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STRUGGLING FOR HOUSING, FROM DC TO JOHANNESBURG

Washington Innerscity Self Help Goes to South Africa

Amanda Huron

Introduction

In the early 1990s, a group of Washington, DC housing activists traveled to Johannesburg to help start the first housing cooperatives in South Africa's history. These activists were from Washington Innerscity Self Help, or WISH, a community-based group organized around issues of concern to low- and moderate-income people. WISH had been founded in 1978, and by the early 1990s, much of its work was directed toward helping low-income tenants purchase their buildings from their landlords and form limited-equity housing cooperatives—collectively owned housing that, because of restrictions placed on resale prices, would be affordable to poor people for years to come. WISH thought limited-equity co-ops were one solution to the displacement and unaffordability wracking Washington, DC. And it also thought these co-ops served as a structure within which people could become involved in their housing, an experiment in small-scale democracy that could pulse out into their surrounding neighborhoods, and enable local people to be empowered in their city at a larger scale. For WISH, housing co-ops represented affordability, collective control, and democratic participation. So when a group of Johannesburg tenants requested WISH's assistance in starting their own housing co-ops in the immediate wake of apartheid, WISH was eager to help.

In the late 1980s, comparisons between Washington, DC and South Africa were easy to find, from the corridors of power to the cities' punk undergrounds. In 1986, Washington, DC's delegate to Congress, Walter E. Fauntroy, declared that his threefold mission was to "Free South Africa, free Haiti, free D.C." (Fauntroy, 1986). A couple years later, DC punk band Soul Side sang, "Nation's capital like little South Africa/Look further on down the road/Every major city pushing

down the poor” (Soul Side, 1989). Anti-apartheid organizing was strong in Washington, DC, where years of daily protests outside the South African embassy provided the opportunity for a wide variety of people to demonstrate against the regime. The similarities between DC and South Africa stirred the public imagination. Both were majority-Black places that had been ruled for years by a powerful White minority, places where democracy was denied and the poor suffered. Although Washingtonians finally won the right to elect their own local representation in 1974, for 100 years the city had been directly ruled by members of Congress from other states—many of whom were outright racists (Fauntroy, 2003; Jaffe & Sherwood, 1994). There was a similarity, too, to the racial geographies of the DC neighborhoods in which WISH concentrated its efforts and the Johannesburg neighborhoods where the tenants who requested WISH’s help lived. In both cities, these were centrally located areas that had been built for Whites, but later abandoned by Whites and by capital. In DC, the abandonment began in the 1950s; in South Africa, the 1980s. By the early 1990s, in some ways the context in the two cities was very different: Johannesburg was suffering continuing disinvestment, while in DC, tenants were concerned about gentrification. But in both cities, home ownership for low-income people of color was equated with stability and with political power.

For WISH, going to South Africa was a political project. Ultimately, I argue, what WISH and its South African counterparts were together constructing was what geographer Cindi Katz (2001) would call a countertopography. A countertopography, for Katz, is a way of drawing lines of connection to understand how similar processes affect different places. Through back-and-forth visits, the Washingtonians and Johannesburgers realized the similarities between their two cities. And in both places, they reckoned with the sometimes impossible difficulty of forging more equal cities in the context of capitalist real estate markets.

The Origins of Washington Inncercity Self Help

Washington, DC in 1978, the year WISH was founded, was a city rife with contradiction. On one hand was massive poverty and disinvestment. 1978 marked the 10-year anniversary of the civil disturbances that exploded in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., which destroyed several of the city’s commercial corridors. Those areas—upper 14th Street NW, 7th Street NW, H Street NE—were still, 10 years later, largely abandoned by capital. And the people who lived in those areas—most of whom were African American—were still largely poor. In fact, many African Americans who could afford to move to the suburbs in the 1970s did so, leaving behind people who could not afford to leave, along with those who were committed to remaining in the city (Gale, 1987). On the other hand, the late 1970s saw surges of reinvestment in the city, and an influx of a more affluent, educated, and whiter populace. In the 1970s, in centrally located

neighborhoods like Mount Pleasant, Dupont Circle, Adams Morgan, and Capitol Hill, housing prices were going up, and homes were being renovated (Gale, 1976, 1977; Henig, 1982). Houses that had been turned into boarding houses for rent to poor people were being converted back to single-family homes, for sale to relatively wealthy families (Zeitzi, 1979). Evictions in the city were increasing on a massive scale, in part because building owners saw the profits to be made in converting rental apartment buildings to condominiums. By 1978, gentrification and displacement filled the news, was on the lips of all the politicians running for office, and was increasingly recognized as a problem that needed to be tackled head-on, through tenant organizing and city policy (Gately, 1978; Huron, 2014; N.a., 1978; Wells, 2013).

It was in this context that Washington Innercity Self Help, or WISH, came into being. In the mid-1970s, Christian Communities Committed to Change (CCCC), a group of 10 DC Catholic parishes, was working to provide services to the city's low-income elderly. When those involved with CCCC realized that what was needed to create change was not services but self-advocacy among the poor, they reached out to other churches to start something new (WISH Housing Development Program (Revised—January 1987), 1987–1994). Ultimately, a group of about 40 DC churches worked together to found WISH in 1978 (Articles of Incorporation of Washington Innercity Self Help, Inc., 1978–1982; W.I.S.H. Washington Innercity Self Help 10th Anniversary 8th Community Congress, 1988). WISH's original geographic focus was the north central section of Washington, DC, including the neighborhoods of Columbia Heights, Shaw, and Dupont Circle East: neighborhoods that were just at the edge of the revitalization activity (WISH Housing Development Program (Revised—January 1987), 1987–1994). WISH was founded with just three staff members; over the course of its first 10 years of existence, the number of staff members ranged from just one to four (W.I.S.H. Washington Innercity Self Help 10th Anniversary 8th Community Congress, 1988). The staff's role was to facilitate poor people's ability to take collective action to solve their own problems. WISH's power was in its membership, which was made up mostly of low- and moderate-income African American and Latino residents of its target areas. In an internal document, the organization summed up its mission neatly: "W.I.S.H. views its role as a vehicle to bring poor people together so that they can collectively determine their problems and collectively achieve the solution" (Community Economic Development—Washington Innercity Self Help (W.I.S.H.), n.d.).

The organization strived for democratic control from below. To that end, it held an annual congress to elect new board members, report on accomplishments from the past year, and pass resolutions for the upcoming year. Its first annual congress was held one Saturday in the spring of 1980, in the Sacred Heart School, which was affiliated with the Shrine of the Sacred Heart Church, one of the 40 founding churches.¹ The membership considered 27 separate resolutions at

the day-long meeting, which taken together highlight the breadth of the group's work. Sixteen of the resolutions dealt directly with housing concerns, seven resolutions addressed issues of concern to the elderly, one resolution dealt with harassment of Latinos by DC police and the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), one addressed the need for jobs for youth, and another dealt with the need for credit unions as an antidote to the lack of financing available in poor neighborhoods. Most of the resolutions were translated in the written program into Spanish, highlighting WISH's concern for including Latino residents, just as the wave of Central American refugees who would pour into the city over the course of the 1980s was beginning to swell. Here, too, we see the beginnings of WISH's interest in cooperative housing. A resolution on "Tenant Management and Ownership" states that "large numbers of tenants are thinking seriously of buying their apartment buildings," and that WISH resolved to provide organizing assistance to tenants' associations that wished to purchase their homes.²

An examination of the resolutions passed by the WISH membership at its annual congresses gives a sense of how the concerns of the WISH membership evolved over the 1980s. Although the membership was concerned with a wide range of issues, from public transportation access to public education, it increasingly focused on questions of affordable housing and displacement.³ Displacement had been a major concern from the very beginning. A few years after its founding, WISH explained its focus on displacement this way:

One of the most dangerous and threatening issues to face our target area and all of Washington, D.C. is the displacement of Blacks, Latinos, and poor Whites. Indeed, that is the issue that brought the Sponsoring Committee [of churches] together in the first place and is the issue that holds new emerging leadership together now. Our area is made more vulnerable by the fact that most of our people are renters rather than homeowners. . . . Politicians, news reporters, developers, and ordinary citizens see the massive possible turnover of our city both racially and economically.⁴

WISH fought displacement by working to enable low-income tenants' access to safe, affordable housing in their neighborhoods. Examination of just a single year of WISH's work reveals an astonishing array of accomplishments in terms of supporting low-income tenants. Its achievements in one year, 1982, included the following: it stopped nine illegal condominium conversion attempts; helped pass a new city law, which required an owner/developer to get the agreement of at least 51% of tenants to convert a rental building to condominiums, and also guaranteed lifetime tenancy for senior tenants; stopped more than 300 evictions; won \$300,000 for tenants who had been illegally overcharged rents; created or helped develop 100 tenants' associations; won 70 agreements by landlords to make repairs, including major repairs in 60 of the buildings (these were large buildings,

with 30–450 units each); demanded that landlords of the 10 worst buildings identified by the WISH Slumlord Coalition be prosecuted unless repairs were made (in the end, three of the landlords were prosecuted, four brought their buildings up to code, and three of the buildings were repaired by the city); helped write and pass a new rent control law for the city; won an agreement to rehab 3500 14th Street NW, a building of more than 250 units, without evicting tenants; helped 29 WISH members become qualified to purchase one of 53 newly rehabilitated units in Columbia Heights; helped get emergency heat for several hundred people over the winter; through the WISH Senior Housing Coalition, won air conditioning in four of the buildings in which it organized, and security systems in all 14 buildings in which it organized; and through the WISH Homecare Coalition, won \$400,000 in additional funds from the city council for home aid services for elderly and handicapped people. Finally, as of 1982, WISH was working with the Metropolitan Washington Planning and Housing Association and the Southern Columbia Heights Tenants Union to help seven tenants' associations buy their buildings and convert them to limited-equity housing cooperatives.⁵ Clearly, WISH's work ranged over a wide variety of housing issues. But over the course of the 1980s, WISH became increasingly interested in tenant cooperative ownership as a way to stabilize communities and empower residents.

Wish and Cooperative Housing: Building Collective Economic and Political Power

The United States has a rich history of Black cooperative economics. Jessica Gordon Nembhard theorizes cooperative activity as a way for African Americans to gain collective political and economic power. She discusses the long history of Black cooperative movement in the United States, and emphasizes the important role cooperative economics has played in African American thinking and organizing. “Almost all African American leaders and major thinkers, from the most conservative to the most radical,” she writes, “have at some point promoted cooperative economic development as a strategy for African American well-being and liberation” (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 213). Co-op members, Gordon Nembhard finds, receive economic benefits, but they also, through direct involvement in the collective self-governance of the co-op, learn skills of participatory democracy that can help them in other areas of life. WISH's philosophy of the development of housing cooperatives fits within Gordon Nembhard's framework. The housing cooperative, WISH believed, addressed two needs: the desperate need for housing affordability, and the need for neighborhood-scale participation and democracy. As WISH's executive director, Paul Battle, wrote in 1990, “Our focus on co-ops is intended to create a network of organized low and moderate income homeowners, able to constructively participate in neighborhood affairs. They will become building blocks of an empowered community.”⁶ The housing co-op, that

is, was not just about the material need for housing. It was about building a more empowered populace.

While WISH began assisting tenants and other community-organizing groups with cooperative housing development as early as 1982, the first housing co-op for which the organization could really claim primary credit was on Chapin Street NW, in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. The building's tenants contacted WISH in early 1986, looking for help. A year earlier, their building had been sold out from beneath them, in violation of the city law that required landlords to give tenants the opportunity to purchase their buildings should they choose to sell. The tenants knew their rights had been violated, and they wanted to stay in their homes. But the building was in sorry shape. As a reporter from the Washington, DC *Afro-American* described, it "had a troubled history of blight and neglect under the ownership of various landlords."⁷ By 1986, only 5 of the building's 26 units were occupied—the terrible conditions in the building and the violence of the block had driven most other tenants out—and only two tenants were active in the struggle to keep the building.⁸

Those two tenants were Deborah Bruce and Blanca Villalobos.⁹ Bruce spoke only English, and Villalobos only Spanish—but they were united in their desire to keep their building. With WISH's help, Bruce and Villalobos created a tenants' association, naming it Tenants Right to Fight.¹⁰ And they started searching for funds to buy the building themselves. With WISH's assistance, they organized a "Candidates' Tour" of their building on the evening of Wednesday, September 3, 1986—a week before the primary elections for mayor and city council (Brisbane, 1986).¹¹ The purpose was to bring attention to the building and raise political support for the tenants' fight to keep their homes. At this event, Deborah Bruce, who had become president of Tenants Right to Fight, emphasized that their work was part of a broader struggle for affordable housing. As she told the *Afro-American*, "We intend to renovate the building to keep housing costs much lower so that the people of our neighborhood will not be displaced."¹²

After putting together the funds to buy the building—which they did through convincing banks that they were a good credit risk, securing financing from the city, and holding their own fundraisers, like a disco they organized one month—the tenants were finally able to purchase the building as a limited-equity co-op in June 1987. They named it the Chapin Ciara Cooperative, and moved out temporarily so that renovations could begin.¹³ While the building once had 26 one-bedroom units, after renovations it had 11 two- and three-bedroom units, which, WISH noted, were more suitable for families.¹⁴ About a year later, with renovations completed, WISH worked with the co-op to organize a grand opening celebration and building tour. WISH distributed a brochure for the grand opening, illustrated with a drawing of the building, and the words, "Reclaim Housing for the Community."¹⁵ This housing, indeed, had been successfully reclaimed from unscrupulous landlords, and was now under the control of its

residents—and, importantly, served as an affordable housing resource for others looking for housing. WISH helped Chapin Ciara recruit new members, distributing a brochure, *Welcome to Home Ownership at 1447 Chapin St. NW*, to explain cooperative ownership to prospective members.¹⁶

The creation of the Chapin Ciara Cooperative was a triumph for the tenants and for WISH. The co-op was soon to gain international attention. In the fall of 1989, the Chapin Ciara Cooperative was selected by the UN Centre for Human Settlements, also known as UN Habitat, as a Citation Award winner. As the director of Habitat's New York office wrote to Paul Battle, "The award is being given in recognition of WISH's work in the provision of shelter to the poorer segments of the population through an innovative approach that could be replicable internationally." WISH was invited to the UN headquarters in New York on October 1, 1989, World Habitat Day, to receive the award.¹⁷ Deborah Bruce, the co-op president, traveled to New York on WISH's behalf to receive the award (that same year, Bruce had been elected the president of WISH's board).¹⁸ Years later, Battle recalled, "When Deborah Bruce went to the U.N., I was the proudest person in the world."¹⁹ With the encouragement from the receipt of this award, WISH began thinking about how it could, in fact, replicate its work internationally.

WISH had already been making international connections. People working on issues of social justice around the world regularly visited the US capital; WISH's location in DC made its office a convenient stop for these folks, who often wanted to hear about local organizing in a city well known for its inequality and racial segregation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, various relationships with people connected to South Africa in particular began to coalesce. Early on, members of the South African National Civic Organisation, or SANCO, a group that represented local civic associations throughout South Africa, visited DC and attended a WISH membership meeting. The meeting reminded the SANCO representatives of the organizing work they were doing in Johannesburg—and so a connection was born.²⁰ Another connection was made through a graduate student named Patrick Bond, who was studying at Johns Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC in the late 1980s. Bond had been working with the DC Student Coalition Against Apartheid and Racism, or DC SCAAR, on pressuring Johns Hopkins to divest from South Africa, an issue being tackled on university campuses across the United States in the 1980s.²¹ Through his research on divestment, Bond had amassed information on the investment practices of local banks, and he used that information to assist WISH with its anti-redlining campaign in DC.²² One of the reasons WISH members could not get loans to purchase their homes was because banks were not lending in neighborhoods considered risky. Although the federal Community Reinvestment Act had been passed in 1977, redlining was still a problem in the city, so WISH organized against it with the help of many, including Bond. In 1981, the WISH membership had passed a resolution targeting Riggs Bank, then the city's

premier local bank (motto: “The most important bank in the most important city in the world”), to pressure it to invest in poor neighborhoods. “Riggs Bank,” the resolution begins, “has a very poor record of reinvesting in our community despite the fact that communities like ours built the bank, at the same time Riggs provided interest free loans to antidemocratic and racist regimes like South Africa and Chile.”²³ The lines connecting flows of capital from a DC neighborhood to a nation across the ocean were being drawn.

Other South Africans were building personal connections with WISH. Cas Coovadia, a tenant activist from Johannesburg, visited DC in the fall of 1991 and spoke at a WISH quarterly membership meeting about the tenants’ struggle in South Africa.²⁴ Coovadia worked with a civic association called Actstop, which had initially formed to fight evictions in central Johannesburg during apartheid, and continued to do anti-eviction work after apartheid’s demise.²⁵ Odette Geldenhuys, a lawyer at the Legal Resources Center in Johannesburg, traveled to DC during this time, and visited a number of WISH housing co-ops with Paul Battle. She was inspired by WISH’s work, and, upon her return to South Africa, spoke glowingly of WISH to her colleagues working for housing justice.²⁶

Interest in cooperative economics had been growing in South Africa throughout the 1980s. A group called Cooperative Planning and Education, known as COPE, was founded in 1988 to help set up cooperatives in South Africa.²⁷ Although COPE initially focused on worker co-ops and community businesses, by 1991 it had decided to focus its efforts specifically on housing cooperatives. The reason for this shift in focus, COPE reported in its October 1991 newsletter, was the terrible housing crisis in South Africa, and the many requests for housing assistance it had received. “We will be working mainly in informal settlements where the need for housing is greatest,” they wrote, “and inner city situations where residents need control over their accommodation to prevent them being exploited by landlords.”²⁸ As Patrick Bond wrote later of that time in South Africa, “[T]he most obvious terrain of conflict during the early 1990s was housing” (2000, p. 222).

Housing in South Africa: From the “Grey” Years to the Seven Buildings Project

In his novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Phaswane Mpe describes the central Johannesburg Hillbrow neighborhood in the early 1990s: the violence of daily life, the devastating impact of AIDS, the crumbling and overcrowded housing, the tensions between native South Africans and recent immigrants from other parts of the continent, the constant busy movement of the streets (Mpe, 2001). Hillbrow, by the early 1990s, was infamous. But it was only relatively recently that Blacks had even been allowed to live in central city neighborhoods like Hillbrow. The structure of apartheid, formally instituted when the Afrikaner-dominated National

Party came to power in 1948, was relentlessly spatial. The 1950 Group Areas Act required people of different races to live separately, and city centers were zoned for Whites. The 1954 Natives Resettlement Act provided for the removal of Blacks from areas that had been designated White, like central cities and close-in suburbs. Under this act, Black-owned land was expropriated, and Blacks were resettled either in the townships on the periphery of cities, or to further distant homelands. The 1955 Natives (Urban Areas) Amendment Act worked to further remove concentrations of Blacks living in central city apartments. About 10,000 people were removed from Johannesburg alone under this law, many of them servants. Most were relocated to the township of Soweto, southwest of the city of Johannesburg (Christopher, 1994). The city of Johannesburg was for Whites.

But during the 1980s, people of color started filtering into central Johannesburg. The financial center of Johannesburg had moved from the central business district out to Sandton, a gated and highly fortified suburb, and many Whites moved out as well during this time (Ngwane, 2003). This posed a problem for landlords: their White tenants were fleeing the city, but they were not allowed to rent to Blacks. At the same time, the townships were experiencing a housing shortage, and many non-Whites desperately needed housing (Cull, n.d.). Many landlords simply ignored the law, renting to non-White tenants (Joburg Metro Council, 2006). Residential areas in which the races mixed became known as “grey” areas (Cull, n.d.). The illegal nature of Black occupancy of White cities meant that White landlords could charge exorbitant rents while neglecting the buildings, as Black tenants had no legal recourse. Low-income tenants desperately wanted to stay in the city, in large part because the central location made access to work much easier. “More than anything else,” COPE reported in 1992, “inner city residents want *security of tenure*—not to have to worry about being kicked out by landlords at any time.”²⁹

It was in the context of the illegality of Black occupancy and ownership within urban areas that a group of mostly Black Johannesburg tenants got together, in the late 1980s, to try to wrest control of their buildings from their landlord. These tenants lived in seven different buildings scattered across three different central Johannesburg neighborhoods: Hillbrow, Joubert Park, and Berea. Together, these seven buildings comprised 446 units (Cull, n.d.). The seven buildings were all owned by a single landlord, David Gorfil. Gorfil had purchased the buildings in the early 1980s, and had done little to maintain them over the years.³⁰ As a local newspaper reported at the time, “Tenants say the buildings are in a sorry state and the most basic infrastructure has gone to ruin: lifts do not work, the plumbing needs to be completely overhauled, all the buildings need to be rewired and most of the foyers and garages rebuilt.”³¹ The tenants had been working with their local civic association, Actstop, which helped them organize a rent boycott in protest over exorbitant rents. But in 1991, Gorfil issued the tenants in all seven buildings a notice to vacate. Threatened with losing their homes, the tenants approached the

Johannesburg Legal Resources Center for assistance (Cull, n.d.). COPE provided training and organizing assistance to the tenants. An organization of progressive city planners, activists, and academics, Planact, helped with the financing of the purchase. Tenant purchase of buildings was a bold move, something that had never been done in South Africa before. As Paul Battle emphasized in an interview with *Organizing* magazine, “[T]he effort to buy the buildings is unique—the tenants would become the first Black owners of an apartment building in South Africa.”³² The effort of these tenants became known as the Seven Buildings Project (the seven buildings involved were Argyle Court, Branksome Towers, Coniston Court, Manhattan Court, Margate Court, Protea Court, and Stanhope Mansions (Cull, n.d.)). In the spring of 1992, the Seven Buildings tenants asked WISH for help in realizing their dream of cooperative ownership.

WISH Goes to Johannesburg, Johannesburg Comes to WISH

For WISH, working in South Africa in the early 1990s felt like both a moral imperative and an incredible opportunity. Nelson Mandela had been released from prison in 1990, but would not be elected president until 1994; this period of time was, for South Africa, rich with potential but also rife with uncertainty. As WISH described in its 1993 annual report:

WISH came to work in South Africa as an extension of our local community development work, because the same problems and needs for empowerment and community control are present in urban South Africa and urban America. Feeling a sense of both moral commitment and excitement over the significant new property-ownership possibilities for African tenants, plus a chance to start “people-to-people” links at the grassroots level, WISH decided to devote the time of three staff members to travel and work in Johannesburg for 2 to 4 weeks each, April-July 1992.³³

Executive Director Paul Battle was the first person from WISH to make the trip. In April 1992, he was formally invited by COPE to work as a consultant on the Seven Buildings Project, and he was paid for 80 hours of work over the course of his month-long visit.³⁴ While in Johannesburg, he stayed with Pressage Nyoni, a tenant organizer on the project, who lived in Argyle Court, one of the seven buildings, in the Hillbrow neighborhood. The similarities between the situation of tenants in inner-city Johannesburg and inner-city DC were clear to Battle and to the South Africans with whom he worked. As COPE wrote in a 1992 article about Battle’s first visit:

Putting the people first is the slogan on the t-shirts of WISH, Washington Innercity Self Help. People living in the inner city of Washington, DC,

capital city of the United States, face the same problems as inner city residents of Johannesburg. As in Johannesburg, there are many low income families living in rented apartments (flats), struggling against bad living conditions, lack of maintenance, high rents and evictions. As in Johannesburg, some tenants have taken action around these problems.³⁵

In this article, Battle is asked how the situation in Johannesburg compared with DC. He responds, “The people in buildings here and in Washington are very similar. They need the same motivation and have the same doubts.”³⁶

Two months after Paul Battle’s initial trip to South Africa, two other WISH staffers, Martha Davis and Linda Leaks, traveled to the country to continue the work Battle had begun. Davis, who stayed for two weeks, worked to explain to local banks and the Johannesburg city council how WISH was working with DC banks and local government agencies to finance tenant purchase and cooperative conversion. Leaks, who stayed for a month, worked with tenant organizers, and shared WISH’s strategies for organizing tenants in DC. Seven Buildings Project tenants took Linda’s experiences seriously; on her advice, for instance, they decided to hire a tenant organizer for each one of the seven buildings.³⁷ Highly detailed reports from the trip indicate that Davis and Leaks were constantly in meetings, day and night. It was a deeply moving trip for them both. One of the things that stood out in Davis’ mind the most from that trip was the singing. Tenants held enormous meetings in the parking garage below one of their buildings, and they opened and closed every meeting with song. Their voices ricocheted off the concrete surfaces, and left her in tears.³⁸ In a letter addressed to the “7 Buildings Comrades,” written shortly after Davis and Leaks returned to Washington, DC, Davis thanked the tenants for their “great hospitality,” and recounted some of her impressions of their visit:

I particularly remember our trip to Soweto, to the soccer game with Kaizer Chiefs, the after-meeting dinners at Manhattan and Margate, the 10 pm. training session in Pressage’s flat (the latest training I have ever done in my life!), Kippie’s, the farewell party, and the incredible singing at each of your meetings. If I come back, I’m going to bring a bigger tape recorder to record your singing for everyone in Washington to hear.³⁹

She signs off, “Again, thanks for all your love and support on my visit. VIVA the 7-Buildings/WISH partnership!”⁴⁰

The WISH–South Africa exchange continued after the initial visits by Battle, Davis, and Leaks. In late 1992, WISH was visited by Monty Narsoo of COPE.⁴¹ While Narsoo was in DC, Leaks organized a reception for him at the 919 L Street Co-op, where she lived, where he discussed cooperative housing and tenant organizing with co-op members.⁴² A few months later, in February 1993, WISH

helped representatives from the Standard Bank of South Africa and US AID to meet with Riggs Bank to learn about how Riggs was engaging in community reinvestment in DC.⁴³ Just a few weeks after this visit, an agreement was signed for the Seven Buildings Project tenants to purchase their buildings, although the sale was contingent on the tenants' ability to secure financing (Cull, n.d.). Despite the steady efforts of WISH and the South African organizations assisting the tenants, this financing was still unsecured.

In the fall of 1993, a delegation of five from WISH traveled to Johannesburg for 20 days, again at the invitation of COPE and the Seven Buildings tenants. The delegation included Andrew Williams (who was the first vice president of WISH's board, and also the president of his housing co-op, the Eastside Manor Cooperative, which WISH had helped organize), Deborah Bruce (who at that point was an at-large member of WISH's board and still president of Chapin Ciara Cooperative), Paul Battle, Dorothy Kemp (the executive director of Neighborhood Housing Services), and Karen Kollias (of NationsBank). The purpose of the visit was for Williams and Bruce to share their experiences, first as tenants involved in cooperative purchase, and later as co-op leaders; and for Kemp and Kollias to discuss the role of private and public sectors in supporting the development of housing co-ops.⁴⁴ In addition, Battle spoke at a housing conference in Durban, South Africa, the theme of which was, "Housing in the Inner City: Making it Happen."⁴⁵ Williams and Bruce's role was in part to bolster the confidence of the Johannesburg tenants. WISH described their work in a report filed later that year:

7 Buildings tenants, including leaders appeared to be growing tired. Some are beginning to question if they will ever buy the buildings. The buildings are deteriorating, and the owner is demanding an increase in rents. Some of the tenants have lost jobs, so despair has begun to set in. In order to assist tenants in working through this difficult period, Deborah Bruce and Andrew Williams, shared their experiences, which in many ways parallels that of the 7 Buildings tenants.⁴⁶

The visits back and forth continued. In September 1993, a group of bankers and civic leaders from Johannesburg, including a tenant leader of the Seven Buildings Project, met with WISH members and staff in DC. In November of that year, two South African bankers visited WISH to discuss cooperative loans. In January 1994, 15 South African leaders from Capetown met with WISH staff to discuss organizing, development, and training. Also in January 1994, Cynthia Rakale, a South African graduate student at Howard University, joined the WISH staff to produce the WISH newsletter; her role was also to attend various meetings, including tenant and cooperative meetings.⁴⁷ In April 1994, "old friends from Actstop" visited WISH to discuss "organizing and development."⁴⁸ The next

month—May 1994—Nelson Mandela was elected as president of South Africa, inaugurating a new era of democracy.

That fall, US AID awarded a grant to the Maryland-based Cooperative Housing Foundation to develop a framework for cooperative housing in South Africa. “The purpose of the project,” the foundation explained, “is to assist the new government in South Africa to diversify the housing delivery system so as better to meet the housing needs of low and moderate income households and to assist in the empowerment of citizenry through a democratically-based housing delivery mechanism.”⁴⁹ CHF’s partner organizations on the grant were WISH and SANCO, the South African National Civic Organisation. A five-person delegation, including two representatives from CHF, one from SANCO, and Paul Battle, undertook a 10-day “reconnaissance mission,” during which they traveled throughout South Africa to promote the development of cooperative housing.⁵⁰ While WISH was still in touch with the tenants of the Seven Buildings Project, by this point it was working at a national scale to help influence South Africa’s housing policy.

In March 1996, the tenants of the Seven Buildings Project finally received the financing necessary to purchase their buildings, in the form of a 6 million rand subsidy from the Gauteng Department of Housing (the city of Johannesburg is within Gauteng Province). This was the first time a housing project in South Africa received an institutional housing subsidy (Cull, n.d.). The Seven Buildings Project was, as one expert on post-apartheid Johannesburg puts it, the “most celebrated” of the social housing programs initiated by the Johannesburg city government in 1996 (Murray, 2008, p. 142). But by this time, WISH had decided to return its focus to its local work in Washington, DC. As Paul Battle explained later, “I became uncomfortable with it, because I felt we were spending too much time away from D.C.”⁵¹ WISH had done what it could in South Africa, and the Seven Buildings tenants had successfully purchased their homes. A time of intensive back-and-forth work across the two cities had come to a close.

Constructing Countertopographies of the City

The housing activists of Johannesburg and Washington, DC were together constructing a countertopography of the city. A topography, as geographer Cindi Katz notes, is a map of a landscape built by contour lines: lines connecting the same points of elevation across space. A topographic map provides a detailed understanding of the contours of a particular place. A countertopography, as Katz theorizes it, is a way to understand how like processes shape different places across the globe. She describes how countertopographies can be constructed:

Contour lines are lines of constant elevation, connecting places at precisely the same altitude to reveal a terrain’s three-dimensional shape. I want to

imagine a politics that maintains the distinctness of place while recognizing that it is connected analytically to other places along contour lines that represent not elevation but particular relations to a process. . . . This offers a multifaceted way of theorizing the connectedness of vastly different places made artifactually discrete by virtue of history and geography but which also reproduce themselves differently amidst the common political-economic and socio-cultural processes they experience. . . . The larger intent is to produce countertopographies that link different places analytically and thereby enhance struggles in the name of common interests.

(Katz, 2001, pp. 1229–1230)

Activists in Washington, DC and Johannesburg were building connections across place, tracing contour lines from Washington, DC to Johannesburg and back again. They saw similar processes at work: first housing segregation, and later redlining, had kept Blacks from owning housing in central neighborhoods in both cities. The legacy of a lack of democracy, while far more profound in South Africa than in Washington, DC, was another line traced. South African tenants were inspired by the work of WISH housing co-op leaders like Deborah Bruce and Andrew Williams, and by organizers like Linda Leaks, herself a co-op member. And the WISH activists were profoundly moved by the struggles of the South African tenants—sometimes to tears. The relationships built through their ongoing exchanges seemed to, as Katz describes, enhance struggles to secure affordable, democratically controlled housing in both cities. In both places, tenants and activists had a vision of a city that would be a good home for poor people.

But what this countertopography reveals over the long term is the difficulty of creating and maintaining affordable housing in the context of capitalist real estate markets, from the east coast of the United States to the tip of southern Africa. Although the Seven Buildings Project had received a grant from the Gauteng Department of Housing to purchase its homes, it had to take out a loan to finance the substantial repairs the buildings needed after decades of neglect by their old landlord. Some co-op members resisted making payments on this loan; many believed that the repairs were insufficient in relation to the amount they were required to repay (Cull, n.d.). By 2002, five of the seven buildings had gone into default on their loans (Murray, 2008). As of the summer of 2013, only two of the buildings were still owned by their occupants. The other five had reverted to rental status, although at least one was considered an affordable rental.⁵² Not all the WISH co-ops have remained affordable housing resources for low-income people, either. As of 2014, of the 10 co-ops WISH had developed by the time of their initial visits to South Africa, 2 had failed and 2 had converted to a market-rate condominium structure, thus rendering them unavailable to other low-income people who need affordable housing. Chapin Ciara Cooperative, WISH's very first limited-equity cooperative, was one of the co-ops that ultimately converted

to a condominium ownership structure, still under the leadership of Deborah Bruce. In the fall of 2013, one of its units sold for \$479,000 (N.a., 2013)—a typical market-rate price for a condominium in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. The challenge, as a scholar of Johannesburg succinctly describes it, lies in “the difficulties of reconciling the goals of maintaining and upgrading inner-city housing stock with the cost-recovery principles that govern the capitalist marketplace” (Murray, 2008, p. 142). What is true for Johannesburg is true for Washington, DC.

The original idea of the WISH–South Africa exchange might have been to see connections and share experiences between tenants and organizers in these two cities. The personal connections built among people across continents were profound, and in some cases life-changing. But in the end, one of the things this countertopography shows is how hard it is to create and maintain affordable housing controlled by its residents in the context of capitalist real estate markets, no matter where you are on the globe. After what was widely regarded as the failure of the Seven Buildings Project, the Johannesburg city council moved away from supporting cooperative housing, and toward subsidizing rental housing, which was easier for the state to control. After 25 years of work, WISH folded in 2003, although another organization, Empower DC, arose to take its place, and continues to work on questions of displacement in the city. In DC, as of 2015, tenants’ associations are still able to purchase their homes and transform them into limited-equity cooperatives. It is not impossible, in the midst of the capitalist cityscape, to create housing that is both affordable and democratically controlled by its members. But ultimately, the struggle for this housing is a matter of collective political will.

Conclusion

Twenty years after his first trip to South Africa, Paul Battle mused, “Did we do any good, or did we just create some trips for ourselves?”⁵³ WISH certainly did some good: it built connections and enabled people to see similar situations of racism, economics, and housing crisis in cities on two different continents. Although only two of the Seven Buildings Project buildings remain tenant-owned, and although cooperative housing never took off as a framework for affordable housing provision in the new South Africa, this work was still important. People like Odette Geldenhuys, Pressage Nyoni, and many others involved in the Seven Buildings Project went on to do other important work in affordable housing and legal aid in South Africa.⁵⁴

Today, gentrification is coming to Johannesburg. As in Washington, DC, inner-city neighborhoods are becoming hip, and tenants are fighting to remain in place as rents rise. The struggle for equality in the midst of growth—the theme of this book—bedevils cities around the world. It might behoove activists working for housing justice to follow in WISH’s footsteps, building exchanges and

drawing lines to connect the experiences of poor people living in different cities across continents. Everywhere, people continue to experiment with new forms of struggle. Through building countertopographies, we may yet construct new ways of staking a claim to urban life.

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Notes

- 1 1st Annual Congress of W.I.S.H. WISH Papers Series 5, Box 22, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 22/1: 1st Annual Community Congress (1980); W.I.S.H. Washington Inncercity Self Help 10th Anniversary 8th Community Congress. WISH Papers Series 5, Box 22, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 22/8: 8th Annual Community Congress (1988).
- 2 1st Annual Congress of W.I.S.H. WISH Papers Series 5, Box 22, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 22/1: 1st Annual Community Congress (1980). Quote p. 9.
- 3 WISH 2nd Annual Community Congress. WISH Papers Series 5, Box 22, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 22/2: 2nd Annual Community Congress (1981); Washington Inncercity Self Help 7th Annual Congress; Resolutions. WISH Papers Series 5, Box 22, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 22/7: 7th Annual Community Congress (1986); W.I.S.H. Washington Inncercity Self Help 10th Anniversary 8th Community Congress. WISH Papers Series 5, Box 22, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 22/8: 8th Annual Community Congress (1988).
- 4 Washington Inncercity Self Help: Proposal: Aetna Life and Casualty. WISH Papers Series 9, Box 38, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 38/24: Fundraising/Grants (1982–1991). Quote pp. 6–7.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Proposal from Washington Inncercity Self Help (WISH) to Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), March 13, 1990. WISH Papers Series 9, Box 38, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 38/24: Fundraising/Grants (1982–1991). Quote p. 8.

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- 10 Bylaws of Tenants Right to Fight, Inc. WISH Papers Series 1, Box 5, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 5/57: Chapin Ciara Cooperative/Tenants Right to Fight, Inc.— 1447 Chapin Street NW (1986–1989).
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- 24 Quarterly Meeting Flyer. WISH Papers Series 9, Box 40, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC. Folder 40/42: Quarterly Membership Meetings (1991–2003).
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- 52 Interview with Pressage Nyoni, June 6, 2013, Johannesburg, South Africa.
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