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The Mayor of Freetown

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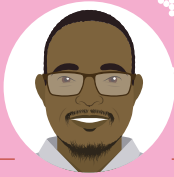
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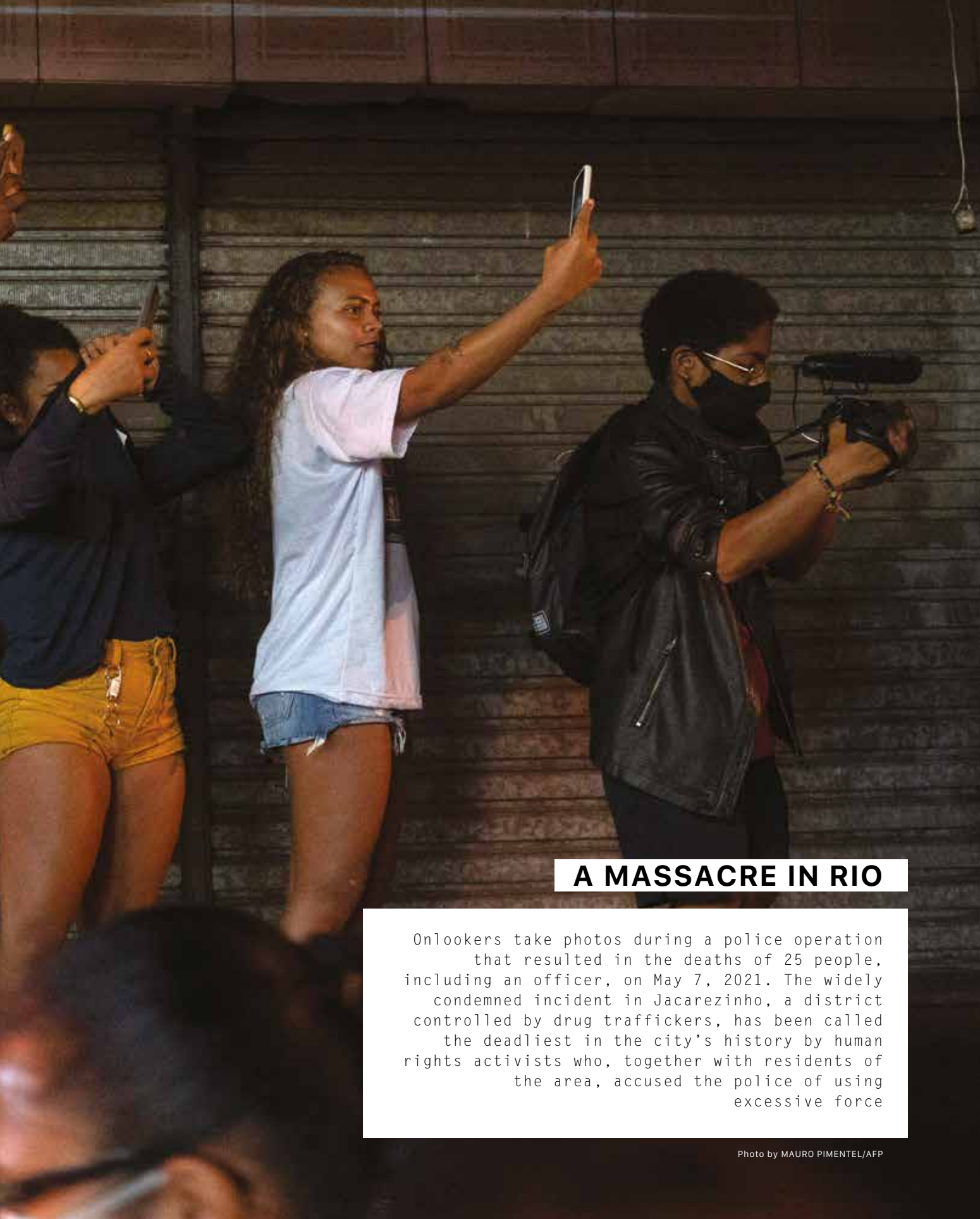
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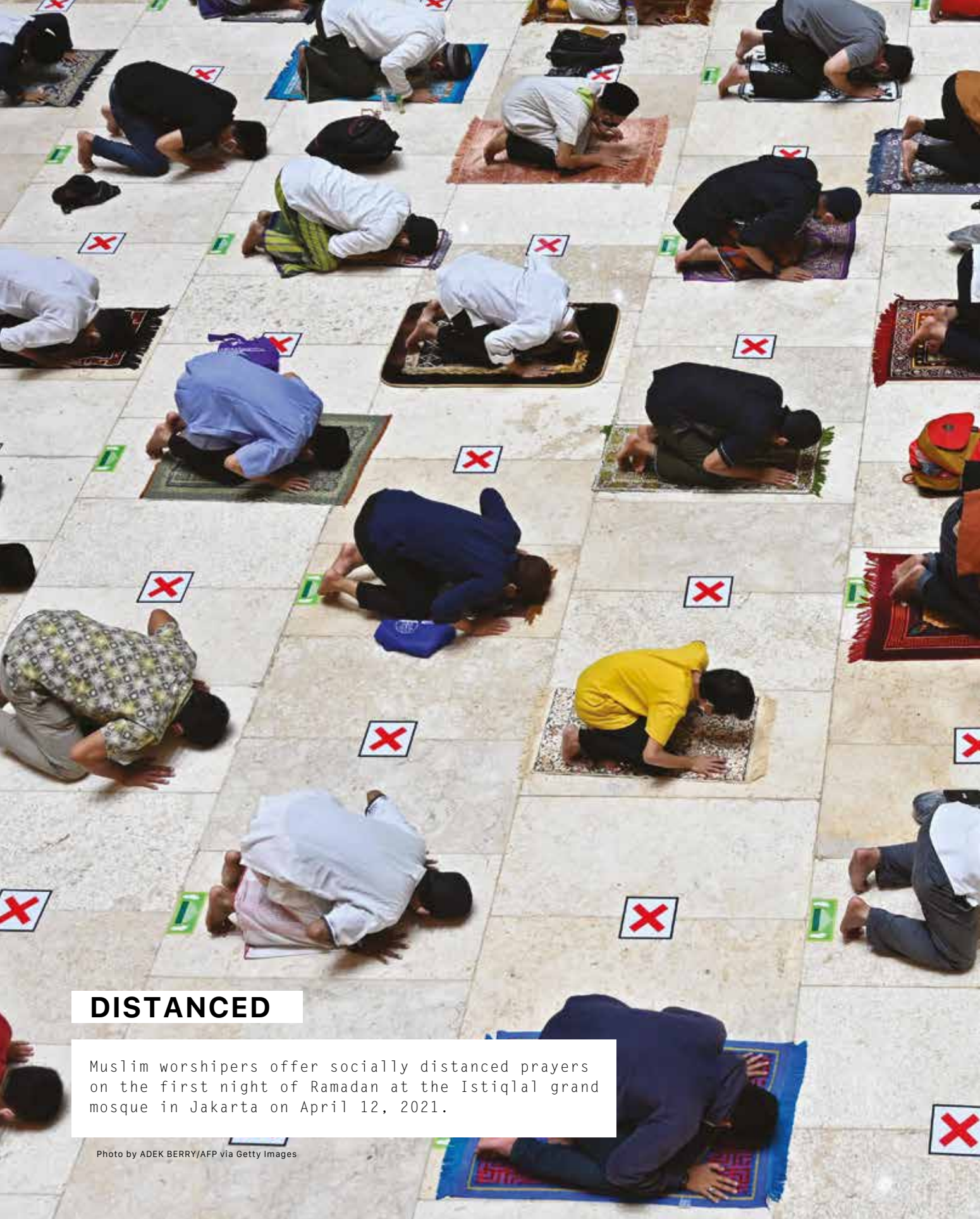


QUAIS AS
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IMPORTAM?
JACARE
ZINHO
PEDE
PAZ



A MASSACRE IN RIO

Onlookers take photos during a police operation that resulted in the deaths of 25 people, including an officer, on May 7, 2021. The widely condemned incident in Jacarezinho, a district controlled by drug traffickers, has been called the deadliest in the city's history by human rights activists who, together with residents of the area, accused the police of using excessive force



DISTANCED

Muslim worshippers offer socially distanced prayers on the first night of Ramadan at the Istiqlal grand mosque in Jakarta on April 12, 2021.

Photo by ADEK BERRY/AFP via Getty Images



WAITING

People wait to register for the first injection of the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine during the launch of the vaccination campaign for frontline workers in Nairobi on April 21, 2021. Kenya began vaccinating its population in March after getting 1 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccines from India. Since then, the programme has been disrupted by delays in further deliveries of the vaccine.

Photo by YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP via Getty Images







MAYOR YVONNE AKI-SAWYERR

THE ICON

“I was taking notes because, you know, Yvonne has plans,” wrote actor Idris Elba on time spent with Freetown Mayor **Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr**. These words were part of *Time Magazine*’s intro of her as one of 2021’s global leaders to watch. It’s true. The Mayor, who took office in 2018 after decades working in the private sector, has plans—big plans. What sets Aki-Sawyerr apart is she is turning hers into reality, and pulling Freetown and its people out of decades of decay along with her. In early April 2021, the Mayor spoke to African Centre for Cities Director **Edgar Pieterse**. Their conversation covered her battle to infuse pride and a new culture of public service in the City’s government. Also an architect of Sierra Leone’s Ebola crisis response, Aki-Sawyerr spoke about how, as Mayor, this experience helped her prepare for the city’s Covid-19 response.

EDGAR PIETERSE

Congratulations on being recognised as one of the “2021 Time100 Next” leaders. You may very well be the first African Mayor to achieve this accolade. How does that make you feel?

YVONNE AKI-SAWYERR

I am humbled. One decides to do something because of so many factors. Becoming recognised is not one of them [laughing]. My decision to run for office was because of concerns with sanitation and the environment. Finding myself in a position where just getting on with it is identified as something worthy of note is humbling. It's also a little bit frightening. But maybe what's behind this—just the fact that we've been so ambitious. We came to realise you can't fix one bit of city life to make a difference; you have got to fix it all. Of course, you're not going to fix it all in one swoop.

EP: When you started as Mayor, you were pretty much starting from scratch, right? Presumably that was an opportunity to do things differently? But you also had to fix everything at the same time. How are you managing that challenge of having to work across so many fronts simultaneously?

YA-S: Our approach is based on the saying that the only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. In addressing the challenges of the city, we were very realistic. We started with an engagement with 15,000 residents to get a first-hand sense of where people were and their expectations. In addition, we onboarded a wide range of technical experts. We then created sector working groups that brought together people from the public sector, the private sector, NGOs and government partners. Even members of the public with interest in a particular topic were encouraged to join the sector groups. We created a space to get people's ideas and give people permission to think outside the box. This was unprecedented in the history of governance in Freetown. It provides a space for people who never had a chance to make their contribution.

Through this mechanism we were saying, let's adopt a blank sheet of paper approach: define what the problem is and specify how we

fix it. We ended up with these organic ‘planning labs’. This made explicit a theory of change. It clarified which part of the elephant to chew on first. Most importantly, it defined the things we were able to do. It allowed for thinking without limits, even when we didn’t have the money for any of it. But we had to believe that we could get the money. There had to be a line of sight or potential—we had to be able to picture how we’d access resources, and then what the impact would be. This was how we landed on the priorities that had the highest likelihood of being fundable.

The outcome was 19 targets spread over 11 sectors. To ensure focus, each sector has no more than two targets. For example, we only had 6% sanitation coverage [across the city] and 21% of liquid and solid waste [being collected]. We set a target to increase collection to at least 60% for both. Within the targets, we set out some flexible initiatives, because I learnt long ago that if you’re going to succeed, you need to be able to adapt.

Another target was that we want to increase vegetation cover by 50%, which implied planting a million trees during my term of office. Across all the targets, the idea isn’t for us to necessarily achieve 100% success. Instead, the idea is to demonstrate that if we remain focused, we will fundamentally change people’s lives in our city. This mindset was infectious. People looked at us and went, “You’re so crazy—maybe we should help you.” And they did [laughing].

EP: That’s really refreshing to hear. That you’re sort of making yourself accountable, right? But, as you say, when you started this work, you didn’t necessarily have the resources to implement everything. Usually the context of very high need and very limited resources is a recipe for conflict. I wonder, did conflict arise?

YA-S: There is the important dimension of me being an opposition Mayor. As a consequence, all sorts of challenges come with the perception that your party is competing with the ruling party. This can become troublesome when one should be focusing on governance and not on politics. Inevitably, people bring politics into these things.

But to come back directly to your question, yes, there are conflicts. In addition to that political dynamic, there is also internal conflict. Our transformation programme is seeking to advance fundamental change. This had not been seen before in the

complacent administration that I walked into on the 13th of May 2018. On the first day, when I walked into my office, there was no laptop, no computer, no internet. I was like, “Huh? How do you get anything done?”

EP: So how do you manage it?

YA-S: Well, with some difficulty. I must confess it has not been an easy ride. The key is persistence. Furthermore, fostering allies is critical. When you are crazy enough to do the hard work, people come alongside you. When people see the commitment and a desire to make a real difference, they come onboard. In fact, you’d be surprised where you find allies. There is actually a lot of goodwill around. We’ve had no less than ten or 15 consultants come and work pro-bono for us from all over the world. We’ve also had graduate students from Oxford and Columbia University, among others. Our work also caught the attention of philanthropists because we’ve articulated a

Our approach is based on the saying that the only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. In addressing the challenges of the city, we were very realistic.

vision and set targets. This offers an entry point for people who want to help you do something.

EP: I want to come back to an issue you mentioned earlier related to motivating people when organisational culture is difficult to shift. From what you said, the internal dynamics were one source of conflict, which could manifest as resistance to your agenda and approach, right? Could you say a little more about how you've mobilised the core staff in the administration to work differently, especially if they don't necessarily have the requisite skills?

YA-S: Yes, this dynamic has been complicated because we have staff hired by the central government as the core management staff. As we speak [in April 2021], it's about to come to a head. We have challenged the legality of these arrangements because they are contrary to the provisions of the Local Government Act. Thankfully there are also colleagues in the ruling party that understand this has to stop. It is untenable. You can end up with a serious conflict of loyalty that fuels dysfunction. We've had waves. However, overall we've made progress because this is not about individuals but instead about building an effective and functional institution. We have made remarkable progress. One staff member confided that he never wanted people to know he works for the Council because nobody had anything good to say. "But now I am proud for people to know," he says. "I walk around with my head high because I work for Freetown City Council." We've also put in place training

programmes. We're doing an HR review to ensure we are fit for purpose. I'd been trying to do [that review] for three years but could not leverage the budget. In the end, someone came forward and said, we will do it pro bono. That is how an agenda can move forward.

EP: But the staff know it's being done.

YA-S: Yes. They also know better than anyone else the number of HR issues that need to be sorted out. Before, people didn't have job descriptions or get payslips, and would suspect that those junior to them were earning more. This is in a context where salary levels are not a living wage. I have been at pains to explain that we cannot address problems on an ad hoc basis. We need to do it systematically. We had to undertake a comprehensive review to understand what was going on and how best to fix it transparently.

Due to these reforms, the first year was quite tense in the administration. My sister gave me the idea to throw the staff a Christmas party at my own cost. So, with the support of friends, we had a great party. Afterwards, some of the staff came up to me and said, "We've never had a Christmas party. We really appreciate you."

That doesn't mean it's been easy sailing. There was a strike in June 2020 when we introduced the Mop Tax, a new system for Property Rates. We introduced an automated system, and there was a lot of resistance to that.

EP: What else did you have to address at a fundamental level?

YA-S: The City hasn't done urban planning in 40 years. As part of our 19 targets framework, we identified the priority to produce an urban structural plan for the city. This had to be done in the absence of a planning department. Similarly, we explored introducing a cable car system given the city's steep topography, but we did not have a transport division in the administration. We identified the need to create jobs through processes of improved service delivery, but there was no institutional unit with expertise in local economic development. In other words, there were a lot of priorities that administratively just simply didn't exist.

It is important to understand the context. The City had fallen asleep through a lack of resources, which generated a breakdown of the social contract between the City with residents. People didn't pay taxes. The City did not have reliable records and wasn't counting everybody. Only 30% of the residents that are property owners in the city were on the books. Against these deficits, I

am saddled with senior managers who were not appointed by me. They state openly, "We don't work for you. We're not hired by you." You can imagine how difficult this makes the job.

EP: Right. So how are you addressing such a binding constraint?

YA-S: I am working with the

dispute was taken to Parliament, which stood on the side of the law, and confirmed that the appointments being made by the national government were against the Local Government Act. These are really tough challenges because it tests our authority and mandate.

EP: Some of these inter-

governmental complexities that you've got to navigate are often not well-understood. The fact that you're still able to maintain momentum regarding your agenda is obviously significant. I want to move us on to the big overarching cloud that we're all living under at the moment, the Covid-19 pandemic. Your return to the country was due to your desire to help manage

Across all the targets, the idea isn't for us to necessarily achieve 100% success...the idea is to demonstrate that if we remain focused, we will fundamentally change people's lives in our city. This mindset was infectious. People looked at us and went, "You're so crazy — maybe we should help you." And they did

Local Council Association of Sierra Leone, and we put out a press release when this all came to a head a few weeks ago. We asserted that we will not accept these appointed people because it's undermining our authority and our councils. We then convened an emergency council meeting to formalise our position. I also appeared on TV to present our case. Fortunately the

the Ebola crisis. You quickly achieved a central role in that fight. Given that experience with the Ebola crisis, and now having to contend with Covid-19, I would love to hear your reflections as the Mayor.

YA-S: Being the Mayor is a very different role [laughing]. During the Ebola crisis, I was

This naïve idea that we would have these pretty markets where everybody would be like six-feet apart was just not going to happen! Truth be told, we planned, but we were not really prepared. And maybe that's the message we need to reflect on.

an unknown quantity from the private sector. I had no political affiliation. In terms of Covid, my first action was to reach out, because I knew from my personal experience of Ebola just how important it was to be ahead of the curve. So, by February 2020, even before we'd had the first case here, we had started working on a Covid preparedness plan. It was published on the 16th March 2020. In it, we set out what we felt were the peculiarities of Freetown, in particular the predominance of the informal sector and informal settlements, which are everywhere. We had to figure out what that material reality meant in terms of essential preventative measures such as hand-washing and social distancing. Our response plan had three elements: behaviour change messaging, behaviour change support, and isolation and quarantine support. Having

a plan and methodology opened doors. So we were able to raise \$4 million in a fairly short space of time to implement that Covid plan. We implemented it whilst supporting what the national government was also doing. I was able to draw on my learning from the Ebola experience, and we incorporated it into our Covid plan. We partnered with different parts of government, and the National Response Unit that was established. They had a specific one for the City. We worked very well with the Head of that agency. As it turned out, she was a former schoolmate of mine. We sat in the same classroom from form one to five, and we went to university together. So, cooperation for us was practical and easy.

EP: Can you unpack some of the practical challenges you faced during this period?

YA-S: The government would quarantine people, but there would be no food. So one of the big things that we had to prioritise was food support. In addition, we had to also offer water support, face masks and constant messaging. It was a major operation. We had 480 people moving around the city for five months providing these kinds of support. In retrospect, that was the biggest community engagement that was done during the outbreak. But of course, it's not about who gets the accolades, right? It's about getting the job done. And that was the great thing about working with the Head of the National Response Unit.

EP: When you look back on your response plan, is there anything

you missed? Or, do you feel that it put you on a really good footing to be proactive?

YA-S: One thing that became really clear to me is that one size cannot fit all when it comes to Covid regulations. Our cities are not the same as cities in the West, and we can't expect to adopt and implement the same guidelines in terms of, for example, social distancing. It's an impossibility, especially in dense informal conditions. Even those who don't live in informal settlements are invariably using informal transport. Curfews make little sense. For example, you tell people you have a curfew at ten o'clock. Guess what happens at nine o'clock? Everyone crowds into public transportation and causes super-spreader clusters rushing to get home. Another exceptional condition is the markets. This naïve idea that we would have these pretty markets where everybody would be like six-feet apart was just not going to happen! Truth be told, we planned, but we were not really prepared. And maybe that's the message we need to reflect on. You cannot do, in the face of a pandemic, what you've not been able to do for 20 years prior. There are some tough lessons in all this. We cannot escape the need for solid urban planning, and we must address water and

decent housing. In the absence of these, we're not going to be able to deal with these pandemics.

EP: Shifting register, I want to discuss your influences and sources of motivation. You obviously have had a very unconventional career. You became Mayor without being a career politician. Do you think coming from the private sector has been an advantage for you?

YA-S: Yes, I think so. There are benefits to having worked in the private management sector. Also, having an economics degree, being a chartered accountant, and having done a masters in international relations, have all helped. In the UK, I had wide-ranging exposures, having worked with some of the biggest financial institutions. Outside of the big corporate environment, I've also started and run my own business. The benefit of coming with that range of skills is that you are very clear about the complexities you are dealing with. I found the concept of risk identification and management ingrained by my private sector background. It is a tool that is immensely useful when you're in public service. In the public sector, risk is a big part of your everyday life, and operates on a huge scale. But coming at this with a problem-solving mindset definitely makes a difference. Actually, the biggest preparatory ground was when I established a not-for-profit organisation 21 years ago in response to our civil war. That was a means for me to display my love for my country and my people.

EP: Say more about that experience.

YA-S: Then, I was simply driven by a desire to do something. In my family, politics was not something that you even thought about. You just don't go there. It was only later that one realised that one must go there to make a difference. And public service is where that's done. In fact, it is not about politics, but sound governance. And if it's politics you need to get into to address governance, you need to do the politics. Politics is a means to an end. And the end is compassionate governance that leads to delivering services for the people.

EP: Finally, the way you go about your work and your mission has made you a global face for African city governments. Obviously, it's not what you signed up for. I'd love to know how you feel about that responsibility and that level of visibility. Your intense focus on people, and insistence that the job is about transforming lives implies a personal awareness and strength. How do you manage to maintain the inner strength necessary and sustain this ability to remain focused on the end goal—the people, and implementing your vision?

YA-S: It's simple—my faith in God. I'm a believer rooted in the Christian faith. And I really do depend on God for my strength. I also have an amazing family that's incredibly supportive. They are my strength. I'm blessed. I am also part of a group called "Praying Ladies". My sister started this intimate circle on Christmas Eve in 2014, in the heart of the Ebola outbreak. And we've been meeting consistently since.

82. LESLEY LOKKO

Lesley Lokko's multi-faceted career has had many acts. She is an architect, educator and novelist. Lokko got thrust into the forefront of debates on the need to reform architectural education and its desperate need to expand the canon that defines it when she founded The Graduate School of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg in 2015. The school, which became the continent's first and still only graduate school of architecture, was a labour of love for her. It marked a return to architecture after a hiatus that saw her write several novels. It was, in part, a response to the call and space opened up by students in South Africa following a tumultuous year of protests against the failure to reform the higher education curriculum as part of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement protests that began in the country and lasted for over a year between 2015 and 2016. In 2020, Lokko again found herself at the centre of the conversation.

By then, she was dean of the Spitzer School of Architecture at City University New York. She found herself wrestling with reforming an institution that needed to respond to the Black Lives Matter protests enveloping American cities, but simultaneously unwilling to truly change itself in more fundamental

ways. After resistance to her reforms and a lack of institutional support, she quit in protest. "The lack of respect and empathy for Black people, especially Black women, caught me off guard," she wrote in a widely publicised letter of resignation. Never one to rest on her laurels, Lokko is on the most ambitious and challenging act of her career yet. She has moved back to her native Ghana, and is opening a new institute. She explains why this high-wire act is necessary, and how her storied career has been building up to this moment.

VEAT

88. OMAID SHARIFFI

In 2014, armed with buckets of paint and paintbrushes, Omaid Sharifi and some volunteers set off into the streets of Kabul, determined to give a splash of colour to the intimidating, grey security walls that had come to dominate the city. But this was no ordinary art project. A former political consultant and activist, Shariffi wanted to find ways to use art to expose corruption, lift spirits and challenge the culture of fear and silence that define everyday life in Kabul and Afghanistan. They have done that, and more. Artlords, the organisation that emerged from this one act, has grown to include a 53-strong staff in Kabul, multiple other endeavours, an advocacy office and gallery in Washington DC, and collaborations with other art/activism projects across South Asia. It's dangerous work, but Sharifi and his band of activists are undeterred by the risks of taking on what he calls the "negative lords" of Kabul. The Artlords are determined to bring change to the city and are doing so one brushstroke at a time.

92. EMI KIYOTA

Trained as an architect, environmental gerontologist, Emi Kiyota is on a mission. She wants to revolutionise how we think of “elder care” and the organisational culture behind it. In the last decade, she has become an influential advocate for an empathy-driven approach to designing nourishing, happy environments that give the elderly their urgency and dignity back. It involves deep listening and requires a humility that often does not come easy to designers and architects.

96. PEDRO HENRIQUE de CRISTO

In 2016, after years riding a wave of success that saw him win many accolades for his work on the Sitiê Ecological Park in Vidigal, a favela in Rio, architect and urban designer Pedro Henrique de Cristo found himself having to leave the project behind in fear for his life. Threatened with violence, he and the park’s co-lead Mauro Quintanhila were forced out of the project and neighbourhood. In that moment, de Cristo rediscovered his belief, planted in childhood, that changing the political system and uncompromised participation in it were the only way to ensure sustainable change. Unable to live safely in Rio de Janeiro, he moved to São Paulo, where he has since run for federal and local government elections without success. For him, these first runs for office were just a dress rehearsal for the next campaign. He is determined to run a grassroots campaign to get into public office, where he sees himself and other young urban professionals like him as a missing key ingredient.

102. THIRESH GOVENDER

Thiresh Govender sees architecture as a potential battering ram that can be wielded to break down the systems perpetuating social and spatial inequality. In Johannesburg, where he is based, this function is critical, and has guided him and his firm, UrbanWorks. Founded in 2008, UrbanWorks was voted one of the world’s 50 best firms of 2020 by Domus. Govender’s mission is to democratise architecture and design practice, and to remake them to be as fluid, dynamic and fit-for-purpose as some of the informal practices proliferating in cities like Johannesburg. With traditional practice flailing in its attempt to contend with the city’s turbulent state of flux, he says there are lessons all around; architects who fail to take heed will render themselves irrelevant.



ARCHITECTURE MUST CHANGE

LESLEY LOKKO

I quit academia 20 years ago, primarily out of my exasperation with what I understood to be a reluctance — on the part of many institutions, not just the one at which I worked — to understand that questions of identity, race, power and gender were central to architecture. They are not marginal or irrelevant. When I came back as the director of a new, experimental school — the Graduate School of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg — it was both a very different time and place, and I was a different person. It was the first time I managed to make something, whether a course, a programme or a school, that was genuinely centred around those concerns and within an existing institution. I need to make this very clear: issues of race, identity and power are not complaints. They're what I would call 'creative' concerns. ›



◀ The GSA was an amazing place, but it needs to be put into context to understand it correctly. It was built on the back of student protests that rocked South Africa in 2015 and 2016, creating an opportunity to ‘do things differently’. We were able to take an existing, and in my opinion, completely outdated curriculum, and turn it on its head. There was a very specific context—protests and a drive towards decolonisation—that allowed a transformational agenda to take hold.

This isn’t the first time I’ve said this. The students were not the issue, nor were the teaching staff, who, by and large, were terrific. I couldn’t get the administrative support I needed to run a school of that size and complexity. So, what scuppered the project [of the GSA] for me was a question of labour. For four and a half years, I was the only full-time staff member at the school. It meant I sat on every committee, lectured, researched, fund-raised, picked people up at the airport, and put toilet paper in the toilets. It was an absolute nightmare. However, I’m the first to admit that the extensive range of responsibilities came about because I wanted to change something.

So, I realised very early that the desire to drive change and the reality of doing it are two very different things. If you’re serious about change, you must have the courage to see it through—all the way. Dismantling means reforming the curriculum, rethinking canon—how, where, with whom and what you teach, right down to reorganising class timetables. I now recognise that for anybody with a transformational agenda, you’re going to have to take on two tasks by default. One is to dismantle the existing structure to build something new, and the second is to create the new. A single person cannot do those two tasks simultaneously.

At the GSA, what was also important was the space we created by changing how we taught. Introducing the Unit System, a new teaching method, allowed students up to two years to investigate particular topics. We also always taught in tandem. Two people taught every course, which allowed students to understand that the process of learning was also discursive. There was a dialogue between tutors and students that disrupted the idea of the master-student relationship. It wasn’t a one-way relationship. These seem pretty small changes on the surface, but they were significant in terms of the kind of work they enabled the students to produce. Everywhere else I’ve been, people want that result, but they don’t want to change the structure to get it. So, it’s setting up a Catch-22.

The other thing that I came to understand both in South Africa and in the United States, is that academia’s conventional role is to withstand change. Academic institutions are very bureaucratic, quite hierarchical and heavily built on tradition. For me, tradition and culture are two separate things. So, if you have a genuine desire to produce something new, the organisation or the institution must be questioned—the institutional

structure, how decisions get made, the management style, all of those. Academia, to me, is one of the worst examples of the public sector. It’s almost impossible to change. In contexts like the US, I found it even more difficult to shift the mindset. So much gets invested in keeping things ‘the way they are’, partly, I suspect, because the alternative—the unknown—is so terrifying. I found in the States that people wanted the illusion of change, a flagship bearer, but they weren’t prepared to accept its consequences. They wanted the face, but not any structural change. To me, those two things are incompatible. You cannot desire change and fear it simultaneously.

These are the things African Futures Institute—the new institution I have just founded—will do differently. We have a set of creative concerns that don’t find a comfortable home within the existing canon. They don’t find an easy home within the current teaching methodology, research, archiving and questioning. These concerns are disruptive to architecture’s canon, which comes from different sources. They also demand time, which is absolutely necessary to the process of learning. Students need to have time to dismantle and deconstruct before they can rebuild. In that process of dismantling and deconstructing, you build their confidence, develop their voices and build very directly an authenticity about how they respond. You cannot do that in a 13-week semester, and you cannot do it within the existing curriculum, as I understand it, both in the United States and in Europe.

What I'm attempting to do with the AFI—and its early days—is to have some aspects of an academic programme. It's not only a school though. An institute is the most accurate description because, as an institute, we can be many different things. I've deliberately included the word "futures" because I think there are many other possibilities in terms of the product that will come out of this place. It is African in the sense that it's pan African, but it also includes the diaspora. Somehow, as in the open-endedness of its naming and structure, I'm hoping this will be an authentic experiment in setting up an institution in which pedagogy, research, changing and administering discourse get configured differently from how they currently are.

It's a conscious choice that the word "architecture" does not appear in the name. One of the things that was very clear to me as a student—I'm talking sort of 30 years ago—was that somehow indirectly, I was made to feel as if my culture, however I described it—African, black, diasporic, mixed-race, whatever it was—was lacking in something in terms of architecture. That it lacked in sophistication, order, canon, history; that it lacked in precedent. Thirty years later, I now understand that relationship to be completely reversed. It's architecture that's lacking. There is something in the canon that cannot deal with the complexity, particularly the African—just the concept of Africa. So, to do the kind of work that I think starts to provide some answers, we've had to force students to go outside architecture, and do so in a generous, imaginative, creative and constructive way. So, to not operate from a position of lack.

To be able to say, for example, that what I want to say can best be told through performance, not through the writing of a 10,000-word dissertation. This choice is not because one cannot write a 10,000-word thesis, but from a confidence that they can rely on the timbre of their voice or the relationship between them and their audience—whatever form it takes. So, the expansion of architecture for me is crucial. It is like trying to take something and stretch it rather than take topics and bring them in. That's in part why I decided not to put the term architecture in there. I think the discipline is broader than the construction of buildings. It's more comprehensive than what we currently understand as architecture.

What I hope the AFI will produce is undoubtedly not more professional architects. What I want to produce are thinkers. We want students to understand that it's possible to have an identity outside being a practitioner, someone who, you know, puts a building together. We want students to know that a building does not always have to be the only result of architectural practice. David Adjaye and I often talk about this. What we're both trying to do in Ghana—through practice, academia, through institution-building—is to build knowledge as well as buildings.

I moved back to Ghana almost 20 years ago, when I first got into writing fiction. I moved back, bought a piece of land, built a house, and got settled in a way. But, 20 years ago, I wasn't ready to take on the challenge of creating something as ambitious as AFI. Ghana, back then, was still quite

So, I realised very early that the desire to drive change and the reality of doing it are two very different things. If you're serious about change, you must have the courage to see it through—all the way

Now is an exciting opportunity to tilt the axis of power in terms of where knowledge is produced, and take advantage of all the things we think of in Africa as being deficits: the lack of infrastructure, lack of regulation, lack of health and safety. These can also be seen as incredible freedoms

fluid—politically, economically, socially and culturally. As a society, it felt to me as though we were still trying to find our way. Twenty years later, things have settled in a slightly different way. The infrastructure is much more stable. It's much more solid. But there's another side to the story. I have built most of my career outside my home, not in Ghana. In that sense, South Africa, for me, is like Europe in terms of its history of race, power and class. Those are the lenses through which everything is considered. Ghana is not like that. I mean, we don't speak about 'race' in Ghana—everybody's black, everyone is 'raced'. So for me, it's the last major challenge. Can these issues survive in an environment where race is thought of differently? I mean, I've taught in the US, the UK, in South Africa, and now it feels right to be in Ghana. I'm 56. It's probably the last big part of my career. It feels right to try and take that experience and allow it to be challenged, in a profound way, by coming home. It's interesting David is also back here now. I think my decision might be different if he hadn't also set up shop in Accra. When I walk into his office in Accra, and I see what he's managed to create in terms of an environment for young Ghanaian architects, I think, yes, this is absolutely the right time to do this.

Last year's events—both the pandemic and the BLM protests—have opened up a kind of territory that feels a little bit similar to the protests in South Africa at the start of GSA. Something has happened that has destabilised the existing order. We are all aware of it, and, in that moment of instability, there's also a kind

of openness. There is a kind of landscape of possibilities that's bigger somehow. So, for me, this is the right moment to do something that speaks both to what is happening and has happened, but speaks to it from a different location. You know, I've said many times that for me, one of the fundamental problems of the United States is that it is literally built on a lie. So, the task is to constantly reference the lie, expose it, challenge it, and bring it to the surface. Before you even get to doing anything else, you've got to expose that the lie exists.

But, I'm not from there. I could care less. That's perhaps flippancy. In a slightly different way, in the UK, there's a kind of hidden guilt. There, talking about issues of race is viewed as a little bit impolite. "It's not the British way", "we're a really fair nation", "fair play": you've heard it all before. People in Britain also don't want to be reminded of the Empire. But these locations are also where the vast majority of architectural canon has been produced. I'm literally tired—physically, emotionally, mentally and professionally—of working from those locations. I think now is an exciting opportunity to tilt the axis of power in terms of where knowledge is produced, and take advantage of all the things we think of in Africa as being deficits: the lack of infrastructure, lack of regulation, lack of health and safety. These can also be seen as incredible freedoms. I'm actually really looking forward to working in an environment that is not so highly regulated that you actually restrict freedom of speech out of existence. So, I think this is the moment to try and do something like AFI.

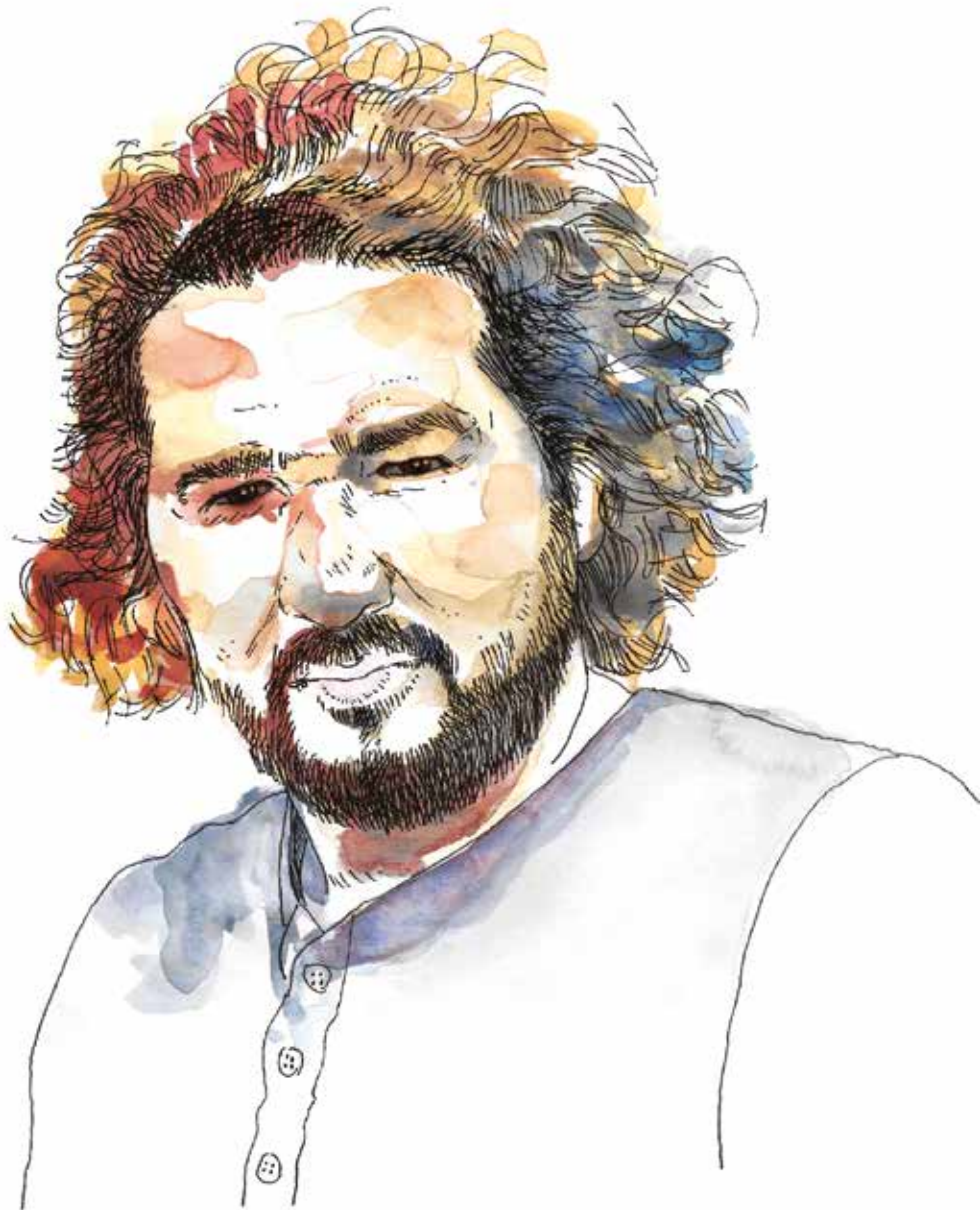
What we will do differently first and foremost is we will be very explicit about putting questions of transformation, decolonisation, decarbonisation, all the big "Ds", at the centre of the pedagogy, not at its edges, which is currently how it's constructed. We will design a curriculum that looks at these issues as central, and I mean that in the most minute way. I think in the West, architectural education over the past 50 years has become increasingly fragmented. When I first arrived at Spitzer [School of Architecture at City College of New York], I looked at the core structure and was just so baffled by what I saw. I was like, what are all of these courses—one credit here, two credits there, another four here, etc. It was like a spaghetti junction. I thought, where I'm coming from, there are three things: history and theory, design and technology, give or take. Across the field, we complain about being siloed and about the disciplines having no kind of inter-relationship with one another. If we teach in a way that is so fragmented and so siloed no wonder the net result. So, AFI will also argue that those areas that have always been viewed as separate are actually the same. Because it's postgraduate only, we can be explorative in a way that's very difficult to do at the undergraduate level.

African Futures Institute is not a grassroots, bottom-up initiative. We are about the production of a new canon. All of that is up for grabs at the moment. Yes, I can draw on the experience of the GSA, having different voices within the institute that tackle different areas and issues. Most of the people involved with the

AFI have huge international networks, and those networks have to be brought back to Ghana. So, this is not a local production. It is a global production, or, in David Adjaye's own words, "it's a planetary operation".

The history of architectural education is peppered with radical schools that do things differently. The basis of our curriculum will be the Architectural Association, the Unit System. I really believe in it as a model. So, we are not reinventing or even inventing anything. We're drawing on examples that have worked, before us, and will work again. In a sense, what we want to do is draw on things from different locations. One of the things that was really enjoyable for me at the GSA was not just the setting of the pedagogical framework, but also the exhibitions, the symposia, the international lecture series. In the end, the school was as known for that as it was for its innovative curriculum. We will kick off in July 2021 with the beginning of a year-long series of public programmes. So, for the next year and a half, the AFI will be doing things, it just won't be teaching. But, it's important to remember that teaching occurs in many different ways. Our first 'official' cohort of students is slated to begin in 2023.





ART AS ACTIVISM

OMAID SHARIFFI



For me, all matters come down to Kabul and the people who live there. Living in Kabul, you feel a big divide between the powerful, the rich and the poor. A lot of wrongs are happening without any questions or accountability. When you live here, you feel that this is a sad city, it's a city with a lot of anger, violence, hatred, and it's all because of this war that's been going on for too long. ›

◀ These things are what encouraged me to try something new. That's why we started Artlords. We want to promote critical thinking among the population of the city. We also want to bring a bit of kindness, empathy and love back to the city. We are asking tough questions to the rich and powerful involved in corruption and drug smuggling, which is also a big problem in Afghanistan.

I worked in different government institutions, and I quickly learnt that I could not criticise the government when I was part of it. I couldn't push for specific reforms because I was just one individual in a big institution. I realised I could not make much impact—that the whole system is against you making noises. I also understood that I couldn't reach as large a part of society as I would with art.

So, I thought of how street art and music could be tools to push for reform and transparency and accountability, to force what's hidden out into the open, and advocate for the things we believe need to be changed, to raise the voices of the people. So, these are the tools we use as Art Lords.

The word "warlord" has been used quite a lot for the last two decades. In Afghanistan we have "drug-lords", "corrupt-lords", all these negative "lords" associated with our country for a long time now. We wanted to spin that into something positive. Because there are also these other forces; other lords who are part of my country, but are never really highlighted. Hence, we decided to call ourselves Art Lords, to highlight another reality of life in Afghanistan. For us, it was a way of declaring that despite the war, the violence, the warlords, the drug lords, the corrupt lords, there's also the positive.

We started as a muralist organisation in 2014. Our idea was to paint murals on these blast walls—ugly security concrete and steel walls across Kabul that are very tall, up to eight metres high sometimes. These security walls started to mushroom all around the city from 2008, and by 2014, they were everywhere. They were just a part of life in the city. Every school, university, government institution, embassy, everything was behind these walls. So, we decided to paint them, because we wanted to make the walls disappear somehow. It was our way to reclaim our city back from all these negative stereotypes and evil people.

Since then, I can say the face of Kabul has changed. You cannot drive anywhere in the city without spotting murals done by Artlords. So, suppose you're a resident of Kabul. Every day you get out of your house, you face all this insecurity, poverty and everything. But, the moment you see one of our murals—which might be talking about

Even with the success we have enjoyed, we have lost some good human beings. We have also received a lot of threats, but still, we keep going. We believe that our work is important for Afghanistan. It's extremely dangerous work

love, fighting corruption, about women's rights—it just gives you a break from thoughts that you otherwise have all the time. We have made Kabul much more colourful than it was before.

So far, we have been able to do over 2,000 murals all over Afghanistan, not just Kabul, but all over the country. We have now done some projects in Pakistan. And we have expanded beyond murals, doing theatre, music shows, events, art conferences and therapy sessions for youth. Kabul and our country need these things, so we are doing what's necessary.

It's been unreal because, all said, we started with just a bucket of paint. Now we have six offices, and 53 people working for Artlords. There have been some low points too. One of our co-founders got killed, my assistant got killed. Both in explosions. So, even with

the success we have enjoyed, we have lost some good human beings. It's extremely dangerous work. We have also received a lot of threats. But still, we keep going.

Afghanistan is a dangerous country. We have been in a war for a very long time, and that war is taking lives every day. The UN reported that in 2020, 8,500 civilians—women and children—were killed or injured. So, this is a brutal place. Whatever you do, it is not far from danger.

But, Kabul is also a “real” city. You never hear about that part of it. What people know about the city and Afghanistan is from headlines in the *New York Times*, *CNN* or *Al-Jazeera*. They think of it as this place of violence, explosions, suicide attacks, violence against women. That's all true, but at the same time, the other reality of Afghanistan is Artlords and what

we represent. Kabul is a city of 6 million people, a lot of them are young. It has this vibrant culture of Persian cafés and, like other cities globally, a very active nightlife. It's very colourful; there are studios, galleries, there's art happening on the street. That's also the other reality of being here that a lot of people don't know. So, we are trying to introduce this face of Afghanistan and Kabul to the world, and, also to remind ourselves.

That is the city right now. Yes, there's a lot of fear; there are targeted killings and explosions every single day. Every morning, you wake up, not sure you'll be alive at the end of the day, because at any moment, there might be an explosion right in front of your house, school, or office, and you might get caught up in it. But at the same time, people live. They breathe, they go about their work. They carry on, and they're not losing hope. That is what Kabul is.





DESIGN FOR AGEING

EMI KIYOTA



Designing for older people or even just caring for older people requires humility. You cannot do it successfully if you maintain a paternalist approach to design and how you provide care. You cannot be designing something for them. My work has taught me to sit with the elderly and just listen. That's how you find out what kind of assistance they need, what they want. Being quiet and listening, which comes a bit easier for me because I grew up in Japan, is a fundamental skill. So, for me, it is easy. ›

◀ I once visited my grandmother's nursing home in Japan and asked the staff members where I could find her. No one knew her by name, but everybody knew her bed number—14B—and diagnosis. When I was growing up, she was one of those very wise old Japanese women. At some point, she developed a memory problem—dementia. Not wanting to burden the family, she packed up everything and admitted herself into the nursing home. It was a terrible experience for all of us, especially for her. Within six months, she couldn't talk. Nine months in, she couldn't walk. She had lost her will to live. The nursing home made sure she was well fed and kept her physically healthy, but her spirit was completely broken. No one expected her to do anything.

That experience visiting my grandmother and observing her fast decline sent me on the path I'm still walking today. Of course, I was young then and somewhat naïve, but I wanted to change the world. I wanted to learn what could be done to change this. That's how it started.

While studying architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, my mentor—Dr Gerald Weisman—taught me two things that fundamentally changed how I understood ageing and the built environment. He said, "Society shapes how buildings should look like, and architecture reinforces those notions." My experience at UWM changed how I understood my grandmother's experience in that nursing home in Japan. It made me realise how we think of older people and their place in society generally. We have this odd idea that it's okay to warehouse older people.

As designers, we are complicit in this; we are okay with designing environments that are just good enough for older people, even as those that design them would never want to live in them. That's how we see them, and that's how we see the buildings they live in—just good enough. Learning this was quite a profound experience. I wanted to challenge this. I wanted to see how we could create a design process that can change how we educate both designers and elders to think about ageing, older people and their environments. This led me to found Ibasho.

After my PhD, I was doing lots of consultancy work designing hospitals and nursing homes. While working on my master's thesis, I lived in a nursing home for a while. I thought it would allow me to understand the experience of being within that institution. At one point, I realised no one was happy living there. I understood that somehow, we spend so much effort and so many resources designing something no one wants to live in. We are still doing that. That was my turning point. I was shocked how little we listen to older people when we design nursing homes. We think of the experts when we talk about users—the administrators, perhaps the doctors, and nurses—but never the residents, the people who live there. We never trust older people to tell us how they want to live their lives. It's strange.

That's when I started to think about creating Ibasho. Ibasho is a Japanese word. It means a place where you feel at home and can be yourself. I liked this word because when I was involved in designing nursing homes, we

always tried to create a home-like setting. But home means different things for everyone. Home shouldn't be one-size-fits-all, really. It's impossible to create a home. Someone has to make it that.

Of course, there are cultural differences, but when it comes to ageing and how people experience it, the things people worry about when they get older are the same. It's almost universal. Everyone's worried about being irrelevant as they age, and they worry about being socially isolated. I see this over and over. I have found that institutional care and how it operates everywhere is pretty much the same no matter where you go. The institutional culture is the same. Any traditional, indigenous cultures get erased in these places when it comes to eldercare. In Japan and other parts of the world, older people are relatively more respected. But, as soon as they move into an institution, everyone treats them as beings they must look after. They stop being seen as individuals with experience, skills and wisdom that can still be useful to society. Geographical culture is one thing, but the institution has created its own perverse global culture.

I started Ibasho as an attempt to address these issues. The main ideas we are working with are that we need an architecture that is incomplete, an architecture that responds and shifts as the needs of its users change. The thing is, what's accessible at one point of life might not be accessible at another. So, we are advocates for adaptable design, something that says, "If I need one, then I can have this function built-in."

We are for a design that's flexible enough and adaptable enough for people to age in place.

The second thing we are interested in is who decides? A lot of time, architects are the ones deciding how design should be. I am a huge proponent of embracing imperfection gracefully. That's what we do for Ibasho. We intentionally, purposefully, don't complete the building. We ensure it is well-designed and that it is sound enough and safe enough. The interiors are very basic. We leave the users—the older people—to use the space and decide where things will go and how they will use it. When we have put something in place, it's often been the wrong location. It's a challenge first for architects to set aside their sense of perfection. It's difficult for them to say, "Okay, I'm going to stop designing at this level." But really, who is the user? Who should the space be perfect for? The users should complete the design. They have a better sense of what they want and can define what perfection is for them.

One of the elements of Ibasho is that you must get the user's hands dirty in their own space. They are part of the creation. We trust older people who use the environments we create to show their creativity and complete the environments we design and build. It's interesting to see what happens. They own the spaces much more, and are happy with the challenge. I was working on developing senior housing in Bhutan some years ago, and came across a quote that said: "The way to be happy is to make other people happy". It resonated with me because it captures the gap between our current approach of care and what elders want.

In our work, we are committed to making spaces that do this. Elders can be valuable assets and resources to their communities. We want to be part of co-designing a future in which ageing is not something to fear. Architecture can be a powerful tool for not only facilitating meaningful relationships with others. It can also empower elders to find their own "ibasho" through contributing back to their community.

Designing for older people or even just caring for older people requires humility. You cannot do it successfully if you maintain a paternalistic approach to design and how you provide care. You cannot be designing something for them. My work has taught me to sit with the elderly and just listen. That's how you find out what kind of assistance they need, what they want. Being quiet and listening, which comes a bit easier for me because I grew up in Japan, is a fundamental skill. So, for me, it is easy.

The pandemic has exposed issues about ageing that have been around for a long time. Covid-19 did not create social isolation; it did not create high virus infection rates in nursing homes. These problems already existed. Older people are not the problem either. The big issue is equity, and the pandemic highlighted this. If you look at it, elderly facilities in specific zip codes were much more susceptible to high infection and death rates than others.

We must systematically think about this. Ageing is not a problem; it is not a disease. But we insist on treating it as something negative. We have to shift our views on ageing and how we

transform the elder care system. No one likes to live in the elder care settings that we warehouse older people in. Warehousing elders in spaces that are the most efficient as we do now is not the answer.

"Ageing in place" has been a buzzword for many years. Everyone wants to stay at home. I get that, but it's not always positive. For example, if you have diabetes and can't go anywhere, and so you just stay at home and do not see anyone, that's not healthy. We need to start thinking about communities and neighbourhoods as part of a care ecosystem. Suppose we work to transform housing by making it more accessible, both physically and economically, paired with robust home and community-based services. In that case, people wouldn't have to move because their house is not accessible or unaffordable to live in as they get older.

Another example is developing dementia; most sufferers go into something referred to as "memory care"—terrible words. What happens when you have dementia is you start to lose your sense of orientation occasionally. Could we design neighbourhoods that enable older people with memory problems to walk around safely so they can stay at home instead of institutionalising them? Why are we not doing this? We sent people to the moon decades ago. We are now talking about going to Mars and space tourism, yet we can't keep our people within their community in their own home?



POLITICS IS ESSENTIAL

PEDRO HENRIQUE de CRISTO



I remember the impeachment of Fernando Collor de Mello in 1992. I was a kid, but that day marked me for life. I was nine years old. We had just gotten back all democracy, we had the elections, and this guy had won. He promised a lot of things. His administration's corruption was so rampant, and people — the youth, students, workers — were organising and warned him that he wouldn't last for long. It was just mind-blowing for me. ›

◀ I felt like I could kind of understand this idea of what democracy meant—for the people, by the people, with the people—I saw that as a kid. I was in a Catholic school that was a bit conservative. They were more focused on morals and stuff, so they wouldn't let us kids stay home to watch the impeachment process that day. So I asked my parents if I could skip school and stay home to watch the impeachment on TV because they would talk about it all the time. They said yes, and I was inspired. Even as a nine-year-old, it became clear that politics was the way to change the world. I was lucky because both my parents are architects, and I would help them in their studio. That meant I grew up admiring artists, scientists, architects, creators of all kinds, but the idea of politics being critical was always on my mind.

So, after completing my master's degree in 2009, I went to work for the United Nations as an urban design consultant. This was in Rio, as Brazil was preparing for the World Cup and the Olympics. I quickly got impatient; I realised I wanted to get something done rather than be part of a vast bureaucracy, you know. There was all this investment, political will, and attention on Rio—everybody wanted to do things there. So, I decided to work in one of the city's favelas, in Vidigal. I was interested in the question of how favelas could be integrated better into the city since this is one of the most pressing challenges in many cities across the world. In Vidigal, we did everything we could professionally and achieved some pretty impressive results on the Park Sitiê project I led with Mauro and some other colleagues. To the national and local media, I was the face of the project, but I did not want to be its leader.

I just could not be because we wanted to develop something sustainable and scaleable. For that to happen, people from the local community had to lead it, which we set out to do. In retrospect, I made some mistakes. Through it all, though, I still believed that organising was the most important aspect of what we were doing. That's what drove me. I would constantly practice what I would call micro-politics—solving minor problems and handling relationships—while keeping a view of the big picture and designing some cool shit.

I came to understand one thing I hadn't before—that people can change their circumstances by working together, but that most of the time, even when you do the best possible job you can, events and circumstances can still overwhelm you. I was thinking a lot about getting into politics, even as things unravelled in Vidigal. In a sense, I was overwhelmed by events beyond my control, and I had to leave Vidigal and Rio quickly. This could happen partly because we did not have a functioning state. We have a failed state within the favelas. It didn't matter what models you could come up with and how—coming from the outside as I did, or even from the inside as Mauro—you managed to work with people. In the end, without the state to guarantee your security, your life, even, you can do everything correctly, and anybody can just fuck with you as happened, and you can't do anything about it.

I left Vidigal in November. By the beginning of December 2016, I had moved to São Paulo, and I knew then I would run for political office. I was determined to work

I came to understand one thing—people can change their circumstances by working together, but that most of the time, even when you do the best possible job you can, events and circumstances can still overwhelm you

towards uniting all these renewal movements that were emerging. This was during the peak of the Petrobras scandal in Brazil. It was unclear where the country would go. We organised initially as a group of NGOs and all these white-collar professionals. We didn't last long. We could not agree on a strategy I was pushing for to align ourselves with social movements like Carmen Silva's MSTC (Movimento Sem-Teto do Centro) and MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) led by João Pedro Stédile. We ended up running just a few candidates in 2018 elections.

In that first election, I ran for the federal senate and quickly realised, fuck man, what we're trying to do feels important, but most of the people in that initial group I was part of did not care at all. They didn't care about the favelas, the poor, or any of the other things I cared about. What seemed important to them were things like who your political godfather was and how much money you could bring to the party, how that would help their election, you know. The great thing about it was I ended up working quite closely with Lula's party as well as some of the biggest social movements in Brazil. Those relationships continue.

Even though I lost, I learned another lesson during that first election. It became clear that we live in two worlds instead of the one we all think we are in together. The one world is occupied by citizens, people who work for a living, professionals. The other is the political and money world, which has totally different dynamics. That should be something you learn to understand and are taught from a young age. I

realised I hadn't really had a clue how this world worked.

In the second election in 2020, I ran for a seat in the city council with the support of Eco-labor@BR21. I had less media support, fewer resources, but I knew the risks. I had also learnt not to worry about the things I cannot control, as I kind of did in the 2018 election. I must tell you; I had more fun. I think I took myself less seriously. It wasn't about me. I got 136,000 votes, which was a lot of votes. I was the most voted for candidate in the Green Coalition in São Paulo. It was a difficult campaign, but our team worked hard with little to no money or TV time. We ran a very grassroots campaign. We didn't have the resources. It was in the middle of a pandemic, and we have a fascist government in power. Under all these constraints, we approached our campaign as a political and cultural movement. This appealed to a lot of people in the city. Because of the pandemic, we couldn't organise rallies, so we campaigned on bicycles. We had a sound system, would get around the city organising small, impromptu distanced gatherings with music, and would do a lot of public health messaging—encouraging people to social distance, wash hands, that sort of thing. We wanted to bring something different in terms of how to do politics. We tried to get people to have a bit of fun during a very dark time and think about the issues and the future. I lost that election too, but it felt like the beginning of something.

Up until I had to leave Vidigal, everything I did seemed just to work. If you haven't learnt how to lose and grow a little wiser

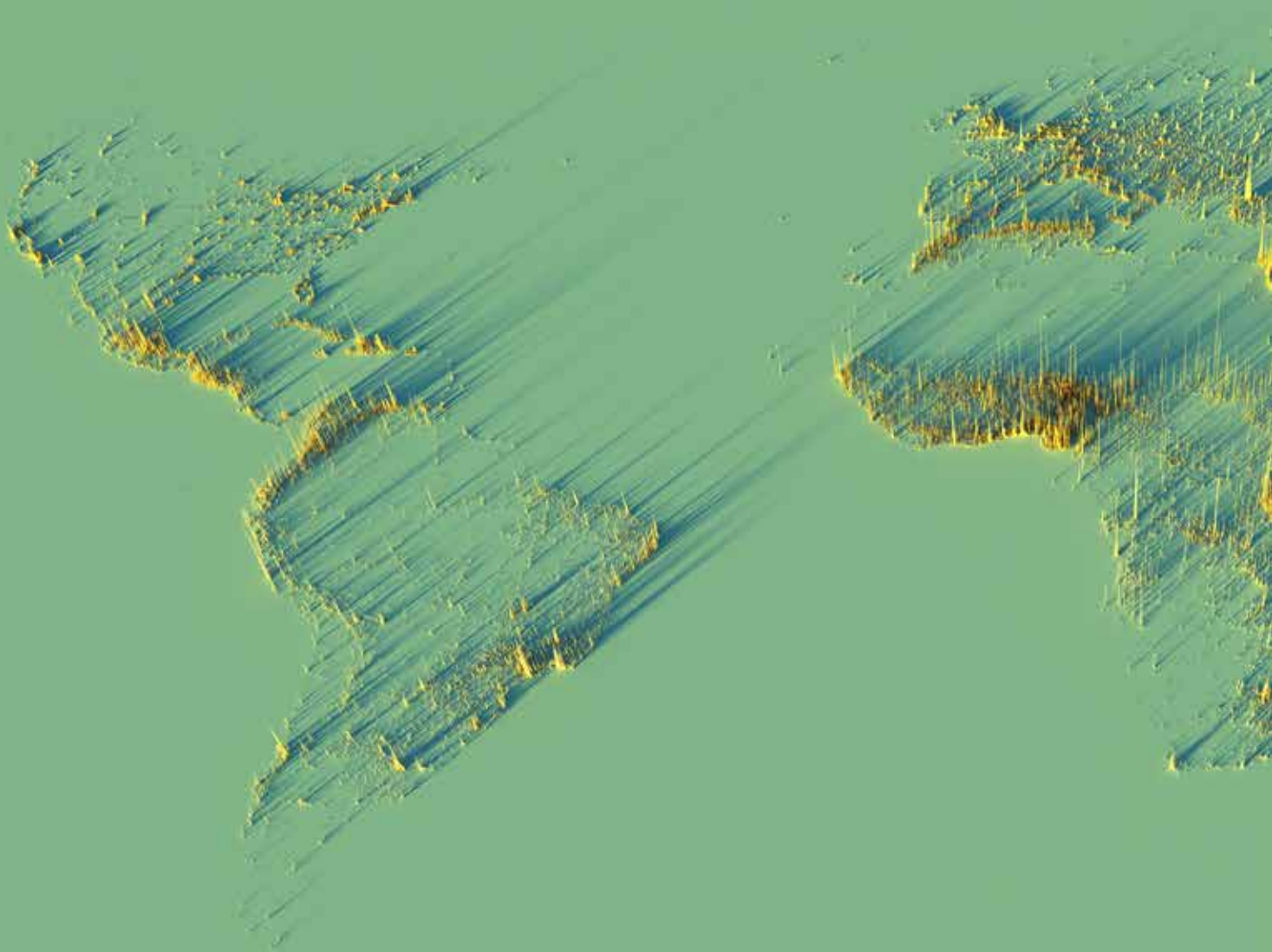
from that experience, you're not going to accomplish the things you dream of doing. That's not how the world works, right? The first campaign was an ethical and moral minefield. I had a lot of obstacles, but we still managed to bring in a lot of votes. In the process, I made a lot of honest mistakes. In the second campaign, we knew a little more about what we were dealing with, and we knew there was a slim chance of winning, but it was still necessary to run. In the end, we treated it as a build-up for running the third time—and winning, but in the right way, without being compromised by anyone or the system. It's a lie that you can't do politics if you're not corrupt.

If you want to know whether a politician is honest or not, ask them after a first election if they have financial problems. If they do, there's a high chance they have been honest. I have had many financial issues in the last few years, but I'm determined to win the right way. I can't just be thinking about what's good for me personally. There are more important things. So, that's what I have learnt. I understand why people don't want to risk their comforts and livelihoods and leave their professional lives running for office. They want to take care of their families, which is fine. It's very tough, and it's rough.

I will run again, either back in my home state of Paraíba or Rio. I really believe more young professionals and activists should too. The only way to make real change is to change the way the whole system works. We must change how government works, and the way to do that is through politics.



DENSITY RE-VISITED



VISUALISATION BY ALASDAIR RAE



The impact of density on emerging infectious diseases has been rarely studied. In theory, density leads to closer contact and more interaction among residents, which makes them potential hotspots for the rapid spread of emerging infectious diseases. In the case of worldwide pandemics such as the recent Covid-19 virus, larger, dense urban centers, particularly if coupled with strong tourism, could become epicentres of a worldwide health crisis and lead to thousands of deaths. At the same time, their superior health and educational systems

could help mitigate the full impact of the disease for those who are infected, leading to higher rates of recovery and lower rates of mortality. Even the relationship between density and exposure is not a straight line. Dense areas may be more likely to put in place policies that foster social distancing, thus reducing actual rates of infection or simply leading to greater social distancing due to greater public awareness of the threat. In addition, it is possible that denser environments make it easier for people to stay somewhat connected with neighbours, families and friends while they are sheltering in place.

SHIMA HAMIDI, SADEGH SABOURI & REID EWING

(2020) Does Density Aggravate the COVID-19 Pandemic?, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 86:4, 495-509, DOI: 10.1080/01944363. 2020.1777891



CONTEXT MATTERS

THIRESH GOVENDER



Design should be responding to the complexities of the world now. We are living through a time with so much urgency, necessity and trauma. As designers, we don't have the luxury of being self-indulgent and self-centred. Our work needs to serve in some way, and more specifically in relation to the urgent pressures of our time. But, the first problem is in the way we trained. ›

◀ Our education has not prepared us for a world experiencing this level of turbulence. It does not give us tools to respond to the barrage of chaos that confronts us daily. How we design needs to be closely attentive to the undercurrents of what makes our cities operate as they do, and how they are failing us all.

I'm interested in design that's not necessarily coming from a professional or a single author. There's the design that's all around us in a city like Johannesburg, where I live. That's what interests me. It results from ongoing, multi-layered, multi-authored (micro and incremental) reactions to the conditions to which it

is responding. It is not coming from an all-knowing central figure asserting a design logic onto an environment. Instead, it's the result of a reciprocal relationship between, let's call it, a design professional, the built environment and society.

Johannesburg has been a phenomenal (intense) and accessible laboratory for me as a practitioner. It's this turbulent metropolis, actively trying to reconcile itself with multiple

I find architects quite complacent and compliant to the existing status quo. So, this democratisation of architecture that has been happening...is exciting. Any person with a hammer can essentially be both an architect and a builder. So I have opened myself to it and am trying to learn from it

traumas and a complicated history all at once. As it does so, there's this incredible entrepreneurialism—opportunism even—that is emerging and becoming part of the city's identity. The fact that many aspects of life across the city have become somewhat deregulated means that the impulses of people seeking survival and opportunity are apparent and present everywhere you look. It's layering a new kind of city on top of the old one.

It's a gift for an architect like me: someone curious and interested in translating what others might dismiss as chaos, into new ways of planning (strategizing, speculating) and arranging life in cities like those in the global South. So, Johannesburg is an exciting place for me. It feels like a city on the cusp of moving from one state to another in a remarkably short space of time.

One of the things we need to manage in the way we practice design is certainty. As architects, we typically approach buildings with precision and confidence, sometimes even as we insert them into volatile environments; that's what we trained to do. So, we keep designing ourselves into these dead-ends. We produce architecture that's mono-functional when we can no longer afford to do this. It's unsustainable for many reasons, and too often not fit-for-purpose. What's the point of continuously producing buildings that serve a particular need for a specific moment, when everything is evolving around you, sometimes in unpredictable ways?

We need to radically re-think what a building is. In cities that seem to be in a perpetual state of flux like Johannesburg, architecture needs to be hyper-conscious and primed to respond to the complex layers of different actors, economic forces, conditions of governance, and environmental pressures at sites that might even be in the same neighbourhood. Sometimes things are that dynamic. It's an interesting dilemma and a challenge. How do you even begin to design for something with that extreme level of fluidity and complexity?

Personally, I have had to learn to be less precious about architecture, especially its aesthetic composition. I have begun to lean towards a more operational architecture. When we start concerning ourselves less with what something looks like, and more with the complex environments or systems it has to exist in, some exciting things happen. Only then can we begin to create architecture that is engaged enough to stimulate, amplify or shift some of the things we are trying to address. So, first, we need to understand how a proposed structure will work within its surrounding system, and not in the superficial ways that processes like "community engagement"—that dreaded buzzword—often fail to. Of course, there is a lot of uncertainty in that process.

So how do we embrace uncertainty? For a start, we welcome it. We invite into our process the numerous pressures, assertions and appropriations that are ever-present in a city like mine. We immerse ourselves in developing ways of responding with work that adds onto, rather than subtracting, the design systems people are fashioning for themselves. We explore how they can accommodate us, not the other way around. Perhaps this is more difficult, but it's worth it. What you achieve, in my experience, is a richer way of co-producing architecture and design that means something, and that has the potential to enrich people's lives. It differs from what often comes out of mere conversational engagements (the conventional "stakeholder engagement processes"), because it also addresses the power dynamics

so often hidden in how we consult our constituents—especially in non-commercial, mission-driven work. I find architects quite complacent and compliant to the existing status quo. So, this democratisation of architecture that has been happening in places like Johannesburg is exciting. We have to embrace everything that enables us to serve better.

There's this four-storey walk-up residential building in Yeoville, a Central Johannesburg suburb. Constructed in the 1950s, the building has a modernist aesthetic—one could say attitude. That's what the author of this building was going for, and that's what it shouts out. In the last 20 years, it, like many around it, has become occupied by immigrants, primarily from across the African continent. They are repurposing and using the building very differently from what the architect imagined. So, the living rooms, passageways, kitchens—every space, including the balconies—have now been turned into something different.

There's now another type of interior architecture that does not mirror how the building presents outside. Some windows are blocked up; some new ones installed. One could look at this as the desecration of an otherwise beautiful piece of architecture. I would rather look at it as a legitimate (and emergent) form of co-production. Residents are asserting their lives in those spaces. We see this in quite a few residential buildings across Johannesburg. The city's densification occurs not only through new buildings, but by re-imagining the existing residential building stock, including

A world that is profoundly complex and sophisticated is building itself up in the absence of professionals willing to engage it on its terms. And it is talking back to us, saying, "Look at me. Look at what I'm doing"

warehouses. Architects and policymakers have to understand this and learn to engage with the phenomenon productively.

These appropriations come out of necessity. They are happening in two forms. The first—let's call them occupations—often defy the current legal framework or bylaws and standards for safety, health, fire, etc. They're dangerous. The second form I'll call extra-legal. People have a right to be in these buildings. What they are doing, again out of necessity, is productive. They are finding ways to use space with little waste, and creating a different type of value. In some instances, what they are doing is way more progressive than the law and policy in place. We have a history of laws not

serving the majority in this country, so it's not always easy to take the law as an absolute. As our cities evolve and grow, so should the laws and regulations that govern them. Some things still in law in our cities are arbitrary and outdated—they don't have a public health, well-being, or safety basis. As architects—together with communities like those in this modernist building in Yeoville—we must challenge and contest laws and policies that are irrelevant or obstructionist so we can build something new.

So, our legal frameworks need a re-think as much as our education system. That is how we will re-build the field to be as robust and dynamic as the places where it is trying to find new relevance. Many

of our bylaws were developed in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s—a different world from the one we now occupy. I often find myself struggling to reconcile with them, to do everything by the book, as much as the residents I mention. So, in a sense, we are allies, and we have the opportunity to make a real difference in these spaces. A kind of rebel approach might be necessary.

We can no longer think that professional architects alone define the discipline. Any person with a hammer can essentially be both an architect and a builder—a majority is producing with no other choice, and they are doing it in a responsive, sensitive and sophisticated way. Yes, it might have an aesthetic crudeness to it, but we need to look beyond that stuff and learn to work with it. A world that is profoundly complex and sophisticated is building itself up in the absence of professionals willing to engage it on its terms. And it is talking back to us, saying, "Look at me. Look at what I'm doing."



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How we think of policing and public safety needs to change. Communities have a more significant role to play in their safety, argues Amara Enyia

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Amara Enyia

Block Clubs can empower citizens to take more responsibility for watching over their communities

When I stepped out of my home on Chicago's West Side in late May 2020, my brain struggled to process the scene in front of me. Military tanks lined Madison Street. Soldiers in military fatigues stood in front of buildings; some patrolled the block. Broken glass, half boarded-up storefronts and debris from days of uprisings evinced the anger following the murder of George Floyd, a 47-year-old Black man killed by a Minnesota police officer. In a video filmed by a teenage bystander, Floyd was restrained and struggling for his life.

According to a recent study by *The Guardian*, Black men between the ages of 15 and 34 are nine times more likely to be killed by cops in America than any other Americans.

The image of armed soldiers on the streets of a prominent American city did not evoke a sense of safety—only dread. Communities—especially those long-forgotten—simmered with an anger pent-up through countless incidents in which Black people have died at the hands of American police.

Police scrambled to restore some order, even as they perpetuated disorder in some places. All notions of “safety” seemed suspended—until further notice.

Soon after Floyd's killing, another video of police murdering a young man emerged online. It, too, sparked massive protests. This time, in Nigeria.

On the 3rd of October 2020, in Ughelli, a town about 450km from Lagos in Nigeria's Delta State, a bystander captured a video of the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) officers shooting a man dead before driving off in his vehicle. Created in 1984 in response to a rising number of armed robberies, kidnappings and other violent crime, it didn't take long for this elite crime-fighting unit to become the object of dread. Members took part in extrajudicial killings, corruption, and routinely flouted regulations. SARS also systematically targeted young men. In their warped logic, having a tattoo or wearing earrings were signs of gang membership. Similarly, possessing an iPhone was a clear sign of involvement in illegal activity—only criminals could afford them. This resulted in sometimes deadly encounters and multiple cases of abuse.

In an attempt to kill the story of the killing in Ughelli, police claimed the video was fake and arrested Prince Nicholas Makolomi, the videographer who filmed and posted the incident online. This move incited the #EndSARS protests, which quickly spread across Nigeria and sparked solidarity protests worldwide.

Nigeria's police forces were formed during the country's colonial era and are still generally regarded with suspicion. Marginalised and poor communities see the police's primary duty as furthering state interests above all else. The origins of policing in the United States are similarly steeped in the country's original sin—created to protect private property, including

capturing escaped Black enslaved people. Wariness and mistrust of the police, mostly among communities of colour, is warranted and logical and necessary.

2020 ended as one of the United States' most violent years in decades as cities—both big and small—reported astronomical increases in murders. A 2020 report released by the Council on Criminal Justice recorded a rise in homicides by a daunting 8% between 2019 and 2020. The continued increase in documented police brutality led to heightened demand for reforming policing and a rethink of intercommunal safety across the United States.

One cannot assign a one-size-fits-all approach to community safety for cities across the world. The Nigerian context is different from that of the US. However, what is constant is the importance of hyper-local models of organising, which are unsurpassed in their ability to create networks of care and accountability for community members. Member accountability to each other, first and foremost, and each other against the state, is critical.

Hyper-local community safety models are premised on the notion that safety is based upon

trust and that trust is a byproduct of intentional relationship-building. This intentional relationship-building is critical to establish a community fabric upon which to build a culture of care.

The Block Clubs we are helping activate in South and Westside neighbourhoods like Bronzeville and Austin adopt this model. Residents of the block get to know each other, host community events like block parties and festivals, and look out for each other's homes. People on a block are most familiar with the patterns and rhythms of that block—more so than police officers.

But, the local government has a part to play too, and a responsibility to support residents in this role. It can do this by providing tools that facilitate togetherness. These can be digital infrastructure that enables the easy flow of information across the community. Developing mechanisms for identifying potential bad actors and ensuring they are apprehended when necessary—typically the only contact that a community would have with state actors—is also essential. Articles of clothing that differentiate neighbourhood monitors and make them visible to the community at large are a seemingly minor but equally important tool, as are investments in essential infrastructure like lighting and public spaces.

Many people have expressed reservations over this approach. What about the ever-present threat of vigilantism? They ask. What prevents these organised groups from becoming a law unto themselves under the guise of protecting communities? These

are valid questions.

For Block Clubs to work, each establishing community needs to create a democratic council. It is a space for sharing information, discussing challenges and problems that arise, a room for accountability. Communities also need to develop specific mechanisms to expose and address misconduct. Misconduct is an offence to the community as a whole—not just to an individual.

The Black Lives Matter Protests sparked by the death of George Floyd and the #EndSARS protests, while in different contexts, amount to the same thing. People are demanding a different approach to how we think about safety. Reducing crime is not something that only cops can do. Other ways exist. Resources that we have long ignored and need to claim back for ourselves.

2020 taught the world that the notion of collective good must be front and centre. Economic, political and social systems based upon individualism and weak public infrastructure continue to devastate communities grappling with the public health crises of disease and violence. Designing systems of care and accountability requires hyper-local efforts that restore the fabric of togetherness—even in an environment where physical distancing may be necessary. Communal safety systems reduce the role of the state, thus limiting the possibilities for state-sanctioned violence. They also position communities to mitigate instances of intercommunal violence through a strong apparatus for monitoring, accountability and the development of safety norms based on the collective good.



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Sanele Sibanda

South Africa needs to redefine whose interests its laws are meant to protect in moments of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic

As countries worldwide struggle to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus, intensive securitisation, curfews, regulated gatherings, and unprecedented closures of massive sectors of the economy have become the norm. In various parts of the world, litigation has followed. Individuals, business, and other organisations are challenging the constitutionality of the laws and regulations and actions of institutions charged with their enforcement.

ILLUSTRATION BY BLAIN VAN ROOYEN



In South Africa, such legal challenges have been fewer than one would have expected. After all, the country is generally litigious. But, as it turns out, access to courts in this country remains largely the preserve of the wealthy. Unsurprisingly, most documented assaults on human rights in the last year primarily occurred in poor, black and marginalised communities.

In the first, so far most-stringent, phase of the lockdown that began in March and lasted till August 2020, at least ten people were reported killed by police and members of the armed forces deployed across the country to enforce lockdown regulations. These included stay-at-home orders and, to the dismay of many, an alcohol ban.

As the world held demonstrations in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests across the US, some South Africans took to the streets to protest the brutal killing of Collins Khosa. The 40-year-old was killed in Johannesburg's Alexandra township on April 10, 2020, by South African Defence Force members. According to witnesses, soldiers accused Khosa of drinking alcohol. They beat him up with the barrel of a rifle in a sustained assault that led to his death. In death, Khosa has become the symbol of the government's and other state actors like the police and army's overreach in enforcing lockdowns.

How did we get here? How could a regime of disaster management lead to such consequences, more so, under the auspices of the law? Could we have imagined the rules that are in effect differently? Perhaps a little more humanely?

Let's go back to the beginning. I am a constitutional scholar. As

Covid-19 struck and it became evident that we would be facing an unprecedented public health emergency. I was taken aback by the South African government's response. It struck me that the state's first Act was to declare the pandemic a disaster, managed under the Disaster Management Act, instead of a Constitutional State of Emergency, which would have been regulated in terms of section 37 of the Constitution. This distinction might seem overly technical, but it's one of great importance.

The regimes have two critical differences. Embedded as it is in the Bill of Rights, the constitutional regime anticipates the harmful effect on human rights that dealing with an emergency may entail. Accordingly, it establishes institutional safeguards. For any national emergency to continue beyond 21 days after being declared, Parliament's approval is required. Not so under the National Disaster Management Act.

By contrast, the disaster management regime is framed to assume that the primary and overriding concern is managing and controlling the crisis. It establishes a cascading command structure under the authority of a cabinet minister designated by the country's president as the disaster-response-point person. While it's understood that these powers are to be exercised in the public interest, the Disaster Management Act is disturbingly silent on human rights protections. In addition, it does not unambiguously establish institutional safeguards over the exercise of the immense powers created in its name. By contrast, the constitutional regime is more explicit.

The ultimate goal of the Act, then, is establishing control. Control of systems and processes, structures, goods, people, and ultimately society, as long as the disaster endures. The result is the overly muscular and securitised reaction that facilitated the legal deployment of the armed forces that would eventually kill Khosa in his own home. The Act provides very little by way of in-built checks and balances.

Listening to South African President Cyril Ramaphosa as he announced the governments' early plans to tackle the pandemic, I did not see a lot of what was to follow coming. Who would have guessed in early 2020 that in June 2021, we would still be dealing with the pandemic with no clear end in sight? In retrospect, could the response have been managed differently from a law and constitutional perspective?

My answer is YES!!

In our response, foregrounding the protection of human rights and institutional safeguards to prevent abuse through legal encoding would have shifted the government's emphasis from control to working with communities to save lives.

To future-proof against a repeat of what we have seen, we need to reframe how we imagine disaster response. A reprioritisation of whose interests the law is meant to protect in a moment of crisis is required. This will ensure that the disaster regimen South Africa is in right now, and all those that will surely follow in future, reflects similar priorities to those that underpin the constitutional emergency regime.

At present, South Africa's Disaster Management Act makes no mention of human rights. It

places no expectations on those it empowers to exercise restraint and accountability. This requires urgent correction. Another more consequential fix would entail legislatively locking in South Africa's 'institutions supporting constitutional democracy' as role players in the event of a national disaster. It is not difficult to imagine the role independent bodies such as the Human Rights Commission, the Public Protector, the Commission for Gender Equality and the Auditor-General, could play in this scenario. All of these bodies already hold significant remedial powers and have direct access to Parliament. They need to be key players actively involved in defining and safeguarding the public interest during national disasters, of which experts tell us there will be more to follow.

Ultimately, the framework of disaster management needs transformation from one focusing on control to one privileging care and the preservation of human rights. We can achieve a lot without having to reinvent the wheel. We need to fix its dis-entangled spokes and address the shortcomings of the laws we have. All the prerequisites are there.



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Tolullah Oni

The youth have something to say about the health and future of our planet. A failure to listen could be to our peril

Every major societal disruption has resulted in systemic changes to the city. Some, like the cholera and TB epidemics in 1850s London even improved conditions for the majority—they revolutionised sanitation and housing standards. Other moments of significant disruption have, however, been used to amplify pre-existing inequalities. The bubonic plague was employed to sow the seeds of the apartheid state, leading to the implementation of the Group Areas Act in South Africa.

As we consider possibilities for a fairer, healthier, more sustainable urban future, it is critical that we confront the existing factors that drive and perpetuate inequality, some by design, others by neglect.

Make no mistake, cities were not healthy before the Covid-19 pandemic. They were simply unhealthy in ways that were largely ignored. Underneath the veneer of societal advances in many urban settings across the world lies a darker reality of widening inequalities resulting in poor health and equally poor societal outcomes. For example, a month before the pandemic was declared, the ten-year Marmot report on health inequality in the UK showed the importance of poverty, place, gender and ethnicity in determining health, with a decline in life expectancy for the poorest, and a widening health gap between wealthy and deprived areas.

It's unsurprising that the Covid-19 health inequities that emerged a few months later perfectly mirrored these findings. Black and brown people and those living in more deprived urban areas have borne the brunt of the pandemic, not only in the UK but globally.

Indeed the pandemic has affected everyone, albeit to widely varying degrees. It has also made it difficult to look away from the inequalities that define life in most cities. These disparities include the most fundamental needs. According to UNICEF, in the UK, an estimated 8% of adults are "food insecure". In South Africa, 7% of the country's households do not have access to reliable and safe water.

The pandemic has also revealed that quick adaptations to how we live, work and travel are possible. We have been reminded that work and workers in healthcare social care, food and transport are critical but undervalued. We have also learnt the vital importance of early pre-emptive action. The countries that acted quickly and decisively to halt and reverse Covid-19 transmission

have generally fared better than those that did not. Avoiding the hubris of know-it-all exceptionalism to learn from others has proven critical as (not) demonstrated by the UK's failed efforts at re-inventing the contact tracing wheel in lieu of learning from countries like Taiwan, which have had more experience and success with breaking the chains of transmission during epidemics. The role that historical and contemporary experiences of discrimination play in informing behaviour has also been brought to the fore with the (dis)trust people have in the public health system and their governments significantly influencing their decisions to abide by public health control measures or take up vaccination. The interdependence of health and the economy is also clear as shelter in place public health measures have, to varying degrees, impacted livelihoods, requiring intervention from the economic sectors to protect jobs and incomes. As we set our sights on the future—re-visioning the urban experience to support health and sustainability—we must be conscious of the mind-bending reality that the present is the past we will be ashamed of tomorrow. Unless we choose to act differently, we will look back to this present—future—past and wonder how we can live in a society that allows some to live in housing that makes them sick and to breathe air that kills them and their children.

We need to take the anger arising over urban health inequalities—anger that has been amplified by the pandemic—and transform it into sustained action. We have an opportunity to confront the structural factors like racism and poverty that have perpetuated these inequities for too long by shaping who is more exposed and vulnerable to disease, who has access to healthcare and healthy environments, and who is more likely to suffer disastrous consequences if they fall ill.

In the uncertain future we are stepping into, we need to be guided

by a recognition of the supremacy of compassion beyond the individual. Health is everyone's business. This means health must be embedded into all our systems from food and transport to urban planning and housing. By assessing the health impacts of new urban projects or programmes over time, these sectors will need to be held accountable for the ill health they contribute to and rewarded for creating good health.

We also need to be extremely adaptable, developing the muscle to anticipate and mitigate preventable surprises. For example, the risk of emergence of new diseases from animals to humans due to cities growing in ways that disrupt natural ecosystems is entirely anticipatable. Urban growth and planning that considers and avoids such future risks could very well prevent the next pandemic. But anticipation and adaptability alone are not enough. After mastering these capabilities, we need to hone our systems to be able to pivot rapidly in the event of health emergencies that we can't or don't avoid, with agility and strength. Building trust will be pivotal. We need to find ways to address the lack of trust in our health systems, often by marginalised and underserved population groups. Some of the reasons for this mistrust are historic, while others have to do with the ubiquity of information from bad actors, boosted by the internet.

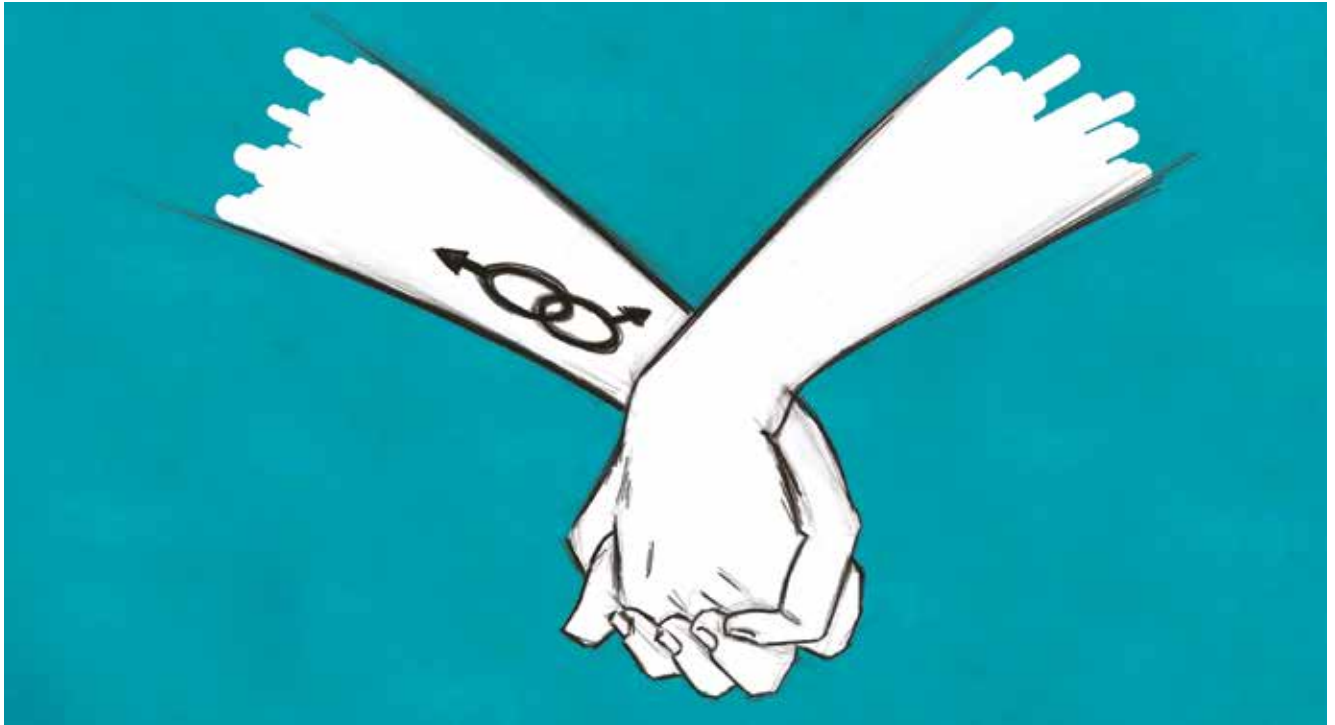


Tolullah Oni is a medical doctor and public health scientist based at Cambridge University's MRCP Epidemiology Unit. She's founder and principal of Urban Better | Oni et Al. Her urban health practice and research aims to identify creative strategies to address complex urban population health challenges in rapidly growing cities globally. She is a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader

We need to find ways of communicating clearly and effectively to allay any fears and address the scepticism that Covid-19 has made evident. Critically, the foundations for this will ideally be laid outside of moments of crises to build the trust needed to ride future storms. Taiwan's approach to building a digital democracy before the pandemic and its use of a 'humour over rumour' strategy to fight disinformation during the pandemic are examples of what a robust system to counter the spread of unreliable information can look like.

As we are thinking through all this, our cities keep growing, daily. So the mindset of how we think of urban development needs to shift too—urgently. We can no longer afford short-term-ism in our thinking. We have big, complex and interdependent societal challenges in front of us. Further urbanisation and climate change will only exacerbate them. It's critical that indicators of a successful city are aligned with these complexities to help us anticipate, prevent, mitigate and adapt to future threats.

I am hopeful about this future. Through my work across cities in the African region, I am beginning to embrace an old but still prescient adage. If "children are the future", then African cities are living in the future today. The median age in Africa is 19. Bringing the future into the present simply requires mainstreaming the voices of young people on the continent, and across the world, today. We have an opportunity to listen to the future, to heed its warnings and ideas. I am convinced that the cities that will be most successful at setting a new course for health and sustainability are the cities that create space for and mainstream youth-privileged approaches, unencumbered by the comparatively jaded social imagination of the elders, to lead the way to shape the future they already occupy. The future is all around us, and it beckons.



Neil Hassan & Andrew Tucker

There is an urgent need to critically engage with how internationally-funded HIV health programs like PEPFAR are being rolled out to male same-sex communities across the urban South

Before Covid-19, the United States' President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) programme represented the most significant global health initiative for a single infectious disease ever attempted. Since its inception in 2003, the programme has spent some \$85 billion to combat HIV across Asia, Africa and Latin America. Tactically honing in on "key populations", or those with a high risk of contracting or passing on HIV, the epidemiological category "men who have sex with men" (MSM) is considered one of the most at-risk populations, primarily due to their engagement in unprotected anal sex. As such, in the 2018/2019 period, PEPFAR reportedly allocated \$360m to programs targeting key populations, including MSM groups.

In South Africa, a recent multi-year funding call to support MSM health programmes primarily in two major cities, Cape Town and Johannesburg, had a budget of \$15.5m (approximately ZAR220m). By comparison, the 2018/2019 South African national budget allocation for primary healthcare services for the entire country was only ZAR302m (about US\$20m). Despite significant PEPFAR funding earmarked to reach MSM, the way internationally-funded HIV health programs like PEPFAR are rolled out, particularly in urban centres in the global South, remains problematic. For example, PEPFAR places overt emphasis

on the periodic need to monitor and evaluate access and sustained uptake of clinical HIV-related services, such as antiretroviral therapies (ART). The measurements prescribed by PEPFAR are narrowly defined as they are primarily based on quantitative data metrics. While the number of MSM who access HIV prevention or treatment programmes is important to record, a primary emphasis on quantitative data restricts opportunities to holistically understand and reflect on the qualitative relations and situations in which HIV infections occur. In other words, current efforts to promote urban health and well-being for groups such as

MSM are somewhat defined by a search for numbers, with very little programmatic focus on activities that address the psychosocial, economic and spatial factors associated with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This is particularly troubling considering the significant—one could say game-changing—global health resources PEPFAR allocates.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, same-sex individuals such as MSM are still desperately seeking opportunities for social solidarity and safety, which often means migration to urban centres. Yet urban centres are also where HIV infections often remain highest. This raises critical questions about the potential, unintended and long-term consequences of PEPFAR funding in urban Africa, where only narrowly defined health interventions are implemented and monitored. It also creates the space and opportunity to consider what more holistically responsive and socially integrated MSM HIV programmes might look like, and how such programmes can also contribute toward sustainable urban transformation.

In Cape Town's historically marginalised townships, our research is beginning to uncover the implications of non-government organisations' (NGOs) PEPFAR-funded MSM programmes. A growing number of MSM who regularly engage NGOs in urban Cape Town have begun to call for a reprioritisation of resource allocations by NGOs, and, by extension, funders including PEPFAR. Their demands: collective social

health strategies that in addition to combatting HIV also emphasise holistic, sustainable, and spatial urban transformation. Based on MSM engagements since the 1990s, these NGO supported "safe" spaces, today these spaces have evolved beyond current funder mandates, namely the provision of clinical HIV-related resources, to now emerge as political community engagement assemblages that prioritise peer-led and township-based social healthcare.

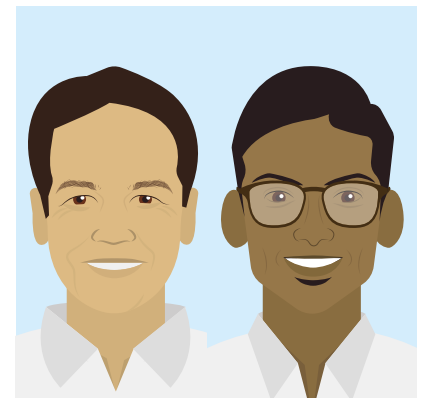
Our research also reveals that MSM "safe" spaces have the potential, if better funded, to significantly contribute to urban transformation in Cape Town. Such spaces could serve as a place where the kinds of skills and infrastructural development activities that should accompany community engagement programmes (basic administration, financial management, typing and computer skills) could be offered. MSM in these spaces are also calling for a much more active role in urban development, to better promote nutrition programmes, shelter and safe infrastructure, and by developing their own responses to human rights violations. Unfortunately, a lack of basic skills, a lack of access to physical spaces, limited funding and policy priorities, and limited safety to gather as MSM all hinder how MSM are able to develop and implement their own social health programmes and contribute to sustainable urban transformations.

Furthermore, the exclusion of Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, and other Queer (LBTQ) women from MSM HIV-related township activities stems primarily from international funders' narrow priorities and responses based on biological HIV-risk factors. Not only does this ignore the social risk of HIV tied to gender-based violence and rape of LBTQ women, it also fails to consider how MSM exist as part of broader social solidarity networks that include other marginalised same-sex and gendered groups.

While we do acknowledge that separatist spaces play an important

role in South African politics, the type of urban transformation that MSM in Cape Town are currently calling for is co-developed and strategically sustained by the collective experiences of poor health and precarity embedded in townships, that go beyond current MSM-only urban models of health engagement.

Much work still needs to be done to reimagine MSM sexual health as embedded in a vast urban constellation of relational and place-specific inequalities. For HIV programmes, this means finding ways to move beyond what are often acontextual and narrowly focused and quantitatively measured clinical HIV interventions. For urban scholars, this requires an acknowledgement that HIV funding and programming can act as potent political tools that, if reimagined, have the capability of effectively engaging with diverse marginalised groups, to address not only socio-spatial health inequalities of some of the most marginalised in African cities, but also help address sustainable urban development challenges across the urban South.



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Andrew Tucker is a researcher focused on urban development, sexuality and health in the global South.



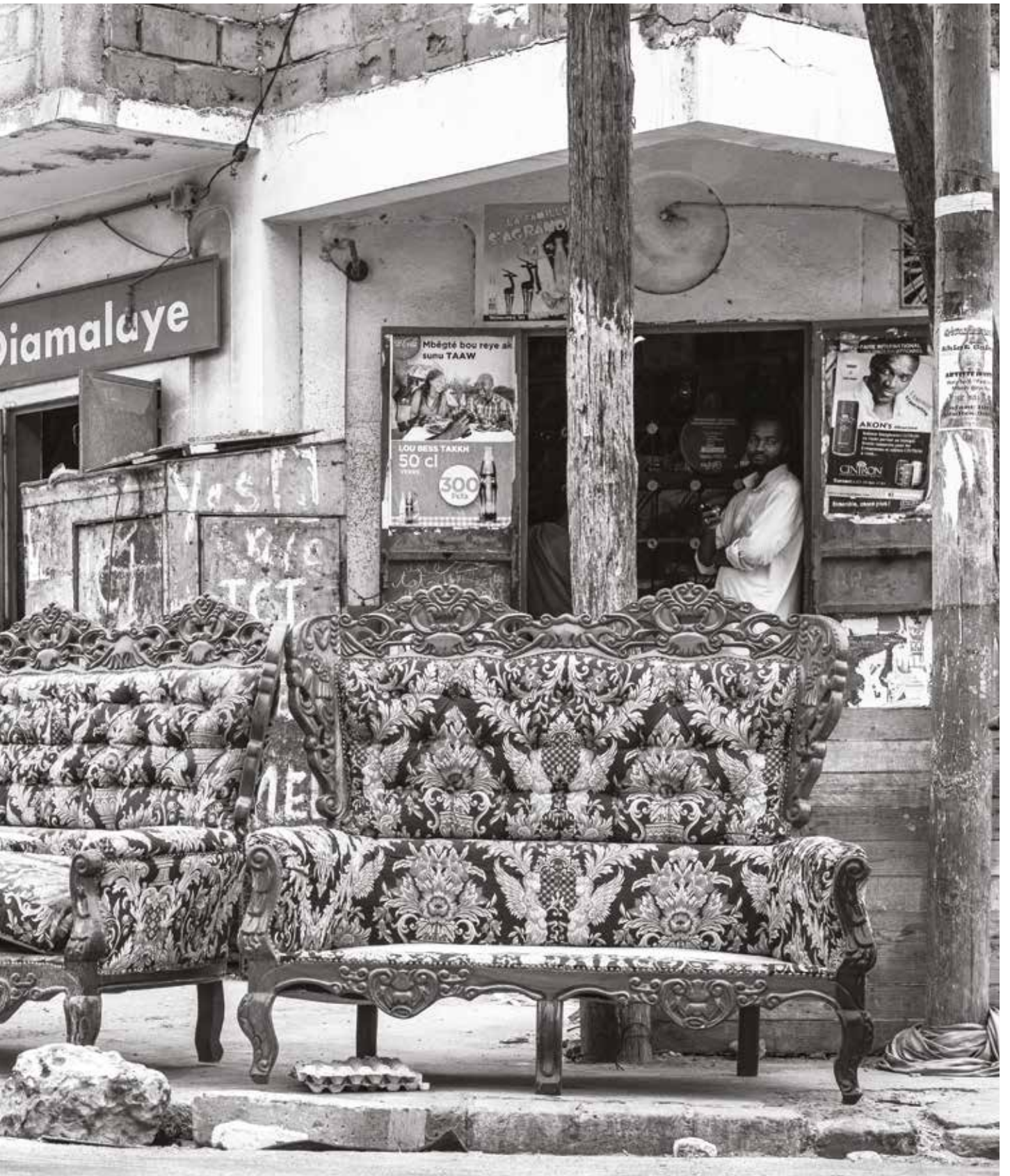
LENS



EMMANUELLE ANDRIANJAFY ON FINDING DAKAR

After years of living in Dakar, where she relocated in 2011, Emmanuelle Andrianjafy (b. 1983, Madagascar) embarked on a walking tour of the city. In 2014 “I walked the city in order to experience it,” she says. While exploring the city over an extended period on foot for the first time, she captured the following series of black and white images that show a raw yet intimate side of the city. Since then she has produced several projects, and was winner of the 2017 MACK First Book Award, Contemporary African Photography Prize and finalist of the Aperture Portfolio Prize.















All images from the series "Anonymous Neighbours" by Erica Canepa
Supplied by INSTITUTE ARTIST







The expropriation movement think Berlin has any choices left

Ultimately it seems the question of the benefit of rent caps really comes down to whether—or how much—you view housing as a commodity.

Certainly those protesting the closure of Neukölln's Syndikat bar—carrying posters emblazoned with slogans like “opposed to a city that's only for the rich”, “defend neighbourhood culture” and “the key stays in our hands”—don't see it as such.

Similar discussions on out-of-control real estate markets are happening elsewhere around Germany and Europe, including cities like Copenhagen, London and Barcelona.

It is possible that slowly but surely attitudes around real estate as an investment are changing. In January this year, members of the European parliament voted for a resolution that calls upon the EU “to recognise access to decent and affordable housing as an enforceable human right”. The resolution was supported by a 2016 report from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, which surmised that poor housing was costing EU economies nearly €194 billion every year because of related costs in healthcare, social services and lost productivity.

“European rules are often better at protecting profit generated by the housing market than protecting people who need a roof over their heads,” the project's rapporteur, Kim van Sparrentak, a Dutch member of the Green party, argued.

Lielani Farha, former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to housing and director of The Shift, an organisation she founded in 2017 to advocate globally for housing as a human right, believes that all of the above are signs that attitudes around rent and housing are changing. According to Farha, many governments

and organisations accept that housing is a human right and have signed human rights declarations that include it. The problem, she says, comes in knowing what the implications of that are, or how to act upon it.

But this, too, is changing. The Shift's lead legal researcher, Sam Freeman, has noticed that the tenants' groups he works with are increasingly using the language of human rights to make their arguments. “Tenants are now, more than ever, aware of what housing as a human right means and about how often that right is being breached. As knowledge grows, these groups are using this language to make their arguments more effectively,” he said.

“We are in a totally different landscape than we were four years ago,” Farha agreed. “I think the pandemic has exposed how fragile housing is for most people and how it's a gateway to security, health and wellbeing. The right to housing really has currency now.”

The Berliners who've taken to writing graffiti in the Schillerkiez would appear to concur. While Syndikat and various other left-wing housing projects in the city have been forced to close over the past few years, the ideas they encourage are still, literally and metaphorically, writ large on Berlin.

“Eat the rich”, a rough spray of graffiti heckles newcomers just around the corner from where the bar, its doors and windows now boarded up, once operated. “Whose property?” stickers on a power pole demand of passers-by. “End the rent insanity”, brightly coloured posters on telephone junction boxes all down the same street, answer back.

The Socialize Deutsche Wohnen campaign posters make a more reasoned argument, although what they propose is even more radical than the rent cap: “For a city with affordable rent for all”, they propose, on almost every other corner, in the neighbourhood's majority languages of German, Turkish, English and Arabic. Local media report that members of the Syndikat collective, the people who used to run the bar, are now involved in the expropriation movement.

As yet, nobody knows what plans the billionaire Pears family have for the bar's former premises. One thing's for sure though: around here, it's unlikely to be popular.



ERICA CANEPA TAKES A PEEK AT THE LIVES OF HER ANONYMOUS NEIGHBOURS

Under lockdown in her 25th-floor apartment in Buenos Aires, photographer Erica Canepa suddenly noticed something that in her typical day-to-day, she had never paid much attention to — her neighbours. “They have always been there, but their presence suddenly became tangible to me,” she says. So, she watched them and took photos of their routines — exercising, sitting down for meals, taking selfies — all from a distance. It became her way of getting to know them, if only a little

LENS

Thus on that August day in 2020, protestors were not just upset about rising rents. They were also outraged about who was profiting. The Pears, the British billionaire family that purchased Weisstrasse 56, own over 3,000 apartments in Berlin—mostly through shell companies—and are thought to be worth almost €4 billion. In 2019, investigative journalists discovered that the Luxembourg-registered shell company that now owned Syndikat’s building had reported losses in 2017, and as a result, only paid the city of Berlin around €355 in taxes that year.

As the protestors were quick to point out over their megaphones that summer evening, Berlin’s taxpayers were essentially subsidising police protection of the foreign billionaires’ property.

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The rent cap law’s “ban on excessive rents” kicked in from November 2020. Politicians from the city-state’s ruling coalition—comprised of the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left party—were optimistic that it would ease the sort of conflict that played out around Syndikat last summer.

Thanks to the new measures, in late 2020, around 1.5 million Berlin households received a very welcome letter from their landlords informing them that their rent was going down—sometimes by several hundred euros—to match 2019 levels. Judging by an online calculator that the city set up for tenants to work out if they could have their rent reduced, officials believe the average reduction was around €211 a month. The rent cap Act also made it the landlords’ duty to inform tenants if they were being charged excessive rents and to lower them. Landlords who didn’t comply faced a €500,000 fine.

Not everyone was happy. Some of the country’s biggest landlords said it was unconstitutional. Others claimed it would discourage property investment, and would fail to achieve the desired goal of unlocking more housing in the city. A number of landlords quickly found ways around the new rules. Many began to furnish their properties, as furnished homes were not subject to the new rules. Others got new tenants to agree to a “shadow rent” that would be paid should the law be reversed. Disgruntled property owners and politicians launched lawsuits to overturn the cap, advising tenants to save the difference between the rent specified by the rent cap and the shadow rent.

1.5 million Berlin households received a letter informing them that their rent was going down — sometimes by several hundred euros

In February 2021, the rent cap celebrated its first anniversary. Whether Berliners thought it had achieved what it set out to do seemed to depend very much on whether they thought it was a good idea in the first place.

“After a year of the Berlin rent cap, it is clear that the city’s senate and parliament ... have taken a giant step toward strengthening tenants’ protection,” Reinert Wild, the head of the Berlin Tenant’s association, said in a statement on the anniversary. He argued that the cap was less about tamping down landlords’ expectations of high rents, and more about “...showing that housing is not a commodity and that the state has a large responsibility when there is inequality in tense markets, in order to bring that social balance back”.

Not everyone agreed. “What is happening in Berlin is irresponsible,” said Michael Zahn, the head of Deutsche Wohnen, one of Berlin’s biggest landlords with a real estate portfolio worth around €25 billion. With over 116,000 apartments in the capital, the company was looking at rental losses of €9 million in 2020, according to Zahn.

A study by the Munich-based Ifo Institute for Economic Research suggested the cap had calmed Berlin’s raging real estate market, with rents falling by 7.8% over the year. That said, the number of rental apartments available decreased by an estimated 20%. Within the year, the average number of applicants for a new lease rose from 128 to 214 people.

In popular neighbourhoods, the average number of applicants is between 300 and 400. Queues around the block are a common phenomenon at apartment viewings.

And while Covid-19 might have played a role in this, fewer building permits were issued over the same period compared to the previous year. Sector analysts suggested that insecurity about property investments caused by the rent cap may have dampened developers’ appetite to enter the market.

Additionally, having divided Berlin’s housing into two groups—the regulations only applied to apartments built pre-2014—the law may also have led to the emergence of two markets. According to the same Ifo Institute report, titled *One Year of the Rent Cap: How Has the Berlin Real Estate Market Developed?*, the law resulted in rents falling in the regulated market, but in the parallel, unregulated market, rents had risen faster than in any other city across Germany.

Whatever one’s position, in April 2021, the rent cap finally had its day in Germany’s highest court, with the judges in Karlsruhe deeming the Act unconstitutional. Although the senior judges did not deem the rent cap itself unconstitutional, they decided that the law was. Determining that Berlin authorities had overreached by enacting a property law that should only have been made by federal authorities, the judges voided the rent cap Act, effective immediately. Berlin’s bold experiment was over—apparently, due mostly to a legislative technicality.

On April 15, the day of the court’s decision, Berlin residents took part in an impromptu and unexpected large evening demonstration, with between 10,000 and 15,000 protesters marching through two of the city’s most sought-after neighbourhoods, from Neukölln into Kreuzberg. Renters talked angrily about how much back-rent they owed, and how much more they would have to pay monthly. Landlords said they would accept the thousands owed in instalments. Politicians criticised one another loudly. Later that night, violent clashes occurred between police and anti-gentrification protesters. Yet again bottles and pepper spray flew.

The UN’s Special Rapporteur on the right to housing, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, told German public broadcaster, *Deutsche Welle*, that he was worried about the rulings’ impact in other cities. It “sends a negative message around the world, unfortunately, and that is why I’m quite concerned,” Rajagopal said.

In the days following, the rent cap remained a hot topic. “With the court’s verdict, the fight to limit rents begins for real”, business daily Handelsblat’s headline read. Indeed, politicians have already put the issue back on the table, this time at the federal level. Meanwhile, it is an election year in Germany. The centre-left Social Democrats are already talking about a rent moratorium or pegging rent increases to inflation. This would apply to the whole country, should they win. Germany’s Green party, which is increasingly popular with voters and looks likely to be part of the country’s next coalition

Aiming to do exactly what its name suggests, the latter movement wants the state to be able to seize property from landlords that own over 3,000 apartments in Berlin. This would include Deutsche Wohnen, as well as other big property players like Vonovia and Alkellus, which the initiative’s organisers say make “insane profits”.

“If our apartments were socialised, our rent prices would no longer be set for the purpose of enriching real estate companies,” the organisers have argued, but simply to cover relevant costs. The movement needs to collect 175,000 signatures in order to hold a popular referendum on the subject in September this year. Surveys suggest that the city is split down the middle as to whether it’s a good idea to expropriate the country’s biggest landlords and reclaim the public housing stock that was sold off earlier in the century. The expropriation movement organisers don’t think Berlin has any choices left. Following the high court’s decision, their website exhorted: “there’s no alternative to expropriation”. “We are convinced that many more people will join our initiative,” a spokesperson added.

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Since 4am, a tide of black-clad protesters – some

wearing scarves to hide their faces – had been washing in and out over the Schillerplatz, a tree-lined square

in one of Berlin's hippest neighbourhoods. Lines of helmet-clad police followed in their wake. Locals

watched from the sidelines as 500 to 800 anti-

gentrification protestors lit fireworks, held speeches, threw bottles and stones, and were pepper sprayed in

return, by the around 700 police present. The cause of this central city riot on that late summer's day in

2020? The closure of Syndikat, the bar-cum-left-wing collective that had operated down the road since

before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The 35-year-old bar had just lost a long, legal battle to renew their lease, now held by new owners, a

family of British billionaires that had invested heavily

in Berlin real estate. Syndikat's eviction from its premises at Weisestrasse 56 had catapulted the bar and

its supporters onto the frontlines of a bigger fight that, while on the face of it appears to be about rising rents,

gentrification and newly arrived real estate moguls, is in fact at core about the relationship between a city

and its real estate market.

Unlike other big cities in Europe, Berlin's market was

underdeveloped because of its Cold War history. Over the past decade, affordable central city property has

attracted investors of all kinds – from pension funds looking for sensible, long-term deals to international

asset managers out to make a quick buck – making Berlin's real estate market the fastest growing in

Europe. Real estate consultants Knight Frank noted that property prices increased 20.5% in 2017 alone,

the biggest rise in any major city in the world. As a result, housing has become a source of profit in a

city once known for its reasonable rents and dynamic fringe culture. This shift also caused steep rent hikes,

a serious issue in a city where few residents own their homes, and where the average salary remains

low compared to other parts of the country. In other words, gentrification was becoming a problem,

neighbourhoods were changing too rapidly, and people – and bars – were being pushed out of areas they

had for decades called home.

Enter Berlin's controversial new "rent cap" or, in German, the *Mietendeckel*. The city already had some

rent controls, but they were generally perceived as ineffective. This is what led to Berlin's left-leaning city authorities imposing the 2020 rent cap.

Officially called the "Act Limiting Housing Rents in

Berlin", Berlin's rent cap was passed in January 2020 to a loud chorus of both indignation and joy. Pegging

rents in the capital to those from June 2019, the cap prohibited rents from exceeding what they had been at that time. Berlin's cap bestowed unique power on

tenants, making it possible to alter existing contracts and landlord. Additionally, if a rental apartment

changed hands, landlords could not charge more than the previous renter was paying. Finally, if rent

exceeded the cap's threshold, a tenant could petition to have it lowered. (These conditions did not apply to

Syndikat, which held a commercial lease.) In essence the cap was intended to give Berlin's strained property

market five years' time "to relax", as Berlin's senator for building Sebastian Scheel said, after which it

would lapse, in 2025.

While rent caps are not new (other cities including San Francisco, Stockholm, New York, Paris and

Copenhagen have introduced them over the years with varying results), Berlin's cap was unique in the

power it gave tenants, who, in Berlin, compose 85% of all residents.

To some, a cap like this was the sensible and ethical

thing to do. The rent cap had the potential to "mount a serious challenge to the current speculative model

of housing that benefits both huge global financial actors and smaller landlords," Siobhan Donachie, a

Berlin resident and coordinator at Greater Manchester Housing Action in the UK, wrote in December 2020.

But the measure has also been described as

"radical", "extreme" and "entering new legal territory" by sector analysts and international media. "No city

hates its landlords like Berlin does", a Bloomberg story about the rent cap trumpeted in early 2020.

So how exactly did Berlin get here?

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The story of Berlin's rent cap begins with the

fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. After World War II, the German capital was divided into two, with one

half under Soviet rule, and the other occupied by American, British and French forces. Eventually

becoming East and West Berlin, these zones remained

separated by the Berlin Wall for

28 years. By the time the Wall fell, the two halves of the city were

very different to one another. The West Berlin that emerged from

the division has been described as a "bizarre and contradictory

showcase for western democracy. The most important freedom for

many of its citizens was the right to stay out all night long". East

Berlin, in contrast, was rundown and

restrictive. As the Wall fell, many

abandoned their state-supplied

apartments to move west.

After almost a million East

Germans left their half of the country

between 1989 and 1990, establishing

who owned the once-nationalised

buildings in what had been

East Berlin took time. During the

resulting power vacuum, the

number of vacant properties rose. Researchers say

that by 1990, the city was already home to around 120 squats, mostly

alternative communities that occupied the empty eastern Berlin

buildings. Many of these were converted into communes, artists'

studios, music venues, unlicensed bars and clubs. They left "deep

marks both on the biographies of countless squatters and on the

development of affected urban neighbourhoods," Andrej Holm, a

researcher who has chronicled this period, wrote in a 2016 paper. This

lasted well into the 1990s.

It is unclear how many squats

remain today. Over the years, many transitioned to legally

sanctioned arrangements with rental contracts in place. However,

a handful of the most outspoken and colourful squats persist as

arbiters of the anti-gentrification movement. In many ways, the

punk philosophy upon which many of these alternative inner-

city communities were founded

has leaked into local attitudes

that were at the heart of popular support for the city's rent cap.

Though not explicitly linked to the rent cap, the demise of Syndikat –

founded before the Wall fell by residents of one of the poorest,

least desirable parts of the city, and a cornerstone of Berlin's

anarchic scene – was heavy with the symbolism of the city's

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Back at the pre-rent cap turn-

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Berlin's city government was

almost bankrupt. In response, the city put what would amount

to around 200,000 apartments on the market between 1997 and

2004. This sell-off of municipal housing stock saw the first large

international investors arrive on the scene. Despite Berlin's location

in central Europe, prices remained static for nearly a decade – in

whole apartment blocks for around a

million euros.

But the German capital's consistent

presence at the top of "coolest cities in

the world" lists, and the fact that inner

city rents were low compared to other

European cities continued to add to

Berlin's popularity and population. It

was only a matter of time before

more big investors and pension and

equity funds started investing in

Berlin. In neglected central city

neighbourhoods, this trend caused

property prices to rise steeply (in

Neukölln, prices increased from an average of €862 per square

metre in 2009, to €3,568 in 2019).

Rents rose accordingly. For

example, in Schillerkiez – the

Neukölln neighbourhood where

Syndikat was located and where

the riot took place – rents rocketed

89%, on average, between 2009

and 2015 according to local

newspaper surveys.

FIFTY-FIVE

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

STORY BY CATHRIN SCHAEER

The city of Berlin, led by its left-leaning government, embarked on a bold experiment to control sky-rocketing rents across the city. It didn't last long, bringing protestors back onto the streets once more. What went wrong?



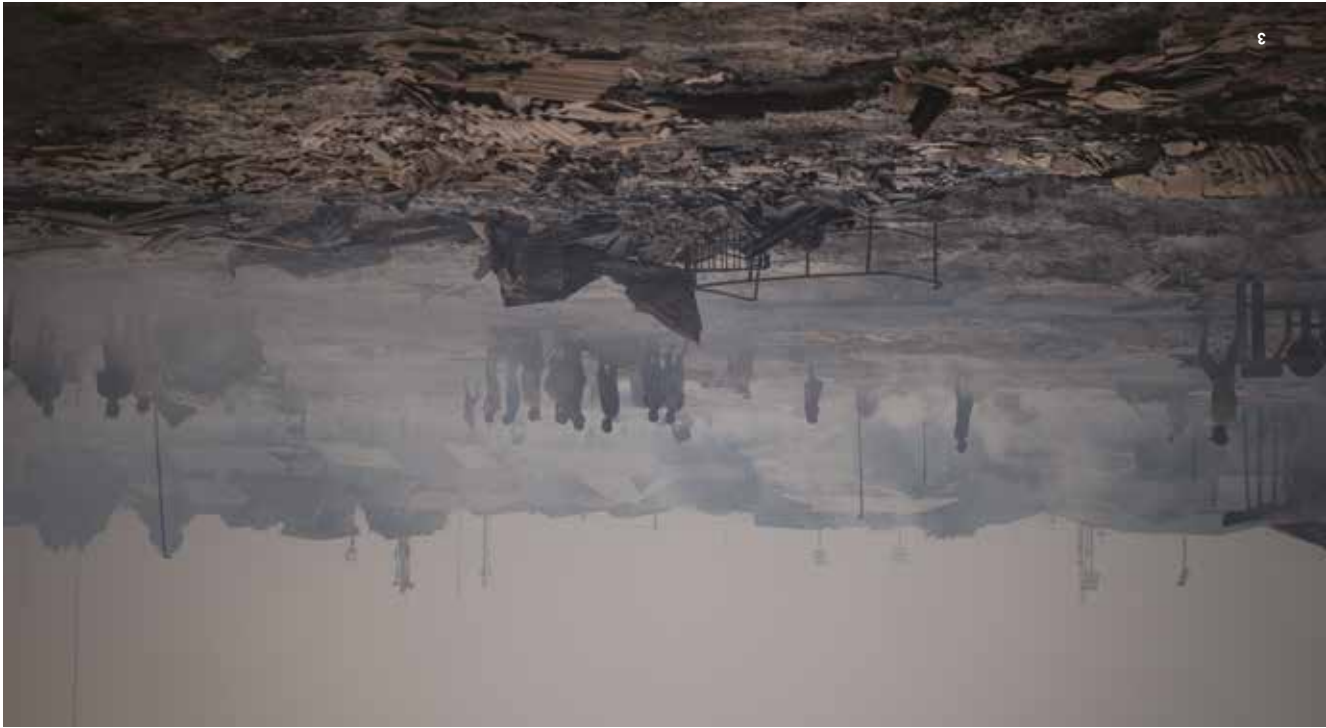
The election is a chaos machine fashioned precisely to generate ungovernability. Though the machines are imperfect, they serve the street traders on either side of the barricades well.

*

Brecht wrote, "Of those cities will remain what passed through them, the wind!". This virus has brought the fear and fascination of empty cities. Not empty with the ruin of war or earthquake. Not ancient cities whose streets have been unpeopled for millennia. Not, actually, cities without people. Rather cities in which all the people are inside.

Yet if I step out onto Kaduna Street, still there is that impossible crush at Fruit Garden Market, the sweet sink of ripening and rotting. It was a tightly packed pitch of tin and wooden stalls till the current governor brought in his bulldozers, raising above the mangled tin and splintered timber a splendid cast-concrete structure with airless steel-shuttered boxes that still stand empty. The current crop of stalls was assembled by traders rebuilding after a fire. When levelled again, all the people and all their fruit spilled out onto the streets, finding a thousand crooks and cracks to set up shop. The market sprawls along the railway line; walking along it is like dialling through radio channels without ever tuning into a station.

Every night the pall from the creeks spreads over the city and settles. And every morning people light kerosene stoves with product gleaned from the creeks, start up diesel trucks whose patched-together tanks are filled with creek product. That soot settles on everything, even the light.



One arm stretches forward to the phone, the other stretches behind him as he gestures to the scene, his chest wide open: "You can see. You can see." The remains centre frame as he pivots, at that moment, a zinc roof and the makeshift timber truss beneath it collapse into ash and embers.

The flames leap from shed to shed. Figures dart toward the flames with buckets. Others dash out of the flames clutching whatever they managed to grab. Someone is sobbing about his burnt documents. People are choking. Some are wearing masks.

The next morning the gridlines of the sheds can be made out through the low smoke. Some circular saw machines, rusted by the flames, stand stark in soft piles of white ash. By afternoon, every extant sheet of zinc, all copper cabling, any timber, each glass bottle that escaped the flame, has been salvaged, stacked, coiled, packed and moved to market. By evening the site has been picked clean.

Less than a week later, furniture makers have set up shop on the fringes of the charred zone, placing pieces for sale along the road. The casket-makers are busy, working beneath a sign untouched by the fire. It reads: "Coffin Zone: love one another".

After months of headlines about the pandemic, accompanied by images of people gasping for breath as they are intubated in the ICUs of rich countries, the live feeds change—overnight. Now, an image of a young man wearing a surgical mask with "I can't breathe" written on it. Shirtless, fist raised, illuminated by flame, beneath a shower of fireworks, he is surrounded by a group of other young women and men. Someone has unfurled a banner. Several have their arms outstretched, phones pointed back at themselves as the screens bathe their faces in a pale light.



Many traders with carts and barrows have loud-hailers. Those who don't, have bells and bellows for lungs.

*

Favour Akwama is silhouetted against the orange tangle of the blaze behind him. He holds out his phone and points the camera at himself. He seems to be walking through the flames; our guide and commentator through the inferno.

"This is Marine Base Plank Shed. It is getting burned down. The fire service could not come to rescue. What a kind of country we are, Nigeria? Nigeria, we are in big trouble. We are in big trouble. It's the mess. We are tired. Running from here to hellfire," he reports. It's the fifth major fire in the same number of years.

► The church on the corner of the block is full, though, and full-throated.

On Aba Road: pyres of tires; tin barrels full of poured cement, painted blue, yellow and green; sandbags stacked around temporary machine gun encampments; armoured personnel carriers narrowing the drag from four lanes to two for a few hundred yards either side of the election commission office. Traffic lights continue their procession of phased irrelevance as soldiers wave the odd vehicle by.

Men in parlours, women on verandas lean into their radios as the lists of those taken in midnight raids are read out: the local government chairman's wife and their young son; the former special advisor to the governor on these or those affairs; the dog of this or that former warlord shot dead when his master's house was raided.

It is Saturday, 9 March 2019: state election day in Port Harcourt. An exercise of national mobilisation that will be attended by a lockdown and curfew. Here, the get-out-and-vote is shut-up-and-stay-home.

Sunday, the day after: activity again along the streets. The traffic touls are out with their rubber hoses and broken chair legs in hand, herding the taxis into the verge, pushing a few crumpled notes into their

pockets, shouting destinations and the number of spaces left in each vehicle, cramming in the passengers. We drive past the route to Presidential Hotel and past a 25-foot cut-out of Ezenwo Nyesom Mike, smiling, striding. He was the governor yesterday. We presume he will be the governor tomorrow.

Monday, the day after the day after: election proceedings are suspended. No counting, no results. Police and army, aligned with the state government and federal government respectively, in pitched battles over occupation of the state Independent Electoral Commission office. This is a violent shadow fight, because

Opening Page: A burning barge in the Ibefo/Bundu Creek. It was set alight by a Joint Task Force army patrol. Such fires are common in the creeks surrounding the city

1, 'House Boats' docked at Nembe Waterside. The boats ferry people and goods to riverine communities, out into the Gulf of Guinea and to neighbouring states. Some sail as far as Cameroon

2, Half the balconies of 7 Station Road were dismantled for the monorail, even though no trains will ever run on these elevated tracks. The building used to belong to the International Bank for West Africa limited and is now home to state government workers and tenants including the Rivers State branches of the National Youth Council and Farmers Association of Nigeria

3, Plank Shed Market in Marine Base waterfront the morning after a fire razed the timber yards and workshops. There are major market fires almost every year in Port Harcourt

4, A polling station set up at a special needs school and women's education centre on Creek Road. Each ballot is held up for verification by observers during the local count

5, The roadside sign at Coffin Zone in Plank Shed Market escaped the flames. The coffin makers were some of the first back to work after the fire destroyed the neighbourhood in Marine Base waterfront

All photos by Isaac Harry, except 4, supplied by the author. Copyright: CMP, 2021



Now, a monorail runs between what might have been Tonye Cole's window and his tank farm. The deeply piled concrete columns have already started to culture mould. Nothing runs on the track, which finishes, abruptly, not far from where it starts. The author of that \$400 million project, former state governor Amaechi, is now the federal minister of transport. It is he who chose Tonye Cole to run against Ezenwo Nyesom Mike. After the ruling which barred Amaechi's protégé from finally challenging Mike, the contest spilled onto the streets.

What? settlement was demolished in July 2012. I Rotimi Amaechi, governor at the time, the Abonnema Thanks to a private-public partnership brokered by built on land that was once home to 20,000 people. could have looked out over Sahara Oil's new facility, have won. From his office in Government House, he Court ruling not forced him from the ticket, he might



PORT HAR- BOR.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ISAAC HARRY

STORY BY MICHAEL UWEMEDIMO

An air of dark carnival hangs over the city. Streets mostly empty but for a sense of suppressed agitation. At Creek Road Market barefoot kids play football by the bus stop on an otherwise empty strip. No street-sellers with barrows of carrots or sugar cane; no plantain or suya roasting on corners; no clack-clack of the travelling tailor's oversized cast-iron scissors. Occasionally a battered police truck rolls by, the officers heaped in the back with red cloth juju charms tied to the sights of their rifles and dusty surgical masks over their mouths; their trousers shiny with starch, their berets stained with sweat-salt. At Six Field polling station, soldiers, police, election officials and nervous National Youth Corp volunteers outnumber voters who stand in small, anxious knots on the sandy field. ▶



Left to me, I'd grade temple utility by the ratio of transgender devotees to Mercedes owners. But this is not how things work in this city, and probably not even how they should

The enterprising old lady who built this temple dug underground to tap into a public water pipe, and ran wires along the rainpipe to a nearby junction box, from which she siphons off electricity. The temple blocks the pavement, which makes movement along the road difficult. It is also the site of frequent mass prayers, which bring traffic to a halt. Despite multiple orders legally requiring that she bring her lucrative enterprise down, she won't budge. She knows something that her neighbours don't understand yet: the law may be against her, but the city—and the country—are on her side.

The enterprise of the illegal temple is, itself, more canny than it seems. There is the everyday business of collecting money from credulous Hindus, of course, which is the simplest way to explain the phenomenon.

Then there is the long game.

However illegal, any established temple has the power to bargain with the city for an allotment of public land, to which legitimate location, once secured, it can simply move.

In a country where the constitution and courts have decided that gods can legally own property, there is a booming market for humans keen to manage those divine estates.

*

I want to say that I hate every new temple that has sprung up along the lake. Truthfully, however, I cannot. My principles collapsed at the steps of the newest shrine along the lake: the Om Sri Angala Parameshwari Temple, built for the deity who protects transgender people in South India.

This tiny shack came up in the last few months alongside the municipality's dry waste management unit—a garbage collection and sorting centre—and attracts a distinctly poorer crowd of worshippers, not all of who are transgender. The structure is really just a metal shed with sheets thrown over it, and the temple has a nice, warm vibe. It's simple and inviting, and I always receive welcoming smiles when passing by.

I do not want this temple to be brought down. I want it to stay. In this city, a majority of transgender people work on the streets, with nowhere to rest and refresh. The Angala Parameshwari Temple functions as a sanctuary. It makes my neighbourhood a better place. I wish I could say I have arrived at a formula for establishing what my neighbourhood needs, or more precisely, what I think it needs.

While I don't think anyone would object to the city building more toilets, when it comes to demolishing temples, I'm adrift. Left to me, I'd grade temple utility by the ratio of transgender devotees to Mercedes owners. But this is not how things work in this city, and probably not even how they should.

The future will no doubt be filled with more temples. Many, many, more. What I find disquieting about this looming urban horizon is that it may be exactly what we deserve.





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1. A vegetable vendor sets up next to the Murphy Town name board. Place names are being replaced with new ones. Murphy Town is now alternately known as Hoyasala Nagar
2. A man holds a Ganesha statue during a festival on Ulsoor Lake. Photo by Nicolas Mirguet
3. Rowers from the Madras Engineers Group (MEG) go through their paces at the Trishna Rowing Club, housed on Ulsoor Lake
4. A Woman walks through a typical conservancy lane in Ulsoor. Sometimes these lanes are used as parking spaces
5. Police keep watch during a religious festival on the Lake. Photo by Nicolas Mirguet
6. Laundry day at Dhobi Ghat, on the downstream side of Ulsoor Lake
7. An ancient Hindu temple towers above the area
8. Students walk through the area on graduation day

A decade later, the expanding movement helped put the BJP back in power, this time, with Modi in charge. He continued to fan the flames of the dispute. In November 2019, only a few months after Modi won a second term, the highest court in the land—consisting entirely of judges hand-picked by him—ordered that a temple be built where the destroyed mosque once stood (the case had been working its way up the courts for three decades in my blameless youth, we lived with fewer toilets, and fewer temples too. The older temples along the lakeshore are dignified places of quiet beauty. The Sri Lake View Mahaganapathy Temple, however, is not. Its fortunes are tied to an annual ritual that I loved as a child: dunking a clay idol of Ganesha—the beloved boy-god with an elephant’s head—into the lake. Forty years ago, in a time when Hinduism wasn’t as much a political statement and even the rich had less, this

The general idea, however, caught fire. In a country in which most of us feel a profound loss of control over our lives, building a temple became something of a self-help mantra; a way to take charge; a DIY kit for reversing the course of fifteen hundred years of Hindu humiliation at the hands of Muslims and Christians. Cue the transformation of Ulsoor Lake. In the seven years since Modi came to power, fifteen new temples have sprouted up around the lake. Given that the lakeshore was already home to a few older temples, a person has to wonder why we needed more. To put this development in perspective, along the lake’s four-kilometre circumference, we continue to live with just two public toilets, each of which reserve only one stall for women.

In a country in which most of us feel a profound loss of control over our lives, building a temple became a self-help mantra; a way to take charge

Today, this ritual occurs in a cordoned-off pool amid a carnival of lights, music, dancing and alcohol. Hundreds of thousands of people descend on the spot, some transporting by truck idols made of every substance imaginable, some nearly ten-metres tall. Traffic is hellish, and the lake takes months to recover. That said, there is no doubt that the whole thing is enormous fun. It is also enormously lucrative. The Sri Lake View Temple has cashed in on the feeling, expanding sideways and upwards and adding layers of gilt with every passing year. Less than twenty metres from the Sri Lake View behemoth is a smaller, more curious temple. Springing up over the last few years, one brick at a time, it is wrapped around an old raintree and houses four idols, locked behind steel bars, and a collection box for donations.

► These days, in this neighbourhood, and in this country, it is almost always a temple.

I live in the cul of a cul-de-sac off Ulsoor Lake in central Bangalore. I grew up on one side of the lake, in a house my parents still live in, and migrated all of two kilometres down the circumference to my present location.

Running along its edge in the mornings and pointing out its beauty to visitors when driving past, I know every contour of this lake, and have a proprietorial relationship with it. It's completely unjustified, of course, as I do not, like my parents, spend most weekends voluntarily lifting garbage from its shores. That said, I have my opinions.

That someone thought the best way to improve the experience of the hundreds of people who visit the park every day, many of them Muslim, was to build a completely unnecessary Hindu temple, well, it was like the municipality showing us - and specifically me - the middle finger.

Born a Hindu myself, the right-wing Hindu extremism that has increasingly cast a shadow over my adult life was part of what made it difficult to acknowledge affection for the faith. As much as I resented that, I resented even more the new temples being built at my doorstep.

I've also long begrudged the management of public space in Bangalore. Even before the advent of temple-mania, the municipality has been, through its park management, giving the middle finger with some regularity to many of Bangalore's citizens, though generally not me or my middle-class ilk.

Belonging to the municipal corporation that administers Bangalore city, parks are, in principle, the property of every city resident. But in reality, park policies seem to be geared towards ensuring that only certain people enjoy them (such enjoyment apparently not including convenient ablutions).

Let me explain. All gated parks keep to a strict schedule. They open at 5 in the morning, shut at 10, and open up again between 5 and 8 in the evening - or exactly the times at which office-goers wish to walk and run.

These hours achieve two key things: by day they keep out the working class, preventing them from relaxing or sleeping somewhere nicer than the open road; by night, they keep out two crucial middle-class obsessions, "sex and drugs" (until recently, Ulsoor Lake, like other city parks, was a popular gay cruising ground after sunset).

In doing this, the city has, for decades, literally closed its gates on the people - the poor and other marginal citizens - who most need public space. While this meanness was bad enough, Bangalore has now found a new way of signalling who its public space is really for: enter the new Hindu temples.

*

While the temple in the park was still under construction, I did what enraged middle-class people do, and called the corporator of my ward. I live in Ward 90, which covers the neighbourhood of Ulsoor. The listing in the directory identified my corporator as Mrs. Mamatha Saravana. The person who turned up to meet me was a man driving a Mercedes. His name was Saravana. I later discovered he lived opposite my parents' house, on the top floor of a block of flats to which he had illegally added two floors.

Corporators are elected every five years in the least glamorous of all elections in the country. They are among the lowest-ranked elected officials, lower than representatives of city constituencies, cities, state districts, states, and, of course, the nation. Choosing a new Prime Minister in 2014, the country saw 67% of its eligible voters turn out for the national election - the highest number ever. By contrast, in 2015, the last time ward elections were held in Bangalore, the turnout was 44%. I voted, but only because my parents harangued me. The event would have otherwise skipped my attention, as it does most middle-class, tax-paying people in my neighbourhood.

It turned out that Saravana was, indeed, a legitimately elected corporator - but from three election cycles ago. In the last election, Ward 90 had been selected as reserved for female candidates, so he fielded his wife. In the election before the last one, our ward had been reserved for candidates belonging to "scheduled castes" or "scheduled tribes" - a nod to the centuries-old system of caste oppression that blights the nation - and Saravana, without missing a beat, fielded his driver.

This was, effectively, Saravana's third term, and his impatience at being summoned by a person who didn't matter to him in any way, showed. I asked him why a temple was being built in our park. I demanded he turn it into a toilet. In the five annoyed minutes he spent with me, he dismissed my concerns, authoritatively informed me of an "ancient shrine" that existed at the spot thousands of years ago, and told me not to get so upset. Ever the opportunist, Saravana was not going to go against what he clearly understood as popular Hindu sentiment just because one snooty resident wanted him to.

I've looked for signs of that ancient shrine. All I can see in the temple - now built, and always locked - are two small pillars that look exactly like mile markers, smeared with holy ash of recent vintage. Aside from a few posters and a steel almirah, the rest of the temple is filled with junk - empty water bottles, cardboard boxes and assorted debris. It must take an extraordinary amount of restraint on the part of visitors not to surreptitiously put the space to better use - including as a toilet.

Not long after the temple was completed, the pandemic fell upon us all, and the city shut down. The parks shut down too. Some clever individuals tore a hole in the fence, and whenever I walked past last year, I saw people enjoying the thrill of breaking lockdown protocol with a romp in this beautiful, deserted, open space, at any and all times of day - and it made me happy.

I did what enraged middle-class people do, and called the corporator of my ward. The person who turned up to meet me was a man driving a Mercedes. I later discovered he lived opposite my parents' house, on the top floor of a block of flats to which he had illegally added two floors

Once the restrictions eased, the parks opened up again. At first, in a wonderfully misguided attempt to control the spread of the coronavirus, they were open to everyone but children. Now, they're open to "everyone", although still only during the permitted hours.

And so, in the evenings, park-goers of all classes are back with a vengeance: families sharing food, young couples shyly holding hands, children screaming.

Civilisation.

Naturally, the park still has no toilet.

*

The mother of all temples in India, the temple that catapulted our current rulers to power, in fact, does not physically exist. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's seven-year grip on the Indian state was made possible thanks to the mere idea of a temple in the town of Ayodhya.

The idea of that temple was largely created by Modi's predecessors in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the 1990s, extremist Hindu organisations turned a mildly contentious but largely forgotten dispute - whether a Mughal emperor had built a mosque on the site of a Hindu temple in the early 16th century - into a contemporary political movement. By tearing down the Babri Mosque, and killing 2,000 people in the process - many of them Muslim - this movement gave the BJP power over the whole country for the first time in the late 1990s, and secured its reign until 2004.

MY HOME IS YOUR TEMPLE



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PEEVEE & USHA RAO
1,3,4,6
7,8

STORY BY ACHAL PRABHALA

Four years ago, when constnction began on a small structure in the park opposite our home in Bangalore, my family and I were excited. Finally, we thought, a toilet. But we were wrong. It was a temple.▶

I returned his calls when I could, but not nearly as much as I should have. Sometimes, life got in the way.

At others, I worried he had become too dependent on speaking with me, and that the boundary between journalist and interviewee had been breached.

Despite my occasional silences, Elie showered me with appreciation for listening to—and reporting—his story. The details of his life first trickled, then poured. He spoke of his youth's carelessness, and his time as an accountant at the Ministry of Telecommunications. He told me about how he struggled during the civil war, when both of his legs had been broken—a trauma resurfaced by the blast. "It was like I went 40 years back in a single moment," he said.

Elie shared stories about his late wife, his three daughters, and Claudette, who visited him daily, offering a warm meal and company. His daughters were busy with their own lives, he said, so besides Claudette, his friends had become his whole world. Before the blast, Elie frequently had coffee with Ahmad, the deceased Syrian woman's husband. He spoke fondly of the man with whom he had shared the weight of desperation wrought by the economic crisis. "We'd listen to Aleppan ballads together, singing and speaking of brighter days ahead."

Depriving himself of simple luxuries such as bananas, and only able to afford subsidized foods like bread, Elie nonetheless maintained faith that the situation would improve, and that his remaining years on earth would be filled with the joys of many friendships. When he felt isolated, he slept at friends' homes—houses now eviscerated.

Elie himself had been rendered homeless by the explosion. Forced to move from house to house, he eventually was put up in a hotel by good Samaritans who had reached out after I shared his story (another had donated a fridge to him, but having nowhere to put it, he had called me, at once grateful and upset). Cooped up in his new but cramped and bare-walled residence that he said resembled a hospital room or a prison cell, he yearned to return to his neighbourhood, his palace, his kingdom.

And so Elie spent most days lingering amid the wreckage of his former home. Often, he would visit a local political party's offices. He would pull up a chair and speak to the young men who hung out there. It

"Why do people tell me to pull myself together?" he asked me. "Depression isn't gymnastics. All I want is to survive. Is that too much to ask?"

didn't matter whom he talked to, really. He just wanted to be around someone, anyone.

The pandemic compounded his desperation as he struggled to come to terms with the notion of social distancing. "I'm lonely," he kept telling me. "Will you keep me company?"

As the months went by, Elie shared less about the details of his past and more about how he was feeling in the present: fearful, alone, sad, abandoned, angry. He couldn't talk to people about these feelings, he said, because when he did, he was told to "pull himself together."

"Why do people tell me to pull myself together?" he asked me. "Depression isn't gymnastics. All I want is to survive. Is that too much to ask?"

Like many in Lebanon, Elie suffered in silence. The pandemic and the blast had exacerbated a national mental health crisis—supplies of antidepressants and anti-anxiety medication had dwindled, and just one in ten Lebanese had access to the care they so desperately needed.

I visited Elie when I could, bringing unworn items from my father's closet. He teared up when I handed him the clothes. "Everything I'm wearing now is borrowed, even these shoes," he told me. Were it

not for the pandemic, I would have hugged or held the hand of this man who refused my money with unshakable pride.

But really, it was he who checked up on me. More than even my closest friends, it was this man who reached out at a time when I felt increasingly useless, unmooored and isolated.

"I wish you a morning filled with flowers," he would say, noting that my name in Arabic means flower. And so my days, which were otherwise filled with reporting on Beirut blast survivors, began with roses, jasmines, carnations, narcissi, lilies and magnolias.

✱

Elie became an unlikely friend. He continued to message me daily, even after I had left in October for a work trip in New York. Via messages and phone calls, I eventually started to open up to him, too, about my own worries—concerns over my parents' health, and whether I should relocate to New York or move back to Lebanon and be with them as they aged.

"Move back here," he said, excitedly. "What do you want with America, when you can stay here? This country needs you, your family needs you. And you can visit me and we can have coffee and *knafeh* together." He proceeded to hum the lyrics of a Fairouz song: "Visit me... once a year. God forbid, don't forget me all at once."

In late December, Elie sent me a lengthy voice note. Running through a long list of flowers, his voice shook. I could hear that he was struggling to speak. He had fallen ill with corona, he said, but was starting to feel better, was regaining his strength. Even then, he was optimistic. "I put my faith in God, the best medicine," he said. "When will you be back in Lebanon, so you can come visit me?" he asked.

Concerned but hopeful that he would recover, I wished him a happy new year and prayed that 2021 would be a better one. That he could be close to his now-displaced neighbours, whom he so loved, once again. That his palace would be rebuilt and his glory days restored.

I wished the same for Lebanon.

✱

Returning to Lebanon from New York on a mid-January evening, I had planned to call Elie the following day to tell him that I would soon pay him a visit.

Early the next morning, I awoke in a room at the same damaged hotel where I'd quarantined when I'd arrived to Lebanon back in August. Startled and jettagged—my thoughts still in Brooklyn but my body in Beirut—I searched, bleary-eyed, for my phone, which, when I found it, glared with a message from a friend of Elie's.

Hospitalized after his COVID-19 symptoms had worsened, Elie had died of a stroke just four hours earlier. Elie, who craved company and was burdened by loneliness, died alone, in self-isolation. Not in a palace, or surrounded by loved ones. Not even in his cherished city, but in a hospital bed in a town unknown to him, as hospital beds in Beirut had filled up.

✱

In his book, *Beirut 2020, Diary of the Collapse*, Lebanese author Charif Majdalani writes of the country's "interminable mourning, physical decline, and loss of dignity". Elie experienced all three in such a short time period and at such high intensity. This thought often keeps me up at night. But when it does, I try to remind myself that I did bring Elie some comfort in his final days, and that I am fulfilling a promise I made to him. Against the guilt that I could and should have done more, I listen to a message he sent me in August, not long after we first met.

"Thank you for all you have done for me," he says in the message. "Please tell my story so that people know what I went through, so that they will remember me."

God forbid you are forgotten, Elie Halabi.

► I arrived in Beirut from London on August 7, just three days after one of the world's largest non-nuclear explosions battered the Lebanese capital. Despite port officials' repeated warnings to the government, a stash of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate had sat unsecured for six years. The blast took place in a city already reeling from Covid-19. A spike in cases had led to restrictions on businesses that compounded an existing economic crisis rooted in government corruption. Over half the population was living in poverty.

The pandemic also had thrown my life off course, albeit in far less seismic ways. I was in the midst of relocating to New York for work when the US had halted immigration. Having already left my London apartment, I decided to temporarily move back in with my parents in South Lebanon. My mother and father, like many Lebanese, had felt the blast at the city's port as a cruel culmination of the state's neglect. With their country seemingly crumbling around them, I thought I could offer them support as I waited out my situation.

Upon arrival to Beirut, I quarantined at a hotel as per Covid-19 restrictions. Pushing through the plastic sheets that replaced the hotel's blown out foyer, I took to the streets in desperate search of something, anything, to do.

Scanning relief efforts, I had joined a dozen teenagers, some of whom were 20 years my junior, to sweep debris at a primary school not far from the blast site. Filled with optimism and energy, the volunteers flirted and cracked jokes as they packed food boxes for the homeless and painstakingly picked shards of glass from soil and cork boards. But all I saw was the school's eerily empty halls. A large Lebanese flag partially draped over a chalkboard revealed scrawlings from an arrested French lesson; a speaker lay where it had fallen from the walls and split into two; a clock was stuck at 6:07 p.m.—the precise moment of the explosion. Silently sweeping the endless debris, my own sense of uselessness enveloped me; how could anything I do possibly make a difference in a calamity so tremendous?

The following day, I ditched the teens, deciding instead to walk neighbourhoods pulverized by the explosion. Class crunching underfoot with each step, I passed aid workers roaming rubble-filled streets strewn with bedsheet, stuffed toys, novels and once-framed family photos; fragments of lives lost or forever changed.

I was searching for people to interview when I stumbled upon Elie. I was unsure about whom to approach, sensitive to intruding on a grieving and aggrieved community. The explosion had left some 200 people dead, thousands injured and hundreds of thousands homeless, and here I was, a journalist in pursuit of quotes. But, sitting alone, Elie seemed also to be searching for someone to speak to.

Dressed in a loose, olive green shirt exposing a white undervest, and creased oversized trousers, the somewhat grizzled man fingered wooden rosary beads. He had a soft voice and a gentle demeanour, and greeted passers-by by their first names, asking how they were faring in the blast's aftermath.

Introducing myself as a reporter, I reluctantly asked for permission to photograph him. To my surprise, the 62-year-old man's eyes lit up, grateful for the attention.

"Should I take my mask off, and should I put this cap on? Do I look older with or without it?" he asked. With frail fingers, he styled his rakish moustache and flattened some stray hairs before posing. But even as he chuckled shyly, asking how his hair looked, his eyes crept towards the rubble, darting around, before resting on a damaged coffee table. Covered with a tatty floral tablecloth, the broken piece of furniture was, I realized, a kind of shrine, bearing a plant, framed pictures of Jesus and Mary, a photo of an elderly woman decorated with pearl and gold rosary beads—and a death notice.

Within moments, the man's smile turned to tears. "Can I tell you my story, my daughter?" Elie asked. "This was my home, my kingdom," he began, gesturing to the skeleton of the three-story building behind him. He then recounted for me the events of August 4.

Moments after the earth shook and the skies darkened, he had heard his sister-in-law, the woman in the photo, Claudette—who lived on the second floor of the building—crying out for help. Her screams intertwined with those of his Syrian refugee neighbours: two daughters and their mother.

*He would pull up
a chair and speak
to the young men
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there. It didn't
matter whom he
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He just wanted
to be around
someone, anyone*

"I couldn't tell who was who," Elie remembered. "All I knew was that the women needed me to pull them out of the rubble; that I would be their saviour." But Elie was himself immobile, paralyzed by the stones that once made up the walls of his kingdom. Within minutes, he was pulled from the wreckage and taken straight to the hospital by ambulance.

Since the blast, Elie had been regularly visited by nightmarers replaying in slow motion what happened that night. Often, he would wake up at ungodly hours in a sweaty panic, realizing that the four women had perished. He blamed himself for their deaths, convinced that he alone could have saved them.

"I feel strange, knowing that I survived and that I'm even talking to you now," he told me.

*

Over the weeks and then months after we first met, from early August through late December, Elie called or messaged me daily. Sometimes he recited prayers and poetry. Mostly he wanted nothing more than to be heard, to have someone check up on him.

FEI

ZAHRA HANKIR ON HER FRIENDSHIP WITH A BEIRUT BLAST SURVIVOR

The edges of Lebanese identity papers, pinned by rubble, fluttered like butterfly wings in the wind. Beirut, that early-August afternoon, was unrecognizable—its buildings now shells comprising shattered windows, collapsed ceilings, broken pipes and mangled metal. Rays of the day's last sunlight bounced off mounds of glittering, shattered glass and onto the weary faces of the city's survivors. Among those faces was that of a small, silver-haired man. Sitting on a flimsy plastic chair, his sunken eyes looked out over a mask, from behind which I sensed he was smiling at me. A trickle of blood escaped a dressing on his arm that kept slipping as he waved clumsily. "Welcome, come join me! But keep a distance—I don't want you to get corona!" said the man I would come to know as Elie. ▶



JOURNALISM

32. BEIRUT

JOURNALIST ZAHRA HANKIR FORTUITOUSLY MET WITH ELIE HALABI DAYS AFTER THE DEVASTATING BLAST IN AUGUST 2020. THIS IS A STORY OF THEIR FRIENDSHIP

38. BANGALORE

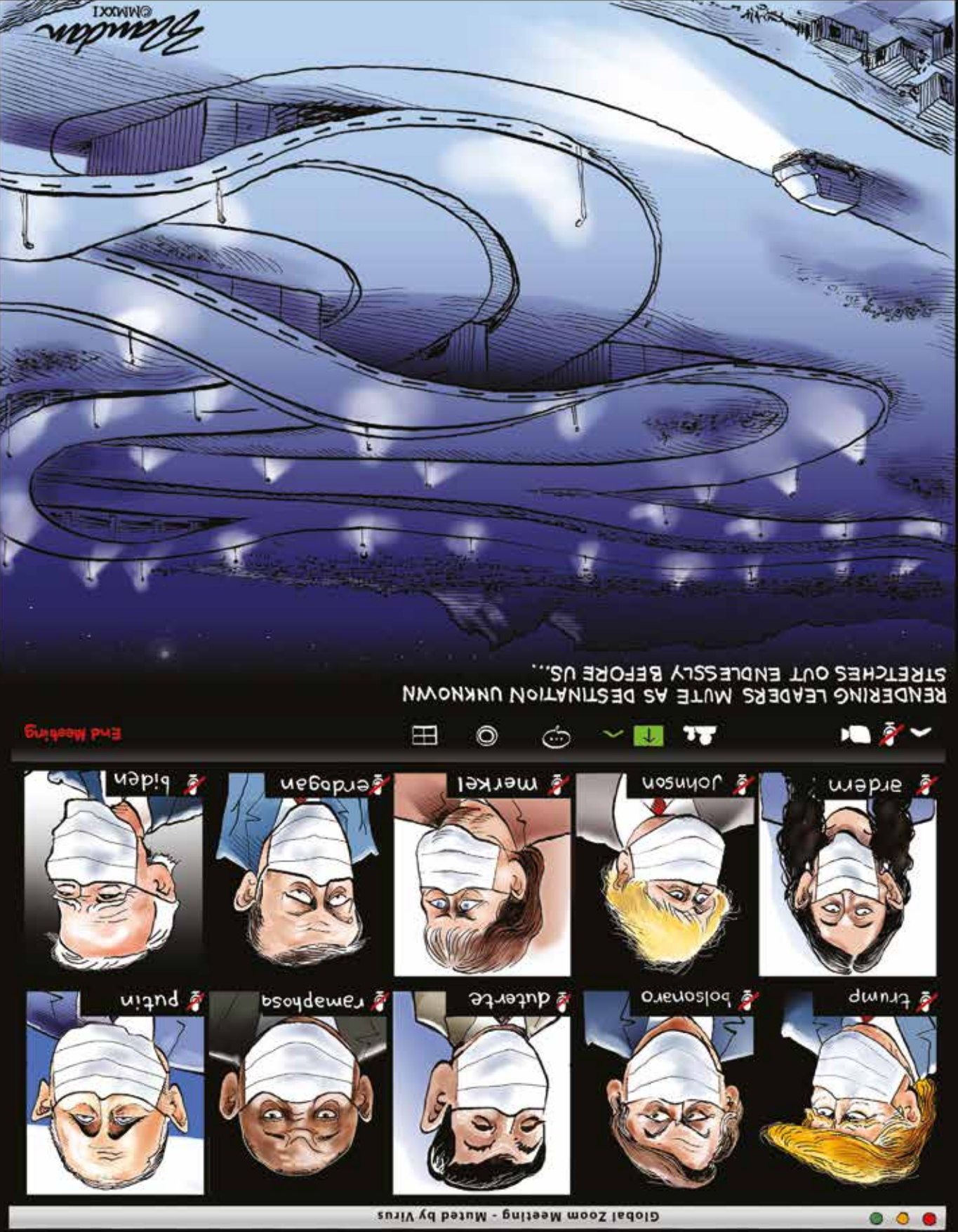
ACTIVIST AND AUTHOR ACHAL PRABHALA GREW UP AND STILL LIVES NEXT TO BANGALORE'S ULSOOR LAKE. LATELY, HE HAS NOTICED A DISTURBING TREND - NEW TEMPLES ARE MUSHROOMING EVERYWHERE

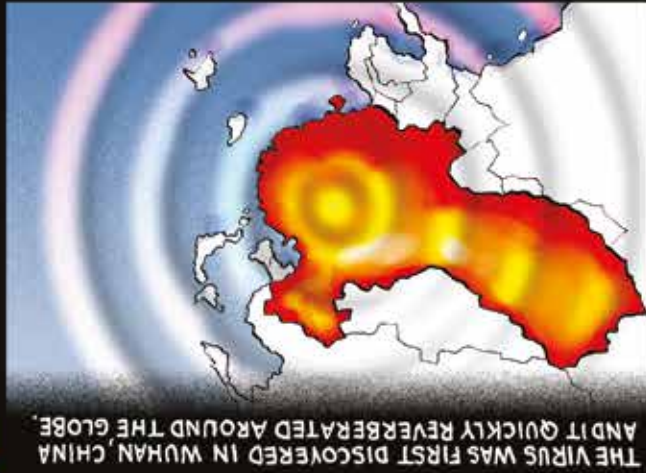
46. PORT HARCOURT

FILMAKER AND ACTIVIST MICHAEL UMEMEDIMO ON LOCKDOWN AND POLITICAL INTRIGUE AS A WAY OF LIFE IN HIS CITY'S SMOG-FILLED NEIGHBOURHOODS

52. BERLIN

JOURNALIST CATHRIN SCHÄER ON HOW A BOLD EXPERIMENT IN RENT CONTROL WAS POPULAR WITH BERLIN'S RESIDENTS BUT LOATHED BY INVESTORS AND PROPERTY DEVELOPERS





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non-belonging. Aphorisms and tropes such as “we the people”, “my land”, “my nation” seem to always pass me by. I lack the sense of national identity.

Due to the pandemic, our family’s movements have been limited primarily to our Brooklyn home in the last year. Our house has a small backyard that I now know intimately. I share it daily with an extended family of squirrels, orange cardinals, bumblebees, and many plants, which, with each passing day, I’ve gradually learnt to recognise and better understand. In my quest to know more about the plants, I recently downloaded an app on my smartphone. The app responds to each query by first proposing the scientific name of a scanned plant. After this, it sorts the plant based on three categories: “invasive”, “decorative”, or “edible”, and lists additional information. Most of the invasive species in our garden are surprisingly local. The edible ones consist mostly of what I have planted, except for the green beans and berries—which either were left by previous occupants, or perhaps brought into the garden by squirrels moving seeds around the block.

My knowledge of the soil is limited, but nowadays, I am longing for this type of earthly contact. I feel myself on the lookout for a different kind of knowledge and wisdom. One that is not satiated by academic discourse or scientific definitions. I am craving knowledge of the world through bodily experience. My initial instinct for planting was motivated by the desire to experiment with self-sufficiency during the pandemic. I wanted to cut our household from external dependency and extractive supply chains. Working in the garden with my two boys, in symbiosis with the insects, the worms, the birds and the squirrels, something much more beautiful and powerful than we could ever have imagined began to expose itself. The magical temporality of life in our Brooklyn backyard has emphasised to my family and me the extraordinary strength, reciprocity and vulnerable dependency between species. It also has made us, at last, feel like we are part of this place, like we belong.

Feeling situated is a new experience for us. With all this life blossoming around, I feel more connected to these moments and space than I ever felt to a nation or country.

In the past months, while working in the garden, I have had ongoing conversations with Amir Qudath, a farmer in Gaza, Palestine. Our conversations shifted

from discussing borders and violence to exchanging information about our families and favourite recipes. From the quarantine in Brooklyn, we discussed, via Zoom, his life in Gaza. His family has cultivated the land along Gaza’s southern borders for centuries, long before Israel’s establishment. Today, his farm is situated next to one of the most militarized borders of the country. Since Ariel Sharon’s withdrawal of about 9,000 Israeli citizens from Gaza in 2005, and the Hamas government’s rise, the Gaza Strip has remained under hermetic siege. Once a symbol of the hopes of Palestinian self-rule, its airport has been bombarded into rubble. Access to the shoreline and the Mediterranean Sea is restricted and highly surveilled by Israeli warships and drones. Each protest along the border is met by disproportionate use of military force. The informal tunnels that clandestinely connect Gaza to parts of Israel have been countered by the construction of an unrecedented underground border wall that, when complete, will run the

40km span of the Israel border to the Gaza Strip. A landscape of control that includes a network of walls, checkpoints, towers, drones and surveillance ships wraps around the Gaza Strip. Qudath’s farm has been assaulted time and again by the Israeli army. It has been bombarded from the air, bulldozed and razed by tanks. Yet he and his family have always managed to survive and to keep the land fertile. Their farming knowledge allows them to lead a self-sufficient life. Despite reported occasional chemical sprays of their crops by Israeli military planes, they cultivate the land and live off its harvest, their bodies in synergy with the soil.

During one of the military attacks, Amir said, he hid with his family for 21-days inside a sheltered room, watching the surrounding homes collapse on top of their neighbours. Death all around them, they survived on the watermelons they managed to pick from the farm, waiting for the shooting to end. What is happening in Gaza exposes the flaws of contemporary global constructs like

the international community and attendant bodies like the UN—systems that have failed to recognise and assert the universal right of people to live peacefully and prosper. Gaza stands bare as both victim of and evidence for the collective ethical and moral failure of Israeli society, the world and the notion of the nation-state. While Gaza is a particularly potent example, the universal failure it represents is evident elsewhere. I remember traveling from Europe with my family at the height of the Trump administration. On landing at JFK Airport, we were bombarded by endless images and news reports of detention centres and migrant children in cages. We were the privileged ones, with documents granting us relatively easy passage and access into most countries. It was overwhelming to be confronted by these images, to see them and make any sense of them. Why were my kids granted access while others were caged? This question still profoundly unsettles me.

The millions of Palestinians living in limbo, in camps and other enclaves, may offer us a glimpse into the grim future and conditions all those who will be displaced by climate change might expect to live under. As levels of displacement and dispossession continue to rise, we must rethink and reform our governance systems to address what is happening to people like Qudath and his family, to reject the callousness that results in images of kids in cages. But the nation-state—a selective space of inclusion or exclusion—stands in the way. It leaves too many people behind, blocking migrants at the border, imprisoning them in detention centres, treating entire families, including minors, inhumanely and subjecting growing numbers of people to live precarious lives. In her essay “We the People”, Judith Butler questions the notion of collective or uniform national identity inherent in the “we”. She asks us to rather explore what she calls the “politics of alliance” and the “ethics of cohabitation” in our struggle for social, political and economic justice.

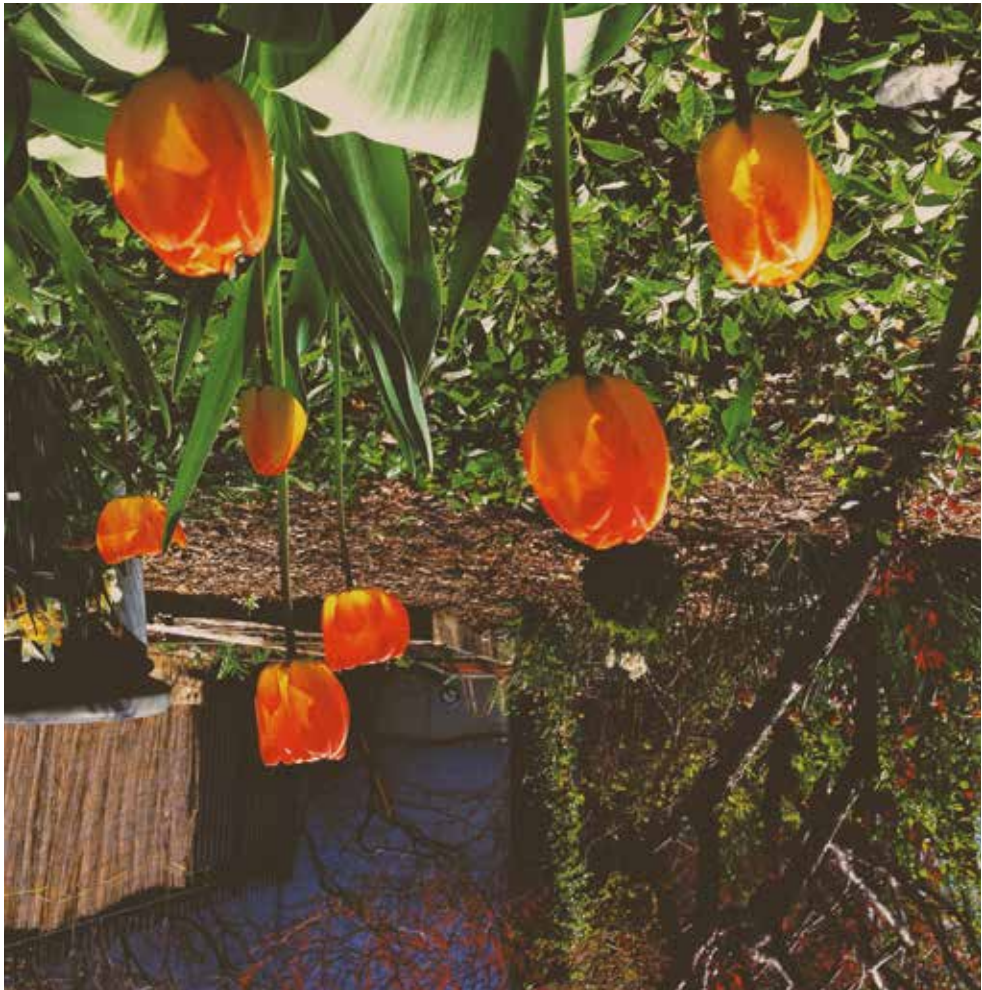
In an ideal world, the pandemic, and the pause it enforced upon us all, is the opportunity for a reset; not only to go back to the simple pleasures of growing a garden, but also to rethink the legacies of our designs, the stories that we tell, and the relationships that we cultivate. Imagine all that could grow in such a space.

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Malikit Shoshan

A backyard food garden became an oasis for a nomadic Brooklyn family



Migration for my family and me is a state of life. We migrate. We have always lived in different places at once. We struggle with the notion of belonging. I was born to immigrant parents in Israel, and my identity is a complex “collection of identities...an assembly...” as Rutgers Professor Jasbir Puar puts it. I am a mother of two kids, both born in Amsterdam, and a resident of Brooklyn, New York. Our household is trilingual, but our words are often braided into mixed sentences of English-Hebrew-Dutch. The order changes according to the speaker and the mood. The prevailing state of my identity is one of

counterparts suddenly became the go-to spaces to view, trade, and exchange ideas about art and culture. They also became spaces to share tactics and resources to help artists and arts organisations survive the pandemic. Resource lists circulated, online events cropped up. One year on, these shifts

continue.

A survey of the

world wide web beyond Cape Town shows some captivating ingenuity in this terrain. That said, to date, nothing truly evolutionary has emerged out of the city’s often surprisingly inventive art scene. Our digital realm still feels like an empty gallery, quietly awaiting its moment to shine.

The month of

February, typically the buzziest and busiest time in Cape Town, remained quiet this year. The big Art Fairs that usually kick off the year, making lots of money for galleries and artists, and all the accompanying networking activity were all postponed. The usual throngs of international tourists who flood the galleries didn’t even make it to our borders. Heading into winter, we wait to see what the reaper leaves behind and what changes stick.

highly as one of the most unequal world-wide became de rigueur among the artariat. Importantly, the economic value of the country’s cultural sector became a key talking point too. Relative to the 7% of the nation’s workforce employed in the sector before the massive job losses that came with the pandemic, the government’s ZAR150 million (about \$10 million) rescue package for the cultural and creative sector was simply inadequate. Important cultural institutions like the famed Fugard Theatre folded amid multiple headlines. Smaller, lesser-known spaces, lacking the Fugard’s clout, just faded away.

But, in some cases, the soul-searching and anxiety resulted in exciting experiments. In the absence of physical exhibitions, opening nights, and other standard practices, artists shifted to the digital realm. Online platforms earlier conceived of as being in service to their brick and mortar

South Africa’s descent into the pandemic was swift. The first case was reported on March 5. By March 27th, the country’s government, following many others, imposed a lockdown that began at Level 5—one of the world’s most restrictive stay-at-home measures implemented. All public life beyond that deemed essential came to a halt. The city’s vibrant art sector came to a standstill. As with many people worldwide, Capetonians initially embraced the novelty of the government’s stay-at-home restrictions. But soon the welcome break from the preceding period of back-to-back arts events gave way to an eerie stasis.



Photo by Jodi Russell

heeten bhagat with Tau Tavengwa

Cape Town’s art scene fumbles its way through a series of lockdowns

It was February 2020, the peak of Cape Town summer, and the Mother City was abuzz with an eclectic range of arts events. A visitor could drop in to the Investec Cape Town Art Fair, the largest annual fine arts event of the season, located at the Cape Town International Convention Centre. Alternatively, one could head to the Winelands for the first Stellenbosch Triennale, taking place in its namesake colonial university town, also home to some of the country’s wealthiest individuals. Punters were spoilt for choice. As the month progressed, however, the gravity of Covid-19, till then something merely happening elsewhere, became a grim reality.

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As the country groped its way through the various stages of lockdown that would define 2020, the impact of the Covid-related restrictions on the arts came painfully into focus. Questions about the sustainability of galleries and other cultural venues across the city emerged. With little government support for the industry, especially amid the spectre of other struggling businesses, it was unclear what of the scene would survive. Conversations about the value and need for art in a city that ranks

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Bhawani Buswala

Exploitative lending practices and pandemic disruptions are destroying the livelihoods and dreams of transport workers in New Delhi!



Photo by Sumit Dayal/Bloomberg via Getty Images

extortionist structure, the e-rickshaw meant that Kajal and Sohantal could, for the first time, begin to imagine a more stable future for their family. Providing him entry into the large pool of informal transport workers across the city, the e-rickshaw meant he no longer needed to be a waste-picker. But after 13 months of hard work and diligent loan payments, “Lockdown *lag gaya!*” (lockdown

Since late March 2020, India has introduced a series of badly planned and poorly managed national lockdowns. The initial 21-day announcement of the nationwide lockdown led to a massive exodus of people from big cities like Delhi, where mobility became highly restricted. Tens of thousands of migrant workers—primarily day-labourers and their families—left the city to return to their home districts across India, effectively emptying Delhi’s squatter settlements. In Sohantal’s settlement, half the residents fled for homes in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Kajal and Sohantal, however, decided to stay. “We could not have left our e-rickshaws here, and neither could we have taken it with us to our village,” Sohantal says.

The e-rickshaw was their treasure, but its safety also became a burden. As Delhi shut down, Sohantal’s daily earnings vanished. Initially, he did not take his e-rickshaw out on the road, unwilling to risk getting infected and afraid of his vehicle getting impounded or receiving a beating from patrolling police. In multiple videos that popped up online, uniformed officers were seen abusing people out on the road during curfew. Another challenge Sohantal faced was parking. Before the pandemic, he parked in a garage close to home for overnight charging. But no longer able to afford the daily fee of INR50 (20.5), he was forced to leave his rickshaw parked in a nearby open area, secured with additional chains and locks. This contributed to the next big blow. After two months of lockdown, the e-rickshaw’s battery—which cost INR30,000 (2300) to replace—was damaged beyond recovery.

The rickshaw has remained parked since. Back where he started, Sohantal is again recovering recyclables from the city’s waste. He now also carries additional debt from the e-rickshaw loan, the compound interest from which continues to increase. Sohantal’s experience is symptomatic of how the lockdown affected informal transport workers across India’s other big cities. The government’s INR5,000 (250) onetime financial assistance package for drivers of public service vehicles (e.g., autos, taxis, and e-rickshaws) was inaccessible to Sohantal, who lacked the permanent driving licence required to access the funds. “There are so many fees and people whom I need to pay for these things...” he explained, adding that he had been driving the e-rickshaw on his learner’s licence, and planned to apply for his permanent licence once he had paid off the e-rickshaw loan. As India deals with the latest, devastating spike in Covid-19 infections, Sohantal and many others like him are being pulled further into financial distress. According to recent estimates by the Pew Research Centre, an additional 75 million people across India have fallen into poverty in the year since the first lockdown in March 2020.

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the government’s mishandling of the lockdowns, police heavy-handedness in enforcing restrictions, and mounting debt and liabilities have stalled their aspirations. The pandemic has reconfigured their life in a city they came to with hopes of improvement. Like millions of poor and working-class people across India’s urban landscape, they are experiencing a lockdown that goes beyond that sanctioned by the state. Discouraged by returning to working as a waste picker, Sohantal started to question the threat and even the existence of Covid-19. “If there is Coronavirus in the city, then let me also see if touching the waste will give me it,” he said.

*

NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT IDENTITIES

As Mancunians, we all know the importance of these issues. For reasons unknown, those in control of the city and its planning don't seem to.

Manchester has been hit hard by the pandemic. As we begin to see a way through it, politicians and policymakers are missing an opportunity to rethink how the city could be governed into the post-Covid-19 future.

"Building Back Better" needn't have been empty rhetoric, but rather could still be a chance to assess the last two decades of rebuilding a post-industrial city. We have the opportunity to implement a desperately needed change in urban policy, and to prepare for a sustainable future. But to do this, housing must be addressed as foundational in addressing climate, health and the other crises facing the city, not simply as a numbers game where more is better.

The question is, will those in control step up? And, perhaps more importantly, what will Mancunians do should their leaders fail?

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lower, under construction. By contrast, London – a city five times bigger than Greater Manchester – has 1,900

co-living units under development. "Building back better" has become a mantra slung around to signify optimism about a post-pandemic era across UK cities, a commitment to tackle the deep-seated social problems that intensified the disruption and suffering wrought by Covid-19.

But what did this mean in Manchester, part of a city-region that suffered nearly 6,000 pandemic-related deaths and experienced the highest level of restrictions in the country during 2020? The possibilities seemed endless.

Could the city go for a municipal Green New Deal that addressed challenges of climate change, unemployment and sustainability? Perhaps a mass public housing programme that built homes for the thousands of Mancunians on waiting lists? How about car parks transformed into much needed green space? Sadly, none of these. So far, "Building Back Better" is translating into 'business as usual' for city leaders focused on acquiring an ever-elusive 'world city' status.

It's been dispiriting to observe the council continue its commitment to an extractive urban development model that seems to have reached its nadir with the newly approved co-living schemes.

Under this model, the city continues to give developers – including sovereign wealth funds, private equity, pension funds and high-net-worth individuals – incentives to build in this fashion without addressing the associated planning-green space, public housing, social infrastructure – required to make urban density work.

And so the city centre's population has risen dramatically, from a few hundred in the 1990s to about 60,000, according to the city's 2018 State of the City report. Between 2015 and that report's publication, the number of residents increased by 35,000. It is expected to hit 200,000 by 2025.

Such rapid transformation has come at a considerable cost. For example, because the council waived any affordable and/or social housing requirements in the approval of new developments, Manchester is experiencing a severe lack of both. Fortunately, residents are not taking it quietly. In inner-city neighbourhoods like Hulme, people are demanding more social, affordable housing and green space. Campaigns like the ongoing "Block-the-Block" – aimed at stopping the development of an 11-storey scheme on the site of a local pub – have gained widespread support throughout the pandemic.

to the relentless

construction of the skyscrapers accelerating the area's gentrification. The Manchester planning committee's decision reverberated across the country, suggesting the pandemic might have changed attitudes towards neoliberal approaches to housing. In Croydon, South London, planning officials warned of the risks of co-living in an era of living/working from home and social distancing. Campaigners in Manchester echoed those concerns, further highlighting how the high densities and cramped spaces of co-living might facilitate disease transmission and would also put pressure on austerity-hit public resources like doctors' surgeries and green spaces. Covid, it seemed, was changing the urban development game.

But it was not to last. A month later when the (near identical) applications returned, the councillor who had led opposition to the co-living schemes was missing in action. The rest of the committee lost its nerve, and in a single afternoon, Manchester abandoned the cautious approach that had been limiting the number of units built for co-living. Manchester now has up to 5,000 units, including a 45-storey, 2,224-bed

Newly-built "co-living" apartment blocks increasingly dominate Manchester's changing skyline, and there are more to come



Photo by Gareth Worthington/@garethmanc

An unprecedented and welcome decision in Manchester and its unexpected reversal confounds affordable housing advocates

Municipal planning committees generally are dull, timid affairs. For years there has been little in the way of drama as Manchester's councillors dutifully signed off on the successive waves of high-density apartment projects that have utterly transformed this post-industrial cityscape. However, in July 2020, something unprecedented happened: the planning committee rejected a slew of developments valued at nearly half a billion pounds. On the agenda that July were a series of 'co-living' schemes. Characterised by private bedrooms with shared facilities, more akin to a hostel or student accommodation, this 'product' dreamt up by the global real estate sector allows financial actors such

as Goldman Sachs to maximise their investments in urban land. Designed to generate ever greater profits by squeezing more residents into less space, these corporate dormitories ironically are pitched by right-wing think-tanks and developers as promoting 'community'. However, debating just as concerns about the connections between housing and health were coming to the fore, this new housing model's disregard for the well-being of tenants or the wider city could not be ignored.

During deliberations, the planning committee noted that the proposed 21 and 19 square metre units incorporated into co-living schemes – sold as "standard" and "compact" respectively – fell below Manchester Council's space design standards. Housing campaigners warned that co-living units could become the 'slums of the future' – a controversial statement in a city that spent over a hundred years demolishing 'problematic housing'.

Given all this, the planning committee's opposition to the co-living schemes should not have come as a surprise. But the fact was, since a pandemic-invoked suspension of activity, a smaller group had been calling the shots. It was only thanks to a public outcry over these proposals that the sidelined committee, just reinstated, was able to reassert its importance. The decision was a big moment for local communities such as those in the inner-city neighbourhood of Hulme, where residents have been demanding alternatives

Flâneuring through Guangzhou reveals a city coming to terms with a “new normal” that’s filled with unexpected treasures...and food



Photo by Zhuofei Tang

In July 2020, I decided to move to Guangzhou, a sprawling city of about 15 million, in China’s Pearl River Delta metropolitan area. It was a quick decision. For years, I lived between my hometown—Shenzhen—and Chicago, but as the pandemic wore on, making travel difficult, I decided to settle.

I’m a bit of *Flâner*. Nothing gives me more pleasure than casually meandering through a city, taking in the sites, and watching life and people go by. I had visited Guangzhou in January 2020, right before Covid-19 hit, and after a week exploring the city, I was infatuated. An ancient city that manages to hold harmony between its eastern and western influences, Guangzhou’s beauty is best described as eclectic.

Unlike that other famous cosmopolitan Chinese city, Shanghai, Guangzhou exudes an earthiness that makes it a relaxed place to live. Guangzhou also is a town for eaters. The Cantonese food is the best you will get anywhere. It is the home of Dim Sum. Food defines life here.

The Pearl New Town area is the most modern

part of town. If you want a completely different vibe, you can hop on the metro. Within ten minutes, you will find yourself surrounded by late 19th century brick-and-porcelain clad houses built by overseas merchants who once traded here. Ten minutes more, and you are in Old Town, amongst Cantonese-style homes from the 18th century, in an area filled with pedestrian-only commercial streets. Here, street vendors rule. There is nothing I enjoy more in my perambulations than diving straight into Old Town’s tight, blue-stone paved streets, with their many twists and turns. I often stick my nose into some of the nameless, hole-in-the-wall food stalls, some of which have been serving delicious Cantonese food for dozens, even hundreds, of years.

The Covid-19 regulations announced in early 2020 had a detrimental effect on the city’s vibrant street life, which revolves around eateries and food markets. It could have been worse. Unlike other parts of the country, Guangzhou was never listed as a “high risk” region. While there was hardship during that initial lockdown, eateries remained alive thanks to a proliferation of food-delivery apps that kept them connected to their hungry customers.

Food delivery services were already becoming a big business in China before lockdown, but the pandemic definitely promulgated the app-based ones. According to a recent report in *The Economist*, it’s now a \$16 billion industry. Last summer, about 20,000 food orders were fulfilled by gig workers—freelance delivery guys—every minute across the country. So it was that during the first few months of the pandemic, when self-isolation/self-quarantine was suggested, eateries and small grocery stores survived thanks to these services.

Luckily Covid-19 was contained relatively quickly across the country. With strict measures in place, infection spikes were kept in check, which enabled a return to something like normalcy. With that return, eateries and markets swiftly resuscitated, only now they were packed with masked customers.

Being back outside at markets and eateries, but also being masked, has been surreal. Besides the mask, the other constant reminder that we still live under a global health crisis is that we all got assigned a “health code”. A programme linked to the ubiquitous messaging service, WeChat, this ever-present contact tracing app tracks our every move, recording any exposure to a confirmed case of Covid-19. If you have been to a high-risk zone, your risk code has become accordingly. This unique health code has become a part of everyday life, and must be shown to an

official before entering any large gathering areas like shopping malls, cinemas, neighbourhoods, restaurants and museums, along with a great spot filled with street food vendors. I was feeling quite uneasy about all this at first. In some way, it felt very Orwellian. But, thinking through it, relinquishing my personal privacy for a “communal good” is probably the most efficient way to manage a crisis of this magnitude in such a densely populated country. I have accepted that we all have to live under the surveillance that has been enforced on us. It will probably remain in place way after the pandemic is gone. It is the world we live in: identities are blurred into data, orders are fulfilled by gig workers—freelance delivery guys—every minute across the country. So it was that during the first few months of the pandemic, when self-isolation/self-quarantine was suggested, eateries and small grocery stores survived thanks to these services.

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air food markets filled with unlicensed street vendors who no longer have to negotiate with heavy vehicular traffic. Recently I found a great spot filled with street food vendors. I was feeling quite uneasy about all this at first. In some way, it felt very Orwellian. But, thinking through it, relinquishing my personal privacy for a “communal good” is probably the most efficient way to manage a crisis of this magnitude in such a densely populated country. I have accepted that we all have to live under the surveillance that has been enforced on us. It will probably remain in place way after the pandemic is gone. It is the world we live in: identities are blurred into data, orders are fulfilled by gig workers—freelance delivery guys—every minute across the country. So it was that during the first few months of the pandemic, when self-isolation/self-quarantine was suggested, eateries and small grocery stores survived thanks to these services.

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Immigration reforms aimed at addressing the tide of Venezuelan refugees are met with suspicion. Are they a genuine humanitarian gesture or the political manoeuvres of an unpopular president?

Edwar Calderón

Two years ago on a bus in Medellín, a man walked down the aisle, flashing a thick wad of Venezuelan Bolívares, and giving the banknotes away to fellow passengers. “The banknote I just gave you does not have a value,” he declared, explaining that the currency was worth “whatever you want to give me in exchange.” When he added that the big wad of notes would get you just a few eggs back in Venezuela, I was as shocked as I was doubtful. It would take another year before I understood just how badly hyperinflation in Venezuela had devalued the currency.

Venezuela’s economic collapse and subsequent currency devaluation led to 20% of the country’s almost 29 million people fleeing its borders. One third are in Colombia, a country whose civil war has, since 1964, left more than 250,000 dead and internally displaced some 8.3 million people. The long-running armed conflict—between Colombian government troops, revolutionary armed rebels (guerrillas), and, since the 1990s, paramilitary groups—has also led to a rural exodus resulting in 84.5% of Colombia’s population now being urban.

The internally displaced make up one in five of Medellín’s residents today, in addition to which, official reports now count over 87,000 Venezuelan migrants. Most of the latter are undocumented, leaving them unable to access housing and essential services, including healthcare, education and certain public transportation services (e.g., Medellín’s public bicycle renting system, Encicla, or the METRO’s reduced-fare CIVICA cards). Requiring official documentation, such services are inaccessible to migrants who enter Colombia illegally. Colombian officials describe this population lacking legal documentation as “irregular”, one of several terms with xenophobic undertones that has crept into general use across the country.

The use of such terms is unsurprising, given that the country’s right-wing President Iván Duque Márquez has publicly made numerous xenophobic statements against Venezuelan refugees. What is surprising, then, was the

president’s 8 February 2021 announcement of a new Temporary Statute of Protection for Venezuelan Migrants. Seeking to “regularise” the “irregular” Venezuelan immigrants who were already in the country as of 31 January 2020, de Protección para migrantes Venezolanos (ETPS) was presented as a way for those migrants to obtain legal documents that would allow them to work and access education and other public services for a period of ten years, during which time they can apply for citizenship. (The Act also covers “regular” or legal migrants who arrive in Colombia between 2020 and 2022, though the rationale for that two-year window is unclear.) While the ETPS could be seen as an encouraging about-face on the part of President Duque, on closer inspection, I have had to conclude that it is a political move intended

to clean up his image.

Ronal Rodríguez of the Venezuelan Observatory at the Universidad del Rosario in Bogotá shares my sentiments.

In a recent conversation, he explained how the Colombian government only had two options for dealing with the influx of Venezuelan migrants. Many enter the country on foot, headed for cities like Medellín and Bogotá, with some continuing to other countries like Ecuador and Peru.

In Rodríguez’s view, securing the 2,219 km border—a challenging terrain mostly controlled by criminal networks—is not only prohibitively expensive, but also virtually impossible.

Introducing policies to integrate the Venezuelan arrivals was always the better option, he explained.

While the ETPS has gained widespread international praise, its implementation remains unclear, and there are questions around the Colombian state’s budgetary and institutional capacity to undertake a plan of this scale and nature.

To start, policymakers are concerned with the lack of reliable statistics on the number of Venezuelan migrants in the country. While the 2018 census estimated 400,000 undocumented permits to immigrants that granting work

Venezuelans in

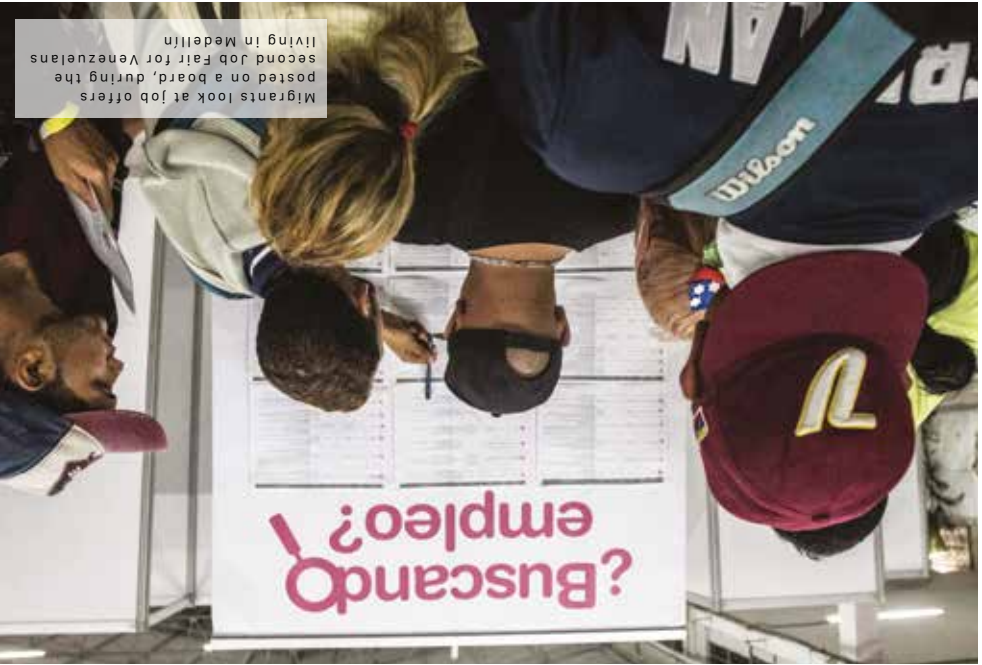
Colombia, authorities insist the number is 200,000. Questioning the methods used to

gather the census data, some experts claim both figures are incorrect, counting even higher numbers.

Not unrelated to this concern is that around the speed with which the policy was introduced. With its final version released only a week after the first draft was published, little time was given for input from experts; many have complained that crucial recommendations they made never found their way into the final draft.

Additionally, some human rights advocates are worried that granting work permits to immigrants without a clear plan for employment generation might increase tensions between the Venezuelan refugees and locals. The economy was already stagnating before the pandemic, and many Colombians have lost their jobs due to Covid-19-related disruptions. Others have expressed concerns about authorities’ possible use of the personal data collected.

Meanwhile, scepticism about the President’s reasons for introducing the ETPS abounds. Since the US-educated Duque swept to power in the summer of 2018, he has done little to enforce the Havana Accords—the agreement that led to a brief peace between government forces and FARC guerrillas in 2016.



Migrants look at job offers posted on a board, during the second Job Fair for Venezuelans living in Medellín

So far failing to protect the human rights of demobilised former militants or other social groups, Duque has said that the terms of the Havana Accords are too lenient on FARC militants. Time will tell whether ETPS marks a change in the government’s humanitarian commitment or, as I and others suspect, is a cunning politician’s play to gain the international recognition he craves. I just hope it does not prove as worthless as the Bolivari!

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central government, it was anarchical, lorded over by thugs and teeming with criminals. Things turned around after Babatunde Fashola, a no-nonsense attorney, became governor in 2007, and deployed task forces that swept thugs into corners and put residents in line. The Lagos of the past, it reared its head again. For the city's youth, however, the sense of threat never really went away –it's always been there, Ololuwa Oluwo, a Lagos developer, does not leave his apartment unless he has to. His housing unit has WiFi, and he's subscribed to Eden, a food delivery, house cleaning and laundry service. Life is good until he steps out of his apartment. There, he gets caught up in Lagos' notorious traffic jams, making him an even easier target for both thieves and the police.

So, Oluwo stays home, hiding. He describes trips outside his apartment this way: You remain in your bubble and you enjoy that, but when you step out of it, you realize you are still in a broken society. And if all your senses aren't turned on, *o ti sun*, as Lagosians put it: You're asleep and you're already in trouble.

But Dorsey's decision doesn't surprise anyone who has tried to run a startup here, particularly foreign investors, says Abdulhamid Hassaan, co-founder of fintech startup Mono. His company joined top piloted startups in France and Dubai, says he would have done the same. Running a company in Nigeria is a difficult task, but in Lagos, those difficulties are magnified. The electricity is unstable, rent and internet are expensive, and then there's the legendary productivity-thieving traffic, he adds. Besides the infrastructural problems, policy after self-sabotaging policy has sent many investors packing from Lagos. Last year, a ban on the popular motorcycles and tricycles that emerged as a way to fill the transportation gap was imposed, grounding ride-hailing startups like Oride, which had helped people navigate the city's traffic jams at the tap of a button. Gokada and MAX, also ride-hailing businesses, only survived because they managed to pivot sharply to logistics. In contrast, Accra, the hip city that has marketed itself as an abode for African Americans, has more stable electricity and a friendlier investor environment. Perhaps Lagos' biggest struggle over the last decade is adapting to the transforming nature of work, which sees more young people opt for jobs in tech, an industry with a more casual culture that has largely left behind the suits and ties of oil companies and banks. Nigeria's casually dressed young are often harassed by SARS, the police unit notorious for profiling anyone sporting dreads or tattoos as a "Yahoo Boy" (online scammer). Meanwhile, although the state recently created a startup fund, it has yet to build adequate public infrastructure dedicated to those budding innovators. That disconnect contributed to the outpouring of rage last October in the EndSARS protests, fuelled mainly by the anger of young Nigerians who had had enough of being targets of police violence.

Unfortunately, the EndSARS protests, pulsating with long-repressed anger amplified by the effects of the Covid-19 lockdowns, were cut short by violent security force crackdowns on crowds that mostly retreated in fear. These crackdowns were then followed by further state violence—the most vicious I had seen in my 11 years in Lagos.

I first moved to this urban jungle for college as a wide-eyed teenager, scared but comforted that it was no longer the dungeon it used to be. Back in the 90s, when Lagos was a stronghold for the opposition political party and received little investment from the

traffic jams are the result of a badly overstretched transport infrastructure. Due to the incessant demand from the growing population, rent and food costs are also soaring. When Jack Dorsey visited in late 2019, it was assumed that Twitter's Africa office would be in Lagos, and rightly so. Other tech giants like Facebook and Google had already squeezed themselves into the labyrinthine cluster of startup offices in Yaba and Ikoyi, another wealthy suburb. Also, Nigeria's Twitter users are probably the most engaged on the continent. But in April 2021, Dorsey lobbied a bombshell—Twitter had opened in neighbouring Accra, Ghana.

Nigerian Information Minister Lai Mohammed blamed journalists for Dorsey's decision. If they had done a better propaganda job, rather than constantly criticising government policies and officials, Dorsey would have opened Twitter Africa in Lagos, he said.

THE AUTHOR

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popular—Flutterwave, Andela and Paystack—are worth almost \$2 billion combined. Most are in the hip Yaba neighbourhood, dubbed 'Yabacore Valley' and also home to the University of Lagos. Others have located themselves in the affluent Lekki neighbourhood, which resides in the low-lying peninsula along the Atlantic, where million-dollar homes cover at the mercy of floods during the rainy season. Lagos is now Africa's most valuable tech hub, valued in 2017 at \$2 billion, ahead of Johannesburg's \$1.3 billion valuation. Investors from North America, Europe and China have all shown interest. 2019 was a big year for Nigeria's fintech sector, which raked-in over \$600 million in investment.

But this reputation is starting to unravel. Lagos is a melting pot not only of Nigeria's cultures and virtues, but also the place where its vices and dysfunction are most visible. The pressure of 20 million people squeezed onto 1,171 square kilometres are evident everywhere. Gutters overflowing in the rainy season speak to an overburdened drainage system, while crowds waiting for hours at bus stops or trying to hop rides home in bumper-to-bumper



Photo by Adetona Omokanye/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Overstretched infrastructure and government bureaucracy threatens Lagos' thriving tech startup sector

Shola Lawal

here is something about Lagos that "opens all the senses". That's how a Ghanaian friend who travels to the city for a yearly dose of its "madness" describes it. Your every sense, every faculty, must be alert, whether driving or walking its streets—smooth or potholed, depending what side of town you are on. One wrong turn could land you in trouble—smack in the middle of the city's notorious 'go-slow' traffic jams, or worse, in a den of prowling fraudsters. If you've been to New Delhi or seen Bollywood movies, you can perhaps picture Lagos. It's a network of mostly crowded streets, where rickety *danfos* (the popular yellow mini-buses), headlights missing, wobble precariously close to throngs of clip-clapping pedestrians. Lagosians move like there's a prize for who can walk or drive the fastest. Day and night, the sounds of Lagos boom: angry honks; loud cursing from *agberos* (street thugs); desperate calls of street hawkers. The sounds rise and swirl among the towering office buildings in popular districts like Eko or Yaba. I imagine that a bird's eye view would not be too

different from how an ant colony looks to us: a hive of never-ending hustle. But zooming in to peer inside those grey and white buildings, packed tightly like sardines, an internal change is afoot. Offices that once housed white-collar businesses like banks and oil companies have recently become home to many of Africa's most prominent and valuable startups. Since the 2002 birth of payment processing company, Interswitch, at least 200 startups have popped up in different corners of Lagos. Some of the most



Photo by Jekesai Njikizana / AFP

A lone cyclist rides through a normally bustling part of downtown Harare during one of the mandatory 21-day lockdowns that have crippled the city.

Murky government communication and inconsistent enforcement of lockdown rules highlight a growing class divide in Harare

Farai Mudzingwa

The jacaranda-lined streets of The Avenues precinct have long served as a buffer between Harare's working-class centre and its affluent suburbs to the west and north. In recent times, however, the Avenue's once-prim streets have become home to informal vendors, flocking from other parts of the city to sell mobile-data vouchers, fruit and vegetables.

This should come as no surprise, given the government's 2017 revelation

that almost 90% of Zimbabweans now work in the informal economy—a reality directly connected to the country's economic freefall since the 14th November 1997, when the Zim dollar crashed thanks to a perfect storm of mismanaged

War Veterans' disbursements, the DRC War and Land Invasions. The decline of the country's economy has long forced citizens to make their own way, often through activities like informal trading, despite vending long being illegal in

undesignated zones. More recently, the Harare City Council has doubled down on vendors, who have proliferated since another round of economic malaise, post the 2013 end of the coalition government between Mugabe's ZANU-PF

and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change.

Chamu Mapfumo (not his real name) is one of this army of vendors. On a typical day, Chamu travels the 15 km separating Highfields–Harare's second-

oldest, high-density suburb—and The Avenues. From his corner along Second Street, he sells mobile data to passing pedestrians and vehicles.

However, since the world plunged into a rolling series of lockdowns to curb the spread of Covid-19, Chamu's days have lost any predictability. What used to be routine brushes with the city council over bylaw infractions have

heightened into daily battles for survival, as Zimbabwe's government, like many, seized the pandemic as an opportunity to introduce new mechanisms to control the informal economy.

In April 2020, the Harare City Council demolished the makeshift vending cabins across the city where vendors like Chamu used to ply their trade. Further complicating daily life for Chamu, 16-seater commuter omnibus

taxis—the primary mode of public transport for thousands—were banned from operating. This ban was a particular show of force by the government against taxi operators whose power to bring the city to a standstill is a sore

point for the state. (That said, the last such protest against fuel price increases in January of 2019 were ultimately unsuccessful, and resulted in the state's brutal retaliation.)

As the hard lockdown took its toll, Chamu had to find alternative, often sneaky ways to enter the city. ZUPCO, a perennially mismanaged state-owned bus service, wasn't an option. Besides the service being woefully unreliable and inefficient, buses, when they do show up, are often overloaded with passengers, violating the government's Covid-19 social distancing measures.

Despite the aforementioned ban, some commuter taxis remained in operation, doing what they could to evade police checks, sometimes resorting to unsafe bush roads. Often running into police roadblocks, Chamu and other passengers forced to disembark the vehicle they were travelling in and flee, fearing arrest. Indeed, the police have kept busy. A few weeks after the nationwide lockdown began in early January, a spike in Covid-19 infections by mid-February saw the police arresting 400,000 people for violating Covid-related regulations. None of this has stopped vendors from continuing to venture out and set up along streets and corners in an attempt to earn an income.

At the beginning of the lockdown, Chamu himself fell afoul of regulations. "I wanted to buy food to take back home. The next thing I know, I have been arrested by the police," he said.

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"Plenty of us were arrested, and many could not afford to pay the fine."

After those who could pay the fines were released, the police, in an unsurprising turn, asked Chamu and those remaining to give them whatever money they had before letting them go. Incidents like this are all too common in Harare, where policing carries a history of brutality and corruption, especially in the high-density townships surrounding city centre. While daytime traffic in The Avenues remained constant during the various lockdowns, the bars and restaurants for which the area is famous have been shut. Ironically, night-time activity across the district now plays out around the many medical facilities—the clinics, doctors chambers, and pharmacies—concentrated in the area.

Things do seem to be changing, though, and Harare is starting to open up. In March 2021, the government announced an end to the hard lockdown. It also has launched what for now appears a promising vaccination programme. A supply agreement with the Chinese government resulted in Zimbabwe receiving enough vaccines to deliver a mass vaccination programme—one of the first on the African continent—and vaccination centres are popping up around the city.

Meanwhile, for Chamu and many others, it's back to The Avenues. Vaccines notwithstanding, the government's promised "Cushion Fund"—meant to provide financial assistance to informal traders—never emerged, while persecution of informal vendors never relented. For now, Chamu's only hope is to maintain his spot on Second Street, prepared for uncertain encounters with hostile city officials.

A wave of government demolitions making way for new construction and highway expansion is causing chaos across Cairo



Photo by KHALED DESOUKI/AFP via Getty Images

In the early hours of June 30, 2020, I received a distressed email from a friend in the US, inquiring about his late father's grave. My friend fretted about news that the Cairo municipal authority was demolishing graveyards to clear land for an elevated motorway. He worried whether the remains of his father—a renowned physician from Pakistan who died in the 1965 PIA Flight 705 crash over Cairo—would be among those destroyed. By the time I reached the vicinity of Imam Shafei's graveyards where victims of the crash were buried, bulldozers had already demolished parts of the wall surrounding the memorial cemetery. Construction of a bridge had begun. I was therefore relieved to find that the bulldozers had spared my friend's father's burial spot. Not long afterwards, another 2,000 family graves were demolished in the City of the Dead. Located both

to the north and south of the Cairo Citadel, this enormous cemetery is part of the Historic Cairo World Heritage Site. Here, too, family grave compounds, some dating back more than a century, were bulldozed. Families of the buried were given short notice, and hundreds of caretakers living in the graveyards were evicted. While the demolitions in Islamic cemeteries incited a brief cacophony from heritage conservationists and elites who also stood to lose their family graveyards, the destruction speaks to a larger trend. Not a day passes without demolitions across Cairo. Cutting of trees, razing of houses and desecration of graves are clearing the way for a frenzy of new construction, highway expansion and roadway bridges, all of which are making calculated incursions into densely populated neighbourhoods. As the city wades through the latest Covid-19

regulations and related curfews, authorities have taken the opportunity to implement a total ban on private construction, numerous evictions, as well as a declaration to wipe out within two years all unplanned and self-constructed areas—a category constituting 60% of the country's built fabric. It is understatement to say that Cairo is in a state of harried confusion. The city has been in this state since 2016, when the country's President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, began waging war on self-built settlements. Deploying a combination of bulldozers and administrative punitive actions, he is also employing what Jordanian architect Hanna Salameh refers to as "weapons of mass construction". One such weapon is the programme of 'unsafe' areas, which category constitutes 1% of the national built area. In 2009, the Egyptian government introduced a risk-based classification of informal settlements, pejoratively known in Arabic as *ashwat'iyat* (haphazard). Derived from UN-Habitat's *State of the World's Slums* (2005), the classification matrix focused on the structural conditions of buildings,

topographical features, utility indicators and tenure status. Creating four grades of risk, 'slums' could be categorised as "life-threatening", "unsuitable shelter", "health-threatening" or "insecure tenure". As such, they could be brought under the Unified Building Law (119/2008) as 'replanning' zones, a euphemism for demolition. Many experts celebrated the matrix as a practical tool for imagining 'participatory' upgrading. International aid agencies flying the 'inclusive cities' banner jumped at the opportunity to assist municipal authorities, bringing their expertise to advise on the "highest and best use" of cleared plots. The programme claiming the eradication of 1% of *ashwat'iyat* was funded by proceeds from selling commercial units developed in place of demolished buildings, surplus profits from urban redevelopment projects, property tax tranches and possibly international donor money. In 2017, after a programme worth EGP1 billion (\$64 million), Cairo was declared free of unsafe areas! The reality is that this 'objective' matrix was a trojan horse for slum clearance and forced evictions, ultimately disrupting and destroying countless livelihoods. Since 2020, the government has gone on a drive to find new ways to increase its revenue base. New ways to levy residents—some conjured from old and forgotten laws, and others newly conceived—have been introduced. Among this arsenal are fines for reconciliation of building violations, a punctuated ban on private construction, and land value capture mechanisms like betterment levies. While these measures oil the mass-construction machine, they also facilitate the attrition of the remaining 99% of unplanned settlements by the sheer burden they place on household budgets. In less than a year, 15 massive new motorway bridges have risen up over Cairo central, with even more across the Greater Cairo Region. The bridges cut through dense neighbourhoods such as El-Zomor axis, connecting to broader transport corridors surrounding and bypassing the city. Such infrastructure is linked to frantic preparations to finish constructing the aptly named New Administrative Capital. A sprawling new city located about 60km out of Cairo, it is where many of the country's wealthy, top bureaucrats and international elites will relocate by year's end. The ongoing activity has turned daily navigation of life in the city and commuting into an epic farce. Road-widening and tree clearing often leave in their wake

fatal and hazardous streets. In small ways, some are fighting back. *Ashgarek ya Masr* (O! Your Trees Egypt) is one of several Facebook groups that chronicle brutal tree clearances. In a city where nothing is left to waste, the trees chopped up to make way for road-widening projects are sold for profit. Members of groups like *Ashgarek ya Masr* chronicle this. They also expose how sidewalks and pavements across the city are turned into heaps of debris, effacing popular landmarks and memories along the way. Like the rest of Egypt, Cairo has been under a national state of emergency since 1958, with intermittent periods of relief, but all the while, largely thriving in its tightly knit and densely populated areas. Ten years after the January 2011 uprising, the city, burdened by its history, seems gripped by a fascination with grandeur, speed and megalomaniac construction. It is almost as if Cairo is determined to wipe out its history by erasing the memories and built fabric representing it.

THE AUTHOR

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8. GOVERNMENT SANCTIONED

DESTRUCTION IN CAIRO

10. CONFUSION IN HARARE

12. THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF

THE FINTECH BUBBLE IN LAGOS

14. IMMIGRATION REFORMS IN MEDELLIN

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THREAT IN NEW DELHI

22. CAPE TOWN ART

SCENE'S FEARFUL FUTURE

23. SOWING REFLECTIONS

IN NEW YORK CITY

THESE



TORRENT

Residents of Fnideq, the northern Moroccan town on the country's border with Spain's Ceuta enclave, woke up to flooded streets after unprecedented storms in May 2021. The once-thriving town's economy has been devastated by a closure of the border with Ceuta as part of Covid-19 regulations. Thousands of migrants have also flooded the town, awaiting an opportunity to cross the border into Spain. This resulted in clashes with local police in May.



Photo by Arsene Mpiana / AFP via Getty Images

On January 19, 2021, vendors in Kinshasa's central market marched against the governor's decision to temporarily close the market while it went through some rehabilitation work. Since then, clashes between vendors and police have continued with tensions mounting over mandatory closures. Covid-19 cases continue to rise across the city

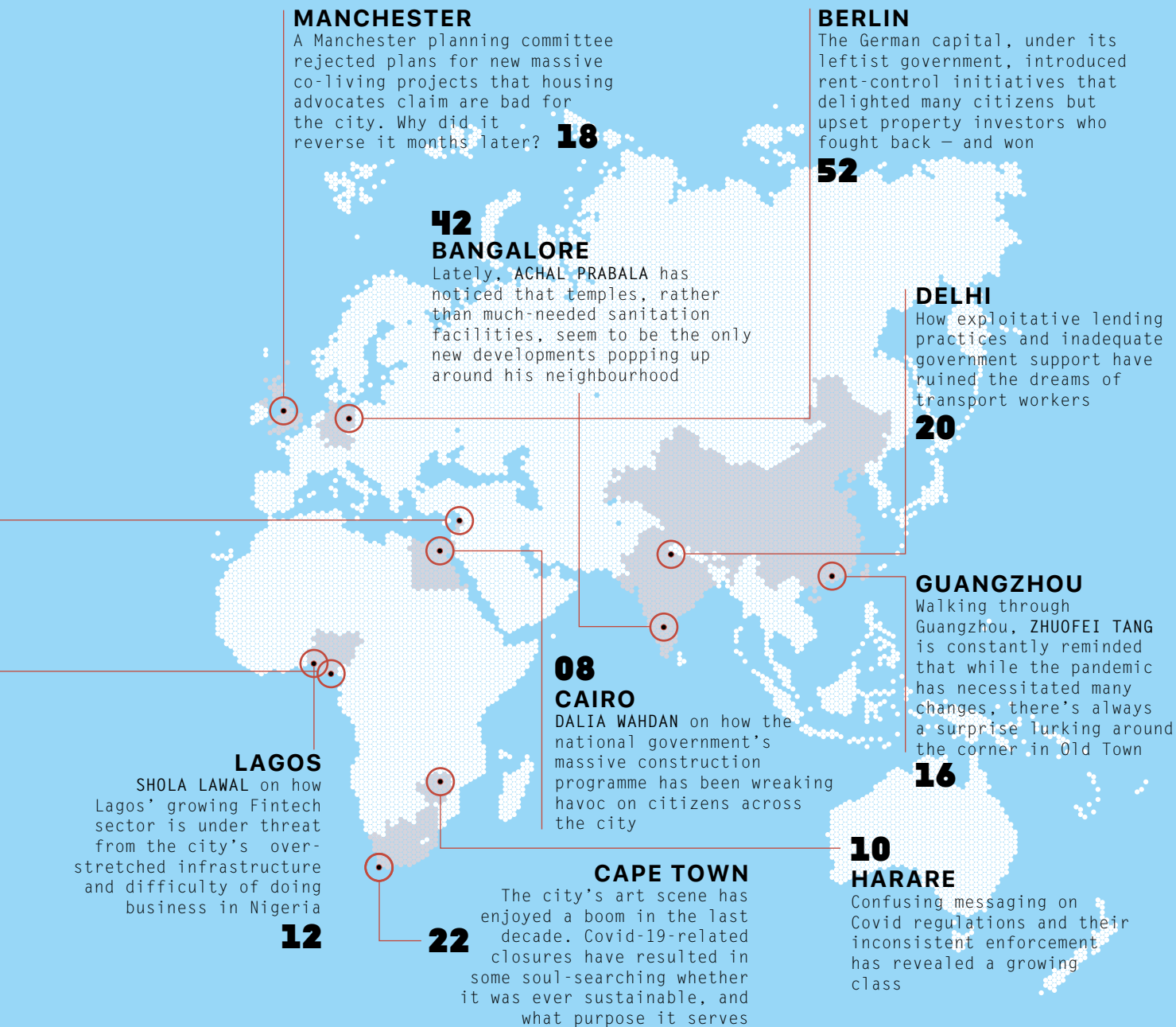
KINSHASA MARKET CLOSURES RESULT IN CLASHES



A TEMPORARY EXODUS FROM CITIES ACROSS INDIA

Across India, millions of low-paid workers fled cities back to their hometowns as Covid-19 lockdown regulations kicked in. By bus, train, and on foot, the exodus happened both at the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, and again as the second wave hit in April 2021. Experts expressed concerns that those fleeing could lead to an accelerated spread of the virus in under-prepared villages

Photo by Sajjad HUSSAIN / AFP



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LAGOS' FINTECH SECTOR IS BOOMING BUT...
CAIRO IN DISARRAY
OUT IN GUANGZHOU
CYNICAL POLITICS OR GENEROSITY IN MEDELLIN?
HOUSING REFORMS FALL FLAT IN BERLIN
STRANGE PRIORITIES IN BANGALORE
TAKING A BREATH IN PORT HARCOURT
LOCKED DOWN IN HARARE

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