Reimagining Flamingo Court. The price of ownership

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UMBilo
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This Report is one of three research outputs and should be read in conjunction with the Photo Essay and the Documentary Film.
Reimagining Flamingo Court: The price of ownership

_Democracy is when the indigent and not the men of property are the rulers_

- Aristotole

Private ownership is often upheld as a stepping-stone towards material and financial wealth. Owning property implies an identity, through which a community is imagined sharing similar values, beliefs and aspirations; in other words, reflecting an ideal nationhood (du Plessis 2004, George 1996). Home ownership is presumed to lead to privileged access to services, a permanent address signifying a signature on an equally imagined social contract, serving as the first step on the ‘ladder of urban prosperity’, to borrow Sarah Charlton’s phrase (2010: 5).

A “home” is made through being occupied and implies a set of social relations in its midst. Property ownership may certainly lead to material wealth in some cases, but can conversely lead to exclusion, dispossession and displacement (Erwin 2011: 101). Home is also a concept ‘built on select inclusions’ and consequently ‘imagining a home is as political an act as is imagining a nation’ (George 1996: 6 and 9). In this report, the tensions between the home as material property and home as an imagined, politically loaded notion, are explored through the lived experience of residents of Flamingo Court, a former social housing block of flats situated in Umbilo, Durban. It further explores the notion of understanding home and the self in relation to the built environment, more particularly in the ways in which social and human activity intermingle with the built structure.

The Flamingo Court social housing scheme

Housing programmes form part of the social welfare apparatus. State provision of housing can be seen as a way to enable citizens’ right to the city, homeownership, and urban land tenure. In South Africa’s turbulent political past, the government housing programme was subject to colonial and then apartheid legislation, the latter meaning land dispossession for black people. After being dispossessed and forcibly removed from their land, the black majority occupied approximately 13% of South Africa’s land (South African History Online), the remainder being reserved for the exclusive use of white people. Black households were confined to renting state houses in townships. In the mid-1980s homeownership rights for black people were reintroduced and tenants were able to buy their houses at a market-related price under what has been labelled ‘The Big Sale’ of 1983 (Marais 2008). The Discount Benefit Scheme of 1992 provided for transfer of ownership to tenants – regardless of skin colour – of state-owned housing at low cost, a move often associated with increased social mobility and economic opportunities (Marais 2018). It was this scheme that allowed Flamingo Court tenants to purchase their flats at low cost in 2002.

Flamingo Court’s genesis lies in the apartheid government’s plan to provide state housing to a newly urbanised, white Afrikaner population. By the early 1930s, a quarter of Afrikaners were classified as ‘very poor’ (du Plessis 2004: 882). Being poor and white became conflated with being Afrikaner (du Plessis 2004: 883), a situation ‘requiring’ redress for the betterment of the _volk_ – the imagined nation that espoused the values and beliefs aligned to the Dutch Reformed Church. When the National Party came to power in 1948, it implemented a host of policies and programmes, including social grants, job reservation and housing schemes for white citizens. This grand scheme not only aimed to reform so-called ‘poor whites’, but also to control and ‘rehabilitate’ them (du Plessis 2004: 883, 885). In the context of apartheid, a white homeless person was, as writer Bloke Modisane put it, ‘a crack in the myth of white supremacy’ (quoted in Naidoo 2009). During apartheid, social housing blocks were the sole responsibility of local government through the Community Facilities Fund – from changing light bulbs in common areas to fixing lifts, painting, plumbing and electrical repairs, providing and
maintaining playground equipment and fencing – as the eThekwini municipality’s archival documents bear witness (Health and Housing Minutes of the Town Clerk, 1/3/3/1/16).

Standing tall and overlooking the Durban harbour, Flamingo Court is an imposing building situated in Umbilo. Completed in 1968, it comprises 200 units spread over 13 floors. As per the Rental of White Economic Flat Scheme in force during apartheid, Flamingo Court offered low-cost rental accommodation exclusively to white tenants, who could summarily be described as economically vulnerable. At a Health and Housing Committee sitting in February 1977, the City Treasurer reported on social housing rentals and noted ‘the difficulty of letting flats in Flamingo Court and Arundel Gardens Flat’ in a bid to justify equalising rentals to make the buildings financially viable. Regardless of financial considerations, in March 1977, the building of the Flamingo Community Hall was authorised as per the resolution of the City Council dated 29 August 1975, subject to approval by the National Housing Commission. At an estimated cost of R24,000, the ground floor hall was later financed by the Community Facilities Fund. Also in 1977, some discussions on the possibility of installing solar heating in council flat schemes were minuted (Health and Housing Minutes of the Town Clerk 9/1/2). This somewhat progressive idea never materialised, and as will be discussed below, the financial and socio-economic aspects of the electrification of Flamingo Court would pose major challenges for decades to come, for the municipality, owners, and tenants. The financial precariousness linked to running housing schemes led the Durban City Council to conduct an income survey of tenants, and a gross loss of R2,2 million on the housing services was registered for the 1980/1981 financial year (Health and Housing Minutes of the Town Clerk 1/3/3/1/18). Nevertheless, in 1982, playground equipment was provided and installed on the grounds of Flamingo Court, and fencing erected around the property, which included a parking lot and office space, among many other common areas and facilities that endure – albeit in degraded condition – to this day.

From social housing to the Sectional Title Scheme

The period between 1998 and 2002 saw the conversion of Flamingo Court into a Sectional Title Scheme, whereby tenants could purchase their flats for as little as R600 to R800 as per the National Housing Programme’s ‘discount benefit scheme’. Letting go of some rental stock was a way for the municipality to reduce the expenses related to maintenance and utilities associated with public ownership. Once tenants became owners, the levy amount was higher than the subsidised rental tenants had to pay while the building was owned by the municipality, and this still poses a challenge for many households. The cumulative non-payment of levies is the root of several problems encountered by residents. In Sectional Title Schemes, levies create a collective pool used to pay for municipal services and undertake maintenance. Due to the non-payment of levies, the common areas were not maintained and utility bills fell into arrears. The lack of a functioning Body Corporate meant that there was no levy collection mechanism. The result was that the building fell into a state of disrepair, and residents have collectively accumulated debt to the tune of hundreds of thousands of Rands. As a physical, material structure, Flamingo Court and its grounds are a shadow of what they used to be. With no functional Body Corporate, and extensive debt to the municipality (in some cases, individual owners also owed the banks), Flamingo Court was eventually placed under administration in 2010.

Sectional Title Schemes are not the most suitable ownership model for lower income households. This model requires regular income and prompt payment of monthly levies to the Body Corporate, among other expenses. In turn, the Body Corporate needs to ensure that rules are implemented and that it administers the maintenance and general upkeep of the building (Jacobs 2015, Petersen 2015, Broughton 2015). Sectional Title blocks require ‘co-operation between many different owners’ to
function (Erwin 2011: 91). As will be gleaned from the interviews and other data collected for this research, cooperation operates at different levels in Flamingo Court, including relations of solidarity, and collaboration amongst residents. However, people’s precarious economic position derailed attempts at co-operation that demand financial commitment.

This report explores the ways in which residents make a home in the degraded environment of Flamingo Court. Through a series of interviews and other data collection methods conducted over several months, the study shed light on various forms of place making, whereby the notion of infrastructure can be linked to people’s activity, with reference to AbdouMaliq Simone’s notion of ‘people as infrastructure’ (2004). Networks of cooperation and solidarity compensate for an ‘overused’, ‘half-built environment’ (Simone 2004: 425), rendering urban spaces such as Flamingo Court functional. Home becomes relational and is created at the junction where the built and social environments, and personal histories meet.

**Flamingo Court in the wider neighbourhood**

With its more than 1,000 residents¹, Flamingo Court could be described as a neighbourhood within a neighbourhood that mirrors Durban’s social and political dynamics. Owners and tenants, families, the youth and the elderly, and South African and foreign nationals share Flamingo Court’s precarious social and built environments marked by intergenerational households, a high proportion of women-headed households, and high rates of unemployment and poverty.

The arrival of a court-appointed administrator in 2010 seemingly signified a change in the sense of neighbourliness and community among residents. There is also an on-going court case around evictions to auction individual units. This has been widely reported in local media such as *The Berea Mail, The Daily News* and *The Mercury*. More often than not, these reports depict Flamingo Court as one of Durban’s ‘bad buildings’, a narrative that silences the diversity of voices of its eclectic mix of residents. In cases like these, the courthouse becomes a site of struggle, used by residents to articulate their identity and sense of belonging and as a debt collection system (Roy 2018: A1, A4). Several residents’ flats are being auctioned, as dispossessed residents face ‘social death’, to borrow Achille Mbembe’s phrase (cited in Roy 2018: A9). The prospect of losing their flat represents a recurrent threat of exclusion from a relatively stable environment that enables access to the city and its services. Most residents we met during the course of our research enjoy the proximity to services and economic opportunities, and for some this was the reason they moved to Flamingo Court in the first place. Sarah Charlton speaks of three interrelated dimensions of inclusion in the city, namely, residents’ entitlement to municipal services; obligations and responsibilities towards the city; and ‘residents’ material, psychological and financial commitment to the city’ (2010: 4).

Despite the negative press and its notoriety as a building – it was even dubbed ‘the Ponte of Durban’², a ‘slum’ and ‘coffin court’ in local media – Flamingo Court has a rich social life. As a building and

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¹ This is a rough, conservative estimate as no official census was carried out at Flamingo Court. Some residents estimate this number to be much higher, as many flats house up to 10 occupants.

² Ponte Tower is a high-rise building in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. Built in 1975, the 54-storey building fell from its former grace in the 1990s, infamously representing inner-city decay and degeneration.
community, it underwent several changes punctuated by landmark transitions, such as the transition to democracy in the 1990s when it was opened to residents of all races; the transition from public to private housing in 2002; and the change from management by a Body Corporate to a court-appointed administrator in 2010. Situated on prime urban land and along major transport routes, in close proximity to key economic hubs such as the harbour and container terminals, the railway, hospitals, schools, and a mall and shops, Flamingo Court is a coveted place of residence for families and individuals seeking proximity to economic, educational, health and social opportunities. In this framework, inclusion in the city can be understood as ‘the ability to access urban infrastructure’ (Charlton 2010: 3). This is in stark contrast to residents who have been housed in Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) units primarily built on the urban periphery. For many residents, Flamingo Court extends well beyond the confines of the building and the land it is built on. The entire neighbourhood and nearby Queensmead Mall, for example, are places where residents meet one another, work and feel at home. Kenneth Gardens, a municipal housing scheme within walking distance of Flamingo Court, also plays an important part in the ways in which residents identify with the neighbourhood. Several residents have friends, family members and memories straddling both places.

The Court Case: eThekwini Municipality Vs Flamingo Court

Flamingo Court is characterised by an array of ownership and occupancy models that at times intersect. These include tenants who rent directly from the owner; tenants who rent from other tenants; owners who cannot pay levies; owners who pay levies; owners who live in their flat and sublet rooms; absentee owners; owners who acquired their property through auction; owners who lived through the transition from public to private housing; and strangely, a few units that are still owned by eThekwini Municipality. As a Sectional Title Scheme, a Board of Trustees is meant to administer the financial affairs on behalf of owners and is appointed by the Body Corporate, while the Body Corporate is the collective that owns the units and the common property. The collective nature of a Sectional Title Scheme is key to its success, or its failure. As pointed out elsewhere (Erwin 2011), the supervisor, body corporate, board of trustees and residents need to cooperate and implement strict rules to ensure that the building doesn’t descend into a spiral of debt, dispossession and lost tenure. This rings true in the case of Flamingo Court, a building comprising 200 units that is run as a collective ownership scheme where owners do not enjoy much protection by housing rights organisations and the ombud. Indeed, cases where flats are auctioned because owners have accumulated debt due to non-payment of levies cannot be treated as eviction and are considered as regular market transactions in keeping with the capitalist logic of the private model of property ownership. The politics of emplacement, which could be defined as positioning in a space providing a vantage point from which to resist, can be seen as a means to cope with the threat of dispossession (Roy 2017: A1). Ananya Roy (2017) further discusses the collective aspect of the politics of emplacement, which in the case of Flamingo Court could be understood in terms of the relationship amongst owners facing the threat of their flat being placed on auction due to accumulated debt, but reclaiming their right through ‘asserting (collective) personhood through human rights’ (Roy 2017: A7). This collective aspect refers to individuals who claim the right to their property ‘by virtue of their
relationship to a community of individuals who were in the aggregate property owners’ (Roy 2017: A7). It is located in claims of neighbourhood and community. Roy further argues that:

> What is at stake here is how the project of asserting (collective) property rights through emplacement is entangled with the work of asserting (collective) personhood through human rights. (2017: A7)

In a case such as that of Flamingo Court, whereby social housing became private housing, and where identity and a sense of ownership straddle collective and individual, the lines between public and private housing rights and responsibilities are at times blurred. Change is perceived and lived differently by different residents. The change from a rental to an ownership model undoubtedly changed the relationships among residents, and their relationship with the space. The series of interviews that were conducted for this research speak to this idea of a transition and transformation of the social and physical infrastructure of Flamingo Court, as the meanings attached to home and neighbourliness change and are at times conflicted. The degradation of the built environment inevitably altered the social environment and relations amongst neighbours, as changing livelihood practices transformed both the social and physical context and what it means to live in Flamingo Court.

This research report details these changes through the fieldwork carried out by the research team, as well as fieldwork researchers that were identified in the process. The contradictions and nuances attached to the before/after privatisation moment are untangled and made sense of through the voices of residents. Through a mix of desktop, interview, participative and visual research methods, the voices of residents are amplified. The community activism taking ground amongst residents was supported in so far as possible, through providing information and linkages with external resources that can offer assistance and counsel on the ongoing court case. However, the focus of the research was deepening the understanding of social relations among residents as neighbours, and the relationship with Flamingo Court as a built structure in a changing urban landscape.

An underlying concern throughout the research process was to be mindful of not doing extractive research, and while supporting the residents in their activism and applying some participation-action research principles, to be conscious of our limitations as lay individuals without legal expertise. As such, we acknowledged and assumed our position as outsiders, and adopted a principle of solidarity with the residents of Flamingo Court. Some resident-led initiatives emerged from this research process, many of which were already in the pipe line and were further stimulated by the reflections and reflexions induced by the research process. Whatever the case may be, what is presented below is what could be achieved within the short space of time allocated to this research³, and dissemination of the research outputs could lead to further research and action.

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³ The research process started in 2017 but was interrupted halfway due to unforeseen circumstances and changes within the research team. We effectively commenced our field research in 2018.
Methodology and research team

Upon entering Flamingo Court, a visitor can immediately feel the vibrant atmosphere permeating the building. Voices resonate along the corridors and against the walls, echoing through the central courtyard. The sounds of children playing soccer in the corridors mix with the chatter of residents patiently waiting for the only operational lift servicing the 13 floors, while neighbours discuss the latest news next to the rows of post boxes in the foyer. Within minutes of stepping into the building, one is overcome by a feeling of entering a city within a city, where an eclectic mix of residents navigates the crowded corridors and bypasses the long queue forming in front of the lift. The photogenic appeal of the building, the diversity of backgrounds and life experiences of residents, and the feeling that walls can indeed talk, all lend themselves to a rich narrative of resilience and neighbourliness that often clashes with the negative stories narrated in the media and popular discourses about Flamingo Court.

Combining visual analysis, and participatory, creative, and traditional research methodologies enabled the team to collect rich narrative data. Academic research, photography and filmmaking were combined to inform the participative and creative processes and explore ideas of space, place, homeliness and identity. The course of the process and further consultation with the field researchers and residents will determine the format of the feedback sessions. The main components of the research methodology included filmmaking, photography and oral history interviews, as explained below.

Filmmaking

Video making expanded on the narratives of the interviews and photographic components of the project and provided avenues for the participants and residents of Flamingo Court to express themselves directly and engage in a dialogue with neighbours and the environment. As noted by Sarah Pink (2001, cited by Mitchell 2008), the use of video breaks down the hierarchy between visual and textual data, and enables both output and process to be analysed as data (Mitchell 2008, 372). The field researchers played an active role in the video making process, taking on the roles of producer, sound assistant or interviewer, and contributing metadata about the interviews and interviewees. The
creative documentary thus produced became both a data collection tool and a dissemination tool for the research and opened an opportunity for additional action and participation following the viewing of the video documentary.

The video component was spearheaded by producer Tiny Mungwe and cameraperson Similo Gcobinga.

Photography

Rafs Mayet headed the photography component of the project. Using the camera as a tool that brings visual meanings to the life narratives of residents, photography was used to produce professionally curated ‘eloquent data’⁴, and as part of a visual research methodology. Photo-elicitation is used to generate data, as ‘using photographs (either those generated through photo-voice or photo images brought to the interview either by the participants or the researcher) to elicit data offers [...] researchers an entry point into the views, perspectives and experiences of participants’ (Mitchell 2008: 369). Three field researchers were provided with cameras and asked to photograph spaces meaningful to everyday life in and around Flamingo Court. These were the subject of discussions, generating data in the form of photographs and unstructured discussions/interviews. Moreover, this exercise provided the opportunity for photography skills development through training and workshops.

Furthermore, the camera perspective locates Flamingo Court as a high rise building in the industrial polluted, truck-infested locale, yet centrally located on prime urban land in a coveted neighbourhood. Ultimately the photography work in its curated form creates visual references to the diversity of Flamingo Court in relation to the wider neighbourhood, and joins the dots between space, place and people.

Both these curated photographs and sets of eloquent data will be exhibited as part of the dissemination of the research, threading a visual narrative through a photo essay that can be read in conjunction with the written report and video documentary.

Visual and traditional methodologies

The data collection tools employed were interdisciplinary and participatory, and also included more traditional data collection methods such as a review of secondary literature, archival research, structured and semi-structured interviews, observation/field visits and focus group discussions. Participatory activities to elicit data also included mapping, a root tree analysis and regular informal discussions and meetings with field researchers and residents during our many visits to Flamingo Court over more than a year. The research process was documented through film and photography, and the footage and photos became ‘visual data in and of themselves’ (Mitchell 2008: 371). These data sets include:

- professionally curated images
- photos created by field researchers
- video documentary
- footage produced through participatory video making
- field notes
- observation notes
- interview transcripts

⁴ This phrase was coined by Peter McKenzie, who participated in the elaboration of the proposal underpinning this research project.
The research design included the visual and participatory processes outlined above, as well as more traditional research methods such as interviews. The usage of mixed methods contributed to the narrative linking the three main research outputs, namely film, photo essay and written report. The written report was led by Rachel Matteau Matsha.

The interdisciplinary aspect of the project including creative and participatory methodologies allowed the research process to amplify a variety of voices through different media and angles, and – it is hoped – created skills and social impact. Paulo Freire argues that working as a group in a collective process enhances creativity while being humanising and affirmative (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1968). We used visual methodologies as a means to collect, interpret, represent and disseminate data. As Claudia Mitchell points out (2008: 366), data collection becomes an intervention that is transformative for the participants, as they become co-producers of knowledge. There is no doubt that the upcoming participatory feedback sessions will elicit additional sets of data, interpretations and readings of meanings attached to home and neighbourliness at Flamingo Court. The feedback from residents on the photographs and video documentary could possibly lead to subsequent research with a focus on the visual methodology and interpretative processes used for the purpose of this first phase of the research.

Material culture

Material culture also played a role in our reading of home and neighbourliness in Flamingo Court. Flamingo Court is in many respects a photogenic building. Its imperfections combined with the familiar atmosphere created by its residents contribute to the building’s unorthodox aesthetic and appeal. Signage in common transiting spaces, framed photographs and the inherited collections of decorative objects adorning the residents’ flats speak of a sense of homeliness, of intergenerational cohabitation, and of the various everyday uses and social interactions occurring within these sturdy brick walls. These objects can be considered as a third party in the interview sessions and interactions with residents, as pointed out by Collier and Collier (1986 cited by Mitchell 2008: 369), creating an array of visual data that complements the textual data. These material objects – which can also be read as texts – speak of the residents’ many ways of occupying and using the space.
Some signage in common spaces clearly dates from the time Flamingo Court was part of the municipal housing stock and were placed from a position of authority and control over the space, as hinted by the language use and languages used, layout and mere materiality of the signs, for instance. Other signs were recently ‘homemade’ by concerned residents trying to organise and mobilise towards regaining control of the building, as the photocopied nature of at times incorrectly spelled signs reveals. All this signage speaks of the various usages of the space, ranging from small, informal businesses and services operating from the building; to sets of rules designed by newly, self-appointed ‘floor managers’; notices of residents’ meetings in the wake of the court case; rules; and improvised notices and classified ads, to name but a few amongst many signs connoting the various uses and meanings attached to the space. These images, signs, objects and things speak to the idea of residents as producers of ideas and knowledge, and further hint at the everyday life and transactions taking place in the building and the various relations with it as infrastructure. Residents inscribe their personal stories on the walls, revealing ‘autobiography and memory, along with their denotative histories, which may be more social and factual’ (Mitchell 2008: 373). The interconnection between the built environment, space and personal identity is also observed through a close reading of graffiti, as discussed further below.

The degraded allure of the building and omnipresent collection of discarded and littered objects further allude to the (ab)use of the infrastructure over the years. For many residents, Flamingo Court is the only place that can be called home, and the mutation of the building from being maintained by
the municipality to its present state punctuated their life stories. In many ways, the visual aspect of the building not only speaks of its physical condition, but also of the popular culture and youth culture created and experienced by residents of Flamingo Court, and of the idea that ‘Flamingo is a lifestyle’ (group discussion with field researchers, 20 February 2019).

The writing is on the wall: graffiti and identity
Graffiti are often associated with decay, degradation, loss of control over the built environment, and a reflection of a community in decline (Vanden-Eynden 2014). However, graffiti in Flamingo Court could also be seen as embodying a popular culture and visual culture unique to the place, as a tangible mark of social and self-expression. Tags, words and images adorn the walls – both inside and outside – located at the interface where people and the building meet, and where private property meets the public space. Graffiti acts as a canvas where residents subvert the transient and temporary nature of their occupation of the space, as a specific moment in personal history is permanently inscribed in concrete. The interpretations of graffiti by field researchers evoke the life narratives of those who produced these images and inscriptions and tell the stories of people who have come and gone, and who left marks at a particular time in the history of the building. They speak of time and place, and of a sense of place identity. Graffiti can be seen all over the building, in the corridors, stairways, lifts, and on boundary walls. A high concentration of graffiti can be found in a specific place made by the youth and dubbed the Mushroom, signifying alternative place making and territoriality.

First meetings with residents
We first made contact with residents via acquaintances of the research team members. After a few informal meetings, they agreed to become our field researchers, and we adopted a participatory research method. The field researchers – Sphamandla Jozana (Bar), Mfundo Zenthembe Sibiya (Mfana), Gcina Mchunu, and Bulelani Jozana – assisted with facilitating a first open meeting with residents on 7 December 2017. They were chosen as they grew up in the building; know the residents and their ins and outs; their parents lived the transition from public to private housing; they mingle with diverse residents from the building (in terms of race, model of occupancy; age group); and are knowledgeable about the history of Flamingo and central in the on-going court case affecting the daily life of its residents.

We met outside the building on the front lawn, next to the pedestrian entrance off Umbilo Road. The noise pollution from trucks and traffic sometimes overpowered our voices, while curious passers-by peeped through the fence in the hopes of hearing what this was about despite the noise and our best attempts to speak over roaring engines, tyre brakes and defective exhaust pipes.

We introduced the gist of the project in English and isiZulu, to a group of perhaps 30 or so residents – mainly women. We took great care to explain that we were not making promises and bringing answers but were looking at documenting a social history of Flamingo Court, through the voices and eyes of its residents. Responses to our presence and the research project were mixed, met with scepticism by some, and indifference and enthusiasm by others. A large number of residents were sceptical, as several people, groups and organisations had worked with Flamingo Court but failed to deliver on their promises. We heard about the Legal Resources Centre, for example, that, according to residents had often been involved without significant results, at least according to the participants at the first meeting. Wary of raising expectations, we were quick to point out that we were not coming with solutions but rather with questions.

The community must stand up; no one can help us. Only we can help ourselves.

- Bulelani
We learned after the meeting that most of the residents that attended were title deed owners, desperate to make the building work and restore their agency as decision makers and form a Body Corporate, having lived the transition from public to private. Some were keen to participate and were in full support, while others were supportive without wanting to be involved, and a few needed much more convincing. Others genuinely didn’t care, seeing no harm in us wanting to speak to residents and amplify their voices. We explained that we were from the area and knew Flamingo Court through friends and through local media coverage on the building, and had frequented it on several occasions for social reasons.

We agreed to let the festive season pass before embarking on the project and promised to return in the new year for more engagement. We left with a positive feeling, discussing with some residents who stayed behind and others who had stood aside and wanted to hear directly from us. Amongst these was a young student, who was interested and seemed to understand the potential of a research project of this nature. Another resident who wanted to speak with us was an elderly white woman, who warned us about ‘these people’ and related how she and her adult son were victims of alleged racist attacks, with the son’s car being repeatedly damaged. She was desolate about how things had changed since ‘they’ came to stay in the building. As we walked back to our car parked on the premises at the back of the building, we were warned about not walking too close to the building as people had a habit of throwing rubbish through the windows. We were also advised not to park too close to the bushes as rats could eat the wires and cables. When we arrived and left the building, the gate was wide open with no security in sight. The degradation of the building and lack of application of the rules was immediately evident.

On 28 January 2018, through the field researchers, we met with a group of residents who were present at the initial meeting. The group was made up of title deed owners, some of whom were once members of the now defunct Body Corporate. One of their wishes was – and still is – to successfully hold an Annual General Meeting and set up an efficient, representative Body Corporate to regain control of the building. We met in a participant’s flat, as we were informed that the hall and other common areas were locked and inaccessible to residents as they were full of plumbing equipment belonging to the Municipality. The delay in installing water meters is seen as being at the root of the debt problem, as residents refused to pay towards a collective water bill, demanding that individual meters be installed. This maintenance was completed while we were carrying out the project, but the contentious unpaid debt remains.

This first meeting took the form of a conversation with the field researchers and a group of ten women, who for the most part lived the transition from public housing to private ownership and raised children and families in the flats. We reflected on the current situation and some concerns were shared about various issues, including overcrowding, security, drugs and alcohol consumption, lack of involvement of owners, unemployment rates amongst residents and especially the youth, the role of rental agent Flatfinders, and the enigmatic management, the governing body of the building, and property developers invested in the building.

The animosity between residents and management was palpable, as the pending court case left a feeling of uncertainty in terms of tenure, occupancy and sense of belonging in the flats. It became apparent that some residents felt their agency was threatened by the presence of a court-appointed administrator. We got the first hint that the transition from social housing to private ownership was a defining moment for the residents of Flamingo Court, the transition period being held responsible for the divisions appearing in the once close-knit community.
It was late afternoon on a Sunday, and the building was busy with people cooking, and others returning from running errands. Children were playing in the corridors, youngsters were smoking and drinking and listening to loud music in the corridor, and washing was hanging in the passages. We agreed on the need to find an alternative venue for meetings, mindful of the necessity of being more inclusive and enabling everyone who wished to attend to feel welcome, regardless of background, status and position in the building. This time, as we left the parking lot, there was a security guard at the parking lot gate who had made us sign a visitors’ register but without asking many questions. We were told this was yet another newly appointed security company.

A third meeting was called on 4 February 2018. Following our failed attempts to find an alternative venue, we ended up meeting in the same flat, with more or less the same group of women that we had met previously, and some new participants who had heard about the project. We were once again welcomed and felt at ease. We updated the group on some of the readings and research we had done on Flamingo Court. We tried to find out more about the governance of the building, the Body Corporate, board of trustees and models of ownership in the block of flats. We were told amongst many other things that all title deed owners were the residents’ committee, and it became clear that there had not been a functioning body corporate and AGM in years. We noted that there was no common plan or strategy for regaining control of the building and for dealing with the on-going court case.

We picked up the discussion where we had left off at our previous meeting, seeking to better understand the causes of these issues affecting everyday life in Flamingo Court. Intergenerational households were identified as an unintended cause of overcrowding, as many households do not have a ‘fall-back’ place such as a yard or piece of land to erect outbuildings or additional rooms, for example. Another cause is sub-letting, a practice often associated with developers and investors who use their flats to generate income. The elusive figure of the ‘foreigner’ was also cited on several occasions as being a cause of overcrowding. Further concerns included lack of access control; cleanliness and maintenance of the building; failing infrastructure; and the lack of rules (or application thereof). The group of residents further denounced the practice whereby an investor was cited as owning as many as 20 flats, each rented out to several occupants who in turn sub-let, leading to overcrowding. This practice, common to many buildings around Durban, often means maximum profit and minimal maintenance costs for these investors-owners.

Participants in this discussion agreed that the research project could serve to highlight some of the challenges facing Flamingo Court residents, while playing a role in advocating for better understanding and support for owners who are faced with a lengthy court case arising from debt incurred for municipal services and utilities, mainly due to non-payment of levies by some owners. We also spoke about the need to prioritise issues, with holding an AGM being the ultimate goal as it would mean that there would have been mobilisation and organising in the building.

As we reached the conclusion of our meeting, we enquired how we could obtain consent from owners in the absence of a functioning Body Corporate and given the visible distrust of the court-appointed administration. We resolved to go door-to-door to introduce ourselves and the project with an information letter and to contact Flatfinders to find out more about access to common areas as well as authorisation to conduct research as they were the main gatekeeper. We contacted Flatfinders, and received a response stating no objection to the project taking place but forbidding us from ‘cold calling’ on residents. However, citing the right to freedom of association and the fact that we in fact already knew quite a few people in the building before the project, we decided to carry on.
Door-to-door meet and greet

During our door-to-door visits (March and April 2018) we moved down from the 13th to the 1st floor together with the field researchers. Generally speaking, residents felt more relaxed as they recognised familiar faces among us, outsiders who had recently started to regularly frequent Flamingo Court. We found that residents were generally positive about the project, at times even intrigued by our interest in conducting research in Flamingo Court. While some were not interested in hearing about the project, others wanted to know more, and others to participate and be interviewed.

The meet and greet gave us a good grasp of the diversity of residents: owners, tenants, South Africans, African nationals, single mothers, families, grand-mother headed households, the elderly, residents who inherited the flat from their parents, single young people, drug dealers, shop keepers, a life skills support group for foreign girls using a flat as a meeting place, a flat with a security surveillance camera looking on the passage over the door, flats with no doors, tuckshops, some with pets, many children, familiar faces in the neighbourhood such as car guards working at Queensmead Mall, professionals, the self-employed, and students. We further saw the various levels of maintenance in the flats: from fully furnished, single family flats, to overcrowded, subdivided and poorly maintained units.

After completing our door-to-door visits, we gathered in the corridor and took stock of the everyday activities taking place in the building: a group of youngsters sitting on beer cases in the passage drinking and smoking, children playing soccer, people passing by minding their own business. Some residents approached us, interested (or curious?) to know what we were doing, as we were obviously outsiders. We left that afternoon feeling positive, as we slowly became more acquainted with the people and the building, learning to appreciate the ambient sounds and scents, and the colourfulness of its characters.

Interviews

Besides informal discussions with random residents in the corridors, numerous days and weekends spent in the building, and meetings with field researchers, structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with some residents between March 2018 and February 2019. We placed posters inviting participants to the interviews in the building, and field researchers were instrumental in identifying those wanting to be interviewed, following our request for a representative sample in terms of status (owner/tenant), length of stay in the building, race, gender, and nationality, amongst other criteria. Along the way, we seemingly lost the support of the initial group of women we had met repeatedly in the early days of our project. We sensed that there were expectations that our video documentary would adopt an investigative approach à la ‘Carte Blanche’ or ‘Special Assignment’, which we agreed amongst us didn’t fit the scope of the project. We nevertheless held participatory-action sessions with some youth in the building – some of whom are children of these women – on mobilisation and activism and facilitated the collection of information and research relevant to the court case.
Throughout the project, we met people who were involved at different levels in the court case, although we could and would not get directly involved. For example, the session with Professor Marius Pieterse facilitated by the Urban Futures Centre in August 2018, where one of our field researchers participated, was extremely valuable as it provided tools to organise for the court case and general organisation in the building, and to make sense of the situation in general. It furthermore provided data and information relevant to the research. The information and inputs shared during this session were later shared by the field researcher with other concerned residents who had formed a small, informal ‘court case committee’. This ‘committee’ was principally made up of young residents who grew up in the building, and for whom Flamingo Court is the only home they know. In a way, they represent the new generation that will take over the flats acquired from the municipality by their parents, and this sense of intergenerational duty and commitment was evocative of a sense of attachment and belonging to the place.

Several interviews were scheduled week after week, but many never materialised due to the unavailability of those we were hoping to interview. Perhaps some potential participants became camera-shy, as all interviews were filmed, and audio recorded. In retrospect, this might have proven to be a limitation in that answers were perhaps less spontaneous than anonymous interviews. Furthermore, filming required more preparation and coordination on our part to secure video equipment and personnel, meaning that we perhaps did not conduct as many interviews as we could have hoped for. Team work also comes with challenges, the least being the availability of all members of the group at the same time. However, we feel that the mix of data collection methods combined with the wealth of information and knowledge shared by the field researchers ensured that the data were triangulated and as such are considered valid and reliable.

The main objective of the interviews was to understand the experiences of interviewed residents in terms of the past, present and hopes for the future. They were semi-structured and sought to understand what had changed in the everyday life of residents since Flamingo Court became a Sectional Title Scheme. The interviews also led to discussions on the social interactions and social networks amongst residents, which often took a turn towards the court case and levy issues, and the roles and responsibilities of the current management and residents.

An area that all interviewees agreed on was the hope of seeing better days at Flamingo Court and for its residents, as a general sense of nostalgia for the former state during the social housing era was palpable. A clear correlation was observable between the physical and social infrastructure of the building. Many residents long for the harmonious sense of community and togetherness that was seemingly broken following the transition from public to private housing. While most participants admitted to having nowhere else to go due to financial constraints, Flamingo Court remains a home of choice, given its central location and social infrastructure. Other discussions touched on the positive aspects and challenges related to living in Flamingo Court, and the life trajectory that led the resident there.

**Place identity and place attachment**

The research was underpinned by an inquiry into what makes Flamingo Court a place and a home, and how and why residents identify with, and self-identify through Flamingo Court – in terms of the built environment, the people who live in it, and the self. In terms of the etymology of the key words ‘place’ and ‘identity’, the Latin for place is *platea,* meaning ‘open space’, while identity comes from the Latin word *idem,* meaning ‘same’. Place identity speaks of a communion between the geographical and
social aspects of our lived experience, whereby the space is transformed into a place by virtue of being used and inhabited, or the ‘symbiotic relationship between place and identity’ (Grey and O’Toole 2018: 1). Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff define place identity as:

... a sub-structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of, broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behaviour and experience which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being. At the core of such physical environment-related cognitions is the “environmental past” of the person; a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person’s biological, psychological, social and cultural needs. (1983: 59)

The development of self-identity, a prerequisite for place identity, is not only about differentiating between the self and others, but also about the knowledge, use and feeling developed through everyday activities and lived experiences, actively transforming a space into a place (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff 1983: 57). Finding oneself in a specific space and making it a place can happen as the result of the fulfilment of a need, alluding to the functional dimension of place making. The sense of place evolves and develops over time, as the self (including our needs), the environment and our relationship with the built and social environment change over time. For example, the need for a safer, cleaner Flamingo Court recently led to resident-led initiatives, such as the appointment of ‘floor managers’ and residents going door-to-door to identify those who do not comply with the rules of the building. This mobilisation speaks of a need for order, for rules that seem to have been lost along the way. The transition from public to private housing seems to represent a shifting point in the application of the rules and in the meanings attached to home and neighbourliness for Flamingo Court residents, as is discussed further below. However, while negatively impacting on the environment, the lack of strict rules represents an advantage for some residents, as it brings a sense of freedom to negotiate the space, a paradox highlighted during a conversation with Sifiso, who has been a tenant of Flamingo Court for more than 12 years. This point is elaborated in more detail below, in relation to the role of nostalgia in shaping place identity and attachment.

Place identity could be conceptualised as a ‘physical environment “data base” against which every physical setting experience can be experienced and responded to in some way’ (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff 1983: 66). Place attachment is part of place identity, and it includes developing memories, values, ideas and relationships with the place and its surroundings. Place attachment could be described as the connection between people and a place, and the impact of these connections on our identity, perceptions and practices of everyday life. In other words, ‘the bonding of people to place’ (Altman and Low 1992: 2), which also involves emotions, knowledge, behaviour and practice in relation to a place (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff 1983). The process of identifying with – and making – a place involves individual, social, and material dimensions. According to Altman and Low (1992: 3), place attachment is complementary to other ideas and concepts including topophilia (Tuan, 1974), place identity (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983), insidedness (Rowles, 1980), genres of places (Hufford, Chapter 11), a sense of place rootedness (Chawla, Chapter 4), environmental embeddedness, community sentiment and identity (Hummon, Chapter 12).

Taking stock of these interconnected notions to unpack the concepts of place identity and place attachment enables us to understand the feeling of homeliness experienced by people in relation to a specific place and the broader neighbourhood. Building on these theoretical considerations around place identity and attachment, the meanings of home and neighbourliness negotiated by the residents of Flamingo Court are discussed. What makes Flamingo Court particularly interesting in understanding
this sense of homeliness and neighbourliness is the ways in which the transition from public to private ownership affected the process of place making or perhaps more suitably, place re-making. The findings below address the following research questions:

- What meanings do residents attach to home and neighbourliness in Flamingo Court?
- What kinds of place identities developed and develop in this space, before and after privatisation?
- How does the changing built environment impact on the social environment, and shape people’s sense of home, belonging and neighbourhood?
- How do residents transform the built environment through everyday livelihood practices and ways of belonging?
- What are the intended and unintended social consequences of living in previously state delivered housing that is now privatised?

In responding to these questions, the specificity of Flamingo Court as a housing scheme that underwent major changes informs the analysis of what it means to make a home in a context of transition.

Findings

1. The sense of homeliness is relational to the physical and social environments

By the residents own admission, Flamingo Court is plagued by many problems. As the root tree analysis focus group conducted with residents revealed (1 June 2018), these are mainly caused by the accumulated debt owed by residents to banks, the maintenance fund and for utilities, the absence of a governing body and the ensuing degradation of the building. In turn, the roots of these causes lie in the change in ownership of the building. It has been well documented that in cases like these, where most owners are economically vulnerable, sectional title schemes are notorious for leading to the rapid degradation of the built environment and high levels of urban poverty (du Plessis 2004; Erwin 2014). This is in stark contradiction to the often-held assumption that ownership has wealth-creation potential (Charlton 2010: 1). In an interview with the Berea Mail, the court-appointed administrator, Andre Grundler, described Flamingo Court as having reached near slum status, which he deplored as a ‘government created disaster’ (25 March 2015). Irma du Plessis is correct in observing that inability to pay for the maintenance of a Sectional Building Scheme can be anticipated in cases where residents-now-owners were defaulting on rent payments under the social housing scheme (2004: 92), which is precisely the case at Flamingo Court. Jabu, an owner whose flat is on auction and who is facing dispossession couldn’t agree more:

One has to ask, when you say single parents and pensioners, what do you expect will happen when they are no longer employed? For you to come back and threaten them with eviction? Where are the human rights in that? What does the Constitution say, in fact, about the poor? (Interview, 31 March 2018)

Betty reiterated this when she said that if she knew what she knows now, she would have never bought the flat.

Transition can be defined as the ‘process of changing from one system to another’, or ‘the processes of changing from one condition to another’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Rowles (1980) conceives of a transition as a passage, a change in a person’s relationship with the social and physical environmental context. Flamingo Court residents experienced several changes and transitions in their environment, with a major turning point occurring when the municipality sold the units to their
respective tenants, in the early 2000s. Some tenants bought their flats; of these some remained while others used their newly acquired property as an income generator. Previous tenants who were beneficiaries of a social housing programme centred on people with a precarious economic status became owners, suddenly participating in a capitalist driven property market without necessarily being familiar with its rules and implications, and what these meant in terms of everyday life practices and administrative affairs. This move aimed to provide long-term housing security for the new tenants and their families, although it could be argued that it was equally a pretext for the municipality to let go of a building running at a deficit. Meanwhile, some people from the ‘outside’ – outsiders in Rowles’ definition of the term (1980) discussed below – also bought flats, either to make a home or rent them out. These movements inevitably created change in the social composition of Flamingo Court.

An unintended consequence of the Flamingo Court transaction between the municipality and tenants was a perturbation of the status quo, as the community socially construed over the years was suddenly unsettled, challenged and required to re-imagine itself. Previously, tenants were part of the social housing scheme and while not owning their flats, were de-facto owners of the space without having to assume the financial costs associated with the administration and maintenance of the building. With the privatisation of tenure, a sense of collective ownership made way for individual, private ownership. The question is how residents make sense of Flamingo Court now, in comparison to before the privatisation? A quick answer could be a change in the sense of community and a changed relationship with the built environment, as new meanings are attached to Flamingo Court both inside and outside the confines of its built structure. The discussion below unpacks these ideas and discusses how people can remake a place when the social and built environments are reshaped, bearing in mind that physical form, activity and the meaning of space mingle to create a place (Montgomery 1998, cited in Ujang and Zakariya 2015: 710). Furthermore, it is argued that places are dynamic and regenerate, ‘as people struggle to adapt to new meanings that might have detached from their culture and identity’ (Ujang and Zakariya 2015: 711).

The sense of place in a context of transition could be articulated through differentiation between insiders and outsiders for whom a place has no meaning. Rowles (1980) speaks of ‘insidedness’ to describe the bond between people and place that informs a sense of belonging. Relph further explains: ‘To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with the place’ (1976: 49, quoted in Rowles 1980: 156). In light of Relph’s explanation, the depth of insidedness could be said to concern the meanings that are created and embedded in a place, bearing in mind that the concept of place is both psychological and physical. The notion of a depth of insidedness speaks to the idea of rootedness, which could be described as a deep association with place (Tuan 1980).

It is of course possible to think about differences without othering. Being an ‘insider’, or ‘rooted in a place’, means much more than simply living in a flat in Flamingo Court. It means making sense of the space, making use of it in relation to the outside. Sphamandla’s comment that Flamingo Court is much more than a house to him, that it is his home, is pertinent in this regard, as the homeliness is actively created, its position in relation to the outside fully acknowledged (Interview, 6 May 2018). The dualism of insidedness and outsideness is articulated through interactions inside a place and relationships with spaces outside the ‘community’. While this idea of the inside and outside speaks to the physical environment, it also speaks to the social environment. As pointed out elsewhere (Erwin 2011), the figure of the other is often blamed for the changes that negatively impact on a place. With reference to Rowles’ idea of insidedness, the figure of the ‘outsider’ was invariably interchanged with the ‘other’ in the speech of several participants interviewed for this study. The outsider is quickly identified (and sometimes vilified) by those inside, often blamed for having disrupted the sense of community and
continuity, as related by Bulelani: ‘You get people coming from outside who come and do things in our building and people think it’s Flamingo people, but it’s not true. We don’t know who is who anymore’ (Interview, 5 July 2018). Betty, an elderly resident who has been living in Flamingo for more than 40 years, also sees the outsiders as a source of imbalance in the sense of community, from whom she wants to ‘save Flamingo’:

I hope with the help of God we can save this place from all these people that come to stay here, the drug dealers, the people who come from outside and make Flamingo a rubbish den. Because they come from outside and they stay with each other as drug addicts... That’s all I can say, that God can help us take out all the rubbish. (Interview 21 January 2019)

Despite this well-rehearsed argument that ‘foreigners’ and new residents came with the ills afflicting Flamingo Court, the root of the problem lies in the accumulated debt, which led to the degradation of the built and social environments. By all accounts, the accumulation of debt following privatisation is seen as the moment the environment changed, and rests on owners who are responsible for the levies fund. As Kira Erwin observes, ‘urban decay is an issue of irresponsible ownership rather than an issue created by tenants’ (2011: 95).

This idea of ‘Flamingo people’ speaks of a strong identity with the place, while the arrival of the outsider seemingly coincides with a change, a shift in the sense of community. However, as Irma du Plessis notes, the sense of community might be broken or ruptured, but some everyday practices still point in the direction of neighbourliness (2004: 904). The ‘outsider’, in the case of Flamingo Court, could be thought of as residents who moved to Flamingo Court from elsewhere after the privatisation. It speaks of the concept of rootedness (Tuan 1980, quoted in Proshansky 1983: 60), whereby only those who developed this deep ‘unselfconscious association’ or attachment with the place can be thought of as ‘insiders’.

For some participants, the moment things started ‘to go down’ is associated with the change in the social fabric of the Flamingo community, as expressed by Gcina:

When Flamingo started going down, a whole of people left, I mean the ones who could afford, they left and then they neglected their flats. So the ones who couldn’t afford were the ones who now suffer. I don’t want to say they suffer because of all the people who left. It is because they neglect their flat and started renting their flat, and then foreigners came and they didn’t care, as long as they got their money. (Interview 5 June 2018)

For the generations who grew up in Flamingo Court, this is the only home they know. For example, Gcina grew up in Flamingo Court but is now living a small distance from the building, in the same neighbourhood. His sense of belonging to Flamingo Court is strong, having grown up and lived there most of his life. He said: ‘I grew up here you know, I grew up in the place, I am from the place so I cannot not fit in’ (Interview, 5 June 2018). This sentiment of belonging to a ‘Flamingo culture’ was echoed during the Graffiti photovoice discussion, where it was said: ‘But what is nice about Flamingo, you can leave Flamingo for 20 years, and when you come back you can spend about a month, you get to relax and enjoy that you are home. We can say this is our home’ (Graffiti photovoice, 20 February 2019). Relph (1976: 43) alluded to the deep attachment associated with having grown up in a place in the following terms:

The essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as centres of human existence. There is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital
source of both individual and cultural identity and security. (Relph quoted in Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff 1983: 60)

Gcina further articulated his feeling of being at home in Flamingo Court in these words: ‘Home for me is the fact that I grew up here, everything comes from here. I have learnt a whole lot of things by being in Flamingo Court. Flamingo Court is home’ (Interview, 5 June 2018). Significant life moments as well as knowledge and culture gained in a place seemingly cement attachment to the place, and while memories make a place, the reverse can also be true that place makes memories. Memories of growing up using the (now derelict) park, the grounds and now condemned community hall point to the functional aspect of place making, but also to the personal aspect.

There is an intergenerational sense of togetherness and belonging for many long-standing owners who purchased their flat from the municipality and raised their children in Flamingo Court. The functional aspect of occupying the space translates into the concern of leaving a legacy to the next generation, for children of current owners to have a place to call home. As we observed through our interviews and conversations with the group of ‘mothers’, the residents who raised their children in Flamingo Court feel a strong sense of attachment to the place. Shared memories and life-marking moments strengthen the sense of belonging, which is also rooted in the desire to pass the flat to their children as a legacy. Brenda spoke fondly of important life moments that she experienced in Flamingo Court, a place she described as a home for herself and her grown-up children who have since moved out but who return ‘home’ when they need to touch base. She spoke of being an elder who saw her neighbours’ children growing up (such as the field researcher who accompanied us for the interview), and the many other single mothers who were tenants of the social housing scheme before privatisation and who still live in the flats. While shared memories consolidate belonging, Brenda explained that for her, the attachment to the place is more than memories: ‘I wouldn’t say just memories... you know, you’ve got that connection... you know where you are safe, very, very safe’ (Interview, 1 November 2018). The sense of attachment is also linked to the need for safety in relation to both the social and physical environments, and with being in a familiar environment:

I’m very comfortable in the flat, the size of it, the comfort, all the facilities around it... I suppose I’m really used to my flat, Flamingo Court. Yes, I like Flamingo Court and its trees, and those potholes in the driveway [laughs]. (Interview, 1 November 2018)

She reinforced this point by saying:

I mean, you go to the plaza (Queensmead Mall), you see Flamingo. You go to Spar; you just see Flamingo Court. You go to Kentucky Fried Chicken; you’ll see my girls there [Brenda’s two tenants who rent a room from her]... So yes, wherever you look it’s just Flamingo. So it becomes a comfort zone. (Interview, 1 November 2018)

Israel, who moved to Flamingo Court with his wife and children a few years ago, agreed that safety is an essential part of the sense of homeliness: ‘You know why I am saying it is a home, because for me home is where I feel that my children are safe’ (Interview 6 December 2018). For Sifiso and Baba Khumalo, a security guard at Flamingo Court who we met on one of our visits, Flamingo Court is not considered as home, and they were both emphatic that they would not raise their family there. While appreciating the diversity of Flamingo Court and having never worked in ‘a building with such a diverse group of races and backgrounds’, Baba Khumalo said, ‘it would be difficult for me to bring my family to live with them here. As an individual I could cope, but as I say it is not a place I could raise my family in’ (Interview, 12 August 2018).
The familiarity of the place was something mentioned by all participants that contributes to consolidating their feeling of belonging, whether through neighbours greeting one another; younger residents helping the elders to carry groceries up the stairs; residents having conversations in the corridors; and the feeling that ‘everyone knows everyone’. Place identity is consolidated through networks of support and solidarity, as neighbourliness translates into caring for one another. This is visible through the safety nets that developed amongst residents. For example, Jabu, who also raised her now grown up children in Flamingo Court explained: ‘We all get along actually. There are a number of us. [...] we live together as single parents and we all get along’ (Interview, 31 March 2018). She later said that they became a ‘community of women, all single and independent without any male counterparts to assist us. We continue to live like this, as friends sharing our grief if there is a loss of life, we share our food and the little resources we have so that no one goes hungry and faces difficulties alone’ (Interview, 31 March 2018). She knows she can count on her friends in the building, as do Betty and other residents we spoke to. Neighbourliness translates into care for one another, for the neighbours. This echoes Brenda’s children use of her flat as a ‘stepping stone’ when in need, speaking to a functional attachment to place. For residents who grew up in the flats, care for the place is, for example, demonstrated in care for ‘the community of mothers’ of Flamingo Court (Mfundo, Interview 5 June 2018), and in trying to organise to fight the court case and safeguard their parents’ (mainly mothers’) property. Care for the place is noticed by some through physical improvements to the building, such as ad-hoc maintenance initiatives, the installation of new water pipes, less litter, etc. Sifiso explained his reluctance to participate in community meetings that are held regularly to discuss the court case: ‘I think as a tenant, I am shying away from the happenings and most especially the meetings, which is wrong, but I think these things should be directed at owners. Maybe the owners could come back to us tenants and say: “Sifiso, maybe you could help me? Go to that meeting, to hear what they are talking about because I won’t be able to attend”. So in that way I would get to know what is happening around and what changes I am supposed to adhere to.’ (Interview, 30 October 2018)

The sense of attachment to home varies, as does the feeling of being ‘rooted’ in the place. Sifiso explained that, Flamingo Court is in some way a home because that is where he sleeps, but he feels that his real home is in Clermont, where he grew up, and eZingeni near Vryheid, where his parents come from (Interview, 30 October 2018). Sifiso’s experience speaks of a dual place identity, where home is here and elsewhere.

Zanani, a cleaner who was on duty at the time of one of our visits, feels that ‘the place is upside down’ and that ‘it is supposed to be clean’ (Interview, 5 December 2018). He concurred with the owners’ aim of regaining the building as a way of improving the well-being of those who use the space, whether to live or work in it: ‘What I think could help Flamingo, is if it was returned to the owners to manage. Perhaps things would change to suit their needs and ours’ (Interview, 5 December 2018). Zanani’s comment relates to Tuan’s (1977) assertion about the role of place in facilitating well-being (quoted in Rowles 1980: 156). Brenda looks to the next generation – such as the field researchers and other youth-led initiatives gathering momentum in the building – to take responsibility for the betterment of the place and people who live in it:

I would love that, for them to fill in now. Don’t just take it like it is any flat, where you are getting cheap rent… take it as YOUR flat, teach your neighbours how to treat it as your property, as your flat. Even that piece of ground downstairs… Then it belongs to everybody. (Interview, 1 November 2018)
Residents such as the group of mothers alluded to by Mfana above are supporting one another and look to the next generation to provide support. The correlation between care and belonging is evident in this passage, and the strong bond that connects residents informs the sense of community. Israel, who moved from the Democratic Republic of Congo with his wife and children and made his home in Flamingo Court, also established the link between the sense of community and care for the space:

Flamingo is a community. You know why it is a community? There is change, the community is now starting to take responsibility and develop a conscience. That’s why you see change here, because before everyone was relying on someone else to take care of them, the community came together now. […] That is why I say it is a community. (Interview, 6 December 2018)

However, as Rowles (1980: 156) argues, inscribing identity in a place involves more than the social and physical aspects. The feeling of being inside a place does have to do with a physical and social attachment, but also with ‘autobiographical insidedness’. Rowles explains that bonding (place attachment) with a place involves ‘not only the place of the present but also an autobiographical insidedness within a place, or more accurately a series of remembered places, of which the drab contemporary physical setting is but a remnant’ (1980: 161). Life events, family memories and shared life episodes all give personal meaning to a place, which Rowles calls ‘historical investment’ in a place, explaining how the place becomes ‘a mosaic of incident-places which together constitute a “lived in” place conveying a sense of on-going affinity and forming a repository of personal memories’ (1980: 161). Having moved to Flamingo Court as a single mother before privatisation; having grown up in Flamingo; having enjoyed the fêtes that were once organised in the community hall; having played in the park as a child and still carrying the scars to prove it; having made use of the crèche that was available to the community; having built a network of friends that are a solid support base, all these autobiographical events consolidate the sense of belonging, of being inside a place. As Betty said with fondness: ‘I can tell you lots of stories about this place’ (Interview, 21 January 2018). And she did tell us stories about how she saw Flamingo changing from when she first arrived there some 40 years ago, when her husband was transferred from Namibia to work at the railway, ‘when it was for whites only’, of a soup kitchen that she used to run with other women in the building, of her friend Piet who committed suicide by jumping from the 7th floor, and of another railway worker who threw a brand new washing machine his wife had bought with his Christmas bonus from the 11th floor, before jumping to his death. Stories of having seen neighbours and neighbours’ children she used to scold grow into fine adults, graduating from university and making her proud to this day.

Rowles explains that physical insidedness translates into the everyday activities that inform our functional existence, the routine, the use of space in the building where we make a place (1980: 158). Social insidedness refers to the sense of belonging to a group, such as that expressed by Jabu who spoke fondly of her support network with women who shared similar life experiences. Through having lived in Flamingo Court for so many years – some their entire life – social capital has been accumulated, and with it a sense of belonging to a specific setting, a community that was knit over time. As explained above, autobiographical insidedness concerns the personal history that is inscribed in a place, such as the life histories that residents have created and experienced in Flamingo Court. Physical, social and autobiographical insidedness combine to create a strong sense of place attachment, as well as place dependence.

The deep connection with a place – physical, social and autobiographical – which informs the feeling of being inside, of belonging to a place, is inevitably shaken in periods of transition, in moments of profound change. With change, the familiar becomes unfamiliar, outsiders become insiders, the feel of the place is no longer what one is used to, and the rules – both implicit and tacit – change. In other
words, the place changes, as do its physical and social infrastructure. Societal, social and physical changes can threaten autobiographical insidedness (Rowles 1980: 167). What is inalienable, it seems, is one’s personal history with a place, the knowledge of what has been before. Flamingo Court underwent several periods of transition, one of which was of a societal nature, such as the transition from apartheid to democratic South Africa, which meant that it was now open to all races. This major transformation would warrant further research, but within the scope of this research what is at stake is the transition from social, state-delivered housing to private ownership in the form of a Sectional Title Scheme. How does one make sense of a changing place when what was known is no more, when the carefully created home becomes vulnerable and at times unrecognisable? How can the sense of belonging to Flamingo Court remain when, paradoxically, being a property owner means gradually losing ownership of the space?

Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff speak of the ‘recognition function’ as the process of benchmarking the present through the ‘environmental past’, which is a function of place identity (1980: 66). They add that it is a comparative process whereby we unconsciously determine what is familiar and what is not, and the idea that the environment is not changing is referred to as ‘environmental stability’ (1980: 66). In a situation of change, for example when the built environment degrades rapidly or when faced with displacement such as in Jabu’s case, the physical environment undergoes changes and requires adaptation. Displacement is indeed a traumatic experience and so is a major change in the physical environment. As explained by Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff: ‘One implication of the recognition function of place-identity is that extreme variations in the physical environment experienced by a person may indeed threaten the self-identity of the individual’ (1980: 66).

Jabu now risks losing her home, her flat being on auction. Her attachment to Flamingo Court is deep: she raised her children there, has developed networks of support and solidarity, has her group of friends with whom she shares life’s ups and downs, her children go to school in the area, and she works in the neighbourhood where she cuts grass and informally trades sweets, vetkoek and snacks around schools in the area. She sees her future in Flamingo Court: ‘The building is home to me and my children, we have no other home outside of this. My hope has always been for this place to remain a home for them as there is nowhere else we can go. It is now about the children’ (Interview, 31 March 2018). The sentiment of having ‘nowhere else to go’ is shared with other elders in the building, for example Betty and Brenda, who although not faced with dispossession and seeing their flat going on auction, also say that nowhere else would they have the comfort they find in Flamingo Court for the same rent. Place attachment also evokes place dependence; as explained by Ujang and Zakariya, ‘the degree to which a person feels attached to, or dependent on, a place is a function of how well his or her needs, goals, or motivations are satisfied or how positive he or she perceives his or her experiences to be in that location’ (2015: 712). They argue that place dependence also emanates from the quality of the current place, and ‘the quality of other substitute places that are comparable to the current place. It concerns the functional and utilitarian aspects of place attachment’ (2015: 712). Place attachment becomes a criterion for place making, contributing to place identity.

The physical, social and autobiographical insidedness experienced by some residents makes it difficult to think of a substitute place, to make a home elsewhere. Bulelani sees Flamingo Court as an ‘RDP flat’ (Interview, 5 July 2018), meaning that the alternative would most probably be on the periphery of the city. Betty and her husband, now in their old age and having lived at Flamingo Court for more than 40 years, said that their children constantly ask them to look for another place to live, but she is adamant that she is not going anywhere:

Where can we go? If you can tell me... you can get me a better place, we will go. But I love Mfana and his family [her neighbours], if we move from here I don’t know if [we] ...will get a
better neighbour or a bad neighbour. [...] I will die here in Flamingo, and if it is the Lord’s will then he will come and fetch me from Flamingo, not from another place... I haven’t got another place. [...] If I can’t make a plan, I will stand up, I will fight and I will fight... that’s why my children always tell me “Ma, you are a fighter, stand up and fight for this place”. I will tell you I am not going anywhere. I like Flamingo. I like to stay here. (Interview, 21 January 2019)

Likewise, Brenda rhetorically asked, ‘If I had to go live outside now, where am I going to get a place for that money? A granny flat you are looking at R2,500/R3,000’ (Interview, 1 November 2018). Younger participants, while deeply attached to Flamingo and having grown up there, had a slightly different idea. For example, Gcina who moved out of Flamingo Court but whose mother still owns the flat he grew up in, and Mfundo who like many young adults, feels like going far away to get some ‘fresh air, a change of air. I would like to go, just outside of Flamingo and stay outside of a flat, in a house; that would be nice’ (Interview 5 June 2019). However, the feeling of Flamingo Court being a home would remain, as is the case for Betty’s and Brenda’s children, who come “home” for visits at Flamingo Court, and who are not succeeding in convincing their parents to move out of the flats. The fact of being inside a place (physically, socially and autobiographically) is a source of support, as argued by Rowles (1980: 167). More importantly, autobiographical insidedness gives meaning to a place that could not be recreated overnight in a new setting, as these memories and histories took a life time to make.

Rowles states that, ‘being physically, socially and – most importantly – autobiographically “inside” a place is a significant ingredient to successful accommodation to both personal and environmental transitions which attend the process of growing old’ (1980: 156). That is to say, social capital grows with the sense of belonging, as autobiographical insidedness accumulates. This may explain why, despite the degraded condition of the building and the challenges residents face, elderly people are reluctant to leave, as they long for familiarity and feel deeply inside Flamingo Court. Flamingo Court has changed: it is no longer government housing, the space is used differently by different people, the routine changed to accommodate changes in the social and physical environments, while some services are no longer available. Nevertheless, the feeling of belonging remains, indicating that places can indeed be re-made.

Rowles adds that ‘the sense of being “inside” is reflected by a reluctance to leave despite a deteriorating contemporary physical setting. In part, this expresses attachment to a familiar house’ (1980: 157). Familiarity and care are two factors of place attachment and play a role in place making. With the transition to private ownership, the social infrastructure of Flamingo Court changed while the depleted maintenance fund led to a change in the physical environment. But a sense of familiarity remained despite these changes, based on what Rowles (1980) calls ‘autobiographical insidedness’, as explained above. Change requires adaptation for a place to provide identity, even in a degraded physical environment such as that of Flamingo Court. Rowles notes that familiarity with the setting and having created a ‘personal niche’ in a place facilitate the process of adaptation to change (1980: 167). In other words, a stronger place identity means greater adaptation to change, echoing AbdouMaliq Simone’s idea that social infrastructure can compensate for declining material infrastructure (2014).

Place identity is not only strengthened by ‘social insidedness’ and by being surrounded by people who share memories and history of the place, but also through contact with the ‘outside’ world. ‘Physical insidedness’, as briefly discussed earlier, refers to the activities and routine that regulate our everyday life, ‘the network of paths traced in the routine of utilizing services and making social trips’ (Rowles 1980: 158). This could refer to Flamingo Court residents making use of one of the various spaza shops that have transformed the physical environment of the building; of walking to Queensmead Mall to
access services and amenities; of walking children to nearby schools; of attending church services across the road; going for a swim at the nearby municipal pool; and visiting friends and relatives inside the building. Having access to quality services is considered as a factor of inclusion in the city (Charlton 2010: 1).

Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff (1983: 61) argue that the physical environment is essential in understanding self-identity, in that it evokes memories, ideals and aspirations. The autobiographical aspect of place identity is also inscribed in material culture (Mitchell 2008), and in the physical environment. The use of the space can alter the built environment, for example the many spaza shops found in Flamingo Court, the use of the parking lot as a car wash, and abundance of posters advertising small businesses operating in the building. The availability of services within the confines of the building is seen by participants as an advantage of being in Flamingo Court, which is regarded by some as a self-sufficient, autonomous place, as an ecosystem of some sort. Mfundo appreciates the fact that everything can be found in Flamingo Court: ‘Flamingo Court is one of those places where you can stay inside Flamingo and not leave Flamingo because you can get anything here, from airtime to bread, you can have your whole groceries at Flamingo, you can still get your music, well not voluntarily, but you can hear music throughout the day and night’ (Interview, 5 June 2018). This description of life in the ‘inside’ speaks of a place identity, which can also extend to the outside physical environment such as the neighbourhood.

For many residents, proximity to these services means access to social, economic and cultural capital, making Flamingo Court a desirable place to live. Access to services adds value to the space, as pointed out by Betty who enjoys being able to walk to nearby King Edward hospital, to Spar and being on public transport routes (Interview, 21 January 2019). Access to the wider neighbourhood means extending the footprint of the Flamingo Court community beyond the confines of the building, as residents often bump into one another at the nearby mall. This feeling of familiarity with and within the neighbourhood, of being at home, speaks to a comfort zone that extends way beyond the walls of an individual flat and the boundaries of the building, reinforcing the sense of belonging to Flamingo Court and the broader area. Gcina expressed it well: ‘Home is here, at Flamingo Court. I mean Umbilo has always been home. If we walk around Flamingo Court, we walk around the whole of Umbilo. That’s why I know Umbilo like the back of my hand today’ (Interview, 5 June 2018).

The central location of Flamingo Court plays a role in reliance on the place in terms of access to opportunities and services and emphasises the functional aspect of place making. For Sifiso, who has been a tenant for more than 12 years, access to economic opportunities is a prime factor that made Flamingo Court his home in the first place: ‘That’s the main reason I moved here because it’s much closer to work’ (Interview, 30 October 2018). Some tenants moved from elsewhere in order to fulfil ambitions that require easy access to “the city” and the services and economic opportunities this entails. Other residents – especially the now grown-up children of the first generation of owners – know no other home. Another tenant, Israel, appreciates the convenient location of Flamingo Court, which makes it ‘a nice place’. He explained: ‘It’s convenient actually for everything. I do not have problems going to the shop. I have no problem going to town, so everything is just around here. That’s the most important thing about Flamingo’ (Interview, 6 December 2018). The easily accessible services and amenities available in the vicinity and the use of these outside spaces by residents extend the comfort zone and feeling of safety experienced inside Flamingo Court, making the neighbourhood part of everyday life.

It could be argued that the functionality of both the inside and outside physical environments, the feeling of safety and familiarity that characterises the social environment, and the autobiographical insidedness felt by residents inform their profound attachment to Flamingo Court, revealing that social
capital takes precedence over economic capital. However, residents are well aware of the challenges they face within the current environment, and constantly need to negotiate their place identity and adapt to change. It is notable that contrary to the widespread belief that ownership can bring stability, in the case of Flamingo Court, home ownership marked the beginning of a period of instability through which residents are still negotiating their place identity.

Many residents have indeed adapted and succeeded in re-making a home in the “new” Flamingo Court. The recognition function discussed above comes into play, as some long-standing residents feel that the environmental stability associated with the period when Flamingo Court was a state housing block has been perturbed. The histories, memories, smells, and sights of a past social and physical environment are well entrenched in the ways in which residents connect with the place, but not without nostalgia as is evident from the interviews with residents. However, a strong sense of autobiographical insidedness articulated by memories of past events enables adaptation to new environments.

2. The autobiographical dimension of place making informs a sense of nostalgia

Jacob Dlamini describes nostalgia as ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement, [which is] is an incurable condition of modernity. [...] However, the irony about nostalgia is that, for all its fixation with the past, it is essentially about the present. It is about present anxieties refracted through the prism of the past’ (Dlamini 2009: 16). Referring to Svetlana Boym, he identifies the differences between two types of nostalgia, namely, reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia, he argues, takes cognisance of the feeling of loss, but also of the ‘imperfect process of remembrance’, while restorative nostalgia aims ‘to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps’ (quoted in Dlamini 2009: 17).

For Flamingo Court residents, especially owners and those who grew up there, nostalgia seems to be a strategy to cope with current changing – and challenging – times. The experience of participants who are long-standing residents resonates with this idea of a present inscribed in the past, as the connection with Flamingo Court is re-made and negotiated in relation to what is known. Interviewed residents interchangeably made use of both restorative and reflective nostalgia. This can translate to apparent contradictions, where it is said that the past environment was ideal, while in the same breath recognising that there were other major problems, as can be gleaned from Brenda who reflected on how Flamingo Court was when she first moved in, more than 25 years ago:

Well, it had its problems, you know. I think when you have low-cost housing as these buildings are called you always have that particular element of problems, you know. Drugs and fighting and all that sort of thing. But most of the time we had caretakers and things were in place. And if you broke the law you got a letter from the municipality... I’m talking about before we bought the flats. You had to go explain yourself, why you and your visitors were causing such a commotion outside on such a night or whatever you were doing with yourself. (Interview, 1 November 2018)

The issue of who should be the figure of authority at Flamingo Court remains a contentious one, although the need for order is agreed by all. According to Jabu, for Flamingo Court to feel like home again, the court-appointed administrator would need to be removed and the owners of title deeds should manage the building ‘so that we can be able to charge levies which are reasonable to the people who live here because it is anyway for the poor people. You cannot be rich in this building. This building is for poor people and everything has to be normal’ (Interview, 31 March 2018). The idea of a return to normal speaks to the notion of environmental stability. Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff point to ‘physical environment-related cognitions’ to define the ‘memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes,
values, preferences, meanings and conceptions of behaviour and experiences’ that relate to people’s everyday experiences, further emphasising that:

At the core of such physical environment-related cognitions is the “environmental past” of the person; a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person’s biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs. (1983: 59)

The environmental past and stability experienced by Flamingo Court residents, where things were familiar and known, also speak of the ways in which residents’ needs were fulfilled before privatisation, and before ‘things started to go down’ as many residents put it. With the changes in the physical and social environments, the capacity of the environment to satisfy certain needs also changed. The comfortable feeling of belonging is unsettled, and the environment appears less familiar, a situation which requires adaptation, as discussed earlier. Rowles has demonstrated how a strong autobiographical insidedness often translates to greater capacity for adaptation (1980). Nostalgia could be described as a desire for ‘continuity from the past’. This desire is even more important to residents as changes and variations to the environment can threaten self-identity, which in turn affects place identity (Proshansky, Fabian, Kaminoff 1983). One way of reclaiming a failing sense of identity could be to hang on to the familiar, to what is known, and the comfort associated with the feeling of insidedness.

Nostalgia manifests in many ways, including the longing for order and authority, and for an environment that is no longer the same. Changes in management of the building, for example, meant going from a highly respected (if not feared!) supervisor whose rules were implemented and supported by residents while Flamingo Court was a social housing scheme, to the current court-appointed administrator who seems to have little authority, and little control over the application of the rules. During the course of our research, we saw several supervisors assuming duty one after the other. They report to the court-appointed administrator, and seem to have little authority in maintaining order. Similarly, the security guards struggle to have rules implemented and to control access to the property. Rules exist, however, and are clearly displayed in the foyer, lifts, corridors and other strategic areas. As Sifiso said, Flamingo Court’s rules are the usual rules applicable to most residential buildings:

In general, yes, there should be rules [observed] in the flat. There shouldn’t be any littering, there shouldn’t be drugs, there shouldn’t be a lot of things. I think those are the general rules everywhere. I’ve never read this flat’s rules. I think in general I am quite aware of rules around a place like this. (Interview, 30 October 2018)

Appreciation of the lax application of these rules is a paradox, as some residents enjoy the freedom to do as they please in the building, but still long for order to prevail. This longing for strict authority can be understood as ‘to yearn [...] for order in an uncertain world’ (Dlamini 2009: 14). Other residents, such as Beverley, seemed to have faith in the new supervisor’s attempts to reinstate a sense of order, as she feared that the building would decline even further if nothing was done (Interview, 21 April 2018).

Authority and rules provide a sense of stability, which could help to deal with the changes occurring in Flamingo Court. Dlamini further speaks of nostalgia as a condition, ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists’ (2009: 15). It is a longing for the past that is experienced when confronted with ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement’ (Dlamini 2009: 16). Petty offences such as smoking and drinking in the corridors and playing loud music impact negatively on the physical environment. However, the
lack of application of certain rules lead to more serious problems such as overcrowding, unhygienic living conditions and degradation of the built environment, causing serious changes to the setting. Brenda deplored the fact that caretakers were in and out, and ‘don’t seem to know how to control the overcrowding which affects a lot of the flats’, later even stating that ‘the police take the building as a joke’ (Interview, 1 November 2019). When we asked Betty what she thought was good about living in Flamingo Court before privatisation, she explained without hesitation that order was a major factor in the quality of life:

The children were not playing all over, the lifts were not out of order like now... And the children, if they came out of school and wanted to play, we had a strict white man, uncle Larry who was the caretaker, so the children had to play in the playground. If he caught them, he would take you to your house and the mother must hit you in front of uncle Larry. My children were some of them, I gave them a big hiding, not once but a lot of times, in front of uncle Larry. That was very nice. (Interview, 21 January 2019)

Most residents we spoke to longed for a more orderly environment, which seems to be proportional with a stronger sense of community. Bulelani observed that with private ownership came a ‘free for all’ attitude, where people are no longer accountable to the larger community: ‘I think that ownership is not okay in our case. Everyone does whatever they want, and then those who rent do as they please’ (Interview, 5 July 2018). The descent into a so-called ‘bad building’ in cases like Flamingo Court is often erroneously blamed on “foreigners”, but is in fact due to the ‘legal intricacies of private ownership’ (Erwin 2011: 89), where there is subletting, a dysfunctional body corporate, and a lack of information, as Jabu noted during her interview, which lead to a lack of rules and order. When discussing the issue of overcrowding during the root tree analysis focus group, the repercussions of lack of maintenance and debt became clear. The participants also spoke candidly of how overcrowding was often associated with the anonymous “foreigner”, and how this affected the social environment:

There is a lot of tension not within a flat itself but with the neighbours as well. Some people don’t like that it is overcrowded, you find them getting irritated. You find people calling them names for the ones that come from another country, “kwerekwere”, and there are fights and tensions around this, all because of overcrowding. And it leads to breaking the rules. Because [someone would say], “you can’t tell me there are too many people, where are the rules about that?” (1 June 2018)

Most of the residents we interviewed spoke about the first time they arrived in Flamingo Court as a place where there was a strong feeling of togetherness, where there were many activities and social support, with the building in good condition. An ideal Flamingo, for many residents, would be returning to what used to be. Bulelani related his first memories of Flamingo Court as a young boy: ‘I think about the very first time I came to Flamingo. It was beautiful, there was lots of activities. Now things are going down, it’s not going well’ (Interview, 5 July 2018). Mfundo, who also grew up in Flamingo Court and is now a young adult, reiterated this point and also gave a good idea of how things changed, and the factors that reinforce the sense of attachment to place:

My ideal Flamingo? I think it is like any other issue, we always want to look back. The ideal Flamingo would be the same one I grew up in, the park and activities with the councillors. I mean the fire station is down the road, we used to take trips there ourselves, they used to let us in and we would play there. (Interview, 5 June 2019)

Israel also remembered that Flamingo Court was in better condition immediately after privatisation, when he first set foot in the building in 2009, some few years after the municipality sold the flats:
I remember those years. Flamingo was much better than today. I remember most of the stuff was clean and the environment was quite different from that time and now. But since a certain time, there has been change again. (Interview, 6 December 2018)

Recently, a group of residents came together to reclaim the building and impose order, with self-proclaimed rules in the absence of a body corporate, a move saluted by most people we spoke to. It is worth quoting Israel at length as he encapsulates this sentiment clearly:

...you know we have been having supervisors here. And supervisors were in and out, in and out. There was no change at all. So, things were happening here and sometimes you would be asking yourself if we have supervisor or something. But we did have supervisors here. But the good experience and the good thing about this is, when some people start taking responsibilities, they start taking charge now, controlling and putting some organs and then I could see some things were starting to come back to normal now, you see. I can see even the passages now are clean, some other paras we used to meet up in the corners, smoking and doing things all over, it’s no more. So, the good experience is when you see people taking charge there is always change. (Interview, 6 December 2018)

The court case also proved to be a catalyst for unity, as can be seen in the recent community meetings, a reminder that the courthouse can be a site of struggle that unifies residents (Roy 2017). The community coming back together is seen as key to improving the physical environment, as noted by Bulelani and other participants: ‘The community should get back together, try to fix the building’ (Interview, 5 July 2018). Jabu and Bulelani both agreed that residents have identified the problem and possess the resources – such as time, expertise and knowledge – to fix the building and deal with change, but what comes in the way of this is the lack of togetherness, as pointed out by Brenda. As with the conversation with Jabu, the Graffiti photovoice discussion and posters hanging by the lifts revealed that mechanics, plumbers, electricians, people who fix refrigerators and phones, welders, handypersons, painters, construction workers and tailors live in the building (Graffiti photovoice, 20 February 2019). The ‘mediating change function’ seems appropriate here to understand the ‘environmental skills’ needed to bring about change (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff 1983: 70), which in this case is returning to a lost home in a respected built environment, a strong sense of community and togetherness. Furthermore, being able to recognise the changes that are needed requires ‘environmental understanding’, which means understanding the necessary changes that will ensure that one’s needs and aspirations can still be fulfilled within a specific place. However, environmental understanding is in itself not sufficient, as environmental competence is also required; one needs the skills to effect the change needed, as well as environmental behaviour to be able to influence the behaviour of others as well as one’s own behaviour (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff 1983). With the changing figure of authority at Flamingo Court, which has seen a dozen supervisors and security companies assigned to maintain order and rules, there seems to be little environmental control, and the resident-led ‘floor managers’ initiative seems to be a step towards gaining a form of control over the environment. During the root tree analysis focus group, it was noted that the lack of control of the building led to the current situation, which makes it difficult to mediate the change: ‘[T]he consequences of the debt is the lack of control, that’s what it is causing. Us failing to control ourselves. We can’t even control our finances, that’s why you find people from outside, the agents, they are managing our finances for us’ (1 June 2018). The idea of taking charge of the building, of exercising environmental control does not only involve the physical environment, but also the social environment.

The longing for togetherness, remembrance of a close-knit community is important in place-remaking. Mfundo recalled that there used to be a ‘closer community’ (Interview, 5 June 2018), but also
understood that the social environment has changed, and re-imagining this community now involves different people from different backgrounds, as social insidedness is now defined in different terms. Nostalgia for what this insidedness used to entail is exemplified through the story of Aunty Anna, as residents fondly call her, who used to be ‘the goddess of Flamingo Court’, as Mfundo put it. As told by several residents, Aunty Anna used to organise activities for children, and was ‘a rock for our parents, because most of them were hustling to make ends meet and then she would help out. [...] She used to be the talk of town. When she left, everything started to go down’ (Interview with Gcina, 5 June 2018). She also ran a soup kitchen, and organised Christmas parties in the community hall, which is now under lock and key and inaccessible to residents. The memories attached to these events and to interactions with Aunty Anna reinforce autobiographical insidedness, while also fostering a strong social insidedness or sense of shared belonging within the community and representing order and care. Interestingly, the caring role played by Aunty Anna is reminiscent of Tannie Swannie’s role in Jan Bom, a council housing scheme in Johannesburg (du Plessis 2004: 891).

As pointed out by Jacob Dlamini (2009: 116), nostalgia is felt through memories and autobiographical events, but also through the senses. Homeliness is built through our relationship with the social and physical environments, and with people, as well as our personal histories inscribed in a place. A sense of place identity or belonging is created with the same senses which inform nostalgia, namely sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste, such as ‘a warm meal in the evening’ (Mfundo), the music echoing in the corridors, and the graffiti telling stories of people inscribed on the walls.

Discussion and conclusion
Flamingo Court means different things to different people, although all share a strong identity with a ‘Flamingo culture’. As seen in this report, the feeling of homeliness and sense of community was ruptured during the transition from public to private ownership. Nostalgia for the pre-2002 era, when the municipality was managing the building and activities were organised for residents, was palpable in all our interviews and interactions with residents, especially for long-standing residents, title deed owners and those who grew up in Flamingo Court.

There is seemingly an impression that Flamingo Court is still under the municipality, as we encountered the perception that the municipality left without fulfilling promises such as installing water and electricity meters and repairing the building before finalising transfer of ownership. As first-time owners, many residents seemingly had a feeling of abandonment and disappointment and had to make do with little knowledge of the Sectional Title Scheme, and even fewer financial resources. The promises held by the mirage of ownership were left unfulfilled and had consequences for both the built and social environments.

The degradation of the building under the watch of the new owners is a central issue affecting not only the built environment, but also the social fibre of Flamingo Court. The importance of the social value of the building exceeds its commercial, financial value. Or perhaps the rich social life compensates for the devalued commercial value of the building. The sense of ownership is closely linked to neighbourliness, and while residents lament the lack of unity, a relatively strong sense of community survived all the changes and challenges encountered over the years.

Neighbourliness is articulated through the social relations and connections among residents. Examples of usage of the space that give meaning to the feeling of belonging and homeliness include the group of single mothers showing solidarity, a group mobilised towards the court case, the clientele and networks of transactions that were built around the various spaza shops, youth culture, and some private clubs and associations such as the Foreign Girls Club, a weekly meeting where young, foreign
women are taught life skills and have a space to share and learn. As such, the idea of home is created through the use of space, whereby different places in Flamingo are appropriated by different groups of residents, for example, the Mushroom for the youth (Graffiti photovoice), and used for different purposes, ranging from social to income-generating purposes.

Care for the space manifests in different ways other than material, through these social networks that directly enable the practice of everyday life, to borrow from De Certeau’s phrase (1980), despite the hardships and feeling of destitution sometimes felt by owners. While the huge number of units makes it near impossible for a Sectional Title Scheme to function – especially in a previous social housing block created for economically vulnerable residents – it is what makes the richness and diversity that so many residents cherish. The space is constantly contested and negotiated, as the corridors play out as in-between public spaces, and places of social and financial transactions. Many residents evoked the idea of a ‘Flamingo culture’ and ‘Flamingo identity’, which is articulated through the communal aspect of living at Flamingo Court. The basic need for safety and a sense of belonging are however, constantly threatened by the on-going court case and pending auctioning of flats in arrears. Owners are fighting for Flamingo Court, fighting for their home, and fighting for the right of their children to be in Flamingo Court, with its central location and proximity to services these spaces afford.

The idea of reclaiming the building motivates the growing organisation and mobilisation taking root amongst owners living in it, supported by a group of young people who call meetings, coordinate transport to attend the court case, and debrief residents following hearings. The formation of a body corporate, with the underlying cooperation and organisation it implies, is a wish for most residents, as this would signify reclaiming the space and controlling the financial aspect of managing the building. The struggle to conciliate the idea of Flamingo Court as a home and Flamingo Court as a property is playing out in court, as well as in everyday livelihood practices.

These practices are, however, not without paradoxes and contradictions. As one resident said, the building is not causing the problems, the residents are. The uncleanliness of the building was decried by all the people we spoke to, yet no one seems to fully take responsibility for basic maintenance and care of the built infrastructure, leaving it to the management of the building. The owners look to the municipality to complete the work allegedly left undone, while tenants look to owners to take ownership of the building and assume a leadership role. The municipality disengaged a while back and responsibility for managing the building is now in the hands of the court-appointed administrator. Residents constantly negotiate the tensions between freedom and the rules, as can be seen in some interviews whereby the lax rules appeal to some, but at the same time are one of the root causes of the many problems afflicting Flamingo Court.

Flamingo Court, with its imposing structure, 13 floors and 200 units, is a city within a city. A public space is created in the corridors and passageways, contributing to the familiarity with which residents greet one another and share the space. The meaning of home attached to Flamingo Court differs for tenants, for owners who live on the property, and owners who rent their flats out. For most long-standing owners who obtained their title deeds from the municipality, Flamingo Court is the only home they know. For those that who rent out their flats, their relation to Flamingo Court is mostly economic. Tenants often see their future elsewhere, as their presence in Flamingo Court is dictated by immediate circumstances and seen as transient.

Tenants were generally less invested in the building, leaving the major administrative and management issues affecting it to the title deed owners. Nonetheless, a sense of unity seems to prevail, as Flamingo Court residents recognise and acknowledge one another outside of the confines of their unit, and of the building. As pointed out by many participants, Flamingo Court extends beyond
the property and into the neighbourhood to reach the surrounding shopping centres, schools, shops, transport routes and hospitals situated in Umbilo and neighbouring Glenwood. Contrary to the negative picture often portrayed in the media, Flamingo Court, with its more than 1,000 residents, plays an important and positive role in Umbilo and Glenwood’s social and economic dynamics. As pointed out by some residents, it has everything within its walls to be self-sufficient and has many skills and resources that could contribute further to the broader neighbourhood.

As we near the conclusion of this project, we have observed that the struggle for Flamingo Court is extending outside the court, as some residents are seeing the value of taking ownership of the situation, and of the space, one action at a time. For example, initiatives to restore some infrastructure and organise activities for the children are taking root and will hopefully be supported with the dissemination of this research, including the film and photography components.

The deceitful capitalist dream of ownership had numerous unintended consequences for some owners in Flamingo Court, as can be seen in this report. For the municipality and investors, the struggle for Flamingo Court is an economic one, but for the residents – particularly the owners – it is very much a political struggle for justice, access to services and the right to the city as well as a sense of belonging and safety. This struggle reminds us that ‘homes are not neutral places’ (George 1996: 6), and are spaces where belonging, inclusion and exclusion are constantly mediated and negotiated.

With South African cities known to be amongst the most inefficient urban environments in the world (du Plessis and Landman 2002: 55, quoted in Goebel 2007: 293), some important lessons can be learned from a site such as Flamingo Court, where a model of ownership was tested, and failed. The fact that neighbourliness and a sense of belonging prevail even in the context of an eroded social environment and degraded physical environment speak to the fact that home is a complex social and political construct, as is imagining a nation or community. While not denying the need for better infrastructure and living conditions than those afforded through state delivered housing and previous social housing schemes, it is important to take cognisance of what makes a home beyond the mere materiality of its bricks and mortar, especially given that a home is so central to our well-being, and identity. In many instances, such as in the case of Flamingo Court, the answer is not synonymous with property ownership. Quality, well-located, affordable rental accommodation can offer the conditions for making a home and provide a sense of environmental stability that could perhaps not be afforded in an ownership model, for example in the case of housing for economically vulnerable people. As Flamingo Court’s transition to private property shows, commonly held assumptions that home ownership provides stability, wealth and security should be revisited. A house in itself is not a warranty for wealth and inclusion in the city. On the contrary, in some instances it can lead to dispossession and uncertainty. As Gaston Bachelard puts it, for a house to be a home, it must fulfil needs, from the most basic to self-actualisation: ‘If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace’ (1964).

Epilogue...

At the time of completing this report, the residents of Flamingo Court won their court case to have the court-appointed administrator removed and are now mobilising to set up a body corporate. Only time will tell how the story unfolds for Flamingo Court and its residents...
Image 3: ‘We run things, things don’t run we!!!’
Cited references


Archival documents:

Town and Municipal Clerk archives, Durban City Council [Durban Archive Repository].

Interviews:

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Brenda, owner (1 November 2018)
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Sphamandla, grandson of owner (6 May 2018)
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Bulelani, grandson of owner (5 July 2018)
Marina, tenant (8 December 2018)
Israel, tenant (6 December 2018)
Sifiso, tenant (30 October 2018)
Zanani, cleaning staff (05 December 2018)
Baba Khumalo, security guard (12 August 2018)
Field notes of interview with Beverley, owner (21 April 2018)
Root tree analysis focus group with Bar and Mfana (1 June 2018)

Info activism discussion with Bulelani, Mfana, Bar, and Gcina (28 March 2018)

Graffiti photovoice discussion with Bar, Bulelani, and Mfana (20 February 2019)