Living and working at Metro Centre

Photo Essay

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Introduction: Living and working spaces

Reclaimers have to leave their homes before dawn so that they can salvage materials from rubbish bins in the suburbs before the municipal waste trucks arrive. Many are forced to sleep rough or in nearby informal settlements in order to beat the trucks. Others sleep close to where they work because the cost of transport to outlying townships of South Africa’s divided cities is prohibitive. In addition, reclaimers often create sorting spaces close to where they live.
Living and working at Metro Centre

Metro Centre is a living and working space near Wits University. People call it Metro Centre because it is adjacent to the parking area for the city’s bus fleet, called Metro buses.

Reclaimers who had been living on the street in Fietas were relocated to this temporary site after the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) negotiated for a limited number of people to reside there.
A quiet place
Metro Centre, with some 35 shacks, is a quiet settlement.
Some reclaimers live at Metro Centre with their families, others are couples and there are also people living on their own. Each shack is unique. Most are made from materials that have been salvaged.
Shared spaces
The open space between shacks is used for cooking and for resting, or for jobs such as repairing trolleys. Bheki Zwane says people who live in Metro Centre have good relationships with each other. He adds, “We make a boula (fire in a tin drum) together and share our food and cook together.”
Interiors
The interior of each shack is different. Some are basic; others are decorated with found objects.
Metro Centre is also a working area.
Several reclaimers sort materials at various places around the edges of the site. Most sort materials they collected with their trolleys. Mantoa Khoali and Louis Mahlangu are sorting a large pile of material collected by the African Reclaimers Organisation’s truck.
Over 200 bags of bottles are waiting to be crushed and prepared for sale.