

Barracks and hostels

A heritage conservation case for worker housing in Natal

Introduction

South Africa in its present period of transformation is exploring a more inclusive definition of cultural heritage, and the physical forms of it. In 1992 an article in *Natalia* 22¹ acknowledged that the designation of historic monuments had in the past reflected a dominance of white cultures, and proposed a form of affirmative action to make monuments more representative of the racial groups and cultural diversity in South African society. It suggested that communities wishing to see sites relevant to their own culture protected could apply, provided they undertook the necessary research and documentation, and that future surveys of the urban building stock would examine all areas, not just those in formerly white group areas.

Part of the cultural heritage of the Asian and African communities in South Africa is the housing, in both urban and rural areas, built for the Asian immigrant workers and African wage labourers. Some physical record remains, although guides to Durban architecture make little or no reference to them.² In Europe and North America the everyday lives of ordinary working people have long been recognized as an important and legitimate area for historical research, and legal protection and conservation resources have been given to representative types of worker housing.³ Among the former British colonies, however, the slaves and labourers are often still the 'invisible men', in the words of a leading historian of slavery, Michael Craton.⁴

A vital element in the colonial economic system was the housing which accommodated millions of slaves, indentured labourers and other workers – people who were almost exclusively non-white. This accommodation was usually intended for temporary sojourners (and therefore much of it shoddily built) and for single-sex rather than family occupation, and it recognised no social bonds other than the work relationship. Ties of family, tribe, caste or region were subsumed in the greater cause of industrial capitalism, and only in the twentieth century did doctrines of indirect rule lead to the segregation of workers by race and tribe.

The barrack and the hostel in the British Empire

From the colonies' need for labour grew the barrack, for over fifty years (from the 1860s to the 1930s) the commonest type of worker housing in the empire. The

Natalia 28, (1998), Robert Home pp. 45-52

colonial barrack was typically a long single-storey structure, internally arranged as a single or double row of standard-sized rooms, each about 10x12 feet. Materials were often sawn timber on a cast iron frame, but subsequently more permanent materials of fire- and vermin-resistant stone and brick were preferred, with a corrugated zinc or iron roof. The floor was either earth (mixed with dung), or raised planking. A cooking area was provided at the front, and a Dutch barn door gave entry. The buildings were usually locked up at night to prevent escape, and often the only ventilation was from shuttered openings at high level under the roof. A single communicating veranda or corridor ran the length of the building. Washing and toilet facilities, where these existed at all, were communal and usually in a separate building.⁵

The barrack as a specialized building form emerged in the 19th century, and its intellectual origins lie with Utilitarianism and the rise of Britain as an industrial nation and world power. It was one of the 'professional buildings' of which Olsen has written:

After Waterloo there appeared one after another new types of building designed from the outset for a specialized function . . . Prior to that period, most urban buildings were amateur, adaptable for a variety of purposes.⁶

With the growth of new mass armies from the time of the Napoleonic Wars, the scale and design of barracks developed rapidly, deploying new industrialized building technologies and materials, such as machine-sawn timber, mass-produced wire-cut nails, and cast-iron framing. A major evolution in barrack design occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, when the high death rates from disease experienced by the British Army during the Crimean War and in India became part of a wider public discourse on public health and overcrowding. New barrack designs followed, and within a few years these were being used all over the British Empire to house and control large groups of young men in relative social isolation.

Barracks were particularly suited for accommodating the indentured and migrant labourers who were transported after the abolition of slavery, particularly from India and China, to meet the labour needs of the Caribbean and other plantation economies. Between 1845 and 1917 (when moral outrage brought an end to this 'new kind of slavery'⁷) India supplied the following numbers of labourers:

Mauritius	453 100
Malaya	250 000 (estimated)
Guyana	238 900
Natal	152 200
Trinidad	143 900
Fiji	61 000
Jamaica	36 400
Surinam	34 300

After the abolition of indentured labour in 1917, companies involved in sugar, mining, oil and other primary produce used a modern version of barrack design for accommodating their workers, and the improvement trusts of port cities like Bombay and Calcutta built multi-storey barrack blocks or *chawls*.

Workers began to reject barrack living conditions increasingly through the labour disturbances that spread all over the empire from the 1930s. The West Indies became a testing ground for new approaches to worker housing, especially after the Trinidad riots of 1937. The Forster and Moyne Commissions investigating the workers' grievances were particularly shocked at barracks that were 'indescribable in their lack of elementary needs of decency', and recommended that family life be encouraged by the building of more semi-detached cottages with gardens, for family accommodation.⁸ In advocating family houses instead of barracks the Colonial Development & Welfare Programme was influenced by the British garden cities and new town movement.

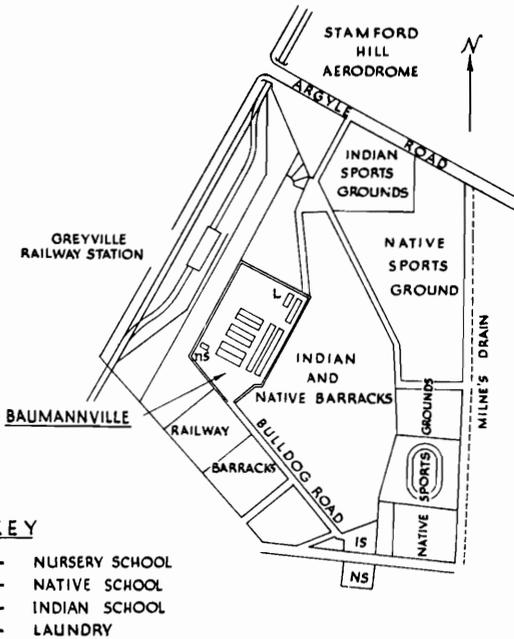
If the West Indies in the 1930s were a testing ground for colonial development and welfare policies, South Africa was, over a longer period of time, also important for testing methods of managing African and Asian workers. Barrack or hostel accommodation was to become one of the symbols of urban *apartheid*. As the Durban Housing Survey defined them,

Compounds may be divided into two main types, namely barracks and hostels. The term 'barrack' covers accommodation owned and provided rent-free by employers such as (a) industrial and commercial concerns; (b) proprietors of hotels, boarding houses and nursing homes, and landlords of flats providing services for residents, and (c) Government, provincial and municipal departments. . . . The term 'hostel', on the other hand, refers exclusively to municipal-owned premises which accommodate Native workers of all kinds, including employees of some concerns whose own barracks are already full. In some cases the rent is paid by the residents, in others by their employers.⁹

After numerous commissions and committees, a policy of replacing in-town barracks by out-of-town 'locations' consisting mostly of family housing was adopted. This became associated with the doctrine of *apartheid* and Group Areas Act resettlement in the post-war period.

Barracks and hostels in Natal

Natal has a particular importance in the history of worker housing, both in South Africa and the wider British Empire, because it combined the Shepstonian system of indirect rule with an expanding plantation economy based upon indentured labour, and a strategic geographic position on the sea routes between Africa and Asia.¹⁰ The so-called 'Durban system', which became a 'model for urban control throughout British East, Central and South Africa'¹¹, depended upon a municipal monopoly of beer-halls, representing one of 'a nexus of institutions including labor compounds, townships and rural reserves within which Africans were in some senses incarcerated'. The origins of the Durban system lay in the *togt* or day-labour system, introduced by Shepstone in 1874, under which *togt* labourers paid a registration fee for their own policing and accommodation. The Native Revenue Account was kept separate from the other finances of the Council, and the absence of subsidy meant that the African workers paid for their own housing provision from the income raised from beer sales, but were denied a share in the rising prosperity of the city. It is hardly surprising that there were insufficient funds to provide or maintain



Layout of Baumannville

satisfactory accommodation, with the result that the barracks were frequently condemned as insanitary.

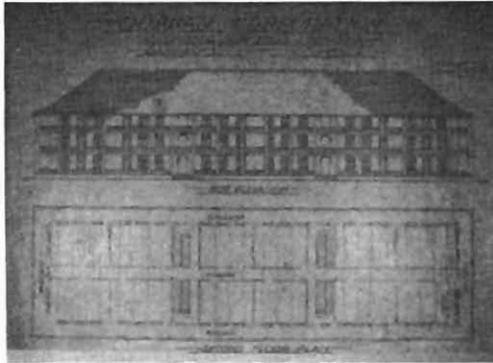
In the year 1878, even as the imperial forces were preparing to break Zulu military power, the first *togt* barracks (for two hundred workers) was built by the Durban Corporation, newly empowered to provide for the overnight accommodation of 'non-resident Natives'.¹² This Somtseu Road location was to accommodate 18 000 workers by 1923, including visiting traditional chiefs from time to time. The building of the *togt* barracks also coincided in time with the introduction of barracks

for the reception of Indian indentured labourers, and a plan of 1876 shows the 'coolie barrack' alongside the *togt* labour reception offices.¹³ From the Point (with its infamous 'Bamboo Square', later demolished as insanitary in response to a plague epidemic), the newly-arrived workers were moved to the Magazine Barracks at Depot Road. These barracks were completed in 1880 (to house 26 married and 67 single men), and in 1912, with the end of the importing of indentured labour, were transferred from the provincial administration to the city council. Condemned by successive experts and committees as overcrowded and insanitary (starting with the Wragg Report in 1887), the Magazine Barracks by 1933 contained a total of 1 251 rooms in a variety of wood-and-iron, concrete block and double-storey brick buildings, accommodating over 5 000 people at densities of four to a room. In 1943, during the Second World War, numbers had risen to 6 000, including 2 500 children, of whom 700 were not attending school. Such barracks later became models for the hostels for African labourers; the term 'hostels' appears in the African (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, which empowered local authorities to build locations for their African workers.¹⁴

Alongside the Magazine barracks, family housing was built at Baumannville in 1916. Named after the then chairman of the municipal Native Affairs Committee, the settlement is 'significant in the history of the urbanization of Africans in Durban, for it shows that the city fathers had accepted the facts that Africans were becoming permanent town-dwellers, that they were entitled to have their families living with them in town, and that the city was responsible for their proper

housing'.¹⁵ The Durban Housing Survey in 1952 recorded barracks, hostels and family housing under the category 'sub-economic letting', a total of 3 195 houses and 13 202 beds being either occupied or under construction.

Neither the Magazine Barracks nor Baumannville still exist. After the 1948 Broome Commission report into the 'legitimate needs and grievances of the African population in the city of Durban', and with central Durban declared white under the 1957 Group Areas Act, they were demolished, and their inhabitants moved out to African and Indian peripheral townships such as KwaMashu and Chatsworth. Other barracks and hostels, however, built at a later period have survived, notably the Dalton Road hostel, the S.J. Smith hostel and stevedore barracks at The Point. With so much lost, these remaining buildings are all the more important as a physical record of this aspect of South Africa's troubled history.¹⁶



Elevation and plan of the Dalton Rd barracks, Durban.
(From the collection of Professor Brian Kearney)

In Natal's rural areas, particularly on the sugar estates, probably more early worker housing has survived than in Durban. The commissions of inquiry into conditions of the Indian immigrants in 1872 and 1887 criticised the estate barracks, then relatively new constructions. The 1872 Commission found that:

The barracks are disliked by their occupants, and metal roofs are found unsuitable to their habits, from not permitting the escape of smoke; all seemed to agree that houses of their own construction were preferable.¹⁷

The 1887 commission was particularly critical of the siting, sanitary conditions and overcrowding:

On estates there has been much disregard of sanitary teaching in the erection of huts and lines . . . There is a general huddling together of the sexes, of all ages, much to be deplored.¹⁸

Over a century later many of these barracks, usually solidly built of stone and brick, are still in use, although often altered and improved. In the Umzinto area, for example, once notorious for bad treatment of estate workers,¹⁹ brick-built barracks at Esperanza have been converted and improved into decent family accommodation. Beside the entrance to the Oribi Gorge from the Fairacres Estate are the ruins of



Improved barracks at Esperanza, near Umzinto
(Source: the author, August 1997)

what is surely another barrack block, stone-built, with its roof gone, but the high-level window openings still in place. There are presumably many other examples from different periods, some perhaps still surviving as originally built.

Conclusion

Early African and Asian worker housing in Durban and Natal has been relatively little researched, but has an important place in South African history and in the cultural heritage of its communities. Many of the physical structures have gone, particularly in Durban, demolished under slum clearance and Group Areas Act measures. What remains deserves to be acknowledged, researched and recorded through photographs, measured drawings and floor-plans, even if physical preservation may not be practical. Statutory protection of the most important examples is merited, although practical difficulties exist: resources to investigate, record and conserve are limited, and, where the accommodation is still occupied, preservation could conflict with overdue upgrading. The subject offers rich scope for



Ruins of barracks near Oribi Gorge
(Source: the author, August 1997)

academic research, and indeed the possibility of a Worker Housing History project. With the present government priority toward housing upgrading and construction, there is all the more reason to develop an understanding of the impact of past policies, through an informed knowledge of the surviving physical record where possible.

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

1. A.Hall, 'National Monuments: A new focus in Natal', *Natalia* 22, 1992, pp.55-64
2. D.R.Bennett, S.Adams and R.Brusse, *A guide to the History & Architecture of Durban*, (Durban City Council, 1987); B.Kearney, *A Revised Listing of the Important Places and Buildings in Durban* (Durban, 1984).
3. See, for example, M.J.Daunton, *House and Home in the Victorian City: Working Class Housing 1850-1914* (London, Arnold,1983), and (ed.) *Housing the Workers: A Comparative History 1850-1914* (Leicester University Press, 1990); C.G.Pooley, (ed.) *Housing Strategies in Europe. 1880-1930* (Leicester University Press, 1992)
4. M.Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man* (Ithaca, New York, 1978), p.vii. His research was based upon the records of the Worthy Park sugar plantation in Jamaica.
5. R.K.Home, 'Barrack camps for unwanted people: a neglected planning tradition', *Planning History*, 15, 1993, pp.14-21, and *Of Planting and Planning: The making of the British colonial city* (Spon, London, 1997), chapter 4.
6. D.J.Olsen, 'Victorian London: specialization, segregation and privacy', *Victorian Studies*, 17, 1974, pp.265-78. See also T.A.Markus, *Building and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types* (Routledge, London, 1993)
7. The phrase comes from H.Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920*. (Oxford University Press, 1974). See also K.Saunders (ed.) *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920* (London, Croom Helm, 1984) and P.C.Campbell, *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries within the British Empire* (London, Frank Cass, 1971 reprint, 1st edition 1923).
8. R.K.Home, 'Transferring British planning law to the colonies: The Case of the 1938 Trinidad Town and Regional Planning Ordinance', *Third World Planning Review*, 15 (4), 1993, pp. 397-410. See also H. Johnson, 'The West Indies and the conversion of the British official classes to the development idea', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 15, 1977, pp.55-83.
9. *Durban Housing Survey: A Study of Housing in a Multi-racial Community* (Natal Regional Survey, Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press 1952), p. 315. See also D.M.Calderwood, *Native Housing in South Africa* (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1953); J.Rex, 'The compound, the reserve and the urban location', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 1(4), 1974, pp.4-17; J.B. Robinson, 'A Perfect System of Control?': State Power and Native Locations in South Africa, *Society and Space*, 8, 1990, pp.135-62; J.Wasserfall, 'Early mine and railway housing in South Africa' (PhD, University of Cambridge, 1990).
10. For background, see B.Guest and J.M.Sellers (eds.) *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian colony: Aspects of the Economic and Social History of Colonial Natal* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1985), and *Receded Tides of Empire: Aspects of the Economic and Social History of Natal and Zululand since 1910*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1994). For indentured

- labour in particular, see G.C.Henning, *The Indentured Indian in Natal (1860–1917)* (Promilla, New Delhi, 1993), and S.Bhana *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal 1860–1902* (Promilla, New Delhi, 1991)
11. Introduction to J.Crush and C.Ambler (eds.), *Liquor and labor in Southern Africa* (Ohio University Press, Athens & University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1992), p.19. See also M.W.Swanson, '“The Durban System”: Roots of Urban Apartheid in Colonial Natal', in *African Studies* 35, 1976, pp.159-76
 12. For the *togt* system, see K.E.Atkins, *'The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money!'* *The cultural origins of an African work ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843–1900* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Heinemann, 1993).
 13. Bhana Collection at the Documentation Centre, University of Durban-Westville, file reference 957/679-90
 14. R.H.Omar, 'The Relationship between the Durban Corporation and the Magazine Barracks' (B.A. (History) dissertation, University of Durban Westville 1989). The Wragg Commission *Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission* (Government Printer, Pietermaritzburg, 1887) criticises the Durban Depot in chapter XIV. See also Durban Housing Survey.
 15. *Baumannville: A Study of an Urban African Community* (Natal Regional Survey Report No.6, Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1959), p.1.
 16. B.Maharaj, 'The Group Areas Act in Durban: Central-Local State Relations' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Durban Westville, 1992); P.Maylam & I.Edwards (eds.) *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1996); Y.S.Meer and M.D.Mlaba, *Apartheid – Our Picture* (Institute for Black Research, Durban, 1982).
 17. *Report of the Coolie Commission appointed to inquire into the condition of the Indian Immigrants in the Colony of Natal* (Legislative Council, Pietermaritzburg, 1872), p.6.
 18. Wragg Commission, chapter XXX.
 19. The Wragg Commission, chapter V, was particularly critical of conditions on the Esqueefa estate, and the Reynolds Estate at Esperanza was the subject of a government inquiry in 1906 (see Bhana Collection, file reference 957/2001-2082).

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