



Fortress or community?

by Dr Phoebe Barnard

Safety and security are, alas, among South Africans' most significant daily concerns. And it's no surprise – crime is a terrible symptom of the desperately-unequal society in which we live. But how can we respond? By retreating into personal fortresses, increasingly armed, isolated, fearful and unseeing of the havens around us? These traits have become a sad South African cliché.

Look around you at the state of your neighbourhood. How many of the houses are surrounded by high walls, burglar bars, barbed wire, security lights, remote-control gates, laser beams? Look at the others, so far lacking these features. These houses are now 'soft spots', whose occupants may soon become victims – many of whom may eventually move out. Nor are the fortified houses immune – thieves know the fortress contains valuables and adopt more sophisticated methods. Ask yourself: Is this 'arms race' really the kind of society which we want?

There is, of course, another way, a way which people all over South Africa are embracing: simply building (or re-building) communities ... get to know your neighbours; be alert and aware; look out for your patch; join the Neighbourhood Watch; contribute to employment and poverty-relief programmes through your taxes and charitable donations; walk around and greet your neighbours, rather than rush by in a car. This approach to community security is less expensive, more peaceful, more rewarding, and almost certainly more effective than going the fortress route.

Too many settlements on the Cape Peninsula are no longer communities, but collections of houses or flats where neighbours

don't even know each other. Some, like my neighbourhood in the Glencairn Valley, face this 'fortress vs community' crossroads. Safe, beautiful areas with a low crime rate, they have retained their rural, friendly, community feel. But crime and, I would argue, overuse of cars, can fast erode that sense of community. Residents can easily retreat into isolation and suspicion once crime starts to take hold.

My friend Ferozah's recent trip to Spain reminded me of what's wonderful about small villages in Europe – not normally my continent of choice... the village square, or the commons, where old men play chess or some version of *boules* in the golden afternoon light; the children bicycling home from the bakery with fresh loaves under their arms, laughing and chattering happily; the smell of home-cooking wafting from open windows; and the friendly gossip of young women. There are no burglar-bars, no shopping malls or gated carports. It is not utopia, but it is a saner and simpler way to live.

We can recreate that sense of community, and peace, in South Africa. But it requires a conscious choice, away from the divisiveness of a fortress mentality. It also requires a fundamental commitment, and action by both government and individuals, to reduce the poverty and unemployment which breed crime.

The Glencairn Valley is one example of a scattered community currently challenging this fortress-mentality community-crossroads. Tony van Niekerk and a team of inspired individuals have convened a small strategy think-tank about ways to keep the area's wonderfully rural and beautiful feel, while keeping crime down and recreating a sense of community. In some ways, it could be an

uphill battle: the area is hilly; most people drive rather than walk; some residents are short-term tenants; and the area has its share of crusty people who do their own thing and don't much care for their neighbours. Still, it also has a lot going for it: scenic beauty; fabulous outdoor recreational opportunities; a reasonable amount of diversity of culture, talent and personal histories. We can regrow a community here, because there are enough well-meaning, lively people who want to see it happen. The Glencairn Valley, like the rest of the Far South Peninsula, can – especially if people drop their excessive dependence on cars – be a model of sustainability and community spirit.

Roy Siegfried once referred to the 'lentil curtain'. I think he meant the 'back-to-the-earth' set, largely English-speaking and enjoying the beauty of Noordhoek, Scarborough, Kommetjie, Glencairn, Fish Hoek and Kalk Bay. There is so much talent, so many ideas, so much intercultural goodwill. Let's build upon that, and support local initiatives and employment initiatives that bring us together and reduce the inequalities of our people. It's not Utopian. It's common sense, justice and the way to peace and well-being.


As with all aspects of sustainability, rebuilding a sense of community is not about giving up what you have, but taking back what you've lost ... mental space; time with family and friends; understanding of fellow men and women; neighbourliness; laughter; caring... Let's be careful not to take the wrong turn away from these values, which make life worth living. ♻️



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