SPATIAL POLICY and PLANNING IN TRANSITION

From Greenfield Imposition to Ex-Post Regularisation: The Trajectory, Contradictions, and Future of Spatial Planning in Zimbabwe

A Critical Reflection for Physical Planners and Policy Practitioners

Kudzai Chatiza, November 9, 2026.

■ **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY and THESIS**

For over a century, statutory physical planning in Zimbabwe operated under an unshakeable operational canon: planning precedes development. Planners decided on land uses and communicated them through Master, Local and Layout Plans, surveyors 'communicated these onto the ground', engineers designed and oversaw emplacement of infrastructures, and 'development followed' with planners overseeing resultant landscapes. This practice created zoned agricultural and industrial enclaves, gazetted vast forestry and wildlife estates, and laid out sanitary infrastructure prior to physical human occupation. Today, across peri-urban areas, in communal and resettlement zones, and national conservation boundaries, that axiom of plan, survey, engineer, build shelter and settle is frequently inverted. Spatial planning is often summoned ex-post to negotiate, regularise, survey and supply services where society has already built. Yet anticipatory planning persists, and the state periodically reasserts control through clearance campaigns. The central challenge is to reconcile this uneven, contested transformation with a professional toolkit still strongly shaped by the linear model.

The Central Question for the Profession

Do Zimbabwean planners collectively understand the spatial transformation they must help define and oversee—and are they sufficiently observant of the migration, livelihood and land-market changes reshaping secondary cities, small towns and peri-urban settlements to guide that transformation towards equity, ecological resilience and secure livelihoods?

This question anchors the article's formulation. The article extends a fundamental conversation and practice reflection Zimbabwe planners must engage with. It draws on and invites insights gleaned from some of the profession's thought leaders, foregrounding Professor Kadmiel Harrison Wekwete's lecture to public sector planners in Harare on 15 January 2019. Wekwete asked planners to interrogate the forces shaping land use and infrastructure, evolving urban and rural settlement forms, desirable futures,

social–economic–ecological conditions, and the institutional means of guiding change. His challenge was to frame long-term spatial transformation rather than merely produce attractive layouts. To map the article's question a spine needs creating to connect pre, colonial and post-colonial planning philosophy and practice. That mapping allows appropriate discussion of what has and what hasn't changed but needs to.

1. The 1890–1930s Foundation: Mineral Speculation, Dispossession, and the Greenfield Myth

Prior to the 1890 colonial intrusion, land management across the Zimbabwean plateau was neither chaotic nor unstructured. Grounded in customary stewardship under traditional authorities (*Madzishe* and *Masadunhu*), spatial organization reflected a delicate agro-pastoral balance. In seminal environmental and demographic histories, Terence Ranger (Voices from the Rocks, 1999) and David Beach (The Shona and Zimbabwe 900–1850, 1980) document how ecological access was governed: wet-season crop areas were balanced against low-impact communal dry-season grazing corridors, while ecologically fragile riverine zones, sacred springs, and sacred ecological groves (*Marambatemwa*) were protected by strict spiritual and cultural taboos.

The arrival of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) Pioneer Column in September 1890 violently fractured this spatial equilibrium. The spatial layout of early colonial Rhodesia was initially driven by the speculative search for an elusive 'Second Rand' of gold. When mineral exploration across the Great Dyke and Mazowe yielded disappointing returns compared to Witwatersrand, the BSAC and settler syndicates immediately pivoted to arable land and cattle as the principal instruments of capital accumulation.

The Invention of the Greenfield or 'Empty Land' Myth

To legitimise the wholesale expropriation of prime territory, colonial administrators and early surveyors constructed the convenient ideological fiction of the *tabula rasa*—the 'empty land' myth. Depressed indigenous population densities in the 1890s, exacerbated by the devastating rinderpest panzootic of 1896 and catastrophic droughts, were weaponised by surveyors as evidence of land underutilisation. European statutory physical planning was subsequently introduced not as a collaborative tool for community organisation, but as a technocratic weapon of conquest and racialised zoning.

Every new urban township—Salisbury (1890), Fort Victoria (1890), Umtali (1891), and Bulawayo (1894)—was planned on a greenfield basis. Planners drew rectilinear, military-inspired gridirons across agricultural expanses, alienating indigenous populations without regard for traditional boundaries. This dynamic was quickly institutionalised through statutory decrees:

- **The Southern Rhodesia Order in Council (1898):** Formalised the initial creation of 'Native Reserves', relegating dispossessed communities to the hot, semi-arid, tsetse-fly-infested fringes of the country.
- **The Morris Carter Commission of 1925:** Recommended total racial segregation of land tenure, concluding patronisingly that Africans and Europeans could not co-exist without friction.

- **The Land Apportionment Act (1930):** Divided the entire colony's 96 million acres reserving about 51% of prime agricultural land (Agro-Ecological Natural Regions I, II, and III) for a tiny white minority, while the majority black population was corralled into infertile Native Reserves (later Tribal Trust Lands and now Communal Lands).

2. 1930s–1980: Fortress Conservation and Modernist Land Use Control

Colonial spatial planning was never confined to urban cadastres. Its most aggressive expressions were rural. The greenfield philosophy mandated that land must be neatly compartmentalised into single-use, mutually exclusive silos of commercial agriculture, urban commercial/residential/industrial, native reserves, gazetted forests, and fortress wildlife parks.

Fortress Conservation and Gazetted State Forestry Estates

In the conservation realm, early planners embraced the American 'Yellowstone model' of fortress conservation, which viewed wilderness as an untouched Eden that must be sanitised of human habitation. The statutory backbone was established under the Game and Fish Preservation Act of 1929, the National Parks Act of 1949, and culminating in the seminal Parks and Wildlife Act of 1975.

To create Wankie Game Reserve (now Hwange National Park) in 1928, San and Nambya communities who had lived in dynamic ecological balance with megafauna for centuries were systematically evicted. In the Zambezi Valley, the gazetting of Mana Pools, Matusadona, and the Chete Safari Area expelled the BaTonga and Korekore, who were forcibly relocated onto harsh escarpments away from their spiritual riverine fishing and flood-recession agricultural commons. Terence Ranger's (1999) historical work documents how in the Matobo Hills, indigenous communities were repeatedly driven out to manufacture the 'unspoiled scenery' of Rhodes Matopos National Park.

Simultaneously, the Forest Act of 1949 established the Forestry Commission and gazetted immense indigenous hardwood timber reserves in Matabeleland North (Sikumi, Gwayi, Fuller, and Umgusa forests) and exotic softwood plantations in the mist-belt of Manicaland (Nyanga, Chimanimani). These forest estates criminalised indigenous access to deadwood, traditional medicine, hunting, and beekeeping, replacing community custodianship with paramilitary forest rangers.

Technocratic Engineering: The Native Land Husbandry Act and RTCPA

Within the overcrowded Native Reserves, colonial spatial planning turned coercive. As Jocelyn Alexander demonstrates in The Unsettled Land: The Politics of Land and State-Making in Zimbabwe, 1893–2003 (2006), the Native Land Husbandry Act (NLHA) of 1951 represented a high-modernist social engineering crusade. Colonial agricultural extension officers and planners imposed centralised spatial templates:

For a retrievable scholarly analysis of the 1951 legislation, see William R. Duggan’s The Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 and the Rural African Middle Class of Southern Rhodesia. (Note: this and the

source below are commentaries and historical companion sources, not complete text.) For contemporary parliamentary discussion of the Land Apportionment legislation, see Hansard, 26 March 1930.

- **Compulsory Linear Settlements (*Maraini*):** Villages were forced out of nucleated, kin-based homesteads and aligned along graded access roads for administrative surveillance.
- **Terracing and Contour Ridges (*Madhunduru/dhirenhi*):** Enforced mechanical conservation through backbreaking uncompensated labour, breeding profound peasant resentment that fuelled the liberation war.
- **Rational Comprehensive Planning and RTCPA 1976:** The Regional, Town and Country Planning Act (RTCPA) of 1976 consolidated the planner as a detached, scientific arbiter. The planner operated under the illusion that objective demographic formulas could determine the 'highest and best use' of any land parcel, while ignoring the violent racial dispossession underpinning the system.

3. 1980–2000: Post-Independence Integration vs. Institutional Inertia

At Independence in 1980, the majority government inherited a structurally bifurcated nation: 6,000 large-scale white commercial farmers controlled 42% of the country's most fertile agro-ecological regions, while over 4 million peasant families were packed into fragile, degraded Communal Lands. The mandate for spatial planners was clear: dismantle colonial spatial segregation, integrate divided cities, and decongest the countryside.

Growth Points and Greenfield Resettlement Models

The early post-colonial administration launched two primary spatial strategies: the Growth Point Strategy and the state-led Resettlement Programme (Models A, B, C, and D). Planners sought to direct state investments, infrastructure, and administrative functions into designated rural nodes like Gutu-Mupandawana, Murewa, Gokwe, Sanyati, and Jerera, hoping to create regional economic hubs that would counter rapid rural-urban migration. Some of the initial Growth Points had a late-colonial designation under TILCOR (the Tribal Trust Land Development Corporation established in 1968) and included Seki Industrial Township (Chitungwiza), Sanyati, Chisumbanje, Katiyo, Jotsholo, Maphisa, Mushumbi Pools, Muzarabani, and Ngwezi (Mphoengs)

However, statutory spatial planning remained trapped in inherited modernist methodologies. The RTCPA retains its 1976 legislative origins, although it has subsequently been amended; continuity should not be confused with an absence of legal change. Growth point schemes were drafted in central offices using Euclidean zoning templates with wide paved avenues, distinct light-industrial segments, and rigid residential plots that bore little relationship to local peasant trading networks or agrarian capital flows. Model A resettlement schemes were planned identically to colonial greenfields: the state acquired commercial farms on a willing-buyer, willing-seller basis, surveyed them into rigid 5-hectare arable plots and communal grazing areas, and replicated the linear villagisation patterns of the 1950s NLHA.

Decentralised Wildlife Management: The CAMPFIRE Innovation

A major spatial departure emerged in the late 1980s through the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE). A foundational source is R. B. Martin and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management's 1986 CAMPFIRE document, preserved in the IDRC archive. Rather than treating conservation solely as exclusion from state estates, the programme brought communal resource use, local institutions and development planning into a shared framework.

CAMPFIRE's institutional promise can be read alongside Marshall W. Murphree's Communities as Resource Management Institutions (1993). His argument distinguishes communal property from open access and places livelihood incentives and resource rights at the centre of management. For spatial planners, the question is not only where wildlife buffer zones are drawn, but who can make and enforce rules, benefit from resource use and account to the communities bearing its costs.

Table 1: Structural Evolution of Spatial Planning Eras in Zimbabwe

Historical Epoch	Planning Doctrine	Rural Enclaves (Parks and Forests)	Settlement and Agrarian Dynamics
Colonial (1890–1980)	Greenfield segregation; Rational comprehensive; RTCPA (1976) controls.	Fortress conservation (Hwange, Matobo, Gonarezhou); gazetted timber estates (Gwayi, Sikumi). Total exclusion.	Land Apportionment Act (1930); Native Reserves; forced linear villagisation (*Maraini*) via NLHA (1951).
Early Independence (1980–2000)	State modernism; Deracialisation; Retained 1976 Act standards.	CAMPFIRE buffer zoning; partial devolution to RDCs (Nyaminyami, Guruve); persistent state park enclaves.	Model A-D Resettlements; Growth Points (Gutu, Gokwe); greenfield municipal extensions (Kuwadzana, Budiriro in Harare, Chikanga in Mutare, Rujeko in Masvingo etc.).
Post-2000 to Present (FTLRP and after)	Ex-post regularisation; Dispute mediation; Hybrid customary regimes.	Encroachments into state forests (Chesa, Mafungautsi) and conservancies; contested human-wildlife corridors.	Fast Track land occupations (A1/A2); peri-urban housing syndicates (Caledonia, Epworth, Victoria Ranch, Cowdray Park); autonomous self-build.

4. Post-2000: The Era of Self-Allocation and the Inversion of Planning

The turning point in Zimbabwe's spatial history arrived in the year 2000. Catalysed by the War Veterans Association and land-starved rural communities, the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) irreversibly upended the greenfield, state-led paradigm. As demonstrated in the seminal scholarly interventions of Sam Moyo (The Land Question in Zimbabwe, 1995; African Land Questions, 2008) and

Ian Scoones et al. (Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths and Realities, 2010), land redistribution evolved from an orderly administrative queue into an urgent socio-political appropriation.

Reading the Inversion through Zimbabwean Planning Scholarship

Zimbabwean scholarship helps shift the argument from a lament about lost control to an inquiry into how space is actually produced. Beacon Mbiba's On the periphery: Missing urbanisation in Zimbabwe (2017) shows why slow growth within inherited city boundaries should not automatically be read as national de-urbanisation: peri-urban expansion and growth in small and intermediate settlements can escape administrative classifications. Planners should distinguish urban–rural relocation, rural–urban migration, movement from city cores to their fringes, natural increase and boundary reclassification. These are different processes, not interchangeable explanations of secondary-city growth.

Davison Muchadenyika's Land for Housing: A Political Resource (2015) places housing allocation within struggles over political authority and control of peri-urban farms. Informal development is therefore not simply a technical failure by households. His Slum upgrading and inclusive municipal governance in Harare (2015) also documents an alternative: city–community partnerships, enumeration and incremental servicing. The professional implication is to investigate who allocates land, who captures payments, which claims residents hold, and how a negotiated upgrading programme can become an enduring municipal function rather than a temporary project.

Abraham R. Matamanda's Battling the informal settlement challenge through sustainable city framework (2020) identifies interacting political-economic pressures, uncoordinated planning and inappropriate planning ideologies behind Harare's informal settlements. Read alongside Amin Y. Kamete's In the service of tyranny (2009), this calls for professional scrutiny of both accommodation and coercion. Kamete distinguishes whether planning instigated Murambatsvina from how planning served repression during its implementation; his critique concerns the planning system's role, not a blanket claim that planners designed the operation.

The regional dimension is equally important. K. H. Wekwete's Rural Growth Points in Zimbabwe—prospects for the future (1988) connects settlement development to viable economic activities, local markets and central–local investment rather than infrastructure alone. N. D. Mutizwa-Mangiza's Decentralisation and District Development Planning in Zimbabwe (1990) identifies the separation of planning from budgeting and continuing financial dependence on central government. Together with Wekwete's 2019 reflections, these works invite planners to connect peri-urban layouts and secondary-city strategies to regional livelihoods, resource mobilisation and accountable institutions. Mapping built expansion is necessary; explaining and financing its transformation is the larger professional task. There is much more Zimbabwean planning scholarship to draw on for purposes of grounded reflection on the state of the profession and the directions it can take to meaningfully contribute to equitable and sustainable development.

The Spatial Inversion Across Three Core Landscapes

The post-2000 restructuring dissolved statutory certainty across urban peripheries, communal frontiers, and protected conservation estates:

- **The Encroachment on Protected Forests and Conservancies:** Occupations breached historically sacrosanct conservation zones. In the teak belts of Matabeleland North (such as Gwayi, Chesa, and Fuller Forest), settlers cleared forest blocks for subsistence farming, sparking ongoing jurisdictional conflicts between the Forestry Commission, RDCs, and traditional authorities. In the South-Eastern Lowveld, occupations within the Save Valley Conservancy and borders of Gonarezhou National Park cut directly through critical regional wildlife migratory routes in the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, generating severe human-wildlife conflict.
- **Peri-Urban Cooperatives and Self-Allocation:** Around Harare, Chitungwiza, Gweru, and Bulawayo, commercial farms acquired under the Land Acquisition Act were settled overnight by housing cooperatives, informal syndicates, and war veterans (e.g., Caledonia, Harare South, Hopley, Cowdray Park). Communities bypassed the formal provisions of Section 26 of the RTCPA, pegging parcels, constructing dwellings, drilling private boreholes, and installing septic tanks long before town planners arrived.
- **Customary Subdivision and Commodification:** In communal zones under traditional leaders (e.g., Seke, Domboshava, Goromonzi), traditional leadership structures informally subdivided and commodified agricultural commons. The Sabhuku became an active land-allocating authority, outperforming bureaucratic district planning offices in speed and community accessibility.

> **■ TEMPORAL INVERSION OF SPATIAL PLANNING**
> *CLASSICAL STATUTORY IDEAL:*
> *Regional Land Scheme ──► Master Zoning ──► Cadastral Survey ──► Trunk Reticulation ──► Physical Settlement*
>
> *CONTEMPORARY EX-POST SEQUENCE (NOT UNIVERSAL):*
> *Land Occupation / Allocation ──► Self-Build / Consolidation ──► Off-Grid Servicing ──► Ex-Post Regularisation*

This structural inversion fundamentally alters the physical planner's identity. The planner is no longer the omniscient designer orchestrating pristine spaces from a clean desk; the planner is transformed into an ex-post negotiator, cartographic detective, and institutional mediator. Planners are deployed to survey standing masonry, bend statutory road reserve widths around fully built houses, fit primary school reservations into densely consolidated settlements, and preserve vulnerable wetland ecologies that have already been partially encroached upon.

Ruptures and Recurrence: From Murambatsvina to Chenesa Guta

Operation Murambatsvina in May 2005 exposes a contradiction in the inversion thesis: development preceding permission does not mean that the state has relinquished power. The UN Special Envoy's fact-finding report (UN, 2005), summarised by Environment & Urbanization, estimated that about 700,000 people lost homes, livelihoods or both. It recommended revising the Regional, Town and Country Planning Act and allied legislation to reflect the circumstances of the poor, restoring dialogue, and enabling tenure security, affordable shelter and small-scale income generation. The professional lesson is that clearance cannot substitute for a funded settlement and livelihood strategy.

Muchadenyika's account of subsequent incremental upgrading demonstrates that the reverse sequence can also be deliberately enabled: occupation followed by progressively delivered services need not be synonymous with abandonment of planning. The article therefore proposes understanding the post-2000 condition as an oscillation between occupation, selective tolerance, clearance, rebuilding and negotiated regularisation—not a smooth or irreversible transition from state control to community autonomy.

Operation Chenesa Guta, described in official communications as Chenesa Harare and subsequently Chenesa/Hlanzeka, brings this tension into the present. The City of Harare's release of 11 September 2026 confirms a government-supported campaign, launched that week, to move vendors to designated spaces and maintain enforcement. A report of the Minister's remarks published on 8 November 2026 describes the campaign as ongoing, records concerns about removals in Bulawayo and Victoria Falls, and presents the government's stated aim of balancing order, public safety and environmental integrity with livelihood protection. This is evidence of continuing enforcement, not yet a settled assessment of its outcomes.

The comparison with Murambatsvina is analytical, not an assertion of identical scale, legal circumstances or effects. A September 2026 report quoting the Ministry's situation report calls for accelerated readiness of alternative markets and sustained dialogue with affected traders. For planners, the practical tests should be explicit: are replacement trading spaces serviced and accessible to customers; are tenure and permits attainable; are procedures transparent; and are relocation costs and livelihood effects monitored? The rupture is not simply that plans follow occupation. It is that enforcement can interrupt an already functioning settlement economy while inclusive planning remains unfinished. Professional success should be assessed through safer, viable and lawful places—not removals alone.

5. Professional Imperatives: What Must Zimbabwean Spatial Planners Do?

If spatial planning in Zimbabwe is to remain a transformative nation-building instrument rather than an irrelevant archival discipline, practitioners, planning universities, and professional bodies (such as the

Zimbabwe Institute of Regional and Urban Planners - ZIRUP) must radically overhaul their conceptual toolkits.

The 7–8 October 2010 workshop on strengthening planning education at the University of Zimbabwe, had already connected curriculum renewal to the rebuilding of practice. Its recommendations included research capacity, stronger links between the Planning School, employers and ZIRUP, and articulation of the planner as advocate. Wekwete's 2019 call for a learning, versatile planner adds a complementary demand: professional education must build the capacity to convene actors, understand changing settlement economies and mobilise resources, not merely reproduce a layout-production routine.

Actionable Directives for Practice and Policy

- **Move Beyond a Greenfield-Only Toolkit:** Planned extensions remain useful, but cannot be the profession's only model. In-situ upgrading, ex-post spatial regularisation, urban densification and infrastructure retrofitting must become central to modern planning education, alongside anticipatory planning for areas not yet developed.
- **Review Statutory Standards and Their Implementation:** The RTCPA [Chapter 29:12] already provides for regularisation under section 27, enforcement under section 32 and appeals under section 38. Reform must distinguish the Act itself from regulations, local by-laws and engineering or servicing standards rather than attribute every restrictive requirement to the statute. Planners should use existing lawful flexibility and advocate transparent, affordable, risk-sensitive and incrementally scalable standards.
- **Reconcile Conservation Boundaries with Community Realities:** Fortress conservation models must yield to genuine, participatory co-management. As observed in modern landscape connectivity models around *Matusadona* and the *Sebungwe* basin, planners must negotiate viable ecological corridors that formally guarantee communal grazing and livelihood benefits, bridging the chasm between the Parks and Wildlife Act and the Rural District Councils Act.
- **Deploy Modern Fit-for-Purpose Technologies:** Ex-post planning requires agile tools. Planners must institutionalise high-resolution drone photogrammetry, participatory mobile GIS mapping, and the Global Land Tool Network's (GLTN) Social Tenure Domain Model (STDM)[1] to record overlapping, customary, and cooperative land rights accurately.
- **Master Land Governance and Political Mediation:** Physical planning is fundamentally political. Planners must move beyond pure technical drafting to master conflict mediation, multi-party tenure negotiation, and administrative law, engaging effectively with housing cooperatives, war veterans, traditional leaders, and civil society.

Return to the central question: a collective answer requires an observatory of changing settlement forms, migration and livelihoods—not simply an inventory of approved plans. Planners, universities and professional bodies should jointly track the city–countryside continuum, connect that evidence to regional investment and municipal budgets, and publish the reasons for choosing upgrading, protection

[1] https://gltn.net/publications/social-tenure-domain-model-pro-poor-land-tool

or relocation. The profession's appeal lies in making transformation intelligible and negotiable before another cycle of clearance and reconstruction becomes necessary.

Spatial planning in Zimbabwe has made a full, dialectical journey: from an authoritarian tool of colonial dispossession and racial segregation, through an idealistic post-independence modernist state apparatus, to today's contested arena of autonomous self-provision. The relevance of our profession in the decades ahead will not be judged by the aesthetic perfection of master plan drawings sitting on office shelves, but by our courage to step onto the contested ground and bring equity, resilience, legal security, and environmental dignity to the vibrant, living settlements that already exist.

Source and access note: Linked public sources were consulted on 9 November 2026. Scholarly repository and journal links may provide an abstract or require institutional access. Historical commentary is identified separately from legislative texts. The linked RTCPA is a 2016 consolidation; the Forest Act text is dated 3 December 2021. The linked Parks and Wild Life Act consolidation flags unapplied 2025 amendments and should not be treated as a complete statement of current law. The Wekwete reflections are drawn from Chatiza, *Spatial Planning: Key to attainment of Vision 2030*, conference summary, 14–15 January 2019, pp. 5–6. The education discussion draws on Chatiza's 2010 executive summary of the UZ–ZIRUP–UN-Habitat workshop. Both reports were supplied by the author; no public download link exists for them.

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