

**DEBBIE WHELAN**

University of Lincoln, United Kingdom

**THE MODEL NATIVE VILLAGE:  
EARLY SOCIAL HOUSING IN PIETERMARITZBURG,  
SOUTH AFRICA 1926-1931**

**Abstract:** The effects of an early modern movement in Europe may not have been patent on the southern tip of Africa until the 1930s for those architects who were seriously progressive. The Union of South Africa, formed in 1910, was more concerned with branding the new Union Government as an amalgam of British and Cape Dutch interests, rather than embracing the new on a distant continent.

However, post-war discourses were similar. The requirements for improved standards of living, access to sanitation, potable water and the new phenomenon of electricity, fitted with the deliberations of the European modernists as to light, air and sunshine. This imperative was exacerbated by repeated malarial outbreaks in the 1920s and the early 1930s which compelled corporate farmers and municipalities to address the requirements of responsible housing, formalising sanitation and access to piped water, thus limiting the breeding grounds of the malaria mosquito.

In Pietermaritzburg, the capital of the then province of Natal, the deliberations of the Borough resulted in the production of social housing rental stock for Africans close to the city, allowing, to a large degree, for a pool of ready labour in close proximity to the city centre, but also exploring the possibilities of high density housing within the city limits. This village, for many years referred to as the 'Native Village' became known as Sobantu, and was one of the earliest examples of experimental social housing in the city.

This paper will begin with discussions on post-World War I Europe which highlight a new agenda of housing provision, based on the Modernist premise of 'light, air and sunshine', as well as new attitudes towards health. It will then briefly introduce Pietermaritzburg the city, and Natal the region and its politics, before discussing Sobantu the village. It will discuss previous assertions by scholars of control and the 'sanitation syndrome' before laying out the history of the construction of the village, and the provision of ancillary services. It will continue by commenting that suppositions in the realm of history could in fact, have been supplemented with studies of architectural trends in order to contextualise the provision of housing for African people as a strategic need, rather than a direct political necessity, in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Health and architecture, Modernism, Pietermaritzburg, Sobantu, social housing.

## Introduction

Shortly prior to World War I, Bruno Taut's seminal Exhibition Pavilion at the Deutscher Werkbund's Cologne Exposition in 1914 was part of a contemporary movement that sought to experiment with openness and lightness. Architecture in the early twentieth century was engaged in polemic, trying to understand the position of the 'modern' and at the same time, embrace the possibilities of new materials developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the Industrial Revolution: float glass, structural steel and Portland cement, which allowed for a technology driven architecture that sutured with the ideas of light, air and sunshine and cleanliness. Paul Scheerbarth stated of Taut's Pavilion that this was a glass architecture, which admits the light of the sun, of the moon, and of the stars' [Scheerbarth, cited in Schittich *et al.* 1999: 29].

The concepts of space and lightness were not only applicable to demonstration pavilions and other follies, but were a conscious part of experimentation in other areas of architecture, particularly after the War in which efforts to house dislocated people were imperative internationally. Christian Schittich *et al.* record that 'they tried to conceive housing which, although not exactly spacious, was indeed inexpensive and, in contrast to the inhuman ghettos of industrial conurbations, offered great flexibility and a decent standard of comfort. An open architecture providing the population with light, air and sunshine' [Schittich *et al.* 1999: 31].

The theme of openness and light was reinforced at the end of the 1920s by Siegfried Giedion's monograph *Befreites Wohnen* [1929] which emphasised *Licht, Luft und Oeffnung* (light, air and openings). Importantly, the same publication used the term *Existenzminimum* extensively; this 'existence-minimum' concept referred to the provision of good quality rental housing stock 'within a minimal and affordable space' [Overy 2007: 11-12], in order to alleviate pressures on social housing in the inter-war period.

Natal, a former British Colony in South Africa, had the same post-war challenges; 'This shortage applies to all classes of the population and has greatly accentuated the overcrowding which previously only existed to any great extent among the poorer classes' [*Union of South Africa* 1921: 5]. Pietermaritzburg, a city placed in the midlands of the south eastern region of South Africa was no different to other large centres such as Johannesburg and Cape Town, having amassed a substantial population over the War years. The Corporation Year Book for 1921 relates that 'Overcrowding is increasing in the town owing to the almost entire cessation of building, and the annual increase of the population. This re-acts unfavourably on the public health owing to the number of people who are living under unfavourable conditions, and to the greater ease with which infectious diseases can spread. This overcrowding also renders the maintenance of the houses in proper repair difficult, and as the landlords can easily secure tenants they allow their houses to remain in disrepair, and in many cases only deal with obvious defects after considerable pressure has been put upon

them by us' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1922: 60]. Action had to be taken and soon, and the discussions to construct the Model Native Village later known as Sobantu, amongst other housing schemes, began in earnest.

The following paragraphs will introduce the study area and general approaches towards housing Africans in the city, before framing the argument that much of the social housing was driven by the same generators as those in Europe, trying to achieve an environment of openness and light.

## 1. Introduction to the study area

Pietermaritzburg was originally laid out in the late 1830s as a Dutch settlement, shortly afterwards taken over by the British in 1843. These early settlers of European origin had moved into an indigenous landscape consisting of tribal peoples of the Southern Nguni, who followed a settlement pattern of circular homesteads containing numbers of dwelling units around a central cattle byre. This is significant, as the development of the model Native Village at Sobantu under discussion in this paper, deals with the provision of orthogonal buildings in a European-derived matrix of streets and streetscapes, and the provision of ancillary community facilities foreign to the intended inhabitants of this village, who were people of clans of the Southern Nguni. This disjunct, for the author, has significance, and will be explored more deeply in the concluding section of this paper.

Because of the intensely political nature of such settlements, little has been written on Sobantu Village in the past: for the historical context this paper initially draws heavily on Heather Peel's unpublished dissertation since this was one of the first studies on the subject [Peel 1987]. The author interrogates scholars such as Swanson [1980] who consider the construction of the Native Village as a product of rolling prejudice and intimately tied with the Native Beer Act of 1908 and the institution of what became known as the 'Durban System' in which municipal beer sales to Africans within the cities funded the construction of facilities for Africans. Maylam indicated that 'It was common for municipal authorities to equate African urbanisation with disease, insanitary conditions, slums and crime' [Maylam cited in Peel 1987: 5] leading to what Swanson, particularly, referred to as the 'sanitation syndrome' that 'advanced the cause of urban segregation with the panacea of locations. Was there more than coincidence in the tendency for locations to be established or proposed in the proximity of rubbish depots and sewage farms...?' [Swanson cited in Peel 1987: 5].

However, a reading of the Corporation Year Books allows for a less prejudicial interpretation and allows instead, a view of the production of social housing within the city as a product of legislation, underpinned by issues of health through ill-sanitation, common in many of the informally arranged housing within the city, for Africans, Indians, Whites and Coloureds. Significantly, in her work on health in

Pietermaritzburg, Dyer [2012] makes scant reference to the assertions of the ‘sanitation syndrome’ situating the term, perhaps, as reactive history of the late 1980s rather than as a driving force for change of health standards.

Thus this paper rather seeks to interrogate the issue of housing and community provision within the ideas of social housing using the framework of post-war Modernism and its strong associations with health. Importantly, primary source material with respect to archival material and annual reports of the Municipal Native Affairs Commissioners will be presented in order to present the Village as an experiment driven by imperative and one which the Municipal fathers at the time took quite seriously indeed.

## 2. The history of African urban settlement in Pietermaritzburg

During the period of Colonial rule until 1910, the issues of Africans within the city centre were contested and yet necessary. Whilst rural Africans had been accommodated in locations around the colony, the issues with urban areas displayed tension between the settlers in the towns. Swanson says that ‘Townsmen wanted to command African labour and seemed tolerant of the “fringe” of “lower” orders that this might imply’ and that as Swanson notes, by the 1870s ‘Complaints and rumours of nuisances, thievery, squatting, depredations, drunkenness and indecent assaults upon citizens, especially their wives and children, became frequent fare in the press and council chamber’ [Swanson 1980: 11]. The issues of public health associated with independent Africans, those not part of a labour force living in the city centre were components of the lead up to the passing of regulations allowing for a ‘pass’ registration for Africans needing to come into the town as labourers.

However, this action also reflected the schism in the African community as well; those who lived European lifestyles as they had converted to Christianity, and were monogamous, and those who comprised the labour force, largely rural and, in the eyes of a detractor at the time, ‘the fellows from the heathen kraals...will descend with their harems from the broad acres and unshackled licence of the Swart Kop, to live on an acre of town land, at the rate of pound per annum, and under surveillance to boot?’ [*The Natal Chronicle*, 19 September 1855 cited in Peel 1987: 4]. This inarticulate relationship made decisions regarding what was referred to as Native Policy more difficult, as there was no blanket, characteristic group of people, on which a common policy could be constructed. The constant iterations of associations of threats to public health did not dissipate: Thus what Swanson termed the ‘sanitation syndrome’, whilst more correctly driven by health legislation and not prejudice, became an impetus for the settlement of inner city Africans into residential neighbourhoods as a form of control, and the need to introduce the post-war ideals of ‘light, air and sunshine’ (*space* and light and order) as a response to the perceived insanitary conditions implicit in formal housing.

Citizens such as William Leathern had motivated for the construction of a 'native village' within the townlands as early as 1855, the formalisation of such settlements which were mooted from time to time being constantly challenged by the ideas of public health. In 1875 Fleming suggested erven be set aside for small allotments to house 200 families within townlands, which did not proceed [Peel 1987: 4]. Legislatively, a Native Locations Act was promulgated in 1904 which allowed for the segregation of Africans in urban areas. However, a colony crippled from the after effects of participation in the Anglo Boer War between 1899 and 1902 could hardly afford to begin to construct municipal infrastructure to relocate randomly settled Africans in the inner city, neither did the fiscus have a vehicle to allow for this.

The finances to enable such projects were realised by an ingenious system of income through silent taxation of inner city Africans; sale to Africans of municipally brewed beer. The Native Beer Act of 1908 allowed for municipal income generation for the management of African settlement in the cities through the sale of beer which was brewed by the municipality for sale in municipally-owned and operated beer halls. Whilst these were contentious operations at best, the profits from beer sales were channelled into constructing infrastructure for Africans in the city, such as the beerhalls themselves, the associated breweries, working men's hostels, football and other sporting facilities, and, ultimately inner city rental stock developments which alleviated the issues surrounding illegal squatting in the inner city, and the long associated nuisance and sanitation complaints which went with these informal developments. The Superintendent for Native Affairs in the city controlled the expenditure and thus the delivery of such projects.

However, due to various external factors little occurred in the construction of the native village. World War I and the subsequent Spanish 'flu intervened as well as political agitation on a national level. Housing in the city was problematic after the end of World War I. The introduction to this paper contextualised the international and local situations that drove the municipalities to investigate the options of council housing. Prompted by the Health Act of 1919, the Housing Act of 1920 made more specific the role of the local councils in addressing the health issues resultant from inadequate housing. Health, it appears, was a critical component in the development of contemporary attitudes towards architecture, embracing the altered early twentieth century social ideals as well as the tools of new materials developed as a result of industrialisation.

### 3. The march of Modernism

The era immediately after World War I has significance in Europe as a time of immense social change largely brought about as a result of the havoc wreaked by the Great War. This dialectic was physically reflected in the architectural response. Projects were built for individuals, such as Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye in Poissy

(1928-1931), demonstrating dexterity and understanding of new technology, and at the same time reflecting the social environment of the inter-war period. Others addressed changes in education; Walter Gropius' Bauhaus (Dessau) reflected a shift in the production of art and architecture through integrating craft and technology. Even the identity of 'Nations' was addressed, such as Van der Rohe's German Pavilion for the Barcelona Exposition (1929), embracing not only the new technologies of glass, steel and concrete but reflecting the values of the period. Social housing too had attention: Ernst May addressed housing needs in the Römerstadt project in Frankfurt in the late 1920s that included elements demonstrating social change such as the Schüttele-Lihotzky's Frankfurt Kitchen and proved that quality housing was possible *en masse*. This latter type of project was made all the more necessary by the rapid influx of displaced people into the cities in Europe after the War. In England, whilst much post-war housing reflected the resurgence of identity and revivals of Elizabethan and Tudor styles, the International style eventually trickled through, largely through foreign architecture in a form known as the 'sun trap' or the 'moderne', an example being New Ways in Northampton, designed by Peter Behrens in 1924 [Yarwood 1963: 522]. South Africa, as a colony of England, adopted the styles of the 'mother' country, embracing the plethora of options available.

Other generators for 'modernisation' also existed. Advances in medicine spurred on by research and development during the Great War prompted the construction of new types of institutions: In 19<sup>th</sup> century England, mental institutions had dominated the British colonial environment as part of an English solution to many ills, whilst other voracious sicknesses such as consumption [McCarthy 2001: 413] were considered un-treatable. However, advancements in the treatment of tuberculosis allowed for a new type of building which Paul Overy celebrates in his work *Light, Air and Openness – Modern architecture between the wars* [2007] in which he directly associates the development of Modernism as being infinitely connected to addressing disease. Citing Johannes Duiker's Zonnestraal Sanatorium in Hilversum, Overy describes how new institutions allowing for open air access and sunshine such as sanatoria to treat tuberculosis were constructed and led the Modern Movement. In Europe and abroad, infectious diseases hospitals to limit the devastation of disease were constructed, particularly after the Spanish 'flu that killed some half a million people in South Africa alone [Dyer 2012: 46].

Significantly, these new health facilities were not isolated developments, but more of a systematic approach towards standardising health and understanding treatments. In 1919, Great Britain, which led its colonies, of which South Africa was one, promulgated the *Ministry of Health Act Chapter 21* which allowed for the promotion of health in the country, and also for the appointment of a Minister of Health. South Africa followed suit; the young country had sent its men to fight in 'England's War', its people had died in droves through malaria, tuberculosis and typhoid, and rapid urbanisation also characterised its cities and towns. In South Africa, *Act no 36 of 1919 (To make provision for*

*the public health*) allowed for the same, however expanding the provisions of the legislation to specific areas of sanitation, defining notifiable infectious diseases, and allowing for the municipal responsibility for establishing, amongst others 'suitable hospitals or places of isolation for the accommodation and treatment of persons suffering from infectious disease' [*Union of South Africa* 1919: x]. This included diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis. In addition, it also regulated the local authorities' responsibility with regard to potable public water supplies and fresh food provision.

#### 4. Health and housing

Fundamentally, this health legislation served to scaffold the subsequent Housing Act of 1920, in that it regulated that the local authorities could intervene in a number of instances; 'any dwelling which is so overcrowded as to be injurious or dangerous to the health of the inmates or which does not conform with any regulations in force in the district as regards air space, floor-space, lighting or ventilation', and 'any occupied dwelling for which such a proper, sufficient and wholesome water supply is not available'... 'It shall be the duty of the medical officer of health of every urban local authority to make an annual report to the chief health officer in regard to the conditions of the district of such local authority in respect of overcrowding and bad and insufficient housing' [*Union of South Africa* 1919: xli].

Great Britain's policies thus had a knock on effect in the countries comprising the Commonwealth. The colonial powers adoption of new standards had thus filtered quickly through to the colonies: Following on the Health Act, the introduction of the Housing Act of 1919 in England intended to allow for the provision of subsidisation from the national budget to the municipalities in order that they could erect municipally owned rental structures known as 'Council Houses' [King 1995: 158]. Anthony King expands upon this, noting that at the time, the 'prevailing ideas of health, a belief in sunshine, fresh air and the merits of an open-air life', prompted the move for construction of bungalows, semi-detached or small compact dwellings, through private ownership schemes or municipal housing projects [King 1995: 169]. Again, the influence of the mother country on the Commonwealth had reference, as South Africa promulgated its own Housing Act in 1920. The consequent *Report of the Central Housing Board* established in terms of this Act indicated in Section 7 (3) that 'Local authority may be required to make reasonable provision for dwellings for poorest section of population, including coloured and native, before Administrator approves any such scheme' [*Union of South Africa* 1921: 5]. Significantly, it refers to an international shortage of houses, following a cessation of building during the War, but that 'This shortage applies to all classes of the population and has greatly accentuated the overcrowding which previously only existed to any great extent among the poorer classes'. It also acknowledged the role of the 1918 influenza epidemic not-

ing that ‘its necessity and importance have been more vividly brought to light partly as a result of the war conditions and partly by the late influenza epidemic’ [*Union of South Africa* 1920: 10]. The Board acknowledged also that the situation in South Africa was more complex given the mixed communities and lack of uniformity in standards of living, but remained resolute, in this document, that the intentions were to provide housing for all classes, viz ‘European, coloured, Asiatic and native’ [*Union of South Africa* 1920: 10].

Guided by the British models, the development of social housing with respect to the *Report of the Central Housing Board* indicated careful selection of sites for public housing which included access to businesses and industrial centres, facilities for social, educational and recreational pursuits for prospective tenants, suitability of the site for construction from a founding and landscaping point of view, and ‘convenience and economy in the provision of sewerage, water supply and other services’ [*Union of South Africa* 1920: 11-12]. Keeping the costs of the buildings down was vital in being able to provide cost-effective housing that was affordable. Changing attitudes towards cleanliness were highlighted: the *Report* mentions that in England at the time, experiments with placing the bath in the scullery were found to be problematic, and that, in Europe, the idea of communal baths and washing areas was being tried out, in an effort to consolidate services whilst keeping the individual costs of the houses down. It also noted that ‘if the desire for cleanliness is present’ internal bathing options (such as shower baths) would also have to be available to African and Indian tenants [*Union of South Africa* 1920:14]. Provision of an adequate garden was also stressed [*Union of South Africa* 1920: 15]. The *Report of the Central Housing Board* provided eight template plans, the cheapest being a semi-detached three roomed house with an outside toilet and a back veranda or ‘*stoep*’, a semi-detached four roomed house with the same, freestanding three roomed houses which were connected to the sewer, and an internal kitchen, bathroom, pantry and toilet, and the same for four roomed and five roomed houses. Significantly, the costing reduced circulation space, and did not allow for the long internal passages common in late Victorian and Edwardian houses in Pietermaritzburg at the time.

Thus, the strong connection between Modernism in Europe and the need to provide ‘machines for living’ which took people out of poverty and dirt and exposed them to ‘light, air and openness’ had corresponding legislations that drove the need to foreground health at the end of World War I and limit death through overcrowding and insanitary conditions was not limited to the European context. In South Africa, similar legislations drove housing and housing provision, to a large degree agreeing with the German term *Existenzminimum* of providing good quality rental housing stock. Sobantu, it is argued, was a response to the elimination of perceived squalor, new legislations and new attitudes towards housing people post-World War I and was influenced directly through colonial imperative, issues of health, and municipal delivery based on the above.

## 5. Housing in Pietermaritzburg and the construction of a Model Native Village

The extant housing situation throughout the 1920s was considered dire. From time to time the Medical Officer's reports described conditions that people were living in: 'Thirty dwellings in New Scotland were examined, and they were found to be occupied by 430 tenants, of whom 240 were Indians and 190 Natives. In six dwellings on Hathorn's Hill there were 86 tenants, of whom 35 were Indians and 51 Natives. In six dwellings on Forsyth's property there were 78 tenants, 16 of whom were Indians and 62 Natives'. ...The provision of housing for Natives must therefore be antecedent to any attempt to improve the housing of the Indians living on the outskirts of town' [*City of Pietermaritzburg* 1926: 68]. Two examples are highlighted: Pentrich, a suburb straddling the Msunduzi River consisted of around 166 acres; whilst being ideal for market gardening, it was also below flood level. The property was owned by the Corporation of Pietermaritzburg, LF and DG Forsyth, and the deceased estate of Bodasingh who all let the property on a monthly basis to Indians and Africans who erected their own dwellings, described reluctantly by the Corporation as a "shack". 'They are constructed of old iron, wood, petrol tins or mud. They have earthen floors and no windows. They are cold in winter and hot in summer and freely admit the rain and the wind. In some of these dwellings a single family only, Indian or native, is accommodated, but to many additional rooms have been added for the accommodation of lodgers. These additional rooms are of the same type of construction as the original shack. The number of persons living in one of these shacks, enlarged to take lodgers, is in some cases twenty or thirty. The lodgers are in most cases native families'. Sanitation, as expected, was non-existent except for pit latrines. Refuse removal did not occur. The water supply was inadequate, with stand pipes being distant. There was no surface drainage although roads led through the Pentrich settlement. It was indicated that there were 183 dwellings (148 owned by Indians and 35 by Africans), containing 1717 residents with 9.4 inhabitants per dwelling. Medical Officer Dr. Woods valued just 5 of these buildings as being good, 45 as being fair and 133 'unfit for habitation'. Further, Hathorn's Hill to the north east of the city was leased to tenants by Tajoodeen; it reflected the situation in the above example. However, here there were 83 dwellings on steep land, 65 owned by Indians, 18 owned by Natives, with 1022 inhabitants averaging at 12.3 people per house. He assessed that 'practically 100%' of the dwellings were unfit for habitation [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1931, *Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1927*: 71-78]. The intention was to provide housing both indirectly, ie house white people within a slightly higher economic bracket which would free up space to accommodate Africans and Indians from these areas, and then also directly through provision of housing such as the Model Native Village into which people living in these settlements could move [*Union of South Africa* 1920].

After the promulgation of the housing legislation, and the consequent *Report of the Central Housing Board*, the city moved swiftly in addressing the housing issue. Whilst previous discussions had come to naught, this initiative for housing across the city was driven by the national imperative and followed closely the housing options put forward in its first social housing project. Certainly, the principles and guidelines embedded in the *Report of the Central Housing Board* reflected on house provision by size, amenity and affordability rather than providing some types of housing for Africans and others for other races.

In July of 1922 the Corporation Year Books reflected that there was talk of investigations pertaining to a housing scheme at the top end of Railway Street, located close to the tram sheds. Whilst it is not necessarily clear as to the process, initially, 'ideas' were received from Bloemfontein, which provided plans for housing artisans. The costing of the houses was described as excluding drainage, electricity, bath, native quarters and wood shed. The Year Book reflects that 'Mr Barras (a local engineer and contractor) expressed the opinion that the average Maritzburg workman, of the artisan class, would not take favourably to this type of house. The plan disclosed that the cooking range was fixed in the living room, the bathroom would also have to be used for the scullery, there was no veranda at either back or front, and no provision made for accommodation of native servants. The Borough Engineer was asked to submit plans and specifications for the erection, complete with house drainage, electric light, water, fencing, surface water drains *etc.* of eight 4-roomed single story cottages, with kitchen, pantry and bathroom, on the Corporation land near the Electric Power Station, between Railway Street and Havelock Road' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg 1922: 21-23*].

Whilst the tone of the excerpt suggests that this development was aimed at white artisans, specifically, it is also clear that a fine line existed between practical and cost-effective delivery for the city and its imperative for housing the more modest class of worker, and the provision of what people expected for housing. However, the cost of the buildings and the potential income was deemed too high. In the same annual report it was indicated that a scheme be prepared for 30 or 40 semi detached dwellings with two rooms and a kitchen in order to rent out to the 'poorer class' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg 1922: 21-23*].

The first real discussions about the Model Native Village were raised by Dr. W Woods, Medical Officer for Health, who recorded that 'The housing of natives throughout the town generally is very unsatisfactory, both as regards native quarters for house servants and barracks in which a larger number of natives live. As the building of a native village has been under your consideration I have not been pressing for reform' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg 1922: 60*]. In 1924, Dr. Woods itemised the housing shortage, applicable to whites, Africans, Indians and coloured people. The Africans particularly, were grouped into three specific areas, in which the first was single men living on their employer's premises, and generally oc-

cupying adequate housing. Single men mainly day labourers, often had arrangements with people to live on their property 'giving some small service in lieu of rent. As a rule they are housed in stables or other outhouses, and frequently no sanitary provision is made for them'. Many such people also lived as tenants of Indian householders, and in this case usually in very substandard accommodation [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1924: 55]. In 1926 the matter was still under discussion, with a vote being held with residents (only white) indicating a preference for the Bishopstowe site. The records note that 'Application has been made, in terms of Section 1 of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, for the approval of the Honourable Minister of Native Affairs to a site being set apart in the district selected by the burgesses for the establishment of a native village for the accommodation of married Natives' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1926: 27].

However, there was some light at the end of the tunnel; 'The Council approved the principle of the location being established on the land on the south side of the Bishopstowe Road and, in order to provide land sufficient for the natural expansion of the Location, acquired two pieces of land adjoining the suggested site; making available all the land on the right hand side of Bishopstowe Road from Ortman Bridge to 'The Finish' (Lot 111 Townlands).' The downside of this site was its close proximity to the sewage farm, which raised displeasure on behalf of both landowners in the area, as well as Africans, who preferred a site at Mason's Mill, distant from the tramlines which were the vectors of electrical power, and sanitation. The city considered Mason's Mill as problematic from the point of view of the provision of services such as water and electricity and sewage [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1922: 20]. In the light of the recommendations of the *Report of the Central Housing Board* which indicated that the optimum site would require less initial servicing, the City was not necessarily pursuing the philosophy of the 'sanitation syndrome' [Swanson cited in Peel 1987: 5] but rather following the advice of the Department of Public Health [*Union of South Africa* 1920: 11-12].

During these prevarications, a municipal housing scheme was undertaken to relieve the housing shortage for whites: 'At present 20 of these houses are being erected. They are small "workmen's" cottages, designed to provide three bedrooms and a combined kitchen and sitting room, at a rental within the means of the unskilled working-man.' A site at the end of Victoria Road close to the old Polo Grounds was selected in order to house people who were being removed from Fort Napier as this was now to be for Government use. The project went to competition and a modified version of the winning design was chosen to go to tender [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1925: 30]. The following year, it was indicated that 20 houses were included in the scheme which allowed for a total cost of £584 per cottage including sewage and lighting. 'There was a considerable number of applicants for these cottages and as many of them were desirous of purchasing a cottage if easy terms could be granted, the Council decided to sell the cottages at cost price, the amount to be spread over a pe-

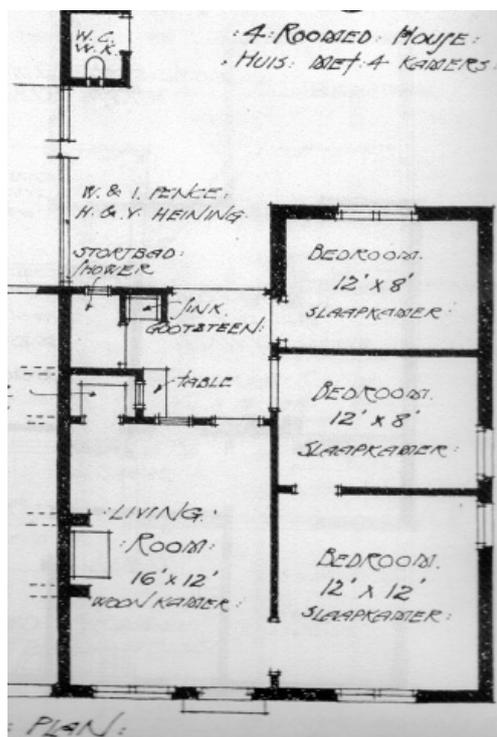


Fig. 1. House #2-4 roomed house which included outside toilet and an internal washing 'stoep' with cooking being carried out in the living room  
 Source: *Union of South Africa* [1921:17].

riod of years' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1926: 31]. Figure 1 below shows a rough idea as the national recommendation of the 4 roomed house that may have been modified accordingly [*Union of South Africa* 1921: 17].

The construction of the Native Village went ahead. In 1926, Dr. Woods, the Medical Officer for the Borough of Pietermaritzburg lamented 'I hope the construction of the village will be proceeded with at once, as the deplorable conditions under which large numbers of the Native and Indian population are at present living cannot be remedied till the village is built' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1926: 68]. Woods managed to report in his report of 1926 that 'It was decided early in the year to begin the construction of the Native Village by erecting 100 houses. At the end of July these houses were under construction, and they will be finished early in the present year' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1927: 80].

burg 1927: 80].

The 1927 Minute Book notes that 'Plans submitted by the Council of the layout of the Native Village, and of the buildings to be erected, have been approved by the Minister of Native Affairs. A contract has been accepted for the erection of 50 single brick cottages of two rooms each, and 25 semi-detached cottages, and the work is in hand. Accommodation will thus be provided for 100 families' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1927: 26]. Importantly, together with this a 35000 gallon water tank was also erected. The revenue account for the same year reflected that the expenditure in 1927 on this part of the project was £1850 6/ 1- for the single cottages, £746 12/ 2- for the water supply, and £63 10/ 6- for sundries [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1928: 66].

In 1928, the report of RE Stevens, the new Superintendent of Native Affairs, indicated that 100 houses had been completed early in 1927, with ten of them being let. The occupants 'have gone to live in the village voluntarily'. The infrastructure included an ablution house, with 'shower baths for 14 men and 16 women' and a wash

area with 'concrete tables and water taps' [*City of Pietermaritzburg*, 1928: 79]. The financial records note that the 50 single cottages cost some £4 950 4/ 9-, the 25 semi-detached cottages cost £5 948 4/ 3-, the 25 latrine blocks £1 166 6/ 6-, the ablution shed £507 6/ 5-, and the water supply £66 9/ 4-. [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1928: 68]

In 1930 the Corporation Year Book records that 92 of the first 100 houses had been occupied. Of these, fifty three houses had been fenced in, and the report indicated that this 'has given great satisfaction to the natives. They have shown their appreciation of the improvement and, almost without exception, have planted flowers and vegetables with very credible results. When originally built the houses had earth floors but these have now been replaced by brick'. It was recorded that postal deliveries had begun to the village, roads had been shaped and street lights had been installed. The village at this point consisted of 92 males over 21, 77 males under 21, 197 females over 21, 96 females under 21, in all 372. RE Stevens, the Superintendent, Native Affairs, also reported that visitors from Rhodesia, Kenya, Cape Town and Paarl had all visited the village, and expressed due admiration' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1939: 55]. Sundry costs also included asphalt floors £704 15/11- fencing £351 16/0-, road and drainage £136 13/10- and office shed £4 4/ 2- and an amount for general administration £22 0/0- [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1928: 80].

In 1930, Stevens reported on the Native Village and its expansion. All of the houses had been fenced in, a market hall was built, as was a school, operated by the Education Department. At the end of 1930, the population was reported as being 102 males over 21, 95 males under 21, 109 females over 21, 106 females under 21, a total of 412 people in all [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1930: 87].

In 1931, Woods reported that another 100 houses had been constructed at the Native Village and that it was envisaged that those people paying rent at Hathorn's Hill would be given first option to move. 'At the time of writing this report all the natives have been removed from Hathorn's Hill, and the shacks in which they lived have been demolished, and practically all the new houses at the village have been occupied. ...the clearing of the slum area at Camps Drift is at present being considered...?' [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1932: 73]. At the same time, it is important to note that the situation of housing for 'Poor Class' Europeans was on the agenda for health reports, however it points to a less severe issue of housing as 'the number of houses occupied by more than one family is comparatively small'. In the same report, it was recorded that an extra 100 houses had been construct-



Photo 1. A row of early two-roomed houses at Sobantu

Source: Author, 2015 (Photo 1 and 2).



Photo 2. Sobantu Hall, ca. 1930

ed at the Native Village; prizes had been awarded for the best kept houses and gardens [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1932: 82] and that ‘The Native Village is now firmly established in popular favour amongst the Natives, and the Natives themselves are very proud of it. At the outset, as is well known, there was a considerable amount of antagonism from the majority of the Natives themselves, most of whom are conservative and view with suspicion

the efforts of the municipality to improve the conditions under which they live’ [*Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg* 1932: 85].

So, the kernel of the village had been established. It continued to grow through following decades, eventually being called Sobantu in 1947 [*Peel in Laband and Haswell* 1988: 82]. It had ‘hardcap’ roads, electricity, potable water and amenities in line with the original declarations of the *Report of the Central Housing Board*. It was gradually populated, and then became a popular suburb. Whilst much of its subsequent history after 1930 relates to struggle and uncertainty, what Sobantu shows is that the Model Native Village provided housing for rental tenants mostly removed from inadequate squalor and at the same time inculcated a move to light, openness and sunshine.

## Conclusion

Speaking of the early 1920s, Heather Peel notes that... *the council’s plans centred on segregating the city’s African population in the interests of greater control and public health, and not on sponsoring an independent suburb of permanent urban dwellers. As the number of Africans living in Pietermaritzburg increased, their haphazard dispersal throughout the borough in shack settlements and poorly supervised private compounds obtruded more and more unfavourably on the council’s attention and strengthened its resolve to amend what it regarded as an unacceptable situation* [Peel 1987: 123]. Peel’s assertions may not necessarily be correct.

In 1920, the Housing Memorandum 1, as Annexure C in the Department of Public Health *Report of the Central Housing Board* specifically noted that due to the mixed nature of the ‘grades of the poorer population’ living together in mixed communities, the imperative was to literally upskill them with regards to living conditions for good health, as well as being able to provide starter housing in order to facilitate the ‘levelling up’ of minimum standards of education. Whilst this may be considered reflectively as social engineering, given the conditions described by Woods through-

out the 1920s, this was possibly not a bad thing. Further, this led to the decision that the ‘minimum type’ of housing should accommodate all people of the ‘poorest classes, whether European or non-European.’ They offered the minimum accommodation as being a living room and two bedrooms, and that ‘Considerable discussion will no doubt arise as to the necessity in the smaller houses to make provision for (a) verandahs, (b) Kitchens, (c) bathrooms’ [*Union of South Africa* 1921: 13]. The discourses talked of addressing a problem and finding a solution, the race of the person being housed was of less importance than the financial models of the housing projects derived in order to respond to the imperatives of the Department of Public Health. The types of houses provided for the white low-income rental stock differed little from those provided for the black. And, whilst perhaps paternalistic, the efforts of the Department of Native Affairs to add the niceties to Sobantu are noted: trees, hedges, properly constructed roads, electricity in and outside the houses, sewage collection, amenities. These speak less to impacts of the sanitation syndrome, as similar projects were carried out through the city for other burgers of different races, using the same standard planning, materials and philosophies. For the adherence to the minimalism of Modernist architecture, the efficiency of the style, *Unnecessary passages and lobbies mean waste of space and consequently lack of economy ...no features which are purely decorative should be introduced ....materials should be of a durable kind and quality...good workmanship should be secured ...choice of suitable local materials, and the adoption of simple lines and good proportion* [*Union of South Africa* 1921: 13] all speak to a consistent application of a means by which housing could be delivered

## References

- Coetzer N., 2013, *Building Apartheid: On Architecture and Order in Imperial Cape Town*. Ashgate Publishing Company, Farnham.
- Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg, 1922, Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1921*. The Natal Witness Ltd., Pietermaritzburg.
- Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg, 1923, Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1922*. The Natal Witness Ltd., Pietermaritzburg.
- Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg, 1924, Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1923*. The Natal Witness Ltd., Pietermaritzburg.
- Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg 1926, Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1925*. The Natal Witness Ltd., Pietermaritzburg.
- Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg 1927, Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1926*. The Natal Witness Ltd., Pietermaritzburg.
- Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg 1928, Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1927. Treasurer’s Report Abstract Statement of Accounts and Balance Sheets for the Municipal Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> July 1927*. The Natal Witness Ltd., Pietermaritzburg.

- Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg 1930, Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1929.* The Natal Witness Ltd., Pietermaritzburg.
- Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg 1932, Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1931.* The Natal Witness Ltd., Pietermaritzburg.
- Corporation of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg 1939, Corporation Year Book for the Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1938.* The Natal Witness Ltd., Pietermaritzburg.
- Dyer J., 2012, *Health in Pietermaritzburg (1838-2008): a History of Urbanisation and Disease in an African City.* Natal Society Foundation Occasional Publications, Pietermaritzburg.
- Gideon S. 1929, *Befreites Wohnen.* Zürich Orell Füssli Verl, Zürich.
- King A., 1995, *The Bungalow: the Production of a Global Culture.* Second Edition. Oxford University Press. New York
- Laband J., Haswell R. (eds), 1988, *Pietermaritzburg 1938-1988: A New Portrait of an African City.* University of Natal Press and Shuter & Shooter, Pietermaritzburg.
- McCarthy O., 2001, *The Key to the Sanatoria.* Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, 94 (8): 413-417.
- Overy P., 2007, *Light, Air and Openness – Modern Architecture between the Wars.* Thames & Hudson Ltd., London.
- Parnell S., 1989, *Shaping a Racially Divided Society: State Housing Policy in South Africa, 1920-50.* Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy, 7: 261-272.
- Peel H., 1987, *Sobantu Village – an Administrative History of a Pietermaritzburg Township 1924-1959.* University of Natal unpublished BA Honours dissertation, Pietermaritzburg.
- Schittich C., Staib G., Balkow P., Schuler M., Sobek W., 1999, *Glass Construction Manual.* Institut für internationale Architektur-Dokumentation GmbH, Munich.
- Swanson M., 1980, *The Urban Factor in Natal Native Policy 1843-1873.* Journal of Natal and Zulu History III: 1-14.
- Union of South Africa, 1919. Act no 36 of 1919 ‘To make provision for the public health’.* Union Gazette Extraordinary, 24 June 1919: ii-liv.
- Union of South Africa, 1920. Act no 35 of 1920 ‘Housing Act.’*
- Union of South Africa (Department of Public Health), 1921, Report of the Central Housing Board constituted under Section 18 of the Housing Act No 35 of 1920 for the Period from the Appointment of the Board on 7<sup>th</sup> September, 1920 to 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1920.* Cape Town, Cape Times Limited.
- Yarwood D., 1963, *The Architecture of England from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day.* BT Batsford Ltd., London.