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Theology from the Suburbs: The Challenge of Life for the City as a Whole

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Abstract

This article seeks to interrogate critically and problematize the silence on the suburb in urban theology: in the process the article seeks to illustrate the importance of the suburb through examining it considering the soteriology underpinning apartheid spatial planning and its persistent quasi-soteriological envisioning of the good life in the ongoing spatial imagination of the South African city. While this proposal does not present a fully developed contextual or public theology in response to the complex place of the suburb in the city, it highlights the persistence of this silence and illustrates key theological questions that could underpin such a focus in the future.

Keywords

urban theology – suburb – suburban theology – soteriology – South Africa

1 Introduction

What follows is in some ways a reflection on a particular silence in how theologians acknowledge our own social location in spite of the near universal recognition that a conscious reflection on where we are doing our theology from is a key part of a responsible (public) theology. This account is not about a quick rundown of the demographic profile we represent, but rather part of a process of more deliberately thinking through how our existence in particular bodies, particular times, and particular places contributes in unique ways to how we do theology. So, what is it that we consciously want to acknowledge and think from?

We are both ordained ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, which is for all intents and purposes exclusively white, and at least in its urban manifestation almost exclusively suburban. The former is sometimes acknowledged, the latter almost never – at least not in the way we propose that it should be faced. One of us speaks from an urban – inner city – congregation in the north-east of South Africa, the other from a suburban congregation in the south-west of the country. While we are obviously interested in the conceptual and theological intricacies of what we reflect on below, these thoughts really emerge from questions on how resources are distributed between our communities and neighbouring communities, how borders are maintained, and how a general sense of space are constructed in the various neighbourhoods we move through. We speak from the afterlife of apartheid.

Apartheid was, among many things, an imagining of space and place, with segregation acting as both method and outcome of a particular colonial and racist vision of society. Apartheid's afterlife¹ in the present continues to find some of its most visible expressions in the built environment and city spatial planning.

Reflecting on this persistent segregation, Greg Ruiters comments on how 'Statistics South Africa [has] show[n] that all South African cities are more racially segregated than Detroit, the most racially segregated city in the United States, with a segregation index of 0.48, compared to Johannesburg with 0.57 (South Africa's least segregated city)'.² It is this persistent segregation – but also the reproduction of the logics of segregation that persist even where

1 Joel M Modiri, *The Jurisprudence of Steve Biko: A Study in Race Law and Power in the "Afterlife" of Colonial-Apartheid* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2017); Robert R Vosloo, 2021. 'Pedagogy after Babel? Reading After Whiteness "after" Apartheid', *Modern Theology*, 37:4 (2021), 1027–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12732>.

2 Greg Ruiters, 'Reracialising and Resegregating South Africa: Municipal Neoliberalism and Internal Colonialism after 1994', in John Reynolds, Ben Fine and Robert Van Niekerk, eds,

formal segregation is disrupted – that draws our attention. It is from this ongoing state of affairs that words like ‘suburb’ and ‘township’ draw their meaning, in our context, from this persistent segregation. The reproduction of the material desires underpinning this segregation even where the formal descriptions of apartheid racial segregation³ would seemingly have less of a hold.

The main observation that we make is that in our theological reflections on the city the suburb is strangely silent. We argue that, when doing theology in South Africa after the end of legalized apartheid, the suburb as context is of immense importance – and we suspect a similar importance will be found in numerous other countries and cities around the world. It is the silence on the suburb in our urban theologies – while it is exactly the suburb that is the norm behind our visions of the good and liveable city – that we want to reflect on below, arguing for a more explicit engagement with the suburb in urban public theologies.

2 The Suburb – The Unexamined Norm of Urban Public Theology?

You would be hard-pressed to find references to the phrase ‘suburban theology’ in English academic literature: where this is found, it would most likely take the form of Ann Morisy’s observation that ‘suburban theology sounds a little sad’.⁴ A simple Google scholar search for ‘urban theology’ (1000+ results), ‘rural theology’ (1000+ results) and ‘suburban theology’⁵ (9 results) illustrate this to some extent. Malcolm Brown⁶ attempted some very explicit reflections on what it would mean to consciously think through the suburb as a question of contextual theology, yet his work, which raised some significant questions, has hardly received any scholarly attention in the almost 2 decades since publication.

Race, Class and the Post-Apartheid Democratic State, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2019), pp. 153–184 at p. 160.

3 Here we refer most superficially to those places where residents representing different racial identities reside alongside each other in neighbourhoods in ways that would have been legally prohibited under apartheid.

4 Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 96–7.

5 ‘Suburb theology’ produced no results

6 Malcolm Brown, ‘Faith in Suburbia: Completing the Contextual Trilogy’, *Contact*, 148 (2005), 1–35.

Malcolm Brown, ‘Blurred Encounters in the Suburbs: Problems of Place and Problematic Places’ in John Reade and Chris R. Baker, *Entering the New Theological Space: Blurred Encounters of Faith, Politics and Community*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), pp. 57–72.

Brown's responses are developed against the background of the Church of England's *Faith in the City*⁷ and *Faith in the Countryside*⁸ reports. The framing of these reports situates contextual theology as a focus on 'problematic contexts' – reducing contextual theology to that which is a 'problem'.⁹ We return to the language of the problem below, but it is noteworthy that a similar pattern can be identified with what goes under the label 'urban theology' in South Africa.

A recent collection of essays on urban theology in South Africa could serve as illustration. In a 2014 collection under the editorship of Stephan de Beer, we find essays focusing on townships and squatter camps/informal communities,¹⁰ homelessness,¹¹ and an inner city faith community¹² on the one hand, or on the city, in the case of this collection particular the metropole of Tshwane, as a whole.¹³ The urban in urban theology is found in its broad sense of the city as a collective, implicitly including the suburbs, but when particular questions of

7 Church of England, *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation (The Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas)*, (London: Church House Publishing, 1985).

8 Church of England, *Faith in the Countryside (Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas)*, (London: Church House Publishing, 1990).

9 Brown, 'Faith in Suburbia', 3.

10 Victor Molobi, 'Living in the Townships: An Appraisal of Pentecostal Social Ministry in Tshwane', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70:3 (2014), Art. #2791, 9 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2791>.

Nadine F Bowers Du Toit, 'Gangsterism on the Cape Flats: A Challenge to "Engage the Powers"', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70:3 (2014), Art. #2727, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2727>.

Johannes P van der Walt, Ignatius Swart, and Stephan De Beer, 'Informal Community-based Early Childhood Development as a Focus for Urban Public Theology in South Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70:3 (2014), Art. #2769, 16 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2769>.

Vuyani S Vellem, 'The Task of Urban Black Public Theology', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70:3 (2014), Art. #2728, 6 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2728>.

11 Stephan De Beer, 'Jesus in the Dumping Sites: Doing Theology in the Overlaps of Human and Material Waste', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70:3 (2014), Art. #2724, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2724>.

12 Johannes N.J (Klippias) Kritzinger, 'Concrete Spirituality', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70:3 (2014), Art. #2782, 12 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2782>.

13 Wessel Bentley, 'Structural Transformation and Democratic Public Spaces: Reflections on Habermas and the 2014 Tshwane State of the Capital City Address', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70:3 (2014), Art. #2755, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2755>.

Derrick T Mashau, 'Reimagining Mission in the Public Square: Engaging Hills and Valleys in the African City of Tshwane', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70:3 (2014), Art. #2774, 11 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2774>.

the urban is being engaged, then the suburban as a particular phenomenon is largely ignored.

At times the suburban is brought into reflections on the urban. From the same collection above, Derrick Mashau does, for example, briefly touch on the suburbs as a part of the city which also experience problems – in its case it is the problem of being targets of violence on the one hand¹⁴ and being caught up in a consumerist mentality on the other.¹⁵ Elsewhere Stephan De Beer opens this problem more deliberately when arguing for an urbanization of theology which include the suburb and rural, thinking through an urban theology which takes the way in which suburbs deplete the resources of its surrounding urban communities as key to what an urban theology which engages with suburbanization would need to engage with.¹⁶

The importance of ‘suburb’ as context can hardly be over-stated – whether this is because of the location of those doing theology or the concrete vision of what a flourishing life would look like by those doing theology. It is this that remains the concern: few would dare make this explicit, yet it is from the suburbs that we do our theological work. What Brown notes is that this silence on the suburb is also a tacit acknowledgement that the suburb is ‘normative – the standard against which other contexts are judged to be deficient and to which all reasonable Christian structures and relationships ought to aspire.’¹⁷ To revise Jim Perkinson’s words around white theology, that which presents itself as ‘just theology’ should probably be understood as ‘suburban theology’.¹⁸ While it would obviously be near impossible to prove this in any conclusive way, we would go further to raise the suspicion that much of what is produced under the rubric of ‘urban theology’ in academic theology, reflecting on urban dynamics as distinct from the suburb, is most likely being written on laptops sitting on desks in suburban homes – given the general class position of those publishing in academic journals, at least in a South African context. Indeed, this might be the most commonly shared social location of the voices that fill academic journals in theology in general. It is this silence on the suburb

Annalet Van Schalkwyk, ‘Space, Place and Ecology: Doing Ecofeminist Urban Theology in Gauteng’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70:3 (2014), Art. #2767, 13 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2767>.

14 Mashau, ‘Reimagining Mission’, 6.

15 Ibid., 8–9.

16 Stephan De Beer, ‘Urban South Africa: An Opportunity for Liberating Theological Education’ *Missionalia*, 40:3 (2012), 251–77 at 254.

17 Brown, ‘Faith in Suburbia’, 3–4.

18 Jim W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 38.

combined with its importance as context for the academic theologian and its global weight in presenting visions of the future of the church that draws our interest.

Yet any kind of suburban contextual theology instinctively call forth a myriad of problems, which may be part of the general silence. It is not just that such a theology ‘sounds a little sad’; if it does the reasons deserve some probing. While the suburb is not typically problematic space – as those urban spaces which usually call forth reflection under the rubric of urban theology are often described; the suburb, nevertheless, calls forth our assumptions on what would be considered a “problem” in the urban landscape.

Some will point out that those who are described as quintessentially ‘suburban’ also face challenges to which church and theology should respond, such as the problem of violent crime noted above. Ann Morisy’s reflection on *The Suburban Challenge* probably illustrates the heart of the problem with this trajectory. She notes the ‘sadness’ of a suburban theology as compared with liberation theologies,¹⁹ the moral dilemma of upper-middle class suburban life in excruciating details,²⁰ and the problems facing those residing in the suburbs, to which the language of liberation might speak. However, contextual theologies reflecting on particular space is generally deeply aware of how the problems of this particular space is tied to a broader spatial reality, and call for a transformation of space to seek the liberation of people. In contrast, the problems typically described as suburban would seldom call forth an imagination that actually expects that this space should fundamentally transform (even if further development and betterment is called for). Rather, it seeks to address the individual contextual challenges of those who find themselves in this space. Yet this focus on individual personal challenges also reproduce the very suburban logic Brown outlines: ‘weak on human interdependence, strong on choice.’²¹ Rather, a theology that is concerned with public policy, urban spatial planning, the abundant life for all in the city, would have to situate the problems often linked to the suburb exactly in its interrelation with the broader city – how the suburb contributes to the fragmentation of the urban and detracts from the liveability of the city as a whole.²²

On the other hand, when the South African Council of Churches published its statement on climate change it described a consumer class as key to the problem: their suburban location was noted as a specific part of this

19 Morisy, *Journeying Out*, p. 97.

20 Ibid., pp. 95–102.

21 Brown, ‘Faith in Suburbia’, 27.

22 De Beer, ‘Urban South Africa’.

problem.²³ What needs to draw our attention is not that the suburb is a relatively ‘unproblematic’ space,²⁴ where its inhabitants can protect itself from the ‘raw and abrasive aspects of life’ and from the presence and closeness of others.²⁵ The problem lies more specifically in how the work of this protection draws deeply on the resources of those of poorer parts of the city – in fact relying on its closeness while keeping it at bay. In very specific ways the South African city has been constructed such that the township supply of labour is close enough to maintain the aesthetics of the suburb, while remaining far away enough not to impact on its property value.²⁶ Here the form of topophilia where place identification revolves around a constructed aesthetic while disrupting a broader ethic of the city is on full display.²⁷

3 The South African Suburb

‘The suburb’, inasmuch as it replicates itself across continents, also informs particular national and local political and economic realities in unique ways. If the South African suburb seeks to replicate an ideal from a North Atlantic, specifically North American, context, then that act of replication in itself changes the meaning of the structure: it now functions to make concrete the implication of a particular colonial imagination. If the ever-expanding suburb, with the gated community in a particular way, in post-apartheid South Africa reproduces, even if in part, apartheid spatial design, then this reproduction also changes the meaning of this structure, exactly because it replicates what was formally denounced, reproducing that past in the post. So, what is the South African suburb, and what is it today?

One way of conceiving South African cities is that it develops with three distinct parts. The urban centres, still containing remnants of the historic core of various cities, but in the 20th century – at least in the larger metropolises – seeing the development of high-rise offices and apartment blocks. Then there is the suburban ring around the urban centre. Finally, the township as labour

23 South African Council of Churches. *Climate Change: A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa*, (Marshalltown: The South African Council of Churches, 2009), pp. 38, 55, 71.

24 Brown, ‘Faith in Suburbia’, 3.

25 Morisy, *Journeying Out*, p. 97.

26 Ruiters, ‘Racialising and Resegregating South Africa’, pp. 164, 167 and 170.

27 James S Duncan & Nancy G Duncan, ‘Locating Bedford in Space and Time’, in Paul C. Adams, Steven D. Hoelscher & Karen E Till, *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 41–54.

reserve (or given an expanded unemployment rate exceeding 40%,²⁸ it could perhaps more accurately be described as dumping ground for the unemployed), historically usually at some distance from the suburban border. It should be noted, however, that today these townships have often grown or moved to border each other, resulting in some of the iconic South African aerial photos of vast inequality. Simultaneously, those who walk the streets quickly realise that these neat divisions no longer hold – if ever they did. What goes as ‘township’ increasingly contain developments that has all the marks of the suburb, while informal settlements are increasingly found in what would typically be considered suburb, as people make a way to locate themselves closer to job opportunities and amenities. The historic urban centres now exist alongside many urban hubs – higher density commercial and business hubs in historic suburban areas, often existing alongside or surrounding large shopping centres. All this contributes to the many different narratives of “unequal scenes” from South Africa.²⁹

In many other national and linguistic contexts suburb and township could even be used interchangeably. There are moments where South African legislation will attempt the same.³⁰ Yet while neatly separating them in the present is not that simple, they continue to function to demarcate the racialization of space. Suburb and township respectively refer to residential spaces around the city historically demarcated as white and black under apartheid. To a large extent their use continues to draw on this racialization of space to define what is being referred.³¹ This practice happens in spite of the fact that the suburb is no longer exclusively white in its residential demographic. While the disruption of segregated neighbourhoods is vital for the transformation of apartheid spatial structures, beyond desegregation the question that continues to draw attention is how these neighbourhoods contribute to structures that reproduce or dismantle historic discriminations.³² As Tim Gorringer has observed

28 Statistics South Africa, ‘Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) – Q2:2022’, <<https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15685>> [accessed 19 September 2022].

29 Johnny Miller, ‘Unequal Scenes South Africa’, <<https://unequalscenes.com/south-africa>> [accessed 24 September 2022].

30 ‘Get Deeds Registry Information’, <<https://www.gov.za/services/place-live/get-deeds-registry-information>> [accessed 23 September 2022].

31 Thabisani Ndlovu, ‘Shuttling Between the Suburbs and the Township: The New Black Middle Class(es) Negotiating Class and Post-Apartheid Blackness in South Africa’, *Africa* 90:3 (2020), 568–86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000197202000008X>.

Muneebah Kara, *Suburban Urbanism: Discovering a South African Suburbia*, (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2014), pp. 30–1.

32 Ruiters, ‘Reracialising and Resegregating South Africa’.

'[i]n the built environment social relations are inscribed concretely in space'.³³ Apartheid remains perhaps the most brutal and explicit example of exactly this design and understanding its concrete afterlife in spatial relations a key concern.

In spite of the above, the 'suburb' remains a vague concept.³⁴ Where exactly does the urban centre end and the suburb begin? When does the suburb cease to be suburb and become urban centre, or where does the city edge end and when do we speak of the peri-urban? Even where we agree that this is suburb, the suburb is not a single entity,³⁵ and includes both affluent gated community and working-class lower density developments around the city.

These unique contexts would warrant a critical interrogation in terms of our urban theologies; they raise questions not so much on the efficiency of ecclesial practices in various suburban context.³⁶ They ask questions on how the language of faith assists in reading the suburb as part of the city in ways that contributes to the liveability for all. For the purpose of the rest of this article, it is the suburb as an imagined ideal in a post-apartheid South Africa that is our primary concern. In spite of the ambiguity on the exact location of the suburb and the diverse forms it takes on, our concern is with the ways in which the suburb is drawn into visions of the good, visions of flourishing and salvation. This role or function historically ties in with imagining racial space in the construction of apartheid: our concern is with the ways in which such visions of salvation continue to be tied to the suburb as ideal.

Simultaneously – or rather, what sharpens the specific concern probed here – the real crisis of faith and theology, for theology that is formed from within lives situated in the suburbs, is the ways in which the flourishing of lives in the suburb relies on the early death of those in the townships. Any talk of a liveable city will then need to speak to how the gathering of immense resources in one part of the city at the direct expense of another is to be addressed. The point is not that there is no interdependence – suburb and township is deeply interdependent – but rather than a life together what we are faced with is a dysfunctional interdependence.

33 Timothy J Gorrige, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 27.

34 Kara, *Suburban Urbanism*, p. 30.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

36 Where theology does engage the suburb, it often focuses on more efficient and effective ecclesial strategies – strategies of church growth and development which struggle to engage with the difficult question of how the space in which such strategies are developed are tied in with the broader city.

Suburbs speak of affluence, of the ratepayer income base for local metropolitan governments set up to perform service delivery through a largely economic calculus,³⁷ and ultimately of the concrete canvas on which desires are expressed. What we perceive as crisis is the simultaneous reliance on extraction from elsewhere to satisfy this desire and the ironic refrain that it never satisfies such desire: like a refrain the suburb becomes described as the ideal goal while simultaneously being described as soulless, lacking community, or aesthetically dull. We would propose that such an unfulfilled attempt at filling desires which simultaneously rely on the death of others is at the heart of what Christian theology seeks to respond to – the language of sin in profound ways speak to exactly this.

4 The Suburb as Soteriological Ideal

Looking at the suburb from the vantage point of either flourishing or desire, regardless of eventual fulfilment but not blind to the cost of lives that fulfilment requires, should almost instinctively draw our attention to the locus and language of soteriology. In short, when thinking about the suburb theologically we should critically ask: does the suburb give concrete expression to a particular soteriological vision?

It is well-known and often stated that apartheid South Africa drew and grew from a quasi-soteriological vision. Without here going into the details, the violent threat born from centuries of colonial wars and the fear of equalisation with black people jointly contribute to seeing racial segregation as a divinely sanctioned concrete structuring of society for the imminent and ultimate salvation of primarily white people, but in white imagination, in fact, of all people.

This line of thought can be seen throughout its history, but with distinct clarity in the 1930s and especially with the publication of the very influential Dutch Reformed Church Mission Policy of 1935. Up until this point, colonial and imperial rule, and the expansion of the missionary enterprise, all contributed to a thoroughly segregated South Africa long before 1930. Yet, the 1930s is particularly interesting inasmuch as these often incoherent ideologies were now being reformulated and expanded into fully-fledged theological systems and, indeed, soteriological ideals. At the heart of the 1935 document is an ambiguous relationship between a hostility toward equalisation (*gebykstelling*), on the one hand, and the Christian conviction that all people are

37 Ruiters, 'Reracialising and Resegregating South Africa'.

equal before God, on the other.³⁸ To reconcile these two ambiguous ideals, the policy adopts ‘separate development’ as a pragmatic alternative. Yet this pragmatic alternative of ‘separate development’ was thoroughly detailed in that it included concrete suggestions for spatial formation in South Africa going forward: they would strive toward so-called “‘equity” but no ‘equality”” in white areas and ‘black development in areas set aside for blacks only’.³⁹ The historian Richard Elphick captures the importance of the document perfectly:

the succinct combination of several themes – equality of the races in principle; denial of blacks’ rights in white spheres; unlimited opportunities for blacks to ‘advance’ in black spheres; development of a separate African nation; generous aid from the churches to blacks; and denial of whites’ rights in black spheres – was so emphatic (despite rather sloppy drafting), and so fundamental to the document, that one can say, with little exaggeration, that the Free State Mission Policy outlined an apartheid ideology almost two decades before it became the official policy of the South African government.⁴⁰

In the first half of the 20th century these visions take on particular form in relation to urban development. The 1935 document paved the way for the church now to become much more vocal in its tabling of separate development and, very specifically, separated urban development as a viable solution to the so-called ‘native problem’ that it had been grappling with for the past decade. Moreover, the church soon realized that it had to give theological backing to these ideals if it was to become state policy.

For the following two (plus) decades a ‘brewing theological storm’⁴¹ and a ‘ideological earthquake’⁴² erupted as earlier missionary ideologies were merged with both Neo-Calvinism and an (political) Afrikaner Nationalism. The result was a theologizing bent toward separate development, of course, but, more importantly for our purpose, also toward describing these so-called white areas in soteriological terms.

38 Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers*, (London: University of Virginia Press, 2012), p. 228.

Carl Borchardt, ‘Die ‘Swakheid van Sommige en die Sending,’ in Johann Kinghorn, ed, *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid*. (Pretoria: Macmillan Suid Afrika, 1986), p. 82.

39 Elphick, *The Equality of Believers*, pp. 229–30.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

42 Borchardt, ‘Die ‘Swakheid van Sommige en die Sending,’ in Kinghorn, ed, *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid*, p.87.

An apt example of this kind of theology is evident in how D. Lategan, from the Stellenbosch Theological Seminary, expressed his support for separate development in a popular Reformed theological journal, *Die Gereformeerde Vaandel*. In his view, segregation is salvific for so-called poor whites in as much as it 'will bring about the removal of the unhealthy back neighbourhoods [and] the creation of healthy neighbourhoods where a healthy Christian family can be built, the undesirable moral conditions can be eradicated and, in doing so, a healthy state, people and Church can be developed.'⁴³ Moreover, he continues to argue that segregation will also be salvific for "non-whites": 'The application of segregation will further lead to the creation of separate healthy cities for non-whites where they will be able to develop on their own lines, establish their own institutions and later govern themselves under white tutelage.'⁴⁴ As Kinghorn rightly explains, Lategan's is a pastoral concern to eradicate white poverty. In that sense, the only form of salvation that he can imagine is separate development or segregation.

Lategan's opinion piece is but a small marker in a much larger concern for the church at the time. In his essay 'From a Farm Road to a Public Highway', Robert Vosloo highlights the enmity and protest that accompanied white urbanization from rural farmlands to the city in the early 20th century. The church's call, he says, was for the Afrikaner to go 'Back to the Land', and city life was viewed as 'a graveyard for the Afrikaner soul'.⁴⁵ Yet, as time went on and the church embraced the inevitable, its language and theology followed suit. For example, in the Dutch Reformed Church's very influential 1947 publication *Kerk en Stad* (Church and City), urbanization was seen as a 'mixed blessing' inasmuch as it presented both positives and negatives for Afrikaner people. And at a National Congress during the same year, urbanization was viewed not only as a pragmatic positive, but as an expression of God's governance and as a holy calling and mission for Afrikaner people.⁴⁶ What is important to note here, also, is that this calling and the rephrasing of urbanization as a positive for Afrikaner people, was wholly dependent on separate development. It was only through the creation of an extensive policy for racial segregation in every sphere of society that this understanding, in their minds, could possibly be maintained.⁴⁷

43 Ibid., p.88.

44 Ibid.

45 Robert R. Vosloo, 'From a Farm Road to a Public Highway', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 39:2, (2013), 23.

46 Ibid., p.28.

47 Ibid.

These ideas grew in popularity and by the end of 1947 they were presented with theological and soteriological support in, for example, the massively influential publication, *Regverdige Rasse-apartheid* (Justified Racial Apartheid). It was the New Testament theologian E.P. Groenewald's text in this publication, especially, that would become 'the first document with elaborate scriptural proofs for apartheid to be officially accepted by a DRC body.'⁴⁸ From the soteriological understanding that God wills and saves through segregation, Groenewald advocated for national, social, and religious apartheid.

The church's recommendations to government were no longer simply theoretical. In the years after these conferences and publications the National Party won the general election and quickly implemented their program for apartheid. Their sentiments grew from the ideology and soteriological vision that the church had advocated. In 1950 it approved the Group Areas Act and soon thereafter began with forced removals of thousands of peoples marked racially as African, Coloured or Indian under apartheid legislation. National Party propaganda regularly promoted forced removals and these newfound segregated areas on the basis that every people should develop themselves and, in doing so, discover their God-given identity as a people. These neighbourhoods, they would suggest, would lead to a dignified existence and, essentially, to human flourishing.⁴⁹

This soteriological vision was not only reproduced in the thought and theology of the suburban church, but also in the very concrete infrastructure of the South African neighbourhood. In post-apartheid South Africa this vision of salvation through separation is seen reproduced in the most explicit way through the rapid proliferation of one particular form of suburban life: the gated community, which draw on historic tropes of black threat and white fortification in its justification and captures the imagination well beyond its physical presence in the urban landscape. As such, we have yet to deal with the wide-ranging effects that this structural and theological design has on our current soteriological vision. What is perhaps of ultimate concern here is how the gated community and similar residential formations draws our desires and informs our visions of the liveability that we should strive for. In accord with Gorrings's remark, mentioned above, we could now also say that: in the built environment, not only social relations, but also soteriological vision, is inscribed in space. Even as one's theology and soteriology shift and expands

48 J.A. Loubser, *The Apartheid Bible: A Critical Review of Racial Theology in South Africa*. (Pretoria: Maskew Miller Longman), p. 60.

49 Elphick, *The Equality of Believers*, p. 237.

over time (as it most certainly did in South Africa), the space continues to reproduce distorted desires.

For example, a large gated community in the southern part of South Africa rightly starts its description by stating that ‘where you live can change your life’: it then continues to draw on visions of a pristine past and craft the description of a community defined by facilitating safety for those on the inside through its clear bordering out of a surrounding city in the language of well-being and community which call forth a salvific vision:

is a global leader in luxury wellness estates and offers countless ways to enjoy an active and diverse lifestyle for the whole family. Residents indulge in quality time, make indelible memories and become more connected to each other and the world around them, while investing in their well-being. Community and friendships are established between neighbours while children live carefree lives playing outside.⁵⁰

What makes the suburb, in its idealized form, such a compelling idea and ‘pull factor’? We need not look far to hear the cries about its unsustainability and disruption of community, yet it retains its place as that place to which we should strive for living everyday life. Why could not a Christian vision of community provide a compelling alternative for where and how we choose to live? What does it say about our theologies of creation if we do not know how to speak Creatively, with a capital “C”, about this place? As Willie Jennings notes, ‘belief in creation must refer to current real-world places or it refers to nothing’.⁵¹ Our visions of salvation need not only to relate to the particularities of our various ways of being embedded in urban spaces but should relate to all of them simultaneously. In the words of Jim Perkinson:

What if, in fact, we are interlinked in such a way that the first world cannot become healthy without the two-thirds world also becoming healthy? Not as a matter of prescription, but as simple description? What if the suburb cannot quiet its angst without the city finding answer to its anger?⁵²

50 ‘Welcome to Val De Vie Estate’, <<https://www.valdevie.co.za/>>, [accessed 2 October 2022].

51 Willie J Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, (London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 85.

52 Jim W Perkinson, ‘Like a Thief in the Night: Black Theology and White Church in the Third Millennium’. *Theology Today* 60:4 (2004), 508–24 at 514.

The fundamental tension is then not merely the way the suburb, with the luxury gated community as its most ideal form, presents itself in salvific fashion. This vision of salvation embeds itself in an understanding of the South African city which not only perpetuates urban structures of death elsewhere, but relies on it. This perpetuation of the heart of an apartheid urban vision, where communities marked by early death, inhumane squalor, and dehumanising infrastructure house those who maintain the very security and aesthetic which undergirds the vision of a flourishing life in other parts of the city. Here an urban theology which seeks the “welfare of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7) would need to ask critical questions around what it would mean to seek to welfare of the city as a whole, and specifically about the ways in which everyday life are being tied to that which undermines welfare elsewhere and for others.

While clearly a challenge of social development and urban design and part of the ongoing legacy of dismantling the inherited apartheid vision, we want to propose that this is a, if not the, challenge of an urban *theology* in South Africa. The combination of sustaining life dependent on death elsewhere, crafting a vision of flourishing drawing on the cheap labour of those facing inhumane living conditions elsewhere, and doing this alongside the life of the Christian community in the suburb raises significant questions about how we think about God’s work of salvation for the city, and our place in it.

5 Salvation and Space in Theology

‘On the edge of tautology’ writes Graham Ward, ‘salvation concerns being saved.’⁵³ That salvation concerns being saved, however, is not as simple as it might first appear, Ward explains, since it calls forth many age-old questions. Among those are: ‘what does it mean to be “saved”?’; ‘How does that happen?’; ‘Who or what is the object of salvation?’; and ‘From what are we saved and toward what?’. Throughout Christian history, there was a level of agreement (although this agreement was certainly questioned) that the salvific work of God is a ‘labour of God by God’ – that is, ‘the Christian tradition holds that we are saved by and through and in Christ.’⁵⁴ Notwithstanding, it was primarily on the ‘how’ question of salvation that many disagreements arose. These disagreements gave way to many atonement theories: substitution and sacrifice, justification, expiation, propitiation, the purchase of freedom, cleansing,

53 Graham Ward, ‘Salvation: The Pedagogy of Affect’, *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 55:1 (2014), 1000.

54 Ibid.

healing and so forth, each holding different ideas of what God intends for God's creation.

Many of these doctrines of atonement focus on salvation as an individual affair. There is a transaction between God and the individual wherein Jesus is given as an offer in response to sin. The assumption here, as Beverly Gaventa⁵⁵ argues, is that 'salvation has to do with the individual human being, who is forgiven, restored to right relationship with God, and thereby saved from eschatological wrath and for the Christian life (hence the slogan of "sin, salvation, and sanctification").'⁵⁶

In its most grotesque form, proponents of apartheid theology often relied on such an individualistic understanding of salvation. As Elphick has shown, it was possible for apartheid theologians (especially in its early form) to imagine the salvation of souls (accompanied by large-scale evangelical and missionary programs) without a genuine concern for societal issues – salvation without equality.⁵⁷ Others, like Dirk Smit, have pointed out that this kind of Reformed theology also over-emphasised the legal notion of justification (and salvation, for that matter) to the effect that the 'fulness of salvation' was lost from view and replaced with a narrow understanding of judgement, punishment, and a form of measurement.⁵⁸ It neglected that God is concerned with the forgiveness of sins and the establishment of the right, the restoration of a (covenant) community and the Lordship of Christ over us.⁵⁹ Narrowing God's salvation in this way made it into, what Barth calls, an utterly 'moralistic affair' – that is: 'so dull, so indifferent to the question of humanity itself, and therefore so lacking in joy'.⁶⁰

Still others, like Nicholas Wolterstorff, have shown how this understanding of salvation made it possible to speak about love, benevolence, and charity without speaking about God's reign of shalom, of wholeness in every sphere of life.⁶¹

55 Beverly R Gaventa, *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel according to Paul*, (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 28.

56 Ibid.

57 Elphick, *The Equality of Believers*.

58 Dirk J Smit, 'Justification and Divine Justice,' in Robert Vosloo, ed, *Essays on Being Reformed*, (Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2009), p. 113.

59 Ibid., p.111.

60 Ibid., 118.

61 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Hearing the Call*, (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 59–79; 95–113; 395–412.

Many of apartheid's critics also challenged the assumptions related to this vulgar form of individualistic salvation. A good example is when Alan Boesak wrote a letter to the Minister of Justice at the time, explaining:

this salvation [which the church is called to preach] is the liberation, the making whole, of the whole person. It is not something meant for the 'inner life,' the soul only. It is meant for the whole human existence. [Jesus] was the Word made flesh, who took on complete human form, and his message of liberation is meant for persons in their full humanity".⁶²

Boesak was well known for his rhetoric of 'wholeness of life'. Salvation, ultimately, is about God actively liberating human beings – especially and, first and foremost, the most wretched – from all types of oppression and injustice and binding them into a new community under the Lordship of Christ.

Two further developments in the theology of salvation are also helpful to mention here.

Firstly, a shift occurred in Pauline studies after the so-called New Perspective on Paul. With more vigour than before, scholars argued that the more individualistic theories of salvation are too heavily influenced by outdated assumptions about the human person, they overemphasise legal metaphors in the Bible, and Western individualism still dominates its use.⁶³ In a search for alternatives, some scholars pointed toward the idea that the individual played a subsidiary role to the group in the New Testament world. As such, they argued that 'people groups' are the primary object of God's intervention through salvation – often referred to as a 'corporate understanding of salvation'.⁶⁴ Another line of thought was to argue that salvation is neither individualistic nor social, but rather cosmic – often called the apocalyptic reading of Paul. Paul's understanding of salvation is much larger than previously argued: it is God's redemption of the entire cosmos, emphasising God's overcoming of the cosmic powers, sin and death. Both the social and apocalyptic share a concern for the world and emphasize that salvation also included visions of a new community (especially the social reading) and God's establishment of a new just cosmos, free from the enslavement and power of sin and death (apocalyptic reading).

62 Allan A Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 33.

63 Alister E McGrath, A.E, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, (3rd Edition). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 407.

64 Gaventa, *When in Romans*, pp. 27–30.

The second development is an ecumenical one. The conversation surrounding the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) between the Lutheran and Catholic communities renewed interest in salvation metaphors. The critique of the document by the late South African reformed theologian Russel Botman is of particular interest. Drawing from his experience and theology in South Africa, Botman argued that it is impossible to agree on doctrinal issues regarding God's gracious intervention of justification without taking the severe levels of inequality, injustice, and poverty worldwide seriously. In his view, God's act of salvation is uniquely concerned with establishing real justice in real societies. By acknowledging this important biblical theme, he says, it will be unthinkable to agree on a theoretical understanding of justification (and salvation).⁶⁵

Although there has been a definite, nuanced and often complicated shift in the language of salvation, this shift was accompanied by a growing concern for emphasising forms of salvation that are concerned with the establishment of justice, liberation, shalom, flourishing and wholeness of life that is as concerned with our physical space as it is with the salvation of the individual. Thinking about the South African suburb along these lines proves helpful but remarkably challenging. It is not merely about inequalities, but about a structuring of life where quest to fulfil desires by some require death of a death-like life elsewhere. What is presented as wholeness of life relies on perpetuating destructive forces elsewhere, and the salvation proposed looks inward and borders out the community on which this life is dependent. Theologically speaking, it should have been unimaginable that we maintain collective urban ways-of-life that is incongruent with a biblical vision of flourishing and justice that seeks belonging, liberation, and wholeness.

In short, we ought to ask: how is God's justice and peace visibly taking shape in our communities today. Can we speak of salvation as it developed in recent decades if our cities perpetuate structures promising flourishing while it relies, for example, on employment below a living wage for those inhabiting other parts of the city? That is also saying that no form of flourishing can exist without establishing justice and a concern for those on the fringes of suburban 'flourishing'.

65 H Russel Botman, 'Should the Reformed Join In?', *Reformed World*, 55:1 (2002), 12–7.

6 Urban Public Theology for the Suburban Congregation

Indeed, what we propose might sound a 'little sad'. It's highly unlikely that this kind of focus would stir up the 'drama and passion' found in inner cities or informal communities all over the world. However, the suburb is intimately weaved into the landscape of the good city⁶⁶ and thinking through it is vital for any future vision of the city. Also, the historic suburbs will remain a significant part of the housing provision of South Africa, and the attention cannot simply be on building 'new cities'.⁶⁷ So how do we transform them? Perhaps most importantly, the suburbs form the imagination of all society. It functions concretely as the goal of those upwardly mobile, or the reminder of lack for those caught in cycles of poverty.

What then is to be done? Surely more can be said than a mere lament of the soulless nature of the suburb or bemoaning of its place in the unequal structures of our cities? If anything, should public theology not be about our salvific imaginations? Why is it that we remain unable to present a Christian vision of concrete life together that may be a captivating alternative? Why is it that our Christian faith cannot meaningfully speak to perhaps the most important decision of our lives: where we will put down roots? Where will home be?

In the context where the visions of the city are largely formed by the movement of capital, how do we develop Christian visions of space that will be captivating enough and faithful enough to allow those who inhabit the suburbs so desired to allow these spaces to be formed in ways which will restore its relationship with the broader city (and countryside). It becomes a vision of concrete life together that enables those who rely on the 'depletion of resources from poorer urban areas'⁶⁸ to life through the transformation of such suburban space towards what would enable a liveability for a all. In a context where perceptions on the utilization of public space is still deeply informed by the legacy of apartheid,⁶⁹ this transformation of suburban space will require a conscious disruption of of racialised patterns of access to and participation in

66 Caroline Powell and Nthando Mlambo, 'Space, Place and the Church: Fostering a Consciousness and a Theology of Spatial Justice in South African Churches,' *International Journal of Public Theology* 16:1 (2022), 74–88 at 82.

67 Philip Harrison and Alison Todes, 'South Africa Doesn't Need New Cities: It Needs to Focus on Fixing What It's Got' *Moneyweb* (2022), <<https://www.moneyweb.co.za/news/south-africa/south-africa-doesnt-need-new-cities-it-needs-to-focus-on-fixing-what-its-got/>> [accessed 19 September 2022].

68 De Beer, 'Urban South Africa', 254.

69 Ursula Scheidegger, *Transformation from Below? White Suburbia in the Transformation of Apartheid South Africa to Democracy*, (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2015), p. 125.

public space, and a conscious commitment to infrastructure that binds the city together rather than fragments it. In a context where our visions of salvation has been intimately tied with with the formation of space which tears apart and extract life from some for the sake of others, in part this Christian visions of space will have to be born from a public vision drawing from a soteriology that can imagine the life of all.

7 Conclusion

Given the lack of attention with such an explicit engagement with the suburb in urban public theology, the above argument largely set the agenda for what would require more sustained work. Following the line of exploration proposed here would inevitably open up numerous other intersections, but potentially bring those conversations home – quite literally, right where the personal and political become one. The suburb is what gets constructed as a place for the formation of whiteness. The suburban home gets built as place where our gender roles are made concrete. The suburban desire is that which drives consumer culture. And quite important, the suburb is the dominant place from where our theologies are developed. If we know today that we need to develop a consciousness of how our various subjectivities and identities inform our commitment and interpretations – most specifically in those places where it remains invisible – then this structure that ties us to the life of the city, or which we desire to have us tied to the life of the city, should be object of critical engagement. What it presents us with is a vision of salvation which really is not salvation for all, where the life it creates for some, perhaps even for many, requires places of death elsewhere. Can we speak of a liveable city if it is not liveable for all? What would theology look like, what would the questions of urban public theology be, if we consciously think through this place which, we suspect, is the concrete and primary context from which the vast majority of our academic theology is being produced?