



Annabel Fenton

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Hidden in plain sight: The “locations in the sky” where Apartheid lives on

*Tucked away on the rooftops of apartment buildings in Johannesburg’s leafy, wealthy suburbs are cramped rooms that continue to house predominantly Black live-in domestic workers. Despite being just a floor away from their employers, they remain worlds apart in how they experience the building, writes **Annabel Fenton**, who identifies three distinct forms of discrimination faced by these workers.*

When Apartheid finally ended in South Africa in 1994, there was the promise of a new nation: one in which all citizens would live equally, leaving the racial injustice of centuries-long colonial rule in the past. However, after nearly thirty years, these legacies have proven difficult to leave behind, and racial and economic inequality is **still rife** (and even growing) within the country.

Spatial segregation is one of these legacies which has been the most difficult to overcome. Through various initiatives of forced removals, the **Native Land Areas Act of 1913**, and the **Group Areas Act of 1960**, the Apartheid government systematically moved people of colour to different “homelands” across the country – often the most infertile and inconvenient locations – as well as “**townships**” in cities, informal settlements which many still find themselves living in.

While the end of Apartheid in 1994 brought legislative equality, and there have been some attempts to undo spatial segregation – for example through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) affordable housing, inclusive housing policies, and public transport developments – spatial injustice persists. This is another barrier that historically disadvantaged people need to overcome.

Another key legacy of colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa is domestic work. Employers, primarily wealthier descendants of colonial settlers, engage native/migrant domestic workers who often receive low wages and, at times, lack full protection of their rights. While legislative efforts in

1993 through amendments to the Basic Conditions of Employment Act extended certain rights to full-time domestic workers, gaps persisted: there were no minimum wage provisions, and part-time workers were excluded entirely.

Consequently, many South African domestic workers face precarious conditions that lack contracts, leave provisions, or regulated working hours. With approximately **869,000 South Africans employed as domestic workers**, predominantly black women, racial discrimination remains prevalent in the sector.

The invisible “locations in the sky”

In the leafy, wealthy Northern suburbs of Johannesburg – historically white areas with large houses and tree-lined streets – sit apartment buildings with a little-known secret. On their rooftops or tucked away near garages are cramped rooms originally designed during Apartheid for live-in domestic workers – what Mather termed “**locations in the sky**” in 1987. These spaces continue to house predominantly Black domestic workers, often just a floor away from their employers, yet worlds apart in how they experience the building.

My **research** involved interviewing 38 people (including domestic workers, apartment residents, and building managers) and analysing rules from 13 different buildings in the Northern Johannesburg suburbs of Killarney, Illovo, and Rosebank. What I found was a disturbing pattern of discrimination that manifests in three key ways...

(1) Physical and structural discrimination

The architecture itself enforces inequality. Many buildings have separate entrances and elevators specifically for domestic workers – a physical reminder of social division. Access to staff accommodation is often through narrow, dangerous staircases that apartment residents would never be expected to use.

As one apartment tenant in Killarney explained: “The first right is where the communal washing lines and domestic quarters are... But if you never have a reason to venture that side, you would never see the domestic quarters.”



A domestic worker descends the stairs (left) and the communal showers of the domestic quarters in a Killarney apartment building (right), where there is clearly no separation between showers. Photos: Annabel Fenton.

A black female domestic worker highlighted the economic factors that trap workers in these spaces: “[Living in the staff accommodation] is cheaper. It’s R500 a month, whereas before I was spending R1,700 on taxis every month.”

This invisibility is by design. Staff rooms are typically around 10m² with high, prison-like windows that prevent residents from seeing outside. Most have communal bathrooms and kitchens that are often in disrepair. The very placement of these rooms – near washing lines or, in one Illovo building, next to garbage bins in the basement – reinforces the status of their occupants as workers rather than residents.

(2) Rules-based discrimination

The discrimination is codified in building rules. In 12 of the 13 buildings studied, there were explicit rules that applied only to domestic workers and not to apartment residents.

One Illovo building’s rules specify: “13.3. Guests [of employees] who stay over for the night must first obtain permission from the caretaker... For a stay longer than two nights, a daily levy of R30 per person... Guests cannot stay for longer than 7 days.” Or one Killarney building’s rules stated that “Residents must ensure that their domestic employees do not cause undue noise on the common property or elsewhere” – a specific noise restriction not applied to other residents.



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A white female tenant described how rigid these divisions can be: "My domestic worker is not allowed to use the residents' lift, even if she is with my daughter, as this is in the rules."

As one staff accommodation resident explained: "They don't let us have any visitors to stay over, and they are very strict with the rules. If I want someone to stay, I have to pay. I am not allowed to have any of my children. The conditions are bad. They have no respect for us."

(3) Discrimination through social power

Even when discriminatory rules aren't written down, they're often enforced through social power. During my research, I encountered several troubling examples.

In one Killarney building, a homeless white woman given accommodation by the building manager was permitted to use the garden recreationally – something Black domestic workers were prevented from doing. As a white woman renting an apartment explained: "Our head of the body corporate has taken pity on a white woman who became homeless and he's let her stay on the sixth floor. She uses the garden recreationally, but she's white. So, if a domestic worker were to go and lie in the sun and read a book, there would be a problem, but because she is still white, she can go and use the garden."



"If a [Black] domestic worker were to go and lie in the sun and read a book, there would be a problem... but because [this woman is] white, she can go and use the garden"



A white male apartment owner in another building in Rosebank described a disturbing incident: “One of the staff members on Christmas had his kids and his wife at the pool area and it caused a stink amongst some residents. There was outrage among some people: it became a tussle. I think he was told he shouldn’t be there, and only after it was determined that he can be there – but your party is kind of ruined by the time that’s happened.”

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these power dynamics. A black female staff accommodation resident in Killarney described how “she had to report her movements to the building manager, and if she was at the mall for too long, she would get in trouble.” An apartment resident described witnessing: “The trustees had a handwashing workshop where the black workers were arranged in the garden where everyone could watch. The idea that there needs to be a separate workshop on handwashing – for the people responsible for cleaning and caring everyday – was quite shocking.”

Some exceptions exist where long-standing relationships ease restrictions. A white male building manager explained: “Yes, [no drinking is allowed], except for [this staff accommodation resident]. There’s nothing we can do. But he doesn’t make a noise luckily. He has got a disease, but he’s been here for over 25 or 30 years.”

A path forward

These “locations in the sky” represent a microcosm of South Africa’s **ongoing struggle** with its Apartheid past. While some buildings are beginning to remove discriminatory clauses from their rules, addressing the deeper social discrimination requires confronting uncomfortable truths about how urban spaces continue to be shaped by race, class, and gender.

For real change to occur, apartment residents, body corporate trustees, civil society organisations, and urban planners must recognise and address these injustices. The **Community Schemes Ombud Service** could play a vital role in regulating these spaces and ensuring equal treatment. Most importantly, the voices and experiences of domestic workers themselves must be centred in developing solutions.

Three decades after Apartheid’s formal end, its legacy lives on – sometimes just a floor above us, hidden in plain sight.

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*For more on this topic, read Annabel Fenton’s article in Urban Studies, **Views from above: The continued discrimination of domestic workers living in the apartment blocks of Northern***

Johannesburg, co-authored by Jennifer Fitchett, or watch her ***interview about this work for SABC news***.

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Image credits: All photographs by Annabel Fenton.

The outside of a Killarney apartment building, where the “locations in the sky” are visible on the top floor, differentiated by smaller windows. Photo: Annabel Fenton.

About the author

Annabel Fenton

Annabel Fenton leads research communications at LSE’s Care Policy and Evaluation Centre. She holds degrees in Economics and Geography from the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand, where her MA research explored discrimination against

domestic workers in Johannesburg. Her work bridges research, policy, and storytelling, with a focus on inequality, care, and urban justice.

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