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STATE OF OUR CITIES

# Durban's hijacked buildings: crime, grime and a rapid decline

Residents fear a repeat of the Johannesburg CBD inferno that killed almost 80 people. By **Chris Makhaye**

In Durban's Warwick Junction section, there is a building that has come to be popularly known as Marikana. It is among a set of three three-storey buildings facing three streets and flanked by a busy taxi rank on the other. The buildings have a single forecourt.

The building complex was named after the area in North West where 34 mineworkers, security guards and policemen were killed during a violent strike in 2012.

It is one of those buildings that Durbanites have come to regard as a byword for decrepit. Critics say the whole city will resemble these buildings in the near future if nothing is done to arrest the decline.

Over the past few years, the number of buildings similar to Marikana in the city centre and on the outskirts has grown.

The so-called Marikana building has a chequered past. It was once a disused warehouse. In 1958, it was bought by the then University of Natal, renovated and renamed Marian Buildings, housing black students who were not allowed to stay within the university precinct because of apartheid laws. In later years, it was used and operated by the KZN Ambulance Service.

In December 2020, the eThekweni executive committee approved a report from the municipality's human settlement and infrastructure department that recommended demolishing 80 buildings – that were identified as "problem buildings" and redeveloping them for social housing. The project was expected to cost about R500-million.

Thirty-nine of these 80 buildings are in Mahatma Gandhi Road (formerly Point Road) and others are spread around the city.

Some of these buildings are owned by government entities or by the Department of Public Works; some are owned by Transnet; and others are owned by private individuals and companies.

## Violent crime and illicit solicitation

In early 2022, Durban mayor Mxolisi Kaunda said "tackling problem and dilapidated buildings" was the eThekweni municipality's number one priority.

When Daily Maverick visited the Point and other areas this week, there were many buildings still in decay, with no construction or renovation taking place.

Nearby businesses and hawkers say the Marikana building has become synonymous with the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. There are illegal shebeens, peddlers of all sorts of drugs openly trade their wares and young sex workers ply their trade. There are also people illegally letting rooms for hours at a time.

A security guard stationed across the road from Marikana, who asked not to be named, said he was a guard hired by local shopkeepers to keep pickpockets at bay.

"The thugs rob our clients and run away into that building," he said, pointing to Marikana. "[When] these thugs come around to mill and wait for unsuspecting victims to rob, we chase them away; sometimes we whip them."

Going inside Marikana recently, before



The smell of rubbish is overpowering at the notorious Marikana building in Durban.

Photos: Phumlani Thabethe



Drugs and alcohol are often sold in the area around the Marikana building.



The Marikana building is where passersby, including women, are regularly mugged.

the deadly Johannesburg fire, Daily Maverick found a hive of activity.

In the courtyard, one is greeted with a huge pile of rubbish as children, who look to be between three and six years old, play.

One of the people running an illegal shebeen, who didn't want to be named, grudgingly spoke to Daily Maverick. He said he had bought the space from a homeless man, who had been one of the "pioneers".

"I saw a gap in the market and took it. My customers are mainly people who are coming to take a taxi nearby... They want to have a nip or a quart of beer quickly before they get into the taxi to go home," he said.

## Dirt and decay

Bheki Mokoena, one of the plainclothes security guards patrolling in the CBD, said there were several buildings that, like Marikana, had been taken over by vandals.

"If nothing is done to bring law and order in Durban, the whole city would be like that. The buildings would be deserted by legitimate businesses and the law of the jungle would be the order of the day," he said.

John Forbes, a Durban-based town planner who has been practising for the past 59 years, said several buildings, amenities and other infrastructure had been left to rot.

"The most obvious thing that you see when you drive through the city centre is the dirt and the decay of its buildings. It is clear that

the municipality is not pulling its weight. It employs people who do not have an interest in doing their jobs and managers who are not following things up.

"One could go on and on. Things have got so bad that many people have pulled out of the CBD. The offices have left the city and some of these decaying spaces are being turned into residential areas," Forbes said.

**“If nothing is done to bring law and order in Durban, the ... buildings would be deserted by legitimate businesses and the law of the jungle would be the order of the day”**

## Political intervention

Opposition political parties said they were worried about the proliferation of abandoned and vandalised buildings in the city centre.

Mdu Nkosi, the IFP's chief whip and an

eThekweni executive committee member, said: "Some of the buildings have become a den of criminals. Some of them are owned by the city and some are owned by the provincial government.

"Instead of allowing them to be vandalised or occupied by criminal gangs, we, as the IFP, put up a motion in the city council that these buildings be allocated to families, to people who lost their homes in the recent floods. But our motion was defeated."

eThekweni Municipality told Daily Maverick that it was finally doing something about problem buildings by cleaning them up and eliminating the danger they posed in their current form.

In the Marikana building, for example, in the past few weeks, the city has destroyed the guardhouse that operated as a shebeen, and an adjoining wall. The owner of the shebeen has since erected a marquee and booze sales continue.

Gugu Sisilana, spokesperson for eThekweni Municipality, said: "The city has identified 88 problem buildings currently in the database. There are 23 hijacked buildings where owners have regained control through problem-building intervention. Five problem buildings have been demolished and 15 have been renovated, and 25 problem building owners have come forward and committed themselves [to cleaning the buildings out and removing squatters]," she said. **DM**