From Culture to Barbed Wire: On Houses and Walls in South Africa

THOMAS BLOM HANSEN*

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................... 345

MODERNITY AND THE MORALITY OF WALLS ................................................................... 346

DOMESTICITY AND DISCIPLINE ......................................................................................... 348

MELANCHOLIC WALLS ........................................................................................................ 351

INTRODUCTION

Houses and their walls have played a dual role in South Africa throughout the twentieth century. On the one hand, houses were devices that were supposed to shape, discipline, and transform the people living in them. On the other hand, houses were also regarded as sites of a somewhat defiant, autonomous, and indefatigable social and cultural life. The idea that houses are devices and sites for the production of certain kinds of people and a certain quality of social relationships is very old in anthropology. Some of the luminaries of the discipline such as Claude Levi Strauss and Pierre Bourdieu have produced seminal writing on how the house, as an organic institution and a representation of both a familial and cosmological order, is at the heart of everyday moral orders and cultural reproduction. In this broadly organicist model of the house, the focus was on how the interior order of the house related to the rest of the social order and less on how that domestic interior was created by the walls themselves. Here, I shall try to focus on the latter—how the walls of modern houses tend to produce certain kinds of people and dispositions.

* Reliance-Dhirubhai Ambani Professor in South Asian Studies, Professor in Anthropology, and director of the Center for South Asia at Stanford University.

MODERNITY AND THE MORALITY OF WALLS

It is fair to suggest that with the emergence of modern physical, legal, and moral protocols concerning how to build a house, walls became less permeable than before. They became clearly conceptualized as legal and moral entities that produce and project privacy, and indeed the modern nuclear family form that emerged as a norm in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century. They were not supposed to close themselves in, but were expected to be available for labor and other services. The infamous enclosure movement in Britain was in many ways an exercise in the right to build and maintain walls, and to use these walls to produce a new class of rich farmers and landowners. A similar close link between social standing, sovereignty, and the nature of walls was, and remains, ubiquitous in India where the distinction between a paccu (hard/permanent) house and a kaccha (soft/temporary) house transmits not only different assumptions of wealth and social status, but also different moral positions—different qualities of the houses and their people.

The colonial enterprise and the making of populous settler societies in the Americas, Australia, and South Africa democratized the right to build and maintain walls as expressions of private property. Walls and fences were now manifestations of bourgeois “civilization” in need of defense from intrusions by enemies, and more generally “the wilderness,” including its native inhabitants. This should be understood in light of two major anxieties marking the nineteenth century. On the one hand, there were new urban landscapes in Europe and North America teeming with peasants turned workers, and “floating populations” uprooted from a rustic existence; on the other hand, there was the challenge of administering millions of people shaped by radically different cultures and religious traditions within the expanding colonial empires. "Primitive people" and fierce natural climes constantly threatened to overwhelm the thin line of colonists and missionaries. The two forms of wilderness, one at home and one in the tropics, were the objects of civilizing

2. See, e.g., David I. Kertzer, Living with Kin, in FAMILY LIFE IN THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY 1789–1913, 51–61 (David I. Kertzer & Marzio Barbagli eds., 2002); Mary Jo Maynes, Class Cultures and Images of Proper Family Life, in FAMILY LIFE IN THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY 1789–1913, 195–226 (David I. Kertzer & Marzio Barbagli eds., 2002) (discussing important changes in the nineteenth century that led to the creation of the modern nuclear family and a desire for privacy).

3. See, e.g., Kertzer, supra note 2, at 8–16 (describing different types of peasant homes in Europe).

4. See Maynes, supra note 2, at 204–05 (discussing how industrialization produced class-segregated residential neighborhoods).

5. See Charles J. Reid, Jr., The Seventeenth-Century Revolution in the English Land Law, 43 CLEV. ST. L. REV. 221, 253 (1995) (discussing the prevailing thought in sixteenth-century England that village depopulation was directly attributable to continued consolidation of pasture land by wealthy and “greedy” landowners).

6. See Romi Khosla, Architecture of Rural Housing: Some Issues in India, 11 SOC. SCIENTIST 56, 60 (1983). In Hindi, paccu may also stand for ‘cooked,’ and kaccha for ‘raw,’ which can carry a literal as well as metaphorical meaning in relation to levels of cultivation both soul and body. Id. at 60 n.2.

efforts that had the house and the meaning of walls at their heart. In Europe, as in
the colonial world, the promoters of the modern household and the modern nuclear
family were lower middle class clerks, missionaries, and functionaries, asserting their
new-found educated respectability whilst haunted by perpetual status anxieties.8
Within these strata, the modern family was widely regarded as a necessary antidote
to the barbarism of the lower classes and the depravity of the aristocracy.9 The
modern family form was also seen as the only way to produce people attuned to the
virtues of thrift, modesty, and industry in the tropics—modern, moral and Christian
subjects. This double move which the Comaroffs very precisely have termed “the
dialectic of domesticity”10 was inextricably connected to the building of houses—the
row houses in Britain’s garden cities, and in the colonial world, the neat and
rectangular houses erected in the bush.

On the colonial frontier, zealous missionaries identified the lack of physical and
functional differentiation inside dwellings that also lacked light and air as the direct
cause of the confusion and infantile stage of the native soul.11 The round dwellings of
the natives were models of their souls, sunk in a morass of unhygienic and immoral
habits and an inability to make distinction, which blocked the development of any
civilization. The answer was not only windows (inviting light and enlightenment) and
cleanliness, but also room-separation, rectangular layouts, and straight lines that in
their turn would give rise to a more civilized interior life of the mind, and ultimately
facilitate the emergence of nuclear and moral modern families.12 Similar
considerations applied to the making of the colonial bungalow in India. There, the
colonizers were detained less by reform of the native dwelling, than by methods to
keep an overwhelming and largely opaque native world of peculiar cunning out of
European lives. Many of the worries centered on how to maintain separation
between domestic servants and European women and children.13 Much effort went
into designing the bungalows in ways that ensured privacy, propriety, and
differentiation of functions. As in the working class tenements and apartment blocks
in Europe and America at the time, internal walls and geometrical precision were the
prime material tools of reform.14 The latter half of the nineteenth century was an age
strongly devoted to a kind of materialist pedagogy, a belief that exposure to the
certain material objects and structural orders—such as a well planned city, straight
roads, and geometrical patterns—would ultimately produce similar desires and
dispositions in the body and mind of those not yet civilized.15 This materialist
pedagogy, whose target exactly was everyday movements and routines of bodies, was

8. See id. at 24 (describing a need felt by the “rising bourgeoisies of Europe” to instill proper values in
the lower classes).
9. See id. at 275 (“[S]avagery had no fixed abode.”).
10. Id. at 277.
11. See id. at 277–78 (“[T]he gauge of a civilized abode was the degree to which its interior spaces
were rendered functionally specific and distinct.”).
12. See id.
14. See id. at 159–62 (arguing that the bungalow was a key site for imposing key domestic values in
the colonial context).
15. See id. at xx–xxii (discussing this pattern as applied to the city of Lahore under British rule).
indeed central to the late colonial bio-political imagination that constituted apartheid.

DOMESTICITY AND DISCIPLINE

Despite certain pretensions towards presenting itself as a coherent ideological project, apartheid was essentially a project of practical engineering that never pursued any systematic ideological persuasion of people of color. It forced and prohibited, but also enabled bodies of color to behave in certain ways by means of infrastructural engineering and urban planning. These policies forced streams of life and movement into racially separate corridors that only met at a few strategic and highly structured points. Whatever objections a comparison between apartheid and that of the contemporary occupied territories in Palestine may run into at a more general level, their kinship at this level of practical engineering through ingenious and detailed infrastructural regulation is as close as it is undeniable.

The purpose of the new townships was to contain and produce docile and easily controlled labor. Yet township spaces were also geared towards fundamental social reform of social life, habits, and family structures. The idea was to mobilize what was as assumed to be a fundamental social habitus based on race and language that would make people embrace the life they had been given as if it was their choice. There were two kinds of townships. On the one hand, there were the African townships which were declared as a form of temporary housing for transient populations that legally and culturally were natives of their respective rural homelands, or quasi-sovereign Bantustans. The idea was that these homelands would be the home of traditional culture, chiefs, natural authority, and proper family life. The townships were merely containers of labor visiting the white world of modernity. However, these distinctions broke down as many families settled permanently in the large townships. In open defiance of urban regulations and the spirit of apartheid, a distinctly modern African urban culture developed in the townships. As a large scale youth rebellion broke out in Soweto in 1976 and lasted throughout most of the 1980s, the explanations offered by the regime and many others was that the cramped conditions in houses in the townships created new and “unnatural” family situations that upset the traditional order and undermined the traditional authority that was supposed to keep the youngsters in check.

---


17. See CHRISTOPHER, supra note 16, at 105 (describing the Group Areas Act which was conceived to effect total urban spatial segregation); see also JOHN WESTERN, OUTCAST CAPE TOWN 88 (1981) (describing the Durban City Council’s “race-space plan” for achieving a segregated pattern and conforming to the Group Areas Act).

18. See id. at 122 (noting that the area set aside for Black townships was small, reflecting the government’s intention that the Black population remain temporary).


20. See ADAM ASHFORTH, WITCHCRAFT, VIOLENCE, AND DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA 24
"broken" African family without proper homes continues to this day to be a primary explanation of the high crime rates. Social life still revolves around the house and the kind of people it produces.

The other kinds of townships were built for people who at the time constituted the in-between groups, the descendants of Indian indentured laborers and the "Coloureds," the official category for those of mixed race. These groups were given rights to live in the city, albeit only in the circumscribed and defined areas into which they were forcibly moved and later subjected to intense bio-political interventions in the areas of family life, morality, and physical environment. The new houses in the new Indian townships were designed to provide for smaller nuclear families in order to break the dependence on the extended kinship system of the past, and thereby also the dependence on the cultural weight of tradition. The key target was younger women, who were encouraged to educate themselves and take control of the emotional life of their own families.

The new township houses, where hundreds of thousands of mainly working class Indians were forcibly moved in the 1960s, were indeed designed to produce modern families, proper everyday disciplines, and to lift Indians out of their supposedly "insanitary habits." However, these new prefabricated houses had no history, little

(2005) (discussing youth riots in Soweto).

21. Clive Glaser explored the history of gangs and criminality in Soweto. See GLASER, supra note 19, at 2. He also traced the evolution of the same criminal structures and networks of young men during the repressive peak of the apartheid period; see generally Clive Glaser, Whistles and Samboks: Crimes and Policing in Soweto 1960-1976, 52 S. AFR. HIST. J. 119 (2005). Adam Ashforth studied the underlying insecurities of domestic lives suffused with petty crimes and violence; see generally Adam Ashforth, State Power, Violence, Everyday Life: Soweto (Ctr. for Stud. of Soc. Change, Working Paper No. 210, 1995) ("The history of Soweto has been marked by a progressive collapse of a state authority, an often violent struggle against representatives of the state... a breakdown of paternal authority within families... and the general rise in crime and insecurity."); see ASHFORTH, Witchcraft, supra note 20, at 28 (describing the fractured family structure found in many communities, high levels of unemployment, and pervasive adult financial dependence). Lloyd Vogelman and Gillian Eagle studied domestic violence and rape during the apartheid era; see generally Lloyd Vogelman & Gillian Eagle, Overcoming Endemic Violence against Women in South Africa, 18 SOC. JUST. J., nos. 1-2, 201, 1991 (suggesting that societal, political and economic inequalities, sexism, and culture of violence are the key factors for rape and domestic violence); Ntlanlha Moeno, Illegitimacy in an African Urban Township in South Africa: An Ethnographic Note, 36 AFR. STUD. 43 (1977) (providing a study of the rise in illegitimacy during the mid-1950s to the late 1960s); Women and Children's Rights in a Violent South Africa Pretoria: Institute for Public Interest, Law and Research 3-13 (Mathole Motshekga & Elize Delport eds., 1993).


23. John Western investigated the effects of residential segregation on the Coloured community. See WESTERN, supra note 17, at 150-52 (1981). Steffen Jensen explored general processes of social exclusion in the Cape Town area and traced the ways in which the Cape Town coloured community staked their claim to dignity; see STEFFEN JENSEN, GANGS, POLITICS AND DIGNITY IN CAPE TOWN 100-45 (2008). For Indian South Africans mostly in Durban, see generally ASHWIN DESAI, ARISE YE COOLIES: APARTEID AND THE INDIAN, 1960-1995 (1996); THOMAS BLOM HANSEN, MELANCHOLIA OF FREEDOM: SOCIAL LIFE IN AN INDIAN TOWNSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA (forthcoming, Princeton University Press, 2011). On the forced removals of the 1950s, see MAASDORP & PILAY, supra note 22, at 122-28 (studying the South African Indian population both before and after the implementation of residential racial segregation).

24. See COMAROFF & COMAROFF, supra note 7, at 277-78 (discussing architecture's role in the production of moral values).
relationship with the land they sat on, and none of the deep organic features and functions that are the assumed ground for most anthropological reflections on "the house," its memories, and so on. These were houses and structures of dwellings that bore the indelible mark of governmental fiat. Young women were now pivotal to the family's emotional economy, and the new house was essentially her domain. This presupposed a break with an older house form, in which the domestic sphere was a site of complex intra-and intergenerational relationships between women, and shared memories among women of different generations. One of the only objects that were passed on between generations was the almirahs, the large wardrobes supposed to contain the dowry gifts of the bride, her saris, and jewelry that also retained a symbolic link to her natal home. The forced removals and the subsequent remaking of Indian life in the townships reconfigured social life more decisively than in many other cases of draconian bio-political interventions. The houses in the townships were alienated places that gradually, and sometimes painfully, had to be made into proper dwellings. Everyday living in these houses transformed them from elements of the abstract space of the apartheid urban planner into a mundane but domesticated lived space. The new prefabricated houses were made into testaments to the dedication of the men in a household to build and maintain their own distinctive "Indian home," marked by exterior and highly visible adornments, small outbuildings, and extensions, fancy doors, or windows.

The result was a new form of sociality in which the walls of the houses, their doors, and openings became more permeable and porous than had been imagined by the planners. People in the former Indian townships recall the 1960s and '70s as decades of striving and building, but also a time of warm and intense sociality, where houses were open and where doors rarely were locked. While this in some measure is a sentimentalized fiction, it is undeniable that four decades of township life created a space of experience, predicament, and possibility that was shared by the middle class and the unemployed alike; by Hindus, Christian and Muslims; by Tamil, Gujarati and Hindi speakers. The social horizon of the ordinary person in the township, his/her patterns of movement, and social imagination became deeply affected, often determined, by this socio-spatial regime. One became an Indian because one lived an Indian life—went to Indian schools, shopped in Indian shops, went to Indian cinema halls, Indian beaches, and visited family in other parts of the country who also lived in enclaves designated for Indians.


26. This was admittedly always more true of larger and more affluent societies. Joelle Bahoul recounts the tale of her own extended family's home in colonial Algeria. See JOELLE BAHOUL, THE ARCHITECTURE OF MEMORY: A JEWISH-MUSLIM HOUSEHOLD IN COLONIAL ALGERIA, 1937-1962 41-44 (1996).

27. See generally Vinay Kumar, Ruminations of a Young Man on Marriage and Dowry, MANUSHI No. 80, 1994, at 29 (offering a broad reflection on the traditional dowry system), available at http://www.manushi-india.org/pdfs_issues/PDF%20files%2080/ruminations_of_a_young_man.pdf.

28. See CHRISTOPHER, supra note 16, at 140 (discussing the ways in which non-whites adapted their government dwellings to their native cultures).

29. See WESTERN, supra note 17, at 149, 152, 153, 203 (detailing examples of social interaction and the growth of social pride in different communities in Cape Town).
The notion of the “proper” joint and multigenerational Indian family was, in this process, becoming projected onto the community as such—that is, the multilingual Indian community coming into being in the townships. The Indian family was now an enduring mythical structure, hovering over the vast township as a cultural matrix of how families really were: a web of intense, warm, and inclusive ties, whether based on a nuclear or an extended kin structure. Regardless of actual practices, this matrix enabled ordinary families to define their mundane modern practices—shopping in shopping centers, entertaining friends, neighborly commensality, watching television and films, going on outings, etc.—were now all specifically “Indian.” Apartheid’s spatial regime had indeed succeeded in creating cultural walls around racial enclaves that were as effective, or even more effective, than physical ones. Physical walls were mainly built around wealthier white houses, but the cultural walls around the townships were effective in creating a sense of comfort and security which enabled social and familial life. This was also true to a large extent even in the otherwise under-resourced African townships where violence and crime were becoming endemic features of life.

MELANCHOLIC WALLS

This picture changed in the 1990s. A virtual civil war between the conservative Zulu-dominated Inkatha Freedom Party and the ANC had gone on for years prior to the real transition of power in 1994. This had created a deep fear of more generalized violence spilling over into everyday life. The apartheid strictures on movement and dwelling were now falling apart, and millions of impoverished Africans were flowing into urban areas all over the country. The Indian areas became popular sites for settlement for two reasons: they had good English medium schools, and Indian residents did not organize armed vigilante groups chasing squatters out of their area as it was known to happen in white suburbs.

The result was a rapidly changing population. Today many of the former Indian areas have 30–40 percent African residents. Crime rates climbed, although not as dramatically as local lore would have it. The fear of crime blended with racial

30. See id. at 203–04 (describing the community and “sense of affective focus and solidarity “the “White walls” created in Mowbray village).
31. I owe this term to Wendy Brown who proposed it during the discussions at the Walls Symposium in Austin.
32. See CHRISTOPHER, supra note 16, at 166–70 (discussing the conflict between the ANC and the Inkatha movement).
33. Id. at 122–25.
34. See Thomas Blom Hansen, Race, Security, and Spatial Anxieties in the Postapartheid City, in GENDERING URBAN SPACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, SOUTH ASIA, AND AFRICA 101, 101–02, 116, 119, 121 (Martina Rieker & Kamran Asdar Ali eds., 2008) (discussing complex relations between Whites, Indians, and Africans and specifically mentioning African enrollment in and quality of Indian schools as well as contrasting the violence directed at Africans in white neighborhoods with more protectionist treatment in Indian neighborhoods).
36. Crime statistics specific to urban Indian areas are difficult to identify. Scholars have called various South African crime statistics into question. See, e.g., Anthony Althecker, Puzzling Statistics: Is
prejudice, anxiety, and sheer discomfort among local residents with the new racially mixed public life. Long-standing apprehensions regarding the immorality, drug use and criminality of “bad,” or low-life, residents of the township were now projected onto African squatter communities and were instantly racialized. The result was that the meaning of the wall and the house began to change yet again. House owners and tenants began to build walls around their properties. The slightly better-off sectors of the township began to resemble the formerly white neighborhoods, including ubiquitous watchdogs and private security companies. The walls of the house were no longer productive of the township sociality, however unfree this had been in the first place, but protective of Indian bodies, threatened by the intrusion, or even just unwelcome proximity, of African bodies. The primary function of the walls thus moved from what was enclosed and made inside the house to that which was excluded and kept out. “Proper” Indian families are today less produced by what happens inside the house than by the fact that secure walls separate them from the bush—perhaps the richest metaphor in South African social life. During the centuries of colonial rule, the bush connoted a world of natural and dangerous wildness of which African people and African culture had been seen as integral parts.

As in other parts of the country, there was a general securitization of everyday life after 1994. That which previously had been regarded as merely inappropriate or slightly undesirable was now seen as outright dangerous. Doors were increasingly closed, and social contacts were mediated by cellphones and cars. This has, in turn, produced new and clear social distinctions based on levels of security, and on the height of walls. The township had always seen a measure of co-mingling between those who saw themselves as respectable lower middle class or skilled blue collar families, and those regarded as “bad” or deracinated Indians from non-respectable backgrounds. This interaction is today greatly diminished on security grounds. The non-respectable home is now the home without walls around it, and without burglar bars. These houses are indeed nothing but the permeable houses that dominated a few decades ago. Today their permeability is seen as a moral problem, and the residents as morally suspect because of their assumed openness to the street, which today represents Africans and the supposed immorality of African culture. This openness is locally understood in its full metaphorical sense: morally as physical and sexual promiscuity, and socially as people without the proper interiority and discipline that comes with an organized life, distinct and separated from lesser and threatening forms of life. Securitization of houses and life has, in other words,

South Africa the World’s Crime Capital? S. Afr. Crime Q., March 2005, at 4 (suggesting that since murder rates in South Africa in the 1990s included conflict-related deaths, those rates are artificially inflated in relation to other countries that disregard such deaths in calculating murder rates); see also Mark Shaw, Crime and Policing in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Transforming Under Fire 1 (2002) (pointing out that South Africa’s crime rates were already high during the apartheid era).


38. See Bhikhu C. Parekh, Gurharpal Singh & Steven Vertovec, Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora 4 (2003) (noting that “[i]n South Africa . . . caste identities have dissolved because, amongst other reasons, their maintenance was of little value to Indian migrants, drawn as they were from the lower ranks of the caste hierarchy”).

39. See Lindsay Bremner, Bounded Spaces: Demographic Anxieties in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg.
simplified social relations by flattening and homogenizing the outside into a zone of potential threat.

In a strange sense, South Africa has almost come full circle from the anxious settler, overwhelmed by nature and seeking to construct domestic order and personhood for themselves and the colonized subjects through houses and walls. Today, the building and meanings of walls have, indeed, been further democratized as a means to create the proper inside of a house and a family. In the wall of the house, property and propriety meet in an anxious embrace. It seems clear that these walls produce their own ostensible cause: the ubiquitous fear which unfortunately also remains one of the most socially creative forces in existence.