In an *escrache*, protests are staged outside the home of a public figure in order to denounce their actions, a method of protest considered to be the most subversive in their repertoire.

### Box 2: Observation of an *escrache* at Camps Bay

At 5 a.m., I join some of the RTC activists outside the occupation. We then return to the NU offices. We have coffee and then regroup in two shared taxis belonging to residents of the occupation. We leave the NGO offices at 6 a.m. to go to Japie Hugo's house. As Director General of Urban Planning for the City of Cape Town since 1996, he took part in negotiations in 2016 over the low-cost sale of the Site B site, a plot of land located in the city centre, to the Growthpoint property company. He resigned the same year and obtained a consultancy position with the same company. We arrive in Camps Bay, the most affluent district in Cape Town. Japie Hugo's imposing house overlooks the beach. It is located in a neighbourhood composed of large villas (figure 2).



Figure 2: Panorama of the *escrache*. A few activists rest on the low wall of the neighbouring villa. Some of them sing and call for Japie Hugo to come out. His gate, visible on the right of the photograph, remains closed.

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The presence of RTC members in one of South Africa's most privileged neighbourhoods, where 80% of the population is white and 4% coloured, is quite striking. Activists ring the doorbell and start singing RTC songs. They dance and sing to the rhythm of *Asina luvalo* and *Senzeni Na*. The "Reclaim the City" banner is placed on the wall surrounding the house, where a number of "panels of shame" are also displayed (figure 3).



Figure 3: “Panels of shame” recounting the involvement of municipal representatives in the sale of Site B  
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After an hour, the police arrive and question the leaders, before leaving the scene (see figure 4). The campaigners remained on site until 6 p.m., waiting for Japie Hugo to agree to answer their questions, in vain.



Figure 4: Activists argue with police about compliance with the Gathering Regulation Act, which governs gatherings in public spaces  
© Matthew Wingfield

The *escrache* is a way of drawing attention to the responsibility of the public authorities for the unequal distribution of land in Cape Town. It reflects the need to condemn political actors publicly, outside institutional and judicial arenas that are deemed to be failing. This strategy generates the possibility for a symbolic inversion of the stigma. It is the public decision-makers who are morally condemned for their action, while the victims of evictions temporarily appropriate the decision-maker’s

living space and hamper his mobility (he cannot leave or, if he does, has to face the demonstrators).

These outings, which take place in white, privileged neighbourhoods where the respondents rarely go, also seek to shine the spotlight on socio-spatial inequalities within the city. During the *escrache*, some of the participants are amazed by the mansions that surround them and get a glimpse of the social and economic chasm that separates them from their elected representatives.

## Conclusion

By tackling the constraints and possibilities of Cape Town's urban space, RTC has succeeded in putting in place an innovative repertoire of territorial action, based primarily on occupations, whether temporary or long lasting. The spatial nature of the movement mitigates the dispersal of the evicted residents and allows mobilisation to emerge and spread. The occupation of a public building and the daily social practices that take place there reinforce group cohesion, develop the political culture of the movement's residents, and enable them to mobilise in other areas of the city. By combining lasting occupation with other forms of pressure such as legal action, temporary occupations and *escraches* in gentrified and affluent neighbourhoods, the activists are able to shake the segregated order of Cape Town. They transpose the pressure of demands from the periphery to the centre, and give visibility to working-class housing claims. The struggle of those evicted becomes a struggle for the right to live in the city.

By 2022, the former hospital was occupied by around 1,200 people. Despite being criminalised, the occupation is tolerated by the municipality, no doubt because it remains relatively low-profile and far from affluent and tourist areas, and allows the authorities to dodge their duty to rehouse people. In July 2022, the residents of the occupied site organised an "Empty Plots and Promises Commemoration Walking Tour" of Cape Town. Visiting four of the eleven sites on which the municipality had undertaken to build affordable housing, the marchers sought to call out the public authorities. Their inaction and refusal to implement significant measures (rent controls, construction of affordable housing) that would enable working-class residents to remain in the area illustrate, more generally, their failure to rectify the segregated spatial structure of the city.



## To quote this article

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