

BACKYARD SHACKS AND THE URBAN HOUSING CRISIS: STOPGAP OR PROTOTYPE SOLUTION?

The number of households living in backyard dwellings increased by 55% during the previous decade, while the number living in free-standing shacks decreased by more than 120 000. For policies to effectively deal with the rapid growth in backyard shacks it is necessary to get behind the social processes at work, write *Jackie Borel-Saladin* and *Ivan Turok*.

Expanding the supply of decent housing in low- and middle-income countries is important because of its wide-ranging consequences for living standards, social stability and economic progress. Proper homes provide protection from the elements; privacy and self-respect; a place for study and personal development; an asset for households to invest in for security, and space for leisure activities and social interaction.

Depending on its location and affordability, housing can offer access to valuable economic opportunities, social infrastructure and other beneficial public and private facilities. The form, density and spatial arrangement of housing also matter for the functional efficiency of cities and the mobility of households, thereby affecting economic growth and social integration.

Finally, the design and character of housing influence jobs and livelihoods through the linkages to construction activity, the demand for building materials and household goods, and the supply of new infrastructure and premises for small-scale enterprises.

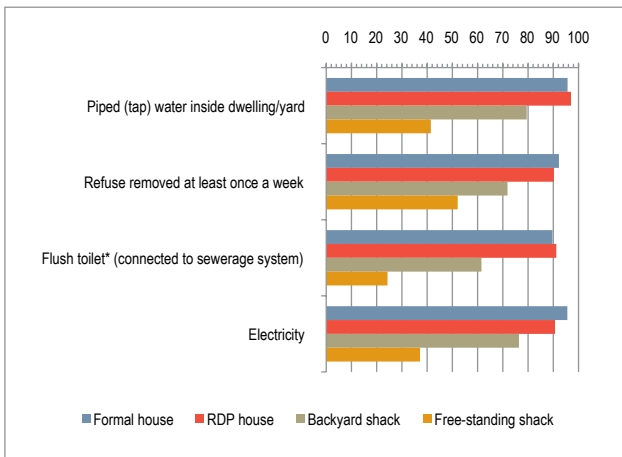
Rapid urban population growth makes it more difficult to provide sufficient, decent housing. The outcome of these factors tends to be the extensive production of informal dwellings using makeshift materials (shacks) in overcrowded settlements. South Africa is rather unusual in that much of the growth in informal housing during the last decade or so has taken the form of backyard shacks located within established townships, rather than free-standing shacks in outlying squatter areas. The numerical significance of this phenomenon became more apparent with the release of the 2011 population census data. This found that the number of households living in backyard dwellings increased by 253 400 to 713 000 during the previous decade (up 55%), while the number living in free-standing shacks decreased by 126 900 to 1 249 800. Yet the issue has been largely neglected by government policy.

To conduct the study, the Gauteng City Region Observatory's 2011 Gauteng Quality of Life Survey (QoL) was used. The purpose of the research was twofold. First, it sought to assess the positive and negative features of backyard shacks compared with other forms of housing, approaching this task mainly from the perspective of the household. Were backyarders more or less satisfied with their circumstances than people living in other dwelling types? Second, it tried to conceptualise the role of backyard shacks in the urban housing market, looking particularly at the strategies of households seeking to navigate their way into the urban system. Were backyard shacks a last resort for people ineligible for RDP housing and unable to find somewhere to erect a shack in an informal settlement (such as foreign or rural migrants), or were they a deliberate preference for people wanting better access to the urban labour market, educational facilities or other public amenities? A third possibility is that backyarders were the offspring of homeowners who were forced out of the main dwelling by overcrowding and who could not afford their own property. The general point is that it is necessary to get behind the social processes at work if policies are to be devised that stand a chance of being effective.

Findings

How did the conditions of life of backyarders compare with people living in free-standing shacks and formal housing? The evidence suggested backyard living conditions were somewhat better than free-standing shacks, but this was offset by the smaller amount of internal space. Backyarders had much better access to basic services than free-standing shacks, yet worse access than formal houses (Figure 1 on page 7). They tended to be slightly more satisfied with their neighbourhood than other shack dwellers, yet less satisfied than people in formal houses. This suggested backyard shacks were a step above free-standing shacks in the housing market, but well behind formal houses.

Figure 1: Access to basic services among shack dwellers



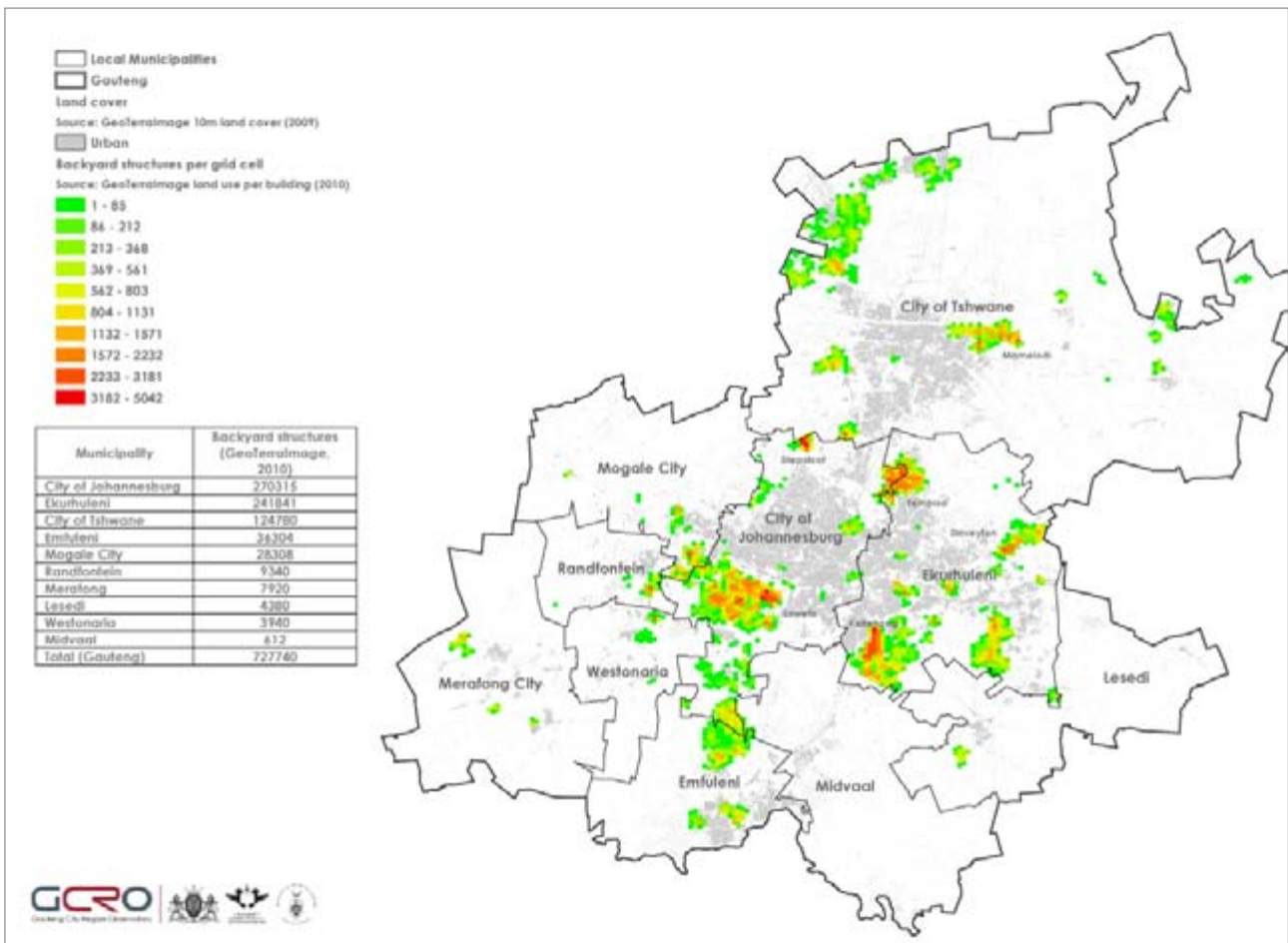
Source: Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) Gauteng Quality of life Survey, 2011.

Backyard shacks were slightly better located than free-standing shacks.



The issue of location was important in assessing the contribution of backyard shacks to urban integration and social inclusion (Figure 2). Evidence from the QoL survey suggested backyard shacks were slightly better located than free-standing shacks. However, it was not clear if they were better located than RDP houses. Maps of the distribution of backyard shacks showed they coincided closely with established townships. Both were poorly located in terms of access to formal job opportunities.

Figure 2: Backyard structures in Gauteng, 2010



Source: GCRO Map of the Month, September 2013 <http://www.gcro.ac.za/maps-gis/map-of-the-month>.

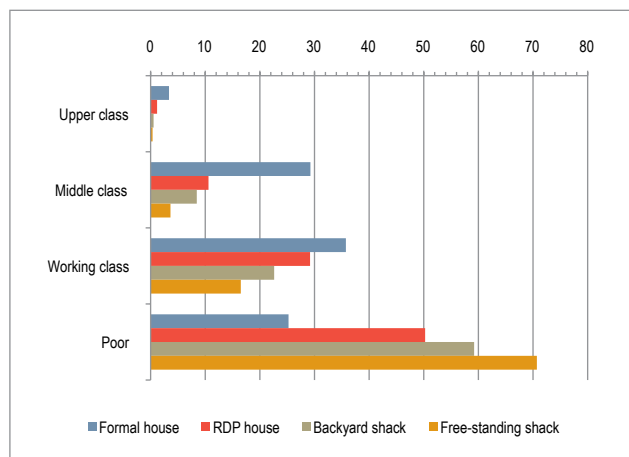
The socioeconomic composition of backyarders is important in understanding the dynamic function of this segment of the housing market. The evidence uncovered in this section suggested backyard tenants were much more similar to the residents of informal settlements than to people living in formal housing (Figure 3 on page 8). Both groups of shack dwellers were relatively poor, low skilled

and young. Almost two-thirds of them were migrants from outside Gauteng. This reinforced the proposition that backyard shacks were an alternative to free-standing shacks, performing a similar function in the urban housing market as a low-cost point of entry for people trying to improve their living standards, but without much success at this stage.

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Figure 3: Household status of shack dwellers



Source: Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) Gauteng Quality of life Survey, 2011.

Government's neglect of the issue seems inappropriate given the scale of backyard shacks.



Conclusion

In some places and for some people, occupying a backyard may be the last choice for those unable to find alternative shelter and ineligible for government support, such as recent migrants with limited resources and social networks. In other places and for other groups, backyard shacks may be purposefully selected over shacks elsewhere because of their improved access to services on site. There are also other possible explanations

not explored here, e.g. relatives and offspring of poor homeowners forced to move out by overcrowding in the main dwelling, linked with the general shortage of affordable urban housing. Cash-poor owners of formal houses may also sublet the main house and occupy a backyard structure themselves in order to generate some income. More detailed research is required to unpack these different processes and outcomes.

In terms of policy implications, the government's neglect of the issue seems inappropriate given the scale and rate of growth of backyard shacks. Some simple and inexpensive measures could be taken to make these makeshift structures more robust and to expand municipal services. It may be more cost effective to intensify existing townships and RDP settlements than to undertake large-scale site and service schemes beyond the urban edge.

Second, there are various negative neighbourhood externalities created by the growth of these structures that need to be regulated and managed in some way, in conjunction with the local community. Third, there are possible equity concerns surrounding the unequal treatment of families in different housing circumstances, in relation to free basic services, free homes and social grants.

A fourth point is that a differentiated phenomenon clearly requires a diverse policy response rather than a standard approach. Careful consideration must be given to the principles that should underlie a national policy towards informal housing, as well as the practical complications of implementation in different localities, including dealing with privately-owned land.

Finally, it is imperative that a policy towards backyard dwellings takes cognisance of the underlying issues of unemployment and poverty. The housing crisis cannot be addressed in isolation of the need for more jobs, greater skills and improved livelihoods. Investment in housing improvement, infrastructure and all the associated inputs could be a catalyst for a broader process of economic revitalisation and job creation. ■

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