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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Delgado, G., Castán Broto, V., & Mukesi, T. (2023). Queering Housing Policy: Questioning Urban Planning Assumptions in Namibian Cities. *Urban Planning*, 8(2), 164-176. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v8i2.6592>

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Article

Queering Housing Policy: Questioning Urban Planning Assumptions in Namibian Cities

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Submitted: 7 December 2022 | Accepted: 22 March 2023 | Published: 22 May 2023

Abstract

Heteronormative models of the home have permeated housing policies for decades, only adding to economic and spatial inequalities in a landscape of housing injustices. Half of the urban population in Namibia lives in precarious housing conditions. Cities like Windhoek and Walvis Bay are among the most unequal in the world. Such inequalities translate into significant gaps in housing quality, security, and service provision. These inequalities are acutely felt by LGBTIQ+ populations that already face other forms of exclusion from economic and social life and fundamental human rights. A new National Housing Policy—emphasizing the right to housing—is about to be adopted in Namibia, but would it address the concerns of queer populations? This article asks what it means to engage with Namibia’s new National Housing Policy through the lens of queer decolonial thought. It presents an exploratory study of the questions emerging at the margins of the discussion on the National Housing Policy. The objective was to develop an exploratory research agenda for a queer decolonial perspective on housing in Namibia. In the context of enormous housing shortages, a queer decolonial perspective emphasizes radical inclusion as a principle for housing provision. The exploration of shared queer experiences in accessing housing suggests that the themes of belonging, identity, and safety may support the development of such an agenda. Queer decolonial thought has thus three implications for an agenda of research on housing in Namibia. First, it calls for understanding what community and belonging mean for LGBTIQ+ people. Second, queer decolonial thought poses questions about citizenship, particularly given the shift to a view of the state as creating housing opportunities (through land rights and basic services) and support mechanisms for incremental housing. Queer decolonial thought calls for identifying the multiple ways the state misrecognizes individuals who do not conform to prescribed identities and sexual orientations. Third, queer decolonial thought invites reflection on the constitution of safe spaces in aggressive urban environments and the multiple layers of perceived safety constructed through diverse institutions and public spaces.

Keywords

coloniality; housing; LGBTIQ+; Namibia; queer decolonial thought; queer housing

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Queer(ing) Urban Planning and Municipal Governance” edited by Alison L. Bain (Utrecht University) and Julie A. Podmore (John Abbott College / Concordia University).

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1. Introduction

Since independence, the housing question has been a salient political issue in the Republic of Namibia (henceforth Namibia; Bogosi, 1992). The National Housing Policy (NHP) adopted in 1991 recognized a diversity of housing needs. In 2009, a revision of the NHP prioritised

homeownership and private provision under the assumption that people could access loans. The fundamental assumptions of those regulations excluded most of the population in Namibia. For example, most Namibians do not qualify for mortgages under current regulations and cannot access the conventional housing market (Chiripanhura, 2018). For those LGBTIQ+ collectives

already suffering discrimination in their social and working lives, access to housing is an additional challenge.

A revised NHP has been under negotiation between the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development (2022) and its stakeholders. The draft document envisions a new era of housing policy in Namibia. It follows six principles of housing provision: adequate, targeted, incremental, people-focused, learning-focused, and accountable (Table 1). The aim is to facilitate access to housing for the majority of the population on low incomes, especially those living in informal conditions, through a dual strategy of informal settlement upgrading and incremental greenfield development. The objective of the NHP is to deliver housing opportunities for populations on ultra-low (monthly household income under €250 or N\$5,000) and low incomes (monthly household income range €250–500), which constitute 62.4% and 25.1% of the population, respectively (Ministry of Urban and Rural Development, 2022). The draft for consultation proposes enshrining the right to adequate housing in the constitution, following a recommendation of the Second Namibian Land Conference (Melber, 2019). The stakeholder consultation of the draft has brought about a sense of opportunity for a possible paradigm shift in housing policy, but some voices call for caution. Neighboring South Africa has already attempted a constitutional approach to the right to housing, creating a state obligation to provide habitation to the poorest people and, in some cases, preventing forced evictions. However, the state has struggled to keep up with demand and rising housing expectations (Turok & Scheba, 2019).

The enormity of the housing crisis in Namibia calls for scalable programs. At the same time, many difficulties in accessing housing stem from the deployment of generalized assumptions about what kind of housing people need and how they can access it, which do not always correspond to the realities of urban living. The supply

approach of the previous housing policy in Namibia did not meet the housing demands of almost 90% of the population. While the new policy might improve upon this in terms of reach, the 2022 revision of the NHP may continue to exclude vulnerable groups, such as LGBTIQ+ populations, if specific provisions for their circumstances are not explicitly included in the policy.

Access to housing is a critical component of stability in LGBTIQ+ lives, and it provides the foundation to support livelihoods, provide security, and facilitate access to healthcare (Badgett, 2014). Access to housing is routinely impeded by forms of active and passive discrimination, from deprioritizing families that do not match heteronormative requirements in housing policies to overlooking measures to address the specific requirements of LGBTIQ+ people to access bureaucracies, information, and resources (Lim et al., 2013). Further complicating matters, LGBTIQ+ people may also lack a broader social network of support, for example, when they are estranged from their family because of their sexual or gender orientation (Mills, 2015). Heteronormative assumptions are thus inherently exclusionary. For example, policies to tackle homelessness focused on meeting the needs of families automatically exclude vulnerable (single) individuals who do not meet those requirements (Carr et al., 2022).

The emerging body of literature on housing issues among LGBTIQ+ people shows that even when policy and planning attempt to be deliberately inclusive, they fall short of addressing the needs of queer populations. The queer constitutes a new frontier of exclusion in which affected individuals are constructed as undeserving, deviant, and abject in ways that generate multiple forms of intended and unintended discrimination (Carr et al., 2022). In this context, urban planning and housing policies must take additional steps to welcome queer groups already excluded by default (Doan, 2010). This

Table 1. Core principles in the draft of the revision of the NHP.

Principle	Definition
Adequate	Interventions shall be guided by the principles of the UN-defined Right to Adequate Housing which outlines a broad understanding of housing as an enabler for social and economic empowerment
Targeted	Interventions and public expenditure shall be proportional to locally varying social and income demographics, leaving no one behind
Incremental	The scale and complexity of the urban land and housing challenges require incremental approaches towards obtaining adequate housing for the majority
People-focused	Ensuring broad public ownership requires continuous public engagement, education, and capacitation for inhabitants, stakeholders, and government officials at all levels
Learning-focused	Effective housing solutions will evolve through learning by doing and assessed continuously through monitoring and evaluation
Accountable	The vast policy scope and its financial implications require accountability and consistent monitoring and evaluation to achieve social equity

calls for no less than a shift of perspective on housing justice: a new perspective that not only recognizes queer experiences but also changes with them. Queer utopianism refers to perspectives that demand a profound transformation of societies shaped by heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialism (Esteban Muñoz, 2009). Queer utopianism recognizes the inherent resistive character of queer responses, the challenges they pose to the current structure of the social policy, and the possibilities of concrete practices that build forms of survival and hope (including situated practices of care, mutual aid, and challenges to disempowering practices; England, 2022). Histories of colonial and postcolonial domination have shaped ideas of home with the archetypes of the nuclear family and the housewife. Imperialism extended this heteropatriarchal model, which became a kernel of the forms of coloniality ubiquitous in the postcolonial era (Kapoor, 2015). Heteronormative ideologies in postcolonial contexts hinder equitable access to housing (Nyanzi, 2013). Dominant notions of the home link good citizenship and nationhood to sexual categories (Gairola, 2006). This is a constant in the development of housing policy for queer populations, specifically in rapidly urbanizing areas where providing universal access to housing is an urgent priority. Equitable access to adequate housing calls for new paradigms that recognize the intimate connection between queer discrimination and coloniality (Tudor, 2021) and celebrate the fact that planning for queer populations is planning that works for everyone in the city (Doan, 2015). Planning for queer populations must also be planning that actively decolonizes existing ways of thinking about housing, planning, and public policy.

This article asks what it means to engage with Namibia's new NHP through the lens of queer decolonial thought—a form of queer utopianism that understands queer liberation and decolonization as synonyms. The objective is to develop an exploratory research agenda to develop a queer decolonial perspective on housing in Namibia. The research used a multi-methods strategy, including “drawn interviews” and two workshops with members of LGBTIQ+ communities in the city of Walvis Bay to formulate research questions that can inform a queer decolonial perspective on housing. In the context of enormous housing shortages, a queer decolonial perspective emphasizes radical inclusion as a principle for housing provision, which is sensitive to the forms of exclusion at the margins. The exploration of shared queer experiences in accessing housing suggests that the themes of belonging, identity, and safety may support the development of such an agenda.

2. Queering Housing, Housing Queer Communities

2.1. Queer Decolonial Thought and Housing

Our analysis builds on the intersection of queer and decolonial thought. Tamale's (2020) account of decolo-

nization brings forward the experience of queer lives in Africa, which are often left out of the literature on decoloniality. Tamale's thought differentiates between colonialism and coloniality. While colonization refers to a systematic project of territorial occupation and labor and resource exploitation, coloniality instead emphasizes the long-standing patterns of power resulting from that process, manifested particularly in the dominance of certain processes of knowledge production (Tamale, 2020). Even when and where colonization is over, coloniality continues. This is an argument that decolonial thinkers have explored, compounding various forms of oppression into what they term “coloniality” (Maldonado-Torres, 2008; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Tamale follows Quijano (2000) in highlighting the endurance of eurocentric perspectives in the production of knowledge. Eurocentric ideas become instruments for organizing the social order, including race, gender, and sexuality. These forms of coloniality become naturalized and, beyond a form of political and economic colonization, subsequently colonize processes of thinking and reduce autonomy.

The colonial project thus suppresses heterogeneity, simplifying people's social roles and dissociating them from their experiences (Tamale, 2020). Colonial legacies also shape how certain practices—and hence the people linked to those practices—are deemed as incorrect, unsanitary, or uncivilized, without challenging the infrastructure systems that reproduce those practices (Aldavidal & Browne, 2021). The colonial project also shapes the morality of urban life and its relationship with the environment and its artefacts. It also shapes governance processes; even participatory processes are drenched in a colonial stench where deserving communities are singled out from the unruly mass (Mulumba et al., 2021).

The family is a crucial entry point for queer decolonial thought (e.g., Hunt & Holmes, 2015). Tamale (2020) examines family law as a sphere where coloniality can be observed. Tamale explains how the British Protectorate in Uganda established a conceptual separation between state and personal law. This dichotomy shielded the domestic family from state intrusion and introduced the male-headed family as the system's nucleus for heteropatriarchal-capitalist reproduction (Tamale, 2020). This institutionalization of a British understanding of the family established a previously absent hardline distinction between public and private spaces, normalized a fixed conception of the ideal family, and reduced the autonomy of non-dominant family members. In a postcolonial context, it is difficult to overlook the dual character of the home as both a site of material comfort and a locus of symbolic power (Blunt & Varley, 2004). Hayden's (1982) work on the relationship between homemaking and nationhood already emphasized the fundamentally political character of the home alongside a series of prescriptions about how the home must be inhabited and, crucially, with which identities. Colonialism put the home and inhabitation at the centre of the imperial political project.

Colonialism, however, did not unfold over blank slates but built upon the existing political conditions of different locations. In Namibia, ethnographic research suggests that Christianity, rather than coloniality, shaped the structure of Namibian society (McKittrick, 2002). Christian missionaries sought to ban traditional practices by imposing heteropatriarchal family models, effectively eroding alternative ideas of familiar or affective relationships (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). During the colonial occupation, familiar or affective relationships were secondary to economic priorities. For example, entire populations were displaced throughout the territory, separating families along lines of gender and physical ability through the infamous contract labor system (Hishongwa, 1992). Mixed layers of heteropatriarchal norms, deployed when they served Christianization first and colonization later, have endured in the post-independence period.

Urban planning during colonial occupation prioritized public and intimate forms of urban space that actively excluded the non-normative. As a result, the expression of solidarities and affections has been largely excluded from urban space, not only in public spaces but also in shared spaces within the home. In a world where queer people live under constant threat (legal, cultural, institutional), multiple hiding processes are at work, and the possibilities for expressing queerness are contingent upon the goodwill of those witnessing the event. This leads to apparently contradictory forms of spatial organization in which nuclear family homes exist alongside sites where queerness is welcome or where heteronormative spaces are transformed into queer ones in an ad hoc manner. Examples of these transformations are entertainment venues (e.g., bars and clubs) or public open spaces (e.g., malls or waterfront walkways), but also when a café allows for queer expression at specific set times (e.g., the evening) or in sectioned spaces (e.g., a back room). The home itself may be a contingent space for the expression of queer solidarities but, at the same time, queer thought questions the home as a stable category that can be found within the confines of housing.

A queer decolonial perspective on housing thus highlights three elements of analysis: (a) the symbolic functioning of the home as it is linked to specific notions of citizenship and nationhood, which separates deserving and undeserving subjects; (b) heteronormative models of the nuclear family that are reinforced through the incorporation of the home in the urban economy as a unit of reproduction; and (c) how the home operates in contradictory ways as a site of safety in an aggressive environment of rapid urban change.

2.2. Enduring Colonialities of Housing In Namibia

With the recognition of the realities of rapid urbanization and the assertion that 66% of the urban population (short of one million) live in an informal settlement, the revised NHP shifts policy direction radically. Housing policy lies within a complex legal framework, which

emphasizes the production of housing in a “formal” way. Under apartheid, urban development planning served the needs of the minority white population, while black people had no right to own urban land, and inhabited sub-serviced, but heavily regulated, townships (Wallace, 2011). After independence from South Africa in 1990, when free movement consolidated as a reality (past laws were lifted in 1978) and urbanization accelerated, meeting the housing needs of the dispossessed populations became a policy priority. The first NHP in 1991 put a strong emphasis on addressing the backlog of housing. The revision of 2009 shifted to an overall understanding of housing as an engine of economic growth enabled by the state. Since 1991, the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development has supported different programs targeted at low-income households, with different legacies and varying degrees of success (see Table 2).

Recent unpublished data by the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia show that about half of the urban population lives in informal conditions without adequate services and tenure security (Scharrenbroich & Shuunyuni, 2022). In the 1990s, the realities of informal settlements were a new and emerging concern (Peyroux & Graefe, 1995). Scholar-activists documented the heterogeneous forms of inhabitation whereby people appropriated the built environment in unexpected ways (Muller, 1993, 1995). When housing was delivered, people adapted built structures in heterodox ways that fit their social norms, daily needs, and a growing interest in new technologies (radio, kitchens). The national approach to the land question has been generally focused on land reform, understood as the redistribution of agricultural land with no consideration of the production of formal land and housing in urban areas, although this changed in the Second National Land Conference of 2018 (Lühl & Delgado, 2018; see also Republic of Namibia, 2018).

The 2009 revision of the NHP introduced a neo-liberal ethos in housing policy (Delgado & Lühl, 2013). This further excluded the majority of the population from housing as the assumption that people could access housing finance did not hold for over 90% of the population that in 2018 could not access a mortgage (Chiripanhura, 2018). These policies have pushed the growing urban population in Namibia to overcrowded townships—densified through building backyard structures, housing division, and extensions—and peri-urban neighborhoods, lacking adequate infrastructures, services, and provision of access to livelihood opportunities.

Colonialities are therefore reproduced in urban planning, with aspirations of formalization that deny the urban realities in the country and that assimilate housing needs to heteropatriarchal models. Informal settlements are often reduced to “a type” without specific needs. Some policy efforts have sought to recognize the dynamics of change in informal developments. For example, the National Land Policy of 1998 referred to the potential of incremental development, and the First Housing Policy of 1991 recognized the role of self-help groups in housing

Table 2. Examples of land-servicing- and housing-related programs and projects administered by the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development in Namibia.

Program	Purpose	Status
Mass Urban Land Servicing Program	Reducing the backlog of supply of land to meet the current demand by making land available, a reaction to youth housing activism in the early 2010s	While it mostly involves conventional land servicing, it has also supported the development of a Flexible Land Tenure System
Mass Housing Development Program	Providing housing at a large scale to the lower-income sectors of the population, closely related to the 2009 revision of the NHP	3,726 houses in various categories completed since the inception of the program in 2013–2018
Financial support to community-based housing organizations	Supporting community organizations directly in the delivery of housing for low-income people, this program builds on previous experiences emerging from the 1991 NHP	N\$44,7 million grant funding to the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia enabled the construction of some 1,901 affordable houses in 2018
National Housing Enterprise recapitalization	Providing housing finance for households in the low-income range, governed by the National Housing Enterprise Act of 1992, amended in 2000 and the State-Owned Enterprises Governance Act 2 of 2006; the National Housing Enterprise is also a depository of a legacy of pre-independence housing provisions for non-whites	Over 8,000 houses were delivered between 1993 and 2010, but current delivery falls short of annual targets
Decentralised Build Together Program	Establishing Decentralised Build Together Committees for each region to deal with applications for assistance from the Housing Revolving Funds; the Decentralised Build Together Programme was a direct outcome of the 1991 NHP	30,400 housing units have been constructed under this program since its inception (1992–2018)
Public-private partnerships	Boosting the supply of public service provision where the government cannot provide, as regulated by the Public-Private Partnership Act 4 of 2017	This remains an initiative rather than a program but is also boosted in the revised NHP

Source: Authors' work based on Ministry of Urban and Rural Development (2018, 2022; see also Lühl and Delgado, 2016).

provision (Delgado, 2018). Women-led groups have for decades advocated for community-led incremental and co-produced approaches (Chitekwe-Biti, 2018). The scale of the housing challenge, estimated to require 22,000 houses per year (Asino & Christensen, 2018), remains overwhelming. Efforts like those described in Table 2 have had too little impact to make a difference (Chiripanhura, 2018). The revised NHP will recognize the agency of the state to create housing opportunities through land rights and basic services and will reintroduce co-production approaches to housing. However, its impact on LGBTIQ+ people already facing social and institutional discrimination has not been examined in detail.

2.3. Queer Lives and Housing in Namibia

While there are accounts of post-independence action by LGBTIQ+ groups (Lorway, 2014), engagement with his-

torical accounts of queerness is rare, except for colonial accounts of "indigenous sexuality" (Falk, 1926/1998). Oshiwambo, a family of Bantu languages spoken by the largest cultural group in Namibia, has a specific term to denote queer identities (singular, *es(h)enge*; plural, *omas(h)enge*), suggesting open acknowledgement and historical documentation of queer presence (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). However, missionization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries entrenched the idea of heterosexual monogamy as the default form of organization (Miettinen, 2005). This was furthermore racialized, with interracial relations outlawed during apartheid times, a practice that continued after the regulation on the matter was abolished in the late 1970s. The influence of patriarchal, racial, and heteronormative norms is still palpable today. The first administration after independence lasted 15 years and was characterized by hateful, homophobic speech, strongly shaping public views

(see Currier, 2010). The following administration, which lasted 10 years, created *de facto* tolerance by avoiding pronouncements. The current situation is one of increasing social acceptance, with the development of a vibrant queer cultural life, despite continuous displays of homophobia in public life and bureaucratic administration (Brown, 2019).

Activists and civil society organizations have increasingly developed projects to advance LGBTIQ+ rights and sexual health. Gaining visibility became a major challenge for LGBTIQ+ movements (Currier, 2012). For example, the Namibian Rainbow Project was founded in 1996 in response to SWAPO's hate speech. The Namibian Rainbow Project pioneered a multi-layered approach of actions to promote the rights of LGBTIQ+ communities, including advocacy, social services, and health campaigns. However, their work also became mired by contradictions and their dependence on resources and ideas from the West (Lorway, 2014). Recent protests led by youth groups have taken a decolonial and intersectional approach, with the prominent inclusion of LGBTIQ+ issues, partly through the emergence of new decentralized and non-institutionalized organizations like the Namibia Equal Rights Movement (Becker, 2022). In Southern Africa, international efforts often focused on health programs to address the horrors of the HIV/AIDS epidemic but left more fundamental questions about rights unaddressed (Tucker, 2020). Today's situation remains ambiguous. The Namibian constitution is not specific about LGBTIQ+ rights. Some of the law's components are homophobic, sexist, and incompatible with the spirit of inclusion and human rights of independent Namibia. Nevertheless, public views combine a mixture of tolerance (or veiled avoidance) and conservative distance. Most people living in urban areas today are reportedly indifferent to LGBTIQ+ people, as the largest proportion of respondents in urban areas (54.5%) would like or would not mind having a homosexual neighbour (Afrobarometer, 2022). Institutional discrimination in governmental institutions, isolated instances of violence, hatred discourses sometimes disguised as harmful jokes, job discrimination, and isolation are all common in Namibian society.

In Namibia, the housing crisis presents existential challenges for LGBTIQ+ groups. LGBTIQ+ people report feelings of homelessness even when having a place to live, which adds to other stress factors, including the need to conform to gendered stereotypes and the threat of violence, often within one's own family (Solomons, 2020). Historically, housing and urban policies have led to a further entrenchment of inequalities with the simultaneous repression of already colonized, racialized, and queer identities. Namibian housing policy illustrates how forms of coloniality compound LGBTIQ+ discrimination. This is visible, for example, in housing designs, such as the matchbox house model that provided the template for black township housing in Namibia (Nord, 2022a). Housing models were tied to prescriptions for habita-

tion that deserving individuals had to match, particularly concerning the adoption of Western lifestyles (Müller-Friedman, 2008). For example, matchbox houses were developed according to the assumed spatial needs of the (white) nuclear family and separated everyday activities around spaces of sleeping, living, dining, and cooking, with assigned roles for individuals in the family across those spaces; any "adaptations" to respond to black and "colored" residents resulted in lower building standards, lower-quality materials, and reductions in space available (Nord, 2022a). LGBTIQ+ people faced the additional need to conform to the gender and sexual roles prescribed in this form of habitation, seeing them excluded from public spaces and community organizations if they did not conform. The reproduction of LGBTIQ+ discrimination through the performance coloniality of practices—for example, in the activities of architects and urban planners (Nord, 2022a)—highlights that neither can be considered in isolation. Instead, they have to be confronted with an explicitly queer decolonial perspective.

3. Perspectives on Housing From Queer Communities

3.1. Methodology

The objective of this research was to evaluate the NHP's principles through the perspective of queer experience, as understood by those experiencing discrimination because they identify as queer. Walvis Bay is a port city where queerness has found relatively welcoming grounds. A city composed of people from many places around the country, it is animated further with a flow of international workers and tourists and is remarkably mixed. As the only major port along the Namibian coast, the city had been South African territory since before German colonization. It remained a contested space, remaining South African territory until four years after Namibia's independence.

Walvis Bay is one of the few places outside Windhoek with the presence of support organizations for the LGBTIQ+ community. In Walvis Bay, we worked with Mpower Community Trust to develop a common research agenda on housing. Mpower Community Trust is an organization supporting the health of queer communities in informal settlements, which is also developing interests in other aspects of queer life, such as housing.

Exploratory interviews were conducted in July 2022 with four key members of the queer community in Walvis Bay and two planners interested in considering queer perspectives in urban planning. The interviews focused on identifying unique aspects of the queer experience of accessing housing and the significance of different places. Field visits to specific locations followed each interview. The strategy for data capture was "visual harvesting," creating drawings during the interviews and follow-up visits that were also shared with the interviewees for feedback. The images were integrated to

create a thematic representation of the issues, in an effort to construct an initial research agenda (Figure 1). In November 2022, Mpower Community Trust organized two workshops with members of the LGBTIQ+ community in Walvis Bay. The first workshop brought together 16 young adults, all black, living in the township of Kuisebmond, and open about their LGBTIQ+ identity. The second workshop included 16 queer activists representing different LGBTIQ+ groups, from high-income white gay men to black trans activists and sex workers. Visual harvesting inputs were consolidated into a map of salient issues (Figure 1) that informed the first part of the discussion during the workshop, seeking to generate shared research questions. During the second part of the workshop, participants drew and shared representations and understanding of ideal homes. The analysis discusses first, a synthesis of queer perceptions of housing and home in Walvis Bay, and second, an analysis of the spatial aspects of the integration of housing in the urban economy and the contradictions in the creation of safe spaces.

3.2. *Queer Perceptions of Housing and Home in Walvis Bay*

Figure 1 presents a collective mapping of the constitution of queer relations around housing. The drawings illustrate the salient aspects of the interviews and establish unexpected connections. Stronger connections are highlighted with different colors. The diagram includes keywords that interviewees or workshop participants highlighted, linking to their personal and other participants' accounts. The discussions clustered around four themes: the development of social relations, the availability of safe spaces, the redefinition of spaces of social reproduction, and the material and symbolic constitution of the city as a place of living. These initial themes were then explored in a collective dialogue during the workshops.

Social relations were mediated by both persisting forms of coloniality and the demands to engage in forms of decoloniality that contest them. Coloniality shapes everything from the forms of communication—what languages are spoken and where—to the spatial inequalities in access to housing, affordability, and services. Coloniality also highlights the dependence on commodified engagements with different forms of inhabitation. At the same time, and particularly in relation to housing, there is a sense of the need to speak “a certain language” that provides access to housing to navigate the complex requirements that enable people’s access. Many participants requested information about how to access the government’s housing programs and shared their struggle to understand the processes involved in accessing them. The difficulties in navigating the bureaucracies of housing programs generate a sense of missed opportunity as if the responsibility for accessing housing rested only on the capacity of individuals to qualify for mortgages. Participants in the second workshop discussed the

act of going to the bank, how the background of different people would condition their access to the bank, and how they come across. These technical and bureaucratic languages are therefore related to the question of affordability in a disabling environment that prevents rather than facilitates access to housing.

Coloniality manifests physically in the structuration of space in unequal neighborhoods. Self-construction appears when people do not find housing alternatives, but this is only possible within less regulated spaces within the city, such as, for example, Kuisebmond. Selective segregation practices are reproduced, if not formally, through the combined practices of multiple actors in a disabling environment that excludes large population groups from accessing housing. “The land speaks,” said some participants when trying to explain the intersection of social histories in Walvis Bay with the spatial and ecological histories that have co-evolved with them because of the consolidation of patterns of inequality in urban space—from land ownership to the conditions in which land is accessed.

In the context of limited affordability, commodified engagements shape individual relationships with the home and the house. Either the house becomes an object of value to be exchanged or it enables access to other commodities, objects of special significance that create meaning within queer lives (a private space to make some noise, a kitchen to develop one’s culinary interests, a storage space to keep clothes or other identity-related objects). These commodified engagements may help develop further social and emotional relationships, for example, when delicious food becomes a shared object and a restaurant becomes a place of encounter. Individuals use forms of consumption to redefine their social relations, making them at home within their neighborhoods.

This led the discussion to the complex aspects of what constitutes a safe space and how it relates to notions of home. Participants highlighted the importance of those physical meeting places, often multi-purpose locales for civil society organizations, where different forms of expression are allowed. The Mpower Community Trust is located in such a facility, where the expression of queer identity is supported and encouraged (our workshops included icebreakers and participants and facilitators shared personal stories).

However, reducing the idea of “safe space” to specific locations where queer expression is allowed not only reduces queer experiences but also diminishes the possibility of finding spaces of home in different moments and stages of life. Participants were also interested in considering how “home” can be constituted into a safe space (as it is not always a safe space). Participants emphasized the idea of “home as a person,” that is, home is not a physical house but a safe space where relationships with loved ones can be developed. The person in question varies depending on queer experiences. Some individuals found themselves linking home ideas to a person they

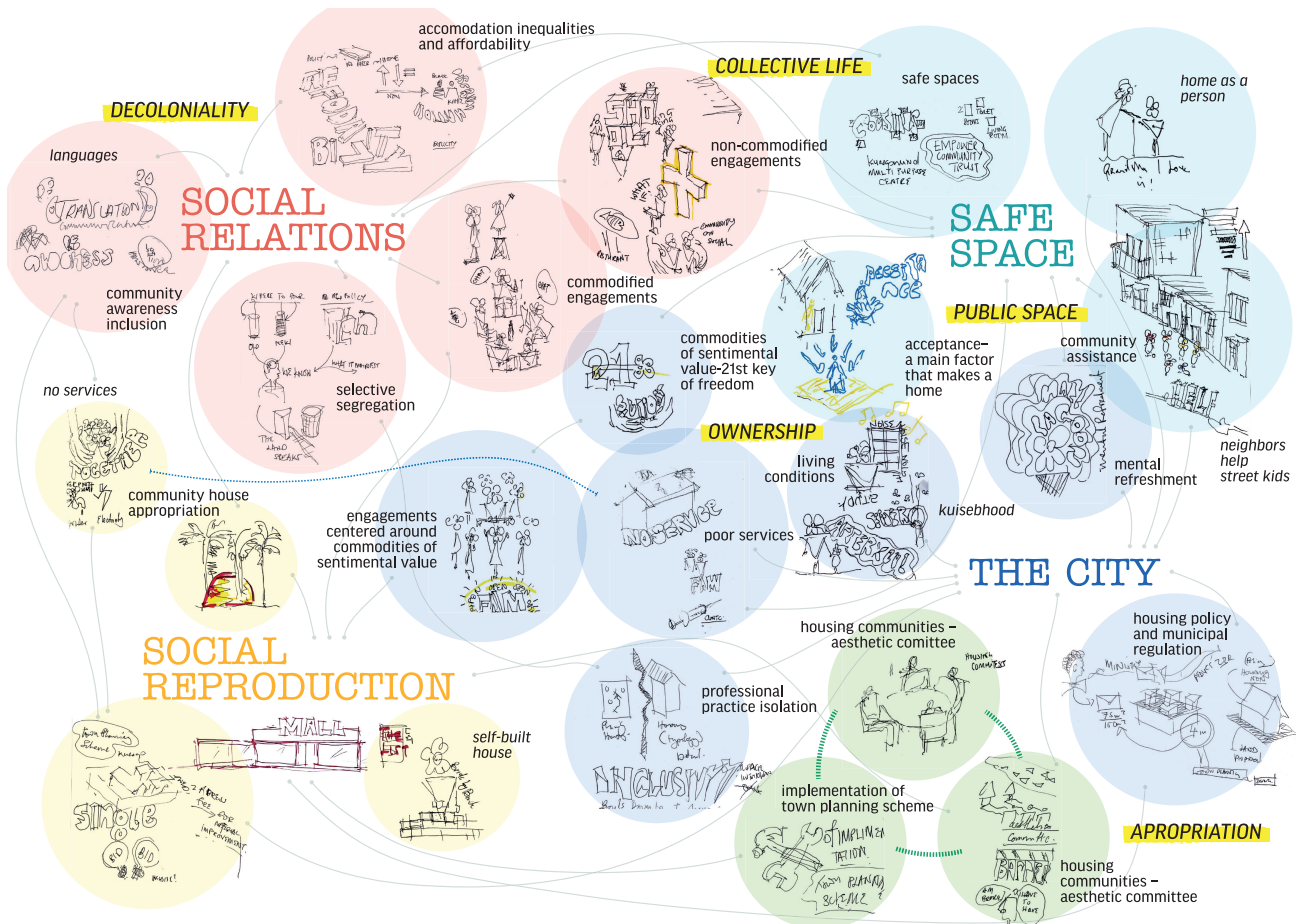


Figure 1. Mapping of housing relations for queer populations. Figure drawn by Erika Conchis, based on designs by Takudzwa Mukesi and collective discussions.

had grown up with, sometimes their parents, other times a person who provided refuge, such as an auntie or a neighbour. Other individuals tied the home to the people they had to provide for, such as their children, siblings, or friends. Whether provided to oneself or others, ideas of care were central to constituting the home as a safe space.

In the workshops, the home as a safe space was presented as a place of acceptance. In a society that still criminalizes non-conforming sexualities—even when the authorities do not enforce the legislation—acceptance represents the recognition of one’s existence as valid by those closest to that person. The home is thus a space where anyone can express themselves through music and noise and through loving relationships with those who make the home. Human relationships thus constitute the safe spaces that queer people can inhabit as a home.

Individuals can also feel at home in public spaces. Queer lives in Walvis Bay extend beyond the home. People expressed their need to feel part of a community and to experience acceptance beyond a reduced circle of acquaintances. Moreover, they explained how community support could make a difference to queer people to feel at home in their neighbourhoods. Many

shared endearing stories about how neighbours supported street kids and the kinds of support received, for example, through HIV-support groups or sex workers’ associations. The need for spaces for “mental refreshment” highlighted that the material constitution of public or collective space is also important. The lagoon, in particular, constituted a common space with which many participants identified.

Safe spaces of homemaking stand side-by-side with the processes that constitute the unequal city as a lived space. The city also has housing policies and municipal regulations, which impose a formalizing language on the urban fabric. Recently, the constitution of aesthetic committees in certain areas and the implementation of town planning reproduce modernist ideas about how Walvis Bay should be inhabited. These formal regulations reproduce housing models that further entrench the historically produced spatial inequalities observable in the city today. Isolation of architectural practices from the actual living conditions in Walvis Bay further entrenches inadequate practices. The housing stock in lower-income areas remains unaffordable, and many houses—none benefiting from architectural design quality—appear empty.

The desire for house and land ownership is not exclusive to queer people. However, our discussions

suggested that, for queer communities, it is strongly linked to a sense of safety and better living conditions, especially in townships such as Kuisebmond. The belief that “owning” a house is a key to safety and well-being rests on the assumption that owning a house is an effective means to securitize space. However, for some workshop participants, home ownership was linked to a desire for sharing and building collectives around a particular space. Several participants emphasized the constitution of their dream home as a collective space of encounter. This is particularly important in the context of “the ghetto,” the term people use in Namibia to refer to townships such as Kuisebmond, especially when they lack services and livelihood opportunities. While many ideal home representations were presented as escapism from the ghetto, some participants drew their houses within that space and argued that “you can also live in style in the ghetto.” One young activist wrote the slogan “mi casa es su casa” to emphasize that their ideal of a home is a house in the ghetto that provides a home for everyone.

At the same time, the representation of the house as a closed, private space also relates to what counts as family. Several participants highlighted the meaning of objects with sentimental value that brought back the figures of specific people who constituted the home, such as a grandparent or a distant relative. Those material engagements may redefine the figure of the family around an extended, multi-headed, and uniform set of familiar relations within which queer people can find safe spaces and feel at home. The appropriation of housing space through squatting and self-built housing are responses that challenge the dynamic of speculation and help reimagine a more inclusive city.

3.3. Spatialization of Queer Housing Needs

The establishment of the home as a unit of social relations translates into specific forms of individual regulation, from moral prescriptions to behavior expectations. Home is where social relations of family and trust are forged, which most often happens through consumption. For example, individuals explained how they forge relationships through performing chores together or sharing food or drinks. Such accounts, however, imply purchasing power and consumption of goods. We also found non-commodified accounts where queer people reported forging relationships with community members who supported their well-being. For the former, schools, extracurricular activities, and churches were places where individuals felt part of a group even when they knew their sexual orientation would represent a problem for some members. For the latter, the waterfront in the wealthier areas was reportedly a place where one could go for a walk or run without being disturbed or worried about safety issues.

Queer populations change the constitution of space across the city. Higher-income areas are generally consid-

ered low-density, comprising larger plots and larger properties. However, some have used planning provisions to build backyard structures for rent, originally envisioned as “granny flats” or service quarters. Another strategy is the establishment of guesthouses, which would, in effect, be medium to long-term rentals. This is due to the pressing need for housing and income pressures, even in traditionally higher-income areas.

At the same time, home is not always a safe space. Several young participants in the first workshop emphasized the importance of privacy and space to be themselves, for example, by playing loud music or being alone. The home and the house are the chief “safe space” in an aggressive urban environment as it enables a certain degree of isolation. At the same time, some shared spaces can constitute a place of safety. Some individuals suggested that a recently built shopping mall was a place of safety and an option for safe recreation. The mall absorbed many businesses that were otherwise distributed within the city’s central areas, and queer people felt safe enough to participate.

Interviewees and workshop participants reported places that felt like home but did not match the assumptions about the home and were in no way conforming to normative ideas of the home. Often, home referred to different collectivities and their operation in safeguarding queer lives. For example, one respondent explained how their safety was reinforced by seeing how the neighbours cared for other vulnerable members, such as street kids. According to this account, some families within the neighbourhood, including the grandparents of the interviewee, organize provisions for street kids. As explained above, extended families play a central role in contemporary life in Namibia.

At the same time, the private house plays an essential role in facilitating access to services. For example, Mpower Community Trust shares space within a municipally owned building that provides a haven for queer men. The place has a vibrant life, busy with activities and formal and informal interaction as the Mpower Community Trust facilitates social events for its members to interact. However, some targeted services, such as sexual and mental health support, happen in private homes rather than in a municipal-owned building and are not sponsored but open for voluntary contributions.

The home, and the house, become sites for urban reproduction, where the future is constituted around the mythical ideal of the family. The experience of queer populations, however, redefines the idea of the home (individual and collective, permanent and transitory, safe and unsafe) and the idea of the family. Affective linkages between home and family are also strong among queer individuals. One participant emphasized that his grandfather had built the house where they lived. The grandfather’s labor in procuring it conferred the house additional value. Much of the potentialities of queer housing emerge from chaotic structures of housing. For example, a respondent described their house as a collective

housing unit without basic services like water or electricity. The house hosted several individuals identifying as queer, among other non-queer members and children. “Family” included several individuals who regularly were found at the house. However, no one could or wanted to provide an account of who lived there and explained that some forms of inhabitation were sporadic and transitory. The space is fully occupied, and places that appeared to be living rooms or kitchens are now used as bedrooms. Inhabitants believe a prominent professional owns the place in Windhoek, and those living there are, in effect, occupying the space without paying rent outside real estate market dynamics.

Few of these accounts, however, engaged with the racialized character of queer living even though racial segregation is a constant in everyday life. A planner explained that race, rather than income, distributed people around the city, with wealthier black people choosing to live in lower-income Kuisebmond, to avoid everyday friction with white people in higher-income areas.

4. Conclusion

Exploring the question of housing in Namibia from a queer perspective exposes the roots of homophobic heteropatriarchal assumptions informing housing and how they have coevolved with different forms of coloniality that are still reproduced in more or less formalized assumptions about urban planning and housing policy. Queer decolonial thought simultaneously challenges (a) the forms of coloniality that endure in the country and become sedimented in spatial patterns of inequality and (b) the assumptions about affective relations, identity, and personal life associated with such forms of coloniality.

The exploratory study of the perceptions of housing among different LGBTIQ+ groups in Walvis Bay raises questions that help interrogate and develop current housing policy. First, there are questions about the reproduction of forms of racial segregation and how they interact with the forms of exclusion from housing faced by LGBTIQ+ people. If “Namibia’s fraught history of segregation remains the phantom that haunts contemporary urban spaces” (Tjirera, 2021, p. 71), this phantom relates closely to the imposition of heteropatriarchal modes of living (Delgado, 2021). What we observe today in the city are strategies of “making space” by different people, including the LGBTIQ+ populations, that assimilate some of those strategies to finding a place in the city. Collective identity offers additional forms of belonging to LGBTIQ+ people who see themselves as sharing a common problem and mobilize mutual support strategies. However, the constitution of safe spaces is not straightforward, as it requires both collective and private sites, in messy arrangements which are not always sanitized. Still today, the uncritical acceptance of modernist planning principles contributes to reproducing formal and informal mechanisms of discrimination

(Müller-Friedman, 2008; Nord, 2022a). What is less recognized, however, is that LGBTIQ+ populations face additional layers of exclusion and may not be able to access additional mechanisms to palliate those forms of discrimination (Delgado, 2021).

One salient finding from the workshops is that for members of the LGBTIQ+ community in Walvis Bay—within and beyond Kuisebmond—is that social-affective relations are the most critical component of the making of a safe home. Here two factors play a role. On the one hand, there is a question of what belonging means in different contexts. For example, what constitutes a family and a community? Multi-generational, extended families are now the norm in townships such as Kuisebmond (Nord, 2022b). The home and the house are appropriated as places of social reproduction where new forms of interaction come into being. Forms of coloniality and colonial imposition perdure, but they are reappropriated and incorporated into the specific spaces of queer lives. How do new ways of performing belonging shape LGBTIQ+ possibilities to access housing?

On the other hand, how different queer identities are performed and how they are distributed in space raises questions about what constitutes citizenship in contemporary Namibia. Housing policy must attend to the heterogeneous range of collective and private spaces that enable the expression of affective lives. The distinction between public and private, collective and individual, and shared and commoditized muddles rather than clarifies the multiple overlapping mechanisms whereby LGBTIQ+ groups in Walvis Bay constitute public spaces where private identities can be expressed and private spaces that enable publicly shared lives. Safety is not achieved through isolation but through connections. These include social, affective, and material connections whose nature is often indistinguishable. Housing policy needs to promote rather than dissolve those connections.

Queer decolonial thought has thus three implications for an agenda of research on housing in Namibia. First, it calls for understanding what community and belonging mean for LGBTIQ+ people. As the revised NHP puts forward co-production and community development as critical strategies for housing delivery, it will need to acknowledge how those communities operate and whom they can reach. The NHP must provide opportunities for multiple forms of social organization to unfold in the city, for example, the growing prevalence of extended and multi-generational families. Second, queer decolonial thought poses questions about citizenship, particularly with the shift to a view of the state’s role in housing and the need to identify the multiple ways the state misrecognizes individuals who do not conform to prescribed identities and sexual orientations. Third, queer decolonial thought invites reflection on the constitution of safe spaces in aggressive urban environments and the multiple layers of perceived safety constructed through diverse institutions and public spaces. Housing

policy needs to be integrated with broader perspectives considering the nature of shared spaces and their sometimes chaotic and transitory nature.

Queer utopian thought, however, goes beyond housing policy focused on housing provision because it emphasizes the need to secure solidarity spaces within existing possibilities. Home dreams intersect with past histories and imagined futures and connect individuals with wider communities. Changes in people and places depend on how people and things interact. The city constitutes a broader kind of home, as it increasingly hosts places of meaningful interaction that help social bonding and the constitution of safe spaces, including schools, churches, public spaces, shopping malls, bars, and community centers. In practice, informal housing—living spaces without services—become safe spaces with different degrees of performance for those who cannot access formal housing opportunities. The very presence of queer individuals in places primarily catering to cis-gendered, heterosexual clientele may already be a subversive act.

Acknowledgments

The team would like to thank the MPower Community Trust for their support in implementing the workshops in Walvis Bay and for their ongoing work. Thanks to Erika Conchis for drawing Figure 1. We also thank Phillip Lühl, Helen John, and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. We thank Alison L. Bain, Julie A. Podmore, and Tiago Cardoso for their patience. The research team received financial support from the Landscape Research Group.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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