

Diepsloot: A Neglected Township

South Africa's shantytowns are notorious for crime and appalling living conditions, but they are also home to thousands of individuals with fascinating stories.

The township of Diepsloot is scattered halfway between Johannesburg and Pretoria, remote enough that both cities can turn their backs on it. From a distance, the three square miles of shacks that litter the grassy veld seem as flimsy and haphazard as trash after a New Year's Eve bash. From a distance, reading about Diepsloot in the newspaper, it seems like just another South African Sodom and Gomorrah shantytown.

Statistics about Diepsloot are more like guesses. A single copy of a town map exists, secreted away by an impossible-to-reach bureaucrat. A rapidly growing population estimated at 150,000 constantly morphs its layout. Unemployment is hazarded at 50 percent. Residents suspect that about half the inhabitants emigrated from other African countries.

During the xenophobic attacks of May-June 2008, a few of those foreigners were killed, including one man who was burned alive. Stores and houses were looted, and an angry mob attacked the police. That's actually not much different from a typical month in Diepsloot.

But look closer, and Diepsloot reveals more character than conflict.

Approaching from Johannesburg, you pass a dry riverbed, the "deep ditch" that gives Diepsloot its Afrikaans name. Then come the mix of corrugated metal shacks and

government-issued tract housing, the vegetable sellers, the clothing hawkers, the broom makers.

Paved roads reach only to the edges of town before petering out into a tangle of rocky dirt lanes. The streets have no names. The neighborhoods, impersonally named Extensions 1 through 13, seem randomly shuffled. In Diepsloot, one navigates by a different set of landmarks: Turn right at the loud music, left at the river of garbage, and when you see the roosters and the house that looks like a garage, you're there.

Businesses come in three varieties: hair salons, tuck shops (convenience stores) and the occasional pub—some in shacks, others more built up and sporting Heineken signs. Bathrooms are metal porta-potties, cleaner than you'd imagine but equipped with a grubby water bucket in lieu of toilet paper.

Roosters crow, music blasts, children's laughter trickles from buildings. Water and sometimes sewage trickle down dirt lanes. Hens and chicks scavenge heaps of mud and garbage.

This is bare-bones poverty, but it's poverty with a face that rarely seems despairing or apathetic. The atmosphere is bustling, almost upbeat.

At any given time, hundreds of people stroll the streets, living their lives in the open. There is no privacy in Diepsloot. It gives the place a feel of community and makes it seem, perhaps deceptively, safe. Kids as young as 4 walk themselves to day care. Families gather in the park each afternoon as an outdoor movie screen broadcasts Township TV. In the evening, women commune at the water pump, scrubbing and filling buckets. People gather round fires, cooking and keeping warm while smoke scents the air and turns the sunset a grimy pink.

Up close, Diepsloot brims with crime, disease, struggle, boredom, tragedy, friendliness, modest hopes, strength of will and thousands of stories. Up close, you meet people like Kingston, Victor, Mama Annah and Pastor Eddie—the personalities of a disregarded township.