

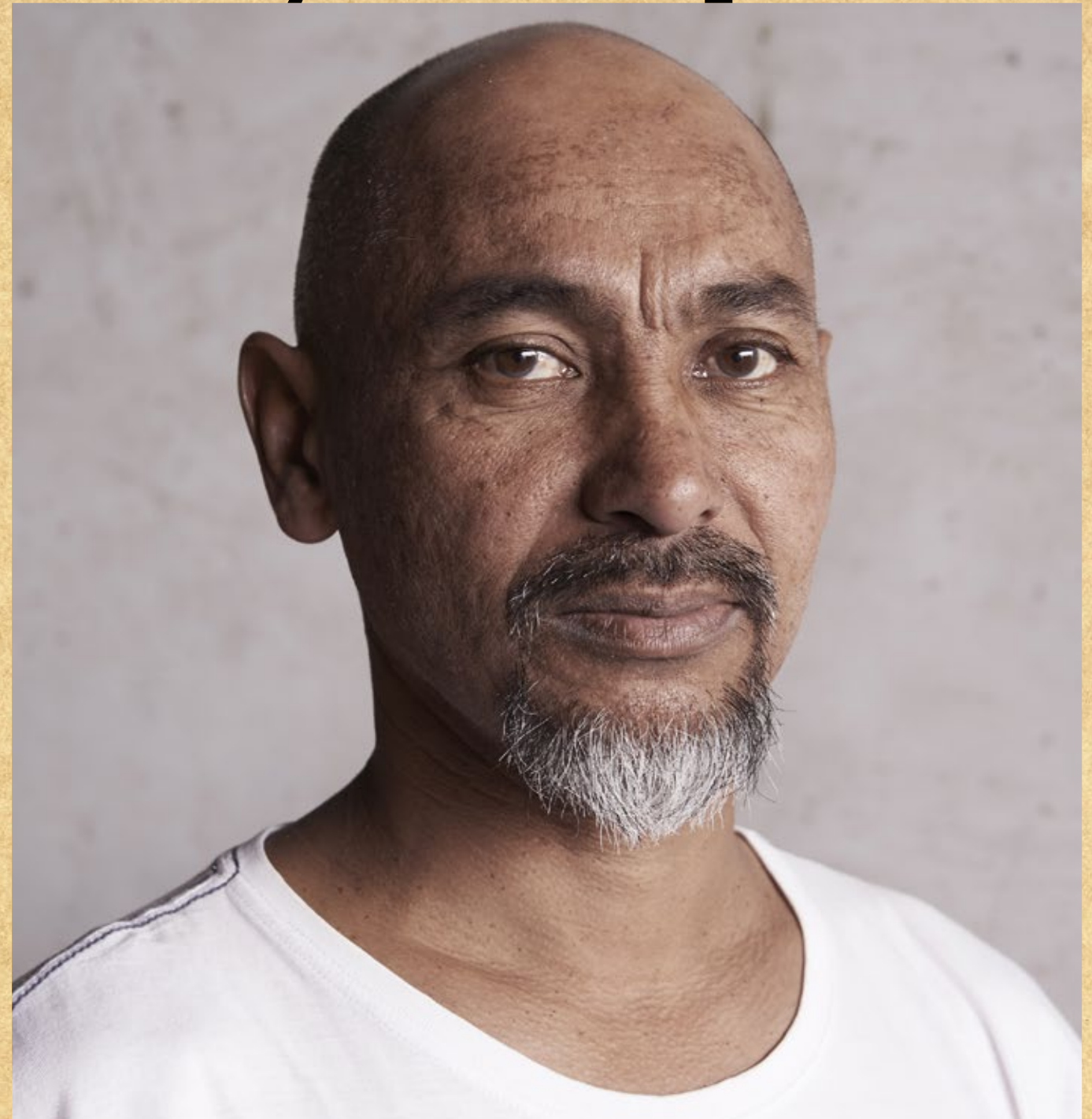
CITY DESIRED OFFERS THE STORY OF A SOUTH AFRICAN CITY THROUGH THE LIVES OF ELEVEN CAPETONIANS. THE TALE OF CAPE TOWN IS EMBLEMATIC OF THE BEAUTIFUL STRUGGLE OF ALL CITIES WRESTLING WITH THE CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABILITY, EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE MODERN ERA. THE INTENT OF CITY DESIRED IS TO FOSTER AND ENRICH PUBLIC DEBATE THAT TAKES THE CITY IN ITS CURRENT FORMS AND ITS FUTURE AS A MATTER OF DEMOCRATIC CONCERN AND ACTION.



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RE-THINKING URBAN THINGS

cityscapes



CITYSCAPES **CITY DESIRED** ISSUE 06



CAPE TOWN A CITY DESIRED

Stories from Sweet Home,
Philippi, Hanover Park,
Observatory & Kensington

RUSTUM KOZAIN • GABEBA BADEROON
MIKE NICOL • ASHRAF JAMAL



ENTER

Cape Town. Where is it? “It is here!” says a pedestrian on OR Tambo Road in Imizamo Yethu (postal code 7806). “It is here!” insists a resident of Rose Street in Bo-Kaap (8001). There is no contradiction in this. Cape Town is a house on Avenue La Croix in Fresnaye (8005), also a paved verge on Koppiesdam Road in Bishops Lavis (7490). Cape Town is geology and infrastructure. It is the wind and the smell of meat being grilled at the corner of Spine and Govan Mbeki roads in Khayelitsha (7783). It is hubris and a fragile green buffer along Settlers Way. So many coordinates, each of them true.

Cape Town. It is right here.



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Cover: **Oliver Kruger**



Featured Photographers:
Hasan and Husain Essop from essay Unrest, 2014, courtesy of Goodman Gallery (see page 192)

FROM THE EDITORS

We say this with optimism: design alone will not save the city. The Latin root of the word design speaks of mark making. Cities occupy and mark space in very real and physical terms. There is nothing ephemeral about a city, nor is there anything abstract about the consequences that flow from a poor design decision.

While important in debating the outcome of urban interventions, qualitative assessments like “good” and “bad” are not the central focus of this issue. Rather, our interest is in the human agents and actors who, in their capacity as engaged citizens, are variously retooling the functions, capacities and possible outputs of the places they inhabit. Rather than blandly accept that the human will to do, act and mark—in a word, design—will right what is wrong in so many cities in the global south, we want you to pause. What are our cities’ key infrastructural and developmental problems? Who is addressing them? In what manner? With what ideological motivation? To whose exclusion? All questions unearthed by architectural critic Fernando Serapião in his recapitulation of social housing design in Brazil, a story that inaugurates our collaborative partnership with USP Cidades at the University of São Paulo. The city, an expression par excellence of citizenship, is however also increasingly abstracting the rights of city inhabitants. What, we foreground in this issue, is the role of the citizen in city making? Is it possible that instead of being passive recipients of design interventions, citizens can be co-authors or design partners? It is an idea explored in a conversation between urban thinkers Richard Sennett and Ash Amin. Responding to Amin’s query whether his recent thinking on cities proposes “a pluri-verse of 1001 hands doing the crafting”, Sennett responds: “One of the practicalities of this is that most people, because they’re not being pushed to develop their visual intelligence, create the most conservative designs—because that’s what people know.” Which prompts a further line of questioning. What are the limits of co-opting citizens as design partners? Cities, after all, need to address a number of fundamental variables, many of which are beyond the ken of people diverted by real life dramas (school fees, groceries, credit limits, social media updates, even where to go to the toilet without fear or loss of dignity). This issue of Cityscapes is built on the proposition that five deep logics pertain to cities everywhere: 1) form, 2) metabolic flows, 3) spatial dynamics, 4) choices by/of residents, and 5) political and fiscal stability. There is a tendency, however, especially in Cape Town (where this magazine is crafted by a half-dozen hands), to reduce talk about design to objects, in the process excluding issues of process and institutions. As part of her lengthy walk across Cape Town, journalist Kim Gurney attended hearings of a commission of inquiry tasked with investigating complaints received by the provincial government about inefficiencies in three police stations in Khayelitsha. The testimonies of Khayelitsha residents, including Nontebeko Nduna, who is forced to do her ablutions on vacant land, point to systemic failings and incapacities that disfigure an entire community, an entire city, a whole country. **Good reading.**

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#Lwandle
On land occupations, housing and tweets

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On water sensitive urban design

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On yellow, design and city branding

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On carnivalesque music and farmworkers



#LWANDLE

Early on the morning of 2 June 2014, a man tweeted about the planned demolition of an informal settlement in Lwandle. Then it actually happened

Lwandle, which means ocean in Xhosa, is a township settlement adjacent Strand on the eastern periphery of the Cape Town metropolitan area. Established in 1958, it initially comprised male-only hostel dwellings for workers servicing the nearby fruit and canning industry. The hostels were transformed into family homes in the 1990s, but the area still struggles to meet housing demands by new migrants to the city. On 2 and 3 June 2014, during an intense cold snap, some 800 families were evicted from land owned by the South African National Roads Agency, which has been earmarked for development. The following is an edited selection of tweets responding to the designation #Lwandle on Twitter.

27 OCT 2012

Bhuti Mgwashu@Vusumzizwen: ANC BAGM #ward86 #Lwandle Strand#so far so good in n effort to elect isikhokelo esitsha#Amandla!!

26 JUNE 2013

SA Police Service @SAPoliceService: #sapsWC arrest 2 men in connection with murder of an off-duty policeman in #Lwandle. The policeman was shot in a field near Hlati Street.

19 JANUARY 2014

ER24CapeWinelands @ER24CapeEast: Accident on the N2 #Lwandle. 2 vehicles 1 patient taken to hospital.

2 JUNE 2014

Earl September @earlseptember: To #demolish a home in winter is not human, whether it’s legal or illegal. Everything can be solved without violence!

Fidel Castro @Siwa_Mbara: CT schoolgirl Anelise Mange 17, Gr12, braves bullets & a water canon to save her possessions

Mfundo Michael Mazwi @IamMM_Mazwi: where are the people of #Lwandle in Strand going to sleep tonight @helenzille.....do u see the rain clouds, can you feel the cold.

Mthoba Chapi @TheMthobaReport: If you are going to demolish the illegal homes at least make alternative arrangements for the dwellers. This just looks wrong.

cathjenkin @cathjenkin: Sorry. No. Didn’t forced removals end with apartheid? What the heck is going on in #lwandle !?!

Patricia de Lille @PatriciaDeLille: Today the Sheriff of the Court executed an eviction order on land belonging to Sanral in #Lwandle.

Siphile Hlwatika @SiphileHlwatika: @helenzille’s response to a humanitarian crisis? = “It wasn’t me!”

Zackie Achmat @ZackieAchmat: Picket outside Premier @helenzille residence. Stop #SANRAL #Lwandle evictions.

Shambanegore @siphokazibantom: EFF is busy tweeting vacancies.Are u waiting for e-tolls to be standing so u can physically remove them?Do something now!#Lwandle evictions

South African Gov @GovernmentSA: The handle @Sentletse is claiming collusion between #ANC & #DA in demolishing shacks at #Lwandle. Untrue. We would never collude with #madam

3 JUNE 2014

Zackie Achmat: #Lwandle @thebookery1 & @equal_education will accept humanitarian assistance – blankets & food etc. Plein Park 63–89 Plein Str CTN

Justice Project SA @JPSAorg: #Lwandle #SANRAL isn’t done demolishing. Round 2 today. :((

Nkomo’omhle Masikane @Mzidlanga: 20 years into democracy, #SANRAL a state owned entity busy with forced removals ,we have a long way to go

Vote EFF 2016 @marrakurru: “@shanducr: Why was the #Lwandle eviction story not on SABC last night and this morning?!”

Kaiser Khoza @khozak: @ewnreporter: A woman sits crying as her house is being dismantled. CL “Oh Lord why Lord,the color of my skin

Justice Project SA: “@tim_meh87: News cameras finaly here.. locals say Couloured policemen called them Kaffirs while shooting”

Mduduzi Gama @Mdu_Gama: I just saw some of the #Lwandle images. Why do black people continue to suffer like this though? There’s a kid entangled in barb wire

LOL @snengwes: This is why we sing kill the Boer These boers should have left in 1994. Madela wasted time, we should have sent them back to Europe

Verashni Pillay @verashni: ANC: “It is evident that the eviction has been meted out as a punishment to this community for not voting for the DA.”

POWER987 News @POWER987News: Human Settlements MEC Bonginkosi Madikizela says they are meeting with the City of Cape town officials to establish the facts.

GroundUp @GroundUp_News: #Lwandle evictions. SAPS and Law Enforcement officers were there. Who were the guys in green breaking down homes?

EFF _WesternCape @effwcpe: @helenzille together with ANC and SANRAL demolishing poor black peoples homes in #Lwandle, Strand, Cape Town

Lindiwe Mlandu @LindiweMl: I wonder what’s going through the minds of those people who are tasked with demolishing the homes.

Justice Malala @justicemalala: “Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies...Claim no easy victories.” – Amilcar Cabral

Mailandguardian: Transport Minister Dipuo Peters apologises for #Lwandle evictions

Feminists in SA @FeministsSA: It’s child protection week and the #lwandle evictions have resulted in the death of a child&many more left homeless. This is not democracy

Michael Moss @MichaelMoss_1: Snow expected in CT tomorrow, 2 days after #Lwandle #Nomzamo forced eviction with no plan for emergency accommodation

City Press Online @City_Press: Lindiwe Sisulu moots inquiry on #Lwandle evictions

4 JUNE 2014

POWER987 News: Evicted residents of #Lwandle Township outside Cape Town will be allowed to return to their homes for now

TheCitizen Newspaper @TheCitizen_News: residents get hot meals

POWER987 News: Cosatu in the Western Cape says everyone must take responsibility for the evictions but SANRAL is ultimately accountable.

phillip mlangeni @phillipmlangeni: Snce I never chose to be black why does being black feels like its a curse? Revotetse eng kante #lwandle evictions

Zackie Achmat: most urgently needed items: baby supplies, clothes and toiletries. Over-supply blankets. Donate 63–89 Plein Street Cape Town

GroundUp: Latest from #Lwandle with the good news that a baby rumoured to be dead is alive.

5 JUNE 2014

EWN Reporter @ewnreporter: Sisulu says govt concerned about unlawful land occupation as it compromises provision of housing/services

SAfm PM Live @safmpmlive: Social Justice Coalition Deputy General Secretary, Dustin Kramer says at least 300 #Lwandle dwellers have been provided with accomodation.

Patricia de Lille: @CityOfCT responds to Minister Sisulu’s statements on #Lwandle

9 JUNE 2014

The New Age @The_New_Age: @kevinjohnbrandt in CPT, residents of Blackheath don’t want #Lwandle residents to put up their shacks on their property

silindelo masikane @Slindelo_M: Sisulu: “Zille should have taken responsibility.”

10 JUNE 2014

Black Sash @black_sash: #Lwandle evictees protest in Blackheath after their building materials dont arrive.

Murray Williams @mwdeadline: Ugly rumours flying. “The #Lwandle people are on their way.” Talk of making barricades with cars. But not true. The evictees are in the hall

SACPWC @SACPWC: Clearly, Zille might have encouraged those residents not to welcome the evicted Lwandle residents because of what she said is going

11 JUNE 2014

POWER987 News: Human Settlement Minister Lindiwe Sisulu and Cape Town Mayor Patricia De Lille are to pay a visit to the families this afternoon

GroundUp: Bail for ten Nomzamo ([#Lwandle](#)) residents who have been in Pollsmoor since last week.

AMLive 104–107 Fm @amliveonsafm: City of Cape Town says a new housing development project is being planned to accommodate evicted [#Lwandle](#) families

12 JUNE 2014

Sisanda Nkoala @Snkoala: evictions are part of a number in recent weeks including Qwa-qwa in the Free State, and Alex in Gauteng

15 JUNE 2014

EFF_ WesternCape: Today Seskhona(ANC) is trying to convince the community of Makhaza, Khayelitsha to accept the [#Lwandle](#) people build shacks on near by land.

EFF_ WesternCape: The Community of Makhaza, Khayelitsha have rejected Seskhona and people of [#Lwandle](#), saying that’s their land to use.

18 JUNE 2014

POWER987 News: Sisulu: As we sit here...the people of [#Lwandle](#) are drowning in water, shivering and shunned from this province.

23 JUNE 2014

Murray Williams: On June 2–3, 235 homes were demolished. 2day the rebuilding begins – materials ready in [#Lwandle](#) [#Nomzamo](#)

25 JUNE 2014

Thanlo Mzassi @mzassi: We need a proper security fence between [#Lwandle](#) and nearby houses please!!! @PatriciaDeLille @CityofCT [#sanral](#) [#Sacrime](#)



GroundUp
@GroundUp_News



[#Lwandle](#) evictions. SAPS and Law Enforcement officers were there. Who were the guys in green breaking down homes?



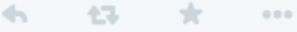
RETWEETS
11



7:20 AM - 3 Jun 2014

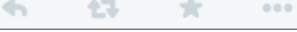


Erraheim @erraheim · Jun 3
The guys in green would have worn Red if EFF had not hijacked the colour, I am sure [@GroundUp_News](#)





ChaCha @Blow_Back_Time · Jun 3
[@GroundUp_News](#) [@Ponkie007](#) This [#ANC](#) are not the real ANC, they are Mother Fucker Chinese funded Communist bastards [#CTEvictions](#) [#SANRAL](#)



14 JULY 2014

POWER987 News: [#Lwandle](#) Residents are currently being housed in a community hall.

mailandguardian @mailandguardian: DA’s Helen Zille likens [#Lwandle](#) inquiry into eviction of shack dwellers to a “political hit squad”

17 JULY 2014

Democratic Alliance @DA_News: Today, the DA has laid charges

against [#SesKhona](#) following the SANRAL [#Lwandle](#) evictions – @Makashule DA MP

21 JULY 2014

EWN Reporter: Ward councillor Matha says there are 12 informal settlements – including Nomzamo – in the Lwandle area.

EWN Reporter: Matha says the informal settlements built on privately-owned land have no services like water and sanitation, no electricity.

EWN Reporter: Matha: “people, who were promised houses in 2008, grew tired of waiting for houses and decided to invade land illegally.”

EWN Reporter: Matha says community blamed him for first eviction in February 2014, he was subsequently provided with four security guards

EWN Reporter: Matha says before June evictions officials from Sanral and City of Cape Town met at Strand police station to discuss mass eviction.

22 JULY 2014

Siyabonga Sesant @4everSiya: Strand Sheriff Johan Burger says a detailed weather was downloaded from the internet BEFORE the controversial evictions on 2 June.

EWN Reporter: Burger says officials from City’s land invasion unit and Human Settlements dept were present at all meetings prior to evictions.

EWN Reporter: Sanral’s Shaun Hornby: “municipality wanted new N2 alignment to be built (on land where people were evicted from), but not tolled.”

29 JULY 2014

Siyabonga Sesant : Inquiry First two residents, Xoliswa Masakala and her husband Albert testifying at Inquiry.

31 JULY 2014

GroundUp: Moving testimonies from Nomzamo ([#Lwandle](#)) inquiry: All I saved was my backpack & ID....

4 AUGUST 2014

Human Rights Channel @ythumanrights: Probe into [#Lwandle](#) [#forcedeviction](#) of 100s extended so more residents can testify.

8 AUGUST 2014

SA Breaking News @SABreakingNews: residents claim police used live ammo

16 AUGUST 2014

Liesl Jobson @LieslJobson: Heading to [#Lwandle](#) Migrant Labour Museum for launch of @UCTPress “Hostels, Homes, Museum” with @CirajRassool

Liesl Jobson: “Hostels, Homes, Museum” by Noëleen Murray & Leslie Witz memorialises migrant labour pasts in [#Lwandle](#).

Liesl Jobson: Witz: Until few months ago nobody knew where this place was. Suddenly [#Lwandle](#) forcible evictions made it visible. Breaking news.

10 SEPTEMBER 2014

TheCitizen Newspaper: Over 300 [#Lwandle](#) evictees remain in CTown community hall

TheCitizen Newspaper: [#Sanral](#) court order at [#Lwandle](#) was unconstitutional

8 OCTOBER 2014

SA Gov News @Sagovnews: [#Sisulu:](#) We are here to accept the report of the enquiry that investigated the circumstances that led to the evictions in [#Lwandle](#)

City of CT Mayor @CityofCTMayor: The @CityofCT is glad that the, [#Lwandle](#) Inquiry, a waste of taxpayers’ money, is over. – Mayor @PatriciaDeLille

21 OCTOBER 2014

GroundUp: Four months after being evicted [#Lwandle](#) residents still don’t know where their confiscated belongings are.

23 OCTOBER 2014

Democratic Alliance: This is not a City of Cape Town problem, this is a nationwide problem.

EWN Reporter: Sisulu was addressing MPs in Parliament this afternoon after the conclusion of an Inquiry into the controversial June evictions.

EWN Reporter: Sisulu: “Officials acted illegally (in their removal of people). Their actions, all of them, were illegal,” she told Parliament.

Siyabonga Sesant: “The parties who knowingly conspired & effected the eviction, namely Sanral, The City of Cape Town and police, acted irregularly.”

4 NOVEMBER 2014

eNCA @eNCAnews: The [#Lwandle](#) eviction blame game simmers *

Patricia de Lille: Democratic Alliance politician and Mayor of Cape Town, [@PatriciaDeLille](#)
Zackie Achmat: activist and member of Social Justice Coalition, [@ZackieAchmat](#)
Groundup: community journalism project, [@GroundUp_News](#)
Democratic Alliance: official opposition and ruling party in Western Cape , [@DA_News](#)
Helen Zille: Democratic Alliance politician and premier of the Western Cape, [@helenzille](#)
Lindiwe Sisulu: Minister of Human Settlements in African National Congress government, [@LindiweSisulu](#)

GEOGRAPHY AND MEMORY



Gabeba Baderoon

You will know black Cape Town by the hiss of yellow busses braking, people running for the hooting taxi, a block of two-storey flats with elaborate burglar bars

Geography is history. Living in Cape Town means you travel through the past all the time. If you were removed, you often make your way to work past the very home you were forced to leave. This was enough to make my mother angry every day for 30 years, when she drove us to school, when she went to work, when she dropped me at the bus stop in Claremont to go to university. My parents were married in the house they were removed to in 1968, where I was born in 1969. My birth marked the shift between the two places, a 15-minute drive but a world apart. That distance between the two places is in my DNA. Geography is blood and birth too. Cape Town is in my DNA. When you stand in one particular place in Bo-Kaap, the birthplace of so many paintings and photographs, looking down at the city and the harbour and the mountain, you learn that you are standing in the oldest slave graveyard in the country. Geography is learning how to step gently on the past, and walking from present into history and back with each footstep. This oscillation between temporalities makes me think of the

back and forth relationship I have with Cape Town. It contains all the things that make me angry, almost as much as my heritage, and the things that I adore. When I shop there, I get cross about the magazines in the queue leading to the tills: they almost always present a line of white faces. Last week, I felt guilty when an American friend said that when she landed in Cape Town, she didn’t know if she was in Africa—there were so few black faces. I felt guilty because the city looked to her like those lines of magazines I get cross about displayed at checkouts. That’s what happens when a place is in your DNA. You feel guilty about the things you haven’t done. Let me tell you about the shops. We still have that amazing phenomenon, the corner shop—“kafi” or “spaza” as we call them. They sell all the things you need everyday, or the things you forgot to get at the shops (which is what we call the supermarkets). Many neighbourhoods in big, sophisticated cities don’t have kafis anymore, places where you know the owner, watched their children serving you (should they have been?) and growing up and deciding what to study, and whether or not to continue to work in the kafi. When I look at my six little godsons and nephews—this new generation consists only of boys—I realize I have to find a way to telling them about being young under apartheid, when we lived in separate worlds, where geography was destiny. It will have to be a complex story. Recently, I drove up the mountain past Gordon’s Bay to Steenbras Dam. It’s one of the most beautiful drives in the world. I know because my friends from Russia and Singapore told me so. And I saw so myself, as though for the first time. When I was young, we used to go up there often for picnics, sometimes to stay at the bungalows. (They don’t allow you to do that anymore, I think.) We stayed in the non-white section, of course. I will tell my godchildren and nephews all that. What I’ll struggle with is how to tell them I didn’t know I was living in a beautiful place.

“

I felt guilty when an American friend said that when she landed in Cape Town, she didn’t know if she was in Africa

”

When I drove up the mountain to Steenbras Dam, my mouth kept falling open with astonishment at the gloriousness of the sight from the car. Did I not see this beauty as a child? Did apartheid abolish even that? Can you only see something truly 30 years later? I asked my friend Shaida Ali about it, if she saw beauty then. Maybe she’ll write a novel to try to answer the question. Instead of seeing the ordinary beauty of our city, she and I dreamed of going overseas. We visited London together. At the end of each day, I noticed that under my nails was a layer of black dust. Geography is fantasy; it’s time and memory. Is there a white Cape Town and black Cape Town? My friends who live in Joburg always get angry when they visit Cape Town. I reply, don’t judge Cape Town by the exclusions of white Cape Town. Think about black Cape Town. “Ja, Gabeba, which other city still has black and white sections after 20 years,” they say. I know what they mean. If you look at the map, black people were carefully removed from the centre of town and from the coastline. “Removed” is such a clean and clinical term. Like “sliced out”. That’s what happened to black people in the city—and that’s how Cape Town became white. Excised, missing some central part

of itself. Sometimes geography is irretrievable sadness. The sounds of Cape Town are: children playing football in the street, the hiss of a yellow bus braking as it pulls up to the stop, an alarm in a house in the next street, the urgent and then distant passing of an ambulance, the bilal from several directions, a lunchtime siren at the neighbourhood primary school, people running for the hooting taxi, the gardjie calling destinations further and further away. The architecture of black neighbourhoods is fascinating. There are the spaza shops, where you buy newspapers, electricity, potatoes and cigarettes. Hairdressers, sometimes two on one block, where women sit under dryers with their hair in big and small rollers. A place where sound systems are fitted into cars. A block of two-storey flats with elaborate burglar bars, fences and gate (behind which you see beautiful gardens). I lived in one of those neighbourhoods for 28 years. Something happens after 28 years in the same place. Your body travels there everyday without volition. Geography is the absence of time. Sometimes when I’m thousands of kilometres away, I hear the sounds around my house in Athlone as I’m falling asleep—dogs yipping nearby, a car’s wheels turning into a gravel driveway, cups clinking in the sink in the house next door, the double ring of the old-fashioned telephone, so close you could answer it. *

Gabeba Baderoon is a poet and scholar. Her most recent books include the collection A Hundred Silences (2006) and monograph Regarding Muslims: from Slavery to Post-apartheid (2014).

WATER SECURITY



Neil Armitage

Demand for water in Cape Town is straining the existing water-supply infrastructure. A new paradigm is required to ensure water security in the future

Like all cities, Cape Town is dependent on an assured supply of water for its survival and growth. At present, virtually all of Cape Town’s water comes from a chain of dams located to the east of the city: Voëlvlei, Wemmershoek, Berg River, Theewaterskloof and Steenbras. The problem is that there are no more major surface water sources to exploit, while the demand for water in Cape Town is steadily rising to the point where it is highly likely that it will exceed the long-term supply within the next decade or so without substantial intervention. Climate change is likely to make matters worse. The National Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) is currently proposing that the predicted shortfall be met from four sources: the augmentation of Voëlvlei Dam; desalination of seawater; re-use of water; and abstraction from the Table Mountain Group Aquifer. The first option, while probably the easiest to implement, will not make a significant contribution to Cape Town’s water security. The desalination of seawater

is hugely energy intensive—and South Africa’s energy is largely sourced from the burning of coal, with its associated large carbon footprint. While energy production could become more environmentally friendly in the future, it is likely to be in short supply for years to come. Meantime, the desalination of seawater has been an expensive failure in places similar to Cape Town such as Melbourne. Not enough is known about the potential long-term environmental impacts of abstraction from the Table Mountain Group Aquifer. This leaves only the re-use of water mentioned in the DWS list. Currently, there is limited greywater (domestic effluent excluding the kitchen sink and toilets) use at the household scale; furthermore, its treatment to potable water standard is very expensive. Nevertheless, this is a potentially important source for the watering of domestic gardens, for example. The use of treated-sewage effluent is gradually growing in Cape Town as the city provides it at a reduced price to select large-scale (mainly industrial) users. The quality is a limiting factor at present but, if necessary, it is easier and more cost-effective to ‘desalinate’ sewage effluent than seawater. There is no mention by the DWS of the most obvious source of water to the city: rainfall. Roughly double the yield of the Western Cape Water Supply System falls within the city boundaries every year. Much of this is flushed directly to the sea. Unfortunately, rainwater harvesting (the capturing of roof runoff in tanks, for example) has proven to be expensive, except when done on a fairly large scale with commercial buildings. The most appropriate use for this water is for toilet flushing as it is not fit for human contact and these tanks generally only fill when there is no need for the water in the garden (when it rains!). Stormwater harvesting (the capture and use of the abundant runoff from roads and neighbouring properties) is limited by the availability of suitable storage areas in highly built-up areas. Better use could however be made

of Cape Town’s 800-odd stormwater ponds, the majority of which remain dry almost all of the time, as well as in the Cape Flats Aquifer through a technique called “managed aquifer recharge” (a mechanism for recycling treated wastewater and captured urban stormwater). The most appropriate use of this water would be irrigation and toilet flushing. Another option that does not appear to have been explored is to take advantage of Cape Town’s location on the coast and use seawater directly for the flushing of toilets, as is currently practiced in Hong Kong. Ultimately, reducing the per capita use of potable water is probably the best way to address future water scarcity. This can be achieved through water conservation (WC), which means looking after what you have, and water demand management (WDM), which encourages the reduction of water use. The City of Cape Town has a team dedicated to just this, and while they have made much progress over the past decade, more can be done. Their main tactics up until now have largely focussed on pressure management (to reduce losses through cracks in pipe infrastructure) and “rising block tariffs” (a method that makes water expensive for big users, thereby discouraging excessive use). Other possibilities include: leak detection and repair; replacement of meters (to reduce unbilled losses through under-reading from old gauges and consequent under-valuing of water delivery); reduction of theft (tracking down and eliminating unauthorised connections); encouragement of water-saving devices; and a shift to water-less toilets. While the demand for water in Cape Town is nearing a point where it cannot be met by conventional surface water resources, there are several workable options, including the use of greywater, treated sewage effluent, rainwater/ stormwater harvesting, direct use of seawater and implementation of WC and WDC strategies. All have the potential to prevent water

scarcity from inhibiting the growth of the city. For these initiatives to work, however, a new urban water management paradigm is required. The concept of “water sensitive urban design” (WSUD) offers the broad framework for implementing a sustainable urban water management strategy. WSUD is an inter-disciplinary approach to urban water management that seeks to make water a central consideration in the planning and design of human settlements thereby creating water sensitive settlements or cities where the most efficient and effective uses of water are central considerations”. Cape Town needs to become a water sensitive city. *

Neil Armitage is the founder and director of the Urban Water Management research unit at University of Cape Town.

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NISTOTAS ILLUPIST



Sean O’Toole

You will know black Cape Town by the hiss of yellow busses braking, people running for the hooting taxi, a block of two-storey flats with elaborate burglar bars

Geography is history. Living in Cape Town means you travel through the past all the time. If you were removed, you often make your way to work past the very home you were forced to leave. This was enough to make my mother angry every day for 30 years, when she drove us to school, when she went to work, when she dropped me at the bus stop in Claremont to go to university. My parents were married in the house they were removed to in 1968, where I was born in 1969. My birth marked the shift between the two places, a 15-minute drive but a world apart. That distance between the two places is in my DNA. Geography is blood and birth too. Cape Town is in my DNA. When you stand in one particular place in Bo-Kaap, the birthplace of so many paintings and photographs, looking down at the city and the harbour and the mountain, you learn that you are standing in the oldest slave graveyard in the country. Geography is learning how to step gently on the past, and walking from present into history and back with each footstep. This oscillation between temporalities makes me think of the back and forth relationship I have

with Cape Town. It contains all the things that make me angry, almost as much as my heritage, and the things that I adore. When I shop there, I get cross about the magazines in the queue leading to the tills: they almost always present a line of white faces. Last week, I felt guilty when an American friend said that when she landed in Cape Town, she didn’t know if she was in Africa—there were so few black faces. I felt guilty because the city looked to her like those lines of magazines I get cross about displayed at checkouts. That’s what happens when a place is in your DNA. You feel guilty about the things you haven’t done. Let me tell you about the shops. We still have that amazing phenomenon, the corner shop—“kafi” or “spaza” as we call them. They sell all the things you need everyday, or the things you forgot to get at the shops (which is what we call the supermarkets). Many neighbourhoods in big, sophisticated cities don’t have kafis anymore, places where you know the owner, watched their children serving you (should they have been?) and growing up and deciding what to study, and whether or not to continue to work in the kafi. When I look at my six little godsons and nephews—this new generation consists only of boys—I realize I have to find a way to telling them about being young under apartheid, when we lived in separate worlds, where geography was destiny. It will have to be a complex story. Recently, I drove up the mountain past Gordon’s Bay to Steenbras Dam. It’s one of the most beautiful drives in the world. I know because my friends from Russia and Singapore told me so. And I saw so myself, as though for the first time. When I was young, we used to go up there often for picnics, sometimes to stay at the bungalows. (They don’t allow you to do that anymore, I think.) We stayed in the non-white section, of course. I will tell my godchildren and nephews all that. What I’ll struggle with is how to tell them I didn’t know I was living in a beautiful place. When I drove up the mountain to

Steenbras Dam, my mouth kept falling open with astonishment at the gloriousness of the sight from the car. Did I not see this beauty as a child? Did apartheid abolish even that? Can you only see something truly 30 years later? I asked my friend Shaida Ali about it, if she saw beauty then. Maybe she’ll write a novel to try to answer the question. Instead of seeing the ordinary beauty of our city, she and I dreamed of going overseas. We visited London together. At the end of each day, I noticed that under my nails was a layer of black dust. Geography is fantasy; it’s time and memory. Is there a white Cape Town and black Cape Town? My friends who live in Joburg always get angry when they visit Cape Town. I reply, don’t judge Cape Town by the exclusions of white Cape Town. Think about black Cape Town. “Ja, Gabeba, which other city still has black and white sections after 20 years,” they say. I know what they mean. If you look at the map, black people were carefully removed from the centre of town and from the coastline. “Removed” is such a clean and clinical term. Like “sliced out”. That’s what happened to black people in the city—and that’s how Cape Town became white. Excised, missing some central part of itself. Sometimes geography is irretrievable sadness. The sounds of Cape Town are: children playing football in the street, the hiss of a yellow bus braking as it pulls up to the stop, an alarm in a house in the next street, the urgent and then distant passing of an ambulance, the bilal from several directions, a lunchtime siren at the neighbourhood primary school, people running for the hooting taxi, the gardjie calling destinations further and further away. The architecture of black *

HIE’S JOU NANNAS



Rustum Kozain

Cape Town hip hop quintet Dookoom have been vilified and lauded for their protest song about the plight of farmworkers and the lingering irresolution its flags

Regular like clockwork, controversy around the political meanings of a piece of art enlivened online commentary in South Africa in October when hip hop group Dookoom released the video for a new song, ‘Larney Jou Poes’. The song, which addresses a boss (the word “larney” describes a well-off social class and does not necessarily connote race), is best described as an angry protest song expressing the frustrations of farmworkers in especially the Western Cape. Predictably, AfriForum, an NGO that describes itself as an “Afrikaner interest organisation and civil rights watchdog”, filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission, hoping to have the song declared hate speech. In 2011 it successfully challenged Julius Malema’s right to chant “kill the farmer kill the Boer” at political rallies in the Equality Court. Just as predictable as AfriForum’s outrage, champions of free speech and freedom of (artistic) expression rose to the bait and derided the organisation’s claims. No difficult task, as AfriForum can be said to be on the wrong side of history. A report on the AfriForum website expresses its concerns about a song that describes white farmers using the “most insulting words in the Afrikaans language” and that might encourage burning down farms. This is a silly misreading of the song. There is a more disturbing centre of gravity to this song, which AfriForum misses through prudish disavowal and through a literalist approach to art. The opening of the song does invite the listener to a burning: “Farmer Abrahams had many farms, many farms had farmer Abrahams,” raps lead singer Isaac Mutant. “I work one of them, and so would you, so let’s go burn them down.” Then follow references—sung in Afrikaans—to the plight of farmworkers, mainly in figurative, sometimes biblical, language: “*Ek slaan my oë op na die hemel – dis skemer; die varke vreet my op want ek meng my met semels.*” (These lyrics, which translate as “I raise my eyes at the heavens—it’s dusk; the pigs eat me because I’ve mixed with

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Visit any small town neighbouring Cape Town—Ceres, Piketberg, De Doorns, Grabouw—and you can read this submission in people’s body language, a cap-in-hand hunch to the shoulders

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bran”, play on an Afrikaans idiomatic expression *Meng jou met semels dan vreet die varke jou op*, which is the figurative equivalent of the English idiom, Lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas). Further lines refer to Afrikaans TV children’s programming of the past (“*Eendag was daar ...*”—a children’s ‘rise of civilization’ show dubbed from French). The music video includes shots of a group of workers gathering, riding on a tractor, falling off it, drinking *papsak* (cheap box wine), and so on. Despite the hardcore sound of the music and angry tone of the lyrics in general, there’s a sense of the carnivalesque in the video: workers bopping around, some trying to hit a golf ball, a cow urinating, a tractor branded, wryly, as “Kulid” (a phonetic transcription of the word “Coloured”, an apartheid racial designation). There are also shots of hay being piled up, burning tyres rolling towards it, and a large fire burning at night. When the next morning the farmer strolls out into his fields, though, the only sign of fire is “MOOKOOD” burnt (branded) onto a hill. The upshot of all the burning is the (re-)branding of the landscape. So, before one gets to any legal

arguments about freedom of expression and hate speech, a cursory consideration of the video reveals it to be multi-layered, perhaps even self-mocking at times. It plays with history (“Jan van Riebeeck was the fucking Ernie Lastig of his day”, a reference to the Dutch administrator who colonised South Africa and former gang boss Ernie “Lastig” Solomons), draws on traditions of protest music (Public Enemy gets a nod) and ultimately transmutes the call to action into issues of naming. There’s the “Kulid” tractor, a cow is branded YMCMB (a US urban brand popular in SA), and lines reclaiming “Bushman” and “bandit” from their pejorative meanings. This is no different from the long tradition of self-reference in rap and hip hop culture: you stake your claim by stamping your name. And, as much as the song is a (legitimate) expression of anger, it also forms part of an age-old contestation over meaning in South Africa—over ownership and naming of land and landscape (as the controversy over the renaming of a landmark restaurant in the Company’s Gardens in Cape Town’s CBD to Haarlem & Hope revealed), and over the continuity of oppression running from colonial times through apartheid into our present. The multiple meanings of Dookoom’s song, which are not at all exhausted in my reading, should thus alert us, also, to its metaphoric richness. Literalists beware. This is not to shy away from the anger in the song and its call to action, most palpable in the music video’s scenes of (reportedly actual) farmworkers exclaiming “Larney jou poes” direct to camera. In these shots, a few farmworkers for once come upright; it is hard not to feel and believe the anger. Most uneducated and barely literate farmworkers do not have easy access to media and other forums where the middle classes can hear their voices unmediated by policy documents, NGO statistics and opportunist trade unionists. But, rather than exploit and mediate this anger—rather than turn it, in other

words, into the grist of the artist’s mill—‘Larney Jou Poes’ seems to have freed up a moment of truth for voices we like to think do not exist, for voices often through circumstances cowed into submission. Visit any small town neighbouring Cape Town—Ceres, Piketberg, De Doorns, Grabouw—and you can read this submission in people’s body language, a cap-in-hand hunch to the shoulders. But here for a few seconds, we see the farmworker’s body upright and defiant. This is the video’s centre of gravity and its main symbolic power: this defiance is possible. And the shots of these workers exclaiming to camera are inter-cut with similar shots of a young boy, insinuating him as witness and heir of that defiance, even if that defiance is momentary. Will South Africa listen? *

Rustum Kozain is a poet and writer living in Cape Town. His most recent collection Groundwork (2012) was awarded the 2014 Olive Schreiner Prize for Poetry and 2013 Herman Charles Bosman Prize for English.

Defining Dookoom

Dookoom’s name derives from the Indonesian word “dukun”, referring to a pre-Islamic shaman, but it is now assimilated into Islam there and survives here in the Western Cape Muslim community, which has its origins in slaves brought from the East Indies to the Dutch colony. Both noun and verb, “doekoem” can be good or bad. In commentary, Isaac Mutant has explained this word as meaning someone who has been placed under an evil spell, in other words, the target or victim of a spell. It may be that among non-Muslims the word form has changed from ge-doekoem (past participle of the verb form) to doekoem, so that one who has been doekoemed is now also referred to as a doekoem. *

FEATURES

One city, ten people, ten ideas ...

The Interrupter:
Colin Barends #security

The Architect:
Gita Goven #housing

The Transporter:
Thabang Molefe #transport

The Doppelgängers:
Hasan & Husain Essop #culture

The Farmer:
Kieyaam Ryklief #food

The Healer:
John Parker #health

The Principal:
Alfonso Louw #education

The Entrepreneur:
Christina Mtandana #climate

The Unionist:
Mina Plaatjies #work

The Conservationist:
Luzann Isaacs #environment



Photo: Hasan & Husain Essop, Resurrection, 2014



HANOVER PARK

The Interrupter

Colin Barends is not a gangster anymore. He works as a violence interrupter on the Cape Flats. His job is to get young men to rethink their code of violence, to staunch the flow of blood, nothing more. He approaches his job with an acute understanding of what it means to fall

Words: **Lee Middleton**



It’s Friday night in Hanover Park. The streets hum with the frequency of youth uncontained. Teenage boys collect towards the shadowy corners, while adolescent girls pass by arm-in-arm and children careen between the rubbish bins and clothes lines rimming the “courts”, three-storey brick flats that apartheid built. “Stop here,” Colin Barends (45) says. The electric whirl of the window lowers to the cool curiosity of three boys, none older than 18, all speaking an unperturbed melodic Afrikaans as they exchange remarks with Colin. “Those three are high-risk individuals,” says Colin as we drive away. “The one’s daddy is a high flyer, the smaller one’s daddy I know from jail.” Satisfied that the boys are “quiet” for the night, he continues to direct me through the area’s maze of small lanes and cul-de-sacs, carving a mysterious path according to a map that exists only in his mind.

Colin is not your typical gangster. In fact he is no longer a gangster, though it remains unclear to me exactly how “ex” someone with Colin’s history ever truly becomes. The first time I met Colin, the man who pulled up on a white scooter in front of a squat brick house in Bridgetown, Athlone upended my image of a high-ranking prison gang member. Moon-faced and almost bashful in demeanour, the stocky figure in a black and yellow tracksuit could have been any middle-aged guy at Vangate Mall. A scar resembling the Southern Cross arcs over his right eye, its horizontal axis deep enough to make you wonder. It’s the only visible trace of Colin’s past. But Colin’s past is never far behind. Especially when patrolling Hanover Park. One of Cape Town’s 1970s-era dumping grounds for non-whites exiled from District Six and other desirable city areas designated whites-only enclaves, the neighbourhood’s very name is shorthand for the violence, drugs and gang warfare that riddle much of the sprawling Cape Flats today. As the night wears on, the seemingly random nature of our route emerges for what it is: a systematic analysis

that incorporates every house and street that Colin knows—either from recent intel or general experience—to be a site of potential violence. En route, he checks in with anyone who might be armed, has a score to settle or could know something about something that’s going to happen. This intelligence gathering usually occurs somewhere between asking after a child, brother, girlfriend or “mommy” (as mothers are universally referred to in this community), and punting a new job database or rehab programme. It is this unlikely combination of Colin’s constant and embedded presence, storied past, personal well of empathy and highly analytical mind that underlie his success as a “violence interrupter”.

“You can’t take the wrong guy and make him the right guy in this work,” says Pastor Craven Engels (48) of Colin, whom he describes as “one of the best conflict mediators” on the CeaseFire team. A concept imported from the gang-ridden streets of Chicago (documented in Steve James’ compelling 2011 film, *The Interrupters*), CeaseFire came to the streets of Hanover Park in 2012. Officially supported by the City of Cape Town, its operations are delivered through Engels’ First Community Resource Centre, a Pentecostal Protestant non-profit organisation that has run social crime-prevention projects in Hanover Park since 2009. Engels has been involved in drug rehab and social work across the Flats since 2002. A response to increased gang-related violence across the Cape Flats, in particular firearm-related deaths involving gang members and civilians alike, CeaseFire’s primary aim is to prevent deadly retaliations between gangs through conflict mediation. It is all about knowing what is happening on the ground and acting fast. Generally the first on the scene of shootings, interrupters like Colin focus on staunching the flow of blood (the age-old code that blood must be “picked up”, as it is termed here). Then, with the help of outreach workers, the interrupters



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try to divert less senior members out of the life and into something else that is not yet entirely clear. They work according to an explicitly articulated public health model: “quarantining” violence “carriers” to halt “infection”, clinically operating from triage to prevention. However, in neighbourhoods where it is not unusual for 40 shots to be fired in a week, nobody is talking cure just yet. “Our job is to reduce the shootings. Not to break up the gangs or stop the drugs, but to reduce the shootings—because the shootings cause trauma,” Engels asserts with conviction. “Trauma in the kids, trauma in the grandparents, trauma in the dog—and we don’t have counselling for that.” He ruefully laughs. South Africans on the whole exhibit globally high levels of trauma and stress due to the frequency

of witnessing death and violence. According to the 2007 South African Stress and Health Study, the Western Cape led the nation in prevalence of mental disorders, a distinction that mental health professionals link to the extreme poverty and violence characterising places like the Cape Flats. In Hanover Park, local organisation Community Action Towards a Safer Environment (CASE) works to address issues of trauma in the general population. Unfortunately, the type of counselling that a programme like CeaseFire would require—the interrupters are constantly on-call, and in bad times can be witness to streams of violence and funerals that no one should have to bear—is lacking. Aware of this need, the charismatic Engels is attempting to find “suitable” counselling for his team.

In the meantime, however, his focus remains on reducing the shootings; and for that, he exclusively hires ex-gang members. “Your wrongs is your CV,” he explains. An interrupter’s street credibility has to be beyond question. On this count, Colin, the pastor says proudly, is “in a league of his own”.

Atypically for someone with his gang and prison resume, Colin is not the product of a home soaked in drugs, alcohol or violence—or all three. Additionally, his father, John, not only was present and employed (as a driver), but also spent a lifetime preaching in the Evangelical Pentecostal Church. His mother, Cecilia, was employed in the textile industry. The eldest child, Colin spent much of his early childhood with his maternal grandmother in Kewtown, Athlone. When he was on the cusp of adolescence, the Barends managed to gather their brood of five together under one roof, moving several times between Mitchells Plain and Elsies River. Colin didn’t take well to the strict religious environment of his parents’ home, however, and by the age of 14 was running wild with the guys who would later take leadership in different splinter factions of the notorious Americans street gang. Though the fascination that gangs held for this preacher’s son may seem unlikely to some, it must be noted that religion and gangs are two competing aspects of life on the Cape Flats, a place where the ubiquity of gangs is matched only by the superabundance of religious institutions. Revival Life Ministries is one of hundreds. In a double-sized converted garage at the back of John and Cecilia Barends’ modest brick home in Tafelsig, Mitchells Plain, a dozen or so congregants have just finished singing a hymn amplified to an astonishing volume. John Barends, a compact 60-something radiating a furious strength, hooks a microphone headset over an ear and assumes his place at the pulpit. “Without Christ, it is impossible to save a drug addict,” he booms.

Drugs or God: the message constantly broadcast for the reality it reflects. Faced with a choice between the two decades ago, a younger Colin turned his back on the church and embraced the street. “You’re young, you want to feel freedom,” he says of his earlier self. Given the starkness of the dichotomy, it’s easy enough to imagine how the adolescent hunger to seize life by the throat could translate into choosing gang life for no better reason than it seems more fun. Colin takes full responsibility for every decision he has made, but certain truths emerge with hindsight. “I felt if I’m not part of the church, I cannot be part of the family. When the gang accepted me, I thought this is what I want. I wanted to be accepted by people. Obviously I chose the wrong people.” But the allure of gangs goes beyond the simple if powerful pull of belonging or the obvious youthful appeal of chaos. Taken in the context of life in the Cape Flats—whether in the 1980s or circa now—gang membership taps into a network of motivations and desires, from the practical to the deeply subliminal. For over four decades, gangs in the Cape Flats have filled a social void, providing employment, a

social cohesion and a safety net for families and communities largely discarded by the state. Then there’s the glittering fantasy of cars, cash, clothes and drugs. And finally, the oldest story in the book: the desire for power and longing for respect. What young man—especially one from a community “up against 400 years of being undermined and told that we are second class, worth nothing,” as Stephen Mentor, who works with men in Hanover Park to reshape ideas around masculinity, puts it— isn’t looking for his piece of that?

Back on patrol, Colin waits for Yaseen* in the darkened lounge of a flat in the Hanover Park area nicknamed “Die Hel”. A stout older woman in a recliner by a window mindlessly pops a length of bubble wrap while a toddler silently clambers across her lap. A half-dozen other children aged three to eight mill in and out of the bedroom, from which some light spills into the lounge. Finally Yaseen emerges, pulling on a striped hoodie and allowing a glimpse of his skinny chest, bandaged where he was stabbed in the lungs. At 26, Yaseen is a rising junior leader in the



Americans. Attacked by members of a rival gang in retaliation for a robbery that a fellow American perpetrated, Yaseen claims the rivals got the wrong guy. He seems glad to see Colin, but dismayed by the older man’s news that while he was in hospital, his gang agreed in mediation to resolve the attack on him non-violently. “Ja,” Yaseen exhales. This is clearly the first he’s heard of it. “So what is the way forward?” Colin asks. “Forward?” Yaseen echoes. “You can change your life,” says the old lady from the corner. It’s the first she’s spoken since our arrival. From the bedroom where the children have all disappeared to watch TV, multiple gunshots blast repeatedly, amplified against the desires silently battling in this conversation. “I can’t talk about it now,” Yaseen says to Colin, glancing at his mother, who gets up to leave the room. Yaseen then tells Colin that earlier that day while he was in hospital having his stitches removed, two armed men busted into the flat, kicking open the locked bedroom door where the children (his own and his brothers’) were hiding. Unrelated to the stabbing incident, these two were looking to “pick up blood” that Yaseen had spilled over a year ago. That is to say, they had come to kill him. I can’t help but think of a comment made by Jeremy Vearey, a police major general who heads Operation Combat with the South African Police Service (SAPS) Western Cape special gang unit, based in Mitchells Plain. “You want to know where your children are learning a violent way of resolving a problem? They learn it at home. The socialisation into the culture of violence comes from the domestic environment: the pernicious effects of children observing [violence], and what it does to them. The houses in Hanover Park and Mitchells Plain are much more dangerous than the streets,” said Vearey, an Elsies River native. He was commenting on the frightening rates of domestic violence plaguing

Cape Town homes, which by most reckonings is a greater if less immediately visible scourge than gang violence in terms of overall impact. Nonetheless, Vearey’s general point resonates, regardless of why Yaseen’s children are bearing witness to the conflicts playing out in this home. Before departing Colin gives Yaseen his cell number, asking the young man to contact him in the week. “I’ll babysit him now,” Colin says in the car. Having interpreted Yaseen’s reluctance to speak in front of his mother as an admission that he is planning something, Colin reckons he still has time to turn the younger man’s thinking. Between his injury and the other outstanding blood “debt”, Yaseen is likely to lay low for a while. In the meantime? “I’ll be in his space,” says Colin. Fortunately for Colin that space is fairly predictable, as people in these parts largely exist in circumscribed zones. Gangsters think twice before treading into a rival gang’s turf. Civilians also calibrate their movements according to gang activity, in addition to which most simply lack funds to move freely beyond commuting for work. Children in particular rarely leave their small communities, sometimes to the extent that the route between home and school—and church or mosque—defines their whole universe. Even that path can be perilous depending on how many gang-controlled turfs must be crossed to get there. “I call it the Athlone-Mowbray-Kaap syndrome,” says Derek Oldjohn, one of Colin’s oldest and most trusted friends. “In the really violent townships, children will stay confined even just to a few streets depending on which gang rules,” the fellow ex-gangster with a philosophical bent observes. Vearey also notes the stifling phenomenon, insisting that exposing kids to life outside of their areas is key to shifting mindsets. “Instead of preaching, you expose them to experiences which demonstrate an alternative,” says Vearey, an ex-military man who



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Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha

01. Nontebeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha

02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha

03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives

deeply believes that policing is but a small fraction of the coordinated and cross-functional intervention needed to truly change things in the Cape Flats. “Bigger guns don’t solve this problem,” states the man at the heart of fighting organised criminal activity in these parts.

As I spend more time with Colin shuttling between different neighbourhoods of the Cape Flats and back to my own home in the city centre, what becomes increasingly clear is that the one feature common to wherever one is in Cape Town is the lack of connective tissue between that place and everywhere else. “Geographically, we have a unique set-up in terms of the mountain and the sea and the way we were designed,” notes Julie Berg, a criminology researcher at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Berg refers to “manmade infrastructures” like the Cape Flats neighbourhoods, whose apartheid-engineered intention was isolation from the white suburbs and city centre, as well as the use of thoroughfares like the N1 and N2 highways as “structural divisions”—roads designed to feed different segments of the city’s segregated neighbourhoods while simultaneously fortifying those boundaries. “How do you address that?” Berg asks of such physical barriers to integration. In 2014, Cape Town—a city awkwardly teetering between polishing its “world design capital” image and defending its service delivery record in highly publicised battles like the “poo wars”—remains a place where islands of safety sit over faults of danger, where perceptions of safety are inextricably bound to where you are and who you are. But the ground can shift beneath any of us, at any time, for the smallest reason: a missed train, a mistaken identity, or simply a wrong turn. Something catches Colin’s eye. It is a posse of kids barrelling down the street, nine year old, splashing through puddles. “They’re playing at being gangsters,” he comments

before we drive on through an area of makeshift dwellings abutting brick houses, where cats perched on vibracrete walls stare down at men in long robes taking the night air. That is to say, a community. “No shots have been fired for 20 days,” Colin tells me with some satisfaction before I take my leave to head home to the city centre. Ten minutes later, I’ve missed the turnoff for the N2 and am whizzing past signs for Manenberg, Gugulethu, Nyanga: names that connote danger at this hour on a Friday night, invoking Colin’s explanation of turfs and the importance of knowing where you are and how 20-days of no shootings simply ends. Then, just as quickly, I’m out of the woods. But what if you can never leave?

“You see the fence here?” Criminology researcher and writer Don Pinnock nods to the tall gate separating his property from the street in Vredehoek, an affluent leafy central Cape Town neighbourhood from which vantage we are enjoying a spectacular sunset over Signal Hill. “Everybody has a fear of this contact crime, which is largely not happening in the areas where people sit with large walls. We have a thousand CCTV cameras, and this is an incredibly safe area. People in the townships can’t afford that level of security.” The stats, such as they are—crime is massively underreported in Cape Town, as is the case nationwide—support him. Although central Cape Town has a healthy share of incidents, primarily theft from cars and robberies, when it comes to contact crime in general and murder in particular, the coloured and black townships of the Cape Flats lead the nation. In those neighbourhoods, the rate of violence against young men is more than double South Africa’s national average, which is already eight times the global rate and heavily skewed to young men aged 15–29 (femicide by an intimate partner comes in at six times the global indicator).

With eight of the nation’s ten worst murder hotspots in 2013, Cape Town is South Africa’s murder capital. According to Jean-Pierre Smith, Cape Town’s mayoral committee member for safety and security, at least 20% of those murders are gang related. “It focuses the mind when you see what a large role gang murders play in your crime stats,” says Smith, who verges on manic in his devotion to the issue. “The murder is the evident part that gets the headlines, but it’s the criminal economy that goes with it, the guns and drugs,” he continues, describing other gang-related crime and social trauma. For Smith, an intervention like CeaseFire is just one horse in a stable that includes transforming the Metro Police from traffic cops to police who can engage in “full-blown neighbourhood policing”; support to neighbourhood watches; creation of special investigation units; youth development and schools programmes; and an expansion of Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU), a safety-through-better-design effort that is in fact the larger programme in which CeaseFire is a project. Asking questions around how physical space—lighting and transport and the layout and feel of public spaces—can improve security, VPUU has slowly begun its rollout in Hanover Park this year. Researchers call the concept driving it “placemaking”. How do you make a place better? Where do you start? “A harm, say a shooting, doesn’t just come from nowhere,” says criminology researcher John Cartwright. “There’s a set of circumstances and events that led to that shooting at that time. So if you start recognizing that, you can start to think of ways of interrupting that pathway. The interrupters are interrupting at a very late stage.” Which is not to say it’s not worth doing. “But there are social interventions that interrupt earlier.” Though CeaseFire has started accumulating data indicating a significant reduction in shootings, many criminologists and social

workers take a less measured view than Cartwright’s, directly questioning the merit of gang-focused interventions. “Gangsters get targeted [but] they are the marketing front, the shopkeepers of a larger process,” says Pinnock. “Trying to target gang members is like mopping up water without turning off the tap. You’re not changing anything.” However you look at it, the Cape Flats are flooded, and with so many individuals involved, what is the cost—practically or ethically—of just giving up on them?

A man in an orange correctional services jumpsuit is singing his heart out. Eyes squeezed shut, face uplifted and beatific, his voice belongs on stage with Aretha Franklin. About two-dozen Pollsmoor Prison inmates fill the room, singing and clapping. They are mostly radiant. It is graduation day for the eight who made it through a six-week “behaviour modification” course that Colin and CeaseFire outreach worker Clint Wildeman have co-facilitated in the prison. Topics included subjects like anger management, paradigm shifting, money management and communication. It is time for the graduates’ personal testimonies. An inmate in his 40s, whose boxer’s physique and aura of dark ferocity stand out like a bruise, speaks first. “I’m an angry man, but the love you have brought us has changed me,” he says with a disarming sincerity. Another man in his late 30s, arms covered in tattoos, says he’s been through dozens of programmes, but this was the first that was “more than a job you show up for”. He thanks “Brother Colin” for his love and acceptance, for teaching him to “respond and not react”. All the graduates are on the verge of parole, and were selected to participate because their activity in prison gangs classified them as high risk. Certificates awarded, they break into a song: “I believe everything’s going to be alright.” The room lifts with a helium-like buoyancy, but

equally palpable is a live wire crackle that one feels the slightest spark could ignite, burning it all down. The concept of rehabilitation came to South Africa’s prison system in the mid-1990s. “The wardens started to be more human to us,” recalls Colin, who served his first sentence for robbery at the age of 16. For the next 18 years he was in and out of over a half dozen Western Cape prisons, for theft and robbery, for durations varying from a few months to five years. Colin’s total prison time exceeds ten years. Rehabilitation programmes and educational outreach didn’t feature much during his earlier stints, though that started to change during his last sentence from 1996–2001. When Colin was released in September of 2001 he had no fixed intention of turning his life around. He went to stay in Masincedane, an informal settlement near Strandfontein, where his plan was to quietly start dealing drugs while he regrouped. Having been inside since 1996, he had missed the radical upheavals taking place in the gang world outside. “The gangs were changing, I was out of touch,” he says of the unthinkable merging of the previously separate prison and street gangs. The shift further fuelled the vigilante war waged by PAGAD (People Against Gangsterism and Drugs), declared with the execution of Hard Livings gang leader Rashaad Staggie in 1996. The economics of the new South Africa’s increasingly internationalised drug trade had created hybrid alliances that overturned old loyalties and rules—a metamorphosis brilliantly documented in Jonny Steinberg’s classic, *The Number* (2004)—and the gang world that Colin had grown up in no longer really existed. In this increasingly heavily armed landscape, he saw a future for himself that ended in either working for someone else, back in prison or dead. In the meantime, and of more immediate concern, he lacked a reliable supply to feed the formidable drug habit that he had cultivated since the age of 17, encompassing everything from dagga to mandrax to heroin. The fantasy that Colin had built his



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I felt i’m not part of the church. I cannot be part of the family. When the gang accepted me, i thought this is what i want. I wanted to be accepted by people. Obviously i chose the wrong people.
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life around—to work his way up through the prison gang and come out able to build his own street gang faction and control ever-larger territories—was over. “You always thought that with being a high-ranking [prison] gang member there’s privileges [and] you’ll get the same privileges in the outside world. But now you come outside and realize everyone has to hustle and look for his own thing. I realised either I have to join a street gang or change my life,” he says. “I felt quite degraded by finding myself in that situation.” With this realisation came the understanding that his first step to personal freedom would have to be getting clean. Masincedane informal settlement is a typical warren of corrugated iron and wooden plank shacks. A combination of sewage and a slightly chemical-tinged wood smoke odour permeate the air. Dunes rise beyond the shacks, giving way to glimpses of the ocean. Colin’s old place sits at the mouth of the settlement. A tiny one-room shelter, windows and door framed by tattered canvas awnings grey with mildew: this was the unlikely site of his transformation. Although he didn’t have high hopes of truly changing his life, Colin began going to church again. Through the congregation he managed to get odd jobs gardening and cleaning, but all the while was still smoking drugs on and off. After a few false starts, in 2005 he finally locked himself in his shack for three days to detox. His recovery story over the next two years was no less challenging for its prosaic unfolding: he struggled, fell off the wagon, got back on, eventually got a job as a labourer at a supermarket distribution centre, fell off the wagon again, but this time enrolled in a rehab programme with a promise of a full-time job upon return to the distribution centre from a compassionate boss who believed in the importance of second chances. Today he has been clean for eight years. While explanations of why certain individuals manage to tame personal demons when so many others fail often have a ring of

pat magical realism to them, Colin ascribes his achievement—to the extent that he would call it that—to a certain old-school discipline and respect deeply inculcated by the family he ran away from so many years ago. Whatever the reason, it defies a few lines of type to capture those years of struggle, self-doubt and finally a kind of peace that is renegotiated every day.

Less than a kilometre from Colin’s old shack, a row of shabby buildings that used to host summer camps now houses rehab centres. The yellow face-brick structure closest to Masincedane is home to Breaking Chains, an in-house rehab founded by Lyndsay Connolly, who works as a “friend of the courts” and runs a diversion programme to keep young and first-time offenders out of the prison system. Connolly, who got into this work because of her brother’s heroin addiction, met Colin when he was at Camp Joy. The rehab centre where he found a job in 2008, Camp Joy was also Colin’s introduction to CeaseFire’s Craven Engels, who is responsible for the place. Engels recalls immediately recognising an “atmosphere” around Colin. “I told him in a year you’ll be running this facility.” The prediction proved true, and by 2010, Colin was managing the rehab centre. “Everyone loved Colin—he’s got the story, man,” says Engels. Connolly agrees. Her eyes shine when she speaks of Colin, whom she credits with saving the lives of numerous young men. “He’s also a father figure for a lot of them. Most of the boys don’t have father figures in Hanover Park, but Colin takes that bit of extra time to spend with them. People don’t understand how satisfying it is for him to give back. It’s a hard thing to walk through, but people can change,” she gushes. Colin’s own view of his progress and ability to help others is more shaded. “It’s still a long road for me, I’ll never see myself as arrived. And I don’t want that the guys get too attached, because I know for a fact I can’t

really help them as they want to be helped. With the young people who are starting on this road, I can give tips and I can lead, but you have to walk it on your own.”

It’s Sunday after church, and Colin heads to Hanover Park, where a netball tournament is in full swing. Dozens of high-school girls in bright colours run rampant, while younger kids, also mostly girls, stick by their mothers sitting courtside in camp chairs. CeaseFire encourages these events, supplying cool drinks and snacks, aware that groups of people out together keeps the streets safer. Today Colin is following up on a shooting that occurred here in the early hours. He received an SMS about it while in church. Colin’s phone never stops, which means neither does he. The woman who sent the SMS approaches. Rifqua* is one of Colin’s “credible messengers”. She informs him that the police arrested a gang member he’s been working with for the morning’s disturbance. “But he wasn’t the shooter,” she says. After they discuss what happened, Rifqua shows me a spray of bullet holes peppering the walls around the court where the girls are playing. On the same walls, graffiti reads “RIP” and “NYC”, the latter a reference to the Americans gang. “We’ve got innocent children here, no gangsters, they just come from that side and shoot this side and make our road suspect,” Rifqua insists. I ask what can be done. “We must put all the bosses together and tell them we’re *gatvol* (angry) now!” she says vehemently. When I point out that the bosses are unlikely to simply walk away from their livelihoods, she falters. “We want peace for our children. Like my daughter’s child, growing up without fatherly love because of gangsterism,” she laments. She doesn’t mention that her grandchild’s absent father was a gang leader, killed in gang-related business. Although that fact in no way negates the validity of her concerns for her neighbourhood, it

“**People do like to stay in this area: it’s near the factories and the places where they work ...**”

does speak to the reality that few here are not somehow complicit or implicated in the system. “The gang scene is not a thing that jumped up yesterday,” says Stephen Mentor of Community Action Towards a Safer Environment (CASE). “You have mothers and grannies and young boys who look like they’re not in a gang, but their family connection is there for 40 years. The whole scene around gang activity, which people don’t understand, is that mothers and wives will still lie for their husbands and sons, hide guns, deny gang activity, deny children are involved in peddling drugs, because of the family history. They’ve been reliant on that activity for their financial security. And the deeper you’re in this whole scene, the more difficult it is to get out.” And so Rifqua calls Colin every time there’s a shooting or a disturbance, but she also will do whatever it takes to protect her family, gangsters or no.

“I bet this is the safest place in all of Cape Town,” Colin says as we circle Robben Island, having just passed the structure where Robert Sobukwe spent six years in solitary confinement. When I first met him, Colin mentioned Robben Island as a place he had feared for years, but had come to dream of visiting. On the ferry ride over he tells me it’s his first time on a boat. Touring the island, he takes pictures of the oystercatchers and shipwrecks with his phone, and while the rest of the group lines up to photograph Mandela’s cell, he inspects the whole



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of Block B with an appraising eye. The shower area is deemed small and he expresses surprise at the wooden doors (“ours were metal”). He is impressed by the intercoms in all the single cells, which he initially mistakes for radios, triggering memories of clustering around the single speaker in the communal cells of his prison days. “They played them so quietly, you had to gather around.

It was our only link to outside,” he says, smiling at the recollection. His mood seemingly approaching something like nostalgia, I ask if he ever actually sought prison time. He struggles to reply. “It was like a second home. You had friends there. And you had more power than you had outside,” he allows. He then mentions a recent visit to old friends serving life sentences. How after seeing them, there was a part of him that felt he should stay. “Not really stay, but... it’s like I leave a part of myself there...” He says that he hopes one day to get that part of himself back: to feel whole and totally unconnected to prison life. However, his current work sustains that connection, and he doubts he’ll ever really be free of it. But he accepts the trade-off as more than his due, to the extent that when I ask if it would be worth dying for this work, he replies plainly: “If it is to save a person’s life, it can be worth it. In the gang life you’re ready to die for something that is wrong, so why can’t you give your life for something that is right? I was part of the problem so that’s why I must be part of the solution.” Perhaps it’s not so much a question of nostalgia, but, as he puts it, “There is something, spiritually, a part that I have left there. My youth.” Although Colin willingly gave his youth to gangs and drugs, to violence and prison, he now gives everything he has left to something else. Part of that something is his new family. He married his wife, Shireen, in 2013, and welcomed his first and only child into the world this past February. He credits the birth of his daughter, Gia, with the ability to “have emotions again”. But this is not a story of redemption by love for one’s child, and if anything, the emotions unlocked by his family help keep him focused on his overwhelming drive to make things right. Once upon a time, Colin Barends’ need to be recognised and thirst for a centre fuelled choices that led him into a life of gangsterism, leaving a trail of violence and pain in his wake. Those same qualities still drive him today. The difference

is they now compel him to look squarely at his own reflection, accept exactly what he sees and to move forward, constantly endeavouring to bring meaning and peace to the chaotic world he inhabits. Perhaps it is this daily act that lies at the heart of all and any true violence interruption. *

* Not their real names

Lee Middleton is a Cape Town journalist and editor whose writing focuses on sustainable development, environmental conservation, humanitarian issues, food security, social entrepreneurship and health



OBSERVATORY

The Architect

Gita Goven is an architect and humanist with an experience of hardship. Her biography has shaped her vision of architecture's possibilities. Gita's practice specialises in the design of integrated and sustainable human settlements. It is urgent work. Housing and the restoration of human dignity are central to the post-apartheid project

Words: **Bekezela Phakathi**





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Gita Goven is a 55-year-old mother of two whose life story encapsulates the struggles endured by previously disadvantaged groups, especially women, during the dark years of apartheid. From sharing a tiny bedroom with five family members in Springs, a mining town east of Johannesburg, where she grew up, to now owning an established design practice in Cape Town, Gita is an example of what courage and drive can achieve. Gita founded ARG Design (ARG) in 1999 with two business partners, István Gosztola and Alastair Rendall, who is also her husband. The practice, which comprises a team of 20 “co-creators”, specialises in urban design, architecture, environmental management and landscape architecture. A key statistic underscores her achievement: only 24% of built environment professionals in South Africa are black; 9% are female. Being one of the few black women owning an interdisciplinary design practice in the country, Gita’s successes stand out even more. “As a young woman, especially being black in a more white environment, it was very difficult,” says Gita, whose diminutive stature and soft-spoken manner belies her many achievements as an architect. “People often assumed I was either the secretary or the junior even though I was the principal in the practice”. Gita learnt to be assertive and demonstrate that she was the “architect in charge”. Despite having to adopt a tough approach in dealing with other professionals, Gita has a private, more homely side to her. She enjoys cooking and reading; she has visited more than 60 cities globally. “The people and the food of these places and the life of the city and quieter places of the soul all are

interesting for me,” she says. Professionally, Gita has emerged as a key figure in post-apartheid housing programmes, her practice specialising in the design of integrated and sustainable human settlements. As an architect, she has been involved in a number of innovative projects addressing problems associated with housing, a key issue nationally. Since 1994, government has been battling to eradicate the staggering housing backlog, which has swollen to 2.3 million units in 2014, up from about 1.5 million in 1994. The government claims to have built 3.6 million houses over the last 20 years, with plans to deliver about 1.5-million houses—and “housing opportunities”—over the next five years. The provision of free housing may however cease. Minister for Human Settlements Lindiwe Sisulu recently said that

she would like to see the state move away from the large-scale provision of housing for the poor. She pointed out that this provision creates a syndrome of dependency. Sisulu stated that the housing backlog would take another eight to ten years to eradicate. The Financial and Fiscal Commission estimates that it would cost government approximately R800 billion to eradicate the housing backlog by 2020, money that central government will struggle to raise on its own in the face of an underperforming economy, growing unemployment and stagnant tax revenues. It will, therefore, be crucial to build more partnerships with the private sector to address the housing problem. ARG performs an important role, functioning as an interface between state and private interests. To date ARG has worked on a number of projects in housing, education and transportation, including: bus rapid transport stations in Cape Town, Rustenburg and Ekurhuleni; informal settlement upgrade development frameworks; small town regeneration projects in the Eastern Cape; the Blue Downs Swimming Pool; Lynedoch EcoVillage, a sustainability research institute near Stellenbosch; and concept planning on the much talked about WesCape, a large-scale urban development project that could potentially transform the West Coast corridor north out of Cape Town. Common throughout these projects is ARG’s emphasis on sustainable design principles broadly aimed at improving the livelihoods of especially low-income families. “Healing is for me a very important thing,” says Gita. “I think our society needs a lot of healing.” She says her work focuses on how to create places that are “wholesome, healing, and where people can both feel free to be who they are, as well as love and respect the places and spaces they use everyday”.

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RG is situated on the fourth floor of Premier Centre in Observatory. The large building faces onto Main Road, a key thoroughfare, and is also home to the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation and an alliance of human rights organisations known as the National Alliance for the Development of Community Advice Offices. ARG’s office is buzzing when I meet Gita on a wet Friday morning. Gita, who wears black pants and a bright jersey, is recovering from a cold. She coughs occasionally as she tells me how she came to study architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Gita grew up and matured into adulthood during the height of the apartheid system; the suffering she endured directly influenced her decision to enrol in an architecture degree at Wits in 1977, a year after matriculating. “I thought that architecture can make a difference because I grew up in a context where I could see that black people were not getting good architecture,” says Gita. However, Wits in 1977 was still a segregated university with only a few places open to black students. “I had to get a special permit from the government to study. Your results had to be good

and you had to show that the course you wanted to do was not offered at an Indian university.” The only tertiary institution for Indians was the University of Durban-Westville, in Natal; it didn’t offer architectural training. So Gita was accepted to study architecture and engineering at Wits. Her parents were confounded by her decision; they wanted her to take a degree in medicine. “They did not understand the world of architecture and engineering,” she says, highlighting a drama repeated in many low-income families where study offered—as it still does—a way out of penury. “I grew up in a community where the only professional person was a family doctor.” In her fourth year, when students do practical work, Gita worked in a Johannesburg firm to gain experience. With the money she saved Gita was able to travel to Britain; she later backpacked through eight countries in Europe. In 1981, degree incomplete, she ended up in India, where she stayed for two years, working in housing and integrated development. Gita’s decision to postpone her studies and travel to India was directly influenced by her experiences at Wits. By the late 1970s, a strictly policed system of separate development had effectively curtailed the rights and movements of the majority black population. The National Party’s Bantustan policy was also gaining momentum, with the newly independent homeland of Transkei widely feted by apartheid ideologues as a viable model. Gita, a member of a black student’s society, experienced the effects of the apartheid system daily. “During those days black students could not even go across the road to a coffee shop.” The logic of apartheid and its spatial practices also infiltrated the classroom. “When I had to work in my practical year, I realised that if I graduated as an architect, I would probably end up designing separate toilets for blacks and whites—it was intolerable.” India, by contrast, was “inspiring”. Gita worked for the Ahmedabad

Study Action Group, an NGO that partnered with Vedchhi Pradesh Seva Samiti, a Gandhian institution inspired by the principles, vision and life work of Mahatma Gandhi. While in India, Gita interacted with a variety of professionals, including architects, scientists, engineers and social workers. She worked on a housing project in the Valod District in Gujarat Province. Gita and her colleagues were briefed to upgrade 5000 houses over five years for landless tribal and “untouchable” people in ten of the district’s 40 villages. “We had village extension workers from the villages as project partners and these folk are now our lifelong friends,” says Gita. “It was a fantastic project because we taught people how to build with their own local materials, use biogas systems that dealt with sanitation and produced energy, and how to better design and create their buildings”. In 1983, after two years in India, Gita returned to South Africa and settled in Cape Town. Her decision to finish her architectural studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT) owed a great deal to its innovative architectural programme, which included coursework in development, security and African studies. Gita’s return to South Africa however coincided with an escalation in pressure, both internally and from abroad, on the apartheid regime. Activism and unrest were commonplace, prompting the National Party government to declare a state of emergency. In 1986, while still at UCT, Gita co-founded the Development Action Group (DAG) with other planning professionals wanting to contribute their professional and technical expertise to a transformation agenda. DAG, which is now a leading NGO in the urban sector, formed part of a broader collective of progressive planning movements keen to contribute to social change. According to Alison Todes, a professor of urban and regional planning at Wits, planners linked to these organisations interpreted UCT’s ideas on the links between urban spatial organisation

and poverty as a platform for redressing urban apartheid. During the era of high apartheid (1948–90), Cape Town’s white city managers, in concert with national government, passed legislation that pushed black, coloured and Indian people out of the central city to outlying areas such as Ndabeni and the broader Cape Flats. Gita says that during her time volunteering in townships she began to understand how low-income settlements, especially townships, worked. These years would have a profound influence on her subsequent work.

Gita’s decision to study architecture in the late 1970s coincided with some fundamental shifts in the practice. The mid-1970s marked the end of a period of sustained economic growth in South Africa, growth that buoyed the career of many architects, most if not all white. By the time she completed her studies in the mid-1980s the building industry was deep in the doldrums. Despite the shaky economic climate, in 1986 Gita was headhunted by the firm Revel Fox & Partners, an established practice that specialises in architecture, urban design and planning. Founded in 1962 by the late Revel Fox, a respected commercial architect and member of the Cape Town city council, the practice designed the mixed-use Victoria & Alfred Waterfront and remains an influential player in the industry. Joining the practice offered Gita a chance to explore what she describes as her interest in “settlement-related issues”. An eager student, she absorbed whatever knowledge she could in Fox’s large office. Two years later she joined MLH & Partners, a firm that has in recent times played a leading role in the development of a wide variety of facilities, including stadiums and educational facilities. Already at this early point in her career Gita recognised that she would eventually have to establish her own practice if she was going to give fuller expression to her interest in dignified housing.

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“The work that I do is not just architecture,” she explains. “It interfaces between economics, settlements, environment and community development. Over time, what became clearer to me was that most of the townships were structured as dormitories with very little other input or attractors of investment that could make a difference”. Gita emphasises that settlements have to be designed in such a way that they inspire people and bring the best out of a community. She points to the Lynedoch EcoVillage near Stellenbosch as a good example. Lynedoch EcoVillage is one of the first ecologically designed and socially mixed communities in South Africa. It is situated in the wine country north of Cape Town on a property that formerly consisted of prefabricated holiday cottages built in the 1960s. Underwritten by businessman and philanthropist Dick Enthoven, who is also the property’s owner, the project includes a sustainability research centre located in the converted hotel in the centre of the village. Directed by Mark Swilling and Eve Annecke, the Sustainability Institute runs a Masters course in sustainable development. Practical projects and related research programmes focus on the village, and provide the ecological research and community development support for the project. The first step in the eco-village project was the development of a primary school with 450 places to serve families of local farm workers. Prior to 2002 the schooling available to the children of farm labourers was substandard. It was Gita’s idea to transform the dilapidated old school into something new– “a really beautiful, warm, non-institutional looking and inviting building set in an eco-village context.” The new school building has many features particular to the needs of the site and its users, including natural systems for heating and cooling. Winter is particularly difficult for young learners, explains Gita, especially those without adequate



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clothing. An under-floor heat source helps create a warm environment. “The heat from the rock bed underneath heats the classrooms up so the temperature is about five or six degrees warmer than the outside”. The upgraded class environment has produced improved results, says Gita. Grantham Jansen, principal of Lynedoch’s primary school, describes the design of the school as “inspirational”. He says the parents and teachers are all motivated to produce “exceptional results”. Over the past 12 years the school has recorded an average pass rate of 90% in all grades (from grade one to seven). Jansen attributes this to the design of the school building.

Design can play a “huge role” in uplifting communities, thinks Gita. “But the power of design goes nowhere unless you have people that are interested and committed to transformation. In Cape Town, there is a lot of focus on the areas that work.” She mentions the Observatory Square upgrade as an example, adding that it was motivated and implemented in good time because it has a strong civic association and ratepayer base driving things. Gita points out that upgrades are causally linked to

strong ratepayer bases. “This level of ownership and driving of projects, as seen in the Observatory Square upgrade, has not been possible in townships, for many reasons,” she says. “Municipal systems work where there is a connection between rates paid and what you can invest. Many township and informal settlements areas have poor rates recovery or are not rateable.” The current system of linking development to rates and taxes perpetuates uneven development, insists Gita. The net result is “two different cities”. This has led to simmering tensions in deprived communities, with service delivery protests related to housing, sanitation and electricity now commonplace. According to Municipal IQ’s Hotspots Monitor report, there were 48 major service delivery protests against local government in the first quarter of 2014. Municipal IQ is a web-based data and intelligence service specialising in the monitoring and assessment of South Africa’s 283 municipalities. Gauteng and the Eastern Cape have witnessed the most protests this year. According to Gita, South Africa’s human settlements “crisis” is attributable to the country’s unpreparedness for the swift urbanisation after 1994. “In the last





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Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha

01. Nontebeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha

02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha

03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives

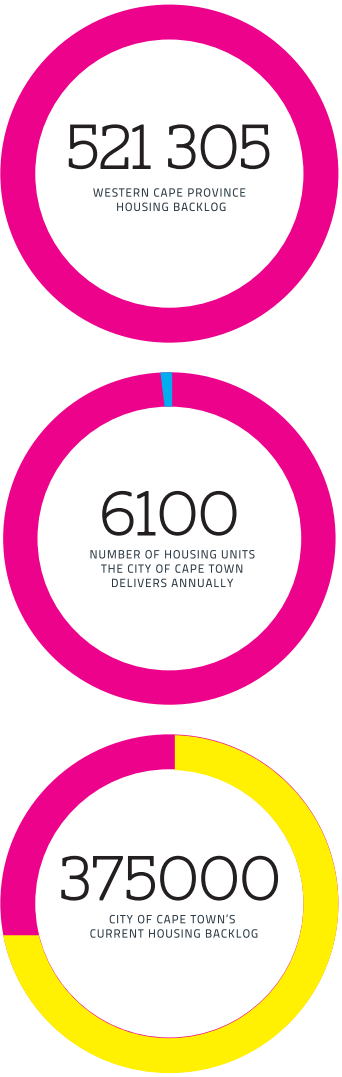
20 years, urbanisation has happened rapidly and major metropolitan municipalities and larger district municipalities who were grappling with restructuring and the transition were inadequately prepared to receive that level of urbanisation.” Not Johannesburg, not Durban, not Cape Town, she elaborates. Cape Town’s population has grown by 30% in the past 10 years, from 2.9 million in 2001 to 3.7 million in 2011, according to Census 2011. The housing shortage has led to a mushrooming of informal settlements on the outskirts of the city, often on precarious and/or environmentally sensitive sites, as well as on privately owned land. These include Marikana, an informal settlement along Symphony Way in Philippi East. The settlement, which was named to honour striking Lonmin workers who died

at Marikana mine in 2012, was established when backyarders began erecting structures on the privately owned land in 2013. Residents have since been involved in running battles with the city’s Anti-Land Invasion Unit, which have removed shacks in 2013 and 2014. Similarly, in Lwandle, near Strand, settlers also illegally occupied vacant land, building 200 or so shack dwellings on land owned by the South African National Roads Agency Limited (Sanral). The land has been designated for future road works. The roads agency sought relief from the courts and in June 2014, during a particularly cold winter spell, some 850 families were controversially evicted from Lwandle. The eviction process, which saw homes razed and recalled scenes from South Africa’s apartheid past, prompted national outrage. A public commission was

subsequently established. There are 276 000 people on Cape Town’s housing waiting list, although the real demand for housing far exceeds that number. The official figure also excludes several thousand unregistered backyarders and street dwellers. Further contributing to the problem of housing is informal densification on the urban edge. A phenomenon common to both new and old townships, it involves the unregulated construction of additional rent-generating shacks on existing sites, often abutting a main dwelling. According to the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa, a non-profit organisation providing professional and dedicated socio-economic rights assistance, and the University of Western Cape’s Community Law Centre, of the 1.8 million households nationally with at least one member registered on the housing waiting list, around 25% live in shacks in informal settlements, 45% in a dwelling/structure on a separate stand, 12% in a traditional dwelling and 10% in a backyard shack. “Whether you live in an informal settlement or RDP house, the risks and the problems are similar,” says Gita, who believes townships are essentially “ghettos”. South Africa’s housing crisis is well documented. Abahlali baseMjondolo, the largest shack-dwellers’ movement in the country, is on record as saying housing is a time bomb waiting to explode. Abahlali claims to have more than 30 000 members. According to Matt Birkinshaw, a researcher from the London School of Economics, by 2009, five years after its launch, the movement had around 10 000 paid-up members and more than 30 000 active supporters in over 40 affiliated settlements. It is now considered to be the largest organisation of militant poor in post-apartheid South Africa. Abahlali president S’bu Zikode said earlier this year that land invasions were a symptom of government’s failure to address the housing crisis. “There will be more land invasions until lasting solutions are found,” said Zikode. “People are desperate for housing.”

The Western Cape government is aware of the problem, if ill-equipped to address it. With a housing database of over half-a-million households in the province, the provincial government estimates that it will cost over R70-billion to provide land, services and top structures, according to Western Cape Premier Helen Zille. Speaking during her state of the province address in June, she added: “This is almost double the budget of the entire Western Cape government. What this means is that we cannot continue with ‘business-as-usual’ – we need new

and improved strategies that harness households, the private sector and NGOs to place the Western Cape on a different housing trajectory, one which offers an improved living environment for everyone.” Zille said the province needed to change the current perception shared by the majority of South Africans that government is solely responsible for providing free housing to everyone – “because it is clear with the available resources and the escalating need, this will take centuries.” Zille appealed for “innovative partnerships and solutions to improve people’s standard of living”, stating that it is crucial that citizens become “directly involved in human settlement projects instead of waiting to receive a house”. According to Gita, the local government’s budget for RDP housing is only adequate for roughly 8000 households per annum in the metropolitan area, leaving a shortfall of some 400 000 households. “There is a mismatch between the quantum of the need and the finance that is available. We have to find other mechanisms to deal with that.” Land costs, which are high in Cape Town, add to the problem. “By the time you pay the cost of land you cannot afford to develop affordable housing,” says Gita. The idea of a housing problem has to be reformulated as an economic development process to stimulate industry and production, she thinks – “so that people can afford to live in a pedestrian-friendly and vibrant city that has mixed uses and incomes, high-quality education, a healthy environment and public places and spaces.”



THE HOUSING BACKLOG
SOURCE: STATISTICS SA, CENSUS 2011

The Two Oceans Marathon, held every year in Cape Town during Easter, describes itself as “the world’s most beautiful marathon”. Its routing threads through plush residential neighbourhoods formerly restricted to white owners. Gita doesn’t mean this popular marathon when she tries to encapsulate the extent of the housing problem by comparing it to a marathon. “It was almost like we are running a race but are unaware of the force and the volume of people that are running in that race,” she says. Government and planners, she elaborates, are the overweight runners at the back of the race. The last 20 years has seen the pace of urbanisation accelerate, with a concomitant growth of housing lists. The crisis that has emerged, says Gita, poses a challenge to our “entire government system”. The only way out of the crisis, thinks Gita, is “to find a way of partnering with the private sector, because the private sector has a greater degree of flexibility”. In 1986, the Abolition of Influx Control Act repealed a key piece of colonial and apartheid legislation: the Native (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945, itself a refinement of older forms of racialised urban control. The 1986 law in essence abolished pass laws, but this applied only to blacks who already had urban rights and so were entitled to remain in white urban areas despite the citizenship-stripping statuses of the 1970s. The law in effect acknowledged what was already a widespread fact: South African cities had a heterogeneous population mix. The years after 1990 accelerated and also complicated the diverse character of South African cities, especially as new residents flocked to cities in search of work and better opportunities. Quality of life in precarious human settlements is closely interrelated with population change, demographic patterns, including growth, structure and distribution of population. This has implications for education, health and nutrition, access and use of

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natural resources, and can also influence the pace and quality of economic and social development. The Border Kei Institute of Architects, a local chapter of the South African Institute of Architects, notes that the South African government has been very successful in fulfilling annual housing quotas, but has been unsuccessful in creating functional, beautiful environments that provide vital services, facilities and economic opportunities (from small to large enterprises). This has further perpetuated the structure of the “apartheid city”, characterised by low urban densities, sprawl and fragmentation, strong cultural divides and strict zoning of residential, commercial and public facilities. South African cities rank among the most inefficient and wasteful urban environments globally. Not only does this negatively impact on environmental sustainability, but it also affects social and economic sustainability. Central government is responding. In 2009 the Department of Housing was renamed the Department of Human Settlements. Government has since used various platforms to acknowledge that housing is not just about the construction of individual houses, or blocks of housing units, but also about the creation of new types of mixed-use residential environments

which stimulate sustainable communities. The National Planning Commission, which is responsible for developing a long-term vision and strategic plan for South Africa, noted in 2011 that the spatial legacy of apartheid continues to weigh on the entire country. In general, it explained, the poorest citizens continue to live in remote rural areas. There is a duplication of this scenario in cities, where the urban poor live far from places of work and economic activity. The National Development Plan (NDP), a government blueprint for socioeconomic development, proposes to address the legacy of apartheid planning by creating better environments for living and working. According to the NDP, by 2030 South African should see meaningful progress in the revival of rural areas and creation of urban settlements that are functionally integrated, balanced and vibrant. The outcomes of the plan will depend on how various smaller initiatives feed and sustain this statement of intent. For her part, Gita believes that the R140 billion WesCape project could provide some of the answers to the human settlement challenges facing Cape Town by creating a functional and beautiful living environment with vital services, facilities and economic opportunities. The WesCape project envisages the creation of a mini-city with 200 000 homes near Melkbosstrand, 15km northwest of central Cape Town. Roughly half the planned 800 000 population will be lower-income earners. WesCape has been earmarked for completion in the next 20 years. The project will also see the construction of hospitals and clinics, libraries and community halls, schools and sports complexes, industrial, commercial and retail development on 3100 hectares of land. CommuniT-grow, a development facilitation agency, will harness the strengths of five companies: Ariya Projects, Bellandia, Target Projects, Pact Developers and Gita’s firm, ARG. Earlier this year, the Western Cape government



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gave the project the green light when it extended Cape Town’s urban edge, a necessary legal step to enable development to proceed. The actual development will still have to obtain planning approval for its various phases. Anton Bredell, the Western Cape MEC for Local Government, Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, roundly endorsed the WesCape project, saying it will address all housing sectors. WesCape, which relies on private developers to fund the project, is not

without its critics. In a 2013 open letter to Zille, Bredell and Cape Town mayor Patricia de Lille, a group of UCT academics—including Professor David Dewar and Professor Vanessa Watson—said that WesCape promotes leapfrog sprawl, with profound implications for the growth of the city. The authors of the letter argued that the costs of this sprawling and fragmented urban form would be felt in loss of productive time, household budgets, infrastructural investment in service delivery, air pollution and

greenhouse gas emissions and the negative ecological consequences, which could exacerbate the city’s future risk profile in terms of climate change. “The lateral spread of the city must be controlled (a primary purpose of the urban edge is to achieve this) and future urban growth directed inwards in order to intensify and infill, not everywhere, but around structurally important lines and nodes,” the letter stated. “In this sense WesCape is extremely selfish. It siphons off the growth of the future to its own ends without leaving the city the resources to rectify the mistakes of the past.” Gita concedes the project is “ambitious”, but is nevertheless optimistic about WesCape. She says that the project still has to work through many complex issues, including the potential health risks posed by the nearby Koeberg nuclear power plant. But, on balance, she remains positive. “For the first time in my life I see an opportunity to make a difference.” Her enthusiasm largely stems from the “partnered approach” of the project. “The city has to do what it has to do, the community has to do what it has to do, and at the end WesCape will add up,” she insists. “You have to consider that Mitchell’s Plain was built in 15 years and Khayelitsha in about 20 years.” Although similarly scaled, WesCape is constitutionally different to both Mitchell’s Plain and Khayelitsha. “WesCape has to be a city that you and I want to live in, a city that our kids will find their futures in,” elaborates Gita. It must embody the prospect of a bright future, make residents feel safe and free to be who they are, have access to opportunities, and enable citizens to “powerfully” make their contribution.

Coetzee Ntotoiyane (64) is an African National Congress (ANC) councillor. He lives in a two-bedroomed hostel unit in Gugulethu. Coetzee moved to Cape Town in 1985 from the Eastern Cape in search of employment. He initially lived in a hostel in Langa before moving to Gugulethu. The

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burly councillor says that he has had “no reason to move” even though hostel accommodation is not the most comfortable. Coetzee, whose large frame stands out even more in his small home, lives with his four children—the kids share one bedroom, while he uses the other; his wife continues to live in the Eastern Cape. The hostel has a small but neat kitchen and a dining room that doubles up as a lounge. Such is the close-up view. Viewed from a distance, the home Coetzee has made with his children in Cape Town is a monument to a particular type of history. “Hostels are an important legacy of a policy of systematic racial discrimination and gross economic exploitation of the indigenous people of South Africa over the last three centuries,” writes Mamphela Ramphele in her 1993 study, *A Bed Called Home*. The policy of hostel dwellings, she further explained, was pursued with “varying degrees of enthusiasm and crudity” by successive administrations and predated National Party rule. “The common denominator,” argues Ramphele, was the need to balance “the demand for labour with the determination to deny African people access to urban resources”. Despite their sullied history, labour hostels remain an important form of secure housing for many working class South Africans. Transforming hostels from sub-standard dormitories into humane places to live has however been slow. Last year Cape Town revealed plans to relocate 1300 families within the next five years from apartheid-era hostels in Langa into secure, two-bedroom apartments. Units will be equipped with individual kitchens, toilets, showers and solar-heated water systems. The first hostel transformation programme started in Langa earlier this year. The city’s overall hostel programme will see an estimated 12 000 units upgraded or built in Langa, Gugulethu and Nyanga. During the period of high apartheid, hostels provided accommodation in single-gender dormitories for migrant labourers who possessed

“bed cards”, which entitled the bearer to a bed in a hostel. Following the repeal of influx-control legislation and the advent of democracy, single-sex hostels became homes for entire families. This has led to overcrowding and the deterioration of sanitation and ablution services; social spaces are also negligible in hostel precincts. Despite these negatives Coetzee speaks warmly of home. “I have lived here for a long time and there is a sense of community that I love about this place,” offers Coetzee, who believes upgrades will only improve the lives of many hostel dwellers. Architect Ilze Wolff, who has researched the history of Cape Town’s hostel accommodation, says that the development of labour hostels happened in tandem with the development of the city’s most important built structures, including the breakwater piers at the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront. “Very early on in the construction of the area by the Waterfront there was a labour camp, more or less where the One & Only Hotel now stands,” explains Wolff. “On a 1905 map it is indicated as ‘Kaffir Location’, thus making reference to the racialised black men whom the locations were built for.” The structures were removed by 1920. The Breakwater Prison was used as a labour hostel thereafter, before the establishment of Ndabeni, an industrial precinct adjacent the Black River Parkway. Ndabeni was also used as an area for housing men who built UCT and Groote Schuur Hospital, projects completed by 1930. In 1927 the township of Langa was established as a formal and permanent location for black inhabitants of the city, many of them manual labourers. Along with beer halls and a pass office, many hostels were also built, some by private enterprises intent on providing housing for their workers. The mixed ownership of hostels

partly accounts for the “inertia” around their redevelopment, says Wolff, adding that some private owners are unwilling to take on this responsibility. Gita supports the upgrades of hostels in Cape Town, partly because of her own experience living in similar conditions. When she was still a child, Gita’s father decided to relocate the family from Springs to Johannesburg, where he set up a business. The race laws made accommodation hard to find, but eventually the family found a two-bedroom flat, which they shared with an uncle and his family. “Mom and dad slept on the double bed and us children slept on a mattress on the floor. It worked, we went to school and we were able to access business opportunities and upgrade our lives.” Despite being able to afford something more spacious, Gita’s family was unable to find better accommodation—eventually they moved back to Springs. Circumstances have changed and Gita is adamant that there are now possibilities to transform township environments to make them work. “I am beginning to see some possibilities [as to] how we can transform a township environment into a really vibrant, functioning settlement,” she says. “The idea of bringing the townships into the city will not happen because our land prices are too high.” Instead, she proposes transforming existing communities, where there is no lack of vibrancy and warmth, but a need for functionality and diversity of services. “If there are enough places for people to go to for the other things that they need, then township settlements can work.”

Gita lives in what she describes as a mixed-use, mixed-income and inter-generational community. Other Capetonians know her neighbourhood as Observatory. When Gita returned with her husband from a global study tour investigating social housing in 1993, they started looking for a new home.



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It presented itself in the form of an old motor mechanic’s garage. “We took the roof off and developed it into a compact set of four row houses to test what well-designed, medium-density living would feel like.” Her mother-in-law lives in unit one; Gita and her husband, Alastair, who have two children, live in unit four. “We have had an amazing range of people from all walks of life that have rented the two middle units,” says Gita. “We live in a walkable village which is really vibrant and fun.” Gita believes transforming public spaces in townships is critical to establishing healthier and vibrant communities. “So much of our lives are actually spent at work, at school, or doing recreational things, so we have to make public spaces high quality.” Gita thinks that a multi-disciplinary approach is needed to deal with the human settlements issue. “We are now entering an era where the real solutions are not only authored by the architects, but just as often by a range of multi-disciplinary practitioners. It is being able to recognise this that makes a big difference.” For Gita, who grew up in a country divided by apartheid, where architecture and planning contributed to the oppression of the majority black

population, architecture has, perhaps ironically, offered her an opportunity to make a difference by contributing to fixing the ills of the past. She describes her role as one involving action and intuition. “When people run logs through a river, the logs often get jammed. If you just look at the jam and think, ‘Oh dear, it’s all jammed and we can do nothing’, then you will not be able to do anything. Sometimes, to unblock the logjam, you have to pick out a few logs, then it flows again.” As she admits, hers is a people-focussed idealism. “Does it make a difference to the people?” If it does, thinks Gita, then do it—even if it’s not the “ultimate” solution. “Progress before perfection,” she insists. *

Bekezela Phakathi is a journalist and researcher with an interest in politics, economics and information technology. He currently writes for Business Day newspaper



PANORAMA

The Transporter

Thabang Molefe started out as a mini-bus taxi driver. After assisting his father he set out on his own. It was hard work, dangerous too. But that is all history. Today Thabang is a key figure in a black economic empowerment project that is transforming public transport in Cape Town

Words: **David Schmidt**



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Thabang Molefe’s personal journey mirrors many of the changes in the transport industry in Cape Town. Thabang, now 43, was involved in the minibus taxi industry from its early days and had first-hand experience of the tumultuous conflicts that underpinned its emergence in the 1980s. He was key player in establishing the Central Unity Taxi Association (CUTA), an important association in the central city, and went on to become a successful minibus taxi fleet-owner. From 2009 he was CUTA’s chief negotiator in dealings with the City of Cape Town over the introduction of the MyCiti Integrated Rapid Transit system, a process that saw Thabang surrender his 12 operating licenses in late 2013 for compensation, including a stake in the MyCiti service. Cape Town mayor Patricia de Lille has described the R2.5 billion deal as Cape Town’s biggest black economic empowerment project. Thabang is the largest shareholder in Ditokelo Investments, a private company that holds CUTA members’ shares in Transpeninsula, one of the two taxi-association-based companies contracted to operate the MyCiti buses on behalf of the City of Cape Town for the next 12 years. He is also the non-executive chairman of Transpeninsula. Thabang has invested his compensation from his business dealings in rental property and a new minibus taxi-operating license for the Cape Town–Saldanha route. Notwithstanding his professional success, Thabang remains a modest man. Married, with two children—he has a young boy and 19-year-old daughter studying law at the University of the Western Cape—Thabang recently moved from Milnerton to a comfortable suburban house in Panorama. He tends to shun the trappings of excess and drives a small sedan. In person, Thabang is soft-spoken and generous with his time and knowledge, volunteering many details about his life story. Thabang’s biography is deeply human and marked by familiar struggles, notably

that age-old conflict between a demanding father and rebellious son. But his story is also particular, with moments of exile and struggle, which he faced-off with grit and endurance. When he was a child in the late 1970s, Thabang would get up very early, put on an overall that was much too big, and help his father, Joe Molefe, repair motor vehicles in the front yard of their Gugulethu home. This would resume after school often late into the night. It was a routine all the Molefe boys were expected to participate in. “We used to help him disassemble engines and we would then have to wash all the parts of the engine so he could re-assemble it when he got home the next evening,” says Thabang. “In those days people had these six-cylinder vehicles with very heavy starter motors. He could not take the engine out on his own so we had to help him using a steel pole for leverage. It was tough. But it meant we were good weightlifters and could defend ourselves if we were picked on.” Joe’s day job was as a truck mechanic in Montague Gardens. A “disco kind of guy” with an entrepreneurial streak, this at a time when being a black businessman was very difficult, Joe also ran a nightspot in the backyard of the family home on Fridays and Saturdays. Thabang’s cousins collected entrance money and a body-builder friend of his father worked as the bouncer. His mother, who demanded customers use a rear entrance to avoid them going through the house, sold soup and bread. Thabang remembers helping his father count the takings—“a lot of coins”—after these events. Police raids put an end to this sideline business, but Joe continued to fix cars after hours while working on other schemes. “He did a lot of things at the same time,” says Thabang. “The same as I do. I got that from him. He felt the pressure of having many kids. There were eight of us.” The Molefe brothers were a tight bunch, partly because of their ethnic background: Sotho in a largely Xhosa community. Thabang was singled out as a foreigner and called names

by other Gugulethu residents. But Joe had instilled in his boys values of self-reliance and family: the Molefe boys walked the 5km route to school together, the older brothers providing protection. In other respects Thabang’s childhood was typical. He avoided working on cars with his father by playing soccer late or ducking out of the house just before Joe arrived back from work. There was however no getting away from Joe and hard work. Joe believed in toughening up his boys. For punishment he would make them stand on one leg while holding up their arms against a wall. It was tiring and painful, recalls Thabang, but it also made the boys strong—a useful outcome for working on cars. Joe’s treatment of his boys often prompted arguments between Thabang’s parents. His mother would reprimand his father for the way he treated the boys, as well as for keeping them from studying by working on the cars. His father would simply reply that one day the children would have to feed their own big families.

“When people talk about surviving, I understand what they are talking about because of that,” says Thabang. Looking back, he is sanguine about his upbringing. He says that his father did what he had to in order to survive. “He did not want his children to be useless. He taught us the importance of being self-sufficient, of being able to do things on your own, and doing them in a proper manner. He would never re-assemble a car engine using dirty parts and if you brought a car back that he had fixed, he would fix the problem without charging you. He always did what he told you he would do. He did not take shortcuts because they always cost in the long run. I learnt that from him. If you do something, do a proper job and do it right the first time.” The mechanical skills Thabang learnt from his father later enabled him to reduce his maintenance and repairs



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bills by 60–70% when he became a taxi operator. The lessons of stripping engines, cleaning parts, resetting brakes, understanding the mechanics of how engines work, identifying problems and fixing them went much deeper than developing a strong body or a mechanical skill—they instilled essential life skills: discipline, knowledge of how things worked, and an ability to problem-solve. But these lessons only clarified themselves much later. At the time, Joe’s strict treatment of his son

prompted resentment. Thabang rebelled. Joe responded by packing Thabang off to family in Sharpeville, a township between Vanderbijlpark and Vereeniging, south of Johannesburg. This is not the full story. The Molefes were a large family living in two-bedroom home. Their living arrangements were cramped. As a result three of the Molefe boys were sent to live with families without kids in Gauteng in the mid-1980s. The Molefe boys arrived in this industrial heartland during a period



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Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha
01. Nontebeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha
02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha
03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives

of intensifying conflict and resistance. During protests at Thabang’s new high school, the principal’s Chevrolet was burnt. The police response was emphatic. “It was terrible,” says Thabang. “We were blue at the back and our eyes were swollen.” Not long afterwards the Molefe boys were back in Cape Town. Thabang’s homecoming was bittersweet. Joe told his son that he would have to look after himself from now on—there were younger siblings who needed his support. At the same time Thabang learnt that his father, who had lost his day job and was struggling to make ends meet delivering newspapers, had secured a taxi permit with the help of a friend who was already operating with a Chrysler Valiant, the main taxi vehicle at the time. Joe demonstrated his entrepreneurial flair when he became one of the first

few taxi operators in Cape Town to buy a minibus. With the boys back home, Joe also decided to invest in additional vehicles. He secured employee transport contracts, notably at the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront, which opened in 1990. At age 16, while still busy with his schooling, Thabang started driving full-time.

The early 1990s were an exciting time to be involved in the minibus taxi industry. Cape Town’s black population grew rapidly as the wall of apartheid crumbled, many living in the informal settlements that had mushroomed on the outskirts of the city. The existing public transport infrastructure was unable to cope with the rapid urbanization and sprawl. With little new investment in bus and rail services to meet the growing mobility needs of the

city’s population, the minibus taxi industry stepped into the breach and began to provide a viable service. The taxi industry had relatively low barriers to entry for black entrepreneurs with little capital or education. Drawing on modest means and enterprise they were able to build profitable businesses providing a relatively cheap, flexible and convenient service, particularly to poor communities. Within a few years the minibus taxi was the single-largest urban public transport mode. Today, 65% of public transport passengers in metropolitan areas across the country use minibus taxis, compared to 21% who use trains and 14% who take the bus. Perhaps the most astounding fact about the growth of this industry it that it was achieved without any public subsidies. Thabang finished school at Steenberg High, matriculating in 1990. In the summer months, he would cycle from Gugulethu through the Philippi and Grassy Park to school—a distance of more than 18km—because it was quicker than public transport. In winter, he used the train from Nyanga, changing at Pinelands or Salt River. After completing school he went on to study electrical engineering at Maitland College. Throughout his studies Thabang continued to drive taxis—at night, doing contracts collecting workers, and over weekends doing passenger trips. The hours were tough, nightshifts usually ending after midnight. During this period, Thabang sold the car his father had bought him to mark his matriculation and used the proceeds towards buying his first minibus taxi. By this time he had secured his own V&A Waterfront contract. Thabang also applied to be a member of Lagunya, the major established taxi association for township operators. He wanted to stand on his own two feet. Despite its popular uptake by commuters, the minibus taxi industry was not without problems. Inadequate regulation and enforcement had resulted in over-trading on many routes. Powerful individuals dominated many

associations and exerted power through coercion and force. Wars between rival operators became a feature of the social landscape. Around 1992, a major conflict erupted between Lagunya and Western Cape Black Taxi Association (WEBTA). The Molefes were Lagunya members; on the same street lived a group of WEBTA owners. Life became very unsafe. “The taxi industry is not an industry for the faint-hearted person,” says Thabang, who decided to leave town. He moved to Lesotho where he started a taxi service between the town of Butha Buthe and Hapokani, a nearby village. He ran this business for two years, assisted by a high school friend from Cape Town, Dumisani Mbelu, who worked as his “gartjie” or sliding door operator. Rural Lesotho was very different to the townships of Cape Town. “One of biggest problems we had in Lesotho was that the taxi people there were very calm,” tells Thabang. “Their industry was not as vigorous as ours. If you came first, and I came second to the rank, then we would stay in this order on the line throughout the day. But what is the point of sitting in line at the rank if that is not where the people are.” The Capetonians shook up the status quo, prompting the “old guard” to organise a gang of young men to disrupt Thabang’s operation by travelling on the vehicle and then refusing to pay. Thabang and Dumisani decided to take them on. They beat up one of the gang members when he travelled on their vehicle. When they later returned to the rank, gang members were waiting to attack them with stones. Undaunted, Thabang and Dumisani pursued them with car jacks as weapons. Drivers from other routes joined in, lending support to Thabang. This tipped the balance in his favour. “From that day things went smoothly,” he says. “We ended up making the rules for the rank and changed the stereotyped way of thinking. It was no longer first come, first served. Now, if you drove past someone needing to be collected,

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you became first. That is how we transformed the taxi industry there.” Lesotho proved lucrative for Thabang. He made enough money to buy a plot and built a three-bedroom house for himself. He also upgraded his minibus taxi, purchasing a 25-seat Nissan bus. But he missed home. Every couple of months, he and Dumisani visited Cape Town, always travelling together out of fear of remaining alone in Lesotho. In 1994, Thabang’s girlfriend (now wife) in Cape Town, Patricia Mohutsioa, fell pregnant with their daughter. He decided to return to Cape Town and traded in his Japanese-made bus for a 16-seater Nissan E20, which he fixed up for use as a taxi in Cape Town.

When Thabang returned to Cape Town he made the decision not to join either Lagunya or WEBTA. Instead, he worked the busy CBD. It was safer and less prone to violence and coercion. His brother was already operating in the area, using a leased permit from a member of the predominantly coloured Peninsula Taxi Association (PTA), which controlled the routes in the area. “My idea was to buy a permit,” says Thabang. “Leasing a permit was never something I was interested in doing. I viewed it as making somebody else rich.” Eventually he persuaded an old operator who wanted to get out of the industry to sell him a permit in the area for R15 000. “That was the first time I got registered as a permit holder. In the township, you just worked. Now for the first time I had a permit of my own.” PTA was the recognised taxi association operating in the central city area, which included the routes from the CBD to Sea Point. Anyone wishing to acquire a permit on central city routes at the time required the support of PTA. But there was also ferment in the association. A number of the black operators and drivers were unhappy. They felt that they were being discriminated against and blocked from obtaining their own permits, which they could only access by buying an existing permit from a PTA

member and not through support from the association. Together they decided to establish their own association. Thabang was initially reluctant to join the embryonic new association out of fear of losing his membership of PTA, and with it his permit and the right to operate. Thabang, together with another black PTA permit holder, however decided to join the new association, which once registered would be known as Central Unity Taxi Association (CUTA). Both of them were part of a gooi-gooi, an informal savings group that operated on similar lines to a *stokvel*. It was this informal group, says Thabang, not threats, that provided him with the necessary social connection as well as momentum to make the move. “These guys threatened me but I only gave in because I was a member of the *gooi-gooi*,” insists Thabang. “It was a risky step but I went with my instinct on this.” The first CUTA meetings were held under the incomplete freeway overpass on Cape Town’s foreshore. Thembinkosi Plaatje was elected chairman. Zolile Mabuda was the secretary and Donald Xhelo the treasurer. Thabang served as vice-secretary. The group hired a lawyer to fight their case at the provincial licensing board and won the right to become a registered association on the grounds that PTA operators were leasing the permits to the CUTA operators, which was illegal (although it remains a common practice across the industry). Another factor that played in their favour was the racist attitude of some PTA operators: they stated that they did not want black people to have permits in the association or ply the busy central city routes, effectively weakening their association’s case against CUTA. The legal victory enabled the CUTA executive to register the association and apply for permits, a formality that did not take long. Thabang secured a second permit for his E20 in this way. Special legalisation allowing for operators who could prove that they had been operating



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for at least two years without a permit to acquire permits enabled Thabang to secure a third permit. CUTA membership now included drivers who had secured licenses as well as a bloc of disaffected of white and coloured operators who had left PTA. Some black members of CUTA insisted that these operators return to PTA. Thabang, who had been promoted to secretary, opposed this demand, even resigning from the executive at one point. Early CUTA meetings were sometime fractious affairs. Xhosa-speaking members would refuse to speak English in meetings, prompting non-Xhosa speakers to walk out. Thabang ended up offering to translate, which then became standard practice in the organization. “TV2 please” became the standard joke when calling for translation. “We survived in this manner in our

own way with our own problems. But this diverse membership helped us. We stood out as an association that was non-racial and was easy to get on with and to talk to.” But some of the new members who had left PTA found it difficult to operate; additionally, they felt that the PTA operators were hostile to them. Most of these operators decided to sell their permits. Thabang had the money to buy these operators out and he managed to acquire many of the permits that became available in this way. Over time CUTA and PTA resolved their differences. “We went on operating as two associations on the same route from the same rank, which was never heard of or allowed anywhere else. We operated in harmony. There were never fights on the routes. We were in fact quite a crowd there on the [central railway] station deck.

PTA knew that they could not push us out and did not even try. They had other challenges on their hands.”

In 2009 Thabang was called to an informal meeting with city officials. They wanted to apprise the CUTA chairman of Cape Town’s plans to introduce a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in the city, which they referred to as an Integrated Rapid Transit (IRT) system. Cape Town had decided to initiate IRT in an area encompassing the central city area, where CUTA and most of PTA’s operations were located, as well the West Coast area up to Atlantis. The reasons for choosing this area to initiate the system included planning considerations—the central city and the West Coast experienced severe congestion because there was no public transport trunk service (such

as a rail system) on that route, as well as the relatively mature taxi industry serving the area that was open to partnership. Rather than negotiating through an umbrella body at metropolitan or provincial scale, city officials opted to deal directly with affected taxi associations. Thabang was told that operators would be well compensated and that they should not resist the plan because it was going to be implemented no matter what. Thabang greeted the news optimistically. It was a new business opportunity as well as a means for him to exit the taxi business. At the time, he was tired of the risks associated with the industry and the infighting involved in running the association. “I was a straight person,” says Thabang. “If you stole something for the association I would be straight about it. But this also creates unhappiness. I thought it was time for me to leave. With IRT coming, however, I knew I had to hang in there because I had no other choice.” To kick-start the IRT process and get buy-in from key taxi industry leaders in the area of the proposed first phase of the IRT project, city officials organised a study tour. The itinerary included visits to Brazil and Columbia, in particular Bogota, which at the time was regarded as the global cutting edge of BRT implementation. An important part of the Bogota model involved the informal para-transit sector being incorporated into running the companies operating the buses. The visit to the Columbian capital included intensive meetings with informal transport operators, including some of the operators that were not involved in its BRT system. Thabang listened and concluded that he did not want to face the latter group’s problems. Back in Cape Town there was growing resistance to the IRT in the broader taxi industry. While Thabang was in Bogota, a taxi strike against the proposed IRT system was held in Cape Town. He watched footage of the strike in Bogota. “I knew this is was going to be trouble. However,

I was prepared to go all the way because it was my only way out.” He was however also clear about his role in selling IRT to the taxi industry. “I will never try to convince anybody to be part of IRT,” he resolved. “They will have to decide for themselves.” During his trip Thabang learnt that he, along with the PTA leadership, was being targeted for “selling out” the taxi industry. The attack had its logic: top brass were generally the targets, and Thabang was part of the elite. “Those people want to shoot you,” he was told by a contact. “They want to shoot you dead.” “Everyone knew our lives were in danger,” says Thabang. “The issue was how to get home and be safe there.” He spent a month on his farm and another two weeks in Lesotho. But this was a temporary solution. Thabang made contact with key people in the industry that he knew. He pleaded his case, stating that he had been with them in Lagunya. Thabang learnt that certain CUTA members had been spreading misinformation about his involvement with the IRT deal, in particular stating that his visit to Bogota had been “to make deal to give the route to the IRT”. Thabang explained that no deal had been struck and that he had simply attended the study tour as a nominee of the association, which these CUTA members had agreed to. Thabang managed to arrange a meeting so that he could explain himself, as well as clarify any misunderstandings. “The thing in the industry is that if you know powerful people, you can go and speak to them personally and explain that you are not how people are portraying you, even from inside your own association,” says Thabang. “It was hectic at that time. We knew we were goners if some miracle did not happen. Even now I do not know what the miracle was. Maybe it was my meeting. Maybe it was what PTA did that I do not know about. Maybe it was that we kept a very low profile.” Shortly after this, Thabang resigned from the executive of CUTA. He nonetheless remained the association’s point person in IRT

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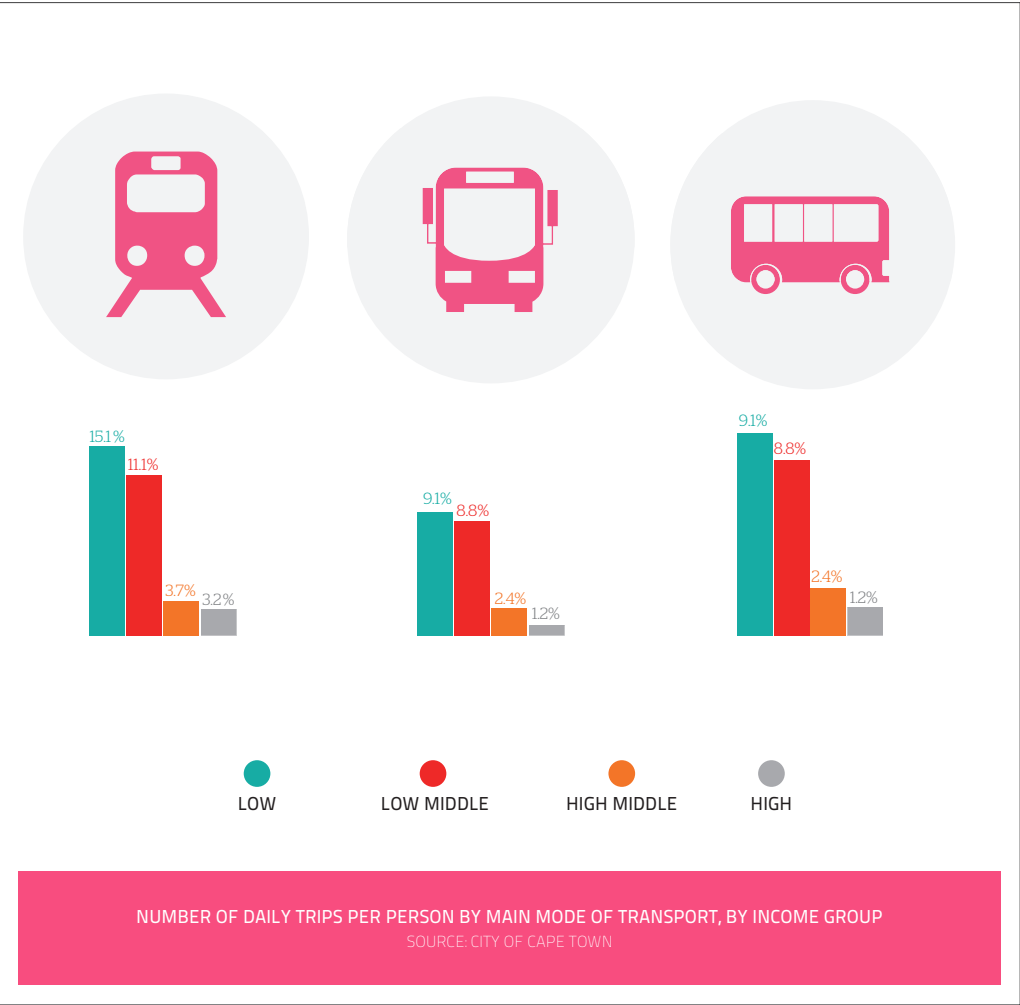
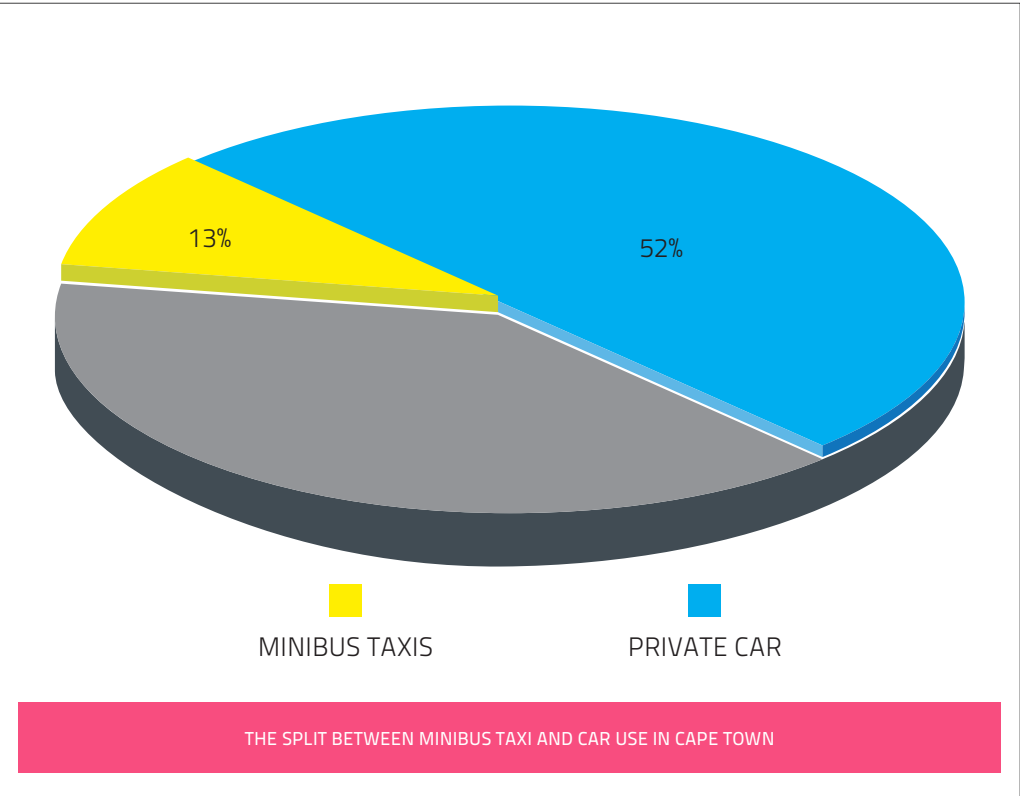
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negotiations. “I became an ordinary member of CUTA,” says Thabang. “I did not want anybody to be able to say I used my power as chair to advantage myself. I said to the members that I intended to be part of the IRT and would try to negotiate the best deal for everybody.” In keeping with the promise he had made after returning from Bogota he additionally told CUTA members, “I will not try to convince anybody to accept an offer. It is up to individual members to decide.”

Cape Town’s IRT transition plan required all affected operators to surrender their operating licenses in exchange for a lump sum cash compensation offer, which they could use to purchase shares in one of the companies that the City of Cape Town would contract to operate the MyCiti buses. Although

voluntary, city officials indicated that operators who refused to accept the offer would not be able to renew their operating licenses when they expired. The plan involved bundling a number of taxi associations: PTA (216 licenses), CUTA (55), and the smaller Vredehoek Devils Peak Association, together with Golden Arrow Bus Services (GABS), a private company that had until then been the sole provider of subsidised commuter bus services in metropolitan Cape Town. The concept required all these parties to establish a single company with shareholding in accordance with their respective shares of the commuter market in the affected area. This was, of course, very challenging given the competitive nature of the taxi industry, where turf was fought for and defended, as well as the history between the particular associations. CUTA, after all, was a

breakaway association from PTA. Golden Arrow had its own issues and eventually, after a legal dispute about the percentage stake it would get of the total service, managed to secure its own vehicle operating company separate from the taxi-association companies and a 12-year contract to run MyCiti services. The associations together established Transpeninsula in 2010, as required by city officials to conclude an interim contract to run a limited initial service during the FIFA World Cup. This was extended after the football event to enable the detailed negotiations about compensation and the 12-year contract to be concluded. Taxis continued to operate in parallel to MyCiti during this period. The negotiations around the long-term arrangement were complex and eventually took three years to conclude. In 2013, a 12-year



vehicle-operating contract was concluded between city officials and Transpeninsula. A “lump sum” cash compensation offer was negotiated for each taxi association. The offer to CUTA members was accepted by all eligible members of the association, with the vast majority also agreeing to invest a major portion of their compensation amount in Ditokelo Investments, which held the 17.7% of the shares in Transpensinsula. In November 2013, operators who had signed agreements began to surrender their vehicles and operating licenses in a phased manner as an extended MyCiti service was rolled out. The underlying intention of the IRT “deal”, particularly as articulated by the national Minister of Transport, was that operators who were required to surrender their operating licenses should not be left “worse off”. For operators like Thabang, who held a number of operating licenses, the deal represented a unique opportunity to sell their businesses and secure an investment in the new public transport service. The deal was also beneficial for older members reaching the end of their working lives: it offered them a way to exit the industry and to secure the equivalent of a pension. The issue is less settled in the case of younger operators with a single operating license who have 20–30 years of working life ahead of them. They will need to find some other employment to sustain them beyond the 12 years of the current contract. The implementation of the 2013 agreement, which involved the phased removal of vehicles, has also created problems. Some operators found that they were suddenly earning much higher incomes when the initial round of taxis were removed and they became reluctant to surrender their licenses. These are, however, short-term creases to be ironed out through the process. The MyCiti IRT project has many dimensions. It is a R6.5 billion investment in infrastructure, systems and operations in the first phase. However, it is also a major exercise

of institution building. The soft processes of building confidence and trust were critical in getting the affected taxi associations on board to create Cape Town’s biggest black economic empowerment project. This took time and effort. The World Cup and interim contracts were very important in growing this confidence amongst CUTA members. As Ditokelo shareholders, they received significant dividends from these contracts even before they were required to invest anything or to surrender their vehicles. Even more important was the way in which the Ditokelo finances were managed. There were regular meetings where an independent accountant explained financial allocations and tax issues to members. Members received regular financial statements. “I felt it was very important to be very transparent up to the last cent,” says Thabang. “If there was a shred of dishonesty during that period, people would have dropped off and not invested their money in the company. There are always people looking to see fraudulent activities but it never happened.” Building trust also means taking less than you are entitled to, adds Thabang. “Once the process started, I could have fought to get additional permits like other members through the dormant process or by buying from other members. I did not do so, but rather enabled others to improve their situation. This builds confidence, people can trust you to represent their interests.” This task of building trust and confidence is ongoing. One of Thabang’s responsibilities now as non-executive chairman of Transpeninsula is to help create a modern business culture founded on transparency and accountability. This is particularly important as Ditokelo has a minority stake in Transpeninsula and can be outvoted on the board.

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Thabang’s story, like the story of transport in Cape Town, is a work in progress. He started at the bottom of an industry as a driver and advanced to become an important operator and leader in the industry. He did this by incrementally building on the skills learnt on cold mornings in his father’s workshop, and by steadily growing his assets through reinvesting the money he earned in his business. It was this disciplined day-to-day attention to small improvements that put him in a position where he could participate in leading a major reorganisation of public transport and influence its future. And so it is with public transport change in Cape Town on a more general level. The real change lies in the slow but consistent process of incremental improvements over time that build on previous effort, that infuse existing assets and capacities with new possibilities, and that connect the different modes (rail, bus, minibus taxi, walking, cycling) in ways that provide a better mobility experience for the people. Large-scale infrastructure investments and the introduction of global innovation can be important in catalysing and inspiring change, but the real system-wide change comes from the slow incremental improvements over time. The first phase of MyCiti was a massive learning exercise for city officials, as well as for the bus and minibus taxi industry operators,

particularly as to what works, and what doesn’t. One key lesson from the process is that there are minibus taxi operators with the capacity to govern and manage high quality bus companies, such as Transpeninsula. Another is that the minibus taxi service and a high-quality bus service such as MyCiti should not be seen as mutually exclusive, and that the future growth of MyCiti should not seek to totally replace minibus taxi services in an area, as was intended in the initial roll-out. Instead, transport authorities should rather harness the complementary strengths of these two models to produce a better quality and financially sustainable system. There are many operational and regulatory lessons from the MyCiti rollout that can be extended to the minibus taxi industry. The benefits of dedicated lanes on priority routes, vehicle-tracking and fleet-management systems and improved driver training can all be incrementally extended to minibus taxi services to improve safety, compliance and profitability. The subsidised commuter bus services currently operated by GABS will similarly benefit from the IRT innovations and will in due course be integrated with the MyCiti service with unified branding, one timetable and one scheduling system. The Metrorail upgrade programme will see major refurbishment of all elements of the rail system that remains the backbone of public transport in Cape Town. And so the journeys connect up and the bigger story emerges. Thabang’s journey weaves in and out of the story of public transport in Cape Town. It is the innovators and pioneers who take the brave and bold steps to regenerate the city in new and interesting ways. Thabang is one of those pioneers. *

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PENLYN ESTATE

The Doppelgängers

Hasan and Husain Essop are twin brothers who make art together. Their composite photographs show the observant Muslim brothers doing things in various Cape Town settings. They have made photos in Hout Bay, where they teach, also District Six, where their father lived before apartheid redrew the map of the city

Words: **Kim Gurney**



We are driving down a dark Southern Suburbs road on a Cape winter’s night, the road slicing a neat dividing line between the childhood checkpoints of twin brothers Hasan and Husain Essop (29). These names have traction on the local contemporary art circuit and increasingly an international one too. It all began, however, in an understated way. Hasan, the elder twin, describes his past as “a very standard way of growing up”, surrounded by traditional spaces and conventional neighbourhood norms. These arguably helped forge a down-to-earth nature that, despite early professional acclaim, still distinguishes both twins’ personalities. It also primed a lively openness to a larger world that is both their charm and vulnerability. We are travelling back in both geography and time to the first family home. Hasan is driving his compact Honda Jazz following a weekly extended family gathering, the lengthy table fuelled by generous food and chatter. We have come from Penlyn Estate to our right, a neighbourhood near Athlone. This parental home is where Hasan lived until a few years ago and where Husain still resides. To the left is our target destination, Rylands, the ambit of the Essops’ childhood world until they finished primary school. The back-story to this “standard” way of growing up, however, is one of forced displacement—a narrative that is not uncommon to the greater area southeast of Cape Town called the Cape Flats. It is bounded by the M5 highway to the west, N2 in the north, Weltevreden and Lansdowne Road to the east and the False Bay coastline in the south. According to the Census 2011, the most recent, 583 000 people reside in the Cape Flats Planning District (Athlone, Manenberg, Hanover Park, Ottery and Philippi), out of a total population in the city of over 3.7 million Capetonians. Yunus Essop, father to the twins, was forcibly relocated in the 1970s by apartheid

legislation to Rylands from District Six, a racially mixed suburb in the city’s heart. District Six was in 1966 declared a whites-only area. House demolitions followed shortly after. About 60 000 people were eventually displaced. Yunus’ own family roots, as well as his wife Rashidah Essop, are from the Indian village of Manobas. Through the instrumentality of the Group Areas Act of 1950, Rylands was designated for “Indians” while the central urban nodes were designated for whites. The spatial legacy of segregation still informs much of contemporary Cape Town’s urban morphology in what some scholars term “neo-apartheid”. In contrast to Penlyn Estate, which boasts more contemporary and spacious houses, those in Rylands appear smaller and packed closer together. People mill about outside, lots of cars are parked on verges, backyards are conjoined. One garage door is half-open with some chair legs visible and human legs too. But it is not all conviviality. Crime is an issue—“the wrong people walking into the wrong people,” as Hasan puts it. After navigating a few more streets, we pass by the former family home. It is remarkable for its lack of fencing in contrast to its well-secured neighbours and is, unusually, set back from the road.

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Hasan is wearing his trademark peak cap, which he sometimes sets back to front. His dark moustache and trim beard match his brother’s but his voice has a slightly more laid-back register. Their personal lives are in synch: both are married fathers, with one small child, and they work for the same organisation. Husain is more extroverted and takes the evident leads, while Hasan fuels that trajectory. Their individuality is perhaps best asserted in the creative interests they maintain on the side rather than their photography, which they practice as a tethered duo represented by one of the country’s top dealers, the Goodman Gallery. Husain has an archive of black and white photography dating back to student days that expands as he travels. Hasan is a draughtsman at heart, with a mark-maker’s interest in printmaking and painting. Husain’s studio is a computer; his conversation flows as smoothly over their work’s conceptual underpinnings as the intricate technical aspects of post-production. Hasan’s studio is a spare room; it includes an easel, sketchbooks and a prayer rug. His words are more personally invested in the issues at stake: “We are telling our life story. The art is kind of like an alter ego. It’s these other personalities that are being expressed.” His childhood street is looking more rundown these days but Hasan livens up as we turn the corner and come in full view of a large open common. He points out a wide post that served as wicket in endless games of cricket. “This was our life,” he says. Rylands and Penlyn Estate was also, more or less, a circumscribed horizon line for the brothers until they enrolled at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, a prestigious art school attached to the University of Cape Town (UCT) and located in the central city, effectively resetting those boundaries. They were 17 at the time. As we navigate alongside Hanover Park, Hasan extends this analogy of an enclosed childhood world to apartheid urban planning that locked people in. We are only skirting the edges of this neighbourhood now

but if we ventured in to the middle, we may have trouble coming out, he says. “Once you were in, you were *in*. The highway separated the area—it was very smart planning. It kept the people where they were.” He is rueful as he comments, noting also how these limited access points now create congested traffic for residents. South Africa is a rapidly urbanising country that is grappling with reversing the spatial legacies of its apartheid past and this includes sprawl, fragmentation and separation, according to a 2013 paper on the street as open space by urban planning scholars Fabio Todeschini and David Dewar.

Nowadays, however, the Essops are inventing their own horizon lines in their photographic artwork. Their signature style features images of themselves replicated in different poses in skits they perform situated in carefully selected landscapes. In post-production, they stitch together photomontages that essentially document aspects of their own lives while simultaneously speaking to a broader audience. That audience often concerns split identities—unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that the creators are twins interested in notions of doubling. Their work travels well to immigrant communities, they say, generally grappling with identity issues. This duality arguably makes their work particularly pertinent to a city like Cape Town too. It is often described as representing two worlds, and this is more than simply spatial. People tend to isolate issues rather than seeing the historical, temporal and ethical interconnections—what Edgar Pieterse, writing in *Counter Currents* (2010), has called “an intertwined crisis of identity, economy and ecology”. Their home neighbourhood features strongly in the twin brothers’ latest artworks. Sites from our night-time drive are recognisable from ‘Unrest’, a travelling solo exhibition for the Standard Bank Young Artist (SBYA) award for visual art, a respected three-decade-old accolade that grants winners a



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stipend to create new work and premiered at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. This solo exhibition extends their usual mode of photography to include video, installation and even performance. We cruise slowly past the Bismillah Cash & Carry, its signage a transliteration from Arabic for “In the name of God”, which appears in a photograph titled 786. Across the street is the facade of *Drug Den*, and over there a shopfront where, in

Athlone Superette, a staged xenophobic skirmish between Somalis and Bangladeshis takes place. We also pass the local high school that Hasan and Husain attended as learners. Hasan speaks about the school with ambivalence since it started to define him and gave him a streetwise nous but also lacked sufficient resources. “It taught me to live by the streets, and it crippled me too,” he says. The school now focuses on art. Hasan references, in an earlier

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interview, the influence of this neighbourhood where he grew up and its relevance to a more militant character that always popped up in their work but they never really dealt with until now.. “I come from a neighbourhood where crime is a big problem. You are bred to be tough. At high school, you had to fight to stand your ground. I think that because we live in this environment, I have naturally grown this ‘militant’ side even though I have a gentle side, a fashionable side, an art side.” This duality is captured in their exhibition ‘Unrest’ too. “It is feeling the tension of South Africa that is shaking, that is about to explode, that is not going to explode,” offers Hasan.

The Habibia Soofie Masjid is lit up in an ethereal lime green glow. It is an unworldly sight, impressive and welcoming at the same time. This is where Hasan and Husain attended crèche and for some time this was also their local mosque, closest to home. “The Sufis are romantics,” says Hasan, adding that it is where they got a lot of influence. “Other mosques are black and white and they are colour.” He means that they deviate from strict tradition. Hasan points out how the mosque has no visual representations on the walls, in line with strict Islamic conventions. The main issue is that only God has the power to create; there is also the related concern around idolatry. This often translates into an aversion towards depicting the eyes in both historical Islamic art and contemporary production. Back in the parental house at Penlyn Estate, there are also no images on the walls, nor any family photographs. There is however calligraphic script. “There is none worthy of worship besides Allah. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him, is the messenger of God.” The twins grew up in a home where eyes on walls were not allowed—for one thing, it was believed to chase away the angels, which have a religious sanctity. A parental truce was declared for their artistic

careers but no Essop photographs hang in the family home. Hasan’s walls in his Rondebosch East home are a different story. There are personal photographs showing his marriage to Tasneem, also a striking photographic trilogy in his passageway that describes Mecca, the holy Islamic city that also offers direction for prayer, and Medina, the burial place of the prophet Muhammad. Standing in front of the trilogy, Hasan explains: “This is like our centre point.” Husain is articulate in describing how the brothers have dealt with the challenge around representation, initially excluding other figures in post-production to only implicate themselves. More recently, they relaxed this schematic but where other figures are present, the twins remain dominant. “If anybody’s faces are seen within the photograph, it’s our faces,” explains Husain. “If there are hints of other people, it’s how their bodies occupy and relate to spaces.” Looking at their new work on their ‘Unrest’ exhibition, the debate seems almost moot. The Essops appear to be pressing into new territory that engages modes of representation in broader society. As Husain says: “No longer is it about the idea around the eyes and the problems around the eyes. It’s becoming more around what are you trying to represent.” That includes critiquing stereotypes and trying to provoke a new visual perspective. By way of example, we see in ‘Unrest’ a sculptural installation of two figures (the twins) apparently gearing up for battle but dressed in prayer robes that have a peaceful function. Likewise, the photographic work *Freedom Fighters* depicts “militants” at a training camp but situated in an outdoor fitness park on the Sea Point promenade. Through such surprising juxtapositions, ‘Unrest’ questions “the gaze”—the art of looking and being looked at. John Berger’s seminal book, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), sets out how art became a political issue by bringing attention to the conscious construction of European



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oil painting conventions in setting up such a gaze, as well as the role of photography in that deliberate visual act. The Essops’ self-replicated world could be construed as a warning meme where echo chambers re-inscribe themselves. We sit back down in front of a computer at Penlyn Estate to flip through images of new work. The screensaver depicts Husain, a tiny little figure unrecognisable in a massive sea of blue. A recreational surfer, he is bobbing in the ocean on his board, seeking the next wave. This picture is not one of their staged photographs—it is for real. Rylands may have been the circumscribed horizon line growing up, but the Essops have a new vanishing point now.

Live Rich Die Trying. The school desktop on which these words appear is a hard single-seater in a freezing classroom in Hout Bay High; it is also a palimpsest of such doodled aspirations. The school sits on a mountainside slope. Although stormy, the views of a slate-coloured sea beyond the school’s doors are more hospitable. The supermarket Bayview, directly across the street, tells no lies. That, however, is where the scenic beauty starts and ends. This school is part of the tough Hangberg neighbourhood, on the slopes of Sentinel Hill overlooking Hout Bay on the southern fringes of the affluent Atlantic seaboard. A largely fishing community, people dwell in flat blocks, shacks and bungalows. In 2010 it witnessed bitter riots over housing. A group of Grade 10 students is busy colouring in mind maps in the classroom. One grabs my attention. It sets out an imagined life:

“Starting
Pass Matric
Getting a Masters
A job in one of the biggest companies
Open my own company
Start Looking for Mr Right
Getting Married
Having two kids
The End.”

The mind map exercise, part of an after-school programme, is supervised by the Essops. The brothers work as tutors (“a mobile artbox” they call themselves) for Lalela Project, a non-profit organisation that runs an educational arts programme for youth in extreme poverty. They used to teach art at more privileged high schools—Rondebosch Boys and Wynberg Boys—and have since switched to tougher neighbourhoods. Mid-week, they work jointly at Hout Bay High and the rest of the week separately at other locations.



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Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha
01. Nontebeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha
02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha
03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives

Husain says this work is important to him spiritually. “It’s not about the money. I believe in life after death that we will be questioned [for what we have done]. I would like credit on my MasterCard or my Visa.” His motivation is to make a child’s life better and he is also very conscious of differences in living standards. He adds: “We are living middle class lives with food on the table. They are living in a shack with no food on the table.” He cites issues prevalent in the Hangberg area, like abuse, violence, gangsterism and racism, and describes them as a “recipe for disaster”. As we stand outside the classroom waiting to go inside, the bell rings and the learners tumble over the door, a rising cacophony of hard, flat accents yelling across a courtyard. “Yoh!” he exclaims, in an amused aside. “Even I sound posh!” Teaching was likewise a big decision

for Hasan, in part driven by pragmatic concerns. He tells me, seated at a desk inside: “The ideal situation would be to survive off your art but realistically we are not William Kentridge or David Goldblatt where work sells for thousands and thousands, and sells constantly.” He also references as motivation the harsh realities: “Kids here live in shacks. They can’t study because there is noise and power outages but you can see they dress well, they want to make it, they want to go somewhere.” Drug abuse and gangsterism is a big problem in impoverished communities, adds Hasan, and is exacerbated by a lack of positive role models that Lalela tries to redress through its life skills coaching. “They want to be like the tough guys, live by their own rules ... Lalela is about creating a safe environment to support them to have fun and be creative ... If we reach one or two, it’s a

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great success. We do try to spot talent and harness it,” Hasan says. They follow in the footsteps of other local artists who have turned artistic skill to socially engaged ends. These include Colin Richards, largely credited with the development of professional art therapy in South Africa. The Lefika Art Therapy Centre in Johannesburg is another example—it was set up in 1993 by Hayley Berman to respond to trauma from political violence under apartheid. Critics of this instrumentalist approach believe fine art should hold to its autonomous power, as advocated by Theodor Adorno. Artists have, however, increasingly adopted a participatory and socially inclusive process or routine, perhaps linked to a broader conflation of art and politics in the public domain. Suzi Gablik’s “connective aesthetics”, by way of example, in Suzanne Lacy’s ‘Mapping the Terrain’ (1995) seeks a model for connectedness where social context becomes “a continuum for interaction” with the reciprocity of an ecosystem.

The Essops live in both worlds. They contribute to socially engaged artistic practice and participate in the fine art sector on their own terms, the latter putting them in a statistical minority. According to a 2010 Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) industry report, there are only about 1575 artists practicing in the Western Cape out of a national count of 5500. They are also racially sidelined in an industry still lacking transformation: the majority of visual artists are white (58%) while only 3% are Indian or Asian. Choosing to practice photography is also unusual (7%); most visual artists are painters (47%), according to the same report. It was not an easy ride for the Essops to get where they are now, but it happened fast. Husain’s fourth-year exhibition of photomontages in 2006 was talent-spotted by Storm Janse van Rensburg, formerly of the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town. Husain floated an idea of collaborating with his brother, a

printmaking major, to the gallery. Go for it, came the response. The brothers produced five photographs. Shot at various locations in Cape Town, one depicted the brothers praying, while another showed them attending a dog fight. Their work now resides in public collections like the Iziko South African National Gallery and in the private hands of Sir Elton John, who has a large collection of photography. Thematically, there is a resonance with their new ‘Unrest’ work that also returns to Cape Town, after their practice being sited in various geographical locations. In their signature collaborative style, which they call “a cool recipe”, each brother brings a particular nuance to the end result. This is most evident when they explain their work: one picks up a thread exactly where the other left off to expand upon or gently burnish what the other began. It is essentially a creative double act in the mode of Gilbert and George, or Jake and Dinos Chapman. Husain explains that previously they depicted less of themselves in their work and more of the landscape. “Now, we have taken it a step further where we have included more of ourselves, more of our performance, more consciousness of the props we use in our gestures,” Husain says. It is partly a technical consideration: shooting more images and extracting stills from a panoramic view. This technique offers printing scale and depth of field without blurriness. “The work actually looks three-dimensional. We are combining our performance with strong, clear quality,” he adds. We are all seated on a bench outside the Hout Bay classroom. Driving rain is splatting us through a leaky roof. “We do have roles,” says Hasan. “I am good at this and him at that. When we are making a work, we know immediately without saying: this is the flow. So when we are at a site, it’s naturally a method and formula. It’s like a ritual if you ever watch us on a shoot.” We return to the classroom to watch the mind maps develop. Earlier, the twins had shown the schoolchildren a presentation of spiral forms in



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nature as inspirational structural devices and reminded them how artists also often use spirals in their own work. They warmed everyone up for the lesson with meditation and deep breathing. “Put your hands on your knees and calm your minds and heart—it’s been a long day. Breath through your nose and out your mouth ... relax. And think about what is a spiral shape. Where is it in nature? Do you know what a spiral shape looks like? Take a deep breath altogether. Hold it and release.” Husain picks up another mind map by way of example, this one depicts a journey including drug paraphernalia (pipes) and images for manhood as well as medical symbols. “Since I’ve been in this community, this is a story I’ve come across a lot,” he tells the class. “This is reality. This is his maze and he has to overcome it to find the end. It’s brilliant!” His voice

drops a register as he adds reflectively: “Brilliant. Inspired by the spiral shape.” The Hangberg surrounds to some extent echo the earlier horizon lines of the twins’ lives and unsurprisingly perhaps speak to issues reflected in their latest body of work. Husain explains: “We are looking at an inextricable reality we are faced with on a day-to-day basis inspired by our learners and our surroundings, having to deal with violence that occurs every day—living in Cape Town, living with crime, living with paranoia, and how [it affects a person] on a physical, mental as well as a spiritual level. We are living in this constant feeling of unrest.” I think about how their own mind map might look -- where it began and how it has curled.

The TV in Hasan’s Rondebosch East home is flickering silent images of World Cup soccer in Brazil. He points out that while people are trained to believe that a camera cannot lie, the opposite is true of the surreal work he makes with his brother. “There is nothing real, it’s all constructed. It’s like a painted picture. It’s light-hearted, having fun. Yes, there are serious issues being dealt with, but, at the end of the day, it’s a nice picture that has been photographed and carefully constructed to look aesthetically pleasing while at the same time posing a conversation.” That is true—but it’s not the full story. For one thing, if we look at the latest photography from the Essops, our world does something very strange and curvy. The composite images are stitched together from hundreds of

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photographs taken from an original panorama. This technique has a strangely affective quality. It seems to unfold the landscape and give it a more malleable character. *Malay Quarter*, a photograph depicting the brothers standing amid a Bo-Kaap mural in an historical quarter of Cape Town’s CBD, is a case in point. “If you stand with a picture camera, you would never experience it like that. What happened is we opened it up because of the technique. It’s offering a different perception of what you see—everyday spaces but totally different,” says Hasan. This 360-degree panoptic sweep is also not as innocent as it may sound. The brothers claim the vital surveying standpoint. Our gaze is their gaze, and the world literally bends from this direction. Speaking about the technical aspects of production, Husain earlier describes how they manipulate only the figures in the composition and not the landscape. He is adamant that they “choose the centre”, his comment chiming with Hasan’s words, while standing in front of the Islamic trilogy in his passageway: “This is like our centre point.” Religion is their personal centring mechanism, and it gets transfigured artistically in this series with a panoptic view of the world. This stretched version of reality becomes fully apparent when visiting the mural in person. It looks and feels like a totally different location. The mural is painted on the inside wall of a building on upper Wale Street in an area with Cape Malay heritage that today faces gentrification. Its brightly coloured residential facades and cobbled streets attract many tourists who mill about taking pictures. Through an archway the original mural becomes visible on a wall to either side, some steps leading to a residential area beyond. An unsigned painter has depicted historical Cape Malay traditions: a tailor at work, religious instruction, and other everyday scenes. It also includes an image of the first mosque built in South Africa, the Auwal Mosque on Dorp

Street in the Bo-Kaap, constructed in 1789 during the first British occupation of the Cape. Two more contemporary murals on either side of a second inner archway form a kind of punctuation point. The brothers chose the scene for its contemporary resonance: in each mural vignette they see an equivalent scenario. It is also a personal site, because they relate strongly to Malay culture, albeit that they are of Indian descent. (When the Dutch settlers arrived at the Cape in 1652 and set up a trading post, they brought over exiles as slaves from the East Indies; they became known collectively as ‘Cape Malays’.) Hasan and Husain have taken various cues from the original murals for their own photograph. They have for instance mimicked a painted pose in their staged portraits as they stand among the mural images in a panorama. There is an ambience to the street scene that has its own particular quality, but the Essops have stage-managed it into a portrait that references what is already there. In reality, the experience of the site is quaint and a bit claustrophobic. In their rendition, it is majestic and expansive. They add a touch of magic to make the everyday otherworldly. It seems to run in the family. Later the same day, I visit High Tea Tightly, a birthday and novelty cake shop in Claremont’s CBD. Its marker is a large blue cupcake. In its windows are four-tiered cake models and inside are table pedestals made of the same cake models. The high-backed white chairs that stretch twice the length of normal ones are straight from *Alice in Wonderland*. The Mad Hatter’s clock and chain hangs from the wall. The woman who created this particular rabbit hole is Husain’s wife, Zaheera Musa. Zaheera is also a trained fine artist who studied alongside the twins at Michaelis and can authoritatively claim her business card mantle, “cake artist”. Her decision to open her own business was born shortly after graduating in 2006. It was driven by a love of baking and beauty together with a simultaneous



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acknowledgement that she did not want to practice in a fine art world. “I didn’t think I was going to be a fine artist and make a statement,” she says. “An artist has a social responsibility ... because of what you say and its effect, whether you are speaking about an event or whether it’s how you portray something.” Art has a public audience, she explains; social responsibility comes with that public end point. A diploma in patisserie later, she opened the doors to High Tea Tightly in April 2013 and made a different kind of public offering. It’s difficult running a business, Zaheera says—

notwithstanding, the very next day she opens a satellite stall at the V&A Waterfront harbour retail precinct. While I sit at a table inside the bakery shop, Zaheera is visible through the side door carefully stencilling an elegant pattern around a cake base while an assistant in a chef’s jacket stands by. The gentle cries of Zaheera’s baby son are audible. I order hot chocolate and ogle the stylish cupcakes on display. “Life is short,” says the script on the wall. “Eat dessert first.”

The yellow Caterpillar is clawing at the red earth 100 metres below us as we stand looking down on Cape Town. The City Bowl is to the left, Table Mountain at our backs, and the Atlantic Ocean disappears into the horizon line. Winter rains have made large puddles of the site in District Six where the Essop brothers recently created a photographic montage, *Resurrection*. It depicts what they describe as a kind of Judgement Day and portrays satin cloths on the ground and figures emerging from this bruised landscape wearing the same. The work appears on their travelling exhibition, ‘Unrest’, but more importantly, the site as photographed no longer exists. The Caterpillar is part of a construction crew digging up foundations for new homes in a R7 billion redevelopment programme underway that aims to return evictees and descendants to their

former neighbourhood. Claimants who registered for restitution may be eligible for newly-built homes. This includes Yunus Essop, who is on the waiting list along with others similarly dispossessed. Yunus used to live on Chapel Street. His business, a fabric store, is still located nearby and he continues to work there today. “He’s still living there,” says Hasan, metaphorically speaking of District Six. “When he left, something left with him and we inherited that link.” This is a geographic legacy for the twins, part of who they are without having physically lived there. This sort of ghosting of a landscape is told in *Resurrection*, a family narrative that mingles past and present into the liminal state of an uncertain future. It is enacted by zombie-like figures that hover between life and death. The imported fabrics they wear were sourced from Yunus’s shop *Focus Fabrics*—they are the same fabrics used by Cape minstrels in the annual New Year carnival, which celebrates the end of slavery. Yunus is a chief fabric supplier for the carnival’s numerous participants. The figures in the twins’ photomontage wearing this cloth seem to be drawn from burial mounds in the earth, facing the direction of the new housing developments. In short, the work comments on the death of District Six and its imminent revival. Since the evictions, the area has been a naked landmark in the city and a brutal reminder of the country’s apartheid past. But some red soil is today being turned. Between us and the Caterpillar, people living in the open veld are busying themselves with domestic chores, sweeping between their bare mattresses and fussing with their clothes while an open fire sends white smoke into the air. The old foundations of razed homes are clearly visible in the long grass. In the Essops’ photographic montage, people living on this vacant land were similarly present but in the final image are obscured by a standing figure. We look at the razed stumps still visible through the grass.

“We always used to drive through here and knew this was District Six and there were homes. It had this graveyard feel to us,” says Hasan. “I didn’t realise that there were remnants of the foundations. Only when we walked through did we really see. There is even a road that the grass is growing over.” Driving away, Hasan points out the signboard to our right. It reads: District Six. It is not the City of Cape Town’s doing. Officially, the area is still known as Zonnebloem, a name prescribed by late-apartheid town planners. Haroon Gunn-Salie, a recent Michaelis graduate and fellow Goodman Gallery stablemate, recently pasted a replica graphic bearing the suburb’s original name, District Six, onto various signboards indicating the neighbourhood. His action, done without sanction, at night, is an act of symbolic reclamation. Today, months later, his signs pointing to District Six remain in place and the Caterpillar gains traction in the rear-view mirror—but there are arguably some reclamations beyond reach. As Hasan says of the new homes: “You are resurrecting the structure, but you are not resurrecting the people who should be in it.” *

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PHILLIPI AGRICULTURAL AREA

The Farmer

Kieyaam Ryklief is an urban farmer. In a food market dominated by conglomerates, Kieyaam has carved out a tiny niche. His farm in the Philippi Horticultural Area supplies a network of informal traders with locally grown African veggies. His fragile harvest is an overlooked source of food for the urban poor

Words: **Leonie Joubert**



Passengers exiting the lunchtime train from town surge down the footbridge that straddles the railway lines at Khayelitsha Station and past James Chembe’s stall. When they reach the small market at the bottom of the concrete ramp, this jostling mass of people dissolves between stands of DVDs, plastic jewellery, sunglasses and cellphone accessories. One stand has pockets of citrus hanging from the structure’s metal frame like bulbs studded around a dressing room mirror. In the distance, there is an ancient caravan, white, with irregular blue hand-painted signage announcing “MONDI Restaurant”, with the outline of a teacup and some food piled on a plate. “Stomach,” says a woman from behind her table of goods. Piles of soggy offal, their pleated white folds as alien as sea coral, sit like partly deflated soccer balls along the front of her table, next to the pinkly moist lobes of lung and unrecognisable tubes of something the colour of fat. James’s stall, a collapsible temporary store-front, sits nearby on upended crates piled with bushels of crispy rapeseed, covo and broccoli leaves bound together at the stem with purple twine. “Five rand each,” he says, through an easy, snaggletoothed grin. Malawian by birth, James, who looks as though he is in his mid-50s, moved to Cape Town after living in Zimbabwe for years. South, south, that’s the way everyone goes. But once he has put his last child through school, he’ll head back home, he says. Although trained as a carpenter and bricklayer, it is much more lucrative to run a stall here at the station. And these fresh leaves, well, they give him the edge, because you can’t find them in the local supermarket. That’s why he’s been up since before sunrise, to travel out to the farmlands in Philippi, 10km back in the direction of town. “Take the train from town through Site C, through Site B. The stop next is Khayelitsha Station,” he’d beamed earlier, describing where he’d be. “That’s where you’ll find me, at Khayelitsha station.”

Another pulse of homebound passengers beats past his stand. None of them stop to buy his fare, but he’s not worried. He’ll sell most of his stock by the end of the day. Rush hour is still coming.

Kieyaam Ryklief stands on the edge of a field of frilly rapeseed plants that seem to have gone into hibernation. Rows of scalloped greenery run away from his feet, parallel green between alternating strips of sandy soil, like the cuff on a jumper: knit one, purl one, knit one, purl one. The damp earth is as fine as beach sand, and easily takes on the tread of anything that wanders through here: deep trenches cut by the arrowed profile of a tractor tyre, lighter workers’ boot prints, a whisper of the calloused under-claws of some unknown bird. He points to a shallow hillock about a kilometre to the south, fuzzy with the crowns of Port Jackson trees, the Australian wattle that the first settlers used to bind down the shape shifting dunes that frustrated their first efforts to farm here. “This whole area used to be like that, just sand dunes,” says the 46-year-old urban farmer. He is hunched over in his windbreaker, a shade of federal blue, that shields against the winter chill. Over time, farmers have levelled these dunes out into what today is the Philippi Horticultural Area (PHA), a patchwork of small farms that have been whittled down to the remaining 1500ha as urban sprawl has slowly gnawed away at the edges of this barely arable land. The PHA has been in the news lately because of plans to rezone the farmlands for housing development. So far, some fiery activism has stalled the process, but an aerial view of Philippi shows how contested this island of vegetable gardening is, in a place where the City of Cape Town says it has a housing backlog of 300 000 units, and, according to the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research a population that’s growing at 3.2% (compared with national average of 1.3%), 40% of which is driven by people moving into the city. On every side, the congested settlements



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of the Cape Flats push harder and harder up against its green edge. This area has been the city’s vegetable garden since the late 1800s. Exactly how much fresh food it supplies Cape Town now is hard to calculate, but according to a report by the African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), up to half of the city’s cauliflower, carrots and lettuce come from here. While most of the PHA’s produce goes directly to retailers (83%), a good chunk of the second-grade veggies trickle down through to the township traders, with third-grade stock given to farm labourers—the latter is a significant contributor to the availability of healthy food to the poorest communities in the Cape Flats. But Kieyaam is battling with his crop. He’s got a good chunk of his 2.5ha of farmland in Philippi under rapeseed

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and the damn things aren’t growing. The weather’s been unbearably cold, and the plants can’t seem to find the energy to send out more leaves. Harvest was supposed to happen in mid-June, but it got delayed by a week, ten days, a fortnight. By the end of June, he still can’t bring in any leaves, and he’s getting fidgety. Things were easier in the furniture restoration business, he says, where he spent ten years working from a shop in Wynberg, before getting into farming in his late 30s. “You’d get a deposit for the materials and labour costs. Then you’d do the job, and get the rest of the money. A project would take a week or so. It’s not the same with farming.” It’s a tough gig, to be sure. Getting the fields ready for planting takes a lot of capital, and then you have to wait for the crop to grow. It can be months before you see cash flowing



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back into the coffers. For an emerging farmer like Kieyaam, who has already ploughed just about everything he has into the business, waiting for these plants to mature is exasperating. Kieyaam and his wife Shereen, 44, have been farming here since 2010, when they signed a five-year lease on the land, as part of a state effort to groom black farmers. But while they wait for the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform to release funding to help kick the 26ha operation up to full power, he rents out most of the land to other farmers, cultivating only a fraction of its potential. He’s keeping his eyes on the bigger prize, but in the meantime he still has to cover the rent and electricity, his biggest overheads. And putting these fields to the plough also costs a pretty penny. The stress of this financial limbo is like a deep undertow in a conversation that, on the surface, seems polite and somewhat reserved.

Later, perched behind the oak-veneer desk in his office next to the pack sheds, Kieyaam talks about how he came to be a farmer—the path he followed has been far from ordinary. He’s not from traditional farming stock, didn’t have the ethos of the soil etched into his genes from growing up on a farm. He didn’t learn its secrets at the heel of his father, nor stand in line with his six brothers to inherit the family estate. The son of a tailor and a housewife, he grew up in lower Wynberg, in that wedge of land below the railway line that was demarcated under the Group Areas Act of 1950 as officially “coloured”, and generally the realm of the artisan and the working class. He didn’t learn the tailoring trade from his father either. He went into yacht building, working on the interiors (“the biggest boats being built in the country at the time:



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eight toilets and showers; two jet skies; the toys!”), later moving into furniture restoration, before he and his brothers clubbed together to buy a piece of land close to where he is now, also in the Philippi area. He just wanted to try his hand at farming, he says. It was a steep learning curve, but soon he was supplying Woolworths with salad greens. However, when they were offered a terrific deal for the land by property developers, they sold up. And that’s when Kieyaam applied for the government farming scheme that allowed him to lease this new section of land. His office is the engine room of the family’s operation, and he and Shereen run it like any business: he handles the fields and production, Shereen keeps the office admin ticking over. While he explains how it all works, their six-year-old son, Bilal, circles him like a restless colt, his toothless grin giving away his age. Shereen slips away to sit in the hallway because 11-month-old Qaa’id is mewling and agitated. He is the last of their six children, and Shereen brings him with her to the office most days. When the two talk about their life together, how they function as a couple and as partners in this business, they are matter of fact. But the reality of the risk they’ve taken on does seem to surge heavily beneath the surface. Shereen had to give up her job as a librarian when they applied for the grant support to get the farm going. “We only found out after we applied that you can’t be a beneficiary of something like this if you’re employed by the state. I stopped working when my contract came to an end,” she says. How does she cope with the stress of it? “Knowing what you want in life, and keeping focused. Otherwise you’ll throw in the towel,” she smiles. “As a couple, knowing each other. I mean, we have come so far!” It’s been a huge gamble. They’ve already lost Shereen’s monthly income, and sold all of Kieyaam’s assets, along with three properties that were in his extended family, to help fund the operation. But until the state funds are released, they’re only farming a fraction of their business



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potential. The biggest difficulty so far has been getting their produce into the formal markets in Cape Town. Kieyaan is competing with the larger commercial farmers, who often sell directly to local retailers or plug right into the massive fresh produce market in Epping industrial area, 11km north of here, which moves 60 000 tons of fruit and veg every month. Try as he might, Kieyaam just hasn't managed to get his foot in yet. In

his experience, the supermarkets aren't that keen to get new farmers on their books. "You really want to get a contract to supply produce to a retailer. You have to guarantee a certain amount per week, but that way your product is sold before planting so there's a sense of security. The problem is also that you have to supply a certain quality and it can take time to get produce up to their standards." Selling through the fresh produce market in

Epping is no easier and requires having a good relationship with the agents there. "It's not viable for us to sell that way. The agents sell on your behalf and if they don't sell your produce, it comes back to you at your expense and it gets thrown away. We don't have the relationship with agents, and our quantities are too small." But this is where things get interesting. There is something almost ghostly happening deep within the food

system, something invisible, which isn't orchestrated by any managing body or overseeing power. It's simply the market responding naturally to a vacuum. While Kieyaam was struggling to flog his marrows and beans and butternut and squash, at the other end of the supply chain, a whole bunch of Capetonians were finding themselves frustrated by the big retail market that wasn't stocking the foods they wanted. Immigrants to the city from Zimbabwe, Angola, Malawi and the likes, found themselves browsing the food markets in vain for the veggies they missed from back home—okra, kale, rapeseed, African spinach, mustard, even the leaves of broccoli and baby marrow plants, most of which they cook up like spinach. And then they found Kieyaam. They came directly to Philippi, and asked Kieyaam if he'd grow these vegetables for them. Some even brought him the seed. And so he did. The arrangement is simple, and it's mostly off-grid. For the past 18 months, he's been growing the veggies. Once harvest time comes, he SMSes his clients, who come directly to the farm on foot or bundled into the back of a bakkie, sometimes arriving as early as 4.30am. They will harvest the leaves themselves, weigh them in the pack shed, pay the farmer, and then trek off to the street-side markets to sell. Transporting the crops is hard, says Kieyaam, but buyers either club together to hire transport or thumb lifts. The formal market overlooked a need, and the system filled in the gaps all on its own.

Kieyaam doesn't look like your average farmer. His fez is as dark as midnight, and perches on his shaved head above an ivory collared jumper. His hands are at ten-and-three on the steering wheel of the white Honda, which has lost a rear door window and has an iffy passenger door lock. He's just back from jum'u'ah, Friday prayers, at the mosque on 5th Avenue in Grassy Park, and it's time to pop down to the local Ottery Pick n Pay to buy some of the bulk groceries for the family. Quiet as a

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mouse, 13-year-old Muh'minah sits behind him on the backseat, prim in a crisp black hijab covering her school uniform. She's also back from prayers, along with her older sisters. There's a library copy of the novel *Lord of the Flies* in her lap. Yes, she smiles shyly, it's a high school network text, and she's enjoying it. "The kids miss the library," Kieyaam explains. "They used to be there all the time after school. They've got a real reading culture. We don't have a television. I'd be an addict if we had a television." Kieyaam's name is an Anglicised version of the name Qayamuddin. Like most farmers he and his family still need to visit a retailer to buy most of their pantry supplies. They stroll through the supermarket, filling it with bulk-buy items: a two-litre jug of sunflower oil, cornflakes, flour, sugar, rice, some baby porridge. It is a five-minute drive from their plot, through a scruffy industrial seam where auto electrical outfits meet overgrown kikuyu fields where livestock graze, to Ottery East and the massive hypermarket in the old Ottery shopping centre. The mall has all the usual names—Spur, Nandos, Ackerman's—and a handful of independent stores, like the one

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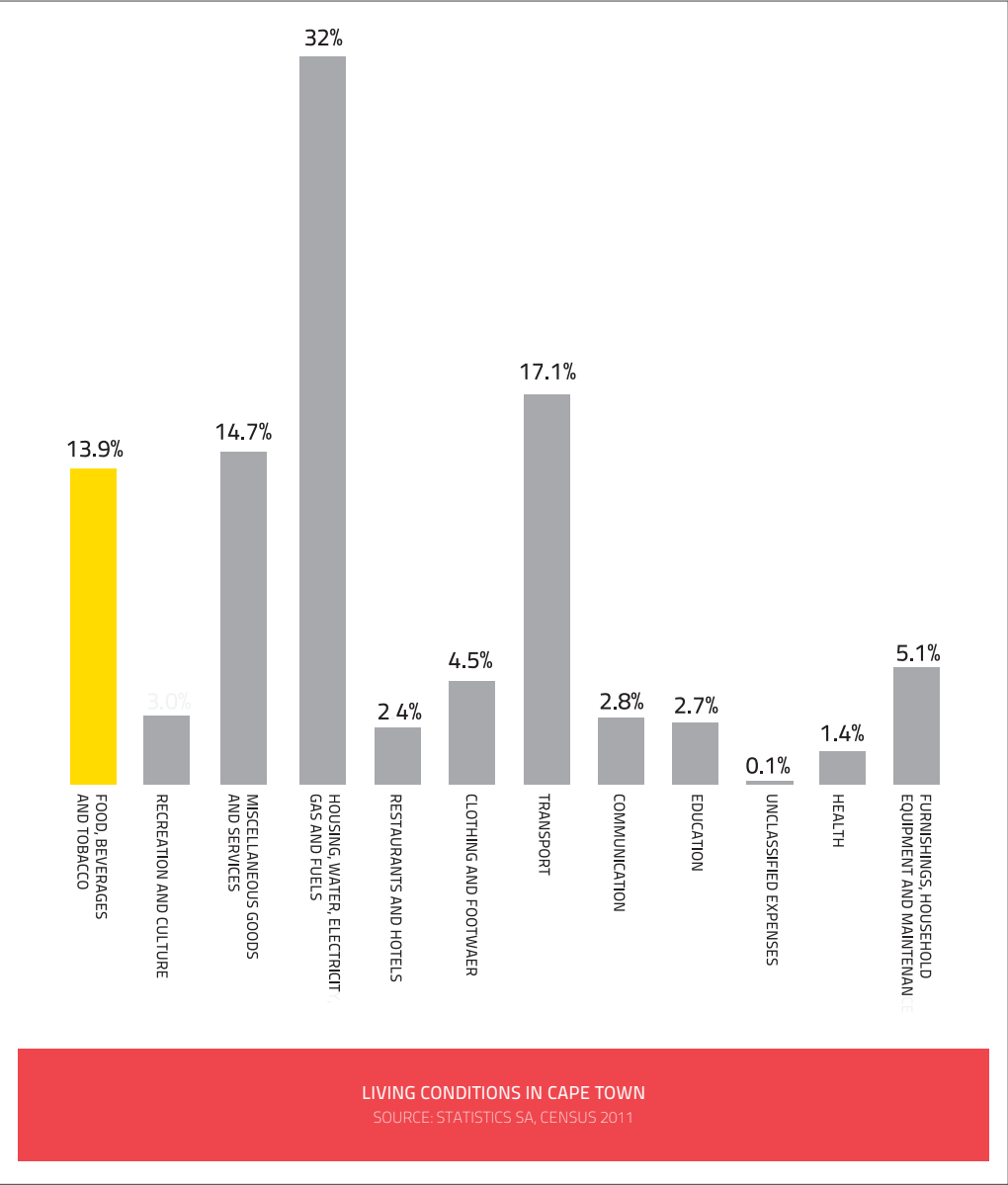
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selling Islamic clothes, and the halal butchery. Kieyaam pushes the shopping trolley, Shereen ambling by his side, hand resting on its metal bars. “Kieyaam knows what to buy.” Shereen’s eyes twinkle from within the oval of her tightly pinned headscarf. “I don’t like shopping so he usually does it.” Kieyaam glances at her with amusement as he lifts a two-litre bottle of fruit juice from a refrigerated shelf. The Rykliefs shop at the hypermarket because of the diversity, they say. And diverse it most certainly is. You can buy everything from a washing machine and TV set, even an 18-piece dinner service, to a warm brand-name pie from the deli, or fruit and dairy from the refrigerated section.

Most of the customers at the hypermarket are coloured, many of them Muslim. It’s a reminder of how the apartheid administration’s petty segregation laws still echo through the city. You can strip away the institutional arrangements that forced different race groups to live in various parts of town, but two decades since the first democratic elections haven’t managed to rid the city of the economic trenches that keep people locked into their neighbourhoods, and largely unintegrated. Cape Town is still a divided city. And like so many of our urban hubs, where 60% of South Africans now live, the sprawl of the city is a powerful force determining what we eat. Perhaps this anecdote from the Nation Planning Commission’s Vision 2030 best illustrates what a burden the city layout is to the poor: “A single mother of four children aged between three and 12 lives in Tembisa with her mother. She spends nearly five hours each day commuting to and from work in the Pretoria suburb of Brummeria, where she is an office cleaner. The journey costs nearly 40% of her monthly salary of R1900. She leaves home at 5am to be at the office at 7.30am, starting with a two-kilometre walk to the taxi stand, which takes her to the train station. In Pretoria, she takes another taxi to Brummeria. After leaving work at 4pm, she may not get home until 7pm, as the trains are often late. She spends over R700 a month on transport and nearly 100 hours on the road.” Anthony Black, an economics professor with UCT’s Environmental Policy Research Unit (EPRU), points out that the burden of the apartheid-era design of our cities, where finding employment and commuting to work is difficult and costly, effectively constitutes a tax on both employment, and on the poor. Like so many other cash-strapped, time-pinchd parents, cooking a meal from scratch using whole foods at the end of a long day, where the kids need to get to bed early, becomes more and more difficult. And so they default to processed, easy-to-prepare



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foods that are often high in calories, but low in nutrients. They fill the belly but don’t build the body. This is one of the key findings from research done by AFSUN—that while there is plenty of food coming into the city, it’s not spread evenly like a neatly buttered slice of bread. And the reason for that is to do with poverty, joblessness, lack of cash, the sprawl of the city and the easier access which cash-strapped people have to highly processed ‘dead’ calories rather than wholesome healthful foods. When AFSUN researchers visited some homes in the built-up neighbourhoods around the Philippi farming area, near where the Rykliefs now farm, they found that only about 10% of families were “food secure”—meaning that most were not getting regular, reliable access to healthy affordable food. Most were living off a diet of highly processed carbohydrates and sugary foods without much diversity or micronutrient content. There may have been volume on the plate, but not much variety, not much nutrient value beyond empty energy. This is how the so-called ‘double burden of disease’ ends up afflicting so many of the urban poor: they put on weight, and get the lifestyle related illnesses associated with being heavy (such as diabetes and heart disease), while at the same time battling with the compromised immune systems and other health problems associated with being micronutrient deprived. This is what’s called the hidden hunger. Research shows two big blind spots in terms of tackling the problems of urban hunger, malnutrition and obesity. The first, as the AFSUN researchers point out again and again, is that our fixation on farming and production as the solution means we tend to channel energy, policy and resources into rolling out urban agriculture in order to put more healthy food into the system, not realising that this doesn’t necessarily mean everyone will be able to buy that food, or will even choose to if the option is available to them. And secondly, as the journal

The Lancet pointed out in its special report on obesity in 2011, we focus too much on individual choice and behaviour as a driver of obesity and related lifestyle illnesses, without thinking about how the broken food system is nudging us into a path of weight gain and ill health. The city, it concluded, makes us fat and sick, but as long as we focus on education and behaviour change as the main interventions in order to resolve the problem, we overlook the many other problems steering us off course. The rising obesity rate in the modern cityscape worldwide, said *The Lancet*, is the normal response of normal people to an abnormal environment. And to quote the House of Lords report on Britain’s spreading girth, the obesogenic cityscape makes it too hard to make the right food and lifestyle choices, and too easy to make the wrong ones. If we make the mistake of focusing too much on urban food gardening as a way of making sure we get more healthful foods into the city, warn AFSUN researchers like Dr Jane Battersby, we overlook these other important factors which sway our food choices. The Tembisa mother mentioned in the planning commission’s report hardly has time to cook her own meals from scratch, let alone grow the vegetables too. And if we level the responsibility for bad food choices purely at the feet of the user, warned *The Lancet*, we give a free pass to industry, which hides so many sugary, processed dead calories in our food. It allows a relatively unregulated, profit-driven industry with scales of economy on its side, to continue delivering food to the city that is fast, cheap and easy—but not necessarily healthy. But there’s something else about life in the city that feeds into this perfect storm of conditions that leaves many of us fat, sick and malnourished. It has to do with culture, and how the city grooms our attitude towards foods. It’s Friday night at the Ryklief home. Shereen’s sister, Faeza, stirs an enormous pot of curry on the stove while her husband slips out the door with a jovial ‘Salaam, everyone!’



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Kieyaam’s mother, Mymoena, potters in the background. The Ryklief kids jostle about on the tiled floor of the open-plan kitchen while Shereen chops veggies, stirs a pot on the stove, and chops some more. A grinning Bilal is at an age where he’s almost inseparable from his dad, so he’s inadvertently getting schooled in the ways of the farmer. “He knows all his weeds,” chuckles Kieyaam, on the edge of the kitchen bustle, cradling his infant son in one arm. Bilal rattles off a name or two, but soon gets snagged on one of them. “Thorn apple? No, apple thorn. Thorn apple? Apple thorn?” he cocks his head, trying to remember which it is. “It’s like a ball ...” He fades out, muddling the answer through in his head. Dinner is nearly ready, though, so everyone’s thoughts soon turn to the more pressing matter of eating.

This meal is still fairly traditional, both in terms of the curries the Rykliefs will eat, and the Muslim observance of Friday as a day of prayer, reflection and family time. But one phenomenon of moving to the city is this so-called nutritional transition, where people often abandon traditional foods in favour of the “Western diet” –energy dense, highly refined, often branded foods that might have high status value and interesting taste but offer little nutrition to speak of. The World Health Organisation notes that this trend is common across the developing world: city folk tend to want branded, highly processed or fast foods, which they see as being modern and sophisticated. A local civil society organisation, Zanempilo, interviewed a group of women in Khayelitsha, near to Philippi, and found similar attitudes

amongst women they spoke to. “People who boil food are not civilised,” one woman said. “Fried food is attractive, tasty such as Kentucky fried chicken [sic]. If your neighbour boils food people say she is still backward because the food does not taste nor look attractive.” Others said it was faster to fry food than boil it, and that fried meat tasted much better than boiled meat. A similar Johannesburg survey by academics from the School of Public Health at the University of the Western Cape (working for the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation) found that some people preferred fried foods because they are seen as a mark of “modern living and wealth, while food that is boiled is considered inferior and demonstrates outdated customs”. Cultural attitudes towards meat, fresh produce and fast foods are a powerful force determining what we eat. As AFSUN’s Jane Battersby points out, we aren’t going to solve the city’s food issues simply by putting more fresh produce on the shelves, because you can’t make people buy and eat it.

There’s a feeling of almost organised anarchy in the cluster of rickety stalls where James Chembe and his fellow traders peddle their wares at Khayelitsha station. A couple of stray dogs trot between stalls. People stride past in a hurry to get home. It’s all dirt roads and tilting stall frames and a patchwork of taut-tied canvas and plastic sheeting as makeshift roofs. Here, a salvaged shipping container with lockable doors; there, a tarpaulin becoming a temporary shelter above the tailgate of a bakkie. This little market has sprung up out of nowhere at the foot of the walkway that straddles one of the busiest train platforms in the city. It may look scruffy, unplanned and temporary, but it has got the thriving pulse of a village square. These are business people who didn’t wait for any developer to come in and build them a mini-mall or shopping centre, to give them running water and charge them rent for a glass-

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fronted shop with faux-wood countertops and refrigerated shelves. They saw where the market was, a stream of people moving through a transport hub, and they cast their net across the mid-current. Informal traders are effective in a city. They are agile. They go where the market is, and they take their own infrastructure with them. They can trickle quickly into places where the formal retailers can’t or won’t go. And as fast as they’ve filled the space, they can move on again. And yet the clampdown on informal traders in many cities around the region, shows how unaware city administrators often are of the importance of this almost invisible part of the food system. Operation Clean Sweep tried to run traders out of the Johannesburg CBD in 2013. The website Urban Africa recently reported that Malawian mayors intended putting a stop to street vending in town centres there. Zimbabwean traders have similarly had to battle the ruling party in their country, even though it has become a “nation of traders” following the economic collapse, according to Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries. People like James Chembe and Kieyaam Ryklief are the antidote to the economic and spatial challenges of the city that prevent poorer communities from accessing

affordable, healthy foods. They are the oasis in a phenomenon that’s become known as urban “food deserts”, those places where typically poor people can’t get hold of healthy, affordable food because of economic or physical barriers such as distance from retail outlets and lack of transport options. The idea of a food desert emerged in the United States and Europe in the 1990s. There, it was mostly due to supermarket “retreat”, where big retailers pull out of poorer inner cities because of low profitability, and set up shop out in the suburbs where wealthier car-owners can easily reach them. Something different is happening in the South African urban food desert, though, because here supermarkets have set their sights on new markets, spreading rapidly into even relatively poor townships on the urban edge. But Jane Battersby warns that we shouldn’t assume that access to a supermarket automatically means people will start eating a healthier diet. AFSUN recently mapped out where all of Cape Town’s supermarkets are, relative to the informal markets. Unsurprisingly, the bulk of the big retailers are found in the wealthy suburbs: the highest-income areas have nearly eight times as many supermarkets per household as those in the lowest-income areas. And yet, while more and more retail chains are opening stores in townships, this doesn’t necessarily mean they’re bringing better foods to these communities. The small shopping centre on the other side of the train line from James’ stall has clothes, furniture and food retailers. There are also plenty of fast food joints, although they don’t offer their customers the freshly picked and culturally appropriate leaves that James does. If they did, he wouldn’t have a market niche here. Researchers found that the retail chain stores in poorer communities stocked less healthy foods than those in wealthier neighbourhoods, something they say “challenges the assumption that access to a supermarket automatically



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Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha
01. Nontebeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha
02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha
03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives

guarantees a better diet”. These shops also seem to feed into the nutritional transition. And while supermarkets are so visible—through their prominent branding and marketing campaigns—the informal traders turn out to have their own key role to play in keeping fresh produce within easy reach for city dwellers. Informal traders tend to be much more ‘fluid’ than their formal counterparts: they pop up where the gaps in the markets are, regardless of the hour of day or night. While they can’t compete with supermarkets gram-for-gram on pricing, they are often much closer to home, which saves people the considerable cost of driving to a supermarket or hauling bags of groceries on a packed minibus taxi. And they often allow customers to buy on credit, which helps make a cash strapped family much more resilient during leaner periods. Yet, in spite of this important and often overlooked role of the informal sector, city policy often clamps down hard on informal traders while leaving supermarkets to play by their own rules. Since South Africa’s economic policy started tacking in the direction of unregulated free market neo-liberalism after 1994, supermarkets have been “generally free to do business without any significant degree of regulation,” writes Battersby and her colleague Professor Jonathan Crush in the journal *Urban Forum*. The urban informal food economy, on the other hand is regularly the target of “control, regulation and draconian eradication policies”.

The story of food and our city is a complex one. We could begin to explore it on the Cape Flats, where farmers like Kieyaam Ryklief try to coax and cajole growth out of the reluctant soils, so the city can put broccoli and cauliflower and salad leaves on its table. For most of us, it is the obvious place to start, at the very headwaters of what often looks like a linear flow of food from farmer to fork. Or, we could start this exploration of urban food security in the aisles of

the hypermarket where Kieyaam and Shereen push their trolley like many other Capetonians. Supermarkets, after all, are the biggest and most publicly visible part of the otherwise almost amorphous system that allows calories and nutrients to flow from the farm, along transportation routes, through packing houses and processing plants and warehouses, to retailers, and eventually onto our plates. Nearly 70% of all the food sold in South Africa in 2010 moved through the checkout tills of our supermarkets, according to the *Financial Mail*. The big four—Pick n Pay, Woolworths, Spar and Shoprite Checkers—own the lion’s share of that trade, some 97% of retail food sales. And they’re expanding yearly. For anyone wanting to think about the complexity of feeding our growing urban population, these retailers are the kingpins in the system. Or maybe this story should focus on Kieyaam and Shereen’s dining room, where the family seat themselves around a coffee table on deep cushions. After all, it is here that they eat their halal mutton and chicken curries on rice, with side servings of frikkadel (meatballs) and a grated carrot and tomato salad, lifting the food from their plates expertly between fingertips. Surely this communing over food is as ancient as we are as a species. But it is perhaps most fitting that this story is understood from the point of view of James Chembe and his fellow informal traders, who bring food to the passing rush hour foot traffic on roadside pavements, close to a railway station and taxi ranks around the city. Their operations are small, the individual turnover not even a speck in the city’s fiscal eye. But together with all the other informal food traders whose stalls pop open like daisy flowers each morning, and fold shut at dusk, they are an overlooked source of food for the poor. Without them, many city dwellers would be at greater risk of going hungry. These traders are a critical part of a system of food flows in the city that has been invisible to policy makers

and researchers for so long. And the money that gets exchanged for food, right here, is a large but little understood part of the invisible machine in Cape Town, a city still marked by a big divide between rich and poor, a city in which food is apparently everywhere and yet hunger and malnutrition are almost pervasive in some poorer neighbourhoods.

Finally, it’s harvest time. In the gloomy pre-dawn, dark silhouettes merge into one, then splinter, merge and splinter, as a group of Zimbabwean women head across the concrete skirt of the packing shed, and off towards the fields that have frustrated Kieyaam so much for the past fortnight. The wind ruffles up a thick wad of clouds, whose underbelly is tinged a chemical orange with the city’s reflected electrical light. The air is saw-toothed and merciless, promising snow. But the harvesters barely seem to notice. News has spread—by word of mouth, by cellphone text message, through a network of friends, and friends of friends. People arrive in groups, some alone. Bent forward, they move up and down the rows, breaking the fuller, lower leaves off each plant with a crispy snap. Bouquets of scalloped green leaves sprout from their hands, and get shoved into swelling carrier bags. *Snap, snap-snap, snap.* Some collect three big bags, others only one. They hoist them through to the packing shed, balanced on their heads, or swaying heavily from a balled-up hand. “Seven rand a kilo,” says Sharon. Her load weighs in at 9.9kg. Next stop, she says, is the neighbouring farm where she’ll pick up covo and broccoli leaves, then to the Epping market to buy tomatoes and okra. By lunchtime, she’ll be back at “Masi” (Masiphumelele, between Kommetjie, Capri Village and Noordhoek on the south peninsula), ready to sell. Kieyaam’s relief is tangible. “This is a much better arrangement,” he says from beneath a woollen beanie, his

greying beard resisting the wind’s icy tug as his customers pick their way between the rows of plants. “People harvest themselves, so there’s no labour cost, and they pay cash. With the supermarkets, you have to harvest using your own labour and then wait 30 days for payment.” Yes, he adds, some Pick n Pays are beginning to stock rapeseed leaves now. Two Zimbabwean men will take their stock back home to Strand, they say, as another bakkie pulls up alongside the field to disgorge half-a-dozen young men. One, clad in a jacket and shorts, despite the cold, slips his feet into plastic grocery packets, which he knots at his ankles, before pulling on his boots. “No, I’m not cold,” he grins, “I’m still strong!” James is the only solitary harvester today. He moves slowly and deliberately, collecting his leaves before those fit, younger men strip the field. He doesn’t have transport, so he won’t be able to get to the Epping market. All he wants is some rapeseed from here, and whatever the next-door farm is selling. Then he’ll head back to his stall at the rickety little market that has blossomed out of the fertile soils of the railway siding in one of the city’s most sprawling townships. *

Leonie Joubert is a science writer and journalist based in Cape Town. Her books include *Scorched* (2006), *Boiling Point* (2008) and *The Hungry Season* (2012)



NOORDHOEK

The Healer

John Parker is a psychiatrist at Lentegeur Hospital. This psychiatric facility in Mitchells Plain is at the frontline of treating methamphetamine-related psychosis. Parker, a barefoot poet and surfer, has developed programmes to address the “tik” crisis. But drug abuse is one facet of a multitude of social problems on the Cape Flats

Words: **Brendon Bosworth**





It is seven, still dark on Baden Powell Drive, a beachfront road that connects the suburb of Muizenberg to the Cape Flats. A white VW Citi Golf with only one headlight, its hazard lights flashing, negotiates the dawn traffic. The sole occupant of the car, psychiatrist John Parker (48), is on his way to meet Kurt Meavers, a mechanic in Strandfontein. The Citi Golf is in need of repair. John is clean-shaven, wears glasses and has a small silver earring in his left ear. He has been up since five. Each morning begins with a meditation routine, either inside his Noordhoek home or outside in his daughters' Wendy house during the hot summer months. The early morning quiet is important to John, who devotes time to cultivating mindfulness, the ability to be in the moment and pay attention in a purposeful and non-judgmental way. The fruits of this practice are recognisable: the doctor holds the space around him when he speaks in his metered and thoughtful manner. John pulls up outside the mechanic's house. Meavers, an affable man with neatly trimmed beard, comes out and greets John with a handshake and a hug. They met two years ago when Meavers saw John standing by the side of the road next to his car—it had broken down—and have become close friends. Meavers says he has learned a lot from John during their conversations whenever he has had to drive the psychiatrist to nearby Lentegeur Hospital, a specialist psychiatric facility in Mitchells Plain, where John has worked since late 2003. The hospital was established in 1987. "He's too calm, man," Meavers tells me. He wears a T-shirt with "My God is an Awesome God" written on it. "It rubs off on me because I can see it. Before I say a thing, I look at it first, take ten or 15 seconds, and then say it—then it will come out right. That's what I learned from him." Others who know John reiterate this sentiment: John is mindful, easy to relate to. And his thoughtful demeanour, as well as the strong sense of self-belief he projects,



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Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha
01. Nontebeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha
02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha
03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives

helps the psychiatrist navigate the broad range of human emotion and experience he encounters in his work. It has also served him well in confrontational encounters with psychotic patients. Like the time he talked a burly patient out of hitting him with a chair, or when he got a knife-wielding patient to hand over his weapon—both events took place early in his career, when he was based at Fort England Psychiatric Hospital in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. “It’s something I’ve discovered in myself,” says John. “I can engage with someone who’s completely psychotic.” For instance, someone who is hearing voices and screaming. “I can go in there, and I’ve done it a lot of times, where no one else will go near the person, and I can walk in there and make peace,” he says. “It’s about learning to speak to the human deep inside there—learning to let your human being engage with that human being at a very deep level.”

John Parker is a straight-talker. He populates his conversations with anecdotes, tales of his travels to different parts of the world by land and sea, observations on the intricacies of human connection, and experiences as a doctor before becoming a psychiatrist. Between graduating from medical school at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1990 and starting work in psychiatry at Fort England in 1995, John did stints as an intern and later a medical officer at Cecilia Makiwane Hospital outside East London. He also worked in the trauma unit in Cape Town’s Victoria Hospital. “I loved being a doctor. I wanted to be a ‘real doctor’ for a while,” he says of his career before psychiatry. “The problem with it is it kills you emotionally. There’s this paradox because you’ve got to care for people but no one teaches you how to be there emotionally and, yet, not get destroyed by that. You’re too close,

emotionally, to people dying all the time. It does mess you up.” With psychiatry, John wanted to go beyond saving lives and work with people who have been othered in some way: he wanted to help them find meaning in their lives. Despite dealing with the darker aspects of human experience on a daily basis, John is clear that his role as a psychiatrist in a government hospital serving poor communities on Cape Town’s periphery is not altruism. “If you do things only for other people, self-sacrifice, it’s the surest road to bitterness and burnout,” he says. “You need to do it for yourself, but it’s a conception of the self that is well beyond Western individualism. It’s closer to sort of ubuntu stuff: I do it for myself in the knowledge that what I give to other people is the most rewarding thing I can do.” John has a casual, approachable air about him and typically wears open-neck shirts paired with a dark jacket when he is at work. Work is a collection of face-brick units with red roofs behind an electrified fence, which John says is there to keep thieves out, not patients in. Three times a week, behind a closed door in the outpatients department, John consults patients with severe mental illnesses, including borderline personality disorder, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Patients tell of hearing voices in their head; some of them slash and burn themselves. He has had patients kill themselves. A few feet away from his office door, a woman in a white coat dispenses medication from the counter of the hospital’s pharmacy. Patients push brown envelopes, containing their details and scripts, into a slot labelled “folders”, wait, and then leave with up to a month’s worth of medication. This is one of the daily cycles at Lentegeur, one of three state-run psychiatric hospitals in the Western Cape. Built by the apartheid government, the hospital serves the urban populations living in some of Cape Town’s poorest areas, including Mitchells Plain, Khayelitsha, Philippi, Strandfontein and Crossroads. Collectively known as the Cape

Flats, this sprawling mishmash of low-income neighbourhoods and slums on the city’s outskirts is where the apartheid government sent non-white residents who were forcibly removed from the city under the notorious Group Areas Act of 1950. Unemployment here is high; basic services are rudimentary and mental health issues not uncommon. Lentegeur houses a small population of persons with intellectual disabilities and forensic patients, the latter criminal offenders either unfit to stand trial or serving court-ordered sentences based on their diminished capacity to distinguish right and wrong. But mostly Lentegeur’s patients arrive experiencing psychotic episodes: some hallucinate, others are delusional; often they are dangerous to themselves, sometimes to others too.

When visiting Lentegeur it is easy to forget that it is a psychiatric hospital because the patients are behind closed doors in their wards. Reminders of its function soon materialise. Occasionally, patients are seen outside, walking around in pale blue gowns. A few times when meeting with John I encountered a man, a long-term resident at the hospital, in the passageway unable to form words. He would talk at me, loudly, making garbled sounds, looking me in the eye, seemingly frustrated at our lack of understanding. Mental illness remains poorly understood. What is known is its pervasiveness: about 30% of adult South Africans will experience at least one mental disorder in their lifetimes, in part due to the high incidence of alcohol and drug abuse and dependency—also classified as mental disorders in the South African Stress and Health (SASH) study, a nationally-representative study of common mental disorders undertaken between 2002 and 2004. In the Western Cape, the province with the highest prevalence of common mental disorders according to SASH, and particularly the

poorer areas on the city’s periphery, drug use underpins a rise in the prevalence of mental illness. There is however no data that localises the incidence of mental health disorders on the Cape Flats, where the popular street drug tik—a methamphetamine sold in crystal form and usually smoked using a straw and light bulb or glass pipe—is strongly associated with mental illness, especially bouts of psychosis. Many tik users who experience psychotic episodes end up at Lentegeur. “The thing about tik is there’s no other drug with such a strong association with mental illness,” says John. He points to the findings of an Australian study of just over 300 regular methamphetamine users: 13% of them screened positive for psychosis, 11 times higher than the figure for the general population. There’s nothing to suggest South Africa would have a lower incidence of methamphetamine-related psychosis. Tik’s popularity as a recreational drug in Cape Town rose sharply in the 2000s, according to numbers from the Medical Research Council (MRC). In the first half of 2003, just 5% of patients admitted to city rehabs reported using tik as a drug of choice. Four years later that proportion had jumped to 49%. Tik remains the drug of choice in the province. In 2013, two-fifths of those in city rehabs reported using tik as a primary or secondary drug of abuse. Tik also has a pronounced racial demographic. Nearly 80% of people using tik as their primary substance of abuse are coloured persons. More coloured people are primary abusers of tik than alcohol, according to the MRC. Tik is also popular among younger users. Since the beginning of 2004, the number of primary users younger than 20 in city rehabs has yo-yoed between 16% and 60%. The relationship between drug use and mental illness among children and adolescents in the Cape Flats is so volatile that a few years ago Lentegeur had to close an inpatient child and adolescent therapeutic unit—it was dedicated to treating



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youth with nominally more prosaic psychiatric illnesses like depression, suicidal behaviour, severe anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and the like—and convert it to a psychosis recovery unit so as to open up more beds for psychotic children and adolescents.

In the Western Cape, like other parts of South Africa, a small cache of middle-to-high income earners use high-quality private hospitals, paying handsomely to do so through contributions to medical aids. The majority of residents rely on public sector hospitals. Based on predictions of the prevalence of mental illness, there are roughly four to five times the number of severely mentally ill people who need hospitalisation in the Western Cape than are actually admitted, estimates John. The combination of an under-resourced public health sector and high prevalence of substance abuse and social toxicity in areas like the Cape Flats has produced a lethal concoction. “In the last ten years in the Western Cape we’ve been absolutely battered by the amphetamine epidemic, in particular, but HIV is also playing a big role in increasing the figures, the number of people in need,” says John. Fragmented and unstable home environments and a hostile social fabric also contribute to mental health issues in Lentegeur’s catchment area. René Nassen, a medical doctor specialising in child psychiatry who trained with John at the University of Cape Town’s psychiatry department, gives a window into the types of backgrounds that shape the outcomes for young patients at the hospital. Nassen, who is also head of Lentegeur’s child and adolescent psychiatry service, conveys a genuine sense of empathy when she speaks. Her dark wavy hair frames a warm smile that I imagine sometimes finds itself subdued, momentarily extinguished by the sombre realities of the young people she consults. A set of Russian dolls, perched quietly on top of the

bookshelf in her office, listen with wooden ears as she talks about the intertwining roles of poverty, abuse, drugs and violence. Typically, teenage boys who land up at Lentegeur get their start in the world with a learning difficulty that may be coupled with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). They struggle to cope

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academically at school and begin exhibiting behavioural problems. Often, they end up dropping out of school, or being suspended, usually around Grade 8. At this point they generally start using drugs, usually cannabis and tik. Three or four years after starting on these drugs they experience a psychotic episode. “The reason why we see these learning disordered children has got everything to do with the social adversity these children suffer,” says Nassen. “Right from in the womb they are disadvantaged.” These adverse conditions include mothers who may be using drugs and alcohol, poor nutrition, and exposure to violence in their homes and communities. “It’s pretty much what one would expect in low-income areas,” she says. “The problem in our situation is that it’s not just poverty and low income, it’s the violence and crime which compounds the picture.” Girls face similar adversity,

but have the added trauma of sexual abuse in their backgrounds. About 90% of the teenage girls admitted for treatment of adolescent psychosis have been sexually abused from a young age, says Nassen. “Many times, I feel like I preside over a human tragedy out of all proportion.” Mental illness is one facet of a multitude of social problems on the Cape Flats. The area is home to a deeply embedded gang culture. Gang violence has become so chronic in some parts that in 2013 government closed schools in one badly affected area, Manenberg, for two days over fears about the safety of pupils caught in the crossfire of warring gangs. Western Cape Premier Helen Zille has at times over the past few years called for the national army to be deployed to help combat the powerful gangs. Amid high levels of unemployment and poverty, children are readily co-opted into gangs and used to peddle drugs at schools and elsewhere. For kids in the area gunshots are nothing anymore, says Joe van der Berg, director of Cornerstone Therapeutic Community, a drug rehab in Mitchells Plain. His office is in a lemon-coloured building next to a boarded-up church; it is not far from the hospital where John works. Across the street from the rehab, children play in a park. Their voices drift intermittently into the office. “They look up to the gunshots. The [drug] merchant is becoming their role model,” says Van der Berg. “Coming from a poor family, you want to have money, you want to have that power—with money comes power.” Treating psychotic patients in this challenging environment is tough: relapse rates are high. With pressure on the available beds, psychotic patients at hospitals like Lentegeur need to be discharged as soon as possible. Doctors see many of the same faces, patients returning after relapsing, sometimes only months later. In 2013, 61% of patients admitted to Lentegeur were readmissions. John likens this frustrating cycle to the fate of Sisyphus, the deceitful king of Ephyra who in Greek mythology

was condemned by the gods to unsuccessfully roll a huge boulder up a mountain, for eternity. “We’ve come into this profession trying to help people and for the first week or two they’re fighting with us, in every way possible,” says John. “You’ve no sooner got them to the point where they’re actually grateful for what you’re doing and out they go. Then two months later they’re back screaming at you again. It just completely wears you down. And even more so when you’re trying to fight for resources to actually do this better and you’re getting flak from the rest of the health system for not taking all the ‘mad’ people out of their hospitals quick enough.” John, who nowadays clocks 50 hours a week at work on average, reached a point of burnout after watching the boulder roll downhill one too many times while running the hospital’s female admission unit. In 2009, he wrote a resignation letter. His CEO asked him to reconsider, so he took extended leave, packing his family—wife, Belinda, and two children, Hana and Grace—into his Land Rover. The Johns headed off on an extended camping trip through Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and parts of South Africa. Ten months later John returned to Lentegeur. “It was like coming home,” he recalls. “I got back here and people would see me from across the hospital and come running and give me a hug. It was very special.” He knew he wanted to stay, as well as find a mechanism to cope with the stress. “I had to find a way to survive, basically.” That path to survival involved introducing the ideas that would culminate in John’s ongoing venture, the Spring Project, which has seen the introduction of vegetable gardening for long-term patients and the greening of some parts of the hospital. Outside the forensic ward there are neat rows of cauliflower, lettuce and spring onion. Behind the same ward, a patch of sweet potatoes has taken root. Patients sell these. At another garden outside the occupational therapy centre—it is known as the “Beehive”—local

organisation Food and Trees for Africa provides permaculture training to forensic patients. At another section of the hospital there is a hoophouse (a polytunnel hothouse) in the making. A semi-circular frame draped with white mesh, it houses various greens. Strewn nearby is plastic piping and troughs; they will eventually be turned into vertical gardens, with the pipes sucking fish droppings out of the water to nourish the plants. The gardens are not just an aesthetic accompaniment to beautify the hospital. There is a deep theoretical concept attached to John’s ideas, informed by the recovery movement: a body of thought that places the need to find meaning in one’s life and a sense of hope at the core of the healing process. “The whole way our society sees mental illness is that it’s profoundly hopeless and is something that’s shameful,” says John. This is something he wants to change. He is fond of dispelling the notion that people cannot recover from serious mental illness such as schizophrenia by making references to those with psychiatric disorders who have gone on to work as professionals, including as psychiatrists—one, an American psychiatrist who was diagnosed with schizophrenia in the 1960s, went on to study psychiatry at Harvard and acquired a second doctorate. John’s hope is that patients will find their work in Lentegeur’s gardens purposeful, and will begin to experience a sense of hope for life outside the institution. The aim is also to help them reconnect with broader society, overriding the historical legacy of mental institutions as spaces that remove the mentally ill from society. John wants to see Lentegeur’s patients reconnect with their communities, and have the hospital reconnect with the community too. Patients give vegetables to visiting family members; they also sell them on site. In this way people become something more than just patients by shifting into the role of providers.

John also sees the project as a way to heal the hospital itself, making it more welcoming. Lentegeur does not lend itself visually to the idea of recovery, thinks John. He points to the imposing and dour entrance. A horizontal column of text set in a version of Times New Roman lettering reads “Welcome to Lentegeur Hospital and Western Cape Rehabilitation Centre”. It sits above a brick security box, where guards sign visitors in and check their car boots on the way out (to make sure there aren’t patients hiding in them). The only other places that have gateways like that are the prisons, he says, and possibly Tygerberg Hospital. “It’s just such a perfect example of disconnected thinking,” John says. “No one who built that gate was thinking, ‘I want people who come through this entrance to feel like they’re about to get help.’ It was completely the opposite.”

It would be a disservice to John’s Spring Project to see it as just vegetable gardening. This is the opinion of Peter Smith, a medical doctor and psychiatrist at Lentegeur who has known John since the late 1990s when they were both training to be psychiatrists at the University of Cape Town. The project ties into a broader framework that brings together elements related to human rights and ethics, explains Smith. “Digging holes and planting trees is a pretty ordinary, humble activity. But it is actually directed at a very complex process, which is about connection,” he explains. “It is about a kind of reconciliation of human beings who have been taken on a detour away from themselves.” Institutions can be slow to change. New ideas take time to get support. John’s project has not been without its critics. “I imagine that for John there must have been immense frustration and obstacles,” says Smith. “I think very few people could have taken on a project like the one he has. What I think has helped him is his natural determination and

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perspicacity, his belief, I suppose.” John spent his early years growing up in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where his father, a manager with British American Tobacco, had been posted. At age nine his parents sent him to St John’s College, a private boarding school for boys in Johannesburg. The formal school culture was a big change from the American school he attended in Rio, where children went without uniforms and called their teachers by their first names. While studying medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand during the 1980s, a period marked by increased political upheaval and protest against the apartheid system, John got involved with the leftist student movement. Part of his activism involved working with an emergency services group, training underground activists in the townships to administer first aid during clashes with police. He recalls working in the basement of a general store in the Zeerust area, during clashes between troops from Bophuthatswana and local citizens. “I can still remember some of the people we saw. Women, shot, beaten up. An amputee *sjambokked* [whipped] on his amputated leg so badly that it had split open.” Having witnessed the apartheid system’s brutality, John was not hopeful about change. “In 1988 I remember seeing a poster from the UDF [United Democratic Front]

Youth League that said, ‘Freedom in our lifetime’. I remember getting tears in my eyes thinking, ‘Geez, these poor guys are so naively optimistic.’” But things did change. John now works for the government. Every workday John returns home to the small Atlantic seaboard community of Noordhoek on the southern outskirts of Cape Town. His house backs onto Table Mountain National Park and overlooks a long, white beach, where he enjoys surfing. It is warm inside the living room on a cold Sunday afternoon, Father’s Day, when I visit. We sit near the fireplace. A westerly wind blows salty air landward from the grey Atlantic Ocean. John is on the couch. He wears a loose sweater and grey shorts with a hole in them. A few hours earlier his wife trimmed his hair. The neighbour’s dog, a laconic creature prone to seizures due to epilepsy, is curled up next to him. A wetsuit hangs from a rafter. There is a photo of famed Cape Town big wave surf spot Dungeons, which produces gigantic waves in front of the Sentinel, a mountain peak not far from John’s home. Another photo shows John on a yacht in Fiji. He is younger, his hair wilder. The water in the photo’s background is cobalt, the vegetation lush. Two drums and a marimba stand against the wall next to the fireplace. At the nearby dining table, Belinda (45) and Hana (9) are crafting animal sculptures from clay. A set of miniature horses stand complete, drying. Belinda has just put the finishing touches on a red cat. These sculptures, and others yet to be made, will take their place on a model of an ark that Hana has made for a school project. John and his daughters are barefoot despite the winter chill. John doesn’t like shoes and neither do the girls. When he gave a TEDx talk in Cape Town in 2012 he went barefoot on stage. I ask him why. “He doesn’t like wearing shoes,” interjects Hana. “I hate wearing shoes too.” “They’re horrid,” Grace (10) chimes in. John recites from memory a poem,

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‘Footloose’, penned during a perennially barefoot period in 1995:

small wonder the putrid odour that emanates from the shoe, straightjacket to the foot. silent strangler that leaves the toes to rot in humid darkness, stolen from the soil. they say that leather moves and breathes as living skin. how pleasant, dead animals to cushion and comfort like a padded cell. I yearn only to tear them loose and stand free, my feet alive, spread out and feeling how the earth sings beneath me.

Inside John’s home, nestled against the mountainside, where poetry is spoken, it is warm and secure. John’s daughters, each wearing a weave in their hair, seem unencumbered. John has found a place where he is connected to his family and the surrounding nature.

I am reminded of John’s deep familial and geographical connections early one morning a week or so later. We are walking down the beach on the shortest day of the year, winter solstice, with a freshly birthed sun on the rise. John, in a wetsuit, his surfboard under his arm, has just crossed the beach’s brackish lagoon. As he reaches the other side, a flamboyance of flamingos lifts off into the sky, pointing their snake-like necks in the direction we’re heading. The sand is cold underfoot and I sink into it as I struggle to keep up with his brisk pace. He tells documentary filmmaker Simon Taylor, who is accompanying us, a story I’ve heard before. Years ago, when John wanted to move from his apartment in the city centre to the south peninsula, he was counselling a mother and her children using narrative therapy. They had been through a tough divorce situation and communication in the family was poor. John had been asking the girls to share their stories with him.

They would always ask him, “What’s your story?” John, who struggles with the classic psychoanalytic notion of a therapist as a blank slate, wondered what to share with these girls. Folklore and fairy tales were strong contenders. One Saturday morning, after recently seeing the girls, he was driving to Noordhoek to go surfing and got to thinking about what he could tell them about whales and surfing. He remembered reading about a surfer being “picked up” by a whale and thought that would be a nice story to tell. He tried to imagine it happening to him. Sitting on his board in the water that day, John noticed something dark below him, which he initially took for rocks or kelp. Looking closer, he realised it was a tail shape. Moments later he felt a surge of water boiling up below him. Something came out of the water and knocked him off his surfboard. He rolled onto his back, landing on a whale’s fluke, put out his hand and touched the whale’s leathery skin, feeling a distinct mammalian response as it pulled away from him. “I felt it feel me,” he recalls. John went to view the home, where he now lives, shortly after the incident. He could see the spot where the encounter in the water happened from the deck; he felt it was the right place to call home. He bought it soon after. John is not religious, but when making decisions he trusts that the right way forward will be revealed to him. “Serendipity,” he says, “the ability to see and surf synchronicity. I think synchronicity events do happen, and there’s maybe, I don’t know—it’s almost a skill you can develop. Either that, or I’m just freaking lucky.” On the walk back along the beach after our surf John adopts a more sombre tone when he talks about losing a patient to suicide. He says psychiatrists need to be able to let that type of thing go so they can move on with their work. It’s part of the job, not everyone recovers, despite a doctor’s efforts. Others, though, make real progress.

It is just after lunch on a Wednesday afternoon. I am with one of John’s patients, 19-year-old Jason*. He lives a short walk from the hospital. Jason has bipolar disorder. He says he was also previously diagnosed with schizophrenia—“just for four months, not so bad”. His father, a mechanic, died in 2009; the event had a profound effect on Jason, the youngest of four siblings. “To me, he said he’s only 14 years old, why should he grow up without a dad? He had a dream of getting old with his dad,” says Jason’s mother. She is sitting on a worn black armchair placed in the corner of the lounge at their home. The home’s walls are painted an orangey-pink. There are no pictures displayed. Along with other family members, Jason’s older sister is at home. She has had her front teeth and incisors removed, a procedure resulting in what is colloquially known as a “passion gap” or “Cape Flats smile”. She removes the plate she wears with false teeth to fill the gap. The incisors are gold. It is something she had wanted ever since she was a little girl. Not long after his father’s death, Jason’s aunt and uncle died too. He became withdrawn and spent hours sitting in front of the TV not saying anything. One day his mother came home to find him having a breakdown: screaming and crying. She took him to a nearby hospital, where she says he was given tablets for epilepsy meant for adults. Shortly afterwards he had a seizure, and wound up at Groote Schuur Hospital, the large teaching hospital near Devil’s Peak. He spent two months there, and a further two months at Tygerberg Hospital, a tertiary hospital located in Parow, before being transferred to Lentegeur. During his psychotic episodes, Jason says the TV spoke to him. He heard the voice of Riaan Cruywagen, a well-known South African news anchor, telling him he would take him on a tour with former president Nelson Mandela. He also heard his dead father telling him he would come to kill him. He saw creatures



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that weren’t there: they looked like meerkats, a type of mongoose. After treatment at Lentegeur, Jason is now an outpatient and sticks to a regime of psychiatric medication. He works as a volunteer at the Spring Project, going into the hospital daily for a few hours. At work he wears

a denim overall with a set of black gumboots. He is well known at the hospital, popular with the staff, and has become like a “pop idol” there, his mother says. Working at the hospital has helped Jason, who dropped out of school when he got ill. It is a chance to get out of the house. Being at the hospital makes him feel at ease, his mother says. “It helped me a lot to stay away from drugs,” says Jason. “That’s the most important thing.” He recently made the pages of a local community newspaper, appearing in an article about the Spring Project. He keeps a pile of copies of that edition at home, and is keen to show them off. “I was actually crying when I saw him in the newspaper,” says his mother. “I didn’t know that one of the children would be like him.” Positive stories like Jason’s give John hope. Part of the reason he got into psychiatry was to work with people who have been othered in some fashion and help them find meaning in their lives—much in the way he has found meaning, largely through

his work at Lentegeur. John doesn’t gloss over the tougher aspects of his job. The social ills that sculpt the lives of the people that come to the hospital are real. But he finds beauty on the Cape Flats among the people he works with, both amongst his colleagues and patients. He praises their “depth of humanity” despite trying circumstances. “There is value here,” he says. “That’s why I’m here.” He is quick to point out that he is not a martyr compelled to labour on the Cape Flats out of a misplaced sense of charity. “I’m not here to save people,” he says. “I’m doing something with them, and that thing that I do gives me joy. *

* Not his real name

Brendon Bosworth is a journalist and editor of UrbanAfrica.net. He lives in Cape Town



KENSINGTON

The Principal

Alfonso Louw is the principal of St Agnes Primary in Woodstock. It is a good school with a diverse student body, hands-on leader and innovative learner-focussed projects.

But St Agnes is also a poor school in a working-class neighbourhood, meaning the odds are massively stacked against its learners succeeding

Words: **Janine Stephen**



Alfonso Louw sometimes tells a wry joke when introducing himself. “Hello, I’m a primary school principal,” he says. “What kind of superhero are you?” The humour is self-deprecating; it refers to the multiple roles he is required to play. A youthful 55-year-old (“I think I have the sexiest man on earth,” his wife says), Alfonso sits in a computerless office, surrounded by administrative files. A rosary dangles from the wall, which sports a plethora of intricate timetables and a showcase of messages from pupils past and present. “Thank you for how you have encouraged me this past seven years,” one reads. Another, from a 32-year-old alumnus who is now a doctor, says “I was awkward & nerdy and you always treated me with such dignity and respect.” The day before, by 11am, Alfonso had taught a class, attended assembly, prepared for an Institutional Management and Governance (IMG) visit and an evening Governing Body meeting, begun collections for a raffle, checked in on a Grade 3 class that wanted to show him how they had grasped their two times table, and investigated quorums for a high school governing body by-election he had volunteered to chair. This morning, he has dealt with an email system on the blink, a tea urn that was left on (the element can burn out, it’s happened before), plus briefed a handyman on leaks that have sprung in the winter rain. Exams are looming and assessment tests are underway. He’s also gathered Grades 4 to 7 in the school hall for a LeadSA event (they’re 15 minutes late, enough to play havoc with the intricate school timetable). Alfonso is as agitated as I ever see him, and even now he’s full of humour. “When my IMG came in yesterday he said to me, *Alfonso, dit lyk as of jy besig is* [it looks like you’re busy]. Really? You don’t say.” St Agnes Primary School, the centre of Alfonso’s working life, is tucked off one-way Dublin Road in Woodstock, a dilapidated block that falls between Albert and Victoria

roads. The school has the arched corridors and voluminous spaces of times gone by, steeped in chalk dust and repetition. The Dominican Sisters opened it in 1899, with a further building added by the Christian Brothers in 1936. Today there are 381 children—but with plans to grow. The same can’t be said for the sisters. In 1970, there were still seven, but pupil numbers were dropping. A school history attributes the decline to the Group Areas Act of 1950, smaller families, and the development of Bothasig—named after then Minister of Community Development PW Botha—into “little Woodstock”. In 1994, Sister Justina, the last Dominican Sister, stepped down as headmistress and St Agnes became a public school on private land. Despite being government run, it has permission to retain its Catholic ethos: statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints stand pastel calm on corridors. The school is co-educational. Fees are R275 per month for 11 months for Grades 1–7 and there is an extra annual R280 “resource levy”. St Agnes is slap-bang in the centre of a working-class suburb full of poverty and new migrants to the city; it is also gentrifying around the edges. Historical photographs show football and cricket teams from the 1940s. The strapping children’s surnames suggest homogenous European roots: Hay, Derby-Lewis, Smith, Tyldesley, Hawkins; the odd Fiorentinoes. Now, like many former Model C schools (and particularly non-elite English schools in accessible areas), the demographics have flick-flacked. Up to 50% of the children in the foundation phase classes (Grades 1 to 3) are not English mother-tongue language speakers. Many students live nearby, in Woodstock, a suburb with mixed demographics: 50% coloured, 25% black, 14% white. Others travel in from the townships, sent by their parents in search of that luminous chance of a better start in life. Khayelitsha mom Nosisa Ndlebe, fresh from picking up her child’s report, says that despite the cost and extra two hours travel time



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a day, “I’m trying by all means to give [my daughter] a better foundation”. As Crain Soudien, a sociology professor and vice-chancellor at the University of Cape Town, puts it in his book *Realising the Dream* (2012), while the family “remains the central space for shaping a child’s values, the realisations of the range of potentials a child has is pre-eminently the terrain of interest of the school”. And many parents believe this potential will be best realised through an English education.

A winter’s morning in Kensington, and Alfonso greets me from outside his home, a cup of the strong instant coffee that fuels his days in his hand. (There’s also the smell of cigarette smoke in the air, but I never see him light one.) The front yard is firmly paved—until last year it was an immaculate lawn. It was Alfonso’s

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“pride and joy” says wife, Tracey-Lee (49). “Friends said you could play golf on it.” Alfonso has lived in this very road ever since his parents moved here soon after he’d started primary school, and he married the girl-just-about-next-door, Tracey-Lee, who now works in the finance department at Rennies Travel. They’ve been married for 30 years, and live in Tracey-Lee’s mother’s house—it was sold to the couple to keep it in the family. The sale meant hard times for a while: bond rates were then still over 20% and the couple had a new baby, Keshan (now 26), plus the older Keenan (now 30) to worry about. But slowly, things stabilised. Keenan is now married and working in a supervisory position in the call centre industry; he lives out in Tableview. He has two children, little Zion and Eden, the apples of their grandparents’ eyes. Keshan is engaged, and his room in the house—



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the door is covered in trance party fliers—is nowadays often empty. He too does call centre work, although he studied graphic design. Kensington itself lies off Voortrekker Road, one of the city’s main transport spines. An apartheid-era suburb, it was still undeveloped when Alfonso moved here as a boy and rode bicycles across the fields, looking for frogs in the vleis. Tracey-Lee remembers going to the ice-rink and drive-in near Goodwood; Alfonso remembers the stock car racing. Now the avenue is an informal pedestrian through-route to Canal Walk, just over the N1. There is a lot of gangster activity, including drug turf wars in neighbouring Factreton (the family hears gunshots at night). “The gangsters we grew up with know who is from Kensington and don’t actually interfere with us,” Tracey-Lee says. The couple has no plans to move. “Kensington has too many memories,” Alfonso says. Still, they didn’t send their boys to local schools. The children went first to St Agnes



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and then, figuring that boys need extra attention and a push to get them somewhere, their parents decided on a private high school, also Catholic, in Greenpoint. Here classes were smaller, the surroundings less



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Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha
01. Nontebeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha
02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha
03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives

disruptive. The boys both passed matric with ease. About 42% of people living in Kensington have matric; 14% are unemployed. Tracey-Lee herself left school in Standard 8, and only years later she finished matric and studied further. It is a casual household. The couple shares chores like cooking and laundry, and weekends are for braais with friends, long drives, grandchild entertainment (they enjoyed the Cape Town Food Festival), and watching Grand Prix racing on TV. Alfonso is out back, weeding, and giving his other pride and joy some attention: a Suzuki GSXR1000 motorbike, which has clocked eye-watering speeds. Alfonso is no stuffed shirt. He has always gone his own way, always been direct—one reason why he has no patience for yes-men in the education system. He is big on treating people equally. “I can mix with anybody [irrespective of status or class],” he says. “I don’t regard myself as superior. People who unfortunately, because of the roll of the dice, are not

well off—I’m not going to treat them any differently. It’s the same with the kids. Does it matter where they come from? Their religion, their gender?” For many years Alfonso was the member of a motorcycle club called the Black Angels. They wanted to be a chapter of the Hell’s Angels, but apartheid scuttled that. Vehicles are obviously the family indulgence. Alfonso also drives a Mercedes that groans with restrained power on city streets. But his real passion, says Tracey-Lee, is his job. “There are very few people in the world who have a passion like that. And he’s become much busier since he was appointed principal.” That was in 2002. Being principal means long days: Alfonso leaves before 7am to avoid traffic, and gets back in the evening. It can worry Tracey-Lee. The school can “take over his life, to the detriment of his health”. She shares a story about the time Alfonso was diagnosed with a near-ruptured appendix. The doctor ordered it out. Alfonso asked if he couldn’t come back in three weeks—when school holidays began.

There are 37-odd children scattered about a Grade 1 classroom in St Agnes. They are being exposed to a mock-test situation, and it is organised chaos. The children’s names are a medley of Xhosa, English, Afrikaans, Muslim. One boy, focused on everything other than his paper and the board, interrupts his teacher over 20 times in 10 minutes (he’s a foster child, diagnosed ADHD and “difficult” to handle). Others are concentrating, some randomly getting up and down, or having a chat. One boy is listening to instructions, but obviously unable to decipher the English; his paper is a mass of erasures, drawings and gaps. The teacher, a remarkable woman, doesn’t miss a beat. Moving between children, she answers questions and defuses arguments. It looks exhausting. “You have to take your hat off to the foundation phase teachers,” Alfonso tells me back in the safety of his office. “They’ve got their work cut out for them. But if you get it right in the foundation phase, the rest of the building blocks fall into place.” This is the phase where South Africa’s education system is falling down. For various reasons, children in state schools—particularly those in lower income areas—are simply not performing. Over half don’t make it through the system. Of every 100 learners, 50 make it to Grade 12, 40 pass and 12 qualify for university, writes Nic Spaull of the University of Stellenbosch. Spaull says that in effect, two public school systems exist in South Africa: wealthier schools, and the poor majority (75%). Someone coming through the latter system has a very high chance of being functionally illiterate and innumerate. Struggling children tend to fall further behind as they progress through the system, this in a system that is marked by strict rules: a child can only fail once in the Foundation Phase, once in the Intermediate stage, and again, once from Grade 7 to 9; otherwise they are “pushed through with their age cohort” says Alfonso. Outcomes Based Education

was worse: in 2002 St Agnes wanted to hold back over 40 children in various grades; they were only allowed to fail six. Spaull’s analysis of the situation is damning: “After 19 years of democratic rule most black children continue to receive an education which condemns them to the underclass of South African society, where poverty and unemployment are the norm ... Poor school performance in South Africa reinforces social inequality and leads to a situation where children inherit the social station of their parents, irrespective of their motivation or ability.” Social mobility is stopped in its tracks. The Western Cape, particularly Cape Town, is not as badly off. Its literacy and numeracy results are far in excess of provinces such as Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. But as Soudien notes, the Western Cape’s low-income schools are also in trouble. He believes legacy issues—apartheid, or the “A-factor”, as he once described it—are to blame. “The Western Cape is simply a stronger managerial environment,” Soudien says in a phone interview. “But we must not run away from the reality. At historically disadvantaged schools, and the *better* disadvantaged schools, you’ve got fewer than 15% of children able to perform at grade level in an area like maths. That’s disgusting. In schools at the poorer end of spectrum, former DET

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schools, something like 0.1% of the children are performing at grade level in mathematics. The figures have improved, but marginally. This comes back to legacy factors, which operate at all three dimensions of what the school experience is all about: first, the home level; secondly at a teacher level. Teachers have to operate a new curriculum with which they are struggling. But then there’s almost inexplicable stuff around student and learner cultures themselves. The commitment to doing homework in poorer schools and discipline around this has gone away.” As Soudien has written, parents with an understanding of the role of education (like Alfonso with his sons) tend to search out the best schools they can access and afford. Schools in poorer areas then suffer a further ghettoising as parents with extra resources, who could be more invested in the school, move on. Institutions abandoned in this way have even less hope of success; they are called “sinkhole schools”. St Agnes is not immune to these systemic and socio-economic challenges, but it is leagues away from being a sinkhole school. Alfonso feels the greatest challenge to improving results over the past decade has been the ever-changing curriculum. St Agnes is getting to grips with the latest, the Department of Education’s Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), although it is very deadline and results-oriented. It also comes with mountains of administrative requirements. At this time of the year, teachers show strain: head of department Elesia Colbe speaks of how the curriculum leaves little time for extra intervention and is all about “teaching to assess”. But Alfonso says the wider education system in Cape Town on the whole is “working and functional ... I think you have a lot of functional schools—in all areas. It can be in the heart of the Cape Flats, but if you’ve got dedicated, committed teachers, willing to offer up their time on a Saturday for the benefit of the kids, qualified people, dedicated people—that makes a difference.



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Without the support of all role-players the system will collapse, and it will show in your results.” Unlike some principals, Alfonso has no desire to leave the classroom, and he teaches 12 hours a week, mostly mathematics. Watching him with the older Grade 6 class—some already pimply, others childlike—is like a choreographed act: a multitude of tasks is performed in swift succession. The lesson has unfashionable aspects (Alfonso is unrepentant about drilling times

tables), but he commands respect. Discipline is simply not a problem. Alfonso won’t allow laughter at those who get things wrong, even as he expresses disapproval at those who don’t try. And thanks to teaching pupils himself, he knows every kid in the school’s story and potential.



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A short history of education in South Africa

At the turn of the 20th century, mission schools provided education to most black pupils. In 1953, 90% of black schools were “state-aided mission schools”. When Bantu Education, as it was known, was enacted in 1953, these schools had to register with the state—most closed. National control through the Bantu Education Department ensured schooling for black children was separate and inferior, in line with apartheid doctrines of separate development. By 1967, black pupil-to-teacher ratios had reached 58:1. Only 10% of black teachers had completed school. The Department of Coloured Affairs controlled coloured schools from 1963. Education was compulsory, but separate. The Indian Education Act followed in 1965. Drop-out rates in the coloured community were high: in 1980, just 0.75% of coloured children passed Standard 10, or matric (now Grade 12). In 1982, government spent just R146 per black child, as opposed to R1211 per white pupil. These disparities continued into the 1990s. Towards the end of the 1980s, there were 18 different education departments. Each “homeland” had its own department. Reforms post-1976 saw the department of Bantu Education renamed the Department of Education and Training (DET), but it still only dealt with black children. Just before democracy, white public schools had to choose different funding models. Almost all became Model C schools, which received less funding but were granted more autonomy. Now “former Model C” is often used to describe former whites-only, fee-paying schools. These are generally dramatically better resourced and funded and have more facilities than former DET schools. Post-1994, the Constitution granted all South Africans the right to basic education. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) recognises three broad bands of education: General Education and Training, Further Education and Training, and Higher Education and Training. The terminology changed with the curriculum: Sub A and B and Standards one to 10 were replaced by Grades one to 12. An outcomes-based curriculum saw grades divided into Foundation Phase (1–3), Intermediate phase (4–6) and Senior phase (7–9). Grade R, a “reception year” grade, has since been added. Primary schools cater to Grades 0 to 7. Education is compulsory from age seven to 15.*

We’re near Mountain Road, after school, never mind that it’s exam week and the teachers have been looking distinctly tense. The Grade 4 teacher and Alfonso duck between a gap in some vibracrete panels, where an unobtrusive building that looks like it was once a clubhouse stands on the edge of an old sports field. There are two children in this orphanage from St Agnes, both of who once lived under the bridge from Salt River Circle to the start of Voortrekker Road. One child came here because she was being molested (the school, meaning Alfonso, intervened). The second was at risk of violence as a relative had had an altercation with drug dealers. Again, Alfonso set the necessary processes in motion for the child to be placed. Now he just wants to check on the set-up. We’re shown around the dorms, crammed but clean, and the communal areas. There is supervised homework time, something the children have probably never experienced. There are many caring and dedicated parents at St Agnes. Watching them stream into the hall to receive their children’s reports and chat to Alfonso and the class teachers makes this clear. Many are smartly dressed, eager for news of their child. But there is hardship too. When tragedy strikes the children at this school, it takes forms that link back to poverty: a child dying after touching an exposed wire; a young boy killed in a house fire, found hugging his brother in the bathroom, an event that “tore our hearts”. A memorial service for the boy was held at the school, but for 24 hours, Alfonso had not slept: his own son, Keshan, had fallen in Porcupine Ravine on Table Mountain and rescuers couldn’t reach him to establish if he was alive. Alfonso went straight from the mountain to school and gave a tribute to the lost boy, even as inside, he gave thanks that his own son had survived. Alfonso’s level of community involvement is unusual. If a child doesn’t turn up at school for a while, he’ll go to the parents to find out what’s wrong. He is familiar with



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parts of Woodstock that few visit: Hard Livings stronghold Wright Street, the Plaasie, an informal settlement on Pine Road. St Agnes, with the help of the Peninsula School Feeding Association, caters to 100 children a day: breakfast and a hot lunch (pilchards and rice, samp and beans). Some families are near desperate: one unemployed woman’s husband abandoned her and her four children; they live in a partitioned room next to a drug house, a bucket the only ablutions. One day when I come around the corner to the office, I see Alfonso enveloped by four kids, hugging him thank you for a loaf of white bread. This goes beyond “Christian charity”. There is a complete lack of judgement of those in need—also, the student body is only 5% Catholic. Alfonso is Christian, certainly. His assemblies are a mix of inspirational story and more uncomfortable sermonising. But the values Alfonso upholds so determinedly are about right and wrong. “Morally, I don’t think I’m corrupt,” says Alfonso. He has an admirable lack of interest in power. He winces at principals who speak of “my school”, “my teachers”. “Shoot me if I say something like that,” he says. “It’s not my kingdom.” Alfonso has earned his respect. Early

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days were more volatile, when the school was wobbling following a number of short-term and inept principals—the last was fired for financial mismanagement. There were no systems, no records and no discipline. Two years later, the bursar was found to have defrauded the school of R290 000. Getting things back on track meant endless overtime, but eventually, things stabilised. Maintenance budgets have not increased in all the time Alfonso’s been at the school, even as electricity and water costs have soared. Thankfully, the school is currently exempt from rates (paying even a percentage of rates based on the land’s current value would be prohibitive). They “survive”. Alfonso is proud of a newly paved playground. A few miniature plants reach for sun in pots and tyres, tended by the children through the summer.

Some say that to understand a man, you must know his memories. To meet his mother also helps. Alfonso’s mother lives on Twelfth Avenue, Kensington. The house is full of colour and a faint smell of boiled vegetables. Photographs of Alfonso as a schoolboy, his siblings and his father adorn the walls. The grandchildren feature strongly too. Mavis Louw (78), nee Diedericks, accesses family memories like a champion darts player: with precision. Her own mother was a housewife and her father a teacher at Wesley Met Practising—in Salt River, where Alfonso first taught—and later at a training college. “At that time, children would stay with their parents, even if they were married,” says Mavis. “People couldn’t afford their own homes.” She and her parents lived first with “Granny” in Observatory, then thanks to the Group Areas Act, moved to 6 Essex Street in Woodstock. “The house is still standing, I went past the other day.” As a child, Mavis would go to Woodstock Park opposite Mountain Road, and the beach (long since destroyed by foreshore development), and play games on



LIVING CONDITIONS IN CAPE TOWN
SOURCE: STATISTICS SA, CENSUS 2011

the streets, including *blikkies*, *bok-bok* and skipping. At 16 or 17 the family moved to Maitland, until Mavis got married to Lionel and moved back to Park Road in Walmer Estate. She left school at Standard 7 to work in clothing factories; an early job was for Gedding & Shames in Railway Street, where she earned £5 a week sewing pyjamas and shirts. She regrets not finding time to study nursing after hours, but “sometimes one doesn’t think when you’re young and stupid”. Thanks to the growing family (Alfonso, Rodney and Claudelle had arrived; *laatlammetjie* Adrian was still to come), she applied to the council and got a house in Kensington. She has lived on Twelfth Avenue for 48 years. “I wanted to help the children get somewhere in life,” she says. “I was thinking of the children’s future. So I didn’t take Alfonso out of his school [the Holy Cross in Searle Street, Woodstock], I let him travel, although I was so worried about this child, crossing busy roads by himself.” For high school, Mavis enrolled her boys at a private Catholic boy’s school in Athlone, St Columbus. “I wanted them to have careers. I would sometimes argue with their father, because I would go without to give them that chance. I wanted to give them something better than what I had. The school wasn’t segregated; that was important: that the children would mix with others.” She pauses. The Louw family was rent by apartheid classifications. Some members of the extended family were classified white, an opportunity seldom rejected. “If you could, you took the chance and perhaps got a better job”. Lionel’s sister’s three sons all married “boere” girls and moved to Bloemfontein and Johannesburg. Alfonso has cousins he’s never met; some of the white family members cut themselves off from their roots. And a school parent, thinking he was white, once accused Alfonso of “having something against coloureds”. “The Group Areas Act too, that was a horrible thing, really hurtful,” says Mavis of this formative piece of



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apartheid legislation. Still, she begged her children not to get involved in politics. Rodney was the only one who did, but he came to no harm. As for Alfonso, she says: “Some people think when they first meet him he can be hard, but he’s got a soft heart. He’s always trying to help others. He’s been my right hand since his daddy’s gone. He’s always so concerned about his school children too, and so fond of that grandchild.” The Louw family’s ties to St Agnes and Woodstock wind back through generations. Mavis’ mother and father were married in the suburb’s 116-year-old church, as was Mavis herself. Alfonso’s children went to St Agnes. Mavis still visits the church, with its voluminous nave and stained glass windows, although St Luke’s in Factreton is now her local. And Alfonso was baptised here. It is an active church, filled with white flowers from a recent saints’ day.

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A Mexican priest caters to the flock. There is a Portuguese mass, as well as services in English and French. And there are new Catholics in the area. From a school window one day, as winter light glistened on the distant harbour container terminals, hung about with gantry cranes like origami vultures, I watched a lean man in a leather jacket approach the statue of the crucified Jesus. Rocking back and forth, he directed a steam of words at the metal figure (surprisingly safe thus far from copper thieves; all the school’s metal pipes and aluminium gutter linings have long since been stolen and sold for scrap). Finally, he bowed his head in silence for a moment, then loped rapidly from sight. St Agnes’ last Dominican headmistress, Sister Justina (now 85) is still alive—she lives in a gracious building in Rondebosch, with a garden full of nooks and benches. She

remembers arriving in Cape Town on the Stirling Castle, seeing Table Mountain for the first time and being served the most peculiar dessert (guavas). She joined St Agnes in 1970. “It was a friendly, accommodating area and there was a large Portuguese [immigrant] population,” Sister Justina says. Many of the students could not speak English, and neither could their parents. She remembers gathering the new Sub A’s together and giving an instruction and “nobody moved; nobody understood me”. The parents were “working people”, there to set up stores and make a decent living. She remembers writing countless letters for fathers who wanted their families to join them from Madeira, and needed proof of a place in a school. Just as it is now, the possibility of a good education was a huge draw card.

A few years back, after turning 50, Alfonso thought long and hard about staying on at St Agnes. It was a difficult time, as his father Lionel had died shortly after confessing to the family that he’d been fighting leukaemia for 12 years. Alfonso was both angry that his father had kept this secret for so long, and utterly devastated. Speaking of his father, a woodwork machinist who often struggled financially but taught the values of respect for all that Alfonso still takes so seriously, the biker-principal wept. “I’ll never forget his words, ‘We don’t all live forever’.” His death hit Alfonso really hard, but he was back at school straight after the funeral. But in the past two years he has found “fresh energy”. The aim now is to fill empty classrooms and grow the school, and he’s galvanised the school governing body (SGB) and education department to support the move. St Agnes is now a “full service” school: it will turn away no one who has capacity to learn, and offers support to more challenged pupils. Already the school has accepted a group of late placement Grade 1s who hadn’t secured a school spot in 2014, and added

an extra Grade 1 class. This meant massive challenges. Over 20 of the new pupils had not been to Grade R and were seriously behind; some have no English language skills at all. “English is not a first language, then you still have to teach a first additional language, Afrikaans. You’ve got to feel sympathy for them,” says Alfonso. I sat in on an afternoon meeting with an Inclusive Education Support team from the department. They and staff members were thrashing out how to make Grade 1 teaching as effective as possible in difficult circumstances. Options included placing all the weaker students in one class so that the teachers could adapt their teaching to the children’s level, rather than dart from level to level all day. The department’s role would be to offer support—including staff, whether support staff or permanent posts. With luck, the school will have more posts allocated to it next year. Already the SGB pays for three of St Agnes’ 12 teachers. Struggling children get a leg up in Grade 2 and 3. Shine, a literacy project that relies on volunteers, offers focused one-on-one classes to help those learners who are falling behind to “crack the code of reading”. It sounds warm and fuzzy, but it works. After 13 weeks of the programme, all children “at risk” had improved; only two were assessed as “poor”. One Shine child lives at the shelter, Ons Plek, another’s dad is in prison, and one is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. As Alfonso says, all the schools in the area—in Cecil and Mountain roads, Chapel and Dryden streets—share socio-economic problems. The “hip” Woodstock that gets media attention is clustered along just a few main streets, but says Alfonso, “Go up a side street and you’ll find this contrast between these posh restaurants and extreme poverty.” Getting parents involved—and to pay fees—is difficult. The school tries: they’ve offered maths classes on Saturdays, for example, for parents who want to be able to help their own children.

This question of parent involvement is a fascinating one. Alfonso’s own parents certainly instilled their beliefs in him. He speaks repeatedly of learning as a life-long process; he has studied further over the years. Shine founder and executive director, Maurita Weissenberg, also sees parents’ involvement in their children’s education as key. Maurita started Shine after seeing how parents were spending a third of their salaries on taxis—never mind school fees—to send their child to English schools that were perceived to offer a better education. “They were so committed. And yet their children were just occupying space. The school had less than 48% literacy, and these children had all the potential, but the gaps were enormous.” All schools with dedicated Shine centres have seen results jump. But at certain schools in very poor areas with “harsh” socio-economic conditions, students still fail to thrive. Maurita believes that one difference at such schools is that the parents are not remotely invested in education. No one is taking that small extra step to help the kids adjust to what school *means*, which, of course, constitutes a huge cultural divide. The school experience around the country, says Soudien, is premised on exactly the same thing. “The cultural symbols and cultures themselves are all variations of what you’d find in a school in Rondebosch. There is not actually a notion of an African school in that the *culture* of the school is African. It’s completely western, even when it’s the poorest school in the country.” This means that many families “lack the books, the resources, the mediums of socialisation into the cultural capital of the language that the schools are going to be privileging [English].” It also means that kids are torn between different identities—at home, at school, in their communities—and experience new forms of “othering”, often related to class. Maurita herself is appalled at some school cultures: the shouting, the judgements. She goes so far as to say

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that the system fails some children so badly they might as well spend their childhoods just playing. “At least then they might be happy.” Soudien believes that children’s chances can be improved if schools help parents see what their own children need to do to be successful in this domain. Also, good principals must understand the legacy of the “A-factor”. Such principals, says Soudien, “take parents seriously, they take home circumstances seriously, they work very hard at instituting cultures of discipline and they begin to think about how the curriculum can best be used”.

It is the end of the school day. A few parents pause to tell the same story of a search for better education. Years ago, Levita Jacobs’s mom moved from Hanover Park to Mitchells Plain because she felt it was safer for the children; Levita herself now sends her own daughter to St Agnes. Wiedaad Higgins from Salt River, who lived through Bantu Education has seen her niece go on to study property law and has high hopes for her son Abdruhman. The diversity of cultures at St Agnes is welcome in a city still accused of segregation, and with reason. But it’s no rainbow nation advert either. Class diversity is at risk; wealthy families are pretty much absent. Parents are drawn to the values, discipline and academic results that St Agnes offers. It is also simply and mysteriously *accessible*:

those jarring discourses of authority and superiority so ubiquitous in the past have no obvious place. Alfonso and his staff have created an inclusive school culture, no small thing. He will not accept belittling of any child. “We need to show a lot of compassion to these kids because we don’t know what their circumstances are. Until we know, we should think twice before saying something hurtful.” The school’s results are good, if not great, and this too, says something about the principal. In a staff meeting one morning, Alfonso reads a story about a lop-sided table. Its owner keeps chopping bits of leg off to stabilise it, not realising that it is the floor itself that is uneven. The message is that you can’t force someone to be other than themselves. Alfonso casually accepts that the school model will not suit every child; that not every child has to be academically successful. “We’re not all alike,” he says. “And yes, there should be less shame in it. At St Agnes we haven’t refused any child admission to the school based on their personal circumstances, their gender, race or nationality. Not a lot of schools are doing that, even if they say they are. It’s not always to our advantage, because it affects our numeracy and literacy levels.” He pauses to think, then offers what he believes is an important question. “Why are we attaching a percentage to a child when we should be looking at their holistic development? Our school’s results will never be like those of schools who practice exclusivity. But the teachers are proud that as far as possible, we help children to achieve their full potential.” For some reason, I’m reminded of Lionel and his words to Alfonso: “No-one lives forever.” Cultures and systems sputter or transform. But teachers, more than most, perpetuate ideas through time. It is the forms those ideas take that help make a society. *

Janine Stephen is an independent journalist and editor living and writing in Cape Town



SWEET HOME

The Entrepreneur

*Christina Mtandana is known for her homemade dough cakes.
She sells them to passersby in Sweet Home Farm.
Business is okay, but it could be better. For Christina,
getting ahead is a constant battle against weather. It doesn't
help that her community is meeting the climate change without
any basic infrastructure*

Words: **Leonie Joubert**





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The serving hatch of Christina Mtandana’s takeaway and restaurant looks out onto two different worlds. The dark slab of rock cutting across the western horizon looks surly and featureless at this distance, but it is still the unmistakable flank of Table Mountain, with its hem of pricy suburban homes and a university ranked amongst the continent’s oldest and most prestigious. In the

immediate foreground, there is a rectangle of grass that has grown thick and lush on the stagnant water seeping up from the ground beneath. The glassy pond reflects a sky that momentarily allows the glow of weak sunlight through, following one of the coldest fronts to hit the Cape this past winter. It dusted snow across the nearby peaks and poured masses of water down into the natural wetlands upon which many

of the settlements on the Cape Flats now sit. A threesome of goats dozes on the edge of the dell, while a single chicken bobs past. Plastic bags, empty bottles, a discarded 5kg flour packet and crushed polystyrene cups litter the greenery. The serving hatch of Christina’s store—it is called Sigalo, from *isigalo* meaning “new start” in Xhosa—is bolted shut. The fryer that usually bubbles away in the front room

of her home sits cold and silent. There are no swollen blobs of dough jostling for room in the mesh cradle. There won’t be any customers popping their heads up against the burglar bars to order their usual: a *vetkoek*, deep-fried dough bread that 40-year-old Christina sells either plain, or with a burger patty, or Russian sausage or jam. The faint whir of the freezer motor is ominously silent. It has been four

days since the electricity went off and she hasn’t turned over a penny of business in that time. “Ja, the electricity went off at noon on Friday. I was still busy with my dough. I had to throw it away because you can’t keep it a long time. It’s about 10 kay-gee [kg] of flour.” That’s roughly 100 vetkoek, she calculates quickly, a total of R200 lost. But Christina is making a plan. She is standing in the courtyard, overseeing things. The brick paving under her feet is tilted and buckled. One brick rears up, another sinks into a trough beneath a skin of felt carpeting that has been moulded to the brickwork, stretched taught and smooth by time and trampling feet. She points to the tangle of electrical cables lying on the ground. They are joined together like those ancient Celtic motifs, the mouth of one snake-like creature circling around to gobble the tail of another. Layers of insulating rubber have been peeled back, their copper entrails spliced together and then bandaged over. The red-brown metal looks raw and lethal. “Ja, it is dangerous,” says Christina, “but it will go up on the roof now-now.” She calls across in Xhosa to the man she’s hired to connect her electricity cables to her father’s supply, a few shacks away. It is a temporary fix until the council gets here and repairs the outage. This part of Sweet Home Farm—an informal settlement in Philippi, on the Cape Flats, that sandy expanse of wetland southeast of the central city known as the “dumping ground” for black South Africans under the apartheid state—has been on the grid since 2010, but is still subject to occasional power cuts. Sometimes it happens briefly, like when the city’s electricity department comes in to connect up new areas of the settlement. When the power first went down four days ago, she thought it was this sort of routine upgrade. But as the hours dragged on, and the power didn’t return, she figured out that only about 15 or so shacks had been knocked off the grid. Something to do with a component burning out in the

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substation nearby, she was later told. It seems like such a simple change—a single cable of current-conducting wire strung from the overhead pole, down into the prepaid meter in her shack—but the implications for a person living in Sweet Home are incalculable. The immediate benefit is obvious: it’s much easier for Christina to run her takeaway and restaurant business. Now, she can buy meat in bulk and store it in the fridge-freezer, whereas previously she only bought what she could use in a day. Electricity means fewer trips to the shops, less taxi fare, less spoilage, more time to fire up the kitchen, more turnover. And it’s much safer cooking the vetkoek in an electric deep fryer, than over a paraffin stove as she used to. The need for electricity, along with the other primary municipal services—running water, proper sanitation, efficient refuse removal, installing and maintaining storm water drains—are critical to the wellbeing of neighbourhoods like this in Sweet Home. This is particularly true as the region ploughs forward into a climate-altered future, where heatwaves, windstorms, droughts and wintertime floods are likely to happen more often, and more aggressively. For the time being, though, Christina has to revert to candles and gas, until she can plug a cable into the socket in her dad’s place, and fire up the kitchen again.

There’s something merciless about the Cape Town cold: the moisture in the air makes it feel as though it’s nudged the mercury way further down the temperature gauge than the reading shows. The wet soaks into your very bones. Christina’s five-room home includes the west-facing kitchen with its two fridge-freezers, microwave, deep fryer and plumbing that she paid a contractor to install. In the food business, you have to wash your hands all the time, she says. But these shacks don’t have running water, so she installed the basin in the kitchen, and connected up a single tap with a nearby municipal water pipe running past her shack. The outlet pipe from the kitchen sink runs from beneath her shack into a drainage pond outside the front of her place. Behind the kitchen is the rest of her house, which is snug and warm. The lounge feels roomy, in spite of its plump furniture, tables and TV cabinet. The passageway leads down to two bedrooms, one off to the right with a curtain across the doorway, and the master bedroom at the end where just the foot of the double bed can be seen through the door, which stands ajar, offering a view of framed black and white photographs. The third bedroom is at the foot of the L and is only accessible from the courtyard outside. It’s chained shut now, and has been converted to a games room with a pool table. But Christina has abandoned her shack for the moment; it is full of people lounging about by candlelight, and she needs a bit of quiet. Propped up in a chair inside the doorway of her neighbour Nontobeko’s place, a modest single-room home across the tiny courtyard, Christina’s silhouette almost disappears into the gloom, even at midday. There aren’t any windows, and with the power still out, the spiral of glass coiling out from the bare light socket overhead is useless. She reflects on what happens here when the bitter gales harry the shantytown: “It’s very bad for my house because the wind, it shakes

a shack made of informal building materials, but infrastructure like this shows just how permanent those homes are intended to be: a power cable installed by the electricity department feeds from this box, through a white conduit pipe in the wall, and up to the connection housing on the overhead pole. The entire skyline is a series of sagging cables that string between all these homes, hooking them up to the grid. “It’s wet there,” continues Christina, pointing again to the roof. “All the places, there’s water coming inside. It’s not nice for us when it’s raining. It floods. Outside it’s full of water wherever you go, where you put your foot.” Christina is fortunate. She was able to build on relatively high ground, so her home isn’t prone to the typical upwelling of groundwater that happens in so many parts of the Cape Flats. This ancient dune field sits on a high-water table, and one that is naturally prone to flooding during the wet season. When it rains, the groundwater recharges, seeps up and pools in all the lower lying areas, gathering into stagnant pools in walkways, roads and around communal toilets. Informal settlements like Sweet Home are plagued by this kind of “ponding” every year. If the water rises high enough, it will flood into residents’ homes, seep into their bedding and furniture, leave clothes and bedding sodden, cause food to rot, and—if a family is “wealthy” enough to own any appliances—potentially destroy those too. It is also hard to go to work or school when almost everything you own is soaked through. Cape Town’s population grew by nearly a third between 2001 and 2011, according to StatsSA. About 40% of the city’s growth rate is due to people moving here from elsewhere in the country and housing is at a premium. If you’re poor, buying into the bricks-and-mortar property market isn’t even an option. Impoverished families needing a roof over their heads will find open land where they can, and put up their own homes.



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Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha
01. Nontobeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha
02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha
03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives

the zinc sheets and then the rain blows between them.” She points up at the corner of Nontobeko’s room. The plywood wall is stained where the rain has seeped through, like watery ink blooming across blotting paper. The leak is precariously close to the shack’s prepaid electricity box. This may be

So why do people like Christina settle in areas where it invariably floods, year after year? Why invest their limited assets on building in a place where they’re likely to have their possessions ruined by flooding and their lives disrupted? The motivations, researchers at the University of Cape Town’s Flooding in Cape Town under Climate Risk (FLiCCR) Project found, are complex and more rational than one may think: new settlers often arrive in summertime, when an area looks dry and habitable; they might buy a shack but the former owner won’t tell them how bad the flooding actually gets; they will likely need to live as close to a taxi rank or train station as possible, so they can get to town easily and find work; and, as is also often the case, they have nowhere else to go. “It was not winter when I arrived,” said one man from nearby Graveyard Pond, when he was explaining why he settled in an area that later turned out to be a flooding hotspot. He didn’t know about the dangers of living in a place like this or the problems he would encounter. “The first day we had a lot of water here ... People were standing in upper areas; some were laughing at us: ‘Why did you go and stay there in the first place?’ But when we were putting up our *hokkies* [shacks] they didn’t say anything! I had to roll up my trousers it was so wet. I had to leave the shack for a few days.” People like Christina don’t get into the housing market like your average middle class person. There are no salary slips to convince a bank manager to extend a 30-year mortgage at market-related interest rates. No savings to put down a 10% deposit. No parent to stand surety or pitch in with extra money. Christina left the family home in Queenstown, in the Eastern Cape, as a young teenager in 1986, to join her father, Goodman, in Cape Town. Like so many Xhosa-speaking South Africans from the former homelands of Transkei and Ciskei, he followed the well-worn path of the migrant,

trekking to Cape Town in search of work. When Christina arrived later on, he did little to encourage her to stick at her schooling. “I only went to school for one year when I moved here,” says Christina. “He didn’t care ... If he [had] pushed us, maybe I would be something now. But he just didn’t mind about me not going to school.”

When her father lost his job—and with it the room his family lived in—they had to move in with his girlfriend. “It was not nice, and life was difficult.” Christina took a position as a live-in char with a woman in Grassy Park who she says treated her well and taught her how to clean and iron. “She was a nice lady.” Christina started saving up and “piece by piece” bought the materials she needed to build her own shack, a one-room structure that she put up on a piece of ground in Lansdowne. A second room followed, which she offered to her father. But eventually the informal settlers here were forced to move. Without any legal title to the land, Christina couldn’t exactly sell her place and recover her investment. So she did what most people in the informal property market do in

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this situation: she broke down her home, hired a truck, transported the materials to Sweet Home, and started over. That was in 2005. Life in a makeshift shelter is not for the faint-hearted, particularly when a gale blows through, strafing you with a machine-gun fire of icy pellets and rain. Imagine darting 50 metres through the dark, in the middle of a storm, just to relieve your bladder? Christina’s shack is about that far from the nearest stand of nine communal toilets which flank the green detention pond. “For the children, we keep a five-litre bucket with a lid. You can do that with the children.” Christina’s hands gesture as if pressing the rim down on a bucket lid. “And you can leave it outside and then tomorrow morning you make a plan to go throw it in the toilet. But as an adult you can’t just sit in the house and do that. You have to make a plan to get to the toilet.” It’s a precarious existence. A week earlier, the roof of her rear bedroom, now the poolroom, was ripped off in the early hours of the morning during a storm, while Christina and her son, Liyema (5), slept in the bed beneath it. At least two



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sheets were torn away, another left whipping back and forth as the wind snarled overhead. The two of them fled to another room in the house, just as the rains started, soaking her furniture. But by the next day, she had workmen from her neighbourhood up on the roof hammering the zinc sheets back into place. Christina ran Sigalo from her father’s place for a year, because it was closer to one of the main routes through Sweet Home and always bustling with foot traffic as people headed to the taxi rank or school. But his house is lower down than hers, so the business flooded quite badly when it rained. The water level got really high in the kitchen and her appliances started to shock her. She had to lift all the electricity cables onto upended crates and put on gumboots with two layers of socks. Like many people do in this neighbourhood, Christina did what she could to keep the floodwaters at bay: she dug trenches around the house to channel the water away, and she put building rubble into the bigger puddles and trenches so that people could use these like stepping stones.



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She used plastic sheeting to stop the rain getting in. When her brother moved back in with her dad, she had to relocate Sigalo into her home. At the time it felt like a trade-off: risk flooding, but get good business; or benefit from higher ground, but be away from the throng of the crowd. Still, the business doesn’t seem to be suffering too much, now that she’s back in her home a block or two back from the main thoroughfare. People know her now. There’s hardly a moment to pause on the busy days. Sitting in the dark of her neighbour’s room, the electricity still off, it’s clear just how ill equipped these little homes are to cope with the savage storms that routinely sweep across the Cape peninsula during winter. Crescent moons of light stud the seam where the sheet iron roof meets the thin wall, allowing a cold wind and rain to enter the shack. In the centre of the room, a large aluminium kettle steams over the paraffin stove, which doesn’t have a hope of warming the room. But the worst of the front has broken, for now, and the faint sunshine outside tries to burn up some of the water lying about in the muddy puddles.

Ambling down the dirt road towards Section A in Sweet Home, Christina sidesteps the puddles and piles of building rubble. This is one of the lower-lying areas of the settlement, and the deep canals on either side of the road do their damndest to channel the water away from the homes and into the stormwater drains, but the system is overburdened and water spills over into the road. Christina is part of the street committee here, and also part of a group that’s liaising with the city as it plans to “reblock” the area. Reblocking means laying out formal plots that will be given to families. Even if the city can’t build a house for them, at least the issue of ownership is settled, enabling occupants to safely invest in putting up a bricks-and-mortar structure for themselves.

Reblocking requires putting in pavements, stormwater drains, proper water reticulation and sewerage infrastructure, tarred roads and streetlights. This enables floodwater to be drained away more effectively. In many of these settlements, when communal toilets become blocked up or broken, people often have to resort to buckets and chamber pots, which they’ll have no choice but to empty out into the drainage systems or roadside canals. But these systems often get clogged up with litter. Household rubbish is dumped in communal skips, which are dropped off by municipal trucks or contractors—individual homes don’t have wheelie bins or door-to-door rubbish removal, like in the suburbs. Sweet Homes refuse skips are irregularly serviced and litter ends up strewn about the place, washing into the stormwater drains. Heavy rains push the drainage system to the brink. Many drains block up and flood back into the streets, bringing with them raw sewage. On a day like today, after a bad storm, Christina and other members of the street committee will go door-to-door to see which homes have been worst hit by the floods. They’ll then work either with the City of Cape Town’s disaster relief teams, or non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross or the Salvation Army to help coordinate distribution of flood-relief kits, plastic sheeting (to help waterproof houses, either over the roofs or on the floors), dry blankets and meals. Enock Kopele, the man in charge of the “central area” of the city’s Disaster Risk Management Team in which Sweet Home falls, and chair of the Flood and Storm Planning Task Team, helps coordinate the kind of infrastructural upgrade that will make Christina’s life so much easier. His team flags high flood-risk areas, particularly in informal settlements, which the city can then prioritise for upgrading, like with this reblocking initiative. Flood hotspots are invariably in the lower lying parts of the Cape Flats, but



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also areas where service delivery is falling behind. Something as simple as regular rubbish removal, clearing storm water drains, and taking away building rubble can help areas drain faster. This means liaising with the city as well as with community leaders, such as those on the committee on which Christina sits. The FLiCCR Project made an interesting discovery. While “hard engineered” solutions like sanitation and storm water management are key to reducing flood risk or other hazards associated with extreme weather events, “softer” solutions like person-to-person interactions between different levels of governance are also important. For instance, rather than the city imposing solutions on a community, it is important that they work with the street committees to negotiate a community’s priorities. When you

see the difference that getting access to basic services—water, electricity, a toilet, rubbish removal, a working storm drainage system—has made to Christina’s life, you realise why service delivery becomes even more urgent in the face of rising global temperatures and the associated regional shifts in climate. The southwestern tip of the African continent thrusts out into the rim of the Atlantic Ocean in such a way that it has drawn its own unique climate around itself. The rest of the sub-continent gets its rain in summer, and has dry, frigid winters. The Western Cape region, however, gets buffeted by ferocious winter storms, which, when they have rained themselves out, give way to sweltering summers where the wind drives relentlessly from the southern ocean, stripping the air of moisture, leaving everything

parched and prone to the kind of raging conflagrations that have helped sculpt the province’s unique vegetation for the past five or so million years. Global warming is now driving more energy into the weather systems that buffet the Cape. Climate scientists anticipate higher temperatures, warmer days, fewer cooler days, more heat waves, more intense droughts, and increasingly severe extreme weather events, according to the 2012 Western Cape Climate Change Response Strategy. Aside from the kind of flooding Sweet Home residents already have to deal with, the summertime implications of heat waves and drought are just as harsh. During heat waves, food perishes faster, and pest-borne diseases spread more quickly. The UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has flagged the link between spikes in daily temperatures, and an increase in the rate of everyday forms of food poisoning like salmonella. Scientists writing on the human health implications of climate change for the IPCC’s 2007 assessment report note that contact “between food and pest species, especially flies, rodents and cockroaches, is also temperature sensitive”. Fly activity is largely driven by temperature. “In temperate countries, warmer weather and milder winters are likely to increase the abundance of flies and other pest species during the summer months, with the pests appearing earlier in spring.” Homes that have electricity, where people can afford to run fridges, will be more resilient in the face of these extremes. But those that can’t use refrigeration—like Christina during the protracted blackout—will be more vulnerable. This is particularly true for those with compromised immune systems due to illness or poor nutrition. Christina has no qualms talking about the fact that she’s HIV positive. At first, though, it was hard. She had just moved to Sweet Home from Lansdowne when she got ill. She lost so much weight, people noticed,

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and somehow news of her diagnosis spread. “I walked around here and people pointed fingers at me and said, ‘HIV! HIV!’ , like I was the first person in Sweet Home who is HIV positive. One lady came up to me in the street and said, ‘Christina, what’s wrong with you? *Haai*, they say you’ve got AIDS’ .” Christina is matter of fact about her condition. “I got tired of everyone asking me, ‘Why are you so thin and *bah, bah, bah.*’ So I tell them straight. I’m not a person to have secrets.” It took an encounter with someone in The Warehouse, a civil society organisation working in the community, to convince her that she had a whole life ahead of her. She trained up in catering, found funding to set up her small business, and slowly grew it from a small paraffin-fired operation to the bustling takeaway that Siqalo is now. Christina knows that having clean water in her kitchen is important if she wants to have a successful restaurant, which is why she had

the tap, basin and drainage pipe installed. The IPCC warns of the health implications linked to lack of access to water, good sanitation and extreme weather events, and how these are pivotal in terms of how climate change will affect people living in urban slum environments. What often happens in a poorly serviced community like Sweet Home is a build up of contaminants during the dry season, such as with the black water contents of toilet buckets which get emptied into the storm water drains. The first rains of the season stir up these contaminants, which often pollute puddles and blocked storm drains. Children playing in the streets or merely walking through this water can easily pick up water-borne illnesses. Children in low-income communities are particularly at risk of diarrhoea-related disease, especially if they live in slums, writes the IPCC, which warns of the association between cholera outbreaks, flood events and faecal contamination of the water supplies in sub-Saharan Africa. People with compromised immune systems, such as those with HIV or TB, are similarly at risk, especially of contracting gastrointestinal infections associated with contaminated water. Christina’s own recovery since her HIV diagnosis has been remarkable. She started taking ARVs in 2005. Her body now is strong, full figured, and healthy. “Even those people that were laughing at me, they come to me and said, ‘Hey, Christina I’m sick now, I need help. Where did you get help?’ I tell them, ‘Just pray to god, and then go to the clinic and do what the sisters and the doctors tell you to do’ .” She also offers her own idiosyncratic form of counselling: “You will survive.”



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It was about three years ago,” says Christina. There was an anonymous cry that woke her at 2am. “Fire! Fire! Fire!” Christina has just come back from a street committee meeting where they were coordinating a local census that will allow the city to know how many families live in Sweet Home, a crucial detail for the reblocking process. She is perched on the edge of her armchair. Her windowless lounge is snug and cosy. The electricity supply has finally been restored after ten days and Dr Phil is on the box chastising a 20-something redhead for her narcissistic self-absorption. For a moment it is easy to forget that Christina lives in a shantytown in one of Cape Town’s poorest neighbourhoods. “We were all sleeping,” she continues. “The neighbours heard the fire, but it was too late.” A woman and her three-year-old daughter died in the fire. “Then the police came and took the bodies away. She left behind another girl; she was ten.

Luckily she was not staying in that house, she was in her cousin’s sister’s house.” Fires are commonplace in settlements like Sweet Home where people often use candles for lighting, or paraffin stoves for cooking. “People often fall asleep with the candles burning or the paraffin stove on, and that’s when fires happen. Or sometimes people get drunk and forget a pot on the stove. There’s a drunk guy near here who burned down his house—twice! The neighbours kicked the door down and rescued him.” A fire in one person’s lounge can easily become an inferno that can devour entire blocks in a matter of hours, if the conditions are right. Homes like Christina’s are built from corrugated iron sheets, plywood boards and untreated wooden planks. Many are built with barely a shoulder’s width between them. A single careless moment in one person’s lounge could cost neighbours like Christina everything they’ve built up in their homes over

years—all uninsured, and hard to replace for families who are this poor. Fire services responded to nearly 1200 incidents in informal settlements in 2012, according to the City of Cape Town; nearly 3500 structures were affected, and 105 people died. Fires still happen now that residents have got electricity. Sometimes people tamper with illegal connections, which can cause a fire, or someone will forget a pot on the stove. But, on balance, they don’t happen nearly as often as they did in the past. Rising temperatures are however expected to increase wind speeds year-round, creating “stronger and more dominant” high-pressure systems in the neighbouring Atlantic Ocean, according to scientists involved with the Western Cape government’s provincial climate strategy. This means stronger winter storms, as well as faster, more potent winds combined with heat waves in the dry season— they call it “fire weather”. For people living in flimsy structures made from highly flammable materials and poorly insulated against the cold and the heat, extreme weather will make life in the shack lands surrounding Cape Town even more fragile and precarious. Clean flowing water in the home, refrigeration and decent cooking facilities for food, storm water drains that clear away dirty water, refuse removal, working sewage systems—they are all critical aspects to life in a slum settlement. In the absence of these municipal services, or when they fail, it can have serious health implications for people like Christina. These services are going to be stretched even further, in future, as the demands of extreme weather events associated with climate change escalate.

It is about a fortnight after the power outage that shut down the Sigalo kitchen, and Christina is back to cooking with electricity. Her fryer gurgles as the next batch of vetkoek cooks in the oil. There is a tray with sliced tomato and leaves of iceberg lettuce. The burger patties are



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frying up on the electric stove in the passageway. Christina hops up from the lounge chair as a woman’s head appears at the open hatch. She slips a clear plastic bag onto her hand as a makeshift glove, picks up a vetkoek, and slices it open with a bread knife, while she listens to the customer place her order. For the time being, everything is back to normal. Christina’s freezer is stocked up with frozen supplies, rows of dough swell benignly on a shelf beneath the microwave, and the orders are pouring in. Outside her kitchen, where the air is thick with the smell of cooking food, the

weather is balmy, drying out the seeping paths that bring the foot traffic past her business. But another weather system is approaching: a massive storm is on the way. This is the Cape, after all, and it’ll be a good two months before the summer winds tack around to their usual drying south-easterlies. Until then, the people of Sweet Home will have to batten down the hatches against the next bout of torrential rains. *

Leonie Joubert is a science writer and journalist based in Cape Town. Her books include *Scorched* (2006), *Boiling Point* (2008) and *The Hungry Season* (2012)



CONSTANTIA / GRASSY PARK

The Unionist

Mina Platjies is a domestic worker and trade unionist. She is also a mother of two adolescent children. It is a delicate balancing act fulfilling her duties as domestic labourer, union organiser and weekend mom. But Mina is committed: she wants her children to have more than she did

Words: **Janine Stephen**



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For most of her adult life, Mina Plaatjies has lived in one, deeply quiet room in Constantia, an exclusive suburb in Cape Town. Visiting this subtly determined 40-year-old means transecting different lives. The house stands on a shady street. It has an intercom, and electric gates that slide silently open and then gently shut again. Every day, Mina exits the polished front door to collect the newspaper, tossed over the boundary wall. She walks back past an array of family treasures and photographs in the lobby. The owner, Joan Friedmann* (70) and her husband, Matthew*, collected antiques; the formal rooms in the house are museum-like both in the scope of objects on display, and the hushed atmosphere. Left from the lobby is a cosy sitting room. A right turn takes Mina to the kitchen, where she may scan the headlines while making 4pm tea. To reach her own room, she will unlock the back door, pass the clothes line, climb a step and enter her room. As she speaks, Mina may drop references to “life outside”, how expensive it is, for example, but also how different. Because inside her employer’s Constantia home, Mina inhabits a work persona; outside, she is another person. Mina has cooked and cleaned in this family home for 18 years. She’s on duty from 8am to 2pm, and again from 4pm to 7pm, Monday to Friday. If she works overtime—on public holidays, weekends, or at night—she receives extra pay. She also makes a little extra doing washing and cleaning for Joan’s youngest son, Daniel*. She eats the same food as the rest of the household, sometimes sharing a meal in front of the television. She wears fleecy tracksuit pants and jumpers in winter, and a cotton overcoat in summer, also supplied by Joan. Mina is reluctant to divulge her basic salary—it is well over the minimum wage for domestic workers, but not enough to exclude her from qualifying for state housing (the cut-off is over R3500). Her room in Constantia has a separate bathroom with a

yellow glass window that looks onto the garden. It is equipped with furniture supplied by Joan, a TV and a microwave. Personal items are stuck to the cupboards: a letter from her son Davelin (19) and daughter Jody-Lynn (13), also a poster on the “new generation in Generations”. On the dresser stands a framed picture of Mina, groomed, immaculate and clad in a graduation robe: it records the day in 2011 this domestic worker and trade unionist received a diploma in adult education from the University of Cape Town (UCT).

Prieska is a small community on the banks of the Orange River in the Northern Cape. The town’s name is an adaption of a Koranna word meaning “place of the lost she-goat”. The entire population of Prieska added up to less than the number of people living in Constantia when Mina grew up. In Prieska today, 92.5% of people speak Afrikaans and 30.2% of youth in the local SiyaThemba municipality are unemployed. In mostly English-speaking Constantia, a place of evenly spread privilege, 96% of people have jobs. “I came from a very poor background,” Mina says. It may in part be a reaction to being interviewed, but Mina is a serious person; she is not prone to jokes and flippancy. She thinks before she speaks, which is in English, a language she learnt after moving to Cape Town. Mostly she deploys her adopted language in the present tense. “In Prieska, people work on the farms, in the clinic, as domestic workers and sometimes contracts, like government [public works jobs] for a few months,” she says. “Otherwise, young people are just sitting.” Mina’s mother, Anna Niehoudt (77), was a domestic worker on a nearby sheep farm. Mina never met her real father. She was 14 or 15 when she recognised—or as Mina puts it, “opened my eyes”—to the fact that the farm worker her mother was married to was not her father. Life was hard; these were times when workers accepted



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anything they were given, Mina says. There was no minimum wage, and few rights. Somehow, Mina made it to standard six, harbouring dreams of being a teacher. “I don’t think any little girls dream of becoming a domestic worker,” she says. “You don’t choose that, it just happens.” By this time she had three sisters and a brother, and the family had moved to town, which made it easier for the younger kids to go to school (they all studied further than Mina, although none completed matric). Mina’s stepfather

drank a lot. He hit his wife, and Mina. “When you’re grown up, you sit and think about all these things. I think now, that was abuse. But my mother never understood this thing of abuse.” Mina decided she needed to leave school and find work. She’d helped her mother on Saturdays and during the holidays—so she “knew the job”. At first she worked weekends for a local family. This contact found her a full-time job on an orange farm in Citrusdal, 200km north of Cape Town, where she looked after

twins for about R600 a month. She sent her first salary cheque home to her mother untouched: the employers bought her everything, even toiletries. In Citrusdal she met a man, David Abrahams, also a farm worker. Mina had a son at 21, which caused problems with work. The relationship with David (who has passed on) also grew strained. And so she set her eyes on the city. She asked a friend to find her a job in Cape Town, because she “wanted to experience something more”. She arrived, alone, head stuffed with taxi route numbers and strange place names. A first job in Boston with a single mother, an estate agent, didn’t work out. The next was right here, in Constantia, with Joan.

Cape Town and migration are prickly subjects, and for unpalatable reasons: Democratic Alliance (DA) and African National Congress (ANC) politicians have, at various times over the past 15 years, suggested that changing demographics could influence voting outcomes. Unpublished research by Professor Susan Parnell of the African Centre for Cities at UCT indicates that many perceptions about migration to the city are inaccurate. In 2005, she found that contrary to fears of “hordes” of migrants arriving from provinces such as the Eastern Cape, many migrants were affluent people such as retirees from Gauteng, or highly skilled professionals, from inside and outside South Africa. Parnell also notes that much of Cape Town’s growth is “natural” (babies born in the city), not due to migration. Migration statistics from Census 2011 bear this out. Of a total population of 5.8 million people in the Western Cape, 172 628 people said their “province of previous residence” had been the Eastern Cape. In comparison, almost 75 000 had previously lived in Gauteng, and 115 000 had moved to the province from “outside South Africa”; the Northern Cape, where Mina is originally from, accounted for only 17 868 migrants. Not everyone stays either: from 2001



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Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha
01. Nontebeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha
02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha
03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives



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to 2011, over 234 000 people left the Western Cape. Urbanisation is a feature of growth in cities across the world, and the driving force for many is a job and a chance at a different way of life. But jobs aren’t that easy to come by: unemployment in South Africa has jumped from 15% in 1995 to 25% in 2014. (Throw in all those not seeking work, and it rockets to 35%). In Cape Town and the Western Cape, unemployment fell from 29% in 2001 to 24% in 2011. Of course, different areas tell different stories. The spatially excluded townships are worst off: 38% of Khayelitsha residents are unemployed, and a staggering 72% of all households in the township bring in less than R3200 a month.

The labour market in Cape Town has seen a long-term decline in manufacturing, but a growth of service sector jobs. As a result, unskilled workers with poor numeracy or literacy skills have it tougher than in the past, a trend that is likely to continue. Professor Owen Crankshaw, a sociologist at UCT, and HSRC researcher Jacqueline Borel-Saladin’s work confirms that unskilled manual jobs haven’t grown much in comparison to clerical, sales, managerial and professional jobs, which means those with poor education remain at a disadvantage in the job market. Writing in the *Sunday Times*, Crankshaw points out how the growth of the black middle class is contributing to less segregated suburbs—but poor townships are still home to high numbers of unemployed people. “This new pattern of segregation is a division between the racially mixed, middle-class suburbs on the one hand and the black, working class townships with high levels of unemployment on the other.” Despite the challenges, the possibilities for personal metamorphosis in the city—beyond merely finding work—are enormous compared to rural Prieska, where gender roles and social divides are rooted in tradition as well as class and circumstance. Mina’s own experiences have taken her across the usual city spatial divides. As a domestic

worker, she lives in the back room of an expensive suburb, but in her other identity as a trade unionist, she travels not only to some of Cape Town’s poorest neighbourhoods, but even to other cities.

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I t’s June 16, Youth Day, and the community hall at Khayelitsha’s Site C taxi rank is filled with sound. Mina is transformed. She wears her smart shoes and walks at the helm of a column of women who wave a banner bearing the logo of a woman with a broom in one hand and raising her free fist. Mina is doing the same. Another banner portrays a small silhouette of a woman pushing a vacuum: it is Mina in Joan’s lounge. Struggle songs wash over the audience of school children and a smattering of workers. “My mother was a domestic worker / my father was a garden boy / that’s why I’m a unionist”. Also on the programme is a play. Mina and her colleagues take to the stage to act out confrontations between madams and workers. A scene in which a worker doubles up as an ironing board, and a furious madam demands to know who will pay for a damaged dress, is a great success. The message: join the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (Sadsawu) for protection from unfair labour practices and dismissal.

This is Mina’s other life. How she got here goes back to 12 years ago, when Mina found herself with a tricky work question. She asked another domestic worker in the area for advice; as it turned out, that worker had picked up a Sadsawu flyer—the union targets post-boxes in likely residential areas. A call to the office led to a meeting with a union leader, who carefully explained her rights. Mina’s interest was piqued. She gradually attended more meetings, and later signed up with the Constantia branch. Mina is now vice-chair of the Cape Town region of Sadsawu and an executive member of the union’s National Executive Council. The Sadsawu Khayelitsha event, held in a stark community hall, celebrated International Domestic Workers Day, the day the International Labour Organisation voted in favour of Convention 189, a treaty that acknowledges domestic workers worldwide “as equal to any other wage earners”. South Africa ratified the treaty in 2013. For weeks, Mina and other Sadsawu members had gathered on precious Sundays off to practice songs for the choir and plan the “play”. Different branches—from Strand to Constantia and Kuils River, and from Platteklouf to Camps Bay and Sea Point—all attended. A worker named Gloria Kente (50) retold a workplace story that had made the front page of the local paper days before. The audience gasped and shifted as the words “kaffir” and “spat at my face” were spoken. (The perpetrator, Andre van Deventer, was ordered to pay Kente R50 000 in damages by the Equality Court in October; he still faces charges of common assault and *crimen injuria*.) It was a reminder of how vulnerable workers isolated in private homes can be. Before democracy, domestic workers, like farm workers, had no labour rights at all. A minimum wage was only written into law in 2002, unemployment insurance benefits following a year later. Legislation has begun to change widespread abuse in the sector, but compliance is far from the norm. Research initiated in 2009 by the University of the

Western Cape’s Social Law project found that domestic workers were still “undervalued and underpaid” and that there was a “poor level of compliance and monitoring” in the sector. That few domestic workers are unionised or “organised” doesn’t help. The Khayelitsha meeting coincided with a bout of bad weather. Attendance was poor, especially considering there had been a recruitment drive in this 420 000-strong township the week before; Mina’s union is keen to build membership in areas like Khayelitsha. Still, there was a small scramble for membership forms when the speeches ended. “They opened my eyes,” said local resident Sylvia Siko, originally from East London and now a domestic worker in Melkbosstrand. By 2:30pm, free boerewors rolls had been consumed and the festivities were over. On the way home, the members I was with peered with interest at the stalls lining the roads around the taxi rank. The contrast

between the stillness of the domestic workers’ hidden backyard rooms and the lively street life and trade was suddenly stark. Some 33% of South Africans are informally employed. The informal economy, where most jobs involve trade of some sort, often delivers very low incomes (a 2004 paper by Annie Devenish and Caroline Skinner for the School of Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, found that over 50% of informal traders earned under R500 a month, and 92% under R2500). Yet like many domestic worker salaries, these incomes sustain and feed large numbers of dependents and contribute significantly to local economies. One of the big perks of domestic work is the possibility—and it is really a lottery—of encountering an individual employer who is prepared to pay for a decent education for a child, or driving lessons, or provide access to resources, opportunities and ideas. It’s a way of crossing the spatial divides that still splice the city into territories that exclude people on the basis of

class, which inevitably can mean race, too. However complicated by unequal power dynamics, it’s a chance of accessing social strata that would otherwise be closed off. There are benefits. A University of Stellenbosch study into the “linking ties” between domestics and their employers found that in comparison to households where the breadwinner earned a similar salary but in a more formal, anonymous setting (like a factory), “the households of domestic workers appear to have lower unemployment duration and better quality jobs, a higher likelihood of owning assets and a lower prevalence of child and adult hunger”. The study adds, “the linking ties of domestic workers with their more affluent employers increase well-being”. Of course, the informal gift giving practiced by employers is far from uncomplicated: in her book *From Servants to Workers* (2009) sociologist Shireen Ally suggests that it can be “a strategy of power and control”, designed to increase dependence.



Sadsawu’s head office is based in Community House on Salt River Road. A face-brick building that in the early 1900s housed an organisation representing young white Afrikaans women who had moved to the city to find jobs, the building is better known as Cosatu House, after its anchor tenant, the largest trade union federation in the country. Before it was turned into a labour activist base in the 1980s it was a “dilapidated auto-workshop”. Now, though, its walls are adorned with worker murals and history. It is here that Sadsawu president Hester Stephens and treasurer Gladys Mnyengeza are based. The union, founded in 2000, has 26 000 members; about 5000 are active. Cape Town is the strongest region. It represents primarily domestic workers, although care workers, chauffeurs and gardeners are also welcome. The South African Institute for Race Relations estimates that the number of domestic workers dropped 5% from over 1.2 million in 2003 to 1.1 million in 2012. A number of reasons have been posited, from smaller homes to changing culture and labour laws. However, a study by UCT economist Haroon Borhat has found that the introduction of a minimum wage for domestic workers had not had a negative effect on employment, and real hourly wages had increased. Right now, a key issue is the current review of the minimum sector wage of around R1800 a month. Sadsawu is pushing for R2500, or R150 a day. “Less isn’t even enough for food,” Stephens told a caller during a radio interview. “If you can’t afford to pay the minimum wage, don’t employ a worker as it’s not fair to them. Or employ her for some days and give her a chance to earn more money for the rest of the week.” Sadsawu offers its members a formal network of support and advice, invaluable to city workers in ways that are not always obvious. Informal networks—such as the chain of domestic workers from Prieska to Citrusdal and Cape Town that helped



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Mina find work—are as important, especially for live-in domestics whose links to the outside world can be minimal. Crankshaw has done some fascinating research on job seeking in Cape Town. He tackles theories that presume that those living in spatially disconnected townships are at a disadvantage when seeking work, thanks to the costs of travel, lack of information, social networks restricted to their own neighbourhood, and fewer work

opportunities nearby. Happily, some sidestep this divide. Crankshaw found that many employers liked to hire a manual worker through a referral rather than, say, an advertisement—so for workers, any connections made in workplaces and non-geographical spaces (arguably unions, or social groups from sports to church) could result in a referral. Referrals were particularly important for domestic workers, who have strong connections to their employers, and small businesses, where workers did jobs alongside managers.

It is 2pm, Mina’s lunch break. Private security cars cruise the empty avenues. Rain melts the features of hardy dog walkers. Neighbouring domestic workers—a Zimbabwean woman, a mom from Malawi—emerge from their high-walled properties. Mina says the number of foreigners employed in areas like Constantia has grown, although she shows no hint of xenophobia. Perhaps there is tacit recognition that she too was once a migrant. Sadsawu does not condone foreign workers being paid less. The two workers Mina is seeing today are South Africans. The first is an older woman who gives Mina strict instructions not to ring the bell. She scoots outside a formidable wall to pick up her membership card, admitting that her employer doesn’t know she’s a member. “Undercover” members are common, Mina says. She understands the fear of disclosure, because she was once one herself. Mina believes that the employer feels this worker is getting too old. She’ll explain the law: that the worker is entitled to long-service pay (a week’s pay per year worked), and should apply for a government pension. Mina has become adept at explaining legal requirements and the possibility for different forms of intervention to workers, be it approaching the CCMA, negotiation, or using legislation such as sending inspectors to private homes. The second member ushers us into

her room where a two-bar heater is going double-time and a Bollywood soapie is flickering on SABC2. Her employers are elderly—82 and 84—and she is deeply worried about her position if they pass on. She “lives in” and is paid R500 a week. Should she lose her job, she would not only be unemployed, but homeless. The worker quizzes Mina closely about applying for housing. It later emerges that Mina had heard, via Joan, about a domestic worker’s saving scheme that had applied to the city for housing. Mina enquired, but they were not taking on new members. So she approached Cosatu directly to intervene on behalf of Sadsawu’s members. Negotiations with the savings project representatives and the province’s Human Settlements department took place, and the upshot is that Sadsawu members are now eligible to apply for 40-odd homes, soon to be built in Pelican Park. (Mina is helping others apply.) Mina also tells the Constantia worker about an essential meeting, commiserates about her insecure position, and promises to bring a form around for computer classes Sadsawu has organised at UWC through Cosatu. The circumstances of live-in domestic workers, observes Parnell, mirror classic migrant labour systems and drive circular migration (in 2000 about a third of domestics were live-in workers). They are provided with accommodation for as long as they can work, much like mine workers in hostels. “What happens when you retire?” Parnell asks. “You’re much more likely to go home [back to the place of origin, where there are family networks] if you haven’t actually become a citizen of the city.”

First met Mina in 2013, when she served coffee in Joan’s living room and Joan told of her diploma from UCT, and her trips to Durban and America for the union. She also teased Mina about an allergy to dust. Mina doesn’t often say much in front of her employer. For many years, the two have had to negotiate complex and changing

needs, within the intimate confines of a family home. Children have come and grown, both Mina’s and Joan’s—times have changed. When Mina arrived, she was “very countrified” and “unsophisticated”, recalls Joan. “She spoke no English.” Mina remembers the salary, which was around R800 a month, the size of the home and its array of personal objects. Mina liked Joan, who she calls a “good woman”, although “it was a bit difficult getting to know her. She’s got her moods and the way she likes things, like everyone.” Joan Friedmann is from Kimberley, the Northern Cape provincial capital, situated 230km east of Prieska. Her parents held important positions in the provincial health system. Joan also “migrated” to Cape Town. She came to the city to study physiotherapy; she is a sharply intelligent woman who holds a Masters of Philosophy in medical bioethics, has lectured at the University of the Western Cape, and for many years did different locums at hospitals and charities. She met law student and “soul mate” Matthew one night at the Snakepit, a social venue in Muizenberg. They had three children, all now “properly trained and with a good education, so they make their own jobs”. The Friedmanns built their Constantia house nearly five decades ago. For many years, the house was a bustling place: the family was sociable and held many parties. Then, unexpectedly one afternoon 13 years ago, Matthew collapsed after helping Joan carry in some shopping bags. He died later that night of a brain aneurism. And slowly, the house emptied out. Joan’s mother moved in about 10 years ago and until July this year, when she passed away at age 96, the two women lived here alone, with Mina in her room. Life is quieter, the only disruption the odd movie shoot—the house is rented out for location shoots. In the past few years, Mina’s own life has gradually been taking her further from Constantia, for longer, to Grassy Park, a suburb which the 2011 Census describes as largely coloured with



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an unemployment rate of 13.5%. On a street full of playing children is a house with a neat lawn and a cluster of frangipani trees; it has no fence. Around the back is a separate entrance with a small kitchen, a slim bathroom and a bedroom. Mina rents this space for R1890 a month, a cost she shares with a lodger, also from Prieska. Her adolescent daughter, Jody-Lynn, lives here and on weekdays—when Mina is in Constantia—makes her own way to Simon van der Stel Primary in Wynberg. Jody-Lynn has always gotten on well with Joan. She remembers receiving sweets, clothing and her granddaughter’s toys. “She bought my brother a phone. Sometimes Joan will ask me to have supper with them. I enjoy it. At first I didn’t know how to eat with a knife and fork.” Jody-Lynn and her brother have stayed in Constantia at times, including for

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weekends and holidays. She would share her mother’s bed, Davelin slept on the floor. As they’ve grown older, Mina has sensed a less welcoming attitude. She felt that electricity and food costs became an issue; Joan also expressed discomfort when Davelin brought older friends around. Eventually, Mina decided to find her own room. Joan paid the deposit. Now every weekend, she heads to Grassy Park, and sometimes will stay overnight after union or school events. Mina has braais with family and friends. “It is fantastic to have my own place, I need a break from the work,” she says. “Even if I pay a lot for the room, I need to come out of that situation. On a Friday I just feel so relieved.” On the odd night she’ll head down to the hotel or the civic hall for a karaoke evening. Her favourite song is Whitney Houston’s ‘On my Own’, an expressive song in

which the deceased singer offers: “I never had a chance to do things my way / So now it’s time for me to take control / And I am not afraid to try it on my own.”

Back in 2001, five men attacked Joan in her driveway. She is, as a result, very aware of security. Increasingly, she didn’t like to leave her elderly mother alone. When she employed Mina, she worked every second weekend too. “I employed a sleep-in, full time maid,” Joan says. “Not to say that she’s not entitled to her off days, but now every Friday night she’s gone and Saturday and Sunday night, and all public holidays.” She worries about the extra costs of the Grassy Park flat for Mina: rent, transport (R28 a return trip) and food. But now that Mina is not permanently based in Constantia, inevitable extra requests for time off (for school and union events) cause tension. Joan is obviously uncomfortable about this dilemma; her friends, she says, think she’s a pushover. But she is more sympathetic than some. “I know Mina for who she is,” she says. “As mad as everyone thinks I am, I appreciate what she does. My life has been for the underdog, and Mina does not have a nice easy life. She has had to bring up these children in circumstances where she’s constrained by her work hours; she can’t do the normal things that other parents would be free to do. She’s entitled to her human life and yet she’s in bondage—it’s very simple. I recognise the need for her own life. I’ve encouraged it. She’s done amazing things.” For years, Mina confined her union activity to weekends and “off days” only. She was still undercover, thinking that her employer would view her union membership as “about fighting”, not opportunities. Mina absorbed the new knowledge she encountered like a sponge. There were workshops on basic rights and minimum wages, HIV, and also health and safety, which was when she realised cleaning products were contributing to her

eczema and asthma. When she was elected to her branch, the workload suddenly soared: she was responsible for advising others as well as administrative tasks like collecting fees—and there were always meetings, and soon a leadership course too. Her membership status eventually came out; it was a non-event, in a way, considering all the secrecy. Mina continued to grasp every chance she could to learn. She has a sheaf of certificates. Her passport includes stamps from a 2013 trip to America with Solidarity, funded by the US government.

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In 2009 Mina was chosen by Sadsawu to study for a UCT education diploma (adult education), a two-year gender studies course, sponsored by a Dutch NGO, aimed at building knowledge within Cosatu-affiliated unions. In return, post-course, she and the other unionists would offer gender workshops directly to their members. The workers negotiated for time off to attend classes for an intense week every two months. Mina bartered her annual leave: “I didn’t see my (Northern Cape) family for two years”. There were also tutorials on Saturdays, assignments and research. “It was very hectic, I didn’t even have time for my kids.” The study experience was near overwhelming, not only scholastically: “I always

thought only those who had high education who could go [to UCT].” Everything was new, from the enormous library and grounds to the topics covered (patriarchy, emotional, verbal and physical abuse, domestic violence, protection orders and so on). The big test was giving a first workshop to Sadsawu members. “One of the older domestic workers went out the room in tears,” she recalls. “Her own husband abused her ... I didn’t know there were workers in our own union who had problems. So when the lady started crying, I knew we were doing the right job.” Now domestic violence is something the union speaks openly about. One of the songs the choir performed was a Zulu lament: “I had a boyfriend / he was jealous / he brought thunder.”

Another winter’s night in Cape Town near another public transport hub, this time the Mowbray Town Hall. Mina has arrived by taxi from Constantia, having asked to leave work early. There is an air of urgency in the crowd, noisily seated below a drooping Democratic Left Front banner. This is not business as usual, no matter how familiar the struggle songs and liberation slogans. Speaker after speaker—they include a Lonmin miner and Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) members—lambasts government, media, bosses: the issue at hand is the protracted platinum strike and the proposed salary of R12 500. Labour activists brief the crowd. Did they know the platinum sector’s wage share has inched down to 36% from 44%? They tell how the state and capitalists (presented as allies) believe they “have to defeat the strike in case the mood spreads”. They also say that the question must shift from “What can we afford?” to “What salary will produce a decent life?” A farm worker union pledges support to the striking miners, saying “a victory for the miners will be a victory for the farm workers”. There is a heady sense of defiance. Scalding criticism is poured on the ANC and DA, with repeated mentions of the lack of

sanitation in the townships. Mina listens with care. Later she stands to sing in support. Mina is not overtly political. We’d previously discussed the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which expressed support for labourers by wearing domestic worker uniforms to the opening of parliament a few days before. She approved of the gesture, especially, as she says, parliamentarians all rely on domestic workers to keep their households going, yet few support calls to up the minimum wage. As for the EFF itself, Mina remains unsure: “I see this thing on TV and in the newsletters and the question going through my mind is when Malema was rich, he never thought of domestic workers.” She speaks of the platinum strike in clipped terms, only saying that it had gone on too long and all she could think about were the families who were suffering.

Children. This is who domestic workers work for, and worry about. Cruelly, it is the employer’s child that a domestic worker ends up raising, while their own children are neglected. Mina had to leave Davelin and Jody-Lynn with relatives when they were six months old. “All of us domestic workers go through the same thing,” Mina says. “The child blames you. He says you’re never there for me; you dumped me with the grandmother. But what must you do? You have to go to work so that he can get education ... it’s very difficult for the child to understand. Even my child said, ‘You were never there for me as a mother’.” Mina has fierce hopes for her own children. “I don’t want the children to end up where I ended up, in the kitchen,” she says. “For me education is very important and I have been learning myself. I said to them, look, any education I can get, I’m grabbing with open hands. They say it’s very difficult for young people to find jobs. The women next door does administration at [a supermarket] and she says even the cleaners now must have matric.”

Davelin, who has just passed two supplementary exams to get his matric, wants to be a nurse. Jody-Lynn is doing well at school, both at sports and academically, despite having to be self-sufficient for much of the week. She has a head full of dreams: joining the army, becoming a tug-of-war coach (one of her school sports), or an actor or dancer. Mina wants to send her to Hoërskool Jan van Riebeeck in the City Bowl next year, and is trying to get an interview at the Afrikaans high school so that she can ask for a bursary, or at least a subsidy. Mina is full of warmth when she speaks of her children, but she’s strict when speaking to them. Calling home one afternoon, she keeps it short. Has Jody washed out her school shirts? No? She must. Jody says she’s proud of her mother because she “makes a difference in the world and stands up for domestic workers”. But, she adds, “I don’t know anyone who wants to become a domestic worker.” We meet during a long afternoon study session in Mina’s Constantia bedroom. “Most people in our community want to go further in life and become more.” It’s not simply about money, Jody adds, recalling something her grandmother told her. Money is the devil’s thing. “It’s not the whole world.”

Today, the future seems to hold few fears for Mina, despite uncertainties created by Joan’s mother’s passing (the Constantia house, for example, could be sold). After 18 years in Cape Town, she seems to be assessing how far she’s come, and how much more life might offer. She hints at a growing personal life, a possible relationship. There is room to stretch and breathe. She expects to remain in the city, hoovering up all opportunities for learning she can, at least until Jody finishes school. Mina’s role in the union is cemented. Her housing project work is opening up even further horizons (she has met the Minister of Human Settlements, Lindiwe Sisulu, at the Pelican Park site where the houses

allocated to union members are to be built). As it is, the Sadsawu leadership is growing older, and making space for younger members. That she was chosen for the American trip suggests that there are efforts to push her further. She wants to become more involved in CCMA processes and attend hearings. But mostly, she hopes to leave domestic work behind. It is not that Mina is blasé about leaving her employer, who she certainly cares for and is tied to on levels that are difficult to explain. But her choice of words says much about domestic work’s most intractable dilemma: that it feeds someone else’s needs. “I won’t be a domestic worker forever. I need a change. I always see a vision for us domestic workers: you don’t have to [get] stuck there in your employer’s house.” Her dream is to one day do gender work for an NGO. And possibly even leave Cape Town, return to her roots, to Prieska—“where you can go everywhere by feet” and woman like her are hungry for knowledge. She wants to teach others the rights she has discovered during her studies, and help women like her mother, who never understood abuse, to see a different future. It is a future in the making. Mina’s years as a domestic worker are interesting in that her job has not defined her life or future opportunities. The networks she has cultivated, in particular through the union, have proved stepping-stones to greater independence. Mina has breached the walls of her employer’s home and accessed more city spaces than many. “When I started going to union meetings, that’s where I started growing,” she agrees. “You have to understand things before you can go forward. The knowledge came step by step.” *

* Not their real names

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MUIZENBURG

The Conservationist

Luzann Isaacs manages a wetland park in Philippi. The fenceless park is home to a rare water fern and small endemic frogs. An environmental park in a low-income urban area might be a luxury. But, through Luzann's outreach, this park is shifting the racial and class connotations still attached to conservation

Words: **Kim Gurney**





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Good walls make good neighbours, the saying goes, but that is not the case at a nature reserve on the Cape Flats. In fact, on the one occasion a fence went up at the Edith Stephens Wetland Park (hereafter Edith), it was stolen; some poles still stand as *memento mori*. There is a stretch of fence at the entrance gate running adjacent to a highway but the remainder is gone. Arguably, it is porous boundaries that are making good neighbours but it takes a lot of dialogue to keep it that way. The woman at the helm of this urban experiment is Luzann Isaacs (32), who works for the City of Cape Town, managing the park in its Biodiversity Network. She might have studied to become a psychologist if she had not picked nature conservation instead, and she often needs to act like one. As manager, Luzann shape shifts across different worlds to explain to each the value of keeping over

39ha of urban land aside to preserve threatened fauna and flora. Cape Town has the highest number of threatened plant species in the world, according to the City’s Biodiversity Network website, and half the country’s critically endangered vegetation types are found in Cape Town. This kind of rationale is not self-evident in a post-apartheid society with competing ideas about the value of land. Luzann thinks a balance should be struck between animals, plants and people. Her audience at Edith ranges from visiting fishermen to scientists intrigued by a case study, from schoolchildren learning about indigenous gardening to a passerby provoked by the land’s possibility for housing, which she says is a valid concern. “To have a house is important—everybody thinks that,” says Luzann, dressed in her usual outdoor gear with the feminine touch of a ponytail. Her personal adornment is a wedding band and neighbouring

ring on an index finger. “If you’ve never had your own space, you would know how important it is.” Recent protests and land invasions in the greater Cape Town area highlight that fact, as urbanisation pressures mount. Cape Town is part of the African urbanisation trend: every year, 14 million more sub-Saharan Africans become urbanised, according to UN-Habitat (2010), and 70% of them in informal conditions. According to the City of Cape Town, 78% of households live in formal dwellings, 14% in informal dwellings, with backyarders increasing significantly. The country is still shaped by the legacies of the Natives Land Act of 1913 that effectively allocated 87% of land to the minority white population. Land ownership is a pressing issue and in June 2014, the Restitution of Land Rights Amendment Bill was signed into law, allowing the land claims process to re-open for five years. These realities are literally on Edith’s doorstep. Its immediate neighbours are an informal settlement split into an electrified and non-electrified section, a brick-making factory, a chicken farm and a scrap dealer. Its residential neighbours are Hanover Park, Manenberg, Gugulethu and Nyanga to the one side and Philippi to the other. These are working-class communities with “food on the table” issues, as Luzann describes them. “There is a preconceived idea of what a nature reserve must be and Edith doesn’t fit into that box,” she says by way of introduction. This includes the prejudicial notion that conservation must happen where people “understand and accept it”—but this neighbourhood includes gangs, crime and poverty. “When you are dealing with those hard issues, conservationists don’t think it will survive.” Yet here we are, over half a century since botanist Edith Stephens donated a 3.7 hectare plot of land to the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens (now managed by the South African National Biodiversity Institute) in 1955 to protect the rare water fern *isoetes capensis* that grows



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here and nowhere else. Today, the reserve is over ten times bigger, an approximate triangle wedged between two major highways. It is easily dismissed in the side window of passing vehicles as just a large piece of bush. A faded bus stop decorated with wetland vegetation is the only external marker. The approach road along Robert Sobukwe Drive is lined with residential blocks and the landmark of GF Jooste Hospital, large discount stores and building warehouses, small informal traders, and the bustling Nyanga junction. Turning right into Govan Mbeki Drive, it feels improbable that amid an industrial landscape with electricity pylons looming, an eco-sensitive wetland with bird hide and educational centre will soon be in view. But just past Duine Scrap and Ace Transport businesses, a gate appears amid a stretch of open land. In the heart of the Cape Flats, a low-lying area southeast of the CBD, freely entering what is effectively a natural urban commons feels like a provocative act, partly because of apartheid’s spatial legacies. In Cape Town, who accesses and uses what landscapes remain largely racially informed, writes Pippin Anderson, an urban ecologist who lectures at the University of Cape Town. She points out in a book chapter contribution to

Urban Forests, Trees and Greenspace (2014) that historically white and wealthier suburbs cluster around the lower slopes of Table Mountain and the seaboard areas, the most environmentally aesthetic. Historically black and so-called coloured areas are found on the lowlands, “characterized by mobile sands and seasonal inundation in winter due to an exceptionally high water table”. Further, Anderson writes that social perceptions around nature in the city are “hugely variable” and compounded by inequitable access to green space and nature more generally.

Before Cape Town expanded and developed, with apartheid’s zoning laws exacerbating urban sprawl and fragmentation, many parts of the low-lying area southeast of the city towards False Bay were covered with temporary wetlands that appeared in winter months. Apartheid spatial planners earmarked these precarious sites for the construction of racially proscribed communities with cheaply-built subsidised housing and new low-income suburbs. “But obviously the water gets displaced,” says Luzann of the infilling this process required. “And in some of the places, a lot of the houses have huge cracks because the water is pulling up into the walls so there is



3

Opening spread Youngsters play a game of football on an open plot of land opposite Enkanini, a large informal settlement in Khayelitsha

01. Nontebeko Nduna, Khayelitsha resident and community activist with the Social Justice Coalition, at her home in Site C, Khayelitsha

02. Luthando Tokota of the Social Justice Coalition during a walkthrough of BM section, Khayelitsha

03. Griffiths Mxenge, a suburb in Khayelitsha, is named after an anti-apartheid activist murdered in 1981 by police operatives

a lot of structural impact as well as displaced water.” She says Edith is an example of what was there before the development.

It is also a handy gauge against which to measure the impact of new developments. Take for instance the nearby Vangate Mall, opened in 2005, just off the major N2 highway. Adjacent homeowners recently found themselves with a weird problem: hundreds of frogs were literally jumping into their houses at nightfall, after a good soak on freshly watered lawns. The person who often ends up fielding this kind of community distress call is Luzann. Since it falls outside of Edith, she sends community partner Dale Isaacs to assist.

We are standing in the carpark of a fast-food chain adjacent the mall. Palm trees across the way stand out against a rectilinear, squat building. There was a school here before the mall emerged. To the other side, in a seasonal wetland adjacent, there was a river, which was reportedly severed in two. That disconnect has become a problem for some Bridgetown residents living in a strip of houses that face this open piece of veld. Clicking Stream frogs living in this wetland are unable to follow the disrupted course to join the Vygieskraal river on the far side of the mall, which is part of the Black River system. When the seasonal wetland dries, they become trapped and are attracted to nearby waterlogged gardens. They head for the houses—and right inside. That is more or less the assessment of Dale, who set about finding a solution. “All these tiny frogs came into the people’s houses. Two years ago, we had quite a huge percentage of rainfall so they started breeding again. They went up the stairs and into the bedrooms in the double-storey. [Residents] blocked up the bottom of their doors but nothing stopped them.” The plan is to make the wetland more habitable so the frogs don’t pester the homeowners in future, and add activities for the community. We walk down the affected street. To the left,

Quinton Body Works is busy fixing cars. Power lines loom overhead. Opposite is a government building with manicured lawns. Adjacent is a mixed-income residential building with washing hanging off balconies that forms part of the broader mall development, Vangate City. The mall dates back to the late 1990s when the Athlone Business Syndicate proposed developing the Athlone Golf Course, previously situated on the other side of the mall. Vangates Investments was formed and successfully bid to purchase and develop land from the City of Cape Town. A R350 million mixed-use complex opened in September 2005. The mall is today owned by the Public Investment Corporation (PIC), the asset manager for the country’s public sector, which also manages 30 retail shopping centres in townships. It did not respond to requests for comment.

Dale thinks that the biodiversity of the Cape Flats is not considered highly enough in developments of this nature. She underscores the value of genuine community participation in general: “It’s also about speaking my language—speaking to me, not over me.” Dale’s words chime with the neighbourhood engagement of Edith. “You speak to the people who are living there. They will be part of the solution. They grew up with those things as well.”

We ring the doorbell of the double-storey to speak about the Clicking Stream Frog invasion but the owner is out. To complete the circle that the frogs cannot, we drive around the back of Vangate Mall to see where the rivers would have reconnected. The intersect is plainly visible. The mall looks more sprawling from this angle, with three large buttresses atop. The stream of the Vygieskraal runs clear, its belly is visible from the grassy slopes and some indigenous arum lilies grow on the verge. Geographer Karen Till argues for a politics of care that acknowledges among other things that urban space is more than property. At a 2014 UCT seminar around the notion of





wounded cities, quoting an example of a disappeared river, Till remarked: “We need to think about time, resilience and inhabiting the city differently. One possibility is about ways of taking care of place, which might help us to learn to take care of each other ... to think differently about political imaginaries and understandings of the city, an ethics of place-based social responsibility.”

People can visit Edith freely during the week—and they do—although the security guard keeps a register for people who enter the gate and fish that leave. About 2400 people officially visited Edith in the first quarter of 2014, excluding weekends. Free access, together with a virtual lack of perimeter fencing, is in fact one of the reserve’s striking features and symbolic of its management ethos. “I get to work and I see it in my way,” says Luzann. “But then I work with people who see it differently.” They need to understand the park in their own language, she says, to feel part of it, “to feel this is common, this is ours as much as Luzann’s, as much as the person living on the other side”. Luzann extends this analogy: “I may see a bird and see something scientific in an ecosystem whereas another person sees a bird and thinks it is so beautiful just to look at it and what it is doing ... It’s important for people to see it through their own eyes.” She tells me in a later interview, seated on a bench at the park, that science is the pursuit of truth, but not *the* truth—scientists are skilled observers but there is a person making that observation, with subjective ideas. “Sometimes as scientists we tend to forget that this [observational] skill, we use in life in general—when we are with our families. We separate science from the world when actually the two are quite linked.” Ismail Jacobs is standing at the edge of the detention pond wearing a black jumper with white grid pattern and his jeans tucked into his socks. “It’s very good fishing here,” he says



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in a soft voice. He is preparing to cast his line, a white scarf with yellow patterning wrapped around his head, his fishing rod resting up against a perfectly forked branch as makeshift stand. His friend is seated alongside. “It’s nice and quiet, still, relaxing and there are birds and other animals,” he says. Jacobs singles out the fish eagles that watch how you take the fish out the water. He catches mostly trout for eating rather than selling. He likes the fact that the park has no fence and is accessible on weekdays. It also means if they are fishing on the far side of the pond, they are more vulnerable to opportunistic passersby (“guys that are rude to us,” he says). The fishermen are fairly new to the park but their pragmatic management is an example of how it is run. Instead of unilaterally imposing rules upon their catches, Luzann describes how they are actively enrolled to understand

the rationale for co-existence, that breeding birds for instance also need a particular sized fish for their own catch. The approach also helps fishermen self-regulate. A team of four others assists Luzann, who has worked at Edith for ten years, in managing this urban haven on behalf of the City of Cape Town. They are not alone: there are over 7000 wetlands, mostly outside the city boundary, and more than 50 wetland types, according to a five-year-old city wetlands map. A 2006 UCT report cites major threats as coming from alien vegetation followed by physical modification, crops, urban development and water abstraction. The Edith offices are an old German homestead, built in the 1800s, its walls now painted with wetland vegetation and its defunct swimming pool literally sprouting the same. Edith has over 100 plant types including the endemic fern. Its birds include the biggest inland breeding

population of white-breasted cormorants and African snipe has been spotted—an apparent first for the Flats. Its five amphibian species include a threatened local spotted toad. For one breeding week in August, youths undertake a scientific census of the mating calls. “It gives us this one opportunity where we are collecting data but the communities also get the experience of being out in nature on the Flats and seeing the really special natural part that is left,” Luzann says. We are together on the lookout deck when a silky black rabbit with long attentive ears and nervous eyes stops in a grass pathway across our field of vision, halting us both midstream. Human visitors to the park include church and mosque groups, NGOs and angler—and in the future, counsellors may seek out neutral territory for sessions. “Edith has this possibility of being open to people and to a



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variety of people, not just this kind of dominant user type,” Luzann says. This seems key to Edith’s survival strategy. Its human ecosystem comprises its neighbours and its management ethos is wound into this reality. The park creates what it calls a network of ‘partnerships’. I return another day to see one in action.

Tasriek Williams has turned a large black refuse bin into a drum. He beats out the rhythm of the children’s song, ‘If you’re happy and you know it’. He is standing in the amphitheatre at Edith, formerly a dumping site and now transformed into a natural stage. Tasriek wears a dark sweater and grey track pants, and is surrounded by a group of schoolchildren, mostly aged between six to ten years, who have just arrived from adjacent Hanover Park. While

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some are kitted out for the two-week holiday project at the park, one child wears a pair of thin pink pyjamas and striped cloth slippers. A few younger late arrivals shyly join in the group’s icebreaker call and response, with the improvised drum at its heart. By the time it comes to partnering up to sing in Afrikaans ‘Apples on my head!’, they are definitely looking happier than on arrival. “Alright?” shouts out Tasriek. “OK!” sings back a high-pitched chorus. “OK?” calls back Tasriek. “Alriiiight!” That improved sense of wellbeing is just part of the impact bringing kids into nature can have. Erica Kessie is a group facilitator, hosting this school holiday programme after receiving training from Luzann and her team as part of an effort to spread

knowledge and capacity. “It’s about the learning,” says Luzann later. “It’s easier to run something and give to people and dictate to them. It is harder to walk with them ... but the result is much more amazing and the impact is much broader. They also add dimensions to the work that we would never be able to do.” In an earlier meeting with Luzann, she said you have to let go for co-operation to work. “I’ve had to learn in my mind to make room for other people’s pictures as well. It’s not personal.” Erica belongs to an NGO, the Hanover Park Advice Office and Youth Centre. She says children from the area struggle with violence and gang-related trauma, a hardship compounded by the fact that they are often looked after by grandparents who cannot cope. She describes how one child attending the Simonstown Navy Festival flinched because of the gun salutes. “I had to explain they were firing blanks,” she says. “Our kids are so traumatised by violence and gunshots.” This prompted her to concentrate her NGO’s activities on working with children at their foundation phase (6–10 years). Luzann describes it this way: “We sometimes don’t understand the value of a space like this. The value of a safe space, the value of space with beauty on it, the experience within this space.” She muses on other kinds of potential help for kids on the holiday project, who are clearly dealing with many issues they bring from home. “There’s a kind of support they need that talks to them as people—not only about the environment and the short experience we give them but something that talks about their inner strength and how do they go back? Because this is a once-off experience. The circumstances haven’t changed. When they leave here, they still have to go back and face those same things.” The children divide into groups and Erica leads ours to the medicinal garden. Indigenous knowledge systems are conveyed through this section of the park. Traditional plant names and remedies are carried

with each plant species. It could be viewed as part of a larger effort to reclaim flora from western systems of categorisation and to privilege local voices that often carry informal and consequently less visible knowledge forms. Luzann recounts for instance a recent park visit from Philippi elders to teach them about the Edith plants; the staff themselves ended up picking up new knowledge. The garden concept also has to do with language. “People value things but don’t necessary use the same words we use in our sector. They don’t have a scientific connection,” she says. Henrik Ernston explores this aspect of the politics of urban ecologies with regards a comparable wetland in Cape Town, called the Bottom Road Sanctuary, in a paper demonstrating how plants participated in giving voice to memories of oppression while undermining expert-based practices that separate nature and culture (2012). This brings us to the larger take-home point about Edith: the scientific concept of “ecosystem services” tries to find a way to price natural capital. Edith seems to be a transformer that recalibrates this value in a variety of ways—to a brickmaker, a passerby, or a school learner. And its key metaphor is an indigenous garden. “Who has a garden at home?” asks one facilitator. A child replies: “My *ouma*—but she’s very old. She’s 79!”. And that cues an explanation of how he could be helping his grandmother, now that he knows how to plant and care for growing things himself. Erica bends down to snap off a stem of a sour fig (or *umGongozi*) and wipes it over her lips. She explains to several sets of large eyes its medicinal properties and how it can cure a sore throat. You don’t have to spend money or time at the day hospital, nature has the answer. “We have got it on our doorstep!” she adds. The same plants are tied into a potted cultural history too. She asks her young audience: “Who was first here?” “Adam and Eve!” a quick study retorts.

But Erica was aiming for the Khoi, herders who inhabited the Cape as long as 2000 years ago, and San gatherers before them. She explains how the Khoi watched to see what plants the animals ate, knowing they would be safe for humans too. Teaching children about their heritage is important, thinks Erica. “The kids need to understand and know where they come from,” she says. Edith teaches children about their forefathers and their methods through indigenous games, for instance, that reconnect them to culture, says Tasriek, who attended Edith’s youth programme in 2007 before setting out to start his own. “We teach them about the value of the wetland.” A resident of Hanover Park, Tasriek thinks it is also important that the park is fenceless. “People must feel free to explore,” he says. “They know it’s a wetland, but it’s another thing to teach people.” The visit to Edith is ultimately an experiential one, he adds. “You can listen to the story of a young boy or girl who came but it’s a journey for yourself.” That journey includes ideas like “solo time”—introspection about larger questions in their life. Nature is one of the places to bring this out. “Our young people need to know the value of ... Mother Nature to respect it to the fullest,” says Tasriek. “Stories are being told here, like in the olden days around the fire,” he offers. On the final day of the Edith holiday project, the same children gather at the Hanover Park Community Centre. It is Mandela Day (18 July) and they are warming up to head outside for 67 minutes of picking up litter in honour of the 67 years Nelson Mandela spent in public service. Ryan van Louw, a facilitator from the Hanover Park Youth Forum, is in the centre of a circle of about 50 children, again of varied ages. Ryan, dressed in a grey hooded sweater and dark sneakers, describes their home environment. Some of the learners are from homes where drug abuse is prevalent, others from environments where drugs and gang culture overlap. “So what we are doing is keeping them away from it and teaching them valuable attitudes

to be dedicated, goal-driven and motivated, and afterwards they can help improve other people as well,” explains Ryan.

The inside of the hall has fluorescent lighting, stacked plastic chairs and a few trestle tables. There is a cellphone hooked up to some speakers for music. Adjacent is a kitchen and more rooms. Outside, the hall’s stark presence is less hospitable with all the windows barred with steel grates. It sits opposite the New Apostolic Church; on the other side are residences and the Golden Factory Shop with bright sandwich boards advertising its wares. The children don surgical gloves and head into the streets to collect litter, which they deposit in black refuse bags. One blows the fingers into rooster manes and another dangles his glove like an earring. On the streets, they are enthusiastic litter gatherers and do not flinch at the muckiest locations. We start at an open common before passing through a narrow street with loudly barking dogs and curious onlookers. After a turn at The Takal Tuck Shop, the children rush upon an impressive homemade communal garden outside an apartment block, Pelican Court. Brightly painted half-cut tyres mark its boundary, but the soil is covered in copious litter and their refuse bags are soon full. They spend a lot of time transforming the garden into a litter-free zone before dragging and hoisting the rubbish back along a circular route to the hall where lunch awaits.

Tasriek is today wearing a T-shirt bearing Nelson Mandela’s visage. His drum on this occasion is the real deal, with a taut skin surface. Voices quickly soar and temperatures rise inside the hall with his interactive musical repertoire. He has written a poem for the occasion, which he reads to the schoolchildren. A former resident from Hanover Park, a strikingly tall man in a dapper suit, has evidently made it in the wider world and pops in to give the kids a motivational talk. One song in their repertoire has a slight inflection today: “If you’re happy and you know it, say Mandelaaaa!”



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Luzann came to love plants as a child while gardening with her grandmother Suzanne in Athlone. She enjoyed digging her hands in the soil, planting a bulb, and watching it grow. For a long time this was her first concept of nature. Of her grandmother, Luzann says: “She is creative also, sews with her hands and makes her own things like knitted blankets. I can do a bit of that but I’m not very good at it so I could never relate to that part of her. But when it came to the plants and working outside, I loved that and

we connected on that sort of level.” Even now, they still talk plants—only it’s her grandmother asking Luzann which plant is which. “Holding a bulb and putting my hands in the soil ... I used to love that—and the fact that sometimes you don’t have control over everything. Nature teaches us that so often.” Luzann relates this garden experience back to Edith: it is local and self-contained. It also lends itself to the concept of “home”. Her own family home is in the coastal town of Muizenberg, a



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suburb on the well-known tourist route towards Simonstown and Cape Point. It’s a haven for surfers and more recently new immigrants to the city too. She lives there with her husband Nathan and their three young children—two boys and a girl—in a warm yellow-painted house with a fence and yard out front. Luzann explains how they first came to Muizenberg, house-sitting for a friend in the neighbourhood in lieu of a honeymoon. The close proximity of amenities, like the beach and swimming, were the drawcards. The area is far away from work, however, so the family are early risers. Nathan, a foreman in the construction industry, must travel each day to Malmesbury where he is busy building an educational administration block. He is a tall man who softens an imposing first impression with gentle gestures. Nathan describes their home neighbourhood: “It’s got a different culture to it,” summing up what he means with a single word—diversity. “We like that. We want our children to grow up in an environment where they can recognise diversity and be part of it. I think they have a very laid back culture and we like laid back. We don’t want to live in a world where everything is a rat race. There is more than just work.”

When they first married, says Luzann, they were both driven and ambitious. “But I think life has taught us a lot of lessons about not moving fast but moving deep. And having good roots and foundations.” Having children of their own has also taught them to think beyond their own generation and its concerns. “It no longer becomes only about us but more than us, and how their lives will influence their children’s lives,” says Luzann.

When she talks about family or issues relating to children, Luzann is often at her most animated, whether perceptively describing the personality attributes of her own kids or picking up on the emotional needs of those visiting the park. “For me, my home is my anchor,” she says. “If this is fine, it’s easy for me and I’m more balanced in the rest of my life. For us, family is very important and having relationships with people.” If everything is going right in this world, she can “fight the good fight and come back home”. She calls on her husband to double-check how long they have been married. Almost nine years, he says. Propped against the wall in the kitchen are two certificates, one of which declares “Married for Life” and records both their names. Athlone is more or less the ambit of Luzann’s childhood world: she was born and lived the first two years of her life there and then grew up in Montana, further east along the N2 and not far from Edith. Her mother was forcibly relocated from Claremont to Athlone as a result of the Group Areas Act of 1950. Luzann has two siblings—two brothers, one is 14 years younger. Her parents still play a very active role in her family life. “I was a very quiet person,” she says. “I liked being at home with my mom until I became a teenager.” She laughs when she recalls her more rebellious teenage years. Her laugh is one of her most distinctive characteristics, a ricochet of girlish delight. Even through these independent phases, Luzann says, “I always knew where home was—that’s how we grew up.”



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She studied nature conservation at Cape Peninsula Technikon, initially applying without her parents' knowledge. They had their own ideas about nature conservation, she told me earlier, and financial reservations too. Table Mountain was her main nature reserve reference at the time. "As I learnt, my parents learnt with me." Her studies included a formative time at Casablanca, a community in Somerset West, for practical experience on a nature reserve. "They had that sense of having old connections: the people have been around and the stories they tell of generations of being in Cape Town," she says. "I think I learnt a lot about the natural environment through the eyes of the community and I liked the feeling of wisdom." This included indigenous knowledge of the plants and a different perspective of the land that connected it to community, something she feels is under-appreciated.

Luzann's father was a teacher at Manenberg High School for 37 years and her mother still teaches. Her parents were youth leaders in the church and often led hikes. This instilled a more expansive notion of nature and built on her love of gardening with her grandmother.

Her parental family home was a protective environment, a Christian home that offered values and principles she carries forward into the rest of her life. "Understanding people and where they are coming from is something that I have learned from the Bible. You have to put away yourself for a second. That helps quite a bit when you are moving in between different spaces with different kinds of people," she says. It is not about influencing a person so much as understanding where they are coming from. "With that kind of attitude, I find I can learn from a lot of people, even people that you sometimes tend not to like. I find I can still learn from them because understanding is very important." She continues to attend regular Christian meetings with a dozen or so like-minded people. At one of these meetings, she reads a text that connects to land. During the same meeting, the host—a man named Reggie—quotes a piece of scripture, "A man without discipline is like a city without walls." Luzann recites it softly in tandem.

I try to reconcile these words with Luzann's park management ethos and recall a conversation in her office. A colleague of hers remarked that Edith didn't believe in fencing;

you need to have a boundary that talks to people. There are other ways to demarcate, added Luzann. Perhaps Edith does have a wall after all—a talking wall, and the discipline for Luzann is the politics of dialogue. South African apartheid stands as metaphor of some forms of contemporary domination, writes Spanish philosopher Josep Ramoneda in a prologue for the 2008 exhibition 'Apartheid: The South African Mirror', curated by writer and philosopher Pep Subiros. There are increasingly few people who have everything and more who have nothing, Ramoneda writes, noting too how Europe is erecting fences "to prevent those coming from the South from reaching the continent, while in contrast it builds motorways for those coming from the North". In such a global reality, an urban common without a fence may offer a new kind of post-apartheid mirror. *

Luzann Isaacs, who works for the City of Cape Town, participates in this profile in her personal capacity. All views expressed are her own.

Kim Gurney is a journalist, artist and research associate at the University of Johannesburg's Research Centre: Visual Identities in Art & Design. She lives in Cape Town

**“WE ARE LIVING
IN A TERRIBLE
SITUATION.
IT’S NOT RIGHT
FOR US TO LIVE
LIKE THAT.
MY CHILDREN
ARE STILL
TRAUMATIZED BY
WHAT HAPPENED.”**

**XOLISWA MASAKALA,
LWANDLE RESIDENT**

WIDEANGLE

Hasan & Husain Essop
The dispersed landscapes of Athlone, Bo-Kaap, Hout Bay and District Six

Bryan Heseltine
The before people of Bo-Kaap, District Six, Langa, Nyanga and Windermere



LONG AGO CITIZENS

Photos: **Bryan Heseltine**

Cape Town's urban formations are both settled and constantly shifting. Take Windermere, which, like District Six, would be reconfigured by the apartheid bulldozer. Bryan Heseltine (b.1923, Addo, SA – d. 2008, UK) started making photos in Windermere in the late 1940s. He was particularly interested in Windermere's black population, who lived in shack settlements between 8th and 12th Avenues. As he done in Bo-Kaap and District Six before, Heseltine paired his deliberate gaze with an empathetic eye. His vivid portraiture—exhibited in Cape Town in 2013, the first time since 1952—summons a moment of fragile and ultimately lost grace. In 1958 Windermere was reclassified a “coloured” area.





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- 1. Unidentified man, Cape Town, c. early 1950s
- 2. Unidentified man, Cape Town, c. early 1950s
- 3. Unidentified man, Cape Town, c. early 1950s
- 4. Unidentified woman, Cape Town, c. early 1950s
- 5. Unidentified adolescent, Bo-Kaap, Cape Town, c. 1949-52
- 6. Unidentified watch repairer, Windermere, Cape Town, c. early 1950s
- 7. Unidentified barber with client, Windermere, Cape Town, c. early 1950s

ELSEWHERE

Shadow of the Mountain
*Ashraf Jamal on David Lurie's
photographs of Table Mountain and
the balkanised society that abuts it*

The Last Harpooner
*Cyril Fernandez knew how to jump a
southern right whale and kill it, but
he never fully got to live that life*





1

CAPE TOWN

SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAIN

There are rote stories about Table Mountain that emphasise its daunting and picturesque qualities, but between these stories falls the shadow of another story

Words: **Ashraf Jamal**

*... there appeared a mountain obscured
by distance
and of a height
I'd never seen.
We rejoiced but turned to sorrow:
From the new land a storm rose
and struck our prow.
Three times we whirled with all the waters
at the fourth our stern rose up
and our prow plunged,
And the waters closed about us.*

**—Dante Alighieri, Inferno Canto 26,
circa 1320**

Could it be that Table Mountain, South Africa's stony autograph, and the country's most sought after tourist destination, may have been imagined by Dante, the visionary Italian poet, 150 years before it was discovered by the Portuguese mariner Bartholomew Diaz? Absurd as this may seem, there remains the canny (or is it uncanny?) possibility that Dante's vision holds a truth that Africa, and in this particular case, its southernmost tip, began for the

European seafarer, or landlubber, as a matter of *dream*. That this dream also possessed its darker variant—that of nightmare—says much about how, even today, any conception of the Cape is inevitably Janus-faced, a matter of fascination and loathing. For Table Mountain, a haunting promontory that seems to emerge from the storm tossed loins of the sea, was also persistently and darkly perceived as the embodiment of a world outcast, thrust beyond the pale of the known (European) world. This vision of Table Mountain, most forcefully and hauntingly conveyed in Luis de Camoes' epic poem, *Os Lusíadas*, anthropomorphises Table Mountain into a banished and damned god; a god utterly malevolent in nature, whose name is Adamastor. If, then, for Dante the earthly realm of Paradise was situated at the summit of Table Mountain—a mountain he precisely and artfully pictures as a gargantuan plateau, girdled by a forest through which two streams flowed—then this mountain was also to be the cipher and repository for the

European imagination's worst fears of damnation, isolation, wreckage and death. These conflicting sensations of calm and awe are conveyed in the Cape's contrasting names: the Cape of Good Hope and the Cape of Storms. How could the same place be so contrarily perceived? The answer surely lies in the stark variance in the weather patterns that affect this tip. And yet, it is not the weather alone that shaped the response, but the *emotions* that resulted from the experience of the Cape; emotions, notably, of seafarers whose rounding of the Cape was wholly reliant on a kindly wind and a gentle sea, for this particular promontory was notorious for its unforgiving power to shipwreck and destroy a seafarer's hopes. From a European perspective, the Cape was a treacherous obstacle which—come hell or high water—had to be circumnavigated. It is not remarkable that it would take yet another 100 years, after its initial discovery, before the Cape would be perceived as a place worth inhabiting. This decision lay not with

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What is most striking about Table Mountain is its north-facing aspect; that perfected horizontal plain of rock flanked by Devil’s Peak and Lion’s Head

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the Portuguese, but with the Dutch. They would create the Company’s Gardens that would nurture their first seedlings; they would dig the foundations on which a fortified castle would be built. This decision, made by the Dutch East India Company (a decision that can be seen as an early corporate takeover), was made with a view to the East. As a European place of settlement, the Cape continued to foster a vicarious existence. The first habitations, notably, nestled at the relatively verdant foot of Table Mountain. The prospect that these habitations tended to face was seaward, that is, *northward* towards Europe, thus silently, and gnawingly, invoking an instinctive and fearful withdrawal from the African hinterland beyond. For what is most striking about Table Mountain is its north-facing aspect; that perfected horizontal plain of rock flanked by Devil’s Peak and Lion’s Head. Its very shape, with its austere flush façade, its stately cornices, and its human stage below, suggests an amphitheatre; a place one beholds from afar, as though through a spyglass from the prow of a ship, or, through opera glasses from the lofty distance of a gallery. This latter prospect is certainly implicit in the remarkably strange 1899 painting by James Ford, strikingly entitled ‘Holiday Time

in Cape Town in the Twentieth Century’. This painting, held in the permanent collection of the Iziko South African National Gallery, n, casts an aura of European festivity and civilisation upon life lived at the mountain’s glossily perceived foot. Futuristic, or prophetic in both a utopian and dystopian sense, Ford’s painting positions itself as though seen from the north through the parted curtains of a proscenium arch. A rainbow bestrides a bustling urban scene which, while it harks back to the Gothic revivalism of English architecture, also anticipates the resurgence of such architectural nostalgia in the absurdly grandiose postmodern shopping malls that line the coastline, notably the Victoria and Albert Waterfront and Century City. As a prospect of pleasure, Ford’s painting, and the consumerist world it anticipates, replete with Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s rainbow no less, says as much about British imperial fantasy as it eerily invokes the pleasure domes of the “new” South African fantasy. Nowhere in Ford’s painting are traces of Dante’s divine paradise or Camoes’ unsettling vision of a corrosive force. Rather, Ford envisions a highly secular commercial paradise with its unquestioned announcement of distinctly European wealth and power. As a setting, then, Table Mountain appears as nothing more than a backdrop to colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid settlement. What interests me, however, and what I consider to be the implicit—if not the glaring—objective of this collection of photographs by David Lurie, is how they tell the *other* story of Table Mountain. Between that which is daunting and that which is picturesque falls the shadow of another story; a story of geography and the peoples who occupy it that cannot so neatly be resolved. For the life lived in relation to Table Mountain remains a matter of myth and fantasy, as it does that of grim reality. Thus far I have not stated the obvious: prior to the first European landing at the southernmost tip of Africa, that belt of earth was by no means

uninhabited. If I have chosen to begin with Dante’s first imagining of Table Mountain and Diaz’s discovery of it, this is because I wish to emphasise that just as the Cape bears two utterly contrasting names so too is it the battleground of two utterly contrasting civilisations: the Khoisan—nomadic herders, hunters and pastoralists—and the Portuguese, Dutch and eventually the English. Although these latter cultures were distinct, they each believed that life had to be mastered and rendered subject to routine and domination; hence the construction of a delimited and controllable garden, the building of a fort and the fencing of cattle and other food sources. That these projects were conducted without an ethical consideration for the rights of the Khoisan, who had long preceded them, is a terrible truth that will toll throughout the history of the Cape. Today, and for some time now, the life of the Khoisan has largely become extinct, the lives of the dwindling few belatedly regarded as an urgent matter of conservation and ‘heritage’. Of course nothing is as simple as I have intimated. The Cape has, over the centuries, played host to migrant slaves from the East, to Xhosa peoples from the northern mainland, and to a conflagration of desires—bidden and unbidden—that have produced the creolised peoples which, like the fantastic strains in all evolving species, possess their own traces of long forgotten pedigrees. In short, like all colonised places with their asymmetrical relations of desire and power, the Cape is host to a motley crew. However, despite the talk of free and equal citizenry—which remains the absurdist plea of a phantom democracy—life below the mountain remains strikingly balkanised and split along grid lines defined by colonialism and apartheid. That these grid lines remain as violent as they are superstitious says much about the persistent neuroses forged at the outset by the first foreign colonisers. The carnivalesque harmony evoked by Ford’s ‘Holiday Time in Cape Town in the Twentieth Century’ remains



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such only in an illusory sense. In other words, those who don a set of opera glasses and indulge such a fantasy, do so at their peril. Clearly, life lived on the verdant and opulent slopes of the mountain, in the quarters of sometime slaves, or on the wastelands that stretch beyond, where the huddled masses lie largely abandoned and disregarded, are—if unequally—*both* compromised. No one can be said to live a happy life; a life unstained by that previously mentioned *shadow*. If guilt is one name for this shadow, so too is fear and denial—a fear and denial to embrace the sprawling geographical body of land and the peoples who occupy it. This shadow of guilt, of fear and denial is revealed in a strategic yet strikingly *unmotivated* way in David Lurie’s photographs from his essay *Images of Table Mountain* (2006). By unmotivated, I mean that Lurie does not intend to reveal to us the monstrosity of life lived at the foot of a mountain, which was conceived by Camoes as the very embodiment of monstrosousness itself. Rather, Lurie’s photographs implicate the viewer in the casual staging of a series of unsightly apparitions. He gives those who dare to face his images the unsettling sense that, in the instant of viewing those images, or apparitions, one is, necessarily, unnerved. It is therefore a photographic project which does not appeal to the viewer’s conscience, but to a certain ethical nerve that is not wholly a matter of mind. And yet, those photographs are not merely the affect of viscera—simply documents in passing—but, more potently, they capture—without indulgence, and without a framing consciousness—the sense of worlds encountered that are *not quite human and not quite inhuman either*. Lurie’s photographs are shadow works, or, works caught in the physical and darkly mythic shadow of Table Mountain. By way of contrast, consider a photograph by David Goldblatt, ‘Suburban Garden and Table Mountain, Bloubergstrand, Cape Town, Cape, 9 January 1986’. What is most striking about this work is that it is unpeopled, although,

in the far distance one sees the pinprick of a figure walking two dogs along the beach. The human factor, then, is thoroughly incidental. What is striking is the vacuity of the lawn, the nullity of a sliver of face-brick patio, the blank white corner of a tiled A-frame house, the foregrounded mock Greco-Roman birdbath and pillar. In the encroaching distance lies the rolling sea, and further beyond the beatific and smokily picturesque view of Table Mountain with its eloquent abutments, Devil’s Peak and Lion’s Head. By erasing the vacant lawn and the crass traces of human habitation the photograph becomes an unthreatening picture-postcard. However, what makes Goldblatt’s photograph unsettling is precisely these unsightly traces; traces that assert a failed petit-bourgeois grandiosity. Goldblatt’s photograph harbours a deliberateness, a pointedness, that the German thinker, Walter Benjamin, when confronted by the similarly eerily vacant photographs of Atget, described as the scene of a crime. Such is the scene that one encounters anywhere in relation to Table Mountain. But what is it that invokes this unsettling sense of a wrongdoing? Is it the mountain? Or is it what the mountain, historically, invokes? Of course, one arrives at this uneasy trace of violence when one encounters other photographs by Goldblatt. Therefore, in regard to the work of that photographer, the sensation is not bounded by the daunting and threatening plateau that is the subject of this essay. To return to Goldblatt’s abiding signature, then, it is perhaps best described by poet Stephen Watson, in an essay tellingly entitled ‘A Version of Melancholy’: “So steady is [Goldblatt’s] gaze that ... objects ... surfaces, are revealed not only in the poverty of their design, but an entire culture starts dissolving, is reduced to a basic, seemingly primordial nakedness, to the vacancy inherent in such things.” Now it is precisely such a reading, or apprehension, which is impermissible when addressing

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Lurie’s photographs implicate the viewer in the casual staging of a series of unsightly apparitions

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Lurie’s photographs. This is not merely because Lurie’s images are invariably peopled, or because they are animated and eschew the petrified gaze, but because there is nothing primordial about them. Lurie resists the modernist notion of an essence—primordial or otherwise—to the precise degree that he resists the overly politicised plague of the document. Neither alluding to a past nor anticipating a future, Lurie chooses to locate the viewer in the intensity of the broken present moment. This break, which gives his photographs their aliveness, compels one to reach beyond the frame. However, in so doing, in seeing the moment that is photographed within a relay of broken lived moments, one realises at that instant that the recorded moments cannot be explained within a continuum. Lurie shifts from place to place: from the shanties of Khayelitsha to a peri-urban edge of Langa; the graveyard of the NY5 in Gugulethu to the petty vacationing haven of Milnerton; from the industrial wastelands of Paarden Island with its invocation of white poverty to the crumbling barrios of Manenberg; from the sudden scenic shifts along De Waal Drive to District Six with its traces of a gone world amidst encroaching bush and up-market domestic settlements; from the informal sector that flanks the

City of Sand

The spirit of a place is not anywhere particular, and in Cape Town it certainly is not in the national park. That common, defining Cape Town is in the elements of wind, sand, tar, slat, rail, rain—diffuse conditions that make sense to a Capetonian in their various combinations, just as they would to other citizens in their own cities. In truth, these things do not make sense, but are recognised, and are beloved in the degree to which, being recognised, they appear as reflections of ourselves. These things might be thought of as our likeness. We see ourselves in them and in the moods they induce. They stand for our likeness also in that we know—or believe—that others recognise themselves and us in them too. By contrast, the mountain, its forests, its dams and uplands, its paths of quartz sand, its clickety restios, its seeps, its stains, its lichens and rubbles, its carpenter bees, its porcupines, its now endemic fires, all these stand not for likeness, but for what is unlikely. The truth is that ours is not a mountain city, nor a city of forests (we are far more a city of sand flats).*

PR Anderson, from his essay ‘On Common Ground’, published in A City Imagined: Cape Town and the Meanings of a Place (Penguin, 2006)

central railway station to the casual consumption and commerce that defines the V&A Waterfront. His drift encompasses the barricaded and opulent parade of wealthy homesteads in Camps Bay before edging closer, at a steep diagonal, towards the un-housed slopes of an implacable mountain, then down, down, in the encroaching darkness, with a car, its headlights on, flashing past the viewer, and away... None of his photographs are posed or stately. Rather, as if seen through a rear-view mirror, at once backwards and forwards, they quicken the nerve, combust a settlement, allowing the viewer a state of seeing that is neither that of the flâneur or the voyeur, but rather that of Iggy Pop’s passenger (“I am a passenger / and I ride and I ride”) The traces of a lived world flood past, and, in that moment, deposit their shards into the eye and psychic body of the viewer. In a country defined by pathological obsession—evinced in fascination and loathing, a loathing that segues into self-loathing—Lurie’s photographs emerge as a healthy anomaly. One cannot underestimate the importance of Lurie’s healthy in-road, for it shadows and complicates the tedious reversion to a golden age of photography, as well as the deadening ease that marks the emptiness of so many photographic records. It is all too easy to fix the visual record of South Africa in a formulated phrase, to visually conceive the country as a diorama or reliquary for history’s ills, or as a many-coloured prism through which one refracts the “new”. As a result, the photographer must develop what I would call an ethical turn—a way of seeing that is both immanent and full. Because it is as easy to define likes as dislikes, because we rarely question our taste, we must invite the unease that allows a suspension of judgement, thus enabling an openness and fullness of vision. It is this prerequisite that is crucial to the construction and the perception of Lurie’s photographs. To not grasp this proviso is to fail to grasp the significance of Lurie’s work.

Note, for instance, the incidental manner in which Lurie records Table Mountain. Sometimes the mountain appears as a mere sliver in the distant horizon, then again it appears in fragments in the urban thicket. Never is the mountain memorialised. When the mountain dominates the frame it also engulfs it. As a long shot or a close up, the mountain invariably disturbs the frame. Never is the mountain steadied in a medium shot, and, as a consequence, never is the mountain naturalised or perceived as a normative framing register. This decision is not merely a perverse one. Rather, what this decision suggests is the complexity and the uncertainty of human habitation in relation to the mountain. Parsed quite literally according to a racial and economic designation, Lurie’s sequence of images forces one to recognise that the closer one gets to the mountain, the more well-off or normatively middle-class the context. It is not however Lurie’s wish, à la Karl Marx, to thrust the theory of alienated labour and conspicuous consumption down our throats. In other words, it is not the content per se, that matters. Irrespective of whether Lurie captures a well-heeled white European family lunching at the V&A Waterfront, or a black African woman passing a cash store in Langa, what matters is the photographer’s ability to level these worlds, establish a psychic kinship in the midst of a glaring disparity. This levelling is not the sum of a cloak-and-dagger “universalism”—the sleight of hand of the liberal—but the choice of someone who places mortality before class and truth before art. That this mortality, this truth, is captured in the engorged instant—an instant neither sacred and elevated, nor profane and ordinary—defines Lurie’s visual and ethical signature. In *Slow Man* (2005), novelist JM Coetzee echoes Stephen Watson’s “primordial” reading of Goldblatt’s photography. The central character of Coetzee’s novel, Paul Rayment, reflects:

“The camera, with its power of taking in light and turning it into



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substance, has always seemed to him more a metaphysical than a mechanical device ... As the ghostly image emerged beneath the surface of the liquid, as veins of darkness on the paper began to knit together and grow visible, he would sometimes experience a little shiver of ecstasy, as though he were present at the day of creation. That was why, later on, he began to lose interest in photography: first when colour took over, then when it became plain that the old image of light-sensitive emulsions was waning, that to the rising generation the enchantment lay in a *techne* of images without substance, images that could flash through the ether without residing anywhere, that could be sucked into a machine and emerge from it doctored, untrue.”

What is striking about this passage is its remove from Lurie’s position. Nostalgically, Coetzee’s protagonist hankers after a metaphysical ideal where the ecstatic moment of apprehension becomes akin to the “day of creation”. This primordial day is perceived by the protagonist of *Slow Man* to be tragically usurped by the “enchantment” of the simulacral,

that is the banal enchantment of the postmodern in which the copy becomes the thing-in-itself without reference to an original work. Hence Coetzee’s disenchanted gibe against “a *techne* of images without substance”, against art. What Coetzee’s protagonist fails to reflect upon, however, is the existence of another order of photography which manages to grasp mortality without fixing it or rendering it disposable and inauthentic. It is this in-between order—an order that owes its allegiance neither to the essential nor to the glibly faked and disposable—which Lurie grasps, and which, in the grasping, neither fetishistically cherishes nor casually and voyeuristically passes by. Rather, Lurie’s photography captures the shadow between the metaphysical and the simulacral. It is this shadow that makes Lurie’s photography a visual membrane that links and parses the human and the inhuman. Such an ethical strategy allows Lurie to quicken thought and engender feeling without, in any given instant, letting these effects settle and fix or dispel a given moment. In a contemporary culture of sleepwalkers, Lurie’s photography is

deftly alert. In a culture defined by a nostalgic remembrance of things past, his photography reminds us that the personal experience of the ecstatic is grossly insufficient. Always, there is the shadow of another story. No vision is ever finite. No vision the pure summation of a given moment. Rather, it is the moment in itself, a moment which cannot be chaperoned and contained, which erupts and breaks the narcissistic experience of it, signalling its newness, its thorough disinterest in the moral consequences of its effect. It is Lurie’s broken moments that break the sorry desire for control, as well as the equally sorry desire for the imagined bliss of no control, that—in eschewing the hallowed domain of art as well as the postmodern *techne* of artlessness—restores photography to the disregarded living moment of non-art. In a country in which so much is manufactured at the expense of a lived truth on the ground (and here the manufacture of Table Mountain as a tourist trap is a case in point), Lurie gives us a way of looking, a way of feeling, that is neither spectacular nor merely ordinary or artlessly banal. His Table Mountain is not a metaphysical *idée fixe* nor a trumped-up stage set, but an incidental and invasive monstrosity whose magnetic field shapes all who choose, or who, against choice, are compelled to survive in its morbid shadow. *

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This essay originally appeared in David Lurie’s book *Images of Table Mountain* (Bell-Roberts, 2006)

- 01. A barber shop in Sohrowardi Park provides cheap haircut and grooming opportunities, 8 October 2012
- 02. Man posing for photograph, 29 August 2012
- 03. Sohrowardi Park has a large homeless population who use the lake for bathing, 15 August 2012
- 04. Mother and child, 27 November 2012
- 05. Mother and child, 27 November 2012
- 06. Mother and child, 27 November 2012
- 07. Mother and child, 27 November 2012

KALK BAY

THE LAST HARPOONER

Cyril Fernandez learnt how to stand in the bows of an open boat and wield a harpoon from his father. It was a valuable skill, knowing how to jump a southern right whale and kill it. Up until 1976, South Africa ran one of the most intensive operations in the history of modern whaling. But then the whale populations dwindled. Cyril witnessed this, and other things

Words: **Mike Nicol**

In 1996, I traced the last man in False Bay to be trained as a harpooner. He was 87 years old and confined to a wheelchair. There was nothing in his face that belied his career or years: the only grey in his black hair was at his temples and in his sideburns, nor could I describe his features as rugged or deeply lined despite a life time spent fishing from ocean-going boats off the western coastline of South Africa and Namibia. He had a quiet voice, so quiet that sometimes it registered as merely a sibilance on the tape recording. In fact he told his stories so fluently that I wondered if he lived more in the past than the present. He smiled as he recounted his memories. The man’s name was Cyril Fernandez. We talked in a dim, ground floor Sea Point flat that was rented by his granddaughter and her husband. The sea was at the end of the street but he had no view of it from his room. The only indications of his fishing life were a cast of a giant marlin’s head on a chair in a corner and a print of a

sailing ship running before the wind hanging on the wall. In the middle of the nineteenth century his grandfather, Pedro E’ustaquio, a Filipino from Iloilo on the island of Panay, had been shanghaied to help crew a Spanish merchantman and had jumped ship in Simon’s Town bay, roughly 40km south of Cape Town’s CBD. At the dead of night—what other time was there!—Pedro swum ashore and walked along the wagon track to Kalk Bay, a fishing village with a reputation as a Filipino haven. There he was taken by the young men to hide in the caves above the village. Of course, the Spanish captain came looking for him: cursed the villagers for their deception and offered a ransom for the runaway’s return. But the people of Kalk Bay wouldn’t give up their secret. In disgust the captain went back to his ship, sailing out the following day. From his refuge in the mountain E’ustaquio watched the sails of the ship until they disappeared. He was sad: he would never see the Philippines again. But

if sadness was the price of freedom, then a new life was worth it. He left his old surname on the mountain. When he walked into Kalk Bay he said, “My name’s Fernandez. Pedro Fernandez.” There were no dates to this history: it floated in the memory of his grandson, Cyril Fernandez, with all the immediacy of an anthology of short stories. Which was how he told me the story of his parents’ marriage. When the south-easter started blowing a few days before his wedding, Pedro Fernandez (the son of the stowaway and Cyril’s father) got the itch of money in his fingers. But the wind also brought the stench of whale oil to his nostrils. He knew the cash would not come easily. Pedro shrugged. That was the least of his worries. Of more importance was to take his beloved to get the blessing of his dying mother. This was a task that filled his heart with dread. As he cleaned fish on the Kalk Bay beach Pedro wondered how he could prove to his mother that the beautiful Lydia Luyt was his.



An undated promotional photo of the whaling industry in Durban

Lydia was a Claremont girl, a servant of Mr Green, a wine merchant who every summer brought his family to holiday in their cottage near the fishing village. It was known that young women from the merchants’ houses had no eyes for fishermen. So Lydia was a catch way beyond the wildest dreams of Pedro. There wasn’t a fisherman in Kalk Bay who hadn’t tried his charm on her and been spurned. Lydia, with her English blood and her soft hands, wasn’t for them. Pedro knew his mother would be sceptical of this good fortune. Words were not proof enough for her. When Pedro had finished cleaning the fish he took them to sell to Mr Green. As he approached the cottage he could see Lydia’s check petticoat hanging on the washing line. The sight of it lifting so gently in the breeze mesmerised him. How beautiful it was, how fine between his fingers. Then quickly, unseen, he snipped off a square at the hem and slipped it into his pocket. The next afternoon Pedro and Lydia took the Cape cart from Kalk Bay to St James where his mother and father had a cottage. Pedro was nervous. He could hardly talk. His Adam’s apple juggled in his throat with agitation. “How do I know she’s really going to be your wife?” the frail Ma-Fernandez breathed at her son. “Just ask to look at her petticoat,” he replied. To Lydia’s embarrassment she had to reveal the hem of her petticoat with its missing square. “What does this prove?” Pedro’s mother demanded in a scratchy voice. “Would I cut this from a stranger’s petticoat!” declared Pedro flourishing the missing square. “Of course not, I would only take it from the woman who was to be my wife.”

By the time they got back to Kalk Bay, radiant with the blessings of the old woman on her death bed, the south-easter was set and roaring. Pedro Fernandez looked at the impossible sea and knew there would be good

catches when the wind went down. He knew too that with this wind the butcher, grocer and baker would give him meat, cheese, eggs, bread, vegetables, fruit, dates, nuts, wine, whatever he wanted for the wedding feast. The south-easter guaranteed repayment. In that howling summer gale Pedro and Lydia were married. The wind gave them a week’s honeymoon, for no one could put to sea in such a maelstrom. When one night it stopped, abruptly, unexpectedly, Pedro woke at the sudden quiet. In the early light he and Lydia went down to the beach: washed up on the rocks was a dead whale. “It’s ours,” he whispered to her. “Quick, give me your petticoat. We claim the whale.” Poor Lydia, the Claremont girl, awkwardly stepped out of her petticoat and watched as her Pedro tied the garment to an oar and plunged the oar into the whale’s blubber. “There,” he said, “now it’s ours.” And then poor Lydia who’d never had to clean a fish watched her husband cut a door into the carcass and disappear into the belly of the beast. Poor Lydia shut her eyes and prayed to the Virgin Mary. When she looked again Pedro stood before her grinning. He was covered in blood and gore. Poor Lydia wanted to faint. Fetch tins, he told her. Fetch wood and coal. Under the huge iron cauldrons that Norwegian whalers had long ago abandoned on the beach Pedro built fires. “But why are we doing this?” asked Lydia. “You’ll see,” he replied. And showed her what to do. For two days Pedro laboured in the slime and ooze and stench and dimness. He cut off strips of fat from the stomach and took them like sacred offerings to his wife. In the cauldrons she melted them down until a fine oil bubbled on the surface, which she ladled into the tins. For two days Pedro and Lydia stank of whale. Their clothes were saturated. Whatever they touched became greasy and contaminated.

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Lydia wondered if she would smell like this for the rest of her life. It made her want to cry. “Don’t worry,” said Pedro. “It’ll be worth it.” For those two days the people of Kalk Bay joked about the foolishness of Pedro and Lydia who were so deluded by love as to think they could compete with the Norwegian whalers stationed at Cape Hangklip across False Bay. No, it was rank foolishness, the Norwegians had long cornered the market. All these two were doing was smelling the place out with the reek of boiling fat. Pedro paid no heed. When the job was done, he made a fire in their backyard and destroyed their clothes. No soap on earth could wash the smell and the oil out of them he told Lydia. Clothes were precious she reminded him, thinking longingly of her ruined petticoat. Don’t worry, he said to her, soon there would be enough money to buy new trousers and dresses. The best there were. That night Pedro decanted the oil into old bottles he’d scrounged from the villagers. He cut plugs of wood as stoppers. The next day Pedro took a sack full of bottles to town. He caught the Cape cart to Wynberg and the train to Cape Town. The merchants snapped up his oil. “But don’t bring us anymore,” they cautioned him, “we’re now overstocked.” Pedro went home with money-filled pockets jingling and a new check petticoat wrapped in tissue paper. He had married the most beautiful girl on the peninsula and she’d turned out to be lady luck. Pedro’s heart was singing. He and Lydia would be the envy of Kalk Bay. And then the south-easter began to blow again. For a week it whipped the bay: the waves seethed against the rocks, dead gannets washed up in the tideline, a salty haze drifted across the mountain. The fishermen talked of steenbras, hottentot, yellowtail, mackerel. Maybe even tunny blown in. Or another whale torn lose from the Norwegian whaling ships. Imagine that, they said. Those Norwegians were always

losing whales, perhaps they’d lose another. Which is what happened. On the morning the wind went down a whale carcass lay on the beach. This time everybody wanted a piece of the prize except Pedro and Lydia. Pedro said he would rather go fishing. Lydia said she had housework to do. You’re too late Pedro tried to tell them. You shouldn’t compete with the Norwegians. But no one believed him until the merchants of Cape Town, crossing their arms, shaking their heads, said, no, no, no, we don’t want any more oil. Cyril Fernandez recounted the story in his quiet smiling voice. “My father was a good harpooner,” he added. “He taught me to be a harpooner, but I never harpooned a whale.” Cyril was born too late. By the time he was old enough to stand in the bows of an open boat being rowed achingly towards a slow-moving southern right, there were few whales coming to mate or calve in False Bay. For one thing, their numbers were declining. For another, the Norwegians in their steam-powered whaling ships mounted with harpoon guns got them first. But when Cyril was young there were still men on the coast who had the gear and the will to hunt any whale should the opportunity arise. One of these was George Cotton from Tristan da Cunha who had a trekking licence to fish off Simon’s Town beach. “There was a man called George Cotton, tall man, darkish,” told Cyril. “And then there was a whale in the bay. Cotton was trekking on the beach in Simon’s Town, Long Beach in Simon’s Town, when he got a report that there was a whale in the bay, so he went out with his trek boat. He had his gear, his whaling gear, ropes and harpoons and so on. At Kalk Bay there was also an old man who had whaling gear, an old coloured Portuguese, Mr Michaels. He came from Cape Verde. He had harpoons and bombs. The old man could get these bombs from Portugal or somewhere. “Anyhow. Cotton went out and they

harpooned the whale. Now these ropes of his had been lying there in the sheds for so long that naturally they had got dry and rotten and so on. So Cotton’s rope broke. You know when you harpoon a whale by hand from an open boat it sets off and you play it until it bleeds itself to its death and then you tow it back to shore. There’s another story I can tell you about a whale that took the run after it was harpooned and the whale took the run and it ran so far out of False Bay that the crew had to cut the rope and row back home. But now Cotton’s rope broke and Cotton lost the whale. He did not have bombs so he couldn’t kill the whale before it broke his ropes. “My brother with the skipper of the boat, The Chrissie, saw what had happened and they saw that the whale was coming towards Kalk Bay. So they got a crew together and they rowed out with old Mr Michaels as the harpooner. They got near the whale and they harpooned it. The old man was already so old but he had the true style of the whale harpooner. When they got the whale alongside he jumped onto the whale and drove the lance into the soft spot of the whale and killed it. Then they towed the whale in. “At that time the harbour was built already. I was a youngster and I was there to watch them bring the whale in. Now Cotton was watching through his binoculars from Simon’s Town and he could see the whale had been caught by somebody else. He knows his harpoon is in that whale and as such it means that that whale is his. Cotton came to Kalk Bay on the train and he came onto the long pier. Now he was a tall thin man and had a very gruff voice. When he got in amongst the people looking at the whale he stood on the edge of the harbour there and shouted down to the men in The Chrissie: ‘I CLAIM THE WHALE!’ “Those few words took them to court. And only then did Cotton realise that the whale did not belong to him even though his harpoon was in it. If his harpoon had had his name, George Cotton, and address then the whale would have been his. But his harpoon was unsigned so he lost the

whale. The people on The Chrissie didn’t have their harpoons signed but they had their ropes attached to it. So Cotton did not have the whale, just a loose harpoon in the whale.” In Moby Dick, when Stubb kills a whale, Herman Melville writes: “[The whale] rolled not in brine but in blood, which bubbled and seethed for furlongs behind in their wake. The slanting sun playing upon this crimson pond in the sea, sent back its reflection into every face, so that they all glowed to each other like red men.” Cyril Fernandez again: “You see the dying part takes a long time. The dying part can take a very long time. The harpoon is merely to keep the whale hooked and you wait until it weakens. But the whale can set off with boat and all and later on you are so far away from land that they would rather cut the rope than be drawn right away to sea. How quickly the whale dies when it’s weakened and alongside all depends on how brave the harpooners are. Usually when the whale is alongside they jump onto the whale to kill it with the lance. They put it in the soft spot. They also used bombs. A bomb is about this long” –he indicated about 60cm– “and about as thick as this” – he made a circle with his forefinger and thumb. “You push that bomb into the whale and there is a trigger on the bomb that as it goes into the whale it goes off and the bomb bursts inside the whale. When it bursts it shoots out all little assegais and they break up the whale’s blood vessels and what-have-you and the whale dies.” Cyril cleared his throat. He looked at me. “Those were the ways they killed a whale in the olden times,” he said. *

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EXIT

Twin brothers Hasan and Husain Essop refuse the monochrome sobriety of social realism, an entrenched tradition in South African photography. They also refuse the anthropological gaze of the camera, particularly in relation to describing the lives and labours of Cape Town's Muslim community. Framed by many moods, from the playful to the devotional, their work is fundamentally about home, Cape Town. Produced in various biographically resonant locations, their work presents Cape Town as site of a "multi-cultural clash between religion and popular cultures".

