Living and working in Bekezela

Photo Essay

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Introduction: Living and working spaces
Many reclaimers are forced to live informally or to sleep rough. They are likely to choose to live close to where they can collect or to where they can sell. They also require space for sorting material. These settlements may be small or large but overall, they occupy small amounts of land in the urban space.
A living and working space

Bekezela is a living and working space in inner city Johannesburg. Many of the residents earn their livelihood through reclaiming and are members of the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO). They sort and compact materials close to where they live. Bekezela is just a few city blocks away from a buy back centre where they sell some of their materials.
Location
Bekezela is a dense settlement located under the highway bridge in Newtown.

It occupies the site of a historic building – originally a school – on PRASA-owned land. The building was the site of a sports academy but when it was abandoned, people who needed a place to stay in the inner city, including many reclaimers, occupied it.

When authorities illegally evicted people from Bekezela, the community went to court. The judgment requires PRASA and the City of Johannesburg to find permanent alternative accommodation for the residents.
Living conditions

Now it is estimated there are 300 people living in Bekezela. They include families and people living on their own.
The site includes formal and informal structures. Some residents live in old classrooms, others in shacks.
There are also spaza shops and taverns.
Working under the bridge
Reclaimers sort and store the materials they collect under the bridge.
It is where the ARO truck deposits the sorted material it collects in suburbs where residents have asked ARO to collect their recyclables. Reclaimers sort the material into bags.
Manually compacting materials.
Sometimes reclaimers wet plastics or cardboard to make it heavier when they sell it. They do this to make up for the low prices they are paid for the materials.
Loading bags onto trolleys to transport for sale.
Loading bags onto trolleys.
Savings

The materials that reclaimers collect are also a form of savings. They can store materials and exchange them at times when they are unable to work. Or they can store them to sell when the market prices for particular materials are higher. Some reclaimers use particular types of materials as their savings.
A high turnover of material

The area under the bridge is often full of bags and materials. At times law enforcement authorities raise concerns about this or even threaten reclaimers. In reality, it is an efficient system as sorted recyclables leave to be sold and are replaced by new recyclables throughout the week. Without these spaces, reclaimers would not be able to collect as much material and more would end up in landfills.
A high turnover of material.
Transporting sorted materials to buy back centre
Reclaimers move trolley loads of materials in a long train towards the buy back centre.
Transporting sorted materials to buy back centre.