

Urban Planning and the Politics of Spatial Integration in South Africa: the Fleurhof Mixed-Income Housing Experiences

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1 ABSTRACT

How can mixed-income housing developments contribute to spatial integration, in societies with protracted histories of racialised planning and related socioeconomic and spatial injustices? This is the question that this paper endeavours to grapple with. While a plethora of housing-related legislation and strategies have punted “spatial integration”, “spatial harmonisation” and “inclusive planning” as being central to the reconstitution of South Africa’s socio-spatial milieu; the spectres of colonial/apartheid planning have proved to be difficult to exorcise. Using the Fleurhof mixed-income development as a case study; the paper asserts that there is a huge disconnect between the legislative and strategic planning vision on one hand and the realities on the ground. Put differently, South Africa’s planning effort remains fundamentally informed by the ‘politics of radical difference’, i.e. differences in race, class, religion, nationality, and other related markers that are used every day to justify spatial fragmentation. Thus, in fleshing out the counters of these politics of every day that define planning; the case study research design was adopted, and a qualitative approach was employed to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences of residents, the socio-economic dynamics within the development, and the broader governance and policy challenges influencing spatial integration in Fleurhof. Data was collected through a combination of qualitative research methods, including interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The results show that the development of Fleurhof mixed-income housing has been largely influenced by political dynamics, which have in the main, frustrated the legislative vision of spatial integration. Residents’ experiences within Fleurhof reflect a complex interplay of social interactions, economic disparities, and institutional dynamics in planning. Furthermore, research reveals that effective community engagement and participatory decision-making processes are crucial for ensuring the success and sustainability of mixed-income housing initiatives. In conclusion, there is a need for a comprehensive approach to development planning that prioritises spatial, and social justice, particularly in cities characterised by deep inequalities.

Keywords: mixed-income housing, spatial integration, urban planning, Fleurhof, Johannesburg

2 INTRODUCTION

The legacy of apartheid urban planning in South Africa remains deeply embedded in the country’s spatial structure, despite 30 years of democracy and progressive policy intervention. Apartheid-era planning was deliberately designed to segregate communities along racial and economic lines (Strauss, 2019; Kibido, 2022; Marutlulle, 2022), creating urban environments that continue to reflect stark inequalities in access to housing, infrastructure, and economic opportunities (Schensul and Heller, 2011; Hänel, 2019; Sanderson, 2024). To address these historical injustices, post-apartheid South Africa has made efforts to make spatial integration the centre of its urban agenda; however, despite a profusion of housing-related strategies advocating for spatial harmonisation, integration and inclusivity, colonial and apartheid planning traces run very deep within the country’s spatial landscape (Berrisford, 2011). Mixed-income housing developments have emerged as a possible strategy for achieving spatial integration by means of socioeconomic integration within the community (Lukhele, 2014; Geyer Jr, 2024). In its ideal sense, mixed-income housing endeavours to demolish the conventional barriers of separation by enabling citizens of diverse economic strata the chance to live together in an open urban arena. Whether such housing effectively causes integration or not remains contentious. Structural inequalities, socio-political tensions, and class-based divisions continue to seep into the lived experiences of residents of such developments. Secondly, the disparity between policy

rhetoric and real-world implementation raises important questions about the effectiveness of mixed-income housing as a tool of urban transformation.

In this paper, an in-depth analysis of structural inequalities, socio-political tensions, class-based divisions, and the gap between policy rhetoric and real-world implementation was conducted using Fleurhof mixed-income housing development. Fleurhof was selected as a case study as it is one of the newly integrated housing development projects that the City of Johannesburg has commissioned as a strategy to address these inequalities that the city continuously faces even in post-apartheid South Africa (Baloyi, 2020). Fleurhof is located in the southwest of Johannesburg, between Soweto and Florida within the City of Johannesburg's Region C. It was introduced as an inclusive mixed housing development that will offer housing to individuals of different income levels (Hofer et al., 2021). Yet this paper uncovers that this development has been shaped by the political and economic imperatives as much as by its spatial planning agenda. The residents' experience in Fleurhof shows the interconnected dynamics of governance, social interaction, and economic stratification that work to undermine the very ends of integration that the project seeks to enhance. This paper used a qualitative case study approach to assess the huge disconnect between the legislative and strategic planning vision and the realities on the ground. It argues that whilst mixed-income housing has been used to contribute to spatial transformation in other areas, in South Africa, the enduring "politics of radical difference" that is marred by race, class, and other social divides continues to shape urban development in ways that perpetuate exclusion rather than combat it. Ultimately, this paper argues that successful spatial integration in South Africa will require more than just policy rhetoric. It will require the government and planners alike to reconsider the planning practices based on community participation, equitable governance, and long-term investment in social infrastructure. Drawing from Fleurhof's experiences this paper aims to contribute to debates on the use of mixed housing developments as a strategy to achieve spatial justice through integration in divided societies like South Africa. The paper starts by looking at the theoretical context which supports spatial justice and integration efforts, setting the stage for the introduction of Fleurhof mixed-income development as the study area. It then delves into the research methodology, outlining the approaches used to gather and analyse data, before concluding with a discussion of the study's key findings.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SPATIAL INTEGRATION

South Africa's spatial integration efforts can easily be explained by urban planning theories and legislative frameworks that aim at addressing the country's spatial historical injustices. The country's urban landscape is still dominated by decades of racially motivated spatial engineering that continues to segregate people along racial and socio-economic lines (Spinks, 2001; Hamann, 2015; Lowton, 2021; Monama, Mokoale and Mokgotho, 2022). After the country gained its democracy in 1994, there has been an intensive implementation of policies and legislation that aims to restructure cities and promote equitable access to resources and opportunities (Maharaj and Ramballi, 1998; Turok and Parnell, 2009; Phosho et al., 2021). However, even with all of these efforts, the reality on the ground shows a disconnect in the policies and legislation implemented and practice as evidenced by the continued marginalisation of the urban poor and the economic divide that still characterises many South African cities. This section looks into the key theoretical framework that supports the spatial integration efforts by examining how these mixed housing developments are situated within the frameworks as strategies to address the historical injustices, whilst some limitations and contradictions emerge in practice. The paper looked at the theoretical perspective on spatial justice and spatial integration, and mixed-income housing as a tool for integration to provide a foundation for understanding the complexities of spatial transformation.

Spatial justice, as articulated by scholars such as Peter Marcuse and Edward Soja, underscores the inseparability of spatial and social injustices (Marcuse, 2009; Soja, 2013). Soja notes that spatial justice concerns 'greater control over how the spaces in which we live are socially produced' (Soja, 2010). He further states that spatial justice 'seeks to promote more progressive and participatory forms of democratic politics and social activism, and to provide new ideas about how to mobilise and maintain cohesive collations and regional confederations of grassroots social activist'. In South Africa, the National Development Plan 2030 emphasises spatial justice as one of its overarching principles for spatial development and states that 'all spatial development should conform to the principle and should explicitly indicate how they will meet the requirements of this principle' (Republic of South Africa, 2012). While the

inclusion of spatial justice as a development principle is appreciated and supported by many people, it has raised questions as to what exactly spatial justice means for South Africa, what this is intended to achieve, and what the requirements would be to achieve it. The concept of spatial justice in South Africa is not merely about redistributive equity but also about transforming the spatial structures that sustain systemic injustices.

To understand spatial integration, one must first understand the concept of segregation, which has historically shaped urban landscapes, particularly in societies with deep-rooted racial and economic inequalities like South Africa. Segregation can be defined as a reflection of social causes (e.g. prejudice, discrimination, a sense of superiority) with physical manifestations (i.e. denial of access to space, spatial concentration) and social consequences (e.g. social dislocations) (Ruiz-Tagle, 2013). Spatial integration is a result of efforts by governments/states to dismantle the spatial divisions that segregation creates. In the context of this study, spatial integration refers to the process of creating urban environments where people from different socioeconomic, racial, and cultural backgrounds can live in close proximity, share public spaces, and access equal opportunities. It is about breaking down the physical and social obstacles that separated people in South Africa's past, predominantly those generated by apartheid planning which insisted on segregation along racial lines (Murray, Shepherd and Hall, 2007). This is an important component of the democratic government's efforts to mitigate the long-term effect of apartheid spatial planning. This study argues that while mixed-income communities like Fleurhof can make spatial integration possible, the actualisation of this potential depends on bridging deeper socio-economic divisions and actualizing the gains from integration for all the residents.

4 STUDY AREA

Fleurhof is a privately owned housing scheme that was developed in partnership with the City of Johannesburg municipality for integrated residential properties. It is located on the Southwest of Johannesburg's Region C in between the township of Soweto and the suburb of Florida as shown in the figure below. It is one of the largest mixed-income housing developments in Johannesburg. The development is situated in the centre of one of the CoJ's main urban concentration zones. The development's construction got underway in 2011. With 10 411 residential units spread across 4.4 km², it can accommodate an estimated 83,000 people (Calgro M3, 2014). The development is a mixed-income human settlement development that includes various housing typologies and tenures, which are targeted at specific economic markets that comprise fully subsidised BNG housing, social housing, open-market rental housing, and open-market bonded housing (Khan, 2014: 16). The project started in 2011 with the fully subsidised BNG housing as the first phase, and the other types of housing happening after two years. Hence, the project was known for some time as a subsidised BNG housing development.



Fig. 1: Fleurhof Locality (Source: Google Maps)

5 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a case study research design using a qualitative research approach to explore the extent to which mixed-income housing developments contribute to spatial integration in post-apartheid South Africa. The Fleurhof mixed-income housing development was selected as the primary case study due to its strategic role in Johannesburg's spatial transformation agenda. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the interplay between policy, planning practices, and lived experiences within the development. A total of thirty interviews were conducted with municipal planning officials, residents of Fleurhof and developers. In addition to interviews, direct observations were conducted to assess physical integration, infrastructure provision, and social interactions in communal spaces. Particular attention was paid to the design and use of public spaces, patterns of mobility, and the spatial distribution of amenities to understand the development's effectiveness in fostering integration. Furthermore, document analysis was undertaken through a desktop review of key policy documents, spatial planning frameworks, municipal reports, and housing legislation. Documents such as Breaking New Ground (BNG), the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), and local spatial development plans were analysed to contextualize the Fleurhof development within broader urban planning and spatial justice discourses. Thematic text analysis was applied to qualitative data from interviews and policy documents to identify recurring patterns related to spatial justice, governance, and socio-economic dynamics within mixed-income developments.

6 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section of the paper presents two critical aspects that the paper aims to uncover in the Fleurhof mixed-housing development: the lived experiences of residents and the disconnect between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities. The first part explores social and economic interactions between members of different income groups, whether or not the development has been successful in promoting social cohesion, or whether underlying racial, economic, and cultural divisions continue to shape daily life. From the point of view of the residents, the study mapped both good practices regarding integration and the long-standing barriers which inhibit social mixing within the community. Then the second part focuses on planning and governance themes, looking at the disjuncture between the spatial integration policy goals and the consequent implementation challenges faced in Fleurhof. It explored how political requirements, institutional constraints, and administrative inefficiencies influenced consequences, normally missing the mark on creating the ideal integrated community. Through the analysis of these interrelated issues, this section attempted to answer the question "How can mixed-income housing developments contribute to spatial integration, in societies with protracted histories of racialised planning and related socioeconomic and spatial injustices"?

6.1 Resident Experiences: Social and Economic Interactions

The findings reveal that there are many social and economic benefits of mixed-income housing: economic desegregation; access to improved infrastructure and services; better calibre of housing; a safe community and an increase in local amenities; poverty alleviation; low and medium-income earners gain access to functional social networks and good role models (high-income earners) for better behaviour and lifestyle changes; everyone benefits by being exposed to a variety of people and lifestyles and by developing an appreciation for their differences (Levy et al., 2013; Gina, 2022). The findings from Fleurhof reveal a complex dynamic interplay of social relations among residents from different income groups, with alternating phases of integration and profound division.

The results show there is more social cohesion between the communities that live in Fleurhof. Bernard (1999) described the social cohesion concept as a "quasi-concept, that is, one of those hybrid mental constructions that politics proposes to us more and more often to simultaneously detect possible consensuses on a reading of reality, and to forge them". Madonsela (2017) describes it as the cornerstone of social relationships, which depend critically on the social systems that determine people's behaviour. Taking into account the two definitions of social cohesion, it is clear that mixed-income housing developments like Fleurhof play a crucial role in fostering integration by creating shared spaces and economic interdependencies that bring diverse groups together. As a key driver of social cohesion, shared public spaces between residents of varying economic means, such as parks, community centres, and shopping areas, have

allowed for informal social interactions across class lines to occur (Mehan, 2024). These areas have fostered a sense of belonging and collective identity within the community. These spaces are neutral spaces where residents of different socioeconomic backgrounds interact with each other through the course of their daily lives, generating spontaneous contact that might otherwise not be made in a classically segregated urban setting. The provision of these neutral spaces in this development has created spaces for informal conversation and economic exchange, thus helping break down social barriers and foster an inclusive neighbourhood climate.

Fleurhof has also fostered economic inclusion and upward mobility by providing lower-income residents with access to enhanced infrastructure, employment, and public services. For low-income residents, the proximity to middle-class families has a tendency to attract higher-quality amenities, improved transportation networks, and additional private-sector investment in the community (Rosenthal and Ross, 2015). This is a phenomenon referred to at times as the “neighbourhood effect”, which suggests that mixed-income neighbourhoods have the potential for positive spillover effects, where the presence of middle-income households creates demands for improved service and infrastructure (Settersten Jr, 2001). The result in Fleurhof is that the low-income group in the area are exposed to improved schools, health facilities, and commercial centres which would otherwise be lacking in predominantly low-income areas.

There is also a noticeable increased access to public transportation. This is mainly because the middle-income commuters’ presence has led to increased investment in effective transportation systems and thus the low-income citizens’ also get easier access to working areas in the rest of the city’s districts. Such improved connectivity is playing a prominent role in preventing the poverty trap through the reduced cost of commuting and closer proximity to work centres. In addition to infrastructural benefits, private investment in this neighbourhood has brought economic growth and employment opportunities. During the construction of Fleurhof, many people in the surrounding neighbourhoods got employed, and even though the employment was short-term, many jobs were created. After the completion of the project, some businesses opened shops in the area because of the new diverse customer base. These businesses end up employing the residents which plays a crucial role in intermixing the middle- and low-income population which in turn results in economic networking, whereby informal referrals for employment and business alliances arise out of daily interactions.

Despite the intention of creating spatial integration, Fleurhof continues to experience profound social and economic challenges that deter the full development of an integrative society (Hofer et al., 2021; Gina, 2022). The most evident problem remains racial homogeneity in development, as whites continue to be rare in the area. While Fleurhof has been designed as a mixed-income, integrated community, the lack of racial diversity suggests that time-honoured traditions of segregation continue to shape housing choices. White families, particularly middle- and better-off families, are reluctant to move into the neighbourhood due to long-standing attitudes regarding safety, property value, and social homogeneity. This shortage also highlights broader patterns of racialized settlement and delimits the extent to which Fleurhof is possible as an instance of real integration along class lines.

Affordability is also an essential issue raised by some of the residents, particularly for low-income residents who struggle to bear the economic costs of maintaining a secure home in the area. While the development has subsidized types of housing, dwelling in Fleurhof is quite costly for most low-income households. Essentials such as electricity, water, and transport have proved to be a burden, especially for those working in informal or irregular conditions. Furthermore, the disparities in income levels between different groups within the community are creating social tensions since lower-income residents may be kept out of certain areas or economic opportunities that middle-class households can more readily access. The affordability issue is whether Fleurhof will remain a true mixed-income community in the future or whether fiscal pressures will push out the most vulnerable residents in the long run.

The higher cost of living in the country has also put at risk the sustainability of social and economic diversity in Fleurhof. While inflation, rates on property, as well as service fees, increase, poorer families are finding it more challenging to stay in their homes, potentially leading to displacement. This is particularly concerning given that mixed-income housing is meant to provide for long-term stability among poorer residents while providing for social integration. Unless economic burdens are reduced, Fleurhof can experience a type of “economic filtering” such that only residents who can bear rising expenses stick around, ultimately

undermining the developmental purpose for which it was originally planned. In the absence of certain affordability tactics such as subsidies, rent capping, or legislation protecting low-income households from displacement by cost, Fleurhof may reflect the same kind of inequality that it was originally designed to relieve. These ongoing problems highlight the challenges of achieving true spatial and social integration in South Africa's urban space. While the development has managed to bring together inhabitants from different income levels, structural differences still exist, dictating who can afford to live there and who cannot. For Fleurhof to be a continued inclusive, integrated community, policies must address affordability but also systematically encourage added racial and economic diversity. Without these, the vision of mixed-income housing as a vehicle for spatial justice can be maintained as an ideal, but not a reality that will endure.

Overall, while challenges remain, the findings suggest that social cohesion is emerging in Fleurhof through shared spaces, economic interdependencies, and collective community initiatives. These aspects demonstrate that mixed-income developments have the potential to foster meaningful integration, provided that opportunities for organic interaction and mutual engagement are actively nurtured. Fleurhof's experience highlights that, despite historical divisions, everyday encounters and shared interests can contribute to the gradual development of a socially cohesive community.

6.2 Planning and Governance Issues: Disjuncture Between Policy and Reality

The Fleurhof mixed-income housing project was designed as a spatial integration model, in accordance with national policies like the National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), Breaking New Ground (BNG) Strategy, and Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA). All these policies demand inclusive, integrated human settlements that break from apartheid-era spatial imbalances (Adebayo, 2021). However, what is on the ground still represents a broad gap between policy intentions and realization. While Fleurhof has achieved some level of class integration, the absence of any white residents reflects the limits of racial integration in the sense that deeper societal and economic forces continue to shape residential patterns in cities. Another noticeable key planning failure is the lack of provision of effective public transport links between Fleurhof and major centres of employment. Most of the residents, particularly the low-income group, still heavily rely on informal transport services such as minibus taxis, which are unreliable and expensive (Hoferet et al., 2021). Poorly coordinated, affordable public transport works to reinforce economic segregation by limiting access to job opportunities, thereby inhibiting lower-income residents from the full benefit of living in a mixed-income community.

A critical factor shaping Fleurhof's development is the overwhelming dominance of private developers whose interests do not necessarily represent the government's broader spatial justice agenda. While private investment has accelerated construction and the delivery of infrastructure, it has also created affordability problems. The majority of the housing units, including those labelled "affordable," remain unaffordable to lower-income families, consolidating the risk of displacement. The balance between government priorities such as the delivery of long-term affordability and spatial justice and private sector interests in profitable development is an unresolved issue that affects the realization of Fleurhof's integration goals. Perhaps the greatest problem in the long-term viability of Fleurhof is a lack of meaningful measures of accountability guaranteeing that developers and government departments adhere to promises of spatial integration. Regulations and policies are set in place for the sake of inclusive urban development, but these are not being enforced effectively. As an example, middle-income housing is generally preferred by developers because of wider profit margins and promises of having enough low-income housing may fall short at times. Inadequate stringent control means that the most vulnerable are being excluded from the benefits of mixed-income living.

The rigidity of existing policies, which cannot keep up with emerging socio-economic challenges, is another challenge. While policies such as SPLUMA and BNG advance spatial justice, they do not normally account for rising living expenses, gentrification pressures, and economic shifts affecting affordability. Some of the poorer residents risk being priced out due to increasing property values and rising living costs in a mixed-income complex. Failing to implement adaptive policies to mitigate such problems threatens the long-term viability of Fleurhof as a mixed neighbourhood.

The Fleurhof case shows once again the stubborn challenge of moving spatial integration policy from paper to practice. Even as Fleurhof's development is a good step towards removing entrenched spatial inequalities, governance weaknesses and tensions between public and private interests erode the initiative. These will

have to be surmounted through more effective accountability frameworks, responsive policy, and insistence on ensuring that mixed-income housing developments benefit all residents, particularly those who have long been disadvantaged.

7 CONCLUSION

The Fleurhof mixed-income housing development is both a promise and a challenge of spatial integration in post-apartheid South Africa. While some social cohesion through shared public facilities, schools, and economic interactions has been fostered in the development, deep-seated divisions limit full integration. Affordability, public transport shortcomings and bureaucracy inefficiencies have served to undermine its success. Private sectoral interest dominance and poorly established accountability institutions also threaten future sustainability. This study highlights that genuine spatial integration is more than a mixed-income housing development, it requires inclusive governance, sensitive policies, and forward-looking action to close socioeconomic gaps. In the absence of these interventions, spatial justice will remain an unattainable ideal and not an achievable phenomenon in South African cities.

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