

Selling Your City: Four Ways Cape Town Has Been Sold



Figure 1: Landscape Shot of Kalk Bay by Anelisa Mzimela

The Mother City, Cape Town, is changing fast in ways that are easier to see but harder to live with. Rent prices are spiking, short-term lets are on the rise, transforming ordinary flats into mini-hotels, and long-promised affordable housing is still being strangled by municipal red tape, waiting for approval. There are many stories that are unfolding in Cape Town. In the city's courts, families in Bromwell Street go against international property developers for the mere luxury of staying near work and school in a city with international eyes on it. In Bo-Kaap, residents are pushing back against tour-bus traffic on heritage streets. The Housing construction in Salt River that was approved in June still has not begun. And activists continue to keep the pressure on regarding the Tafelberg school site in Sea Point.

These four human-centred stories, from Woodstock to Sea Point, reveal how policy and markets are reshaping who gets to live in the city.

1. Bromwell Street vs. the City of Cape Town: Court Says "You Can't Just Move People Out of Sight"

For nearly a decade, families in Bromwell Street, in Woodstock, have lived harsh lives. They have faced eviction notices, court dates, and the dread of being bussed to far-flung “temporary” camps. Years later, on the 20th December 2024, South Africa’s Constitutional Court [ruled](#) the City of Cape Town’s failure to provide inner-city temporary emergency accommodation was unconstitutional. The ruling applied to families facing eviction in both Woodstock and Salt River. The court [reiterated](#) that the City’s housing programme ignored people displaced by gentrification and must be remedied so families aren’t driven away from jobs and schools, circumstances created by inner city reinvestment.

[Local reporting](#) captured the relief and uncertainty that Bromwell residents felt following the ruling. They still didn’t know where or when they would be moved, only that their temporary accommodation had to be in Woodstock, Salt River, or the Inner City. The Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI) [unpacks](#) the principle clearly: emergency housing cannot mean banishment to the outskirts; cities must plan for both long-term social housing and well-located emergency options.

Why it matters: South Africa’s [highest court](#) has made it plain: developers cannot assume that low-income residents can be sent to distant temporary relocation areas and forgotten. That decision now guides future eviction fights against gentrifying neighbourhoods, requiring cities to plan nearby, dignified alternatives.

2. Bo-Kaap Heritage turns into Profit

A living Muslim heritage area, even preceding spatial apartheid, Bo Kaap is now being packaged and sold back to the world as an “experience”. On any weekday, you’ll see it: tour groups funnelled up narrow streets for the perfect photo, short-stay flats turning over every few days, souvenir shops priced for international visitors rather than locals. What used to be a quiet walk home from madrasa can feel impossible to navigate. Residents don’t need a policy paper to know what’s changing; they feel it in their rent, in the noise on a weeknight, and in the way strangers treat their stoep as a backdrop.

In April 2025, after years of community pressure, the City restricted large (36-seater+) buses from entering key routes into [Bo-Kaap](#), redirecting drop-offs to the periphery. Meanwhile, short-stay tourism keeps pressure on housing. Cape Town’s 2019 [planning by-law](#) permits short-term letting up to 30 days per guest, and Airbnb’s live page [shows](#) about 180 active

rentals in Bo-Kaap. The result is a wider dilemma: booming visitor demand, outsider-owned businesses, fears that noise complaints could even target the call to prayer, and a community fighting to keep control of its own cultural economy.

Why it matters: A bus route is policy in tar. Limiting large coaches is one of the few fast levers a city has to protect liveability, while longer solutions, like managing short-term rentals and building affordable homes near jobs, lag behind. Bo-Kaap's achievement shows how residents can win small, practical victories that keep everyday life possible.

3. The delayed promise of the Salt River Market

By now, you're starting to get the gist of these stories. After years of delay, on the 23rd of June 2025, Heritage Western Cape [approved](#) the Impact Assessment for Salt River Market (approval dated 11 June). The plan starts to take shape: two apartment buildings with retail at ground level, while Salt River Town Hall and the public plaza are kept as part of the precinct. The delivery model is split, about 300 social-housing units plus 700 open-market units, and the non-profit Communicare is the developer. But the site handover is still pending; funding from the Social Housing Regulatory Authority (SHRA) isn't approved yet, and families in the adjacent informal settlement must be relocated before building can start.

Set that slow progress against the need: more than 400,000 people are on the City's housing [waiting list](#). The City talks up a 12,000-unit affordable housing pipeline, and says 11 parcels have been released, yet as of July 2025 construction hasn't begun. The contrast is stark: the pipeline is moving on paper; residents need doors, keys and move-in dates.

Why it matters: Every year that sites like Salt River Market inch forward is a year in which service workers must commute further, families double up, and landlords see little reason to temper their price expectations. The backlog is not abstract; it's a daily bus fare and a lost hour of sleep for people who keep the city lights on.

4. Sea Point's Tafelberg: What Happens on Prime Public Land?

A former school property, bold ocean air, and some of the most valuable land in South Africa: the Tafelberg site in Sea Point has become a proxy for a bigger question: Will prime public land in wealthy areas ever carry social housing? The fight over the former Tafelberg School site in Sea Point has become a test of how governments will use well-located public

land. Activists forced the city to cancel the sale and commit, on paper, to affordable housing; the Constitutional Court heard the case in February 2025 and reserved judgment, after a decade of rulings that first stopped the cities' sale and then revived it on appeal.

While the court weighs that question, the Western Cape Government began consulting on new concept plans for the site. In early 2025, officials [confirmed](#) that part of Tafelberg would be used for affordable/social housing and unveiled three mixed-use options; public engagement started in May and will run through a longer statutory process into 2026. The important signal: all options now include social housing on this high-value strip.

By August 2025, [reporting](#) indicated a preferred scheme could deliver up to 252 social-housing units (alongside market and “affordable” units), though numbers remain proposals until planning is complete. Activists argue this shift only happened because communities kept the pressure on.

Why it matters: You cannot fix apartheid-era geography if every centrally located public site becomes a private luxury development. What happens at Tafelberg will echo far beyond Sea Point: it will tell us whether the state treats land policy as a lever for integration, or a balance-sheet item.

What these four stories ask of the Mother City

Taken together, these aren't isolated disputes. They're a pattern. Families on Bromwell Street are asking not to be pushed out of sight. Bo-Kaap residents protect daily life on streets that carry history. A social-housing site in Salt River is crawling forward while the waiting list grows. A block of public land in Sea Point forces a basic choice: use prime land to integrate the city, or cash it out and deepen the spatial divide. The human cost shows up first in routine things: how far you travel to work, whether your child can stay in the same school, and whether a neighbour of 20 years can afford to renew a lease.

If Cape Town wants to stay liveable for the people who keep it running, three shifts are needed:

1. Deliver well-located homes, not just pipelines. Publish clear timelines, break ground on inner-city projects, and report progress quarterly. While building, keep

emergency accommodation close to jobs and schools, as the court has required, so evictions don't become exiled/s.

2. Use public land to fix the map. Sites like Tafelberg should set a new norm: social and affordable housing as a default on prime, well-served land. Treat land policy as a tool for inclusion, not a profit margin.
3. Protect housing for residents where supply is tight. Manage short-term letting in sensitive areas, align rates and planning rules with actual use, and keep data public so the City, communities and owners are working from the same facts.

None of this is anti-tourism or anti-investment. It's about balance and location; making sure nurses can live near hospitals, cleaners near hotels, teachers near schools, and elders near their mosques and churches. Cape Town can welcome visitors and still be a place where ordinary local households can build a life.