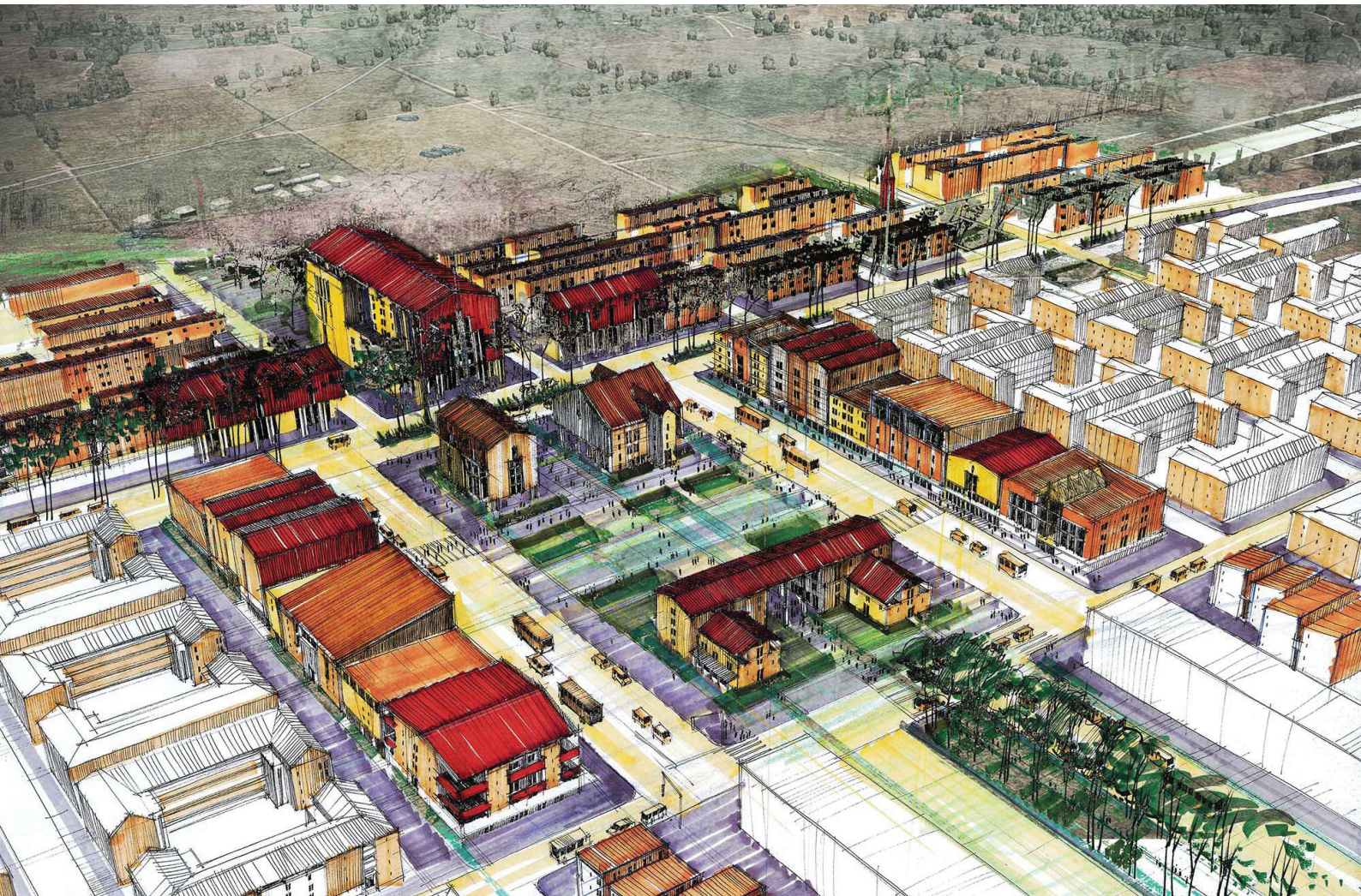


THE ARCHITECTURE OF COMMUNITY: South Africa's Humanitarian Land Crisis Unfolding

By Bouwer Serfontein, Director at NEW URBAN Architects and Urban Designers



CATEGORY:
Sustainable Design

Southern Farms development vision, Johannesburg, South Africa

August / September 2018

A. Introduction

An urban and rural land debate is unfolding in South Africa. Apartheid planning left the majority of South African citizens at a grave disadvantage, being forced to live on the outskirts of cities, making commuting to and from work an arduous journey. For people to feel autonomous in a city, they need opportunities and choices in their day-to-day lives. With the current land reform debate, there lies an opportunity in re-defining the way we live in the metropole.

This urgent matter leads us towards the discussion on how people want to live in cities. What should the architecture of communities look like in South African cities? The answer is yet to be defined.

Modernist ideology resulted in cities that are not user-friendly. All aspects of daily life were separated, which today means that commuting by car - and far distances - is the only option.

There are a few theories available to remedy the outcome of these disastrous planning methods. One thereof is New Urbanist planning where a city's urban core is regarded as equally important as the natural environment surrounding the city. The aim thereof is to integrate all levels of urbanity and provide citizens with walkable neighbourhoods that include a wide range of housing- and job types.

The perpetual drought in large parts of South Africa, paints a bleak future for its citizens with food security threatened. The UN's WHO states that a

substantial proportion of South African households remain at risk of hunger or is experiencing hunger. Although the South African government's food programmes appear to be beneficial, they need to be run more effectively to alleviate further food security.

The lack of access to land for the South African majority must be addressed through sustainable, non-income dependent measures, such as the promotion of subsistence farming.

To avoid prejudice over land reform, there needs to be a coherent programme that guides the discussion that enables decision-making. South Africa is facing an imminent crisis that will require an international humanitarian response if not addressed in the short-medium term. The stagnant economic situation

precipitated, according to economists, by potential disastrous land reform policies (nationalisation) that will scare foreign investment, high personal and public debt and a fluctuation of commodity prices, combined with an even higher unemployment rate.

The Freedom Charter on land calls for the Agrarian Revolution. This is a potential solution to the anticipated problems as it promotes what unites us and not divides us. Indeed, it is necessary to embark on a land reform revolution, as long as it is urban in nature. Land reform should benefit all – especially the city itself.

B. Land Revolution Today: How did we get here?

Cyril Ramaposa is the fifth head of the post-Apartheid government since their first ruling in 1994. Addressing a key 2019 election issue, he stated: “Without the redistribution of land, we will not build a united South Africa. Without giving the poor the means to productively farm the land, we will not defeat poverty”. He has made land reform one of his primary objectives after taking office on 15 February 2018. The ANC has been the primary agent to maintain order and civil stability under the current constitution that protects private ownership and Expropriation of Land without Compensation.

Slow land reform, high crime, corruption, political jostling and infighting have broken out in his ANC party ahead of the national elections planned for 2019. A familiar pattern of the ANC “buying” votes with the promise of swift land reform and services to the majority of South Africans has started again, this time under persistent pressure from the far-left Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Of greater concern, the EFF and the ANC is now united on how land should be dealt with, the Expropriation of Land without Compensation and possible Nationalisation. The EFF has its grip on “people’s

power to grab land”, the prospect of escalating civil disturbances and a potential police and military intervention in land matters become more likely. There are signs of radical civil unrest: social media and grassroots campaigns have highlighted South Africans’ dissatisfaction with the government over the issue of land and services.

C. Solutions towards an Agrarian Urban Revolution

What could be done from a planning and urban design perspective? It is not only about accessibility to land but also about how communities ideally want to live and what they should look like.

There are related models to the New Urbanist approach, such as Agricultural Retention, where many techniques are employed to safe-guard existing agriculture farmland. Urban Agriculture, is an alternative, where citizens take up the project to cultivate unused land or even their rooftops or balconies for agricultural purposes. There is also Agricultural Urbanism, where there are working farms in settlements, but the community is not actively involved in running the farms. Lastly there is Agrarian Urbanism, where the entire society is involved in the food process from organizing to growing, distributing and eating.

In the case of Southern Farms, just south of Johannesburg, a few of these approaches were employed under the principles of New Urbanism. The development was awarded a CNU (Charter for New Urbanism) award for excellence in 2016. The urban design model is based on transect zones that are dedicated to levels of urbanity where the core has the highest population density and as one moves towards the periphery, the density decreases. The idea is that all levels are equally important, but each transect zone has its own set of rules and regulations to work within. The site is located on a piece of land that holds the potential to integrate the

previously segregated Soweto into the rest of the Johannesburg metropolis, thus adding a politically driven layer to the decision-making process.

This development has the potential to be a prime example of how urban design can establish not only places for people with identifiable neighbourhoods and increased economic opportunity but also illustrate how natural, man-made and political challenges can turn into opportunities and enrich the resulting neighbourhoods with a multitude of layers and complexities.

(Agrarian Urbanism as a revolution)

D. Conclusion

Access to land is a complicated, emotional and contentious issue. First, we should look at what the community and city need and what resources would enable them to achieve these needs. Agrarian urbanism is a possible solution to bridge the gap between the freedom charter and the urban land issue.

To have a charter with principles that aims to achieve a city that is designed for its people is, but without policies changing and adapting to the current political and economic climate, it is not an achievable goal.

Land ownership in the city should be in individual hands and not in the city’s hands. Development is incremental. Begin in center giving people land. Agrarian Urbanism is an advantage of the city itself. Should be a debate away from only land reform towards Urban Agrarian revolution in Africa.

Author Biography: Bouwer Serfontein



Bouwer Serfontein is a registered Urban Designer. He promotes strategies for sustainable urban environments in Southern Africa and applies the principles of New Urbanism in Urban Design projects. He was awarded the Grand Prize for excellent work by the Congress for New Urbanism, CNU USA in 2012 for project Verkykierskop, Small-Scale Agricultural Town. He currently also teaches Urban Design at Stuttgart University.

