

This Is Not Development. This Is Displacement

Cape Town loves to sell itself as Africa's postcard city. It parades its Table Mountain views, its glass towers and luxury lofts. Its wine estates marketed to tourists who can afford to drink R300 glasses of Chardonnay. But step away from the tourist brochures and walk the streets of Woodstock, Bo-Kaap, or Salt River, and you will see another Cape Town bleeding quietly. Families being evicted from homes they have lived in for generations. Rents doubling in less than a decade. Pensioners being harassed by lawyers working for developers who want to flatten their history to make space for boutique hotels.

The city calls it "urban renewal" and "revitalisation." I call it displacement. And it is nothing short of violence, even when dressed up in the language of development.

The Ghost of Apartheid Wearing a Suit

Let us not fool ourselves, what we see today is not some random market phenomenon. It is the direct descendant of apartheid's spatial planning. Then, it was bulldozers and police trucks driving Coloured and Black families out of District Six and other "desirable" areas. Today, it is eviction notices, market rental spikes, and municipal policy documents that sell off public land to private developers under the cover of "investment".

The violence is quieter now, but not less brutal. Apartheid at least admitted its racism openly. Today's version wears a suit, hides behind municipal spreadsheets, and calls itself the free market. The outcome is the same, poor and working-class people, mostly Black and Coloured, are told they have no right to live in the inner city.

Numbers Don't Lie

The statistics alone should make any official blush. Since 2010, housing prices have soared by 141%, according to StatsSA, far outpacing income growth in the mother city. Over the past five years, the Western Cape's property inflation hit 35.5 %. This is the highest in the country, driven largely by Cape Town's overheated housing market. Developers call this "market value." For residents, it is an eviction disguised as an invoice.

Meanwhile, the state's investment in housing has withered. In 2022–2023, government built only 34,000 subsidized houses nationwide, compared to 235,000 in 1998–1999. And the backlog has swollen to a staggering 2.5 million households still waiting for a roof over their heads. This is not just bad planning. It is deliberate neglect.

The effects are brutal. A Harvard study found that South Africa's lowest-income workers spend 37 % of their income on transport. Which is a direct result of apartheid's spatial segregation being reproduced by today's so-called development. By pushing working-class families further out of the city, gentrification doesn't just rob them of their homes; it robs them of their time, their wages, and their dignity.

The Human Cost

Behind every statistic is a person forced to live the consequences.

In Woodstock, someone who has lived in the same street for fifty years can suddenly be told their rent has tripled because their building is being "revamped". They cannot afford it, but where would they go? The Cape Flats? They would be cut off from their children's schools and the church that has anchored their life.

In Bo-Kaap, heritage homes stand next to cranes building luxury apartments that no one from the community can afford. Should the residents protest on cobblestone streets, waving placards against construction projects that threaten to erase their history. Their chants are drowned out by the sound of drills.

In Salt River, once a tight-knit working-class hub, evictions leave houses standing empty until developers flip them into Airbnb rentals. Neighbours who once borrowed sugar from each other now live hours apart, scattered by a market that values profit over community.

This is not development. It is erasure.

The City's Empty Promises

The City of Cape Town insists it has housing plans. Policy documents speak of "inclusive growth" and "spatial justice." Election manifestos repeat the same slogans year after year, 'more affordable housing, more opportunities, more accesses'. But where are the results? Public land that could have been used for social housing has instead been sold to private developers. The much-touted Foreshore Freeway land release? Tied up in bureaucracy and sweetheart deals. Mayors come and go, but their promises dissolve like mist on Table Mountain. The reality is simple. Government has chosen the developer over the resident. They argue that private investment will "lift the city" and create opportunities. But what good

is a shiny new apartment block if the very cleaners and construction workers who built it cannot afford to live anywhere near it?

When the Courts Must Step In

It says everything about this city that communities must drag the state into court to secure their most basic rights. In late 2024, the Constitutional Court ruled in favour of residents of Bromwell Street, Woodstock. The court ordered that emergency housing must be provided as close as possible to their homes, rejecting the city's attempts to dump them far out on the Cape Flats. The judges recognised what the city refuses to admit, relocation is not neutral. To rip people from their communities is to rip them from their lives.

Activist groups like *Ndifuna Ukwazi* and *Reclaim the City* have carried these battles for years. Their reports show a systematic pattern of displacement, where "market forces" now do the dirty work once carried out by apartheid bulldozers. As *Ndifuna Ukwazi* puts it, "Cape Town's housing crisis is not natural. It is manufactured." And it is maintained every time the city sells off public land to private bidders while telling residents to wait their turn.

A City of Contradictions

Cape Town markets itself as a "world-class city." But what kind of world-class city deliberately excludes its own people from its centre? Walk along Albert Road in Woodstock: on one side, a decaying council flat where families crowd into one-bedroom units. On the other, a newly-built apartment block where rent starts at R18,000 a month. The distance between them is not just the width of a street.

It is the chasm of inequality that this city refuses to confront. Luxury shops sprout next to struggling spaza stores. Rooftop cocktail bars look down on pensioners counting coins for bread. Developers boast of "urban vibrancy" while the actual vibrancy of communities. Neighbours, traditions, shared history, is being bulldozed into silence.

The Academic Mirror

Scholars at UCT's African Centre for Cities and other institutions have long pointed out that Cape Town's so-called development is a continuation of apartheid logics through neoliberal economics. Instead of bulldozers, we now have the weapon of "market forces." Instead of

forced removals, we now have rent hikes and evictions. It may appear more civilised, but it is equally destructive.

Research shows that cities that embrace gentrification without strong protections for the poor become hollow. They lose cultural diversity, destroy social cohesion, and create what urban sociologists call “exclusionary enclaves.” Cape Town is heading exactly in the direction where a city centre built for tourists and elites, is surrounded by a working class that is forced further and further out.

A Call for Justice-Oriented Planning

We must stop pretending that the market will fix this. It will not. The market alone just deepens inequality. If the City of Cape Town is serious about “inclusivity,” then it must treat housing not as a commodity, but as a basic human right.

This means reserving public land for genuinely affordable housing, not luxury schemes. It means rent control measures that stop landlords from profiteering off desperate tenants. It means listening to communities like Woodstock, Bo-Kaap, and Salt River—not shoving them aside in the name of “progress”. Housing activists have been shouting these solutions for years. The question is whether anyone in power is willing to listen.

Conclusion: Cape Town’s Two Futures

Cape Town is standing at a crossroads. One path leads to a hollow city, where glass towers shine but whole communities vanish. The other leads to a city that honours its history, protects its people, and builds housing policies that put justice first. Right now, Cape Town has chosen displacement over development. But cities are not just cities, they are made of people. And people can resist. If Cape Town continues to auction off dignity to the highest bidder, then its so-called “world-class” image will be nothing more than a mirror of apartheid’s cruelty, repackaged for a new age. Development without justice is not progress. It is plain but ‘legal’ theft. And Cape Town’s poor know this theft way too well.