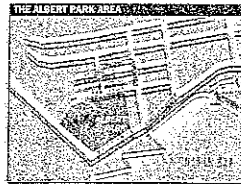


Once an elegant upmarket area, Albert Park is degenerating into an urban ghetto inhabited by hobos, criminals and prostitutes



Have they abandoned Albert Park?

The future looks bleak for Durban's Albert Park, a once-proud neighbourhood which in recent years has deteriorated as a result of absentee landlords, urban decay, crime and wilful neglect by local authorities. **FARHANA ISMAIL and PADDY HARPER report.**



These cover the buildings in the neighbourhood. Pictures: ROGAN WARD



Angling from buildings is a feature of Albert Park.

Albert Park, once an upmarket neighbourhood marked by the elegance and grandeur of its apartment buildings, is slowly declining into an inner city ghetto akin to Gauteng's infamous Hillbrow. It is suffering from neglect and apathy and has a well-earned reputation of being crime-ridden.

The Tropicana restaurant, once a landmark in Albert Park, has closed. The recreational park itself has become a home for hobos and criminals, but also a venue for political rallies.

Illegals

The neighbourhood houses families, students, immigrants - mostly illegal - and working class people. The famous concrete chess board is still there, and is still the home of a new generation of chess players who are mainly unemployed.

A Tribune investigation found while there was apathy among some residents, others were campaigning for a neighbourhood clean-up. On the other hand, businesses, such as the Gloucester in St Andrew's Street - a hotel which is frequently used by prostitutes who also work outside it - find crime no worse than in other suburbs.

Recent incidents, which have seen the area change from one of Durban's first multi-racial neighbourhoods to a

FACT FILE

Location: Situated south-east of the CBD. Bounded by Broad Street to the west, Smith Street to the north and the Esplanade to the south.

Population: Estimated at 70 000. A fairly cosmopolitan group including black upwardly mobile professionals (buppies), shopkeepers and restaurant owners, pensioners, students, legal and illegal immigrants, church workers, and vagrants who sleep in the park.

Recreational facilities: Albert Park which includes a large concrete chess board and a children's playground, Albert Park Bowling Club, a privately owned tennis court which is not in use, a soccer field, and a stadium converted for use as a venue for political meetings.

Business: Many hotels, some offering hourly rates, also plenty other cheap accommodation for students and out of towners. Many takeaways, retail outlets, and liquor stores.

ghetto, paint a different picture: a butchery owner gunned down outside his premises in broad daylight; break-ins and burglaries; armed robberies of shops and takeaways, and muggings and rapes.

Currently causing a local controversy is the planned move of the Ark Ministries for homeless people from Point Road to Albert Park. Residents are uniting to resist the move to occupy four buildings stretching from St. George's to St. Andrew's streets. The buildings are Lyndar House, Lyndar House extension, Solar House, and Harleigh's

Lodge.

Residents blame the city fathers for the decline of the area, saying they have regarded the area as a "grey" (racially mixed) suburb, and not pumped sufficient resources into it.

Buildings are neglected, some residents live in squalid conditions, child prostitutes walk the streets, drug trafficking is rife, shops are burgled daily, pensioners and women are unable to walk on the streets without fear of being attacked, and residents live behind locked gates.

• Easy targets

Children, without any recreational facilities, play on the streets and become easy targets for the drug traffickers.

Sayed Iqbal Mohamed, chairman of the Organisation for Civic Rights said: "Landlords' attitude towards blacks, who are the majority residents in Albert Park, is one of making money without providing maintenance and ensuring the safety and health needs of their tenants."

The city councillor for the area was Malcolm Prentice, who committed suicide. Next month a by-election is to be held to fill the position.

'Divided'

African National Congress by-election candidate Ally Fakrodeen said: "There is a divided approach by the council about how to maintain and upgrade Albert Park."

Attempts to get comment from council on what plans are afoot for upgrading the area were treated in an off-hand and uninterested manner.

Fakrodeen said policemen had become despondent. "Recently, four prostitutes were arrested at the Gloucester Hotel, and the



CHECKMATE: A feature of Albert Park is the famous concrete chess set which draws people from all walks of life.

owner laid a counter-charge against the policeman effecting the arrest for trespassing on his property.

"With incidents such as this, the morale of the policemen is low."

The community is looking to establish a creche for the children of working mothers, a clinic, active youth groups, a music bandstand in the park itself and an "arts in the park" exhibition centre.

Said church minister Justus Poigietier of the Church of England's Trinity Chapel: "People have fallen into a trap of apathy and despondency." Religious leaders also say church attendance has been halved because of crime.

"The elderly and infirm are attacked on their way to church."

Poigietier feels residents - especially those flocking in for cheap accommodation, and others who use the area for criminal activities - have no regard for human values.

"This used to be a place

where blacks and whites mixed without fear of being scorned. Now they have allowed criminal elements to infiltrate the area."

Shopkeeper Shehana Gaibi has had five burglaries at her shop in Russell Street in the past year.

"People who live here are decent. They are not riff-raff but the drug elements are destroying us. When people don't find jobs, they hang around here. And if the Ark comes to this area, the crime will escalate."

Alex Macfarlane, owner of Gloucester Hotel, has a different view.

"It does not matter to me that prostitutes are on my doorstep.

"They use my rooms, and pay just like any other customers. At the end of the day they are doing their job," he says.

The crime rate, he said, was no different from that in any other suburb.

ler blames Nigerians for luring crack cocaine

(her real name) of the Albert Park area, is eight years. She is 37 years of age, she has a son of six, she is a single mother - selling means of support - extended family since her husband moved to a township on

into another Hillbrow. It's the Nigerians who have brought the rocks (crack cocaine) into Durban, it's them who are organising the small boys to steal from cars and take people's cell phones in the street. For years we have all been living here together, blacks, whites, coloureds and Indians with no real problems, but since they've arrived things have got much worse."

Mkhize believes crack cocaine is one of the ill-



HANGING OUT: Washing hanging from buildings is a common sight in the area.

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Drug dealer blames Nigerians for introducing crack cocaine

Thandi Mkhize (not her real name) has been a resident of the Albert Park area for the past eight years.

An unemployed mother of six, she has been plying her trade - selling drugs and alcohol - as a means of supporting herself and her extended family of more than 10 people since her arrival in the area from a township on the outskirts of Durban.

While many people view Mkhize and others involved in the illicit drink and drug industry as a major part of Albert Park's crime problem, she has a vastly different perspective on the matter.

Service

"I don't stand on the street corner selling or harassing people to come and buy anything from me. People come to me and I get them what they want, just like a bottle store or any other person providing this kind of service," she says.

Mkhize is, despite her illegal trade, in favour of a clean-up of Albert Park's streets.

"At night here people are scared to walk around, to go to the shop, to even come to buy their booze and other things," she says. "In the past year we've had all kinds of people moving here from Point and they are a big part of the problem, bringing their bad ways with them."

She is also highly critical of the influx of people from other African states - particularly Nigeria - whom she refers to as Makwerekwere, a Zulu insult aimed at Africans from beyond the border who speak no Nguni language.

"The Makwerekwere have come here and are trying to turn this place

into another Hillbrow. It's the Nigerians who have brought the rocks (crack cocaine) into Durban, it's them who are organising the small boys to steal from cars and take people's cell phones in the street. For years we have all been living here together, blacks, whites, coloureds and Indians with no real problems, but since they've arrived things have got much worse."

Mkhize believes crack - one of the illicit substances she will not sell - is one of the greatest threats to Albert Park's survival.

Hooked

"You see young girls who are hooked on rocks running to the white and Indian men's cars to sell themselves. As soon as they're finished, they're off to spend that money on the rocks."

"They're hardly finished the first rock and they're back on the street selling themselves again. But you don't see any Nigerian girls selling themselves because the men leave their women at home and come here to abuse our girls," she says.

"The dagga and the mandrax were bad enough, but this thing, if it's not stopped, it will finish us all."

Mkhize says she is considering leaving the area.

Children

"This place is like a hostel now. The owners of the flats won't spend money fixing them up because of the way the flats are and because of the foreigners. The worse the flats get, the worse the kind of people that live here get. This is not a place where you can bring up your children nicely."

"Even the shanty townships are better," she says.

People coming from the Point are a big problem.

Woman who supports 10 by selling drink and drugs