

# OUR GHETTOS & US

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## INTRODUCTION

Kingston has grown from its original idealistic little plan and eaten up the countryside. This is simply - Growth - What is complex is the internal dynamics of the city - the interaction of social structures on a *simple* space problem. The internal migrations - the movement of people outwards and the filling of the vacuum with migrants from the country. The migration of the migrants outward - on and on - and the gradual, endless, metamorphosis of the city and in some sad cases like ours, the creation of GHETTOS. There is nothing unusual about our experience. The process of migration outward and the deterioration of the center of the city is characteristic of the development of many American cities since the late 1950's.

The Ghetto for us is a concentration of poverty and crime, but, we should not stop at this glib explanation if we hope to eliminate them. Our job is to find a way forward. So, I am going to review our history, a little and *mention the approach to an overall solution for all of our problems*. Then, I am going to suggest some detailed approaches to the housing side of Downtown Kingston's problems. In the end I will have given you some useful information to help you at least build your own house - if all you really want to do is "tend your garden."

## HISTORY

What has really happened in Kingston? Well - for one thing, more than one thing has happened. Most of it is ironic. Let's take the traditional city first:

### **The Evolution of Traditional Neighborhoods.**

Part of the reason we struggle to find an apolitical name for Southside and Tel Aviv is that they were early expansions to the original city - They were "Town" while the various "Towns," Rae - Hannah - Allman - Jones - Rollington etc., were created out of lands and communities on the ever-widening periphery of the Kingston settlement. They had their own names at the beginning.

As Kingston's population expanded, new residential communities were created in the surrounding farmland. Neighboring towns, villages and districts got absorbed into the city mass. These expansions were formal real estate developments which linked to and sometimes continued the existing street pattern. They were communities for the upper and working classes. We can still see some of the remains which hint at their quality in areas such as Rae

Town and Kingston Gardens.

### **Squatter Communities.**

This process of expansion was orderly and real pressure on the city seems to have started only after emancipation. At that time, the slaves were free to choose wherever they wished to live. Here as everywhere, the city offered access to opportunity. Jamaica saw the beginning of a migration from country to city which continues to this day. These people settled on lands to the West, beginning at Coronation Market and stretching along Spanish Town Road as far as Riverton City. Most of these areas were formally integrated into the city via slum clearance projects of the 1960's & 70's.

*These new communities were born out of the aspiration and desperation which are the reason for rural-urban migration everywhere.*

*On the positive side, their renewal was the product of a level of generosity of spirit and optimism which has disappeared from Jamaica. (Imagine that we actually hired Planners to study the way of life of poor people in Trench Town so that these people could be formally integrated into the city in humane living conditions. Imagine that we thought so much of our potential that we took it for granted that we could afford to subsidize this process.)*

*On the negative side, we were naive about how simple it would be to reverse History, and thought then as now that if we apply pressure here or there, the rest will take care of itself. We were also naive about the motivations of our leaders (at all levels and in all sectors). We accepted that there was political game-playing involved in this process of slum clearance but did not realize the degree to which this was spoiling our country. We did not realize that these efforts at improvement could help create the despair which overwhelms us today.*

### **Models for Development**

Many of us are justifiably proud of Jamaica's record in attempting to provide low income housing. We have a veritable museum of approaches which range from the American style "tower" blocks of Tivoli Gardens to "self help" communities such as the Site & Service projects. Most of this range relates to building types, while the actual strategies employed in Kingston may be narrowed down to an Urban Renewal / Slum Clearance model and later efforts at "Urban Upgrading."

#### ■ "Urban Renewal/Slum Clearance"

Most of our Ghettos were built by us as replacements for squatter communities. As mentioned, the motivations for these developments were mixed. Similarly, the results have their positive and negative sides. On the one hand, it is good that so many people are housed in substantial buildings in serviceable communities. It must be remembered that these communities replace very insubstantial settlements with no physical or social infrastructure. On the other hand, a process of distillation which supposedly began in their political origins has separated them from the rest of the society and each from the other. We like to blame this on politics, but this seems beside the point or, at least, questionable. The same types of communities grew at the same time all over the world. Our Jamaican

versions are still identifiable with political parties but this is becoming beside the point.

There is a large difference between our types of Urban Renewal and the foreign experience. As mentioned, most of our projects have been the replacement of informal settlements whereas the North American experience relates to the replacement of portions of the historic city which have evolved into slums. We are only now reaching the point where we are faced with this problem and we seem to be trying to repeat America's mistakes.

We must renew the "*derelict and abandoned areas*" of our cities. This was said by a Jamaican leader but could have been said anywhere in the world. It is one of those "nice" statements that we accept blindly as justification for "good works" which often turn out to be simple opportunism.

While there is little question that our Ghettos are the result of dereliction, it is obvious that they are not abandoned. So why continue to build the misconception? - For the same reason that the argument was put forward all over the United States back in the 50's and 60's. - It allows the opportunism of the politician and Real Estate Developer (be they Public or Private) to be veiled in the cloak of good works.

This "Urban Renewal" approach has been for many years discredited in the rest of the world, but appears to be alive and well in Jamaica. In America the dislocations caused by this approach and the environments created in Public Housing were recognized as the creation of a problem rather than a solution to one. The ironic difference is that in Jamaica the "slums" to be cleared house a large part of our population while in America they housed minorities.

- The Community Development approach.

The current "state of the art" approach to Urban Development is the so called "Community Development" approach. The rhetoric is as saintly as that of Urban Renewal. Like Urban Renewal it tends to serve external interest groups and be of little use to the residents of the "target areas." The range of Interest groups has an interesting turn in that in addition to the Politician and Real Estate Developer we now have a broad range of professionals in the social service *business* who are supported by the "funding" which is there to improve things in the Ghetto. It is obvious that if major things are to be done, major planning must be done first and the process must be properly managed. Unfortunately, Planning and Management often eat up all of the resources so that while the systems for improvement grow and prosper, little improvement is seen in the quality of life of the residents.

## PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

### “Empowerment”

It appears that our road will be longer and harder, for although good things do result, the improvement of communities by enlightened nonresidents seems destined to create as much harm as good. In addition, all attempts at “empowerment” thru community organization quickly come up against political power playing. So - What is the solution? - *Education and patience of course*. We must realize that “EMPOWERMENT” is a magnificent word, but that we use it cheaply when we pretend that there is a way to community empowerment which is not based in the building of strong individuals. We must accept that, notwithstanding the “Exchange Rate,” Interest Rates, our political system or the Global situation, the majority of people in our society are trapped in a circular social structure from which it is impossible for more than a few to escape in each generation. Although we make much of those that do escape, their proportion decreases with time and the overall society is increasingly dominated by the “prisoners.” I think that the first solution to this problem is the acceptance that these “prisoners” are performing **naturally** and that what we see is exactly what has been programmed. Lets look at our circle - **Birth** - followed by **Growth** - culminating in the desire for **Personal Expression** - followed by **Reproduction** and therefore back to **Birth** (with the “spin-off” being a completely unworkable society in that an increasing part of the population is lost to economic productivity and to development of the larger Jamaican Community). The cycle above happens everywhere, but, in the Ghettos of the world it completes itself in about 16 years. This circle *can* be broken if we realize that the solution lies in the individual that is created in the Growth part of the cycle. It is impossible to directly change the most destructive characteristics of the cycle (Violence, Insecurity and Contempt) but it is possible to build Hope in the society through Education and supplementing parenthood. I think that most Jamaicans will agree that given any kind of meaningful hope, our children can achieve more than a re-creation of themselves and eventually the destructive characteristics can be conquered.

### The Solution to All of Our Problems

To this end I suggest that we build a system of early childhood education which not only provides academic education but helps to nurture the most disadvantaged of our children. I suggest that the way to do this is to provide mandatory Basic, Primary, and Junior High School education on a neighborhood (walk to school) basis in all “Ghettos” and that classes be sized at a level where teachers can remember the names of all their children (15-25). I suggest that we begin a national countdown to the achievement of this and the “dismantling” of All Age Schools and the abolition of the Common Entrance Exam. I suggest that we can begin this process by spending the heavily touted “Social Investment Fund” for this purpose.

**I suggest this as a solution to *all* of our Economic and Social Problems. Yes - it's *that* simple.**

### **CIRCLES**

- we can start playing the loop at any point but lets start with **Growth.**

### **GROWTH**

*The first 15 years of life for a growing proportion of Jamaicans are characterized by:*

- *Insecurity - For a small child it must become immediately obvious that the adults who should offer security are not themselves in control of anything in life except the child itself (for a short time).*
- *Violence - The communities into which these children are born are **totally** consumed in an atmosphere of violence. The child can expect regular uncontrolled violence from the same adults to whom he looks for affection. He can expect to see apparently arbitrary violence meted out to these same adults regularly by neighbors and the security forces who represent the overall larger society. He learns to accept brutality and murder as a common part of life.*
- *Contempt - He will notice quickly that the entire society (Including his own parents) feels contempt for people who talk like him. If he is very dark skinned, he will notice quickly that even though his color is in the majority, successful "black" people are what stands out and "brown" is the normal color of economic and social success. (He will quickly learn to hate all things having to do with "blackness," including himself and his neighbors.)*
- *Hopelessness - A normal child should conclude that it is impossible to rise to the heights of the society without education, economic support or social standing. A few remarkable ones will escape.*

### **PERSONAL EXPRESSION**

*It is accepted that as we leave childhood we seek to assert our individuality, we try to express ourselves - personally. This is universal and timeless.*

### **REPRODUCTION**

*With the growth experience outlined above, the most obvious opportunity open to a young person who wishes to assert her/himself personally is to either bear a child or make a number of children.*

*Notwithstanding the problems associated with it, parenthood is an obvious achievement. It is also, by definition, **creative** and allows for an outlet for the need to give affection. Their love for their own children and the simple return of love by the children may be the first experience of affection that a young person may have had since their own infancy. It is understandably, addictive.*

### **BIRTH**

*So - We complete our circle -*

### **GROWTH**

*The first 15 years of life for a growing proportion of Jamaicans are characterized*

by:

- *Insecurity - For a small child . . .*

### **The Solution to Downtown's Problems**

*No process of revitalization of Downtown Kingston can achieve success if the current social situation in The West Kingston Market Area and in "Southside" continue to exist. Solutions to the problems of West Kingston are well defined and require at least partial completion of the work started there. The solution is in the hands of the UDC. A strategy for the development of "Southside" is needed. (Where "Southside" is referred to; The area meant is that bordered by Harbour Street, East Queen Street, South Camp Road and Hanover Street. Therefore - It includes "Tel Aviv.")*

#### *Ghetto vs. Ghetto*

*A prerequisite of eliminating Ghettos is an understanding that they are of different types and that in addition to type, each has its own personality. I think that the Land Empowerment Proposal which follows, is valid for Southside/Tel Aviv. It may also be useful for other traditional neighborhoods where there is a large amount of vacant land. The Lot Development approach is applicable wherever people wish to build their own home. It is applicable across Classes.*

*It is important to remember that these proposals are made in the context of the revitalization of downtown. Their impact will therefore be on the Spirit of the overall society in that we will have begun to rebuild a city that is for all of us.*

### **Southside's Problems**

There is little argument as to the nature of Southside's problems. The following is the usual list:

Unemployment  
Lack of Skills  
Need for housing  
Crime  
Political Violence

The order of importance varies with the perspective of the individual and there are a number of contenders for inclusion on the list. E.g., Education, Drug Abuse and Sanitation. Unemployment would probably head the list from a resident's point of view. (Certainly, a Job is the most common favor begged.) Political violence seems to be the first thing that comes to the mind of the outer society.

When looked at in a larger perspective, most of these problems can be seen to be localized views of larger National problems. When analyzed in terms of their interrelationships, and *quality*, the above list can be reduced and redefined to

Lack of Skills  
Substandard housing.

Although I feel that the long term solution to *all* of our problems lies in Education, I concentrate here on the issue of housing.

### **The Southside Workshop**

The Caribbean School of Architecture (C.S.A.), Oxford School of Architecture and Massachusetts Institute of Technology) joint Workshop on "Rebuilding Downtown Communities: Kingston, Jamaica" (held in January 1993) studied the Southside neighborhood of Kingston. The conclusions of this project included the need for further investigations into the possible uses of vacant lots and the upgrading of existing housing as approaches to the revitalization of the neighborhood. The basis of these conclusions was the belief in the concept of "housing empowerment." This is a belief that the ownership of one's own home is a moral and economic base for personal development.

In their own responses to the problem of revitalization, the Kingston Restoration Company (KRC) has done some work on the planning of new housing in the community. West Indies Home Contractors (WIHCON), who are based in the area, have, likewise, investigated the construction of an expandable "Core House." Although these efforts are constructive to the degree that they would improve the housing stock, they only provide for people who are affluent by Southside Standards. Meanwhile, no attention has been given to the means by which the poorest members of the community can get access to new or improved housing.

It was observed in the Workshop that within the neighborhood, there was an unusually large amount of vacant land (See Figure 1.). This phenomenon has a direct relationship to the fact that most land in the area is owned by people who do not live in the community. In fact, upon investigation, it is often found that the actual owners are either dead or abroad. Even when this is not so, most owners have long abandoned any active relationship to their land. *It is a premise of these proposals that this fact (the abandoned nature of the land) is a cause of decay in the community and the main obstacle to regeneration.* We believe that a localization of land ownership is the first step in regeneration. The traditional approach to this problem has been governmental land assembly. This approach is an encouragement to stagnation of the land in cases where there is no development. In the cases where the Government has developed, the situation of un-afford ability, as mentioned above, arises. In the past this problem has been overcome by subsidizing the costs. This is often linked to the politicizing of the newly built residential areas. ***Ironically, most of our efforts in low income housing have managed to produce our most desperate and violent Ghettos.*** (Of course, this has been the experience in many other areas of the world. - Small consolation)

As an alternative to this approach, The "SOUTHSIDE LAND EMPOWERMENT

PROJECT" is intended to help members of the community in accessing land and security of tenure. This is meant to be a starting point in improving the resident's standard of shelter and rebuilding the community from a base of *Interest*. "THE SOUTHSIDE LOT DEVELOPMENT PROJECT" investigates approaches to their future development of the land. Although tailored to Southside, the lessons learned in both projects will serve as the base on which other appropriate solutions for similar urban communities can be developed.

## **CONCLUSION**

What does this all tell us? I hope that I have helped to clarify that there is at least one alternative to the traditional approach to "Housing." I hope that presented with these proposals, the people of Southside, Tel Aviv and similar communities will grasp our logic and help to refine it. Those with whom we have spoken are enthusiastic to a degree which suggests the hopelessness now confronting them.

The other thing that this tells us is just how much we take for granted when we speak of "Construction Cost." It shows to what degree our perception of this issue may change if the detailed costs of construction were made transparent.

It is hoped that the proposals will be considered for what they are - an attempt to get "Something Started in Southside" - prepared by an amateur Socio/Economic Planner in a field where there are no experts. It is hoped that the proposed dialogue will result in proposals which will not only help the people of our community but will serve as a model which can be applied to similar neighborhoods in the wider world.

It is finally hoped that the proposals will be an addition to the current World dialogue which is attempting to find *humane* solutions to Urban problems.