

# The process and experience of building homes in Napier Informal Settlement

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## INTRODUCTION

The thematic aims to understand how people build; starting from the process of securing a plot for themselves and their families. We focused on the stories of three residents who are referred to here as, the Planner (Sizwe Majavu), the Architect (Mziwothando Lungephi) and the Manager (Nolwethu Kakana, who goes by the name, Lele). Mziwothando and Sizwe both live in the settlement, but their journeys have been very different. Their homes look different as well because of how the systems and processes of building have

## MZIWOHANDO LUNGEPHI: THE ARCHITECT

One of the most intriguing houses in the settlement, in terms of its design, was that of Mziwothando. We saw his house from the main road that goes into the settlement and we thought to ourselves, “We have to talk to the owner and see this house”. All we saw was a double storey that stood out from other structures. When we went to look at it, we saw the double storey was separate from the rest of the house. The main structure was L-shaped with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living room. There was a garage which had a room on top of it.

Mziwothando, is a forty-year-old man from the Eastern Cape, who moved to Napier in 2009 with his wife. When he moved to Napier, there was no squatter controller – the job that is assigned to Lele now. He was informed about the process of getting a letter to build on municipal land and went to CAM himself to get permission to build his house. When he was allocated a plot, it was comparatively larger than what is currently given because there were fewer residents in the settlement at the time. Mziwothando’s plot was even bigger because it happened to be located on the periphery of the settlement at the time. He said the process of the allocation of land included the municipal representatives putting sticks on the ground earmarking how much land he could use. They did not use a tape measure or other tools of measurement; hence he did not know the exact plot size he was allocated.

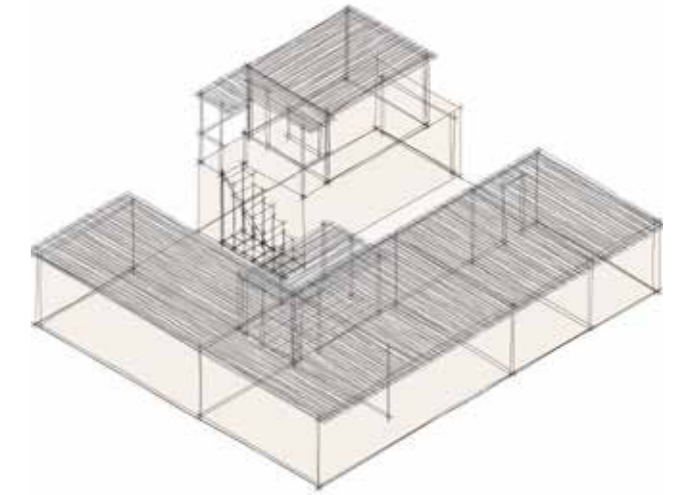
Mziwothando initially built a house with only one room and kept adding additional rooms every time family members came to live with him. In 2016, he built a garage for his car and later added a room on top of the garage as a storeroom for his

changed over time. Lele is a resident as well as a representative for CAM in the settlement. Since her appointment as a squatter controller, she has played a role in managing the settlement and assisting people to get plots for their homes. We explore the structural changes, material and official, that have occurred in the settlement, pieced together through the stories of our three respondents. These stories are drawn from interviews, observations, and drawings of homes.



tools because he had no designated place to keep them. He built his house himself and he did it exactly the way he imagined it. He has a lot of tools because, like most men in the settlement, he works on a farm and often receives tools from his employers. Mziwothando does not sell these tools to anyone, he keeps them for future use.

In his home, Mziwothando lives with his wife and child. While we were interviewing him outside, his wife was inside watching TV. There were lots of children playing in his yard and the neighbours were hanging out there as well. The children were playing in an old car next to his garage, some were going up and down the double storey garage chasing each other along the stairs. This was by far the most neighbour-friendly house we had been to in Napier.



Exploded view of Mziwothando's House

## NOLWETHU KAKANA (LELE): THE MANAGER

One of the most important people we were introduced to when we arrived in Napier, was Nolwethu, also known as Lele. Nolwethu is a community leader, one of five elected by the community. She is currently also a squatter controller in the settlement, a position created by the municipality in their efforts towards managing informal settlements. She is 33 years old and was born in the Eastern Cape. She moved to Napier in 2005 in search of employment. When she explained it to us, she described a squatter controller as a person that monitors the number and quality/size of structures, the legitimacy of occupation, as well as informing people about the process of getting a plot in the settlement. She is basically the eyes and ears of CAM when it comes to dealing with informal structures in the area.

We asked Lele about what people in the community thought about her role as a squatter controller, and her response was that people think she is a spy for the municipality. The community was not informed about the introduction of a squatter controller in the settlement. This made it hard for her to do her job because people think she is stepping over the line. When she sees someone building, she must approach them and ask them for the

letter of approval from the municipality; if they do not have it, she is required to report them to her supervisor in the municipality. Another challenge that Lele faces in her job is that people come and report issues that are not related to her duties, for example, crime, plumbing issues, blockages, and so on.

As more and more people move into the area, Lele’s job keeps getting more challenging because she must monitor the increasing number of structures. She said that some people do not like to follow the rules or even be told what to do by her because she is a woman and because she is younger than most of the people whose houses she has to oversee. We asked Lele how she liked living in the settlement; her response was that she did not feel safe living there because she often gets threats from residents who do not want to follow the rules. She does not see herself living in Napier for long. She plans to move back to the Eastern Cape to be with her family. Lele is a single mother of three, she would like to get a better, less stressful job so that she is able to take better care of her family.

“Being a strong, hardworking and independent woman is what keeps me going”

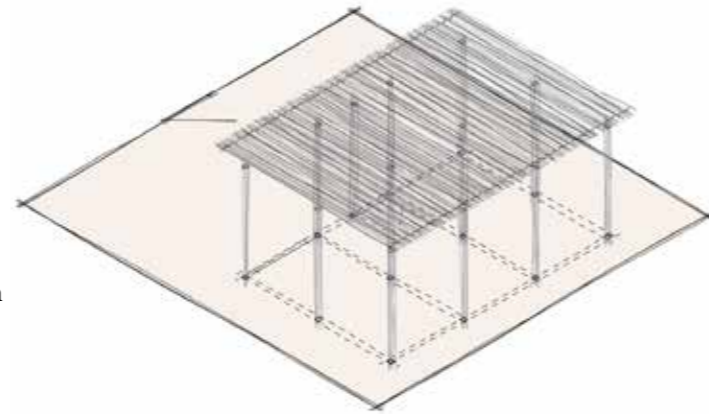
## SIZWE MAJAVU: THE PLANNER

We were also interested in talking to people who owned plots but had not 'finished' building their houses yet. On the periphery of the settlement, where recent plots had been allocated, lay structures that had only wooden frames for the walls and roof, and a fence around the yard.

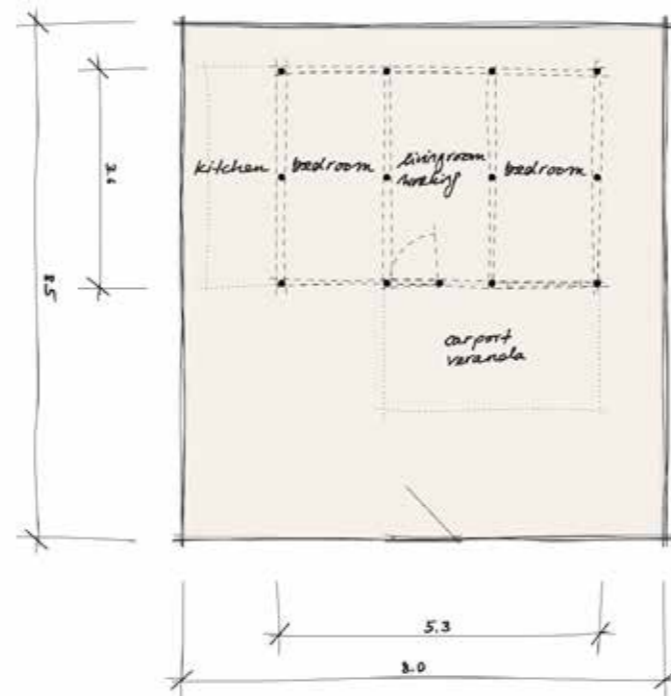
We were introduced to Sizwe Majavu, a 29-year-old man who, at the time of the interview, was staying at his friend's house in the settlement, with his wife and new-born baby. Sizwe applied for and received a letter confirming the allocation of a plot from the CAM on the 15th of January 2020. It had been three weeks since he had gathered enough materials to build the frame of the house as well as the fence bordering his yard.

Sizwe explained that he spoke to Lele regarding his need for a shelter and she referred him to CAM. Sizwe built the frame of the house in a single day, he said that, if he had more material, he would build his entire house in one go. He was grateful that his friend had accommodated him and his family, but he was excited that he had received a plot of his own and that he could build a home for his family. The element of independence that came with getting a plot gave him a sense of pride and achievement.

His biggest motivation for getting a place of his own was his family, his wife and the baby. His wife has a sewing business. She makes church clothes, school uniforms, and alters clothing items for people who live in and around the settlement. Since they are staying in someone else's house, his wife does not have enough space to run her business properly; she needs her own working space. Sizwe works on a farm and he is still collecting materials to finish building his house. He has a clear plan for what he wants to build and how he wants to build it. He explained to us that he wants to have a bedroom, a living room, a working area for his wife, and a kitchen. The kitchen will be built as an extension to the current structure of the house. Sizwe's plot is not as big as other older plots in the settlement, but he seemed happy that he has it, and was very happy to show it to us.



Exploded view of Sizwe's current structure



Sizwe's plan for his house



## KEY FINDINGS

Both of our builders, (Mziwothando and Sizwe) had very different encounters with the municipality in terms of getting access to a plot. Their motivations for building were also quite different. As shown in the narrative, Mziwothando has a larger plot than Sizwe because he moved to Napier when the settlement had only a few residents and therefore plenty of space for its occupants at the time. As time went by the settlement evolved and the demand for plots increased. This is where Lele comes in: as the manager, she works with the

municipality to maintain an order of the structures in the settlement. She also helps people who are in need of housing to go through the proper channels for accessing or registering their plots, as she has done for Sizwe. Whether the plot is large or small, it brings joy to its occupants and provides a home for families. The process of building a house is not separate from home-making; they are intermingled. We have seen that plot size does not limit creativity and building materials, and styles of building differ from door to door.

For residents of the settlement improvisation is an essential activity to build homes and livelihoods. Improvising demands a lot of mathematics, calculations and speculations, as well as the necessity to keep track of constant alterations that shape daily existence. Residents need to suture together their experiences and know-how and form collaborations that nurture a sense of solidarity. Improvisation often builds tactics and daily struggles that respond to instant needs rather than long-term strategic ends. It was clear that people have a vision of their wants and needs but they cannot afford to plan far ahead in time as even to struggle between today and tomorrow is sometimes already a difficulty. Residents possess the capacity to deliver small scale and temporary solutions but to intervene in an impactful longer-term manner is difficult. That requires better-oriented urban policies.

Research Essay excerpt, Kadria Hassan Ali

Most of the shacks were built with rusted corrugated iron and wooden slats, which inhabitants of the settlement source as remnants from renovations and as construction waste from new building projects in town. According to Nolwethu Kakana, a community leader and the municipal ‘squatter controller’, many of the building materials come either from landfills or from such construction sites, which then get traded within the settlement. Many settlement dwellers collect the materials for developing their own shacks, a form of creativity in necessity, and a catalyst in which waste materials become valuable through the act of re-use. The everyday practices of homebuilding, these forms of ‘auto-construction’ and ‘improvised materialism’, produce a material increase in value, a way in which the settlement builds an ‘alternative urbanism’.

Research Essay excerpt, Elena Antoni

Michael Dennis's association with the municipality goes back almost 25 years, when he was elected a Councillor. However, a decade ago, he decided to step away from the politics and work in municipal administration instead. He studied Public Administration at the University of Western Cape (UWC). Currently, Michael Dennis is Manager of the Human Settlements Department. He is responsible for all the informal settlements in Cape Agulhas, including allocation of plots, provision of services, new housing projects, and so on.

“We have an electronic housing database. According to our [housing] policy, we allocate houses according to your application date on the waiting list. For instance, the last two projects we had in Bredasdorp in 2013-2014, we stopped on the waiting list for people with the application date 2005. So, the beneficiaries that will benefit from the new projects start from 2005, 06, 07 up to 2010. So that is how we do our allocation, but we also make provision for vulnerable cases; people with serious social circumstances in the community. On the waiting list, for Bredasdorp only, we're looking at plus minus 3,500 [households]. Struisbaai, we're looking at plus minus 500; Napier, we're looking at plus minus 200, and Arniston plus minus 100.”

“I think politicians have realized -- This [informal settlements] is an African phenomenon. Politicians know that informal settlements are here to stay. We have to plan for it. We can't chase people away. We've got foreign nationals coming in. We can't chase people away. They've got the right to come and find an opportunity. As long as they are legally within the country, we don't have a problem. So, there is the sense from the community, as well as our politicians that informal settlements are here to stay. We just need to find ways and means with limited resources to provide services to people. We have to see how we can accommodate and improve service delivery at all levels.”

“In terms of Napier, you can see the difference compared to Zwelitsha, for instance, and Struisbaai. It's nicely formalized and that's the difference I think that we tried to do when we relocated the settlement from the riverbank. We are still sitting with a challenge there with people coming in trying to put up their shacks without permission. Luckily for us, we've got officials that are our eyes and ears as well. Not plain policeman, but rather working with us. And that's the idea also that we want to sell to communities. If we have people reporting on informal settlement issues, it's not that that person is a policeman and want to hit you and the people that we've appointed, we've also made them understand that is your role, work with the communities. You're not only reporting illegal stuff, but also service delivery issues as they happen, so that we can act on that.”

Michael Dennis, Manager, Human Settlements

“If someone wants to put a shack, she must come to the office... [to] me. Then my Manager is going to send me to go and check if there is a space so that person can put a shack. So, no one's allowed to put a shack without the permission from us. But the people are not doing that. They just put their shacks as they please. Then it comes back to me. In this municipality, it is governed by the DA now. You see now that pile of letters? Now they decided that the people must have to write letters now, if you want a plot now. It was not like that before. Now you have to write a letter. [Earlier], People just came and asked if we can get a plot. Then we go and look if there's a space and give that person space. But now, people have to write a letter. Then the letters - I have to compile all these letters and put [them] on the system. Then one or two, three weeks, the Councillors just asking the list, then we sit down and look at the circumstances of the people in need.”

“The condition is you are not allowed to hire out your place. If you are leaving Cape Agulhas, maybe in Cape Town, or whatever, you are not allowed to sell the property. So, as to material, you have to break your material and sell over, and to leave the space. The municipality is going to give another person that space. If someone got a new [place], like these people are getting new houses now, that person must demolish the shack, then take your material and sell your material, and leave the space. But there are families that are big, and the houses are too small. So, they have to come and tell us: 'no, I've got this family, I can't take all my kids to my house. I'm going to leave them behind'. So that one can't demolish the shack.”

Felicia Bungu, Squatter Control Officer

Originally from Eastern Cape, Felicia Bungu moved to Bredasdorp in 2009. Since then she has worked with the Municipality in one capacity or the other. Reporting to Manager - Human Settlements, Felicia Bungu is currently in charge of 'squatter control' in CAM. All applications for building or modifying shacks must go through her. She has one or two people working for her in every informal settlement.