



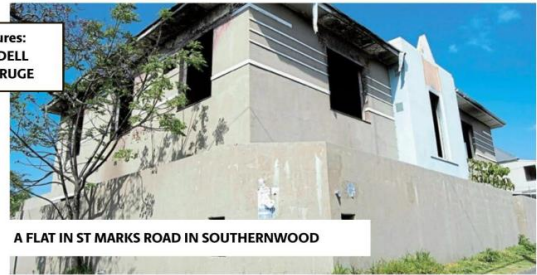
Publication: Saturday Dispatch - CoverStory
Title: Illegal residents survive in appalling conditions
Publish date: 23 Sep 2023
Page: 5

Reach: 14973
AVE: R 149392.79
Author: BOMIKAZI MDIYA

INSIDE BUFFALO CITY'S ABANDONED BUILDINGS



PATRICIA COURT IN QUIGNEY



A FLAT IN ST MARKS ROAD IN SOUTHERNWOOD



A HOUSE IN GOLDSCHMIDT STREET IN QUIGNEY

Pictures:
RANDELL
ROSKRUGE

Illegal residents survive in appalling conditions

Children raised in smelly structures without electricity or water

BOMIKAZI MDIYA

With walls made of cardboard and curtains from rubbish bags, desperate Buffalo City Metro residents with nowhere else to go are occupying dangerous, abandoned and vandalised buildings.

Most buildings are without electricity and water and many have questionable structural integrity.

Residents include young women who fled their homes to escape sexual abuse by family members and an orphaned university student, left homeless and starving after she was one of thousands left in the lurch by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

Some buildings serve as a refuge for drug addicts, who openly smoked tik (methamphetamine) while lying on soiled mattresses.

The stench of human excrement assaults your senses as you enter.

There is no running water, sanitation or electricity. Most occupants are young and raise children in appalling conditions.

The issue of safety in abandoned and hijacked buildings was recently brought to the fore after 77 people died and 88 were injured in a fire in Johannesburg on August 31.

In 2022 there was a fire in the Daily Dispatch's former premises in the CBD. At the time, it was alleged that vagrants lit fires inside the building to keep warm.

This week a Dispatch team, accompanied by Red Alert Security for safety, visited abandoned buildings across the metro and spoke to the people who call them home.

In a house on Goldschmidt Street, Quigney, the walls were stained with smoke. Cupboards were used to create private spaces. Eight unemployed people live there.

Akhona* lives with his partner and their two sons — aged two and an eight-month-old baby.

Akhona, originally from Mooiplaas outside East London, said he had lived in the house for three years.

"It has been three months that we have been without electricity. When we need to use the toilet we use buckets," he said.

He lives by doing odd jobs plumbing and painting.

"I started living here because I could no longer afford to rent. It is not safe but we have established a relationship with the community forum to address the threat," he said.

Akhona said street thugs tried to steal their belongings.

"We look out for one another and always feel safer when everyone is here," he said.

Fezeka*, from Macleantown, said she moved in recently to join her partner.

"I cannot afford to pay rent," she said.

Fezeka lives off babysitting, being a maid, and doing laundry for others.

Stinking raw effluent leaks from Ripple House and flows into Oxford Street.

Most of the roof is missing. Occupants in the upper floors use cardboard to protect themselves from the elements and to create private living spaces.

On the first floor, washing lines are filled with clothes.

Fifteen people are permanent occupants. Some say they have lived there for years.

Catherine* told the Dispatch she had lived there with her partner for four months.

"Living here is not easy. We do not have lights or water. We get drinking water from our neighbours," she said.

The building is charred from the open fires residents make to keep warm during cold nights.

Lulama* left his Mdantsane home because of family conflicts four years ago.

Sharing the same yard, Lorraine and Northdene flats in Belgravia were taken over after it was abandoned almost a decade ago. At least 30 people live in the buildings.

When the Dispatch arrived occupants fled, believing the team members were officials coming to evict them.

Walter Sisulu University student Zizipho*, 25, moved from Dutywa to East London to study but the young woman found herself destitute after NSFAS pulled her funding.

Orphaned at a young age, she had hoped

that life would be better after passing matric. "When NSFAS stopped paying for my tuition I had nowhere to go.

"I want to change my life for the better. I come from a disadvantaged background. When I came here a couple of years ago I just needed a roof over my head," she said.

They have no electricity or water and use buckets to flush the toilets with water from an outside tap.

Mafungwashe* lives there with her two daughters. "I started living here in 2018. I moved from my hometown Ngcobo, and brought my children with me. There are no jobs or opportunities there," she said.

One daughter has a job at a retail outlet and the other is studying.

"We live off grants and the income of the one who works in retail," she said.

The two buildings belong to the Eastern Cape department of public works.

The floor of the now abandoned former post office building in Qonce is still littered with unopened mail.

The floor shows burn marks from fires made by vagrants to keep warm.

The facility stinks of human waste.

We found six men in a tiny room smoking crystal meth.

"I wanted to be closer to town because I am able to make money from piece jobs because work has been so scarce," said Luzuko*.

He is from Dimbaza and for more than 15 years has worked as a labourer in small construction projects.

"I have been staying here for the past two months because I cannot afford to commute daily from the area. When I saw this place vacant I saw an opportunity to stay here," he said.

At Pirates Stadium near Clubview in Qonce, two orphaned sisters, Nomhle* and Olwethu*, are among those living in the abandoned facility's three changing rooms.

Old mattresses are used as doors. In their room there are two-bed units and a fireplace used for cooking and keeping warm.

"We left our home because we needed to escape. Our older male cousin sexually assaulted us and we were afraid of being

raped," said 29-year-old Olwethu.

Both sisters are from KwaMaqoma, formerly Fort Beaufort. "We would be happy if any shelter can take us in. We would like to go back to school and change our lives for the better," said Nomhle, 20.

The Dispatch also visited six other abandoned buildings across the metro. All were clearly being occupied.

One of the abandoned buildings, in St Mark's Road, Southernwood, is owned by the SA Council of Churches.

"Our officials vacated the building for renovation in 2015. People took it over in 2016 and now we have a municipal bill of close to R1m," said the council's provincial leader, Rev Lulama Ntshingwa.

He said they were hoping for a debt write-off so that they could restore the building.

Buffalo City Metro spokesperson Samkelo Ngwenya said they were dealing with about 20 abandoned building cases.

"We are dealing with cases of abandoned buildings. We are in and out of court or attempting to implement bylaws against the owners," he said.

Ngwenya stressed that it was the owners who had abandoned the properties, not the municipality.

"However we have a responsibility to implement our bylaws and take appropriate action in the interest of our citizens. This needs collective efforts from all parties concerned," he said.

Ngwenya also furnished the Dispatch with proof of several court applications and orders aimed at addressing the abandonment and hijacking of buildings.

He said there were many challenges in navigating the law, as was demonstrated in the much-published Currie Street building case.

Occupants of the derelict Currie Court were evicted in January after a court order following a fire that gutted the building three years earlier. There are, once again, people occupying the rooms and businesses operating from the ground floor.

* Names have been changed to protect the identities of those interviewed