

THE FLATS

from *The Number* (2004)

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Magadien was among the first generation of teenagers who lived their lives in the half-moon streets and tenement blocks of the post-removals Cape Flats. A mere 15 minutes' drive from the heart of District Six, the new housing estates of Cape Town's hinter-world constituted a different planet. The drearily symmetrical tenement blocks rising from the sand dunes, the distant blue outcroppings of the Peninsula's mountain range, the nameless public spaces filled with strangers: it was the sort of place one comes to in the depths of a troubled sleep. Indeed, Magadien was a guinea pig of the most far-reaching project of spatial engineering in the Western Cape's history, and a casualty of its catastrophic failure.

In pre-removals Cape Town, the boundaries dividing black and white, rich and poor, were porous and haphazard. Tens of thousands of the city's coloured and African populations lived their lives at the foot of Table Mountain, crammed into dense pockets of the inner city and the suburbs. There was the old neighbourhood of District Six, just inland from the harbour, and the Malay district of Bo Kaap, on the slopes of Signal Hill. Beyond these two ghettos, Cape Town's racial demographics were more complicated. The band of suburbs stretching south of the city – from Woodstock to Retreat – was largely white, but pockets of coloureds, some middle-class, others much poorer, were scattered throughout. In suburbs like Plumstead, it was not unusual to find a white middle-class block, with its prim hedges and pretty gardens, adjacent to a coloured working-class street, densely packed, lined with hawkers and shebeens.

Above the inner city, on the slopes of Table Mountain, middle-class coloured families lived in the suburbs of Vredehoek, Oranjezicht and Gardens. Many were involved in the messy, complicated business of passing for white.

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Out in the city's hinterland, the Cape Flats, a vast expanse of scrubland and sand dunes that flanks the city's south-eastern perimeter, hosted a motley collection of outsiders. There was scattered farmland, but the sand dunes and the beach scrub was good for neither grazing nor cultivation. There were recent and older immigrants from the countryside, both African and coloured, banging on the city's doors with more or less success: a peri-urban underclass. And then there was the spill-over from the inner city, the poorest of Cape Town's poor, ejected from the cramped quarters of neighbourhoods like District Six.

It is often said that it took the madness of apartheid, and thus, by implication, the madness of the Afrikaners, to re-engineer Cape Town. It is often English-speaking writers who say these things. In fact, plans to reinvent the city began a decade before the National Party came to power. And the wellsprings of inspiration were to be found not in the obstinacy of a parochial nationalism, but in the giddiness of European modernism; remanufactured Cape Town sprang from the imaginations of cosmopolitans and futurists – English-speakers, all of them.

In the late 1930s, the radical modernism of Le Corbusier was the rage among South Africa's more erudite urban planners. There were circles in which his new book, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, was something of a bible. 'The city of today is dying,' Le Corbusier wrote, 'because it is not constructed geometrically. To build on a clear site is to replace the "accidental" layout of the ground, the only one that exists today, by a formal layout. Otherwise, nothing can save us.' Forty pages on, he declared that 'surgery must be applied to the city centre. Physic must be used elsewhere. We must use the knife ...'

Le Corbusier's South African disciples took out their knives in 1940. The Cape Town city council began planning its Foreshore Project: a grand overhaul of the inner city, the pinnacle of which was to be the construction of a Monumental Approach to Cape Town – a boulevard so wide it would 'take five minutes to cross it in a stiff south-easter' – stretching from the harbour into the heart of the city. The Approach was to be lined with sky-scraping office blocks, welcoming the visitor to South Africa's shores with a dizzying spectacle of the modern. Among the confidential papers in the city council's sketches were plans for three slum clearance projects: District Six, the Malay Quarters and the Dock areas.

The Foreshore Project ended in disaster, but that is another story

for another time. The point is that plans to move coloureds from the inner city had long been in the air by the time the apartheid state got to work. If the reinvention of Cape Town had taken place along pure *Le Corbusian* principles, coloureds would have found themselves in 'vertical cells': tall residential buildings ringing the outskirts of the inner city. But plans seldom travel well, especially to the colonies, where the questions of fear and control are bound to shape the organisation of people and space. White South Africa was not about to build spanking new homes for coloureds in the heart of the city. So, instead, the fate of Cape Town's coloureds was inspired by another modernist idea, that of the Garden City: the coloureds were to be moved to 'the countryside'.

The Garden City was the invention of late-nineteenth-century England, a society which, like mid-twentieth-century South Africa, was wondering what to do with its workers and its industry. The idea was to move both from the city into self-contained satellite towns on the urban periphery. Young working-class lads and lasses were to grow up in quaint, quasi-rural 'clusters', surrounded by lush meadows, vast stretches of common land, and farms.

Mutilated in ways both comic and chilling, this is the idea that animated the building of the cluster-like townships on the Cape Flats. Flying over the Flats on the descent into Cape Town International Airport, you can see the clusters in all their glory: concentric layers of streets, turned in upon themselves, forming tight, hermetic circles, each surrounded by a barren wilderness of no-man's-land.

With some imagination, you can just make out some of the benign intentions behind the original Garden City idea. The notion of the inward-looking cluster was meant to foster a village-like sense of community. Yet driving through Manenberg, or Heideveld or Hanover Park, one feels as if one has been locked into a maze, as if the ghetto is a dense universe. The idea of buttressing the clusters with greenbelts was intended to create open spaces in which the cluster-children would spend their afternoons. But the 'greenbelts' of the Cape Flats are in-traversable scrublands; the kids are locked inside the labyrinth.

From the aeroplane window, you see six-lane highways linking the Flats to the city; in theory, the satellite towns are 15 minutes from downtown. But this is premised on the universality of the family car; the working-class families of the Flats have no cars. Moving in and out of the satellites is a costly expedition.

Most important of all, perhaps, the Flats neighbourhoods were built on the premise that coloureds lived their lives in nuclear families. Indeed, it was a conceit of modernism that the nuclear family was synonymous with the twentieth century, that other forms of kinship were the residues of more primitive times. Yet the coloureds of the inner city had lived their lives in extended families. You saw from Magadien's earliest recollections how the boundaries of the Mekkas' world traced a jagged, invisible circle around Hanover Street: between granny's house, Jackie Oakers's barber shop; St Mark's Cathedral where Annie's brother sang in the choir. The extended family was not just a source of emotional support: it was the structure through which people like the Mekkas negotiated their way into Cape Town's economy.

And so, between 1966 and the early 1980s, tens of thousands of people were wrenched from their lives in the inner city and dumped in the satellites on the edge of town. Extended families were dispersed to all four corners of the Flats, and everybody shared their cramped streets with strangers. The more well-to-do moved into districts of square, free-standing houses: Surrey Estate, Ravensmead, Uitsig. The poor made their new lives on the crescent-shaped streets and in the squat residential buildings of places like Valhalla Park, Bonteheuwel, Manenberg and Heideveld.

The Mekkas found themselves in 12 Daphne Court, Heideveld, a short, wide tenement block surrounded by two others just like it. Together, the three structures formed the walls of an open courtyard. One stepped from one's front door into a common space shared by dozens of families.

The Mekkas' extended family, which had once lived within a small radius around their Cowley Street home, was scattered across Cape Town. The city was a mirage of lights on the evening horizon. In Heideveld itself, life was lived in a sharp dualism between the very private and the very public: within the curtained windows of their cramped flat, and in the courtyards formed by the tenement blocks. There was nothing in between.

And so townships like Heideveld became crowded, public worlds of strangers, effectively severed from the rest of the universe. If the people of the inner city built their lives around extended family networks, the people of the Flats, thrown into an alien world, were to organise their

lives around their immediate neighbours. The whole of life was lived in the tenement courtyards, and each courtyard became a world.

The new neighbourhoods of the Cape Flats were to become deeply insular. Each block came to constitute a territory, its defenders possessive of insiders, aggressive to outsiders. 'The boy from across the road married Annie's sister,' Magadien tells me when he describes the Hanover Park neighbourhood where the Mekkas finally settled. 'And the next-door neighbour married my cousin. My sister is married to Brian van Rooi, who lived at the end of the block. My older daughter is Brian's niece. Few people left our block. And few new people arrived. We have lived our lives together for the last 40 years.'

And yet the people from just three or four blocks away were like foreigners. A few hundred metres from his house, Magadien would find himself in a world of strangers, sometimes indifferent, often hostile. The ghettos of the Flats were divided into hundreds of micro-turfs, each given life by a micro-identity. It was not only about who married whom. It extended to who did business with whom, how one earned a living, and, perhaps most important of all, the politics of the street gangs, which drew entire communities into their wars.