From Ireland to Cape Town.

An exploration into the benefits of comparative housing research for NGOs in the global South.

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It is precisely in this field that more (academic) research might provide a better understanding of the choices and methods of NGOs. Working on the basis of PhD research done from 2003 to 2007 and follow up research until today this contribution wants to illustrate how comparative (housing) research can contribute to a better understanding of and support for the NGOs activities by Western donors.

To achieve this aim the contribution starts from an analysis of several neighbourhoods within the townships of Cape Town, South Africa, where an Irish NGO was actively involved in housing provision. After contextualising the casestudies the paper shows in which way comparative housing research can be more than just an accumulation of knowledge and how it can make a contribution to the validation of the choices and methodologies of NGOs, eg. the choice to work with women’s networks regarding housing provision. The paper concludes with raising some concerns about the difficult integration of the findings of academic research in the functioning of the NGOs.
**Introduction**

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**Introducing Cape Town**

The Cape Town area is one of South Africa’s oldest and fastest growing regions. The development of the city began with the fort erected by the Dutch in 1647. As a result of their decision to establish a resting point on the trade routes to Asia, fruit and vegetable gardens were set up, which are today known as ‘the gardens’ in the city centre. Today, the city houses approximately 3 million people. Almost 50% of them
are ‘coloured’, 32% are black and 19% are white. This is comparable to the situation in the Western Cape Province, but is very different to the situation nationally. Historically, the black population was generally found in both the Northern part of the country, and in more rural areas. The white population tended to be concentrated in the urban areas, and their presence in the Cape Town region is a consequence of history, since here was the port into which European migrants entered the country. There is a strong presence of white people of English descent, since the first Dutch migrants, the ‘Boers’, tended to trek up to the north. The huge numbers of ‘coloured’ people in the area are as a result of the Western Cape’s influx policy in the 1980s, which favoured coloured labourers over black workers. However, as soon as the apartheid regime was abolished, people started to migrate, and by 2001 the black population in the Western Cape had risen to 32% from a mere 8% in 1995. The city is characterized, as most South African cities, by a strong spatial segregation of the different population groups, since the Cape Flats is home to most of Cape Town’s black and coloured populations. The greatest concentration of informal settlements is situated along the N2, in the black townships of Langa, Nyanga and Gugulethu. The redevelopment of the area, known as the N2 gateway project, is dealing with some of these squatter settlements. Other, large informal settlements, such as Freedom Park, are found in Khayelitsha and Mitchell’s Plain. In 2006, a study was conducted which highlighted the unequal spatial distribution of socio-economic status and living standards. The most vulnerable populations live in the Cape Flats and are coloured or black. The spatial relationships between population groups, living standards and deprivation are prominent (Romanovsky & Gie, 2006).

**Selected cases**

The data used for this paper is part of the larger dataset that was gathered for my PhD, it was gathered during a number of distinct periods between 2005 and 2007. From the very beginning, the intention of this research was to try to understand how and why certain neighbourhoods, in which a housing project was either underway or had been realised, succeed in empowering their inhabitants. Therefore, the study had no intention of being representative and qualitative research methods were used.
A total of 54 in-depth interviews were conducted in the four neighbourhoods studied. Two of these interviews were with men, and two of them were within groups (one in Netreg, and one in Freedom Park). The data gathered during the first fieldwork period, namely that from Wesbank and Victoria Mxenge, was focused more on gaining an understanding of the existence of networks and organisational structures, whereas the data gathered in Netreg and Freedom Park was related more to the residents’ daily lives and personal experiences.

For the broader PhD work a total number of 7 cases were looked at, of which 4 in depth. Of these four, two (Netreg and Freedom Park) worked together with an Irish ngo and are elaborated on below.

**From Backyard Shack to Home-Owner: The Netreg Neighbourhood.**

The Netreg neighbourhood is part of the larger Bonteheuwel area. It is a predominantly coloured locality (99%) with a large number of Muslim inhabitants (23%) and there is a very high demand for new houses. In most of the yards, backyard shacks have been erected, either to house sons and daughters, or to rent out. Eventually, however, these ‘backyarders’ began to want proper homes of their own, and started to organise themselves. In 1985, and still during apartheid, the first steps to contact government officials were taken. As might be expected, this contact was not, initially, very successful, as one of the interviewees (a Xhosa speaker) explains:

“*We started this project in 1985, so I was involved from the beginning [...] Sometimes you don’t know where to go ... And now, for me, there are a lot of changes in South Africa ... because in those days you go to this department and they tell you to go to that department ... and that... But now whenever you come to the department, any department, they give you the right information.*” (N VO39).

By going from door to door, more people were informed about the ideas being discussed and became involved in regular meetings. By 1987, a list of beneficiaries for the new houses had already been drawn up, and one of the project’s key women even stopped working to fully immerse herself in making their dreams a reality.

In 1996, an NGO that specialised in housing became involved: “*We knew DAG from a workshop in New Crossroads*” (N VO39). The Development Action Group (DAG) first helped the community to try to find the owners of the land needed to make the new housing development in Netreg a reality. Again, this turned out to be a difficult task, taking three years to locate them.
Another obstacle was politics. As Das (2004) points out in his article on the poverty of the wage-labour class in India, associations of people are seen by politicians as ‘voters’ banks’. When one of the political parties thinks that the Associations may be a source of potential votes for the opposition, they in turn try to influence them with a variety of measures (Das, 2004). An illustration of this was in Netreg between supporters of the ANC and the DA (Democratic Alliance). These political games caused additional delays, and frustrations reached such levels that council officials were taken hostage, until people were given some answers. This event, obviously, created a great deal of tension between the city’s officials and the Netreg community, and it took the DAG a long time to get the parties to communicate with each other again. Another key factor, which remained unresolved because of political wrangling, was the housing program’s judicial structure. Initially, those involved opted to work together within a cooperative, but, as time progressed, the decision was made to turn the houses into private properties. Nevertheless, every member of the new housing scheme had to sign its constitution, thereby committing to its rules and regulations. As a result of workshops in capacity building and housing design organised by the DAG, enthusiasm for the project grew and by the end of 2005 the Netreg community had met Niall Mellon, an Irish businessman who had helped the squatters’ community in Houtbay. This philanthropist agreed to help the community and added a substantial amount to the government’s subsidy. This meant that every house could be equipped with a geyser and a tiled roof. The pressure to deliver the houses was intense, as the NMTT (Niall Mellon Township Trust) wanted the building work to commence as quickly as possible. Accordingly, the decision was taken to build similar houses, all 45m2 in size, instead of adapting them to the requirements of each household. A somewhat standardised solution was the result, which is still the main grievance today, as became clear during my interviews. Nevertheless, the beneficiaries are happy to have a home in which they can raise their children. The building started in January 2006, and by the end of the year the first families were able to move into their new homes. However, during my visit in 2007 3 properties were still not allocated because of local politics. Although this research focuses on the effects that this new housing scheme had on its inhabitants, it is clear that the new development is an intrinsic part of the whole of Netreg. The bonds and links between the new scheme and the existing neighbourhood are strong and, as such, the project has had an influence on the wider community.
Freedom Park

The 27th of April 1998 will always be an important date to the people of Freedom Park, because it was the day that they took control of the ‘field’. During the weekend of Freedom day in 1998, up to 800 shacks were erected on an unused piece of land in the area between Eastridge and Tafelsig. The ‘field’, as it is called by the people there, had been reserved for a school, but because these plans were not realised, it had become a dangerous and dirty place. Accordingly, the people who lived in backyard shacks or overcrowded houses in the surrounding areas, decided to take over the field and build their own shacks on it. As this took place only three days before the local elections, the initiative received much political and public attention. Indeed, it was initially believed that what had occurred was an attempt by the opposition to challenge government policies, and the project remained on the political agenda for some time. The government tried to force the squatters to leave the field but, with the help of the Legal Resource Centre, they took their case to court and succeeded in getting a negotiator appointed. The squatters wanted the council to provide them with basic services, because they had to buy water from their neighbours, and the unhygienic living conditions were becoming a risk to health. The Grootboom court case in 2001, which obliged the government to provide short term help in the case of need, set an important precedent upon which Freedom Park’s inhabitants could build their case. Thus, in 2002, toilets and water were provided to the field’s residents.

In 2003, the city council started an extensive upgrading project in Mitchell’s Plain and the squatters asked to be involved. Their demands were met, and the ‘Mitchell’s Plain phase 1 housing project’ included 493 houses for Freedom Park. From the outset, the squatters sought official confirmation of their involvement and wanted to utilise the PHP subsidy scheme and then appoint their own town planner. To achieve all this, the DAG’s help was again important, and numerous workshops on capacity building and housing design were also organised. Initially, there were problems with the community’s representation since a number of committees were active, and, as in Netreg, local politicians used the community for their own ends. However, with the DAG’s help one representative committee was eventually elected and received appropriate training. From that point on, politics were kept as far away as possible
from the housing initiative, and it is only around election times that old tensions tend to resurface.

The work on the infrastructure started in April 2006, although there was a set-back when the contractor went bankrupt in September of that same year. During my fieldwork in 2007, a new start was being made on the infrastructure, and the construction of the houses should soon be underway.

In 2006, the NMTT also became involved and agreed to help to complete the dwellings. As a result, the houses will all get solar heating systems and their size will be increased from 36m² to 42m². In November 2007, the NMTT succeeded in bringing 1380 Irish volunteers to Freedom Park to help with building 203 houses, a crèche, a community centre and a playground.

The committee leading the community consists of 13 people, and only two of them are men. In 2003, a list was compiled with the aim of getting information about all the people who were residing in Freedom Park and wanted houses. It is on the basis of this list that the housing project’s final details were laid down. Anyone who came to live on the field after 2003 is not eligible for a house.

When work on the infrastructure began, the whole community had to move their shacks to the top of the field to make the work possible.

**The NMTT and the DAG**

In both neighbourhoods presented above it were the same NGOs who were involved.

The Development Action Group (DAG) is a Cape Town based organisation that was established in 1986, thus still under apartheid rule, in order to assist communities who were threatened to be forcibly removed. From then on their work with marginalised communities expanded and they assisted in people driven housing project and established a housing savings and loan fund.

The Niall Mellon Township Trust (NMTT) was established in 2002 by an Irish business man. His aim was to provide quality housing for the deprived communities of Cape Town. By now the Trust is working on 36 housing project all over South Africa. The NGO’s headquarters are in Ireland and during 2007/2008 a local office opened in Cape Town.
Before we can illustrate how and why the PhD research proofed to be useful for the NMTT we first need to elaborate on the specific interrelation between housing and care, thus in a next section insight into this relation is provided.

**Women and housing projects**

**A housing discourse**

Attempting to provide an all-inclusive overview of the meaning of home is an almost impossible undertaking, and is far beyond the scope of this paper. The symbolic meanings attached to the home are of importance, since the house is a symbol of the Self (Mallet, 2004). For Wu (1993) the home is essential to the formation of one’s identity, and he sees people’s identities (the ‘I’) being constructed through their relationships with others, which relationships are initiated in the home: “Home is where I both was born and am being continually born, within that womb called other people, in their being not me” (Wu, 1993, p. 195, original emphasis).

The values that are projected onto the home are those that are considered to be “good” in the dominant public discourse. These forms of discourse, which separate the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’, support a normalising approach in which ‘good’ behaviour is applauded and ‘bad’ behaviour disciplined. Once more, this shows how our actions and thoughts are influenced by normalising processes. Relevant research has been carried out by Fiona Ross (2005). In her study of an informal settlement in the Western Cape (‘the parc’), she reveals how its residents (of Xhosa origin) imagined a ‘proper’ home as being something that is associated with middle-class ‘stereotypes’ thereof. When these same inhabitants discovered that they were about to be given proper houses in a nearby planned residential area (‘the village’), an open discourse began around the meaning of the new homes. The residents believed that they now had an opportunity to live as ‘ordentlike mense’ or ‘respectable people’. Accordingly, for them there was a strong association between properly built houses and a respectable family life, which was in contrast to the stigmatisation they had experienced when living in a shack (Ross, 2005). I must stress that ‘home’ or the idea of ‘home’ can become a projected ‘stereotype’ onto which hopes and dreams are projected, potentially making it a powerful concept. Additionally are these meanings often associated with family life (Bowly, Gregory, & Mckie, 1997; Clapham, 2005; Jones, 2000; Mallet, 2004). They can be, and often are, used by the political elite to
impose norms and values upon populations. As such, ideas about the house, home, and family, support a ‘normalising’ process through which people ‘subject themselves’ to a dominant discourse which ensures that they take part in society.

Giddens showed that in a post-modern society, people are losing their sense of purpose in life as well as their sense of belonging. He also stresses that a home can become a place wherein ‘ontological security’ can be realised. As such, the home reassures people that our social world is as it should be, and that our own identity is safely assured within it. In the privacy of the home, the inhabitants can rebuild their trust in the world, thereby securing their ‘being-in-the-world’ (Clapham, 2005; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Giddens, 1984, 1990).

The home is the place where parents raise their children with love and care, it is the place where norms and values are passed to the children (Altman & Werner, 1985; Clapham, 2005). It is the place where a significant part of a child’s socialisation occurs. Accordingly, it is an important element in the reproduction of the social world.

**Motherly Care**

The first concept requiring our further attention is the notion of ‘care’, another central concept in people’s lives, and yet its influence is exercised more covertly. In the West, much research about the care concept have been conducted into aspects of the health care sphere, such as nursing, or in relation to paid health care or the more general care of the elderly (Fine, 2007; Gordon & Chase-Lansdale, 2001; Kane, 1995; Sabatino, 1999).

Feminists have also discussed the issue, often in relation to motherhood, noting the association of motherhood and child rearing with women’s confinement to private spheres. Chodorow (1978) has provided important insight, highlighting both how the concept of ‘motherhood’ is socialised within the home, and why the concept of the family has been able to remain so strong over time (Chodorow, 1978; Den Yyl, 1995). Criticism followed because Chodorow started from the perspective of a typical Western ‘nuclear family’. Nevertheless, in most cultures a strong division of labour between men and women exists, and the allocation of work is related to gender (Eriksen, 2001, pp. 124-134). This is also true for the cases mentioned in this paper. A lot has been written about these divisions of labour in Western and Southern contexts, and a scale of appreciation, or status, has often been attached to different types of
work. The perception of these status-differences has been contested in a pre-colonial, pre-modern, Africa (Sudarkasa, 2005). Several authors have shown how labour has been appreciated differently, contributing to a downward spiral in status. In the US in particular, people working in sectors that involve ‘caring’ for others see their statuses devalued, and there is a negative attitude to the notion of ‘care’ in general (Glenn, 1992, 2000). Although these insights are of interest, within this paper I intend to focus on the question of why this notion of care is so important in relation to the home.

To find an answer, a more detailed look into its meaning is essential. Although Fine (2007) argues that care is a social phenomenon and, as such, its specific meaning and form changes over time and space, he also acknowledges that it is “a concept and an ideal that refers to both intangible affective/cognitive elements, and to observable, material actions which have clear consequences for each party involved” (Fine, 2007, p. 143). This definition provides a good starting point for the further exploration of the concept. Levinas (1985) stresses that taking care of the ‘other’ is a moral obligation, and is something that is not naturally within us, but requires stimulation (Lavoie, De Konick, & Blondeau, 2006; Levinas, 1985). Levinas focuses on the relationships we have with others, relationships which begin from the first moment we lay eyes on one another. According to Levinas (1985) it is through the other’s face, in particular his (or her) eyes that a relationship of responsibility emerges. Whereas this responsibility could be evaluated as confining our own freedoms, for Levinas (1969) this it is not the case. He states that “the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness” (Levinas, 1969, p. 200, quoted in Lavoie et al.). Although acknowledging that it is demanding, Lavoie et al. (2006, p229,) argue that this moral obligation is important in “our societies, where relationships are dehumanized”. What I find of specific interest is the connection of the notion of care to ‘goodness’, which again brings us to the normalising power of ‘dichotomies’. White (1960, p. 273) draws our attention to the consequences of associating care, or being careful, with being good, even highlighting that this association has judicial consequences; a careless person is regarded as someone who hasn’t done what he was supposed to have done, and is thus disapproved of, since our judgement is “often strengthened by the social fact that we approve of actions which do not injure others and disapprove of those that do” (White, 1960, p. 273). Thus, care is primarily regarded as something positive, something good.
A second, and even stronger association, is that of care with the feminine. Gilligan’s (1982) influential work deserves our attention. In her book ‘In a Different Voice’ she criticised the work of Kohlberg (1958), who designed a scale with which to evaluate the stages of moral development in young people. At the highest stage, moral judgements are based upon the personal interpretation of ‘universal’ and ‘abstract’ principles. Kohlberg argued that girls often don’t reach this stage, and are usually ‘stuck’ at a place in which moral judgements are based upon societal expectations and personal relationships. Gilligan (1982) went on to demonstrate that the set-up of Kohlberg’s research was seriously biased, as his scale was designed in experiments only involving men. Indeed, she went on to show that women, when confronted with a moral dilemma, made decisions based on their relationships with others. As such, they are not thinking ‘less morally’ but ‘differently’, and ‘contextually’. Women will try to assess the different consequences of the available options presented to them by the moral dilemma. While women will use this assessment to make a judgement, men, on the other hand, will make an abstraction of the context to form a judgement (ten Dam & Volman, 1995). Within this context, the relational and moral orientation of care is highlighted again, and the attachment to the feminine is explained.

It has already been argued that the discourse of home is an efficient normalising mechanism. People try to fit into their society, and do so by complying with dominant discourses such as those about the home and the related notion of family. In this section I have identified how the discourse of care is an equally important ‘normalising’ discourse. I will also argue that the entanglement of the notions of home and family, and care and the feminine on the other, reinforce each other. Let me explain this statement using Gilligan’s analysis. Gilligan shows how women make decisions with the ‘other’ in mind (following Levinas), and will thus take care of that ‘other person’. Add to this the fact that, around the globe, women are primarily seen as the people responsible for child rearing, and this responsibility is optimally (following the dominant societal discourses in the context of this paper) exercised within the privacy and safety of the home. Consequently, the house is regarded as being important to the provision of the best possible care for a family’s children. This goes some way towards helping us to understand the boundless energy that women invest in providing this care.
Notes on comparative and cross-cultural research

During follow-up research conducted in October 2009, the employees of the local office of the NMTT expressed their concerns regarding the attitudes of Western donors, specifically towards their apparent ‘choice’ to work with women groups as steering partner in the housing projects.

As it was explained to me they were getting increasingly more questions about this ‘choice’, as it was seen by these donors. The NMTT tried to explain that in the communities where there was a demand for housing and help to achieve the housing dream it were mostly women who were actively leading the community in their struggle for houses.

Unfortunately the NGO has not done any research in these matters and as such they could not really argument against the donors. The results from the PhD research accurately showed that indeed women are actively involved in housing research and the theory, as elaborated on above, complemented with the results from the fieldwork explains the reasons behind.

Now, one could easily question the use of Western theoretical frames for the analysis of projects in the South. But I want to argue that the use of well described and positioned results from ethnographic research can overcome this critique.

Malinowski is often referred to as the father of modern (British) anthropology, and his work on the Trobriand Islands (1914-1918) set the standard for ethnographic research. He stressed the importance of participating in the every-day life of a community being studied, in order to grasp the subtle relationships between the social institutions and cultural opinions. He also paid attention to the individual as an ‘actor’, who is capable of conscious conduct within a given social framework (Eriksen, 2001, p. 15).

From a methodological point of view, ethnography can be seen as the study of group of people and their conduct through the absorption of, and participation in, their every-day lives. Slembrouck (1998-2006, p. 12) argues that “[e]thnography is perhaps best thought of as an epistemology which constantly moves between what is local/specific and the general, between knowledge already acquired and new data. Nor does ethnography exclude critical concerns.”
Since Malinowski’s study of Trobriand society, ethnographic studies have become more varied, and additional methods of data gathering, other than participant observation, have ‘emerged’, such as document analysis (newspapers, diaries, and photographs), life histories, and interviews. Methodologies are borrowed from phenomenology, feminism and postmodernism. The reflections made about postmodern and critical ethnography are relevant to this work, as considerable attention is paid to the position of the researcher, and efforts are made to resolve the distinction between micro and macro approaches, and between structure and agency (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Smith, 1992). Grand social theories are as much a social construct as the narratives of everyday life and, as such, post-modern ethnography tries to end the divide between the macro and micro. Smith (1992, pp. 509-510) argues that:

“By asking people first to construct their understanding of the opportunities and constraints they face in the world in which they live, and then to talk about the ways in which they appropriate, accommodate to, or resist the forms of power and domination, opportunity and constraint that they encounter, post-modern ethnography does offer us something new, namely a chance to overcome by a contextually situated petit narrative, the fruitless either- or rhetoric that has too often marred the structure-agency debate in social theory”.

By trying to grasp how people cope with and resist the structural constraints, and the cultural complexion put on them in their every-day lives, postmodern ethnography highlights the question of power domination and resistance (Smith, 1992).

My position as a Western, white, female, conducting research in an African, coloured/black/mixed context, raises a number of issues. In ethnographic research, the researcher tries to comprehend the lives of the group he or she is studying, with considerable attention being paid to the historical, cultural and spatial contexts. Moreover, it is also important to be conscious of two other factors that are directly related, not to the people being observed, but to the observer himself. Firstly, the researcher has to be aware of his own context, particularly when carrying out research abroad, and amongst people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. An observer cannot adopt an objective and ‘scientific’ position during research and, as such, is constantly confronted with the construction of the self through the people being studied.
Secondly, because of the ‘cross-cultural’ situation brought about by fieldwork, the people being observed will also be influenced, and the research will have consequences for their every-day lives (Smith, 1992). Furthermore, Jordan and Yeomans (1995, p. 393), based on Said (1989; Said, 1993), suggest that it is also important for the researcher to be sensitive to the issues of power, which might arise between the observed and the observer (also see Pile, 1991).

Ethnomethodology has much in common with ethnography, and they both emphasise the importance of observation, participation and contextualisation. But moreover, ethnomethodology tries to understand how individuals make sense of what they are doing, namely which forces influence the ways in which a person interprets situations and the messages they encounter?

The importance of texts and discussions are stressed, and become “active social phenomena” (Watson (1987) cited in Slembrouck, 1998-2006, p. 41). Accordingly, such discourse analyses, and the deliberate study of ‘story telling’ or narratives, is a very important tool, which is very time consuming and as such NGO’s often do not have the time to engage in these forms of research, and it is precisely then that a collaboration between researchers and NGO can be a major asset for the

**Conclusion and concerns**

I hope to have illustrated how research, such as the PhD, can go beyond the scope of mere academic work. But it has to be acknowledged that more than often this sort of research doesn’t have immediate or direct impact on the subject it is studying. In this specific case it is the personal involvement of the researcher, bringing the research and the results to the NGO that enabled the ngo to make their point to the donors. architecture closer

To conclude I want to also highlight that this sort of academic research is not only beneficial for the NGOs (and consequently for the local communities) concerned, but it also adds to the ‘Western academic view’. I can not put it better than Simone (2010) who beautifully emphasises the benefits of “global” research:
“... delving into the economics, social relationships, and everyday practices of often messy cities of the South is meant to emphasize what all urban residents everywhere must often do or at least consider in order to put together their lives in the city. *Sometimes only by looking elsewhere can a person recognize important aspects of their own life* (Simone, 2010, p. xiv, emphasis added).”

**Epilogue**

March 2010, Freedom Park, Cape Town

“Hi” I said to the women “is L. at home?”

“No, she went to the clinic”

“And when will she be back, I phoned her and we were supposed to meet”

“I don’t know .. can take a long time waiting”

“I understand” (at that moment I realised I knew the girl from my time in Freedom Park in 2007) “you are M. aren’t you... , do you remember me?”

“yes, I am”

“How are doing now”

“I’m fine, I still have my job, but I want to change jobs … don’t like it anymore”

She had changed so much… the bright looking energetic curly girl had turned into a skinny depressed looking woman, she has los her teeth as well as her bright smile.

I felt very uncomfortable … told her I was going to mee a new appointment with L. and gave her the Belgian chocolates to give to L.

Driving back to the city I contemplated on the impact of my work and that of many others in the ngos.

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