

OPINIONISTA

# Inner-city blaze — the blame lies squarely in the hands of the City of Johannesburg

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**The City of Johannesburg cannot claim ignorance. It cannot claim not to have had a workable plan at its disposal. It has no defence for the deaths of these people and its failures. The attempts to blame foreigners and to exploit the tragedy for cynical xenophobic ends is a further strategy to pass the buck.**

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The death of 77 people was an avoidable disaster. The challenges of the inner city of Johannesburg have been ongoing since the early 1990s, they are neither new, nor are they something that the state was unaware of.

Since the 1990s and the inception of various policies that were either not properly implemented, faced speculation of corruption, or were basically ignored, the City of Johannesburg has been hellbent on unworkable solutions.

This is in large part due to the fact that the inner city houses a mass of migrants, and so they do not count as political citizens and have been a useful political scapegoat. The inner-city poor have also not been seen as any kind of

vote bank for any of the parties, opposition or the ANC, and so have languished in poverty and now in tragedy.

### **Legacy of neglect**

The story of overcrowding and poor conditions dates back to the late 1980s and early 1990s and the “greying” of the inner city, as black and people of colour moved in and white flight led to the growth of the suburbs.

High interest rates and increases in costs meant that rents for what were designed as single-family dwelling units became unaffordable to the new residents of the CBD and resulted in increasing numbers of people crushed into spaces intended for a single household. High service costs and the sense that building owners had lost control of buildings led to a lack of maintenance and a vicious cycle of declining conditions.

As such, many of the building owners simply stopped looking after or even acknowledging their buildings, afraid to go into what was seen as an increasingly dangerous inner city.

The state and the private sector have not been unaware of the conditions, but initially attempted policies that evicted and displaced the poor. The Bad Buildings Programme and the Better Buildings Programme of the late 1990s and early 2000s were based on a model of clearing buildings of their sitting tenants and then handing these buildings over to private developers to rent them out for higher rents to a wealthier class of residents.

Despite the time, money and effort poured into these programmes, they produced only some 74 buildings for rental (although the numbers remain obscure) and led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of poor people ([COHRE Report](#)).

### **War waged against the poor**

The Red Ants and other agencies consistently and violently displaced these residents leaving them with few alternatives and set adrift from the livelihood-earning strategies and social networks that made life for them and their families possible.

Neither the Bad Buildings Programme nor the Better Buildings Programme substantially improved life for the poor nor significantly changed the profile of the inner city. These were coupled with anti-immigrant “blitzes”, ostensibly targeted at gangs and cartels, but in reality used as weapons against the poor and migrant communities.

The Constitutional Court decisions to protect the poor of the inner city and ensure that the [Prevention of Illegal Evictions Act](#) was properly implemented was a key judgment to ensure and safeguard the lives and livelihoods of inner-city residents. The decisions (and there were a series of them over the last 25 years) put the onus of alternative accommodation and due process squarely on the shoulders of the local government — which did very little in response.

Two more programmes followed, the Inner City Property Scheme, where little seems to have been done and speculation continues about the corruption and mismanagement that dogged the programme. Within a few years the market-led programme that once again relied on emptying buildings of sitting tenants and releasing the land for higher rental, basically disappeared. An uncertain number of buildings were handed over to private sector interests and under something of a cloud.

Finally, the Johannesburg Inner City Housing Implementation Plan (ICHIP) was developed in the mid-2010s. The plan was commissioned as a response to a call for an updated housing action plan of the 2013 Inner City Transformation Roadmap (ICTR).

Unlike previous plans, it was completed by a multi-disciplinary team in consultation with the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), the Johannesburg Social Housing Company (Joshco) and the CoJ Departments of Housing and Development Planning (RebelGroup, 2016).

### **Plans gather dust**

In October 2017, a media statement issued by then-mayor Herman Mashaba announced that the City Council had approved a plan to “tackle the housing challenge within the inner city”, however despite the fact that the plan was practical, implementable and spoke directly to the challenges of previous programmes, it has still not to this day been approved by the Johannesburg City Council as a housing strategy.

As a consequence, it has been implemented in fits and starts, between some private sector actors and the City, but the conditions of people living in the city have remained atrocious.

The City cannot claim ignorance. It cannot claim not to have had a workable plan at its disposal. It has no defence for the deaths of these people and its failures.

The attempts to blame foreigners and to exploit the tragedy for cynical xenophobic ends is a further strategy to pass the buck, and to further

disempower a group of urban residents to whom the state's obligation has been ignored.

They have been passed over due to their lack of political weight and the state's inability to move away from market-led approaches.

I state again, the tragedy was avoidable.