

SOCIO-SPATIAL DIALECTICS WITHIN LANGA, THE FIRST BLACK TOWNSHIP IN CAPE TOWN, 1923-1960

123

Fadly Isaacs

University of Cape Town
e-mail: Fadly.Isaacs@gmail.com

Abstract

In South Africa, before 1994, spatial segregation of people based on racial classification was a firmly established mechanism that was used for maintaining white racial supremacy. With the coming to power of the National Party government in 1948, this spatial separation was intended to be structured at all scales: nationally through the establishment of Bantustan states for those who were classified as black; within cities separate residential areas were designed for different racial categories; and within public buildings whites and non-whites (sic) were required to use separate entrances and amenities. With the introduction of a pass control system in 1952, it also meant that access to urban areas for indigenous African people was strictly controlled and that their presence within the city was isolated to segregated living quarters. These residential enclaves, which were typically located on the outskirts of the city, have commonly become known as township locations. In Cape Town, Langa became the first such township to be established in 1927, and for the city authorities at that time, this spatial model represented an ideal mechanism of control for implementing and maintaining the dominant social values that prevailed at the start of the 20th century.

However, the history of the anti-Apartheid resistance reveals another dimension of this socio-spatial arrangement. Not only was the apartheid city the space for advancing and re-producing a particular socio-economic order, but the city, particularly the township, was also a place of opposition and social re-imagination. Places of intended control had also featured as places of intense resistance. In other words, this history tells us that the township, as well as the larger city, should not simply be thought of as some kind of abstract determinist spatial instrument. It should not be seen as an a priori entity, but should be appreciated 'as a unity containing different aspects' (Merrifield 1993:519) and as a place, 'a terrain where basic social practices – consumption, enjoyment, tradition, self-identification, solidarity, social support and social reproduction, etc. – are lived out' (Merrifield 1993:522). In this sense the township can be appreciated as a mediating terrain – a spatial threshold, and it is in this light that the early development of the Langa township will be reflected upon.

In doing so, the initial conceptualisation of the township as a functional institutional mechanism (of control) will be considered by making use of Donald Foley's (1964) analytical framework which he developed in order to study the spatial structure of metropolitan regions, and secondly by taking a closer reading of it as a place (of being) where social practices were lived out during its early years. In both cases, the spatial dimension of the township will be foregrounded as a way of bringing into dialogue a socio-spatial dialect. In this regard the spatial features of the Langa township will be discursively considered by drawing on the theoretical and representational techniques offered by space syntax for analysing urban environments (Hillier and Hanson 1984, Hillier 1996).

Keywords: space syntax, spatial structure, township, place, right to the city

Theme: Urban Space and Social, Economic and Cultural Phenomena

Introduction

In South Africa, before 1994, spatial segregation of people based on racial classification was a firmly established mechanism that was used for maintaining white racial supremacy. With the coming to power of the National Party government in 1948, this spatial separation was intended to be structured at all scales: nationally through the establishment of Bantustan states for those who were classified as black; within cities separate residential areas were designed for different racial categories; and within public buildings whites and non-whites (sic) were required to use separate entrances and amenities. With the introduction of a pass control system in 1952, it also meant that access to urban areas for indigenous African people was strictly controlled and that their presence within the city was isolated to segregated living quarters. These residential enclaves, which were typically located on the outskirts of the city, have commonly become known as township locations. In Cape Town, Langa became the first such township to be established in 1927, and for the city authorities at that time, this spatial model represented an ideal mechanism of control for implementing and maintaining the dominant social values that prevailed at the start of the 20th century.

However, the history of the anti-Apartheid resistance reveals another dimension of this socio-spatial arrangement. Not only was the apartheid city the space for advancing and re-producing a particular socio-economic order, but the city, particularly the township, was also a place of opposition and social re-imagination. Places of intended control had also featured as places of intense resistance. In other words, this history tells us that the township, as well as the larger city, should not simply be thought of as some kind of abstract determinist spatial instrument. It should not be seen as an a priori entity, but should be appreciated 'as a unity containing different aspects' (Merrifield 1993:519) and as a place, 'a terrain where basic social practices – consumption, enjoyment, tradition, self-identification, solidarity, social support and social reproduction, etc. – are lived out' (Merrifield 1993:522).

In this sense the township can be appreciated as a mediating terrain – *a spatial threshold*, and it is in this light that the early development of the Langa township will be reflected upon in the rest of this paper. Firstly, by critically considering its initial conceptualisation as a functional institutional mechanism (of control), and secondly by taking a closer reading of it as a place (of being) where social practices were lived out during its early years. In both cases, the spatial dimension of the township will be foregrounded as a way of bringing into dialogue a socio-spatial dialect. In this regard the spatial features of the Langa township will be discursively considered by drawing on the representational techniques as well the theoretical postulates that space syntax research (Hillier and Hanson 1984) has developed over the past number of years.

To further assist with this enquiry, the analytical framework (Table 1 below) that the urban geographer Donald Foley (1964) developed in the 1960's will also be employed as a key theoretical reference. Whilst Foley's initial intention was to offer a frame of reference that could help build a common language for the exchange of ideas and proposals in matters related to the study and planning of metropolitan regions, it will become evident that the approach can be applied across most settlement scales, including that of the township.

Foley put forward three conceptual tiers as the primary elements that were used to structure his analytical matrix. For the first level, he identified the *normative or cultural aspects*, which he referred to as the higher abstract social ambitions, or in the words of Bianca (2000) 'the inner motivations ... (or) deep-rooted human factors which (give) birth to ... a specific type of built environment'; at the second level he identified the *functional organisational aspects*, here referring to the institutional and policy directives formulated and instituted in order to give

effect to the latter; and as the third level he identified the *physical aspects*, the material translations and physical manifestations of both the normative ideals (level 1) as well as the organisational and institutional mechanisms (level 2). In addition to these three ‘horizontal’ tiers, the framework further recognised a spatial as well as an aspatial dimension for each level, or what can also be thought of as the ‘vertical’ dimension of the matrix.

Table 1 Selected aspects of metropolitan structure: a conceptual view (after Foley, 1964)

		A Aspatial Aspects		B Spatial Aspects	
1	Normative / Cultural Aspects	Social values. Culture patterns. Institutional setting. Technology.	1A	1B	Spatial distribution of culture patterns & norms; values & norms directly concerned with quality & determination of the spatial patterns of activities, population & physical environment.
2	Functional Organisational Aspects	Division & allocation of functions; functional interdependence; activity systems & sub-systems, incl. persons & establishments in their functional-role sense.	2A	2B	Spatial distribution of functions and activities; linkages (functional relations spatially conceived); spatial pattern of establishments, by functional type.
3	Physical Aspects	Physical objects: the geophysical environment, man-developed material improvements, people as physical bodies; qualities of these objects.	3A	3B	Spatial distribution of physical objects; the resulting spatial pattern formed by this distribution of land forms, buildings, roads, people, etc.; distribution in space of varying qualities of physical objects.

As a generic reference it offers a way of untangling and bringing to the fore the broad range of facets that are involved in the process of city production, as well as to draw our attention to the relational dynamics, that is, the interaction between and across the different tiers, both in terms of its spatial as well as aspatial dimension. This complex interplay across the matrix becomes very evident when the early development and spatial production of Langa is mapped using this format (Appendix A), the early years (1927-1960) of which is further described in the rest of this paper.

1. Historic Context and Establishment of Langa Township

The Langa township was formally opened on 10th September 1927 (Saunders 1979:19) on a piece of forest plantation roughly 10km from the city centre (Figure 1) and coincided with the period when Cape Town was evolving from a colonial town to a modern city. Its establishment can be understood as a spatial representation of the way in which the then ‘stewards of Cape Town’ (Coetzer 2009) sought to accommodate the growing influx of indigenous Africans who were primarily arriving from the Eastern Cape. One of the most noticeable features during this time was the radical shift in the city’s demographic size and profile.



Figure 1 Location of Langa in relation to Cape Town city centre

Source: UCT Library Digital Collection from Cape Town Surveyor General Office: 1937 Cape Town and Environs 2

During the last decade of the 18th century (1795), the recorded population of Cape Town was 13,000 people and by 1892 the city's population numbered 170,000 with most of the growth taking place over the last 12 years of that period. That is, between 1880 and 1892, the population increased from 88,000 to 170,000. Furthermore, the research by Saunders (1978, 1979) and Bickford-Smith (1995) informs us that it was also during these years that the people of Cape Town witnessed the introduction of segregation across a wide range of work and recreational activities (Bank and Minkley 1998). Langa's establishment was therefore not simply about accommodating the surge in urban population, but it was essentially informed by very specific social imperatives, or what Foley would identify as the *normative or cultural* ideals and informants.

From Saunders(1978) we further learnt that these normative ideals were influenced by concerns related to health and sanitation, as well as the colonial need to take charge of 'undesirable' social behaviour. At the same time it must be remembered that the city's growing industrial economy was becoming ever more reliant on a dependable and cheap labour pool. In other words, these aforementioned concerns indicate that the higher level motivations need not be thought of as a single factor, but in this case it could more appropriately be considered as an assemblage of intertwined socio-economic interests.

When we reflect on *the institutional mechanisms* that informed the establishment of Langa, that is, Foley's second level aspects, we see that these are less ambiguous. Firstly, the introduction of the Native Land Act of 1913 brought about the disenfranchisement of the indigenous people of South Africa since it effectively rendered them to be strangers in their land of birth. They were prohibited from buying or hiring any land within South Africa and their 'citizenship', or urban enfranchisement, became attached to Bantustan states, i.e. isolated territorial fragments that in total accounted for less than 7% of land within the original South African national boundary.

Secondly, the Native (Urban) Land Act of 1923 further controlled the status and movement of Blacks within the urban centres of South Africa. Through this law local urban authorities were allowed to set aside sections of land adjacent to existing cities for temporary occupation by Blacks. Whilst they were however not allowed to own any land, their labour was required in order service the local economy. According to Wilkinson (1984:7), the key provision of the Urban Land Act was to achieve total segregation of the urban African population within the city context. He further elaborated by adding that the 'principle itself held that the right of municipal – and by extension, general-enfranchisement could be denied to African residents of the 'white' urban areas only if their right to permanent residence in those areas, interpreted as the right to free-hold land tenure, was withheld.'

This brief overview of the higher order imperatives and two of the primary institutional mechanisms that informed the establishment of the Langa settlement indicate how the township was primarily conceived of as an instrument of control and a space for the temporary presence of Blacks within the 'white' city.

2. Early Occupation and the Emergence of a Spatial Structure

From the earlier descriptions it is clear that there were active efforts to severely limit the presence of indigenous Africans in the city and that the original siting of the township on the far outskirts of Cape Town spatially reinforced this imperative. However, at the scale of the township itself, Coetzer (2009:17) has argued that the actual layout of the original design (Figure 2), which was based on the Garden City model, can be interpreted as revealing 'the nascent socio-spatial segregation, articulation and control at the heart of the Garden City Movement'. In formal terms, he was drawing our attention to the strong axial features of the layout and the geometric order of the design, where the following features are most notable: 1) a dominant central north-south axis (Lerotholi Avenue) and a secondary east-west axis (Washington Street); 2) a centralised square which is surrounded by two churches, a picture theatre, police station and the Native Administration Offices; and 3) the respective axial anchors – train station in the north and the men's hostels in the south and west.

Hanson (1989) however reminds us to distinguish between geometric order and spatial structure. Drawing therefore on the analytical techniques developed by space syntax research over the past number of years, and using the Depthmap software tool, Figure 2 is overlaid with the segment integration analysis (Rn metric) of the original plan.

It is very apparent that the two primary organisational axes have distinctively contrasting integration measures. Washington Street (east-west axis) records the highest integration value and Lerotholi Avenue (north-south axis), which appeared to serve as the 'spatial spine' along which the higher order scaled buildings were intended to be located, has a relatively average integration measure. This is in contrast to the higher measures recorded for the perimeter streets, including Bhunga Avenue along the western edge, whose further relevance will become more evident in the latter part of the paper.

A syntactical analysis has thus challenged a purely geometric reading of the settlement layout and has started to reveal an embedded spatial structure where Washington Street and the perimeter connection are prominent structural features. At the same time it is worth observing that the inner residential courts have, as anticipated, the lowest integration values, and primarily serve as the background precincts for the area as a whole.

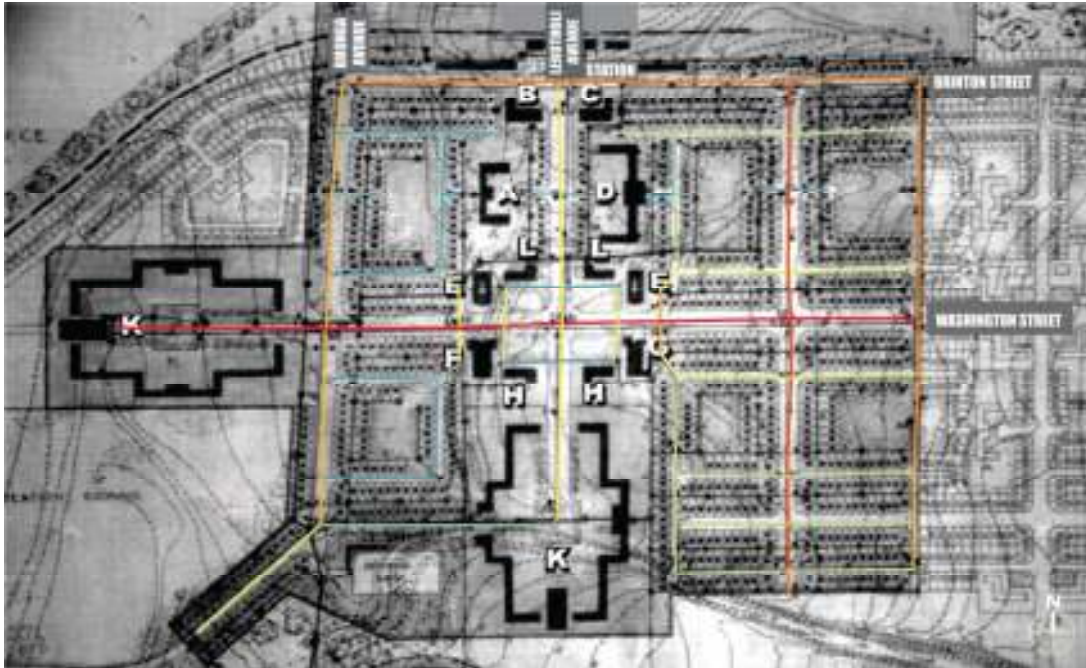


Figure 2 Langa, Drainage Plan 1923 showing original intended layout & Segment Integration (Rn metric) from Coetzer, 2009 with annotations: A: School, B: Meat Market, C: Fruit & Veg Market, D: Compound for 200 Single Women, E: Churches, F: Picture Theatre, G: Police Station, H: Admin, K: compound for 2,000 Single Men, L: Church House (original from Cape Archives, M3/4005)

The next segment integration (Rn metric) map of the area that covers the initial period of Langa's development is based on the 1935 aerial image (Figure 3). Looking at the actual arrangements after eight years we can see that not only did the layout deviate from the original design proposal, but what is further revealing is that only part of the western section of the area had been built by 1935. For the first few years then, the actual spatial arrangements and actual spatial structure deviated substantially from the initial 'master plan'. Whilst Washington Street still records the highest integration value, Bhunga Avenue had now emerged as the clearly dominant north-south spatial connection and can be thought of as having become the western edge spatial integrator. Here we can take our cue from Hillier (1996) and understand that streets that are syntactically well connected have the following potential - that they offer the prospect of generating more pedestrian through movement which in turn attracts land uses that benefit from this higher activity. This interpretation allows us to spatially explain the emergence of the first small shops along Bhunga Avenue as well its use as one of the major spaces for staging public events over weekends, including protest gatherings where anti-apartheid luminaries such Robert Sobukwe and Govan Mbeki are known to have addressed the Cape Town community. This arrangement was in clear juxtaposition to the Police Station and Administrative Offices that remained located at the eastern end of the settlement.

However, beyond a simple binary account that places residents against authority, west versus east if you like, the early presence of churches within Langa features prominently within this unfolding socio-spatial dialectic. Anchored around Lerotholi Avenue, all of the churches, three in total, served as important places for supporting the early educational initiatives during Langa's formative years. For example, for three years, two of the churches served as classrooms of the first school in the area, before permission was granted by the Cape Education Department to construct a formal school building in 1943. The third church, St. Cyprians, also along Lerotholi Street, similarly set up a school within its immediate precinct. Today, this precinct is still characterised by the presence of these religious institutions as well as the adjacent schools that each have sponsored.



Figure 3 Aerial Image of Langa 1935 & Segment Integration (Rn metric)
with annotations: G: Police Station, H: Native Administrator, K: Men's Hostels, L1,2: Churches

A second and third stage in the growth of the area is marked by the further expansion of the township to the east (Figure 4 a+b). This period is strongly influenced, especially spatially, by the formal post-war modernist planning and architectural thinking that characterised this time. However, very much like the initial design for Langa, this new plan was also only partially implemented. The aerial image of 1945 shows the initial extension of Washington Street to the east as well as the construction of 4- four-storey hostel buildings at the furthest eastern end. As can be seen from the segment integration map (Figure 4a), this expansion, together with the rapid construction of single storey hostels across the eastern section of the area just before 1960 (Figure 4a), marks a radical shift in the spatial structure and centre of the settlement. The prominence of Washington Street is reinforced, Bhunga Avenue continues to anchor the western precinct, but a third north-south armature, Jungle Walk, emerges for the first time to the east of the central axis.

Lerotholi Avenue also regains its spatial prominence. Now, however, the existing Police Station and Administrative Offices are reinforced by the addition of a Pass Control Court¹ which was the office to limit indigenous Africans' right to the city. In other words, this period was marked by the originally designed urban core being reinforced as a place of authoritarian control and social discriminatory.

¹ This follows the introduction of the notorious Pass Laws Act in 1952 that sought to regulate the presence of Blacks in urban areas.



Figure 4a Aerial Image of Langa 1945 & Segment Integration (Rn metric) with annotations: G: Police Station, H: Native Administrator, K: Men's Hostels, L1,2: Churches, S: First Public School



Figure 4b Aerial Image of Langa 1960 & Segment Integration (Rn metric) with annotations: G: Police Station, H: Native Administrator, K: Men's Hostels, L1,2: Churches, S: First Public School, T: Beer Hall, P: Pass Control Office

But as it was the case during earlier periods, the site of control was also appropriated as a site for resistance. Consequently, in 1960 one of the largest anti-pass protest marches was organised from Washington Street in Langa. This time, however, not within the Bhunga Avenue precinct, but rather close to Langa's first high school and thereafter heading off in an easterly direction where the first direct street connection to the rest of the city had just been constructed.

The references above could only offer a tiny glimpse into the life world that emerged around the spatial centres of Langa during these early years given the scope and limitations of this paper. Recent historical narratives by some of the early residents, who shared their memories

during an oral history project (Field, Meyer, and Swanson 2007), reveal both the wretched circumstances of the environment, the harsh treatment by the authorities, but at the same time, also the efforts within the community to challenge the status quo as well as construct a spirit of vitality. It is therefore evident, certainly during these early years that a dynamic socio-spatial dialectic unfolded within the evolving precinct.

3. Conclusion

From this broad analysis of the early growth of the spatial area of Langa, it is clear that from the very beginning, there has always been a tension between the conceptual founding premises of its establishment and the lived out experiences on the ground. In its worst sense, the township is a concrete manifestation of a socio-economic and cultural history that typifies both the modern project in South Africa that continues to characterise the spatial structure of South Africa's cities.

However, by thinking of the township as a mediating terrain this paper has shown that it is more than a concrete legacy that can simply be physically 'fixed'. By making use of Foley's analytical frame of reference, it is apparent that any socio-spatial changes will always be informed by prevailing higher order abstract imperatives that are facilitated by institutional and organisation arrangements. It is this unity that ultimately acts itself out, one that is either imposed from the top or that emerges from grounded circumstances. In both cases, it finds mediation somewhere in space – abstractly, typologically, as well as topologically.

References

- Bank, A., and G. Minkley. 1998. "Genealogies of Space and Identity in Cape Town. Kronos." *Journal of Cape History* 25:4-16.
- Bianca, S. 2000. *Urban Form in the Arab World: Past and Present*. Thames and Hudson.
- Bickford-Smith, V. 1995. "South African Urban History, Racial Segregation and the Unique Case of Cape Town." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21 (1):63-78.
- Coetzer, N. 2009. "Langa Township in the 1920's: an (extra) ordinary Garden Suburb." *South African Journal of Art History* 24.
- Field, S., R. Meyer, and F. Swanson. 2007. "Sites of Memory in Langa." *Imagining the City: Memories and Cultures in Cape Town*: 21-36.
- Foley, D. L. 1964. *An Approach to Metropolitan Spatial Structure*. In *Explorations into Urban Structure*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hanson, J. 1989. "Order and Structure in Urban Design: the Plans for the Rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of 1666." *Ekistics* 56(334-335):22-42.
- Hillier, B. 1996. "Cities as Movement Economies." *Intelligent Environments: Spatial Aspects of the Information Revolution*:295-342.
- Hillier, B., and J. Hanson. 1984. *The Social Logic of Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Merrifield, A. 1993. "Place and Space: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18(4): 516-531.
- Saunders, C. 1978. *The Creation of Ndabeni: Urban Segregation*. Social Control and African Resistance.
- Wilkinson, P. 1984. *The Sale of the Century? A Critical Review of Recent Developments in African Housing Policy in South Africa*.

APPENDIX A

LANGA 1927 - post-1994 Urban Structure: A Discursive Framework (after Foley, 1964) – (re: ‘the right to the city – urban enfranchisement’)

Summary of shifts re: normative imperatives / institutional mechanisms / physical aspects in the development of Langa Township 1927 –post-1994

			1927 – 1948 (25 yrs)	1948 – 1986 (38 yrs)	1986 – 1994 (15 yrs)	+	Post-1994
1 Normative / Cultural Aspects / Imperative	Aspatial Aspects	Social values. Culture patterns. Institutional setting. Technology.	Health/ Sanitation, Industrial Economy	Racial domination	Multi-racialism – equal but different		Constitutional Democracy
	Spatial Aspects	Spatial distribution of culture patterns & norms; values & norms directly concerned with quality & determination of the spatial patterns of activities, population, & physical environment.	Slum Clearance, Urban Economy	Spatial segregation	Market economic		Market economy
2 Functional Organisational Aspects	Aspatial Aspects	Division & allocation of functions; functional interdependence; activity systems & sub-systems, incl. persons & establishments in functional-role sense.	Native superintendent / Limited municipal representation -	Bantu Administration Act (1971)(urban housing moved from CC to National Gov.) Black Local Authorities Act (1982)			City of Cape Town Admin, Common SA Citizenship
	Spatial Aspects	Spatial distribution of functions and activities; linkages (functional relations spatially conceived); spatial pattern of establishments, by functional type.	Native Land Act (1913) Native (Urban Land) Act (1923)	Pass Laws Act (1952) Group Areas Act (1953)	Repeal of Pass Laws (1986) Repeal of Group Areas Act (1991)		Private Property Right as Constitutional Right
3 Physical Aspects	Aspatial Aspects	Physical objects: the geophysical environment, man-developed material improvements, people as physical bodies; qualities of these objects.	Huts and Barracks(1 st phase) 4-storey Flats (2 nd phase)	NE 51/9 Western Hostel Dwellers Association	Hostels to Homes Suburban House		Hostels to Homes N2 Gateway BNG
	Spatial Aspects	Spatial distribution of physical objects; the resulting spatial pattern formed by this distribution of land forms, buildings, roads, people, etc.; distribution in space of varying qualities of physical objects.	Native Location Labour Compound Garden Suburb	Model Township	Private development		RDP Development