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Renting in the informal city: the role of dignity in upgrading backyard dwellings in Cape Town, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, informal rental accommodation constructed in the backyards of formal houses is the fastest growing housing segment. These backyard dwellings (BDs) are makeshift structures made from timber frames, metal sheets or wooden planks. Despite the proliferation of BDs, national and local governments have

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done little to improve the living standards of backyard dwellers. The research uses focus groups, interviews and building surveys to examine the current state of backyard dwellings and identify opportunities and barriers for government interventions. We analyse the barriers to home improvements, highlighting the important role of tenant dignity and landlord-tenant relations. Furthermore, the research discusses the challenges of potential government-led interventions, which could easily fail in the context of resistance, mistrust and anxiety over housing. We present four key considerations that any intervention to upgrade BDs in South Africa or similar rental units in other localities must consider.

Keywords – informal rental housing, backyarding, upgrading, informal housing, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Informal housing is the dominant mode of urbanisation in the global South. In many cities, it provides more accommodation to a rapidly growing population than the public and private sector combined (UN Habitat 2020). Engaging with informal housing practices is critical to improving human wellbeing and promote sustainable urban development, as highlighted in the New Urban Agenda and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 11 specifically sets a target for governments to 'ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums' by 2030.[1] Importantly, the SDGs recognise 'that the dignity of the human person is fundamental' and that 'the 17 SDGs have been carefully embedded in the overarching ethical framework around which they had been designed: dignity. Thus, achieving dignity and achieving the SDGs are equivalent, inextricable concepts' (United Nations 2017: 7). Further, many countries, including South Africa, have written such language regarding adequate and dignified housing for all into their constitutions, policies or laws. However, big challenges and knowledge gaps remain regarding how this can be achieved (Gouverneur 2014; Deboulet 2016; Kamalipour & Dovey 2020). This article considers informal backyard housing in South Africa to explore the potential and challenges of government interventions to promote dignified housing for all. It interrogates the specific physical, socio-spatial and regulatory drivers of backyard housing to argue that understanding the role of dignity is crucial to develop appropriate and sustainable upgrading interventions.

While a large body of research and policy analysis exists on upgrading of informal housing in Africa and elsewhere (Abbott 2002; Beardsley & Werthmann 2008; Satterthwaite 2012; Turok & Borel-Saladin 2016; Islanda 2020; Scheba & Turok 2020; UN Habitat 2020), we argue that it overlooks an underlying factor that those living in informality face: dignity. We find that dignity plays an important role in shaping upgrading interventions, especially in the context of informally constructed secondary dwellings, which is a growing phenomenon in cities of the South and North (UN Habitat 2003; Baqai & Ward 2020; Scheba & Turok 2020; Shrestha *et al.* 2021). While upgrades in this sector could improve the material living situation of tenants, they may fail to

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address the underlying social relations that constitute human dignity, therefore perpetuating inadequate living conditions. By providing a deeper understanding of the socio-spatial conditions and drivers of backyard rental accommodation, we aim to point out the key physical, infrastructure, health and safety issues that potential upgrading interventions need to address and how these challenges are inextricably linked to dignity. In addition to improving the material qualities of the dwelling, we argue that any upgrading intervention must tackle the complex landlord-tenant relationships to achieve dignified housing. While our conclusions are more readily applied to this informal housing segment, they do suggest the need for a closer look at the role of dignity in shaping living conditions among informal residents more broadly.

The remainder of the paper will proceed as follows. The next section discusses existing scholarship and how it has overlooked the role of dignity followed by a discussion of the international, South African and local Cape Town policy contexts of informal housing. We then outline the qualitative methodology employed followed by findings. We conclude by exploring potential design interventions and a discussion of their implications.

INFORMAL BACKYARD DWELLINGS AND DIGNITY

Informal housing, most often in the form of large informal settlements or slum areas, tends to be synonymous with a lack of dignity.[2] However, in this paper we specifically consider the unique challenges to dignity that emerge from renting an informally constructed dwelling in the backyard of someone else's formal home (see Figure 1), or informal backyard dwellings (BDs). This type of housing is the fastest growing form of housing in South Africa (Brueckner *et al.* 2019) and is also common in places as diverse as Chile, Haiti, India, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Thailand and Australia (UN Habitat 2003; Baqai & Ward 2020; Shrestha *et al.* 2021). More generally, renting of small dwellings from small-scale landlords in poorer, neglected neighbourhoods is common in Africa, including urban Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria.

BDs create extra accommodation for family, friends and/or tenants and provide an important income stream for the landlord (Banks 2007; Lemanski 2009; Gardner & Rubin 2017). They comprise dwellings of various quality, ranging from rudimentary 'shacks' to more robust brick and mortar structures. While the latter have seen considerable growth in recent years (Scheba & Turok 2020), the vast majority are still low-quality dwellings made of timber-frames and iron/zinc metal sheets (so-called shacks) or wooden structures (so-called 'Wendy houses'). Almost one seventh of the entire South African population live in BDs, with the proportion significantly higher in urban areas (Brueckner *et al.* 2019). Those living in BDs tend to have improved access to services (such as clean water, sanitation and electricity) and better access to urban opportunities than residents located in peripheral informal settlements. Given that the main house in the yard is connected to piped water, electricity, rubbish collection and improved sanitation facilities, BDs can more easily access these

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Figure 1. Urban landscape with mix of formal housing and backyard dwellings.

services than those in informal settlements (Morange 2002; Lemanski 2009; Shapurjee & Charlton 2013; Brueckner *et al.* 2019). This suggests that for many, it is a positive choice to live in a BD because it improves upon other informal living options (Turok & Borel-Saladin 2016).

However, BDs are also associated with a lack of safety and security (Lemanski 2009; Turok & Borel-Saladin 2016), challenges regarding increasing rents, and difficult negotiations with landlord and other tenants about accessing services (Lategan *et al.* 2020, see Table I in their publication for a summary). Importantly, a high density of shacks made of highly flammable material alongside illegal connections to electricity and more people cooking over an open flame in one yard all contribute to a greater chance of fire that can spread from one BD to another (Tshangana 2013; Zweig 2015). The inadequate material conditions of most BD dwellings pose serious health risks to tenants, although there is a surprising lack of research regarding health (Lategan *et al.* 2020).

While limited resources and the stopgap[3] nature of BDs are key reasons preventing people from investing in their BDs, we find that questions of dignity (especially those driven by relations with the landlord) further discourage backyarders from making improvements to their BDs even when they have the desire for and/or the means to make such changes. While a number of studies have investigated the ways in which informality undermines dignity due to a lack of privacy, lack of access to land, overcrowding, etc. (Bryant 2008; Corburn & Karanja 2016; Oni-Jimoh *et al.* 2018), this study is the first to investigate the role of dignity in preventing improved living conditions among those living in BDs. This is especially important given the large number of people in South Africa living in BDs and those living in rental units in poor neighbourhoods throughout the Global South.

We follow Marriam-Webster's definition of dignity: 'the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed'. How exactly can the conditions of BDs undermine dignity beyond the ways in which informality undermines dignity, as noted previously? The typical backyarder tends to live in a one-room shack that is about $4\,m^2$ small. They often share the backyard with at least one other shack. While those living in informal settlements face the same issues of overcrowding, lack of privacy and space, health and security risks, we find below that backyard dwellers are directly affected by their relationship with

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the landlord, who has considerable control over the backyard space. Often the landlord lives in the main house on the property and is thus very present in a backyard resident's life (Brown-Luthango 2021). Our respondents indicated that the landlord can see when those in the BDs come and go, when they do or do not go to work, how they spend their money (what items they carry into their homes), and who visits them at home. Even if a landlord does not actively monitor, the knowledge that the landlord is present can induce a feeling of being monitored. This feeling of a lack of independence, control and privacy could potentially undermine dignity in an entirely different way that compounds the lack of dignity that comes from living in informality (Bryant 2008). We seek to explore this possibility through an in-depth study of BDs in Cape Town, South Africa.

THE POLICY CONTEXT: INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND LOCAL

Informal settlements are diverse and dynamic places, where residents incrementally improve, extend and change their homes and environments, often over multiple generations (Gouverneur 2014; Deboulet 2016; Kamalipour & Dovey 2020). Global and national policies increasingly commit governments to informal settlements upgrading (UN Habitat 2020). At the same time, there are countless community and non-governmental organisations that aim to support governments in designing or implementing upgrading interventions[4] from the bottom up. Despite progress, governments' engagements with informal housing have been uneven and ambiguous (Deboulet 2016; UN Habitat 2020). United Nations Habitat (2014) set out seven ways in which governments have typically responded to informal housing, whereas the sub-sector of informal rental housing has remained largely neglected (Baqai & Ward 2020; Scheba & Turok 2020). South Africa is a typical example of this neglect.

The national government developed the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme; however, this excluded backyard structures as they sit on 'formal' plots of land. The national Department of Human Settlements has not formulated, let alone implement an equivalent programme for this sector (Gardner & Rubin 2017), despite the fact that backyard dwellings contribute to key urban policy objectives, as outlined in the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (Republic of South Africa 2013): spatial efficiency, spatial sustainability, spatial justice and spatial resilience. BDs are certainly an efficient use of space (Figure 2), they contribute to social and economic sustainability and resilience of local areas through increasing density and viability of services, employment and facilities; and BDs provide urgently required affordable rental accommodation.

The National Department of Human Settlements has recognised the potential of informal backyard rental housing, even developing a preliminary policy in 2016 (NDHS 2016). National and local government departments also launched a limited number of pilot projects and programmes (Shapurjee & Charlton 2013; Felix 2014; Rubin & Charlton 2019), but the vast majority of

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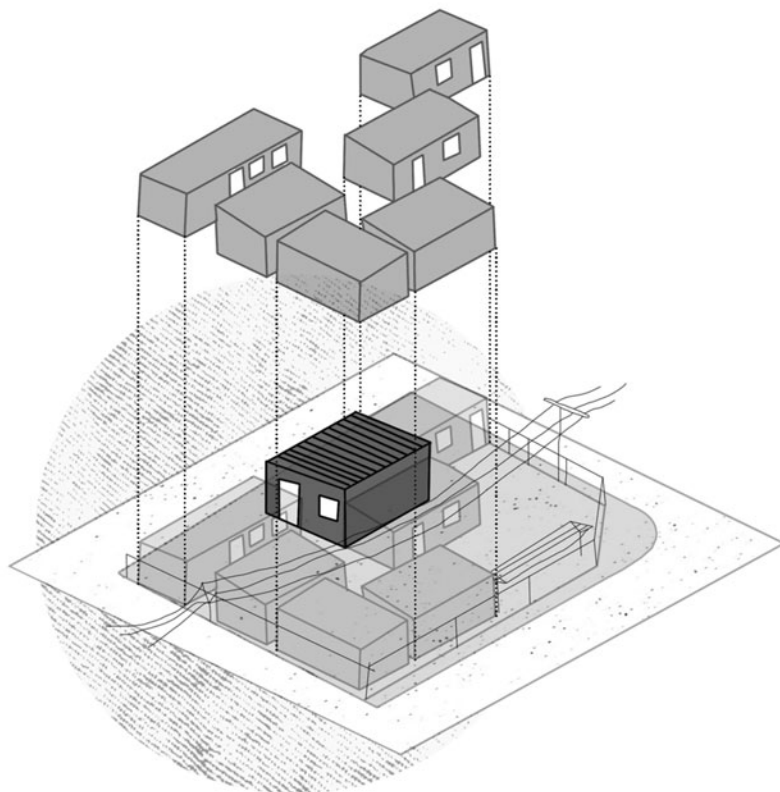

Figure 2. Diagram to illustrate densification of site with additional housing installed into the backyard plot surrounding the formal house.

all BDs continue to be poorly constructed and fall well below acceptable standards for quality, comfort or safety (Gardner & Rubin 2017; HSRC 2019; Isandla 2020; Lategan *et al.* 2020). Similarly, provincial governments have largely neglected the backyard rental sector in their housing policies and programmes, although there has been growing interest more recently, especially in the (potential) role of provincial rental tribunals in mediating tenant–landlord conflicts (HSRC 2019; Isandla 2021). In addition to health and safety risks, planners are concerned that the informal growth of BDs has led to densification of formal settlement areas and exerts a strain on existing infrastructure and public services (HSRC 2019; Isandla 2021).

An important aspect of the limited success of policy developments and pilot projects is the critical role of the local municipality. Local municipalities have crucial responsibilities regarding planning, building control and service delivery that affect the quality and quantity of backyard dwellings (HSRC 2019; Isandla 2021). The City of Cape Town has spearheaded some innovations regarding

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this sector and has officially recognised the important contribution of the backyard rental sector to affordable housing, urban densification and economic development (City of Cape Town 2021). The City has launched various research and pilot initiatives to explore how building regulations and procedures can be adapted to formalise backyard rental accommodation, and specifically to incentivise and support the growth of higher-density brick and mortar flats, or what is referred to as small-scale rental accommodation (City of Cape Town 2021). At the same time, the City has provided basic services to some backyard dwellings located on council-owned property, although these pilot projects have received mixed responses (HSRC 2019). While these policy developments are an important step in the right direction, questions remain regarding what kind of interventions are required for lower-quality backyard dwellings on privately owned land, which is the dominant form of backyarding in South Africa (Brueckner *et al.* 2019; HSRC 2019). Here the common problems of poor thermal control (too hot in summer, too cold in winter, draughty), structural instability, limited space, increased fire risk, poor sanitation and hazardous materials are most prevalent (Figure 3).

Developing effective and scalable interventions for this sector requires an understanding of the complex socio-spatial conditions and relationships underlying informal backyard rental dwellings. The living conditions of backyard tenants considerably depend on the relationship with the landlord, which are influenced by whether the tenant is a family member or stranger, the economic conditions of landlord and tenant, socio-political context of the settlement and broader trends in the city and country (Morange 2002; Bank 2007; Lemanski 2009; Scheba & Turok 2020).

The review of both scholarly and policy literature has illustrated that previous efforts have been insufficient in addressing the needs of backyard tenants. This suggests that we need a better understanding of the challenges backyard dwellers face or what they actually want/need in order to enjoy more dignified and secure livelihoods. We seek to help facilitate more effective support by sharing viewpoints from backyard dwellers themselves about their situation and potential upgrading interventions. What they voice is a concern over dignity.

METHODOLOGY: LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF BD RESIDENTS TO UNDERSTAND CHALLENGES, DIGNITY AND SOLUTIONS

The study is based on data collected in September 2019 in the City of Cape Town, South Africa. We conducted fieldwork[5] in three low-income communities in Cape Town: Delft South (DS), Parkwood (PW) and Beacon Valley (BV). The three communities almost exclusively house black African and coloured populations,[6] are all situated in the urban periphery (Cape Flats[7]) located approximately 20 miles from the city centre, exhibit high levels of poverty, informality and unemployment, and experienced significant densification in past decades through the construction of informal backyard dwellings (Scheba *et al.* 2021).

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Figure 3a/b 'Wendy house' example.

Figure 3c/d. Metal shack example.

While these three communities are broadly similar in terms of socio-economics, they also vary in key ways. First, Delft sits at an important public transportation junction, which makes it appealing to young professionals who need cheap accommodation and an easy commute into the city centre. As such, there is a remarkably high concentration of backyard shacks, probably due to its prime location in the transportation network of the Cape Flats. Delft is also racially and ethnically diverse, made up of black African and coloured residents. The type of backyard housing is quite diverse: beyond the basic corrugated iron and wood shacks that are quite typical, there is a growing number of more robust (cement, bricks, etc.) single and double storey flats given a growing population that is able to afford higher quality flats (Scheba & Turok 2020).

Beacon Valley, a neighbourhood in Mitchells Plain and just a few kilometres south of Delft, represents a less transient and more established neighbourhood

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than dynamic Delft. Beacon Valley is almost exclusively inhabited by coloured residents. The backyard shacks are quite typical and not overly robust and are on a mix of private and council land.

Parkwood is close to the affluent Southern suburbs of Cape Town and is moderately racially diverse, but it is a majority coloured area. The shacks in Parkwood, like Beacon Valley, are on a mix of private and council land. Unlike the other locations, Parkwood has been part of a municipal pilot programme for shacks on council-owned land in which Cape Town Municipality has provided basic infrastructure specifically for backyard shacks including toilet facilities, drinking water access and meters, and electricity access and meters.

Our interdisciplinary (social sciences and architecture) approach informs our diverse set of methods, which includes interviews, focus groups and architectural surveys/site visits. Using these methods, we seek to use the viewpoints and lived experiences of key stakeholders (backyard dwellers and local civil society leaders) to better understand problems and solutions for the difficult living conditions that backyarders in Cape Town face. The aim of the fieldwork was to understand, from the perspective of those living in BDs, the challenges, opportunities and barriers to upgrading of backyard shacks, both historically and contemporarily.

In each of the three neighbourhoods (DS, PW and BV) we conducted one focus group[8] discussion with 8–11 participants. Interviews were also conducted with one NGO or grassroot organisation leader in each location that is engaged in housing struggles in the local community (these leaders did not differ substantially in terms of age, race, gender or socio-economics relative to focus group participants). We selected focus groups because they offer a setting in which respondents can actively discuss issues and build on one another's experiences – which is not possible with only interviews – to create a clearer picture of the BD community's experiences, challenges and desired solutions. In addition to the focus groups, we interviewed three tenants of BDs (one was the community leader and others were recruited in the same manner as the focus group participants) in each community to better understand their perspective on their past and current living conditions, the nature of changes desired and thoughts on improving BDs. Both the focus groups and interviews were roughly equally divided between men and women. The age range of our participants was 18–65 with an average age of 35. In total, the research involved 44 respondents across the three communities.

We undertook architectural surveys to record the existing conditions of BDs and to trace longitudinal physical changes or upgrades made to BDs over time (this was done by asking respondents for dates of residency and for any upgrades during their time; therefore, the longitudinal aspect is simply respondent reporting from memory). We invited participants from each focus group to take part in the architectural survey and conducted them with three from each focus group. Photographic surveys of a selection of backyard shacks and buildings in each of the three case-study areas were conducted and architectural survey drawings were made (in our field journals) of the house and the material

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conditions of the shacks and buildings recorded. This documentation, some of which is reproduced in the figures in this article, was used to give the research team a first-hand account of conditions and efforts at upgrading. The team surveyed and coded the images based on overall conditions and presence and degree of upgrades. We then used these data to structure the discussion and reach the conclusions in the 'Social context of upgrades and potential for design interventions' section below. This information supplemented focus groups reports of very few upgrades and confirmed, in the few we investigated, that upgrades are rare.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit all participants: using contacts the research team had from previous research in each location, we contacted local leaders among BD residents, who then recruited other BD residents to participate in the focus groups. We therefore recruited respondents in each location that could be conveniently obtained, but also asked the local leaders to recruit respondents of varying socio-economics, age, race and gender. Our sample is not representative, but is potentially composed of those that are more connected and/or more involved in issues surrounding BDs, which is precisely the type of highly informed respondents we were hoping to recruit as they could probably more easily articulate and discuss the issues that most BD residents face.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We first explore the status of low-cost backyard dwellings, looking at the contemporary context and the issues residents see as germane and in need of improvement. Understanding these is the first step in designing more effective and appropriate interventions. We find that, in line with past research, respondents are most concerned with access to basic services, health and safety, which is considerably influenced by the landlord–tenant relationship. We break with past research, however, in that our respondents link these challenges to the issue of dignity, which we highlight here as an important and yet overlooked driver of poor living conditions.

We then examine what people want with respect to their physical homes and explore the potential future design qualities for BD accommodation. We then turn to the challenges and barriers to upgrading BDs. We find that some residents are hesitant about any kind of government upgrades due to fears that this would disqualify them from receiving a free-standing, government-built house. Others are worried about the possible rent increase and potential displacement caused by upgrading interventions. Throughout this discussion we centre our analysis on backyard dwellers' voices. As such, we provide a number of quotes from our focus groups and interviews. We identify focus group respondents with codes that identify the respondent's community (DS = Delft South, PW = Parkwood, BV = Beacon Valley) and the individual respondent with their anonymised respondent number (i.e. DS1). When quoting key stakeholder interviews, we indicate 'interviewee' along the lines of 'BV-interviewee'.

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What are the current conditions and challenges?

Services, health and safety

Given past research, it is not surprising that our respondents consistently highlight their limited access to services and health and safety risks. However, it is more than simply the limited or erratic electricity or unhealthy living conditions that are problems in and of themselves, but these individuals' lack of these basic needs negatively impacts their dignity, which is linked to their relationship with their landlord.

With regards to services, access to toilets, electricity and water can be cut off by the landlord often as a tool to ensure payment of rent but often simply because the landlord has gone to sleep or left for the day and turned off the water and electricity or locked the door to the main house, which often houses the only toilet on the compound. However, these limitations on access are not always circumstantial, as one respondent indicated: '[The landlord] put [the electricity] off herself. She said, no, it's Eskom [the national electricity provider]. Why Eskom? And the streetlight is burning … and we pay her!' (BV7). Even when the landlord is home and the rent has been paid, those in BDs can be cut off. Thus, they have to schedule cooking, toilet usage, etc. around the landlord's (often unpredictable) schedule.

Aside from inadequate service access, backyard dwellers expressed concerns over the poor standard of their structures. The main shortcomings identified were leaks, draughts, extreme internal temperatures, poor materials, structural instability, fire risks and poor sanitation ('seeping sewage'). They especially expressed anxiety over TB, children contracting flu, for example 'there's a high volume of TB. Yes there's a lot of health risks … high risk of TB … we got a certain struggle with sewage … it's always wet there … children constantly end up in hospital. They are not safe' (DS7). Given these issues were more directly connected to the structures themselves and less to the landlord in particular, the health challenges identified by our respondents seem to be driven by considerations and issues common to all those living in informality and not necessarily unique to BDs.

In addition to health, safety was another major concern. The growth of backyard shacks has predominantly occurred in the urban periphery of Cape Town, particularly in the Cape Flats (Scheba *et al.* 2021). Given the high crime and murder rates in this part of the city (at the time of the fieldwork, Cape Town was ranked the 8th most violent city in the world with a murder rate of 68.3 per 100,000 people; see BusinessTech 2021), it is perhaps unsurprising that safety and security was a major issue for residents. The design and construction of BDs contribute to anxiety and worries of elevated exposure to crime and violent danger, especially as crime does not respect the boundaries of the backyard: 'There's a lot of danger also concerning the backyard' (PW10) … 'Yes because the gangsters when they fight, they jump over the fence, now you in the yard. And maybe your door is open they now run into your house'

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(PW7).[9] Living in informality, even in a formal neighbourhood, presents risks because BDs are poorly constructed and not fully protected from the outside, whether it is the elements or other people.

In addition, fire risk due to inadequate or lack of proper electricity connection is another safety hazard. People with no electricity often rely on candles, which can set the highly flammable materials alight: 'It's not nice living without electricity, candle is very dangerous. I've 4 kids … and the 3-year-old one, you can't trust him with candles, because they like to experiment with the candles. Anything can happen with the candle. See there, my parent's house burnt through a candle and they couldn't restore anything there until recently' (BV1). Importantly, as with others living in informal settlements, one's health and survival in the backyard depend on others in the yard or neighbourhood.

Therefore, while our research confirms the important challenges of services, health and security that past research has identified among those living in informality generally (Beardsley & Werthmann 2008; Mutisya & Yarime 2011) and living in BDs specifically (Turok & Borel-Saladin 2016; Lategan *et al.* 2020), our respondents reveal the important role of dignity, which we explore further below.

Dignity and access to services

Through seeking to better understand the BD community's views on the nature and quality of existing accommodation, we noted a persistent and recurrent narrative on issues related to dignity, privacy and autonomy. One of the key findings of the research is the importance of human dignity to the BD community and how poorly the current situation serves to protect or support human dignity. For our respondents, a lack of dignity is associated with sub-standard conditions of their dwellings, limited access to basic services as well as challenging relations with their landlords. Respondents indicated that they lack a sense of freedom and that any reasonable person would not want to spend more than one night in a backyard shack and not only because of the tight space but because 'you are not free' (DR9) to move and do as one pleases. Our respondents indicated that when they have to cross the backyard and pass the windows of the landlord's house, they often encounter surveillance by the landlord: 'if you are staying [in a BD], you don't have privacy. If you [are] going out, and she [the landlady] saw you going at the back door she go and stand at the door and watch which way I'm going' (DV9). Landlords sometimes would even check the shopping bags of tenants to see what they were purchasing and use this to hold them account for monthly rent payments (e.g. if the tenant can buy certain items at the shops, then why are they unable to pay rent). More specifically, DV7 recounted that 'I had to conceal my groceries … [the landlord] would be in them, sitting on top of it. … So it's not nice because you don't want to say to the next person 'I don't have this and I don't have that', you understand?' The behaviour of landlords was identified as the key contributor

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to their loss of dignity, with some landlords unnecessarily intervening in the daily activities and lifestyles of tenants such that they felt this unnecessarily revealed their personal socio-economic conditions.

The lack of dignity was among the most consistent and important issues across all our focus groups and interviews, but how does it relate to accessing services specifically? The landlord not only monitored daily movements – Brown-Luthango (2021) also found this to be the case[10] – but also monitored the use of services. As noted above, landlords would often cut access to toilets, water and electricity in order to minimise utility bills, but backyard residents were insufficiently consulted about these cuts, or efforts to conserve, or timing of cuts: 'the infrastructure, the toilet issue, the tap issue, the electricity box issue, that is where it's terrible … when the landlord is out and locked their house, you … have to [look] somewhere else for toilet' (DS1). Further, 'Landlords tend to be nasty and threaten with eviction at any time, and restrict access to water and electricity' (BV-Interviewee). The cutting of access to services, because these services are accessed via the main house (though often there are toilets in the backyard), were entirely left to the whims of the landlord.

The respondents appreciate that they can immediately tap into these services given they are situated on a plot that has these services; however, landlords often prevent full and needed access despite the backyard resident having paid their rent and utilities. In return for accessing basic services, backyard residents usually contribute to monthly electricity and water costs, without knowing the exact amount spent by the landlord. This provides the landlord some leeway to avoid responsibility when issues arise with the utilities (e.g. blame the provider). This can lead to exploitation, as is the case when the landlord charges more than backyard dwellers' actual usage of utilities or the landlord cuts utilities off to the backyard shack despite the resident having paid.

The lack of control over access to basic services signifies, for our respondents, a problematic human condition that is directly related and influenced by their lack of negotiating power vis-a-vis the landlord and the complex social relations of the BD. Some of our respondents living in BDs became hopeless and often depressed due to the way their day-to-day lives become dependent on and suffer from living on someone else's property in informality: 'I have suffered and I'm still suffering from depression … because on a daily basis you basically beat yourself down because you can't provide, you can't assist … it's just never ending' (BV4).

Social context of upgrades and potential for design interventions

We found above that the BD structure is a key driver behind health and safety concerns; therefore, we now turn to possible structural responses that could address these concerns and once again we focus on what backyard residents themselves want. However, while the BD structures themselves are the main source of health and security problems, relationships to landlords, control over one's own housing situation, and thus dignity are key barriers to structure upgrades that could address these problems.

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The limited and small changes observed to many BD structures is somewhat different to the improvements occurring to informal housing elsewhere in the South (Deboulet 2016; Kamalipour & Dovey 2020). Even when a tenant had been resident for years, sometimes decades, the dwellings remained unchanged. Participants in the focus groups reported only very few instances of upgrades or improvements that they or their landlord made, which we also observed during our site visits (see Figure 5). Figure 4 illustrates how the basic structure of one BD was not upgraded since construction (no efforts at insulation or reinforcement) and yet some efforts to upgrade the kitchen area with additional plugs and electrical appliances were made (though the safety of these upgrades is questionable).

These physical changes were generally small attempts at improving the quality of the dwelling or access to basic infrastructure. Respondents across all focus groups expressed that they simply lacked the funds to upgrade their BDs. In addition to the poverty of the residents, the survival conditions of landlords limits upgrades because they simply need all the extra money generated from the rental business to pay for necessary subsistence costs such as food, education, transport and so forth (Scheba & Turok 2020). Aside from access to resources, however, our research uncovered two additional aspects that influenced whether or not backyard dwellings were upgraded: ownership/tenure security and relationship between tenant and the landlord.

Given that backyard tenants rent from the landlord, it is not surprising that they do not invest large sums of money into their structures. Even if they stay in the same yard for many years, they are aware that the landlord owns the place and can ultimately evict them. Investments are therefore limited to small upgrades to the dwelling that immediately improve the living conditions for the tenant. This was especially the case for more transient backyard residents. BD residents tend to be quite transient: 'especially backyarders they here now and tomorrow they not, they live here for 3 weeks and then they not … they be lucky living on the same property for more than 10 years but it's not a common thing because backyarders move consistently up and down' (BV11).

There were, however, cases where backyard dwellers attempted to secure a more permanent and higher quality living situation. They were reportedly prevented by landlords from investing in their dwelling and infrastructure. For example, 'My husband was blessed with a toilet and basin, and we wanted to install them, but the landlady would not allow us to do that' (BV7). Possible reasons for the landlord's resistance include a threat of loss of power and control over tenant's resource access and use. Separate utility connections provide tenants with more transparency and control over the use of basic services, which can be a key tool for the landlord to generate income. Thus, the landlord's greater authority and need for income undermines backyard residents' ability to improve their living conditions, which further undermines dignity. At the same time, investments in the dwelling and infrastructure would increase tenant's claim to the space, making it more difficult to evict and replace them in the future.

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Figure 4a. Interior of backyard dwelling.

Figure 4b. Kitchen area in backyard dwelling.

The situation differed for backyard dwellers renting from immediate family members, who demonstrated that under a situation of tenure security and sense of collective ownership, investments are more likely. Characterised by longer tenancies and more durable relationships, familial relationships often provided more enabling conditions for tenant-led upgrades to the structure and service provision; for example: 'I have put in a toilet, a basin; I´ve water. I

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Figure 5a. Upgraded shack exterior.

Figure 5b. Improved shack exterior.

linked up the electricity. But that was an agreement [because I'm] living with family' (BV4). Yet even in those situations of permanency and tenure security, the architectural survey recorded that improvements were modest and the quality of accommodation would still fall well below reasonable standards. Only few BDs surveyed had been considerably extended, with improvements such as the use of more solid building materials, distinct kitchen areas, bathrooms inside the home, and separate spaces for bedrooms (see Figure 5).

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Figure 5c. Upgraded shack interior.

Clearly, the evidence provided here suggests that resources for upgrades, while an important issue, is not the only issue preventing upgrading. Landlords and their relationship with tenants also play a key role in undermining dignity and ability to upgrade one's BD.

The serious shortcomings in the material quality of the backyard dwellings, and the challenges of accessing infrastructure, demonstrate the need for solutions to improve backyard dwellers' living conditions. Design interventions that improve the quality of dwellings and basic services could ameliorate major physical and mental health concerns and contribute to improved well-being (Wekerle & Whitzman 1995; Colquhoun 2004; Rice 2019). To explore what changes the residents would like to see made, we asked focus group participants: 'If you can choose one thing about your current home, what would you change?' The respondents focused on repairing leaking roofs, adding dedicated electricity supplies and additional sanitation infrastructure. Space and overcrowding (i.e. the size of the dwelling) are also concerns for many. Participants therefore expressed a desire to improve their living standards to meet basic human needs.

Backyarders on council-owned land

The researcher team also asked the BD community for any examples of government-led upgrades to their shacks. As mentioned above, the City's programme of extending basic services only applies to backyard dwellers living in the backyard of council-owned flats, which do not exist in Delft or (in large amounts in) Beacon Valley. In contrast, backyard dwellers in Parkwood have participated in and benefited from the city's programme. Many backyard households received their own pre-paid electricity meter, water meter[11] with access to 350 kl per day (controlled with an electronic tag) and access to a prefabricated toilet structure including trough and tap (see Figure 6). As one respondent indicated: 'Yes, so

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Figure 6a. Example of water meter installation within backyard area.

like me I've got my own toilet because I'm staying alone in the yard. Then the next neighbour, she got her own toilet with her own tag. She can't use her tag on my thing, because it won't work' (PW11). While this city-led programme has improved the material access to services for some backyard dwellers living on council-owned land, it has also encountered several challenges of implementation, including the disruption of existing tenant–subtenant relationships, power struggles over resource flows, technical difficulties, and unclear and unfunded responsibilities for the maintenance of the facilities (HSRC 2019: vi).

Backyarders on private land

During discussions on the potential for design interventions on backyard dwellings on private land, some participants, especially from Beacon Valley, expressed resistance to any sort of upgrades to their backyard dwellings. For example, BV5 indicated that 'I don't want any improvement; I want to get

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Figure 6b. Shared backyard toilet facility.

out!' and BV4 added, 'If I'm gonna be [in a shack] for the rest of my life, then that's not much improvement.' The motivation behind this seemingly surprising perspective is a clear political demand for one's own house, as this has been a major promise from the nationally ruling party, the African National Congress, since the end of apartheid. Housing became a cornerstone of post-apartheid redress policies, and a socio-economic right enshrined in the constitution (Turok & Scheba 2019). Receiving one's own house is seen as fundamental to gaining citizenship, and as such human dignity (Lemanski 2020). However, there is a decades-long waiting list and some of the participants from Beacon Valley were convinced that a government-led upgrade into backyard structures could squander one's right to a housing opportunity. For example, BV4 and BV11 clearly articulated how most respondents felt about upgrades on private land: 'the thing I fear is that if government is going to improve my living conditions, I feel like that is going to be my 'housing opportunity'; they not gonna build me a house' (BV4). 'I think … [the local government]

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intention is not to build anymore social housing and so in this project it's kind of like an upgrade … their upgrade it's now their housing opportunity' (BV11). While, officially, the government has not stated that they will stop building houses and there is no evidence of backyarders losing their 'housing opportunity' due to upgrades, it was a widespread belief among our respondents. The desire to be given a government house, combined with apprehension for the fickle unpredictability of the housing 'waiting list',[12] meant that BD residents were unwilling to accept government interventions to BDs in case it threatened their housing opportunity.

Other fears about negative consequences of the upgrading intervention relate to heightened state control over infrastructure and backyard space. Residents in Beacon Valley were concerned that government water management devices would restrict their water consumption to 350 kl per household per day, which was deemed inadequate for families. This illustrates the fear over further limitations to the BD residents' ability to control their own life choices; further limiting dignity in addition to limiting the amount of water one can access. While backyard residents in Parkwood accepted this technology, Beacon Valley focus group participants rejected it outright. Other participants stated that their landlords would resist government interventions, because they were afraid that this would bring tenure security to their backyarders, making it difficult to evict them in the future.

Another concern expressed over upgrading interventions was economic in nature. The BD community feared that improvements to BDs would lead to rent increases; as the quality of housing improves, the landlord can therefore increase the price of rent. 'We have to put up and be satisfied with what we got. If you accept the improvement, then your rent also goes up from 800 to 1000 rand a month' (BV6). There is a clear catch-22 here: the BD needs upgrades, but this will increase rent, but residents live in BDs because this is all they can afford and any increase is unacceptable. Further, if shacks were to be improved, upgraded or made more substantial, then they could become more of a target for demolition by the authorities. There is a fear amongst the community that neighbours would inform the local government of more permanent housing, leading to the threat of demolition. 'The [local government] sen[ds] out law enforcements, if you build a structure on Friday, by Monday, the neighbours, they phone law enforcement and law enforcement come out and give your 7 days or 14 days to [demolish the structure]' (P11). Thus, the legal situation partly leads to the context where upgrades are rarely encountered. Arguably, if BDs were legalised and barriers from landlords and economic constraints were removed, then it is likely that more investment and improvements would be made over time (as is evident in other countries).

CONCLUSIONS

As most backyard dwellings are in an unhealthy, unsafe and unsanitary state of construction, there is an urgent need to improve living standards for the

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millions of backyard dwellers who are unable to move to higher quality accommodation. In light of this, there is room for government initiatives to support the upgrading of lower-quality backyard structures to bring them to acceptable standards of living. However, the study makes it clear that successful interventions must be based on a careful understanding of the specific socio-spatial conditions and drivers of backyard rental housing. More specifically, we highlight the importance of the landlord–tenant relationship and how this affects the dignity and living conditions of the tenant, access to basic services, tenure security and sense of ownership of the space.

While upgrading interventions are primarily aimed at improving the material conditions of the backyard dwelling, it is clear from our research that the landlord plays an important role in shaping tenants' living conditions. Addressing the relationship between landlord and tenant, and promoting the rights of both parties, are crucial to ensure human dignity. Upgrading interventions should therefore follow rights-based approaches to urban development, which ensure that both landlords and tenants know their rights and responsibilities, and have access to resources to claim their rights in practice. Provincial rental tribunals could play a stronger role in mediating landlord–tenant conflicts; however, intervening in private backyards is a sensitive issue, especially in the context of informality and considerable mistrust between state and citizens. This shapes backyard residents' perception of any government intervention, which is sometimes viewed as a threat and an attempt to exert increased government control (and thus a further lack of dignity for BD residents) over living space, residents and infrastructure usage. Importantly, any intervention to improve the livelihoods of those living in BDs needs to consider (1) whether or not upgrades are what BD residents want, (2) whether the intervention is taking place on private or public land, (3) relations with the landlord and efforts to improve these relationships and (4) the importance of improving BD residents' dignity through improved self-determination.

First, as noted above, not all research participants wanted upgrades *unless a credible promise can be made that improvements will not hinder their ability to receive a government house*. While the physical needs tend to be quite consistent and clear, whether or not *in situ* improvements are desired is a key first question to be answered prior to any intervention. Any intervention should first survey the local community (not simply backyard residents in general or even backyard residents in a municipality, but specifically at the neighbourhood level; here we echo the call of Turok & Borel-Saladin 2016: 405) that is the target of the intervention to assess needs, desired forms of intervention, and any perceptions of how certain interventions impact receiving further benefits from the state. Tenants' attitudes towards government interventions also depend on whether their structure is on privately or council-owned land.

Second, and closely related, government-initiated upgrades on public land may be more straightforward. The tenants see this as the government property and the government investing in it and thus are less likely to see upgrades as threatening their chance at a house: they are already receiving a housing

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benefit by being on public land, so an upgrade to this is less likely to be seen as a benefit that would prevent them from getting a house. Upgrades on private land may need more creative approaches with regards to legality, financing, maintenance and management but these can be overcome (Isandla 2021), if concerns about losing out on a housing benefit, as noting in item one, can be addressed.

Third, the relationship between the backyard resident and the landlord is key and money and access to services are at the centre of this relationship. Interventions that seek to alleviate monetary pressures on both landlords and backyard residents are needed for this lower segment of the rental market. Government funding for improved infrastructure, access to services and upgrades to the dwellings would help to raise living standards and notions of dignity. However, it is important to note that any subsidy or financial assistance to landlords who have already received a free home from the government is likely to be seen as a double subsidy while the backyard resident is still awaiting their first subsidy (a house of their own). Policy interventions need to avoid producing greater inequality and further concentrating government funds in a few hands.

Fourth, dignity. Any effort that seeks to improve the lives of BDs must directly address dignity rather than ignore it or expect it to improve as living conditions improve. We advise that interventions that seek to upgrade or otherwise improve physical living conditions should also seek to improve social relations to promote human dignity. Following a rights-based approach to upgrading will help address dignity concerns: if backyard residents have access to, for example, a conflict resolution mechanism this gives them added control over their lives and the ability to exert their will in determining their own living conditions. By empowering backyard residents, we can restore dignity that could have positive impacts on livelihoods generally (including mental health) and on willingness to upgrade BDs themselves, which can improve services, health and security directly.

These findings clearly apply to the three neighbourhoods in Cape Town studied here. We also hold that, given the representativeness of these neighbourhoods for urban South Africa, our findings would apply to BDs in other urban centres across the country (with the caveat that neighbourhood-level knowledge and data are necessary for any intervention). Further, the issues surrounding dignity, tenant–landlord relations, and access to services and security are likely to be common for those living in BDs throughout the developing world (for example in Brazil, Haiti and India), and thus can help shed light on considerations necessary for effective interventions to improve living conditions in a diverse set of contexts. And finally, we expect that our findings can shed light on rental accommodation, even that which is not informal or in the backyard, in poor neighbourhoods throughout the continent. Contexts in which small-scale landlords are asset rich, cash poor and ever-present in tenants' lives (whether they live nearby or in the same structure or are actively present), the issues around dignity and landlord–tenant relations are likely to play a key role in tenants' willingness to upgrade and improve their living

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conditions. Therefore, in these types of contexts, which are not uncommon in much of urban Africa, our recommendations to consider dignity, landlord–tenant relations, and associated barriers to upgrades that can improve living conditions are likely to be relevant.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X23000034.

NOTES

1. <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals#sustainable-cities-and-communities>.

2. Though this need not always be the case and we agree with past scholars (e.g. Turok & Borel-Saladin 2016) that informality can be an opportunity for urban development and increased access to infrastructure and services.

3. Though this is not always how BDs are used, see Turok & Borel-Saladin (2016).

4. For more information on one of the biggest networks see <www.sdinet.org>.

5. We received ethical approval from the HSRC in South Africa and University College London in the UK for the study. We also took care to consider our positionality as well as any potential discomfort from respondents. Informed consent and/or verbal permission was granted at every step (including before each photograph was taken). No respondents were photographed.

6. We recognise that racial categories are inherently problematic and contested. In this paper we refer to categories used by StatisticsSA in their population census: black African, coloured, white, Indian/Asian, other/unspecified. 'Coloured' refers to descendants from Khoi and San people and people with multiple heritages

7. The Cape Flats refers to the more peripheral areas of Cape Town, both in the geographic and socio-economic sense, which include 'townships' constructed explicitly for black and coloured populations during apartheid as well as low-income settlements developed as part of SA's housing policy post 1994.

8. See the online appendix for the questions asked in each focus group.

9. The Cape Flats, given its history and continuous socio-economic marginalisation, has been riddled with gang and drug-related violence as various gangs fight over turf and settle scores (Lambrechts 2012). This is a persistent problem that the municipality and other levels of government have failed to successfully address.

10. However, Brown-Luthango (2021) looks at middle class neighbourhoods in Cape Town and finds a more positive relationship between landlord and backyard residents than we find here.

11. These electricity and water meters track household usage. With the drought-related water restrictions in Cape Town, these meters will shut off each day once that allotted 350kl is reached. The meters that the municipality has installed for BDs on council land allow each household on the plot to access 350 kl per day rather than 350 kl for the whole plot. This is managed via key fobs for each household. A resident inserts their fob into the meter, draws water, use the toilet, etc., the meter registers how much was used by that fob, and then the resident removes their fob.

12. While the form of this list has shifted over time and most recently to a 'register', it continues to be referred to as a 'list' by citizens.

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