

Johannesburg draws poor, struggles to house them

By *DONNA BRYSON (AP)*
7 July 2010

JOHANNESBURG — The handsome art-deco building at 193 Jeppe St. was typical of its apartheid times: full of white-collar professionals, mostly white, and an army of blacks pushing brooms and serving tea until night fell and the segregation banished them to their distant townships.

Today it's a rooming house crammed with black tenants, and looks more like a vertical refugee camp. Mothers trudge up the stairs, babies on their backs and buckets of water in their hands. The building stinks of garbage and gasoline-burning generators. The elevators don't work. Water doesn't run. Only a few downstairs toilets still flush.

The 10-story building in Johannesburg's old commercial center represents the bottom end of South Africa's gulf between rich and poor, and is a vivid example of the dislocations brought on by the dismantling of apartheid 16 years ago. It's one thing to strike down a hated system of racial segregation; to right its wrongs is a wholly different challenge.

The World Cup has not only put its South African hosts to their biggest logistical challenge since the 1994 election that brought down apartheid, it has also focused renewed attention on one of the world's widest income gaps. The visiting fans who stay in comfortable hotels in the affluent northern suburbs are unlikely to bump into Tony Maara.

Maara, an immigrant from Kenya, lives on the seventh floor of 193 Jeppe St., and runs a small store on the second, selling cigarettes, candy and beer. The windows in his home have no glass so he covers them with cardboard. He carries fuel up the stairs to power a generator for his refrigerator, boombox and lights. Some of his neighbors have only candles.

He has struggled long and hard to keep this one-room toehold in "Jozi," one of Johannesburg's several nicknames. Yet the 32-year-old has hope. Compared with the deadly riots that followed Kenya's disputed 2007 election — a bloodbath that made him leave for good — South Africa's economy and vibrant democracy encourage him.

"Jozi is very tough," he says. "But it has opportunities."

When he moved in he had no lease, but paid less than \$100 a month in rent to a man he thought was the owner.

After about a year, Maara said, police arrested the "owner." Strangers appeared claiming the building was theirs. They promised to renovate, and signed leases. But after a few months, they came back with police and evicted the tenants. Maara and other tenants sought help from a law clinic at Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand. The lawyers discovered that the second set of "owners" also were fake, and won a court order to let the tenants move back.

A 2005 study by the Center on Housing Rights and Evictions, a Geneva-based human rights group, estimated Johannesburg had more than 200 buildings like Maara's, a result of white flight as the apartheid era ended. Owners simply disappeared or stopped maintaining their buildings. In some cases, criminals hijacked the building and demanded rent from tenants.

The turquoise paint on the outer walls of 193 Jeppe St. faded. The Chinese store on the ground floor moved out, leaving only its signs in Chinese characters.

Stuart Wilson, who helped research and write the 2005 study, says the tenants put up with the squalor because they need to be close to jobs. They clean or guard office buildings, sell in shops or on the streets, pump gas, collect trash for recycling — not much different to what they did for a living in apartheid times.

Low-cost housing has been built outside the city center, but the poorest can't afford the commute. So the inner city that was once off-limits to black residents is now attractive, even if it means squeezing into 193 Jeppe St.

The end of the "pass laws" that segregated housing nationwide unleashed vast migrations of squatters from townships into shanty towns and tent camps wherever there might be work. The race war and chaos that white supremacists had predicted never came about, and South Africa remains the continent's most vibrant economy.

At its heart lies Johannesburg, a city of 3 million built on gold mines.

But Wilson worries that democracy in South Africa is being undermined because the wealth gap is widening, and leaders are losing credibility as they fail to live up to the constitution's promise that "Everyone has the right to have access to adequate housing."

Nearly 3 million homes have been built since 1994, and the government plans to spend about \$2 billion on housing this year. Housing minister Tokyo Sexwale has said the target is 220,000 new homes and the upgrading of 500,000 shantytowns. But he acknowledges another 2.1 million homes are needed.

Bishop Paul Verryn, a Methodist minister, has turned his large church into a shelter for more than 1,000 homeless. He estimates up to 50,000 people are living in decrepit buildings in the Jeppe St. area. Maara doesn't know how many people live in his building; a room one day will house 20 people, the next 10. Officially, no one has been paying rent since the court order allowed them back, but people who claim control of a room likely take money from roommates.

When the tenants returned after their eviction, they found plumbing pipes and electricity wires had been stripped, and interior walls demolished. Scavengers may have been looking for scrap to sell, but Maara thinks it was people who wanted to make sure poor tenants did not come back. "It was pure malice, to make the place uninhabitable," Maara said.

Uninhabitable, but affordable. Maara balanced plaster boards on the rubble of what had once been his walls. His front door is missing, so in its place hangs the flag of Brazil, whose World Cup team he supports.

Source: Associated Press