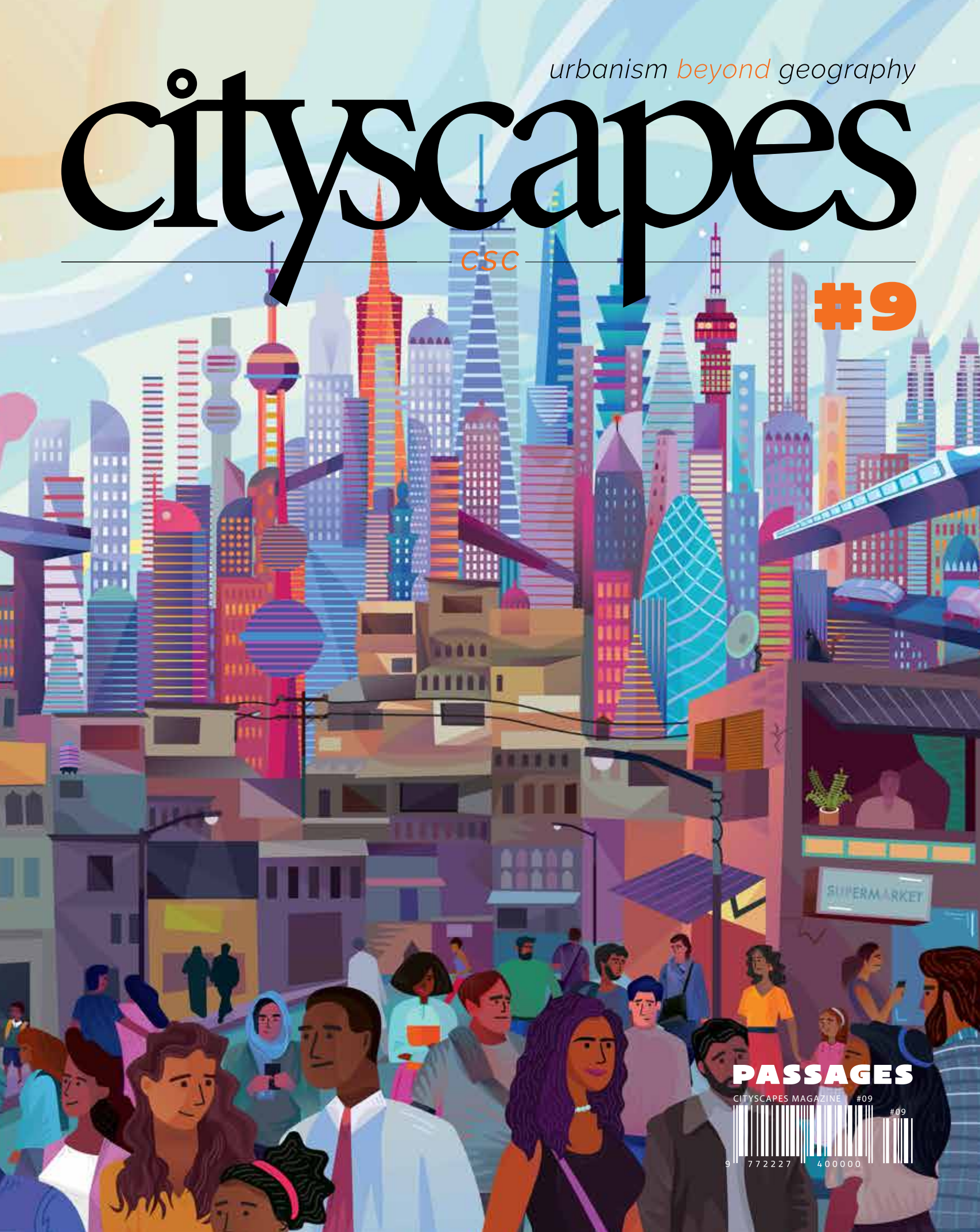


urbanism *beyond* geography

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PASSAGES

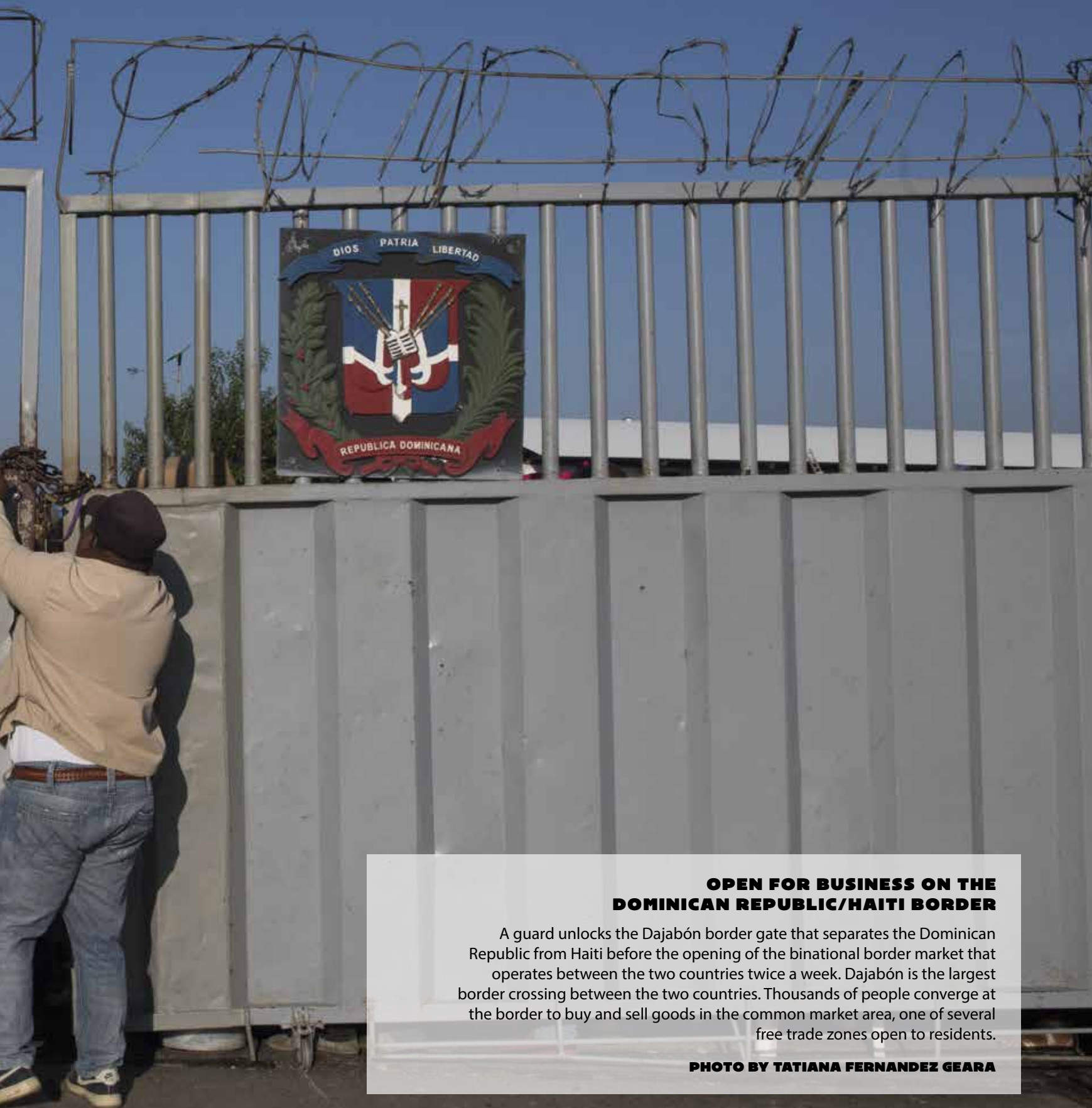
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#09





SNAPSHOT



OPEN FOR BUSINESS ON THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC/HAITI BORDER

A guard unlocks the Dajabón border gate that separates the Dominican Republic from Haiti before the opening of the binational border market that operates between the two countries twice a week. Dajabón is the largest border crossing between the two countries. Thousands of people converge at the border to buy and sell goods in the common market area, one of several free trade zones open to residents.

PHOTO BY TATIANA FERNANDEZ GEARA



EKO ATLANTIC: A DREAM DEFERRED IN LAGOS, NIGERIA

Despite the promises conveyed by the marketing sign, development has been slow and fraught with controversy on the 10 million square metres of reclaimed land that makes up Eko Atlantic. Six years ago, former presidents Goodluck Jonathan and Bill Clinton dedicated Eko as the site of a new African city for the digital age. Africa’s Manhattan, the press called it. “Roaming this landscape by car and foot, I was immediately struck by the sheer ambition of the project and the role images play in maintaining faith in its viability,” says photographer Isaac Diggs, who has been documenting the development for an extended period. “The condition of the sign perfectly captures in its totality the ambivalence Eko Atlantic inspires, at least among the several Lagosians I spoke to.”

PHOTO BY ISAAC DIGGS



THE AMAZON RAINFOREST BURNS, PARÁ STATE, BRAZIL

A burnt area of forest in Altamira in the Amazon basin. Firefighters fought as many as 30,901 individual fires in August 2019—three times as many as that same month the previous year. The seasonal fires have been worsened by the increased pace of deforestation that has resulted from the Bolsonaro government's policy of "monetizing" the Amazon Rainforest. At least 7,747 square kilometres of the rainforest has been cleared in 2019 alone for farming, mining and other purposes. The fires, and the Brazilian government's slow response were met by widespread protests globally.

PHOTO BY JOAO LAET/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



ANTI-AFRICAN IMMIGRANT RIOTS IN JOHANNESBURG

A member of the South African Police Service secures the chains of a detained rioter during attacks against other Africans by some South African citizens in 2017. Similar riots broke out in August 2019. Such violent outbursts first broke out in 2008 across South Africa and have become an almost annual occurrence. They are characterised by mobs systematically attacking foreign/African owned businesses and residences. The violence has caused diplomatic tensions between South Africa and other African countries and the voluntary evacuation of some immigrants from the country. The August 2019 riots resulted in 12 deaths, and police detained about 500 rioters who are being charged for various offences. Simultaneously, the South African police have been criticised for both a heavy-handed and sometimes inattentive response to the crisis by some observers.

PHOTO BY ALET PRETORIUS/GALLO IMAGES



HONG KONG PROTESTS

Protesters march through a tunnel during an anti-government rally. Pro-democracy protesters have continued holding rallies on the streets of Hong Kong since the 9th of June, plunging the city into crisis. Recently, the demonstrations have been marked by continued violent clashes. Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam apologised for introducing the extradition bill which set off the protests and declared it "dead." However, protests have continued, drawing large crowds with demands for Lam's resignation, a complete withdrawal of the bill, and other reforms.

PHOTO BY CHRIS MCGRATH/GETTY IMAGES



A MILITARY DEPLOYMENT IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Responding to an increase in atrocities due to a rise in gang violence, the South African national government ordered an unprecedented deployment of the military in neighbourhoods across the city's Cape Flats. Ravaged by violence, Hanover Park was one of the areas where soldiers patrolled the streets and joined police as they conducted raids on the homes of several well-known gang members. However, the operation, known as "Operation Lockdown" has been criticised by some community members. "We are all well aware that in reality, it is only political posturing at its finest", Victor Altensteadt, a community organiser told a local newspaper.

PHOTO BY RODGER BOSCH/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

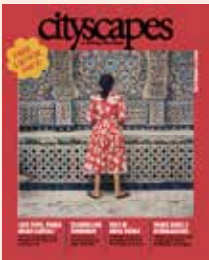
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Lee Middleton is a writer and journalist based in Cape Town

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Untethered Practice
The need for located practice

Keeping Karachi Moving
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Robert Neuwirth is a writer and journalist based in New York

Msingi Sasis is a photographer and artist based in Nairobi

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Tatiana Fernandez Geara is a Santo Domingo based photographer

Tanya Zack is a Joburg-based writer and researcher

Mark Lewis is a photographer based in Johannesburg

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We have dug up stories that explore the nature(s) of movement, the impact it has on how we live and who we are, as well as the lives that are made – mobile or immobile – after the passage

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People move. That is what we do. We move our bodies, move house, neighbourhood; we move across and through borders. We move because we want to and sometimes because we need to. To be with or away from family, to adventure and experience new things, on pilgrimage, to escape, learn, and sometimes to return home when it calls us. We move through space, we move up (becoming wealthier, more affluent), down (becoming materially more impoverished), we also move ideas and resources. We move to work, to search, to find, and sometimes to lose.

We move... It's in our nature and has been since time immemorial.

Yet, as the world becomes better connected, moving has become a challenging and divisive experience at every scale you can imagine. We are building and strengthening physical borders to keep those we feel are “not worthy” from occupying the same spaces we do, while inviting the “desirable” – the educated, “clever”, connected, wealthy and talented – in. Our interest is in where people move to, and why. Also, how ideas and capital circulate, traverse borders, and what the impacts are once “there”. This is the reason we have produced this issue. The ninth issue of *Cityscapes* and our new tagline—**Urbanism Beyond Geography**—marks a re-launch, after a hiatus (of sorts).

As the abundance of figures being released on the topic attests, we have been moving to cities – everywhere. The magnetism of places larger than where we are from has attracted legions – for centuries – and is now just part of the human story. Cities are not a new construct, and moving to them is really not that new a phenomenon. What's different is the

scale. In many economies, cities are the places where opportunities lie, where dreams can be fulfilled—or dashed, but still given a chance—if you're one of the lucky ones. We will always move to such places. Some inner instinct demands that we do.

What we have to figure out is how we live together once we get there. How the resources we have can be more equitably shared, and what we do when they are not. What do we do when the assets we have fuel distributional conflicts, understandably, with those who have been dealt a bad hand and have little to lose?

We have dug up stories that explore the nature(s) of movement, the impact it has on how we live and who we are, as well as the lives that are made – be they mobile or immobile – after the passage. It seems we move so that we are able to move some more. We move so we can “do better”, jump from one station in life to another. We become mobile hoping that it will expand our choices and send us ever onward.

Between these covers, we have tried to explore the question of what happens when we move to where we desire, or leave where we cannot be any more. In a “new” place, whether it's for the short or long haul, how do we keep the ideas we hold dear? How do we, as “newcomers”, maintain the cultures that define us? How can we embrace our new situation in a manner that changes both us and our new settings?

Often, the “new” is old too. It seeks to hold on to its idea of self and wants to be loved and embraced on its own terms. It does not want to lose itself to the influence of newcomers – reinforcements of sorts – that, willingly or not, are its lifeblood 🖐

Members of the public rush in after the opening of the gate that separates the Dominican Republic from Haiti as the binational border market starts in Dajabón, Dominican Republic on Monday, Aug. 23, 2019

PHOTO BY TATIANA FERNANDEZ GEARA



MERCY BROWN-LUTHANGO

RESEARCHER, CAPE TOWN

GANG WOES

It's a place full of contradictions. Cape Town has many faces and multiple realities that somehow manage to uncomfortably co-exist. It is known for its natural beauty – magnificent coastlines, the majestic Table Mountain and incredible wealth – yet millions of residents live in precarious conditions in informal settlements and rickety backyard structures. Most of the city's more than 400 informal settlements do not have essential services.

“The Mother City”, as Cape Town is known in South Africa, is also home to some of the most expensive real estate on the African continent. It is the most violent city in South Africa. The city is ranked 11th on the list of the most dangerous cities in the world, with a homicide rate of 66.36 per 100,000 residents. The 2018/2019 State of Urban Safety in South Africa report states that, of South Africa's nine major cities, Cape Town claims the top spot for murder, robbery, and property-related crimes.

Violence and crime in Cape Town are spatially distributed, with interpersonal violence more prevalent on the Cape Flats: the low-income areas that lie south-east of the central business district. Property-related crime, on the other hand, is more commonplace in the city's wealthier neighbourhoods, typically tucked snugly against Table Mountain.

On the Cape Flats, where the majority of the city's poor live, residents are caught in a vicious intergenerational cycle of poverty, deprivation, inequality, and interpersonal violence.

Alcohol, drugs, and firearms are drivers of the high levels of crime and violence in Cape Town – and gangs contribute to the city's staggering crime statistics. Gang violence across the city is rooted in its historical, socio-economic, and political context says criminologist Simon Howell. He has conducted extensive research on gangs and the associated drug trade in the city and argues that gangs are a response to the social isolation, powerlessness, and economic exclusion experienced by low-income communities.

The intensification of gang formation and activity in Cape Town can be traced back to the apartheid-era forced removals of people from areas like District Six, in the city centre, to the Cape Flats, on the city margins. This dislocation resulted in the destruction of informal home-based economic activity and led to the spatial marginalisation of these communities. Also, crucial social support networks in the form of extended families were destroyed.

There are about 30 significant gangs in Cape Town. Among the largest are the *Americans*, the *28s*, the *Mongrels*, the *Terrible Josters*, and the *Junky Funky Kids*. The exact number of members is unknown. In 2013, a conservative estimate put numbers at just over 10,000.

Besides providing protection, access to opportunity, and a sense of belonging, it has been

argued that gang affiliation and its associated activities, rituals, and symbols fulfil the need for a “rite of passage” that many adolescent boys desire. The post-1994 period was accompanied by an opening up of South Africa to the rest of the world. At the same time, it saw street gangs evolve in structure and nature into sophisticated crime syndicates. Their criminal activities diversified to include prostitution, the illegal abalone and crayfish trade, and protection rackets.

Despite the acknowledgement of the underlying social, economic, and spatial drivers of violence, state responses to this and the war on gangs in Cape Town are still characterised by a security-driven policing mindset.

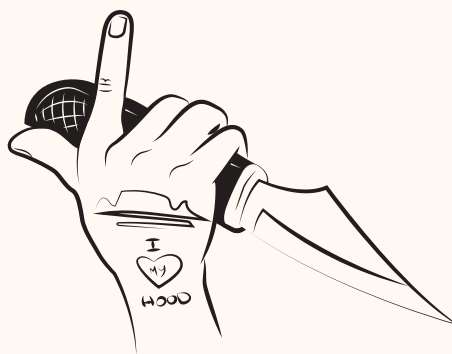
The national government of South Africa, the Western Cape provincial government and the City of Cape Town seem to have run out of ideas on how to combat the persistent violence perpetrated on communities by the gangs. There is a failure to understand the multi-dimensional nature of the violence. The recent deployment of the South African army into the Cape Flats is unprecedented—and clear evidence of this failure. Whether or not deploying army members backed up by tanks is the appropriate response to the gang epidemic is one of the most topical debates in the city. Members of the military have not only been patrolling various parts of the Flats but have joined local police on raids to arrest gang members with outstanding warrants. They have retrieved contraband that includes drugs, guns, and stolen goods in the process.

Some residents have welcomed the move as a sign that the government is finally attempting to respond to the problem after years of doing nothing,

The violence experienced by residents of the Cape Flats is multi-dimensional in its causes and manifestations

but there is little consensus regarding the impact that army deployment will have in the long run. After a brief decline, the number of homicides has begun to tick upward again. This has reminded residents that the army deployment is temporary. Many are wondering what will happen after the military has left.

The violence experienced primarily by residents of the Cape Flats is multi-dimensional in its causes and manifestations. Attempts to tackle it will require integrated and holistic developmental approaches that address the complex factors that often produce and sustain it. Mitigation and prevention programmes should focus on interventions that break the intergenerational nature of the violence. Strategies should include addressing systemic drivers: improve the education system, implement employment programmes that focus on youth and put in place support structures for unemployed and out-of-school young people.



Targeted interventions in the built environment to create safer, quality living environments as well as improving the city’s spatial form to foster integration and access are also crucial. These interventions will not work on their own. They must be accompanied by a range of social and cultural programmes to foster a sense of self-worth and inclusion. They must build social cohesion and understanding across different communities. An intergovernmental, cross-departmental, cross-sectoral approach and programme design is required—as well as the commitment of financial and other resources to implement these programmes at scale. The government claims to be committed to working in this integrated manner. In reality, implementation falls terribly short of this ideal.

It is crucial that the challenge – of both government and violence – is overcome if we are going to deal with the high levels of violence. Violence has had a devastating impact on the daily lives of the city’s poorest and most vulnerable and holds a mirror to South Africa as a whole. Addressing the scourge of gang and other violence now requires all levels of government and civil society to take a different approach and dump old ideas. New types of partnerships with communities will be required.

Thinking more innovatively and creatively about how to deal with gang violence rather than resorting to reactive, short-term interventions will be a long slog. It will be hard work. There are no quick fixes. Short-term thinking is not going to provide a sustainable solution to eradicating gang and other forms of violence. We need a relentless, multi-nodal assault directed at the root causes that drive and sustain violence 🖐



MALINI
KOCHUPILLAI

ARTIST; DELHI

Around 2011, Khirkee, a mixed-income neighbourhood located in South Delhi, began to experience an influx of immigrants from various West African countries. Most moved here for its proximity to the shopping malls across the road, as well as the several private hospitals nearby. Many more arrived to study in the various higher education institutions spread across the city. While not large, the number of Africans living in India is not insignificant. In 2014, it was estimated that 20,000 Nigerians visited India for medical treatment and that 40,000 African immigrants studied and worked in India—spread mostly across big economic hubs like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore.

At the same time, African kitchens—rented homes that doubled up as bars and food “kitchens”—began to pop up, unmarked, and hidden away in Khirkee’s narrow alleyways. Serving beer and the local cuisines of various African countries, the kitchens quickly developed into hubs for immigrants seeking a taste of

BUILDING
BRIDGES,
CREATIVELY

home in an otherwise unfriendly city. The kitchens became the focus of some suspicion among locals, who would see groups of African men in the company of women, coming and going from what appeared to be regular homes—often drunk and in big groups. Sometimes, late at night, the groups would break into fights, infuriating the locals.

These strains soon led to skirmishes between the immigrants and locals. Some were driven by racist mobs. Tensions came to a boil in early 2014 when a newly elected local politician illegally raided the residencies of some Ugandan women in the neighbourhood. Locals had claimed that the women were prostitutes and drugs dealers.

Khirkee Extension is one of many “unauthorised” neighbourhoods scattered across Delhi. These are neighbourhoods that formed with the illegal occupation of former agricultural land all around the city. Neighbourhoods like Khirkee Extension have continued growing without municipal oversight or legally binding land deeds, as well as somewhat limited access to services. Existing on the edge of legitimacy, they fill the void created by government apathy towards building affordable housing for the city’s working classes. Immigrants from Africa and their counterparts from mostly Muslim countries often

experience difficulty in securing rental accommodation in the more formal and middle-class neighbourhoods of the city and so end up here.

As part of my art and urban research practice, I had started photographing life in the kitchens and became close to some of the people that frequented or ran them. I was interested in revealing the normality of what went on in these spaces. When Khoj International Artists Association, an alternative art space based in Khirkee, invited artists to participate in a residency to respond to the historical and contemporary links that persist between India and the African continent, I felt compelled to answer the call.

During the residency, I set out to develop a project that could start to engender some understanding and empathy between locals and the African immigrant community in the neighbourhood.

I wanted to create an artwork that was unintimidating and accessible—a public art intervention with a message—which could reach a far wider audience than a conventional exhibition. In the six-week duration of the residency, we launched *Khirkee Voice* (*Khirkee Awaaz* in Hindi), a bilingual, local “newspaper”, co-edited by myself and Mahavir Singh

Art really can
build bridges,
and reaching out
beyond the “normal”
audience can reap
surprising rewards

Bisht. While utilising the familiar form and language of daily newspapers, *Khirkee Voice* sought to actively subvert the negative news on African immigrants by showing instead, the hidden and surprising links between our histories and cultures, through storytelling, art, poetry, photography, and interviews.

A community-driven “newspaper” appealed to many who read a copy at the end of that residency, and Khoj commissioned us to keep it going as a quarterly.

In September 2019, we launched the 10th edition of *Khirkee Voice/Khirkee Awaaz*. Over the past three years, the project has continued to engage various forms of creative expression to probe complex issues that range from racism to gender, gentrification, migration, mobility, and identity. Our drive is to present them in a manner that establishes the ground for thought and stimulates open discussion.

We have expanded the scope of the project to include various other initiatives. In 2017, we developed a series of interventions titled *Khirkee Talk Show*. Mounted in collaboration with the Phone Recharge Shop project lead by Swati Janu,

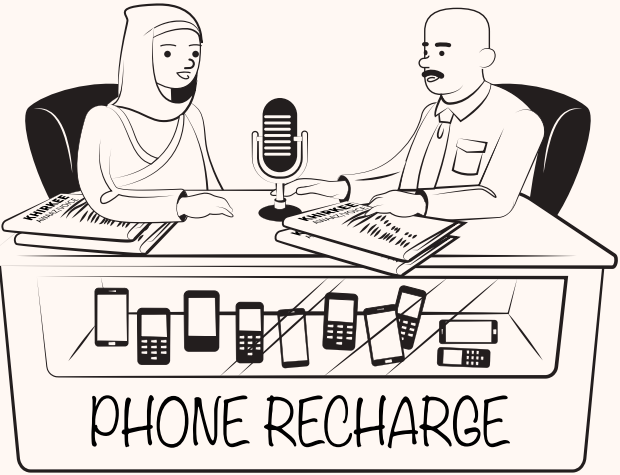
Khirkee Talk Show converted an unused street-facing shopfront in Khirkee into a temporary “TV studio” that hosted a live talk show over two days. We invited passersby to engage in freewheeling and public conversations with our African immigrant collaborators. This led to some honest and heartfelt discussions. Since 2018, we have run a workshop series aimed to help people from Khirkee and surrounding communities to develop the skills necessary to make a publication like *Khirkee Voice*. For the newspaper to have a lasting impact, it will require a group of dedicated individuals from the community to take full control of the project and determine its direction and role in the city.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the project has been observing the pride and joy people get from seeing themselves or their neighbours in print. The project affords residents (both immigrant and native) and their stories visibility and a sense of belonging, if only in their small patch of this enormous metropolis. I am convinced that the arts and creative spaces can play a crucial role in “un-alienating” our collective and individual experience of the city. The continued support from Khoj has been critical.

Their unique location in and commitment to Khirkee has allowed us the freedom to experiment.

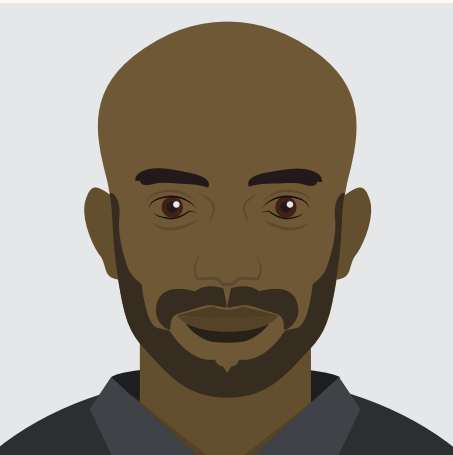
It’s also enabled us to pilot a variety of interventions as the project grows.

Next year, we will be launching a performance adaptation of a play written exclusively for *Khirkee Voice* by a participant in a workshop we held in 2018. Based on interactions between the author and labourers in the neighbourhood, the play examines the precarious nature of the immigrant experience in Delhi. Another participant from the same workshop, whose family has lived in the Khirkee area for centuries, plans to help us facilitate more Talk Show-like events aimed at building dialogue and understanding



between the deeply rooted past and the transient present of the neighbourhood.

Working on *Khirkee Voice* with the community and other collaborators has been a revelation. Grounded creative practices can have a tremendous influence on the social, cultural, and emotional fabric of the neighbourhoods and communities in which they exist. Art really can build bridges, and reaching out beyond the “normal” audience can reap surprising rewards 🖐️



EMANUEL
ADMASSU

ARCHITECT AND RESEARCHER, ATLANTA

HOME
AND AWAY

Until I graduated from high school, my engagement with downtown Atlanta was limited to weekend visits with family members. We would often pull into a parking deck, greet the Ethiopian parking attendant in Amharic and walk through tourist traps that simulated a “real city” elsewhere. It was an opportunity to see people beyond the limited view through the front window of my aunt’s house, in a suburban cul-de-sac neighbourhood where I would watch other, mostly white, suburbanites tending their lawns on weekends, waiting for their children to board the school bus in the morning, or pulling into the driveway and quickly moving through their front doors in the evening.

Those weekend trips were typically punctuated by pit stops in another suburb close to the city, where a strip mall had been saturated by Ethiopian businesses—coffee shops, restaurants, bars and nightclubs.

This would be our lunch destination on the way to the city or a place to get desserts and coffees on the way back. These strip malls provide microcosms of hybridised Ethiopian culture: nightclub promoters smoking hookah and patiently waiting for the sun to disappear, young professionals drinking Turkish tea to recover from the hangovers and heartbreaks of the previous night, and families—like mine—briefly escaping the banality of their suburban enclaves.

The suburban house, with its promises of safety and exceptional public schools, converts the labour of African immigrants into a material form of participation in The American Dream™. Until these immigrants encounter what [African American studies academic] Eddie Glaude Jr. calls the “value gap”. My uncle’s family moved from Boston to the suburbs of Atlanta a decade and a half before my arrival—a move facilitated by the Fair Housing Act of 1968. This provided a threshold for the relatives who were incrementally making the financial and mental transition from the bustling capital of Ethiopia to a quiet subdivision of gables, televisions and manicured lawns.

Those of us who are part of the diaspora are simultaneously moving through multiple cities. We use the memories of our first city to process the difficulties of our present

People form habits to cope with the isolation. Monthly gatherings to share food made with ingredients from the motherland, addiction to American professional sports, and Sunday visits to Kidist Mariam (an Ethiopian Orthodox church in an eastern suburb called Lithonia) soothe the emptiness caused by the decision to leave so much behind: the warmth of casual encounters with neighbours on the streets of Addis Ababa, the prayer calls from the churches and mosques dispersed across the city, morning debates in the blue taxis and mini-vans, and festive holidays when streets are packed with black bodies dressed in all white.

The most common way to cope with this sense of displacement is to maintain a promise of eventual return. This evacuation plan typically requires investments in one of the luxury condos that are being built in Addis. Or developing quick schemes for a small addition to my parents’ compound, investing in Ethiopian tech startups or merely doing the math: “What can I buy in Addis for the price of my suburban house in Georgia?”

This mental leap allows me to toggle back and forth from the hatred and racism experienced in the US to the smile on my mother’s face across the Atlantic. It has proven to be the most potent way to survive the decay and collapse of the American empire. The sting of anger one feels when seeing the Trump/Pence bumper sticker on yet

another pickup truck on the highway, the twitch when listening to colleagues talk about “inclusion” as a branding strategy, or the pain in witnessing another architecture panel about novel shapes and pastel gradients, warrants frequent but momentary escapes to the mountains in the Horn of Africa.



Atlanta has the aura of a place where successful black people live and raise their families. This lingering image makes it an appealing destination for the global African diaspora. The city’s rich history of black resistance and popular culture makes it the type of place where children of immigrants feel at home, while their parents might not.

My nephews, like other first-generation African Americans in my family, maintain a digital relationship with both Addis and Atlanta, negotiating the archaic sensibility of their parents with the irreverence of their Instagram feeds.

Moving to a northern suburb of the city as a teenager forced me to reckon with the racialisation of my own body. Faced with an overwhelming concept called Whiteness™, I began to understand that I had been marked as a Black Boy™. Up to this point, it had been an identity that seemed so distant, a notion I encountered when watching American movies from the comfort of my parent’s couch in Addis Ababa. Suddenly, I began to register how casual decisions to use certain words in my daily vocabulary, the inseam of my jeans, and the cubic zirconia in my ears made me unapologetically black. I had to escape the dangerous potential of Not Being Black Enough™. Needless to say, this potential is never present during routine traffic stops or faculty meetings, where I am the only one.

Those of us who are part of the diaspora are simultaneously moving through multiple cities. We use the memories of our first city to process the difficulties of our present. The defensiveness we feel when watching non-African, African experts on television is balanced by the rare excitement of seeing real Africans in the suburbs of Atlanta. This frames our ability to dwell within the cloud of being home but not at home👊



NAUSHEEN
ANWAR

RESEARCHER; KARACHI

KEEPING
KARACHI
IN MOTION

Public infrastructure in Karachi is a proverbial “slow-motion disaster” that perpetually undermines the lives of the urban majority. It fails all the time. Power breakdowns, acute water shortages, broken roads, overflowing sewerage and burst water pipes frequently bring the city to a grinding halt.

In June 2019, three consecutive power cuts in 33 hours hit the privately-owned power utility K-Electric’s transmission line. The collapse brought the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board’s water supply to a halt. When this sudden electricity failure damaged a 1.8-metre water line in the Dhabeji pumping station, nearly 55% of the city’s 20 million residents were left without water for several days. The pumping station is the largest facility operated by the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board.

Many districts in Karachi remain in a perpetual state of brokenness. In July and August 2019, heavy monsoon rains devastated the city as storm drains, and sewers became choked and neighbourhood lanes were inundated with garbage and floodwater. As the crisis mounted, the Pakistan Army was called in for rescue operations in severely affected areas. In the aftermath of the disruptions and breakdowns, all kinds of maintenance and construction machinery, from bulldozers,

excavators and pumping machines to loaders and dumpers were visibly active, repairing roads and pipes, moving garbage and draining floodwater. Despite the frantic activity, there was still constant fighting between the city and provincial government over who was responsible for the maintenance and repair of the sewerage system.

Maintenance and construction continually remake the city. Countless tradesmen, aided by their heavy machinery, undertake the repair work that keeps the city in a state of constant motion. In Karachi and across the global south, maintenance and construction is a complex and deeply politicised business. Often, these activities are entangled in projects and plans that marginalise poor populations. New mega-infrastructure projects, like the construction of inner-city transport corridors in parts of the city, have involved the clearance of informal settlements. The ongoing revival of the Karachi Circular Railway—a defunct transport corridor—has led to the displacement of hundreds of low-income families which have lived for decades in proximity to the tracks.

The Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) oversees the city’s six districts. Each day, the corporation deploys large numbers of maintenance and construction crews to tend to multiple tasks. Sohrab



Goth, a sprawling suburb on Karachi’s periphery, is often the site of many KMC maintenance and construction operations. The suburb, known as “mini Singapore” by locals, is considered Karachi’s entry point to the rest of the country. It gets its name from the heavy machinery that fills its showrooms and workshops, all sourced from that country and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Over the past few decades, the KMC has become reliant on a complex web of third-party contractors located in Sohrab Goth. The contractors supply maintenance equipment and the men who work for daily wages. The hundreds of showrooms that stock heavy equipment and machinery, and countless (sub)contractors who supply equipment and provide maintenance services have turned Sohrab Goth into a teeming mass of bodies, heavy machinery and spare parts. These have been woven into an industrial-commercial complex that stretches across a five-kilometre section of the Superhighway, the 136 kilometre-long motorway connecting the cities of Hyderabad and Karachi.

Sohrab Goth’s development from an old village to a booming urban centre is rooted in cycles of autoconstruction, informalisation

and state violence. It endured the 1998 massacre of the Akakhel, a local pastoral community, by the Pakistan Army; the arrival of Afghan refugees fleeing conflict since the 1980s, followed by that of ethnic Pashtuns from Dir, Bajaur, Mardan, and Swat in northern Pakistan. In comparison to the rest of Pakistan. Karachi has always been economically more advanced, with a diversified demand for labour, offering a wide range of economic opportunities to migrant workers. The informal provisioning of services in Karachi has long been embedded in social networks such as kinship, ethnicity and religion. Such networks resulted in Pashtuns and Afghani migrants, who were mainly transporters and labourers, settling in Sohrab Goth, as well as the expansion of transport and construction businesses.

Places like Sohrab Goth are themselves the machines that keep the blood pumping to sustain cities like Karachi. We would be well served to pay closer attention to them

Individual settlements quickly became associated with the narcotics and weapons trade. Today, Sohrab Goth appears to have shed its tainted image of providing passage to the drug and weapons trade from Afghanistan. Its workshops, showrooms, and labour force play a critical role in sustaining Karachi’s construction industry. People in the area are more inclined to

have a conversation about Sohrab Goth’s transnational links with Singapore and South Korea than a past when violent ethnic politics pitted the Pashtun-speaking population against the politically dominant Urdu-speaking Mohajjirs.

Tucked away in a quiet corner of Sohrab Goth is SA Technologies, a mid-sized firm that employs 150 workers. SA Technologies is KMC’s chief contractor for key “assignments” like garbage disposal and the supply of excavators and drivers in anti-encroachment drives. Owned by an Urdu-speaking chemical engineer and a Pashtun trader, SA Technologies epitomises the mundane world of continuous maintenance and repair that is embedded in political and social relations that themselves have been maintained over decades. These networks bind in uneven ways the Pashtun and Mohajjir contractors and subcontractors, and the municipal officers, workers, and buyers and traders of heavy machinery.

Though this extraordinary reality is located in the city’s periphery and dominated by the noise of machinery and talk of ethnic politics, it is by no means peripheral. Places like Sohrab Goth are themselves the machines that keep the blood pumping to sustain cities like Karachi. We would be well served to pay closer attention to them: they provide labour and services that have become central to the survival and prosperity of the city on whose edge they sit and whose needs they serve. Understanding them is understanding the complex architectures of urban life in the global south 🖐



TOMÃ BERLANDA

ARCHITECT AND RESEARCHER, CAPE TOWN

“Design” as an active medium, no matter who authors it, allows for a combination of resistance and activism, and can leverage forms of spatial practice at multiple scales

A CASE FOR UNTETHERED PRACTICE

The British Empire is no more, although its influence endures. Almost 39 years after the last British colony on the continent gained independence, the validation of the architectural profession continues to be governed by guidelines set by the Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA) in 12 countries across sub-Saharan Africa. Since its establishment in 1965, after the first wave of independence across the continent, the CAA’s mandate remains to promote cooperation for “the advancement of architecture in the Commonwealth” and to share and increase architectural knowledge.

As anachronistic as this may sound, the CAA retains its influence mostly due to its certification mechanisms’ capacity to facilitate movement and access to a broader market for the professionals accredited under its system. The surprising endurance of the organisation’s influence across Asia and Africa has profound structural implications. Its relatively narrow definition of what an “architect” does, coupled with restrictive national laws, limits forms of practice to the detriment of grounded and appropriate architectural work. This negatively impacts environments that require dynamic new approaches to effectively address challenges posed by growing urbanisation.

More than 50 years after its founding, the recognition of the CAA’s validation of professional membership has not led to any significant growth in the number of accredited educational programmes. Of the 12 countries, only five—Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda—offer validated degrees. Coupled with the limited access to a university education, which is still elitist, the odds of any born-free, English-speaking young African becoming an “architect” remain low. Successful registration with a national professional body does not guarantee an easy path to practice in neighbouring countries either.

In both the north and south, the debate on the legal value of the title of “architect” is widespread. Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands are among examples of countries “notorious” for high-quality architectural production without any legal protection of the title. This does not mean there is no civil liability attached to the creation of the built form, but rather that a viable architectural practice can be achieved by operating from and occupying the malleable “in-between” spaces.

One would like to believe that in the context of rapid urbanisation, with its dire need for improved quality in the built environment, the real concern should be less with legality and more with relevance. There must be multiple ways for ingenious

creative minds to work around degrees and licensure. I’m suggesting that there’s a lateral, non-official way of operating, one that might not be recognised by (trans)national regulatory bodies. This untethered mode of operation can enable spatial explorations that are more grounded in both practice and perspective, which can operate at various scales across both geographic and disciplinary boundaries.

Without the hurdles of a local legal framework on building standards and professional practices, foreign firms have been able to swoop in and produce architecture at various scales on the continent. American/Japanese architect Toshiko Mori’s sinuous structures in Sinthian, Senegal; Venice-based TAMassociati’s Salam Centre for Cardiac Surgery in Khartoum, Sudan, and Boston’s Mass Design Group’s school in Ilima in the Congo Basin, all appear to have been delivered without these constraints. I’m not indicting such projects: instead, I recognise a mode of operation which suggests that the restrictive status quo is not crucial.

What I’m pointing to is the agency of bypassing, which typically favours externally driven developmental programmes over bottom-up, local practices. International agencies are responsible for the design and construction of a considerable amount of buildings in support of government programmes. They directly benefit from an in-house approval process. Hundreds of schools, hospitals and latrines are all deemed to comply with building standards, even though the authorship of their design is unclear and the validation process obscure. Similarly, a cursory search of Western-

based universities doing design/build projects in the global south will show little—if any—evidence of locally registered architectural partners, adding a neo-colonialist tint to their operations.

Faced with a situation that appears stuck and somewhat impervious to change, two examples of anonymous or collaborative authorship as alternative modes of production across borders come to mind.

Drive through many parts of eastern and southern Africa and you can’t miss the 1 x 1 x 2 metre coloured plastic phone booths that line roads, and punctuate the landscape. They are places of exchange, conversation, trade and capital.



These ubiquitous objects appear to be the product of an anonymous “designer”, an industrial and industrious mind that developed easily fabricated and transportable objects. Their provisionality does not subject them to permanent forms of building approval, while, being made of plastic suggests they will mark the environment for some time.

The recent Ikea limited edition collection Överallt is also

notable. The result of a multi-year collaboration between 10 African designers and Ikea’s in-house experts, the collection “explores different modern lifestyles and rituals in urban parts of Africa”. It is easy to criticise the Ikea initiative as yet another by a multinational corporation that already plays an outsize role in the construction of taste. However, it is important to highlight how the select group of African architects and designers involved in the project have leveraged Ikea’s ability to fabricate, package and distribute across borders. In this way they have developed a collection that would otherwise not have seen the light of day, all the while supporting some forms of local fabrication in the manufacture of some of the products. Ironically, the corporate’s only point of sale on the continent is in Cairo. One anonymous yet visible, and the other enjoying the maximised global visibility only a corporation of Ikea’s standing can offer, these two examples point to a way forward. Alternatives to what has been long deemed the only path to professional work do exist for Africa-based professionals.

While the legal framework inherited from the past is stuck in debates on what “architecture” should be and how to constrain it in legislative boundaries, “design” as an active medium, no matter who authors it, allows for a combination of resistance and activism, and can leverage forms of spatial practice at multiple scales. At the same time, it is clear that “design” alone will not be able to address the separate enforcement of standards that affords international development agencies and firms conducting design/build experiments across the continent greater autonomy than local practitioners who are expected to colour inside the lines 🖐



SUZANNE HALL

RESEARCHER AND EDUCATOR, LONDON

A NARROW PASSAGE

In the context of an unequal and uptight Europe, the word “immobility” has come to have two meanings. Both speak to the heightening of systemic discrimination. From one perspective, “immobility” is about the obstacles that prevent citizens from occupying a secure place in society. These obstacles result in an increase in the number of working households living with food poverty, and a decrease in state funding for critical services such as education and healthcare.

The other perspective relates to restrictions on physical movement that prevent people from moving freely across the world. These restrictions are commonly established along racial lines. They take the form of militarised external border formations, as well as internal bordering, in which racism is permitted to fester. The daily tragedies witnessed as far afield as the US-Mexico border and the sanctioned deathbed on the central Mediterranean route from North Africa to Europe, where thousands have died, are repercussions of these restrictions. South Africa has developed its own worrying manifestation characterised by a regular fixture of xenophobic attacks since 2008, mainly targeting migrants from other African countries.

Immobility suggests not just a narrowing of mobility, but also a racialised confinement of space and shrinking of possibilities. In political and

policy terms, the two forms of immobility are treated as distinct. Migration is rendered as a crisis, foisted upon a nation from the outside. Emergent nationalisms now abound within and beyond the contemporary configuration of Europe. The narrowing is part of the same state-market compact that produces peripheral populations of people who are rendered redundant to the requirements of society. These are the people held in stasis in the outskirts of casual employment or those subjected to forms of internment in deportation centres, refugee camps, or prisons.

Immobility means that the vocabularies of borders and peripheries, of sans papier and sans contract (without papers or contract), are part of the same lexicon of dispossession. A narrow passage evokes an ever-decreasing corridor down which many in the “majority world” must travel, with limited possibility of return. For the migrant, it requires a different repertoire of movement and determination to navigate the ongoing restriction of movement and space. As the passage narrows, it also lengthens: migrants learn new languages and acquire new skills along the way. Every now and then the passageway bulges, allowing for a gathering of fellow travellers to overlap.

These bulges are frequently parts of cities: places sufficiently expansive to trade knowhow, to learn how to read the city, listen to its flows and understand

where to intercept and be part of the action. Hillbrow, a central Johannesburg neighbourhood that has been one site of anti-migrant violence, is such a place. It’s a labyrinthine vestibule ready to receive the energies of newcomers.

Sometimes the bulges occur in the flat, far-out territories of cities: places where jobs are harder to come by, and the impacts of state underinvestment are severe.

Over the past 10 years, I have been exploring “street exchange” in the peripheries of UK cities. These peripheries are where proprietors from all over the world tend to converge. In Cheetham Hill, Manchester; Narborough Road, Leicester; Rookery Road, Birmingham; and Stapleton Road, Bristol, newly arrived and long-settled proprietors successfully reconfigure the shapes and textures of shops and the economies of profit, profiteering, care, and counsel that make the street. We have engaged with the kinds of economic and political life that are possible in these edge territories. Our parochial understanding of the local is being reshaped and challenged.



A rewiring of our circuitry to understand a belonging that is decoupled from ethnic and national prescriptions is desperately needed

We have also sought to explore what constitutes socio-spatial exchange, as well as gain an insight into who and what systems people turn to—and where blame is cast—when things go awry. Alongside these questions, we have conducted face-to-face surveys: inventories of jobs, vacancies, a broad range of retail activity, levels of education, tenure types, and so on. While such surveys have uses beyond the tick-box format, it is essential to develop an evidence base that captures the socio-economic value of these streets. This evidence could be an essential resource for planners and policymakers willing to engage with the complexity of street livelihoods in marginalised parts of our cities. Employment in each of these urban seams is significant, as are multilingual proficiencies. The majority of traders have both tertiary education and experience in working in other occupations and sectors before they began their migrant journeys. Having pursued and presented various forms of such an evidence base, it seems apparent that authorities don’t always want to know about the economic and cultural contributions of migrants. We’ve subsequently worked with activist groups to challenge planning decisions and contribute to metropolitan level policy.

When talking to migrant proprietors, it was painfully clear how long and extractive many of their journeys to the street are. Such is the mounting height and depth of borders that it is not unusual for migrant journeys to take years and traverse many border systems. Existing skills might require re-authentication or are invalidated along the way. Some migrants must acquire new accreditations but often without access to secure work. As journeys unfold, often the path narrows. More borders limit the prospects for multi-directional movement and mobility. Migration systems tied to these expansive borders and the excess of social sorting and punishment are at odds with much longer practices of circulation.

A significant question remains in our research: what social, political and legal avenues are required to recognise the forms of city-making that are evolving from activities on the street in Johannesburg, Birmingham, and neighbourhoods across the globe where new arrivals land up and go about making a life, against all odds? A rewiring of our circuitry to understand a belonging that is decoupled from ethnic and national prescriptions—and that embraces a sense of passage that expands rather than narrows our shared humanity—is desperately needed 🖐

DISPATCHES



MONSTROUS PROFITS

MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA

Venezuela’s economic collapse has proved to be a profitable opportunity for unscrupulous property owners in Medellín

VICTOR VARGAS RODRIGUEZ

Wait there,” commands the manager before he disappears to the bottom floor of an old house in the Prado neighbourhood. He is searching for the set of keys to number four—the only room still available for rent in this 30-roomed property, as well as another like it a few blocks down the road. Located in downtown Medellín, on the northern side of the 10th district, Prado is an old

residential neighbourhood that has long been home to some of the city’s elites. The manager is flanked by two men who act like bodyguards. They look like they mean business.

As we walk the long corridor on our way to the room, heads peek through the small doors of neighbouring quarters. A small pile of construction materials lies at the extreme end of the corridor. “We only have this one left,” says the manager. “We are

building another two rooms, but they will only be ready in about 10 days.”

The door into room number four is low, and upon opening it, an unpleasant odour escapes. It is furnished with a bed that has a thin foam mattress with a faded sheet over it, as well as an old 14-inch television screen. These few furnishings fill-up the two-metre-long by 1.5-metre-wide room. Opposite are some shared bathrooms that look clean and don’t smell as bad as number four. “Rent is 17,000 pesos a day (\$5); 7,000 (\$2) more for every other occupant. The deal includes wifi and the right to use the communal kitchen. Other rooms in the building cost about 20,000 pesos (\$6), but for now, they are all occupied,” said the manager. “If you pay for the complete month, the rate I can give you is 450,000 pesos (\$133).” The property down the road consists of about 25 rooms, each costing about 15,000 pesos (\$4.5) a day. The size: 4 metres by 2.2 metres.

The occupants of rooms like these—and many others like them across the city—are mostly Venezuelan migrants, fleeing the country’s current political impasse that has led to a death-spiral of its once-thriving petro-economy. The current crisis is estimated to have brought more than 75,000 migrants to Medellín alone according to statistics from Colombian Migration, the agency responsible for monitoring and enforcing Colombia’s immigration laws. Many of the new arrivals lack resources and have limited employment opportunities. On arrival, they end up as tenants in subdivided, shared housing, often run by unscrupulous landlords. Just two years ago, room number four, or something like it, would have cost a Colombian tenant 40% less than it does now. Venezuela’s decline has proved a profitable opportunity for some property owners across Medellín.

In previous years, the main clientele for our friend the manager would have been those displaced from Colombia’s countryside by years of civil conflict. Tenants would have included displaced indigenous people from the country’s rural areas, single low-income earners and sometimes drug addicts and even bandits fleeing conflict in other parts of the country. Now Venezuelans are the main target—they are desperate and, according to authorities, will pay ever-increasing prices.

Effective regulation of what has become a multimillion-dollar business might be made more difficult by a lack of reliable statistics

As in many other cities across Latin America, there is no certainty as to how many Venezuelan tenants are in Medellín. Sociologist Françoise Coupé of the National University of Colombia, Medellín Campus, has been researching this phenomenon. She says the population “is skyrocketing ... They are everywhere. Some living in good conditions and most not so much.” Coupé has been collaborating with city authorities to develop policies to regulate these kinds of dwellings and ensure the rights of tenants.

Effective regulation of what has become a multimillion-dollar business might be made more difficult by a lack of reliable statistics. The Social Institute for Housing and Habitat Medellín (Isvimed) has the most recent but contested statistics on the number of these types of tenants for only three neighbourhoods—San Benito, San Lorenzo, and San Pedro.

According to Marcela Yepes Vélez, deputy director of planning at Isvimed, a 2015 study estimated the numbers at only 380 across all three neighbourhoods. She cautiously concedes that this number might have tripled. Professor Coupé, on the other hand, says that in some cases, just a small downtown area of the city can potentially house more than 1,000 such tenants. Her research has found areas that contain up to 100 rooms, each room with up to eight occupants. She estimates that the business might be worth more than 5,000m pesos (around \$1.45m) per month.

According to the National Union School, the Venezuelan community already occupies 6.5% or 45,000 of the city’s 700,000 informal jobs. Employment in the informal sector “is a more than valid option that Venezuelan and other migrants can access easily, and it should not be stigmatised,” says Luis Fernando González, a professor from the National University of Colombia’s Habitat School.

In 2017, 21-year-old Daniel Astudillo arrived in Medellín from Maturín, the capital city of Monagas State, located about 500km west of Caracas. He distributes promotional flyers for a tattoo studio in downtown Medellín. Like many Venezuelan migrants, he entered the country with no valid papers. Because of his immigration status, Astudillo has only managed to secure jobs that pay between 25,000 and 30,000 pesos (\$7 to \$8.5) per day. “I try to send 50,000 pesos (\$14) to my family back in Venezuela at least once a month. Whenever I can, I send twice,” he says.

Astudillo lives in the Buenos Aires neighbourhood, one of Medellín’s 16 communes. He pays 300,000 pesos (\$87) for a room in a family house. He previously rented a room in the city centre, but at 400,000 pesos (\$115) a month, this proved too expensive.

the Venezuelan community already occupies 6.5% or 45,000 of the city’s 700,000 informal jobs

Stories like Astudillo’s are just more evidence of exploitation, says Toni Vitola, vice president of Colonia de Venezolanos in Colombia, an organisation of Venezuelans in Colombia.

“The owners and managers of these buildings are taking advantage of the misfortune that Venezuelan migrants are in and profiting from it,” Vitola says. He speaks of his countrymen living in the city centre, paying up to 750,000 pesos (\$2170 per month for a “super small” room. Under normal circumstances, such a room would have cost no more than 510,000 pesos (\$147).

Vitola expects this exploitative rental business to continue growing as what he calls “the third wave of Venezuelans” leaves the country. In the last two years, this third wave has continued to arrive in Colombian cities. Most arrive without the official documents needed to legalise their stays, provide greater access to better-paying jobs and potentially protect them from being forced to pay expensive rentals. Having legal paperwork means more choice.

“They had to run away from the worst conditions in our country and [have come] into informality. They have to sell cookies on the street and cannot access formal work. Sometimes they cannot afford a room and two, three people must join together to pay for it. We have had cases of eight Venezuelans in a single room,” Vitola says.

“It feels like abuse.” 🖐



A SCANNER, DARKLY

JAKARTA, INDONESIA

Navigating Jakarta’s congestion is just one of the challenges faced by residents

ANDESH TOMO

He is late again. All he can do is wait on the station platform for the next train. It’s scheduled in another 25 minutes. This will be the third time 28-year-old Arman Budianto shows up late at the office this month.

Since an electronic attendance system was put in place at his office two months ago, Budianto has struggled to adhere to the rigid office hours. The excellent relationship he enjoyed with

colleagues from the human resources department of the multinational insurance company he works for no longer has any bearing on his attendance record. Like this morning, his punctuality is sometimes jeopardised by the public transport system that he relies on to travel daily from Serpong, a suburb located about 30 kilometres south-west of Jakarta’s central business district. It’s a daily grind.

Jakarta Metropolitan, a city of about 30 million people, has become infamous for its traffic congestion. According to the megacity’s transport agency, nearly 2 million commuters travel into the city daily. Some 25.3% of these commutes take place on the city’s public transport system, while 50.8% are by the

ubiquitous motorcycle taxi. The remaining 23.9% are by private car. Budianto is a regular user of the KRL Commuterline service that connects the CBD to the edge of the city where, driven from the centre by the high cost of living, many Jakartans live. While the city has been abuzz about the recently introduced \$1.1 billion metro rail system, the first 16 kilometre phase that was launched in March 2019 does not reach areas like Serpong, where most of the city’s working population live.

As he waits, Budianto contemplates the cost of being late again. The new attendance system requires a mandatory log-in by 8.30am for each employee. An electronic fingerprinting machine verifies each person’s credentials and logs their time of arrival and departure. Arrive late, and an automatic red flag is registered against you, appearing on the employee attendance record. Cumulatively, it affects the monthly salary each employee receives. Budianto’s employer introduced this new monitoring system with the caveat that it would only apply to mid- and low-level employees.

This is Budianto’s third job since graduating from college some years ago with a diploma in economics. First was a two-month stint working at a construction company owned by his uncle; then came a six-month long gig as a debt collector for Bank Perkreditan Rakyat, a savings and loan business unit popular among small and medium-sized businesses in suburban areas. His uncle paid him too little. At the bank, the intense pressure that came from his supervisor on the one hand, and debtors on the other, became too much to bear. He quit. He finally managed to secure a job as a claims and policy processing clerk at a multinational insurance company after being

unemployed for four months. Third time’s been the charm. Budianto’s current salary of 4m Indonesian rupiah (about \$255) is still pretty good. It’s slightly higher than the regional standard for a minimum income. However, living 30 kilometres from his place of work and the penalty imposed on him for being late are sources of a constant worry.

For the moment, his choices are limited. Renting a boarding room near his place of work would save on transportation costs, reduce the time he spends commuting, and ultimately result in more certainty as to what his salary slip says at the end of each month.

The problem lies in the rental costs. The most affordable rooms within a two-kilometre radius of the bank are single bedroom units with a shared bathroom, no air conditioning and a small window into a communal hallway with no natural light.

This would cost him about 38% of his monthly income and wouldn’t leave him with enough for other expenses – including taking care of his recently widowed mother. His only viable choice for the moment is to continue living with his mother in Serpong. The daily commute costs him 50,000 Indonesian rupiah (\$3.20).

A typical day for Budianto begins at 5am. He has a well-worn routine – shower, morning prayers, and a quick goodbye to his mother as he grabs the breakfast and lunch that she prepares for him daily. Then to the sometimes Herculean hour-an-a-half journey to get into the office by 8.30am. It begins with a hop on his old motorcycle to the train station where he jumps on the packed train into the city. Today, the bike broke down halfway to the station, turning his regular routine into an awful mess.

The train finally pulls into Sudirman Station. Budianto braces himself for the rush that leads him onto the busy city street

The train pulls into the station, and after pushing and jostling his way past other commuters, Budianto manages to get inside, uncomfortably squeezed between a few other passengers, each desperately trying to avoid eye contact. Next to him is a middle-aged man in a grey suit. His eyes are closed. Sitting opposite is a young woman in neat work clothes, earphones on, eyes focused on a Korean drama on her mobile phone screen. On one of the priority seats, a little boy looks out of the window, narrating everything he sees to his mother, who sits quietly, still looking sleepy. Except for the little boy, everyone else looks weary, preparing themselves for the long day ahead. It will end as it has begun – on the same train, only traveling the opposite direction.

The train finally pulls into Sudirman Station. Budianto braces himself for the rush that leads him onto the busy city street. Stepping outside, he stands still for a short while, and other thoughts flood his mind.

On his way home, he has to collect his motorcycle from the garage he left it at this morning after the breakdown – an unexpected cost. Dewi, his long-term girlfriend, is expecting him to propose soon – she texted him while he was on the train to say hello. He will need to call her. Now, he is already late for work.

Budianto collects himself and gets lost in the crowds. The fingerprint scanner awaits, and it remembers 🖐

PHOTO BY KATE GERAGHTY/THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD/FAIRFAX MEDIA VIA GETTY IMAGES

Pakistani men and boys play tape-ball cricket on the streets



EMPTY, NOT LIFELESS

KARACHI, PAKISTAN

Activities that occur in Karachi's empty lots while they await development have begun to define the city.

KEVIN SHI

It's big and empty, what else do you need?" Zohaib says, shielding his eyes from the sun as he waits for his turn to bat. Known as one of the best bowlers in his neighbourhood, Zohaib was first brought to the weekly Sunday matches on this makeshift cricket

ground by a neighbour a year ago, and he has been a regular since. "As long as we can use this ground, we will," he says. The piece of land that Zohaib and his friends use for their regular game of cricket is not actually an empty plot. Instead, it's a large cleared piece of land, set to be

t's big and empty, what else do you need?" Zohaib says, shielding his eyes from the sun as he waits his turn to bat on a makeshift cricket ground. Known for being one of the best bowlers in his neighbourhood, Zohaib was first brought to the weekly Sunday matches by one of his neighbours a year ago, and he has been a regular since. "As long as we can use this ground, we will," he says.

Zohaib was referring to the piece of land that he and his friends use for their regular game of cricket, which, contrary to how it looks, is not actually an empty plot. Instead, it's a large cleared piece of land, set to be turned into an upper-class housing development called Defense Housing Authority Phase 8. It is one of many in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and financial capital, where land is often considered to be in short supply. Before India gained independence from the British and Pakistan was partitioned from India in 1947, Karachi was a port city of about half a million. Since then, the population has grown to around 25 million, due in large part to the flow of migrants and refugees from other parts of Pakistan and across South Asia.

In this enormous coastal city, large swathes of land, sometimes in heavily trafficked areas, sit undeveloped and unoccupied. The piece of land on which I met Zohaib is bound to be developed relatively quickly in comparison to some that have remained empty for decades. Like this one, many of those are also used as makeshift cricket grounds.

Nadeem, a middle-aged shopkeeper, reminisces about his childhood when there were plenty of "nice" public maidans (open spaces) on which he and other kids from neighbourhoods

across Karachi could play hard-ball cricket, a fast-paced bruising game where batters require leg-guards and helmets for protection. "Those grounds are gone now," he says. Before Pakistan's cricket boom in the late 1970s, the game had been the domain of the wealthy in elite schools and universities. Increased television access and successes by the Pakistani national team around the same time resulted in the sport reaching the masses. With that came the invention of tape-ball cricket, where electrical tape is wrapped around a tennis ball so that it can be thrown faster and behaves more like a hard-ball. Tape-ball, unlike hard-ball, was inexpensive and could be played without equipment on open plots and streets.

Some of Pakistan's cricket legends developed their skills with a tape-ball on streets and undeveloped plots

At the same time, Karachi was rapidly expanding, as it has been since the creation of Pakistan in 1947. Karachi, Pakistan's first capital after Partition, instantly became the site of a mass migration of refugees from India and other areas. The government failed to handle the challenges presented by this rapid influx, and the city quickly developed its reputation for violence and unrest. Protests rocked the young capital throughout the 1950s. In 1953, student-led demonstrations spread across the country. After Field Marshal Ayub Khan staged Pakistan's first military coup and became

President in 1958, he shifted the capital to the new city of Islamabad – close to the Army's headquarters and far away from Karachi's riotous population. As part of his reforms, the new regime moved Karachi University, with its sizeable restive student body, outside city limits where it still stands today. The enormous numbers of refugees, most living and working informally near City Centre, were proposed to be moved into two large housing schemes – Korangi and North Karachi, both far from City Centre. The plan sought to ultimately include industrial areas, schools, mosques, and other necessary institutions within the bounds of Korangi and North Karachi as a way of ensuring that these undesirable populations would not need to come back into the central city. However, this didn't materialize. By the time industrial areas developed, it was too late. Many of the Korangi and North Karachi's residents were commuting into the centre of the city. This is where economic opportunity was. Some slept in their stores. The government had expected these first residents to pay instalments to fund further development of housing, but many refused and resisted eviction attempts. Their reasons for refusal were clear: because they had been forcefully shifted away from their livelihoods, they claimed they had actually been made more destitute.

Multiple housing schemes were attempted, and many fell short of expectations for various reasons. Projects for middle-class populations on the edge of the city had no amenities like water, street lighting, or security. In other places, the bureaucracy was so slow and loans so predatory that the given time for building houses on allotted plots passed before allottees could start building.

Eventually, the Karachi Development Authority announced that they would begin auctioning off plots of land, for both commercial activity and low-income housing, to the highest bidder, who, of course, tended to be middle- and upper-class. Some then held on to their newly acquired land, waiting for a more opportune moment to build or sell. At the same time, the government poured money into plans meant to solve the affordable housing problem. It soon became apparent that these policies better served the interests of middle- and upper-class populations at the expense of low-income groups. Today’s Karachi is the result.

In a 2011 report, Karachi-based architect Arif Hasan writes, “62 per cent of Karachi’s population lives on the 8.1 per cent informally developed land.” The density in informal settlements is also increasing. According to Hasan, houses in some informal settlements that were built initially as two- or three-story structures now have expanded upwards, reaching five, six, even seven stories.

In this push and pull of informality and formality, empty plots occupy a space in the middle. Their owners are mostly upper- or middle-class Karachiites with homes or businesses elsewhere. In many cases, they are holding these plots for speculation. Some have owned these plots for decades, patiently waiting for a time to build or re-sell for the highest profit. The estimated 300,000 empty plots across the city have come to represent a complete stagnation in the city. The government has extremely low non-utilization fees, which makes long-term inaction possible. That too is no accident. Beginning in the late 1980s, the governing board of the Karachi



Development Authority tried to force the hand of plot owners by raising non-utilization fees. However, after protests by business and other owners, the board was disbanded by the government. It is for this reason too that 68,000 apartments across the city are currently vacant despite affordable housing shortages and a large homeless population.

These “empty” plots may be empty of formal development, but they are not devoid of activity. Mechanics fix cars, and tea stalls set up seating on these plots during busy hours. An outdoor school for working children is even occasionally run out of a vacant lot next to a busy street in the Defense Housing Authority area.

Tape-ball cricket, which allowed the average Pakistani to access the British colonial export initially available only for children of the elite, is said to have been born in Karachi’s Nazimabad neighbourhood and popularised on these streets and empty plots. It’s possible that cricket’s omnipresence would not have been possible without these wide-open undeveloped patches of land. Some of Pakistan’s cricket legends – including Shoaib Akhtar and Wasim Akram, two of the greatest bowlers Pakistan

has ever produced – developed their skills with a tape-ball on streets and undeveloped plots. Furthermore, these stars represent a completely different demographic than the ones who were brought up on elite school grounds. Shoaib Akhtar’s father was a night watchman at a petrol station. Yousuf Youhana, one of Pakistan’s best batsmen in the early 2000s, is the son of a street sweeper. While empty plots represent stagnation in formal development, informally, they are sites of significant movement, where the boys of Karachi’s urban poor are momentarily within reach of a path to stardom and international recognition.

Like many cities across the global South, Karachi is obsessively trying to achieve an elusive “world-class city” status in hopes of attracting global investment. In the pursuit of these ambitions, spaces for the recreation or economies of the poor hold little value. The dusty weekly matches played by Zohaib and his friends have no role in this idealised city, and formal public grounds have been built over. Karachi’s “empty” plots represent a blip – a short pulse – in the development of the neoliberal city where unwittingly, breathing space is created and seized by an urban majority that is otherwise squeezed by development.

Eventually, these sites – where big cricket games are played every Sunday, open-air schools operate, makeshift tea stalls throng late into the night – will be turned into malls or expensive housing like the planned Defense Housing Authority Phase 8. In that future, Zohaib and others like him will, in most cases, only be able to enter these new upper-class developments as servants, drivers, or security guards. Until the “empty” plot is walled off and the excavators move in, the weekly games will continue. 🖐️

PHOTO BY SUNIL PADMAL



Cranes dominate the Mumbai skyline

GOING UP!

MUMBAI, INDIA

In the last 20 years, Mumbai has transformed into a city dominated by skyscrapers.

VYJAYANTHI V. RAO

In the 1980s and 1990s, it was commonplace to hear that upwards of 5,000 people were moving to Mumbai every day. The Indian State’s seeming neglect of urban development in favour of agrarian reform and rural development was reflected in a general political unease towards cities. Cities were seen as unruly sites of gathering. They were viewed as unpredictable political spaces, into which vast numbers of people were moving daily. This understanding set the tone for the xenophobic violence and gangsterism of the period that preceded the fully-fledged globalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s.

In Modi-era India, the numerical anxiety has given way to a more verbose suspicion of neighbours

and neighbourhoods that are perceived to harbour anti-national sentiment. The current mood is very different from the comparatively more intimate forms of violence experienced by many Mumbaikars who belonged to minority groups during the bloodshed of the 1992 riots, sparked by the destruction of the Babri mosque in northern India. The Babri riots prompted introspection that resulted in the appearance of the first collections of scholarly essays on Mumbai’s fabled modernity, which had suffered a grievous blow as a result of the riots. If Mumbai’s modernity had been taken for granted before, it was now called into question as it was clear that the cosmopolitan and convivial “spirit” of the city had been irrevocably injured

by the heinous acts of violence against minorities in plain sight.

By the early 2000s, there was broad collective experience and perception of change across different classes and social groups. A radical physical change was occurring. Skyscrapers and slums were mushrooming across Greater Mumbai, leaping through a bewildering array of regulatory loopholes designed to both constrict and expand the supply of buildings. The polarity of these regulations, which sought to allow two opposing principles simultaneously, was puzzling. Everyone attempted to understand the sort of built forms and communities that would emerge from the confusion. It took a collective effort across multiple disciplines to begin to comprehend this loophole-urbanism that was turning Mumbai inside-out and upside-down. Before our eyes, Mumbai was transforming into a vertical city.

Mumbai’s “megamorphosis” (as a 2009 conference that highlighted ideas to “make Mumbai a world-class city” once called it) is already a thing of the past. In less than two decades, citizens have become entangled in a reality dominated by tall buildings. These have varying footprints but are shooting skyward between the congested by-lanes of the historic centre. Mumbai is now home to thousands of high-rises and hundreds of skyscrapers. It’s currently one of the largest construction sites in the world. Alongside these domineering giants are multiple congestions. Settlements of tiny dwellings, packed into improvised streets, are increasingly out of view but still unavoidably in the centre of things. They are stuck with the label of “slum”; places to be skirted around and whose fate is yet to be settled. More than half

There is a newly heightened consciousness of how the development processes that are changing the fabric of the city take place.

of Mumbai’s millions live here. Heterogeneous in the extreme, it is impossible to fully comprehend either the socio-economic or political culture of the 2,000 settlements within the jurisdiction of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) that have been legally declared “slums”. There are enormous variations amongst these settlements concerning security of tenure, connections to water, sewage and electricity, and forms of leadership. Since 2014, I have worked with the leaders of a community in north-east Mumbai called Sathe Nagar, named after a famous Marathi literary figure with roots in one of the large Dalit communities in the region.

In 1982, the leaders of the Dalit Matang community decided to bring their fellow caste members scattered across Mumbai together on vacant land attached to an old soap factory. Its proximity to Mumbai’s main landfill meant that many of the settlers and their children found jobs as rag-pickers and scrap dealers. Sathenagar has since grown into a dense and crowded neighbourhood, with tiny homes strung along narrow pathways that are always subject to repair and renewal. A large number of its residents find employment within the settlement itself, providing various services to the community, including construction services, food preparation, vending, tailoring, and education.

More recently, the Mumbai Metro project has provided more jobs. The project is creating hundreds of kilometres of new railway lines above and below ground. When completed, they will criss-cross the metropolitan region and expand the imaginary of the city itself well beyond the territories represented by the MCGM. As in other Indian

cities, the metro feeds into an aspirational fantasy of a unified urban region, although, for its builders from Sathe Nagar and elsewhere, it foretells displacements to come.

Similar large infrastructure initiatives have already displaced millions of slum dwellers since the early 2000s. Some have ended up in a settlement adjacent to Sathe Nagar called Lallubhai Compound. The compound comprises 140 buildings on a brownfield site. Each seven-storey building contains about 80 units. The size of each family unit: 20 sq metres.

This extraordinary collection of buildings has been developed by numerous real estate companies. Their primary aim is to maximize the number of displaced families that can be rammed into each site. In exchange for this “fitting up,” the developers gain free access to land parcels elsewhere in the city, where they put up buildings that only the wealthy can afford. Lallubhai compound’s planning – typically, there is a distance of fewer than three metres between buildings, and no direct sunlight or ventilation – has already led to the spread of diseases like tuberculosis. The structures are unmistakably dilapidated, a mere 15 years since they were constructed.

Lallubhai, constructed to accommodate people displaced by infrastructure developed to enable the movement of people and automobiles, has become a point of congestion, a node of stasis and stagnant air. Watching it grow over the years from the vantage of neighbouring Sathe Nagar, one wonders if this forebodes the future of Sathe Nagar itself. However, there is no denying that Lallubhai has become a vibrant hub in its own right. Its self-built markets

and self-provisioned transport networks provide the services that developers neglected to consider in the first place.

The tale of these two adjacent settlements provides an insight into Mumbai as a whole. Both settlements are artefacts of an urban development model that has come to rely upon air rights [the space above the site, commonly known as “floor area ratio” or “floor space” in India] while battling to provide urban infrastructure at scale for the public at large. Under the guise of the public good, the distribution of air rights has resulted in for-profit, market-rate property development at the expense of housing and infrastructure for the poor majority.

The last two decades have seen a series of ebbs and flows in investment and political cycles that led to unpredictable spurts and lulls in activity on construction sites throughout the metropolitan region. Between these cycles, there has been a tremendous growth of interest in the development process itself. Whether from the narrow perspective of reaping profits from real estate or that of urban growth and its effects on the broader population of the city, there is a newly heightened consciousness of how the development processes that are changing the fabric of the city take place.

An excellent example of this awareness is the public process surrounding the 2014-2034 Development Plan drawn up by the Municipal Corporation. During the community engagement period, which invited public comment and input on the plan, the Urban Design Research Institute staged a kind of coup d’etat of the process. The non-profit body

of architects, preservationists and planners turned this otherwise closed process into a truly public conversation. They persuaded the MCGM to hold hearings in every ward. Also, they intervened with alternative suggestions to the proposed floor area ratio-driven model presented. After a four-year process, an imperfect version of the Development Plan was finally ratified in 2018. In many ways, this marks a new era for the city. Yes, market forces might have triumphed over civil society with the collusion of representatives of the state, but the public’s participation and increased awareness of planning and zoning gave the people who are subject to these plans a foot in the door.

How one acts, identifies allies, and what or how they are aligned within this milieu is not always clear. The answer can no longer be confined to “community” – that which generations of urbanists have sought to protect and secure, but still struggle to define. In this rapidly morphing city, amidst all its movements, the city has become a place where it is necessary to rethink our approach to politics in an era of non-community. A public process such as the one that unfolded around the development plan is perhaps the closest one might come to a unified politics of the city.

It’s a politics of alliances rather than of interests, of the commons rather than of community. The right to participate in shaping the city can only become meaningful if it acknowledges the city as a constant experiment in scale, a series of continuously evolving lines of flight, and as the persistent refinement of contradictions and the continuous performance of practical actions 🖐

FEATURES



PHOTO BY RODRIGO ZAIM, COURTESY OF MSTC

CARMEN SILVA'S STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

SAO PAULO, BRAZIL

The detention of housing activists Preta and Sidney Ferreira, as well as a year-long struggle by their mother, Movimento Sem Teto do Centro founder Carmen Silva to avert arrest, marked an escalation of hostilities against one of Brazil's most respected social movements. "Life is struggle," says Silva, who is now celebrating a suspension of efforts to detain her following an unexpected legal victory. With this dark chapter behind them, the MSTC is preparing to continue its campaign to empower Sao Paulo's homeless population

WORDS

MATTHEW SHIRTS

OPPOSITE PAGE: Carmen Silva and her daughter, musician and fellow activist Preta Ferreira during a shoot for the music video "Minha Carne" at São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) in 2009

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reta Ferreira’s release after four months in jail on 11 October 2019, and her subsequent reunion with her mother, the urban activist Carmen Silva in downtown São Paulo, was filmed and posted on the Facebook page of the progressive news collective, Jornalistas Livres. It is raw and emotive footage. It begins after dark with a journalist’s running narration about where they are (across the street from the mainstream Brazilian daily newspaper, the Folha de São Paulo), and abruptly cuts to the street. There, Ferreira, who was granted habeas corpus late that afternoon, appears amidst shouts of encouragement from her friends, family and supporters. Ferreira can be seen climbing the stairs of an older building typical of old-school downtown São Paulo. She is warmly and enthusiastically embraced by the narrator: “Mana, mana” (“Sista, sista”) can be heard amid a raucous reception from other friends and supporters of the Movimento Sem Teto do Centro or Downtown Roofless Workers Movement (MSTC), an activist organisation that rehouses the city’s homeless in previously abandoned buildings. Ferreira displays a small, red MSTC flag, held upside down in the emotion of the moment before she is overtaken by enthusiastic embraces and led into another room to be reunited with her mother.

Preta (“Black” in Portuguese) is a nickname. Ferreira is 35, the oldest of Carmen Silva’s eight children, a college graduate with a degree in advertising as well as an actress, singer, and MSTC activist. Silva left Preta and her siblings in the city of Salvador in the north-eastern state of Bahia when she fled an

abusive husband in search of a better life in São Paulo in the 1990s. She slept on the street and in shelters in the city before becoming part of the Roofless Workers Movement.

Silva has been in hiding, out of reach of the police and journalists. I was able to speak to her on the telephone just as this piece was going to press. The over 100 days in which two of her children – Preta and Sidney – were in jail while she was in hiding, were terrible, she confirmed. “I lost my identity,” she said over the phone.

This is quite a thing to lose when you are the Roofless Workers Movement’s most charismatic leader.

In July 2019, Mother and daughter; together with Sidney, Silva’s son; and several others, were accused of extortion and sentenced to “preventive” prison

Silva became one of MSTC’s founders in the year 2000. As Silva tells the story, she was distraught when she attended her first meeting of homeless activists. She had been invited to the gathering by a friend at the shelter she lived in during the 1990s. São Paulo was not what she had expected it to be. Jobs, education, medical care and housing were tough to come by. It wasn’t dissimilar to Salvador, the city she had fled in the expectation of better

conditions. Silva went to the meeting “out of politeness – to please her friend – and then all this happened,” she says, laughing over the phone. “All of this” is the MSTC, which has managed the occupation of dozens of buildings in the city. It also refers to the 3,000 people who have a roof over their heads thanks to the movement.

In 1997, Silva had moved to an abandoned municipal building downtown on 9 de Julho Avenue, where Preta was later brought up. 1997 marked the first of several attempts to occupy the building. Both mother and daughter figure prominently in a movie released in 2016 about the MSTC occupation of another abandoned building in São Paulo, titled Era o Hotel Cambridge (The Cambridge Squatter), directed by Eliane Caffé. Silva led the occupation of this site, the former Cambridge Hotel. She plays herself in the film, which was made on-site with a mixture of actors and real-life participants, including Preta. Within the MSTC, both Silva and Preta are leaders. Silva is a living legend.

In July 2019, Mother and daughter; together with Sidney, Silva’s son; and several others, were accused of extortion and sentenced to “preventive” prison. Silva avoided imprisonment until her lawyers were able to obtain habeas corpus for her, keeping her out of detention. To almost anyone who cares, the extortion charges against Silva and Preta and Sidney are regarded as outrageous. The significant pro-bono support they received from some of the most prestigious legal firms and professionals in the country was not just



luck. More than 500 Brazilian artists, including Chico Buarque and Caetano Veloso, signed a petition demanding their freedom.

Silva’s reputation is enormous and impeccable. She is considered one of the most important and effective brokers at work in São Paulo’s

myriad social movements. She has led several occupations of abandoned buildings across the city with a mixture of natural charisma, collective and democratic principles, and an ability to enforce rules and standards. She navigates smoothly between the different worlds inhabited by the homeless and government

PHOTO COLLABORATORS OF 9 DE JULHO OCCUPATION



authorities and has secured funding and status for the MSTC occupations. When she speaks, Silva sounds like an urbanist. She expertly cites statutes and laws and lists the incentives instituted by São Paulo’s city authorities, matching each item to its political sponsors and mayors over the last 25 years.

The “roofless movement’s” occupations in São Paulo typically begin with the removal of dozens of tons of garbage from an abandoned building that is identified as suitable for housing. (Between 30 and

40 truckloads were carted away from the 9 de Julho occupation in 2018.) The second step is to clean and paint the interior. These necessary sanitation measures control rats, cockroaches, and dangerous scorpions, which have been known to sting and kill children. The next phase includes rewiring entire buildings, working on the plumbing, and other labour-intensive – and expensive – measures. As Silva is known to point out, there is a massive amount of labour involved: she has often complained that she works for free as the state’s janitor and building contractor.

Urban squatters have been active in São Paulo for decades. Unofficial estimates place the number of occupied buildings in the city at around 200. Most of these are located downtown, an area that has deteriorated quickly since in the 1970s, partly as a result of new zoning codes, the popularisation of automobiles, and middle-class flight to more suburban, less dense, mostly gated neighbourhoods. In 2018, the BBC reported that a new law that authorised the public seizure of buildings after five years of misuse was used to caution the owners of 1,385 buildings in São Paulo: 708 of the structures were

empty, 457 unfinished, and 220 underutilised.

There are many explanations for the high number of abandoned buildings. One is bureaucracy. The number of approvals and costs associated with retrofitting and renting out older buildings can be prohibitive, particularly in the downmarket downtown area. Preservation, paradoxically, is another motive. Once buildings are declared to be of official historical value (tombado), they become costly and difficult to maintain. There is a similar deterioration of the downtown real estate market in Rio de Janeiro, for example, where legal and bureaucratic codes are identical.

Since at least the beginning of this century, however, downtown São Paulo has shown encouraging signs of urban renewal. The vitality of the organised roofless movements is one of the drivers. The idea that hundreds of formerly abandoned buildings could provide affordable housing for thousands of less privileged citizens is an exciting one.

The idea that hundreds of formerly abandoned buildings could provide affordable housing for thousands of less privileged citizens is an exciting one

It could help solve a pressing social challenge and improve the conditions downtown. Businesses and offices have begun to move back to the area popularly known as O centro (the centre). New low- to medium-income residential apartment buildings are being built in the area.

Young people have flooded to new and even old-school nightclubs, and several of the excellent and innovative restaurants for which São Paulo is well-known have taken advantage of the lower rents, good public transit systems, and the general enthusiasm surrounding the rejuvenation of the area. One of these restaurants, A Casa do Porco, was recently listed among the 50 best restaurants in the world. An open space on nearby Avenida Augusta was secured as a park following public protests there. And the ugly, deeply polluted overpass popularly known as the “Big Worm” (Minhocão) – forced through the heart of the area like a stake by the military dictatorship in the 1970s – has been closed to automobile traffic in the evenings and on weekends, and overtaken by pedestrians, bike riders, families, and skateboarders. It is slated for a park to be designed by the famed urbanist and architect Jaime Lerner, although many insist it should be removed altogether. For downtown São Paulo, most of the 21st century has been an exciting and heady time.

His positive mood changed abruptly on 1 May 2018, when the 24-storey Wilton Paes de Almeida building, located just off the Largo do Paissandu, caught fire and collapsed, killing at least seven people (two missing residents were

PHOTO COLLABORATORS OF 9 DE JULHO OCCUPATION



preparing lunch in the 9 de Julho occupation Kitchen. Once a month, a guest chef and collaborators are invited to cook together with residents. An affordable quality lunch along with shows, workshops and exhibitions are open to the community on the day

never found). It was a dramatic and heart-wrenching event. The building was occupied at the time by Movimento de Luta Social por Moradia (MLSM), the Social Struggle for Housing movement. The Wilton Paes de Almeida was one of the first high-rise buildings in São Paulo; its all-glass façade was designed by Roger Zmekhol, and it was erected between 1961 and 1968. By 2018, it was in terrible condition but a classic piece of Paulistana architecture, nonetheless. It had housed several businesses and the Federal Police before being abandoned by the government in 2003. The building was considered to be of historical interest, and its external characteristics were preserved by law.

The tragic collapse of the Wilson Paes de Almeida brought the urban roofless movements under public and government scrutiny. What had seemed an innovative solution for the city’s housing crisis was now called into question.

A police investigation was undertaken. Conditions in the building were revealed to be dangerous, at best. The investigation determined that the fire had started due to deficient electrical installations. Plumbing was found to be almost non-existent above the second floor. Urine and faeces were carried in buckets from the upper to the lower levels for disposal. In spite of these conditions, residents had been paying between 300 to 400 reais (about \$72 to \$100) in “rent” per month to the leaders of the MLSM movement. The fee was allegedly for the improvement of conditions in the building, but there was little evidence of any significant maintenance. The investigation led to charges of public endangerment against three of the leaders of the MLSM.

This set the stage for further action by São Paulo state prosecutors. In July 2019, some decided to execute the

“preventive imprisonment” of 19 members of different social movements for crimes committed concerning the collapse of the Wilton Paes de Almeida.

Among those accused were Carmen Silva, Preta Ferreira, and her brother, Sidney, in spite of the fact they had nothing to do with the MLSM or the Wilton Paes de Almeida Building. Preta and Sidney were apprehended. Silva was able to avoid being served with an arrest warrant. All were charged with criminal conspiracy and extortion. The idea was that they were profiting from “rents” being extorted from occupants of a building occupied and managed by the MSTC on 9 de Julho avenue.

Silva, Sidney, and Preta’s lawyers argued that their clients had nothing whatsoever to do with the occupation of the Wilton Paes de Almeida building. There is no relation between the MLSM and the



Art Workshop at 9 de Julho. Artists and residents meet every week for a few hours to draw, imagine and interact.

PHOTO COLLABORATORS OF 9 DE JULHO OCCUPATION

The tragic collapse of the Wilson Paes de Almeida brought the urban roofless movements under public and government scrutiny. What had seemed an innovative solution for the city’s housing crisis was now called into question

MSTC. The fees charged by the MSTC at the 9 de Julho building, the same one Silva had occupied in the late 1990s, were agreed upon in democratic assembly, and legal records of all expenditure on building improvements were meticulously kept. In an interview, one of Preta’s lawyers, Augusto de Arruda Botelho, contends that his client’s imprisonment was part of an attempt on the part of individual prosecutors to criminalise the entire roofless movement. The ideological conflict in Brazil between social movements and “private property”, even when there are no clear owners, is an old one.

What is clear is that each occupied building presents its own set of circumstances. There are different movements and distinct individuals. But pretty much everyone agrees that Carmen Silva and the MSTC represent the gold standard of urban roofless movements (although Silva herself is quick to point out that there are several different responsible and important branches of the roofless movement). If its practices could be scaled up to hundreds of buildings and tens of thousands of residents, it would represent a significant improvement in the quality of life in downtown São Paulo.

A visit to the MSTC occupied building on Avenida 9 de Julho confirms this impression. Access is gained through a discreet metal door off a side street. Visitors are required to sign in at the desk. Children play in the courtyard after returning from school (school attendance is mandatory for residents). There is a community garden, a small and inexpensive thrift store, a collective kitchen used

for special – often public – occasions. There is also a spectacular art gallery loaded with works donated by several well-known artists. Some of the works are quite expensive. A library and meeting rooms where architects, teachers, and other professionals offer their services to the residents is also part of the building. There is an air of utopia about the place that is intoxicating and rare in Brazil right now.

In the video posted on the Jornalistas Livres page, when Preta is released from prison and finally encounters her mother, they both scream and cry and hug each other relentlessly. It is a moving moment, tough to watch in its intensity. The crying comes from deep within. Justice is precious, as is identity.

I learned later on Preta’s Instagram page that Sidney was also granted habeas corpus and released from prison. There is a photo of the two of them and the phrase, “Sidney is finally home.” It is good to see them all together.

Carmen Silva says they are fine now. When I asked her, over the phone, what she planned to do next, she said: “Study, study, participate and fight – life is struggle.”

Brazil and other parts of the world “are being overcome by an ideology of hate,” she continued. “We have to fight against it and bring information to those who don’t have it.” 🖐

WELCOME TO LITTLE MOGADISHU

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

A small corner of Joburg’s inner city has transformed into the center of the country’s Somali community

WORDS
TANYA ZACK

PHOTOGRAPHY
MARK LEWIS

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here once four houses or maybe corner shops stood, I count more than 20 businesses. The tuckshops; takeaway joints; cellular repair, barber, and clothing shops mirror one another on either side of the road. Teeming with commerce, this mini agglomeration has enough variety to satisfy the needs of an entire neighbourhood. Hidden behind the enterprises, an unknown number of backrooms offer cheap accommodation.

The intersection is the core of an unexpected high street that has emerged along 8th Avenue in Mayfair, Johannesburg. And the frenetic energy of this formerly inconsequential quiet residential road is not confined

to its borders: the retail strip has spread onto some side streets. Even parts of 9th Avenue join the retail cluster that is known as “8th Avenue Mayfair” now. Welcome to “Little Mogadishu”. Located west of Johannesburg’s city centre, Mayfair has never lived up to its affluent London namesake. A suburban location near the gold diggings, Mayfair was historically home to working-class Afrikaners escaping crop failures and drought, Jews escaping persecution, and Gujarati and Hindu traders. It was always quieter than the adjacent and crowded Fordsburg area, where most of the city’s Indian migrants lived and traded. Distinct cultural and religious rites were observed by each group in synagogues, churches, mosques and cultural centres across the area. Most of the suburb’s residents lived in compact two-storey walk-ups, bungalows, row units, and semidetached houses that fronted tree-lined sidewalks. In 1950 the Group Areas Act



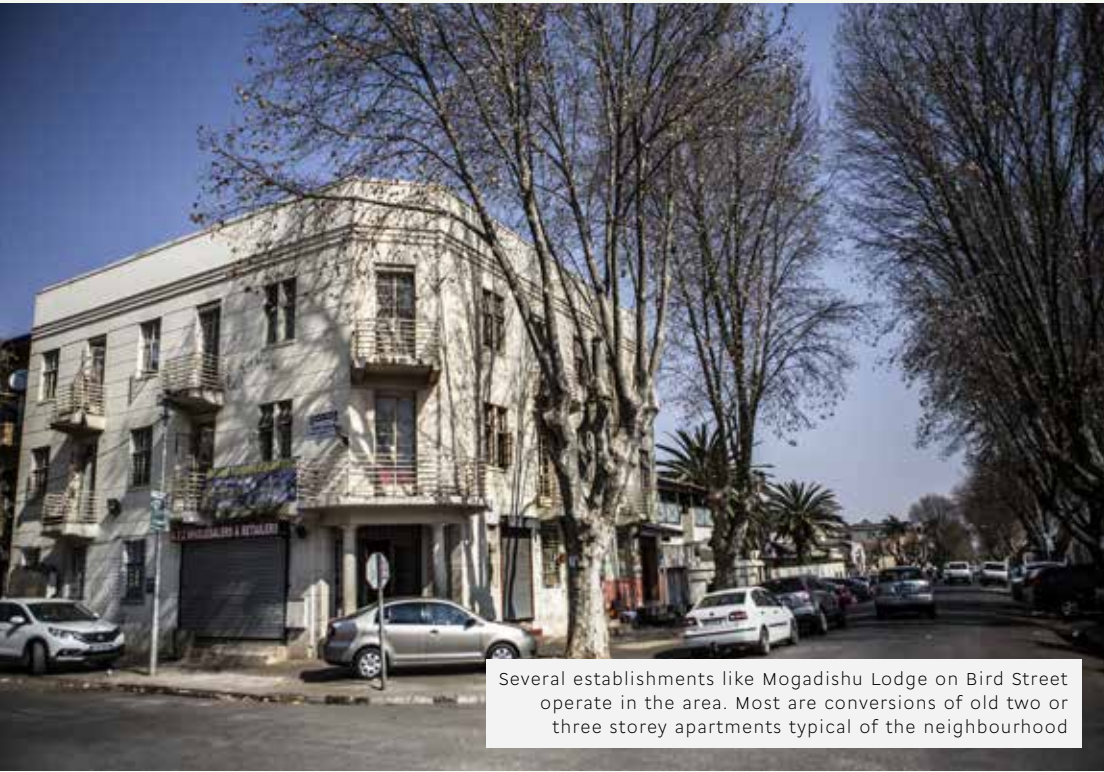
At the Intersection of 8th Ave. and Bird Street



Men delivering meat to a restaurant on 8th Ave. The street’s Somali and Ethiopian restaurants are a cornerstone of symbiotic living in Mayfair



Here, few eat alone. A group of men share a meal, a common scene in the area



Several establishments like Mogadishu Lodge on Bird Street operate in the area. Most are conversions of old two or three storey apartments typical of the neighbourhood

declared Mayfair a whites-only suburb and all other residents were forcibly removed. From the late 1980s, many Indian households moved back to the area under a system that allowed them to appoint white South Africans to buy land and obtain trading licences on their behalf. Court battles to prevent their eviction followed. Now settled, many of the returned middle-class Indian families transformed the semidetached and single houses into signature double-storey mansions that accommodated extended families.

While standing at the corner of Bird Street and 8th Avenue, Abdirizak Ali Osman, general secretary of the Somali Community Association, gestures up and down the strip as he explains the making of this improbable high street. “We came to Mayfair because we were welcomed by the people, Islamic institutions and mosques here,” he says. “What made us come to 8th Avenue is the houses on both

sides allowed us to turn these into businesses. [Also], other main roads are busier, but they have fast-flowing traffic. But on 8th, the many small businesses and guesthouses face each other, making the street busy. And the road is narrow, so traffic must move slowly. Even women and children can cross the road safely.”

Osman does not mention that the uneven paving, absent curbs, potholes, and pools of stagnant water on the sidewalks and the roads also play a role; slowing the passage of pedestrians to a pace that enables lingering. The broken sidewalks are partly the result of small trucks parking illegally to load and unload the piles of washing powder, milk cartons, sweets, cosmetics and other products that are continually being dispatched from the wholesale businesses on the street, bound for townships around Johannesburg and beyond.

What made us come to 8th Avenue is the houses on both sides allowed us to turn these into businesses

The sounds, smells, and the signs of communal living distinguish Mayfair from other suburbs across Johannesburg. They clearly mark it as Islamic. It is an identity that Mayfair wears publicly.

The sound of lyrical Arabic nasheeds flows down the road from sidewalk boom boxes strategically positioned at the entrances of shops. On sale are varieties of coffee, perfume, spice, and expensive German cookware. The sounds vary. Sometimes it is music; other times, a stream of recitations from a local mosque – the Imam beckoning supplicants to consider what they would pay for an eye and how Allah grants them wonder without charge.

It immediately strikes you that the sidewalk coffee shops, where news, tips, political views and jokes circulate, are male-dominated. The Somali and Ethiopian restaurants are a cornerstone of symbiotic living in Mayfair. Osman earlier explained

how single Somali men eat at the restaurants daily and how most have arrangements to pay their restaurant bills monthly. These restaurants are a kind of home away from home. Here, few eat alone. “Usually, you will share with others. Some people don’t have anything, but we call them to share our plate. When I didn’t have, people helped me too.” He had added, “Our restaurants are cheap, many of our black African brothers from Uganda, Malawi, and Tanzania also eat here.”

While seated space is the reserve of men, much of Mayfair is worked by women. They sit on low stools from where they oversee coffee ceremonies. You catch glimpses of them frying eggs in the corners of rooms partitioned from front porches. In cupboard-sized shops, it’s the women who are re-stocking the narrow shelves.

“I can do business here. In Somalia, I could not do this business because money is small-small,” says Sahra Olad, the owner of a tiny street-facing

restaurant. After her tuckshop on the same site was vandalised, she opened this eatery where punters come for breakfast and lunch – and for her rolling conversation. “My nation helped me. They collected and gave me money to open this restaurant here.” Olad feels safe amongst her fellow Somalis. “Somalis not gonna take your money. If you have a million dollars, no one gonna touch you. But if outside people come here to make trouble, Somalis gonna kill.”

The generous interiors of apartment blocks and extended family mansions that were built for traditional extended family living by mostly now-departed middle-class Indian families offer another kind of business opportunity for the residents of Little Mogadishu. Many have been converted into guesthouses. Like Juba Guesthouse, where three men can share a room, each paying R1,000 (\$68) per month for a single bed and space for a suitcase. Coat hangers dangle on a few nails that have been

rammed into the wall. Guesthouses have also been carved into the interiors of the original compact houses. Side doors lead to bedrooms and to backyards, where more rooms have been constructed. Go deeper into the neighbourhood, and you will be confronted by the crude metal gates that shelter another, even more, private realm of backyard living. Spaces that might once have been neat gardens now house workers in shacks and simple brick rooms. These kinds of reconfiguration can happen overnight in Mayfair. A barbershop might seamlessly transform into a clothing boutique; a house into an internet café, and that internet café into a khat bar. Where a few weeks before photographer Mark Lewis and I had eaten lunch in a restaurant attached to a guesthouse, there were now several small businesses – a narrow eating house, a tailor-shop, a tiny schoolroom with five empty desks, and a laundromat. The luxurious astroturf coating the exterior walls of the Mandy restaurant frames a mural of a waterfall. This Ethiopian restaurant has made full use of all the spaces of the original



“I won’t do that work anymore,” he says, pensively. “I have lost so many friends. All shot dead in their shops. I have lost people in Diepsloot, Soweto, Orange Farm ...” Ten friends, who “were like family to me”, he says, were killed in a single night in Diepsloot. “You are lucky if they rob you, but they don’t kill you.”

Musa Abdu lifts his shirt to expose a scar down his chest and abdomen and counts the number of bullet wounds from the time he was shot during a robbery in Orange Farm, a township located 45 kilometres from Johannesburg. Attacks on foreign tuckshop and other business owners are a regular occurrence in poor neighbourhoods like Orange Farm. “It’s like this: the same guys who are stealing and who shout ‘Go back!’ are our customers on other days,” says Abdu. “If looting is happening on the streets, even your customer will loot. I was bleeding there for two hours. The police found me and took me to hospital in Sebokeng.” Three months and several operations later, Abdu came to Mayfair. “Now I stay here with no work. My friends pay my rent at a lodge. I eat together with other people.”

The conversations around here are not just about violence in South Africa. Besides the food and drink, people come here daily to meet their community, and gather information on what’s happening around Mayfair as well as what’s going on back home in Somalia or Ethiopia. Some days the conversation is dominated by football, other times about life in Joburg and how to do business here. Because business drives Mayfair. From small beginnings, many successful stores have grown around South Africa. And the strong business networks that service Somali shops from wholesalers in Mayfair

and the nearby Crown Mines (Bird Street takes you straight there) have built an assertive entrepreneurship. The people drinking coffee here, working the shops around us, and walking through these streets do not comprise a migrant group clinging to the edge of Johannesburg. This community owns, sustains and fuels Mayfair.

“When we arrived in Johannesburg, I was surprised to be alive! Those three guys had connections here. There was only one Somali lodge in Mayfair – 34 Becker Street. A lot of Somalis started off there. They gave me a mattress to sleep on.” This is Abdirahman Sheikh Omar’s story. Now an elder in the Somali Community Association, he left Somalia in 1997 after the civil war broke out. Omar abandoned high school and fled the conflict between armed clan-based opposition groups; for years, armed factions fought for control in street battles that made Somalia one of the deadliest war zones in the world. The conflict displaced millions of Somalis, with many of them ending in countries across sub-Saharan Africa. Without a passport and unable to speak Swahili, Omar could not enrol in any of the local schools when he arrived in Kenya. This was also at a time when the Kenyan authorities were rounding up Somalis and deporting them. Three Somali guys he knew were heading to South Africa and invited him to come along. The foursome travelled by bus through Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, passing each border as refugees.

“Guys gave me some money to buy my first stock of belts and socks,” Omar recalls. “My attention was on how to live and pay rent. I bought a belt for R7 (\$0.50) and sold it for R15 (\$1). The profits were good. In those days, I was welcome to

incidents have become a regular feature of life in cities across South Africa.

“I had a spaza shop in Mossel Bay,” says Shakur Khalif. “It was attacked in 2008. Within 40 minutes, everything was stolen. All the stock, as well as the whole shop – the walls, the roof, everything. Only the floor was left. I came to Joburg with nothing, to start over. I must support my eight children in Somalia and my one child here. A guy here needed a driver. So that’s what I do.”

Mohamed Shabel has worked in tuckshops all over South Africa.



Journalist Omar Mohamed found refuge in Joburg after threats from Al Shabab. He has lost 13 journalist friends to violence in Mogadishu



A van laden with sweets heading out for an informal settlement in outside Joburg



Faria Sane and her daughter Fatima in her restaurant

sell at taxi ranks. Now a Somali cannot even catch a taxi. He will be in danger. People will say, ‘Where you come from? You look like Indian – you are not a real African’. It doesn’t matter what your name is. If you are Somali, they will call you Abdul.”

As a community elder, Omar assists new arrivals in the same way that he was aided 20 years ago. “We have to teach them the system. People who have come here in the last 10 years have never experienced government. They have never voted and don’t understand what municipal services are. They get confused between police and security guards. We grew up with clan fighting, not with a government. So what do you expect? When someone comes here, they first look for their clan. And the support system still runs that way.”

Somali journalist Omar “Kiyow” Mohamed was assisted by Amnesty international to leave Somalia after receiving

many threats from Al Shabaab militants. A radio journalist in Mogadishu, Mohammed had lived in fear after receiving threatening phone calls from the militants. Sometimes his mobile phone would ring, and the voice on the other end would describe to him where he was sitting and what clothes he was wearing; a reminder that he was vulnerable and could be killed at any time. “Since I left Somalia, 13 of my journalist friends have been killed – including the journalist who took over my job. But my wife and four children are still there. I want to go to Canada. And to have my family with me.”

“We also talk about how to leave,” says Tadalesh Mahdi. “South Africa is good. There are people who run from Canada and the USA to live here. In the USA there are some places where you would be too afraid to go because of racists. But here we enjoy religious freedom and freedom to open a business. If I open a shop here, I just have to get customers. I don’t have to tell anyone or ask

anyone for permission. On the other hand, we are still asylum seekers who cannot travel.” Our conversation attracts the attention of a man walking past. He leans in. After learning that Mark Lewis has been to Mogadishu, he asks, “Is it better in Somalia or here?” And adds, “Ethiopians came after us. They followed us to Mayfair. We are the legitimate refugees. Some Ethiopians like to change to pretend they are Somalis for refugee status. But they cannot be Somali. We can count our families back for seven generations.”

Across the road, blood is running in the gutter. It’s Eid al-Adha. Men are carrying bags of fresh meat. Goats and sheep are collared with loose ropes in a makeshift enclosure on an open lot. A man pulls a sheep by its hind leg, and it hobbles backwards to the concrete slab from which a freshly slaughtered carcass is being dragged. Women dressed in black hijabs watch through the palisade fence.

Eighth Avenue Mayfair ebbs and flows. During the week, shopkeepers stand in doorways, trying to lure passersby in. On weekends, the mosques and restaurants fill up

They are waiting to receive the portions of meat that will be reserved for the needy. Later we walk westwards down the “more Ethiopian” side of 8th Avenue. We meet Said Jiraa, who is sitting outside a friend’s tuckshop. Jiraa was a member of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), an armed opposition group formed by Oromo nationalists in 1973 to fight against the dominance of Amhara power

across Ethiopia. In the early 1990s, after the fall of the Derg regime, OLF troops were being arrested and killed by forces of the rival Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF). In 1994, Jiraa fled to South Africa. He was advised to tell the authorities that he was a Somali refugee to increase his chances of getting refugee status. “I didn’t want to lie so I told the official I was from Ethiopia,” he says. The official told Jiraa that he didn’t matter to him whether he was from Kenya, Somalia, or Ethiopia. All that mattered was whether he had money to pay him under the table.

Maliyun Ali Farah provides a running commentary of what she’s doing as she tidies the table, refills coffee pots, or stirs a pot of porridge. We are at her coffee stall that’s tucked next to a tuckshop that leans heavily onto the alley separating it from the neighbouring property.

About two years ago, back in Somalia, four masked men forced

their way into her family home. After taking the valuables, they killed her husband, (who worked for the police), in front of her and the children. This included her 14-year old son Adam, who joins us now. The al-Shabaab militants threatened to come back and finish off all of them. After seeking refuge in the port city of Kismayo in Somalia’s autonomous Jubaland province, Farah was advised that the UN was giving assistance to Somalis in South Africa. This was how she ended up on the streets of Mayfair.

Farah and her children arrived in Mozambique by boat via Kenya and Tanzania. They walked for four days to the South African border, and with the assistance of fellow Somalis they met along the way, ended up living in a room in Johannesburg. Mayfair’s Muslim community assisted them in getting on their feet.

A few weeks after I first speak to her, I revisit Farah. By then, she has expanded her operation



Maliyun Ali Farah with her sons. After fleeing the conflict in Somalia, she ended up in Joburg where she sells tea, coffee and porridge

on the same uneven sidewalk. It now includes a few plastic tables placed on a square of astroturf and sheltered under a flimsy canopy. Her pop-up sidewalk restaurant is portioned off with crates, each lined with plastic and filled with potting soil. Each one has a thirsty plant inside. “I love flowers,” she says.

One year later, the house, tuckshop, and Farah’s coffee stall have disappeared. A large building is under construction across the length of the city block, a design that is planned to mimic the example set by the compact street-facing shops that Somali traders have introduced to this area. We ask around. Farah now sells coffee from a shopping trolley. One day we see her walking at high speed along 8th Avenue, a loud presence on the street. She’s announcing the contents of her trolley, exchanging greetings with people across the street, pausing to shout instructions at her Malawian assistant, who struggles to keep up with her pace. She, too, is now part of the colour and sound of Little Mogadishu.

Your dress and gait announce your status, religion, and intention as you walk through Little Mogadishu. It’s easy for residents to distinguish between the insiders and outsiders from just one look. As you walk by, you are quickly tagged as a customer, a shopkeeper, driver, beggar, cleaner, hawker, or a drug dealer. Some blocks are called “Mexico” by the locals. I’m told that “Tanzanian drug dealers” work these blocks. There is a code that dictates where the dealers dare not go; where it is okay to chew khat and where it is forbidden.

There are khat bars that lurk behind secretive metal doors, where bunches of the plant

are stored under lock and key in large steel cabinets. During the day a sleepy trade in the plant takes place through the shuffling of plastic bags under counters, in a room that poses as a dark coffee shop. But in the early evening, the atmosphere relaxes as laughter, banter, and contemplation swirl around the room. Men sit against the walls and chew on the fresh green leaves. The supply is delivered before dawn each day from Mpumalanga, a province that shares a border with both Swaziland and Mozambique. Throughout the day, people can be seen chewing khat while sipping bitter coffee. Mayfair has its own unwritten rules that govern what happens publicly and what is hidden. The boundaries are in constant flux.

Eighth Avenue Mayfair ebbs and flows. During the week, shopkeepers stand in doorways, trying to lure passersby in to buy their wares. On weekends, the mosques and restaurants fill up. Most guesthouse beds are occupied, and goods overflow onto the street from every shop. The number of people on the road reaches a breaking point. This often happens when the tensions that usually precede violent attacks against foreigners from the African continent happen across Johannesburg, as they did recently. The flare-ups drive Somali and Ethiopian businessmen to seek refuge in their own communities.

In these times, as it always does, 8th Avenue Mayfair offers not only security but also the tastes and scents of home to people who are struggling under the burden of being separated from wives and children and parents. It is a bosom that offers comfort and familiarity even as it shifts and reshapes itself for the next day’s opportunities 🖐️

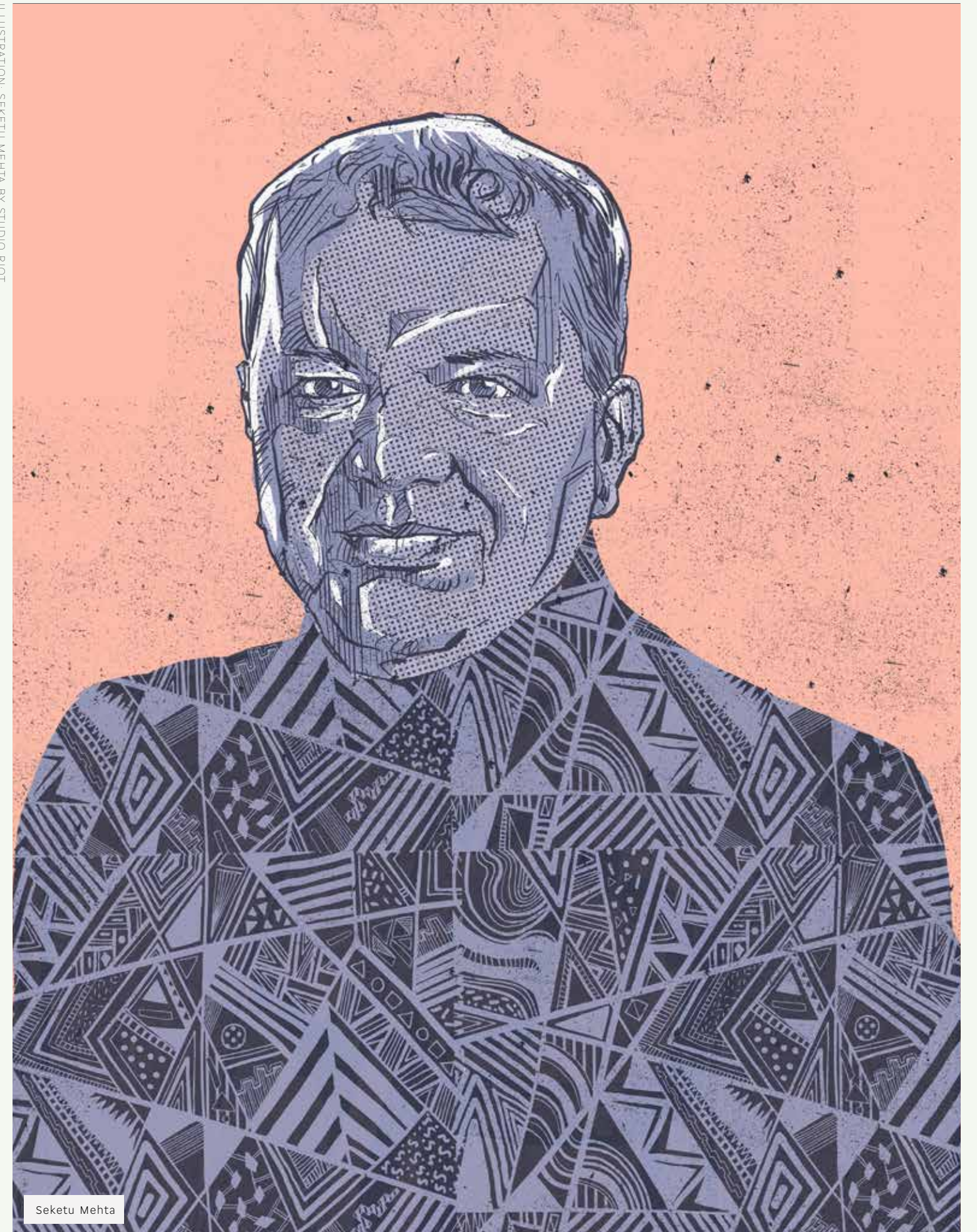
THE TRUTH TELLER

NEW YORK, USA

For years, writer **Suketu Mehta** had been researching a book about New York – the city that became his new home – to follow his award-winning blockbuster *Maximum City*, about Mumbai, the city he left behind. In 2019, he interrupted this work to publish a book he deemed more urgent. *This Land is Your Land* is a manifesto for immigration: its economic benefits as much as its moral imperative. The wealthy nations of the west have an obligation to accept more immigrants, Mehta writes, as recompense for their pasts of colonial plunder, political oppression and environmental destruction. The world's cities are the stages where the critical debates about migration will play out. They are the magnets to which immigrants will gravitate, and the entities that must best figure out how to accommodate them.

BY SAMANTH SUBRAMANIAN

ILLUSTRATION: SEKETU MEHTA BY STUDIO RIOT



Suketu Mehta

Suketu Mehta: I was working on my endless New York book when someone from *Foreign Policy Magazine* contacted me and said: “We’re doing an immigration issue. Do you have something like a family story, something you can quickly knock out?” That will take a week or two, I thought. But as I started writing, I found myself getting outraged and angry as I’d never been before, just thinking about this whole current fucking immigration debate worldwide. It’s all from the viewpoint of the west, of the rich countries. Is immigration good for us? How many immigrants should we let in? Should they be skilled or unskilled?

Well, what about the immigrants themselves? Why are they moving? It’s not because they hate their homes or their languages or their food or people. It’s because they have no choice. They move because these rich countries stole the future of poor countries through colonialism, war, inequality, and now, climate change.

So the piece comes out, and I begin to get an avalanche of hate mail. It was unbelievable. Ann Coulter and this one guy, some white supremacist named Steve Sailer, who really has it in for me, tweeted about it. He was like: You die, go back to your country, on and on. It felt like being in high school in 1980 during the Iranian hostage crisis when my friend Rajesh and I were walking down the hallway. This Irish kid yelled, “Fucking ayatollahs!” at us, and we said, “Hey, hey, we ain’t Iranians, we’re Indians.” Then he went, “Fucking Gandhis!” So as all this was happening, my agent contacted me while I was at the Bangalore Literature Festival and said: “You’re turning this article into a book.” I said: “I’m already writing a book,” referring to my New York book, and she said, “No, write this one instead.” Because I’m scared of her, in a week I had a book proposal.

By the time I returned to New York, nine publishers were bidding on it. And Farrar, Straus, and Giroux made a pre-emptive bid for three books. One of them is this small book – *The Secret Life of Cities* – that has only been published in Spanish and Italian. It’s a sort of meditation, a riff on migration, alienation, and community in global cities. And then everyone wanted *This Land is Your Land*, like, yesterday. It’s a short book, just about 200 pages with 80 pages of footnotes. I’ve never written anything so fast. I did it in a year. I felt so strongly about it. It included research trips to places like Morocco, Spain, Hungary, Serbia, and the Mexican border.

SS (Samanth Subramanian):
Why did you feel this urgency?

SM: The Czech poet, Jaroslav Seifert, once said that for anyone else, not to tell the truth can be a tactical manoeuvre. They can just be silent. But a writer who’s not telling the truth is lying, even if he’s just staying quiet. I’ve never seen it so bad in this country or in Europe. There’s just a massive global backlash against immigration. At the same time, people have never migrated in such large numbers. There’s a quarter of a billion people who’re living in a country other than theirs.

SS: The current backlash is a reaction to that?

SM: No, it’s not just the numbers, that’s the interesting thing. The world could take in much more immigration than it does, and everyone would be better off. I did a lot of research on numbers; it can’t just be me on a soapbox. If you had open borders – and I’m not advocating for open borders – world GDP would double. The world would be wealthier by \$78tn a year. In the US, there’s this notion that the country is full up, that we can’t take any more immigrants. The US takes in 1 million people per year. And we think of ourselves as the most immigrant-friendly country, which is what the Republicans keep saying. The US ranks 23rd in the world in the number of immigrants it takes in as a proportion of its population. Even if we tripled our immigration intake, from 1 to 3 million per year, we wouldn’t even be in the top five immigrant-friendly countries.

Australia, Canada and Switzerland all take in far higher percentages of immigrants and are doing just fine. Basically, people are moving in larger numbers. The world can comfortably accommodate many times this number. During the age of mass migration, from the middle of the 19th century to the early 20th century, one-quarter of Europe got up and moved to the US.

With what result? The US replaced Europe at the pinnacle of world wealth and power.

SS: Were these positions you held before you set out to write the book – misgivings you had intuitively – before you went out there and found that there was a wealth of academic evidence to back them up? How did it happen? Which came first?

SM: I didn’t have any kind of empirical evidence, because this was not the track I was on. Every book, I think, begins with a puzzle, with a question you ask yourself. You could write a magazine article from a commission, but a book has to feel necessary on a

deep intrinsic level. And it felt necessary to write this book now.

So as I did it, I just went very deep into all kinds of obscure journals and economic studies and papers. And of course, I spoke to a lot of people. I was educating myself. I’m not an economist or a demographer, I’m a storyteller. I found all these people who had the evidence. It’s all there ...This is an angry book, but with a happy ending, and the happy ending is that when immigrants move, everyone benefits. The figures are just staggering. If you wanted to help the poorest people in the world, the fastest way to do so would be to ease the barriers to immigration. Last year, immigrants sent back \$689bn in remittances, which is three times more than the direct gain from abolishing all trade barriers, four times more than all the foreign aid that these countries receive, and 100 times the amount of all debt relief. When they send these small amounts of money back, they don’t send them to governments, like foreign aid. It doesn’t go to the local junta leader. It goes to your aunt or your grandmother, who’s very economical with the money. And it’s used to build a house, send a child to school.

SS: Why did your own family move to the US?

SM: My parents wanted to provide a better life for my sisters and me. We come from a business family, so we would have been just fine in Mumbai. My mother’s father moved from rural Gujarat to Nairobi – from one part of the British Empire to another – because it was impossible to make a living in rural Gujarat. People were dying of hunger there because of regular famines. The British had been stealing from India for 200 years. When the British arrived in

India, India’s share of world GDP was 23%. By 1947, it was under 4%. During the colonial period, the European share of world GDP went from 20 to 60%. We began our long trek around the world because one rich country stole our future.

SS: In the book, you describe arriving in New York City in 1977. What was that experience like?

SM: When we arrived, there was a blackout – an electricity outage. People rampaged through the streets breaking into shops, looting. As a 14-year-old, I got mugged twice on the streets of Queens. It was a dirty city ...

SS: They mugged a schoolboy?

SM: Oh, yes. This gang comes up to me and shows me a knife, which was entirely unnecessary. “So, what have you got?” And I start pulling out, like a schoolboy, pieces of paper, pencils, and then the money I had: 12c. The gang leader says: “This is the guy we’re looking for?” Then he said to me: “Keep it, man, you need it more than we do.” And they walked off in disgust. Our car got broken into regularly, then it was stolen. So it was not a great city, and it was an incredibly racist city. I was in Queens, where I went to this terribly racist Catholic school. I was one of the first minority kids in the school and represented everything that working-class whites were scared of. The teachers called me a pagan. I only attended the school for three years. Now, this same school is overrun with South Asians – Bangladeshis, Indians, Pakistanis, and other riffraff. Queens, that whole neighbourhood is just full of non-white working-class people now. Back then, it was full of Irish, Italians, Poles. We outbred them.

SS: You have made this point about cities, I think, quite rightly. That in cities, there is a tolerance that you have, just purely because of proximity. The New York you arrived in was not necessarily like that.

SM: There’s an urban experience of difference in New York that I experienced first-hand in this building I grew up in, in Jackson Heights, Queens. It was filled with Indians and Pakistanis, Haitians and Dominicans, Russians, Jews, and Muslims as well as Chinese. The super was Greek, but it was owned by a Turk. These were all people who had been killing each other just before they got on the plane. Here we were living next to each other. It’s not that we loved each other. We said racist things about everyone else when we shut our doors. But there was a *modus vivendi*. There were demarcated areas where we could interact. It’s not like we invited everyone into our homes, but in the schools, in the shops, the workplaces, we interacted. And everyone was there, really, as immigrants. Immigrants aren’t interested in rioting and looting and pillaging. They’re interested in making a living.

SS: So, a city is the best engine we have to get people to get along with each other, but at the same time, it is also vulnerable to breaking down at some point. One of the most striking things that kept coming back to me when I read about your experiences in Jackson Heights was that Queens, which is arguably the most diverse neighbourhood on the planet, has also produced Donald Trump. The paradox is impossible to escape.

SM: Exactly!

SS: After high school, you ended up at New York University?

SM: I started out in the business school. I was going to be a diamond trader. Then I took this Introduction to Sociology course, and it blew my mind, and I just read everything I could. I took classes in philosophy and anthropology and creative writing. I had no idea what I was going to do. Then I worked in my family’s business for a short while. My father brought home this packet of diamonds for me to sort out, and I spilled them on a shag carpet. It took three days to take apart this shag carpet, look for the little tiny rocks. I was not meant for it.

Then I applied on a whim to the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, and I got in.

SS: Had you written anything before that?

SM: No. I mean, only at NYU, in undergrad literary magazines. Nothing that had got published beyond that. I wrote fiction. I did the workshop for two years. Then I needed a job and found one at a computer magazine which had just started. At the beginning, they gave me a couple of issues and said, “All right, kid, go home. We don’t think you belong here, but see if there’s something you might contribute.” I came back and said: “What you need is a humour column.” And so it was then that I began my writing career, as Dear Aunt Lannie.

SS: That was your first nonfiction writing job?

SM: Yes. I worked for that magazine, then for *Computer Reseller News*, a trade magazine for computer dealers. That’s when I really learned about investigative journalism. I had to figure out what Microsoft and Apple and Oracle were doing so that dealers could act on the information and make business decisions. I had to sneak into conferences

and cultivate sources and get people drunk and get them to tell me shit that they shouldn’t say.

SS: Proper journalism.

SM: Yes, “proper journalism”. I found out I was good at it. People liked to talk to me. I broke this major story about Oracle. The day the story came out, Oracle stock experienced what was until that time, the most significant drop in Nasdaq history. Suddenly the *New York Times* was following up on my story. I then got recruited by McGraw–Hill to run a magazine in Paris called *Data Communications International*, which was about large corporate data networks. I moved to Paris, had this fantastic apartment on the Ile Saint-Louis and an unlimited expense account. Paris is too beautiful to write about large corporate data networks, so six months in, I went back to writing fiction. I wrote short stories. Then I started to write for the *Village Voice*. I did a story on Aids in India. They told me to write a 500-word story, and I sent them 7,000 words. It became the cover story. This was when I first developed a kind of approach to long-form nonfiction, which is to go deep into the data but also collect the human stories. The little stories tell the big stories. You know, in the statues of Nataraja (the Hindu god), Shiva dances on a dwarf. The dwarf is the ordinary human, and he’s struggling to escape from underneath this massive foot of history and time, personal and political. The dwarf is my focus. Always has been.

SS: How did it go from that to *Maximum City*?

SM: My breakthrough really was this story about the Bhopal gas disaster. I wrote a 10,000-word story on that. It led to another piece for *Granta Magazine* about the 1992 riots in Bombay. That resulted in a two-book contract for Knopf on Mumbai. One was a novel called *Alphabet*, which was a tale told by a foetus while still gestating. I wrote 200 pages of that, and Sonny Mehta [his editor at Knopf] said to me, “Do the nonfiction first.”

“Why?” I asked him.

“Well, because I want to read it,” he responded.

So I thought I’d go to Mumbai and write a quick-and-dirty book about a quick-and-dirty city and come back in a year or two. Seven years later, I dropped a stack of 1,667 pages on Sonny’s desk, and he stopped speaking to me for nine months. It had become my obsession.

SS: What was writing and researching that book like? You had all these gangsters, politicians, filmmakers, bar danc

SM: Everyone had a story, and everyone was so generous with their stories. Rich and poor, male and female, they just told me their stories. So that was a feast. I didn’t want to leave, but I had to come back. I wrote the book and thought I would go back to the novel, but then I got divorced, which was ... It took a lot to deal with. And then I needed money, so I signed a contract for a New York book. New York is much harder to crack. You can’t just walk into a building or a shop in New York and start asking questions. You’ll get shooed out. Also, New York has many, many more people writing about it. Every little corner of it. When I was writing about Bombay, I pretty much had it to myself.

SS: It struck me while reading *This Land is Your Land* that the experience of cities in Asia, Africa or Latin America is different from the experience of say London or New York. The migration to cities in the developing world is mostly internal, from within the country; the tensions are internal. Whereas, in these global cities of the west, the prejudice is directed at people of other races, from other countries or other continents.

SM: You’re very right. There are two groups of cities in the world. There’s the giant megacities of the developing world – your Sao Paulos, Johannesburgs and Mumbais – which are characterised by huge migrant flows from the countryside of their own countries and the surrounding states. With South Africa, it would be Zimbabwe. With India, it would be Bangladesh. Cities like New York, London, and Paris have much smaller migrant flows, but in their eyes, it’s enormous. New York is panicked that it’s going to go from 8 million to 9 million people over 20 years. Greater Mumbai adds a million people every year. The migrant flows coming into the developed countries tend to be much more diverse. So, in France, you’ll see a lot of people from Francophone countries, but there are also people from many other countries. They’re coming from all over the world.

These cities are better run, so they’re better able to manage these much smaller migrant influxes whereas, in the cities of the developing world, the migrants make their own rules. The planning is from the bottom up. They create communities. What other people call slums, they call communities, bastis in Mumbai. They’re more like villages in the city. If you go to

a basti in Mumbai or a favela in Sao Paulo, there’ll be people from a particular region of the country who will somehow have the trees from their region. They’ll have temples to the specific deities and saints of their region. They celebrate their customs and have their own religious festivals, their own food. They will literally rename the streets and the lanes of the slums after the streets back home. So there’s a transposition of the psychic geography of the village onto the city.

The thing that the new immigrant fears most when he or she moves to a city isn’t necessarily poverty or crime: it’s loneliness. These communities that they have, that’s the one thing that really staves off loneliness.

SS: They also have to figure out their own ways to get access to essential services.

SM: Anyone who’s gone to a basti in Mumbai or Delhi will see that everything’s privatised. For electricity, residents get a local electrician who will tap the municipal electricity lines illegally. They’ll get a plumber who will tap into the water lines, or pay for water tankers to come in. Transport is provided by auto rickshaws. Buses don’t go in most bastis. For security, there’s the local dada (don). Residents of the basti will give him gifts and occasionally just outright pay him to protect their section of the basti from other people who might want to do them harm. It’s an anarchist’s dream. Municipal services basically stop at the edge of what is the legal city.

SS: The state capacity is also typically limited in cities like Mumbai and Delhi.

Anyone else, not to tell the truth can be a tactical manoeuvre. They can just be silent. But a writer who’s not telling the truth is lying, even if he’s just staying quiet

SM: The state often is not allowed to go in. When I was doing some reporting in Rio I went to this crazy street party in one of the favelas. It began at midnight and went on until 8am. There was a 16-year-old with an AK-47, and he was the doorman. He had to give me permission to go in. Everyone was dancing to this heavy Miami bass sound. The lyrics were all about cop-killing and underage sex.

So the next day, I’m in a police helicopter flying over Rio, and I said let’s go over Maré, the favela I had been in. “Oh, no, we can’t fly over that part of the city,” the pilot said. I asked him why, and he told me they’d get anti-aircraft fire from the drug dealers. The previous month, a police chopper had been brought down by some anti-aircraft fire. So the police can’t enter on the ground, and they can’t go over Maré by air.

SS: What is the future of citizenship itself, what does that look like to you? As you said, rightly, 150 years ago, the notion of citizenship was fluid. The concept of borders was fluid.

SM: It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a long time. What is belonging? Where do I belong? Where am I a citizen? I’ve come to realise that people like me and you and the Salvadoran and Mexican migrant workers in these [New York] restaurants – we think of ourselves fundamentally as belonging not to a nation, to a state or even to a city, but to a locality within multiple cities or regions.

I call it being “inter-local”. We connect multiple localities. This makes me a citizen of Greenwich Village and Bandra, and occasionally Wembley, in London, where my grandfather used to live, or the Ile Saint-

Louis in Paris. My son’s there right now, and I used to live there. I can go into all these places, and I basically have the same sort of life. I have nice Colombian coffee in the morning and pasta in the evening with a glass of wine. Basically, I might see you today here in New York; next week both of us might hang out in London with other friends.

The project affords residents and their stories visibility and a sense of belonging, if only in their small patch of this enormous metropolis

SS: And it’s not just the wealthy who live this way?

SM: It’s not just the rich. There’s this wonderful book called *Mexican New York* by Robert Courtney Smith, a sociologist. He studies this group of Mexican restaurant workers in Sunset Park in Brooklyn, who are all from a particular village in Puebla. Those who have papers go back and forth between the village and Sunset Park, and every year they have a religious celebration, the Fiesta del Padre Jesus. All the people here who have papers fly back to their village, and they adorn the head of the statue with a wig that is made with the hair of the girls of the village who are living in Sunset Park. When they come back, they recreate the festival in New York. They take a replica of the saint across the Manhattan Bridge to a church in Brooklyn. The romantic liaisons, the gang fights, are between the same communities in the village in Puebla and the neighbourhood in New York.

People can have an allegiance to a locality. I know where to find my groceries in Greenwich Village just as I do in Bandra.

SS: That’s interesting because right now, we’re also experiencing this surge of nationalism around the world.

SM: There are many, many more inter-locals than there are nationalists. Look, the number that nationalists in the US or whites in the US are afraid of is 2044. This is when the country becomes majority-minority. Everyone’s afraid of being replaced.

With nationalism, the idea is that you must be American or English or French or whatever. That, in terms of the mass movements around the world, will fade. It’s not just migrants. It’s also tourists. Someone from Wisconsin, who’s been taught to hate Mexicans over here, and then suddenly there’s like a cheap vacation in Cancun. He goes there, and he meets an ordinary Mexican guy. Huh, he thinks, this guy is the same as me. He wants his kid to go to college, he’s worried about his wife cheating on him, he’s drinking a little too much. He sits at home watching football all day.

That experience of the other, the lived experience of the other, is why cities work. This is why there’s much less resistance to immigration in global cities than there is in the global village 🖐



If the personal is political, then equally, academic practice is both personal and political, **Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh** tells urban ethnographer and academic **Tatiana Thieme**. An award-winning researcher and professor in migration and refugee studies, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh has conducted extensive research in and working with Syrian, Palestinian and other refugee communities across Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Germany.

T

Tatiana Thieme: The work you do seems to dance between academic and activist scholarship. How did you get into it? To what extent has your experience in the humanitarian sector played a role in that dance?

EFQ (Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh): When I finished my undergraduate studies in Cambridge, I decided that I never wanted to return to academia. I moved back to Tenerife in the Canary Islands (where I was born) and worked for a couple of years in an accountancy office. By chance, one of the firm’s clients was a paediatrician who was part of a team establishing a maternal and infant healthcare unit in the Sahrawi refugee camps in south-west Algeria. In a chance encounter over a glass of water, it turned out they needed a French-Spanish translator to help them navigate some administrative processes during their transit in Algiers, en route to Tindouf, a military airbase near the Sahrawi camps. I had had previous experience as a multilingual medical translator, so I accompanied this team of doctors to the Sahrawi camps. It was there that I met and worked with Sahrawi women who were educated in Cuba and had subsequently been leading medical responses within the camps. This became the root of my work in this field. Having promised that I would never return to academia, I ended up going back to complete three master’s degrees and a doctorate, which involved research with and about Sahrawi refugees living, growing up, studying, and working in Algeria, Cuba, Syria, South Africa, and Spain.

TT: How did your experience of growing up shape your world view, your sense of home and belonging? In what ways has it influenced your work?

EFQ: I was born in the Canary Islands but spent my early life in Ireland before eventually moving to northern England. We moved back to Tenerife when I was 11, and then returned to Oxford, England, where I completed high school.

Although I longed to belong when I was younger, I have never really had a strong sense of either geographical or, given my multidisciplinary background, disciplinary belonging. I no longer miss having roots, or a specific community that fully recognises or acknowledges me as one of their own, whether that’s personal, familial, or academic.

While I have had the privilege of enjoying extensive mobility and movement throughout different periods of my life, the situations I work in are characterized by immobility as part of broader processes of displacement.

A lot of my current work is underpinned by an interest in the encounters that take place when people can no longer move or can no longer situate themselves in relation to the places that they would wish to identify with.

TT: You’re focused on two projects at the moment.

EFQ: Yes, the first – Refugee Hosts – is a project I lead with three co-investigators, Alastair Ager, Anna Rowlands, and Lyndsey Stonebridge. We are a very inter-disciplinary UK-based team, which in part is a reflection of our funding. The project is supported by UK Arts and is a Humanities Research Council-led funding project in collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Council. We also work with a writer in residence, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh [Ms Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s husband] who was born in

ILLUSTRATION: ELENA FIDDIAN QASMIYEH BY STUDIO RIOT



Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Baddawi Refugee Camp in Lebanon, and with a team of locally-based researchers in that country and Jordan. Most have been affected by conflict and displacement themselves and are residents in one or more of the field sites where we’re conducting research. The field sites are neighbourhoods that are “hosting” people who have been displaced from Syria – not only Syrians but also Palestinians, Iraqis, and Kurds who have long lived in Syria.

In Lebanon, our sites include a middle-class urban neighbourhood in Beirut. This counterbalances the assumption that refugees are necessarily poor people who live in deprived areas or informal settlements. The other sites are the Baddawi refugee camp in the north of the country and the area adjacent to the camp, Jebel al-Baddawi, which is a “non-camp” area in one of the poorest urban areas of the country.

In Jordan, we’ve been conducting research in different areas of Irbid, a town only 25 kilometres from the Syrian town of Daraa, and then in two neighbourhoods in the cities of Jerash and Zarqa. We had planned to conduct research in Turkey, but the model of research that we have been using – working closely with locally based researchers – was considered to be problematic in the current environment. Such researchers and our interlocutors from Syria would have potentially been at risk of arrest or deportation from Turkey. We conducted a series of short visits in Istanbul and Ankara but have had to “de-territorialize” that part of the research. We have interviewed people from Syria who live in or passed through Turkey and are now based in Germany.

In conjunction with interviews and participant observation in these neighbourhoods, we have hosted creative writing workshops. These allow us to explore encounters between people who are longstanding residents within the various locations, and the new arrivals. Some of the longstanding residents of these neighbourhoods are Palestinians, Armenians, Iraqis, and Kurds displaced from previous conflicts, so this has been one way of exploring what I call “refugee to refugee” relationality. It’s not the more usual frame of “citizen to refugee” relations, or humanitarian organisations’ relationships with refugees. Southern Responses to Displacement from Syria is the other project. It complements Refugee Hosts, because we are examining not just what is taking place on a neighbourhood level but across multiple scales, including trans-regionally. Through the project, my colleague Estella Carpi and I have been working with a group of locally-based researchers in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. We are looking at the ways different stakeholders from around the world have responded to displacement from Syria – a broad perspective that encompasses responses by the Cuban, Brazilian, Gulf, and Malaysian states as well as faith-based organisations (both locally and regionally situated), as well as different forms of citizen – and refugee – led responses. We are therefore not only focusing on state-led perspectives down to the neighbourhood level, but also through the lens of transregional south-south assistance.

We are especially interested in exploring how people from Syria view and conceptualise the differences in how assistance is (or is not) provided by different actors around the world.

We are especially interested in exploring how people from Syria view and conceptualise the differences in how assistance is (or is not) provided by different actors around the world.

TT: What informs your own politics and practice when you do fieldwork? How do people respond to your presence, and what is their perception of where you’re coming from?

EFQ: I do not have a strong sense of belonging, or a rooted approach to defining myself. In many regards, it is relationality that frames which features of my identity become more or less important in my research.

For instance, my nationality and origins are read and interpellated by others. My being married to a Palestinian from Lebanon is also an important feature that enables me to do the kind of research I do in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Those different features or identity markers come through depending on the context. Also, my identity and position as a mother is undoubtedly essential to my and our ongoing research now. This is something that I am negotiating and feeling increasingly comfortable in positioning publicly, as opposed to requiring it to be in the background or my private sphere, as it were. The personal is political. Equally, the academic is both personal and political for a variety of reasons. My husband (Yousif) and I are both researchers in this field. He approaches these processes as a writer while I have traditionally been a “social science” researcher.

There is significant fluidity between the academic and the personal in this regard. The political is intrinsic to that precisely because of the everyday nature and ongoing processes of violence and displacement that characterise the research we’re completing. That includes spaces that my daughter’s grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins inhabit, reside in, and share with different groups of displaced

people. It is impossible to evade the everyday politics and the position of these spaces within a broader geopolitical framework.

TT: These seem like complicated entanglements. What is it like when you go and do fieldwork while also visiting your in-laws and family?

EFQ: One of the most important ways of coming to know Baddawi refugee camp as a site of family and of research has been sitting in my mother-in-law’s living room and feeling “stuck” at times because it often simply isn’t safe to leave the house. Rosemary Sayigh has described the Palestinian camps as “islands of insecurity”. Armed clashes take place relatively frequently throughout the camps.

Sitting in my mother-in-law’s living room and feeling stuck while monitoring the situation outside has been part of partially sharing and embodying that process of being rendered immobile. Being unable to go outdoors safely is one of the defining features of everyday life for a lot of people in situations of displacement, including in refugee camps like Baddawi. People from Syria living elsewhere in Lebanon, for example, can be at risk of detention and deportation if they are identified in the public sphere.

Being stuck in the living room is also accompanied by being attuned to everyday life taking place on the other side of the wall. One of the most evocative moments, which I think stimulated a shift in my conceptualization of the camp and my engagement with it, took place while sharing a cup of coffee with my mother-in-law. We heard the clinking of the coffee cups carried by a Syrian coffee vendor as he walked through the alleyway on the other side of the wall.

That personal sense of restricted movement stimulated another way of engaging with the rhythm of everyday life. I had mostly prioritised conducting interviews and participant observation in the past. Such experiences have led me to explore the possibilities and potentialities of soundscapes and listening as ways of thinking through what it means to be stuck in displacement.

As Yousif and I have explored in a photo-poetic reflection accompanied by a soundscape, rather than a dialect or a voice identifying who was walking past, it was the clinking of the coffee cups that informed us of the presence of the Syrian coffee vendor on the other side.

This has increasingly led me to think through what it means to be inside yet simultaneously engaging with the outside. In hearing the rhythm with which people navigate the alleyways of the camp, a process of encountering and being encountered is occurring at the same time.

TT: I guess the “clinking of the coffee cups” puts in sharp relief the importance but also relative arbitrariness of what we choose to pay attention to, what gets into the field notes, and what appears in our writing. There is

a kind of politics in what gets selected out of the multitude of things that happen on the day that could be rendered invisible, but, then, suddenly get picked up and are part of the frame. It’s also such a clear affirmation of the significance of seemingly ordinary details, and the importance of drawing them in as we curate our fieldwork “findings”.

EFQ: Absolutely. Part of what the Refugee Host project is trying to do is focus on the everyday, on the quiet moments of encounter rather than the grand humanitarian narrative, or what aid agencies consider to be pivotal moments, or the pivotal identity markers.

I’ve become more interested in those echoes across sites, as well as those everyday rhythms and moments. So, on the one hand, I document or, like Yousif, I archive what is taking place in the camp quite carefully. And yet, at the same time, some things speak to or jump out at me that I’m more interested in. These are the things that I photograph and ruminate on – something I’ve become increasingly attuned to as the fieldwork has developed. The fieldwork is undertaken by colleagues who live in these communities all year round. So, it’s a multi-sighted ethnography that is being conducted by a group rather than by an individual ethnographer.

TT: Is there any value in resisting the presumed imperative to compare field sites if you’re doing multi-sited ethnographies, and instead to think across different spaces and encounters? Must multi-sited research involve some sort of claim to comparative work?

EFQ: In the grant application for Refugee Hosts, there was probably an implicit

notion that we would be completing a similar number of interviews in each of these nine locations, and then we would bring them together, and identify common themes or differences across the sites. So, the comparative element was implicit. But as the project has developed and my interest in more humanities-based and creative research approaches that include photography and poetic reflections has increased, what has become particularly significant are the connections between these sites, more than the comparative elements.

Through the creative writing workshops that we’ve run as a team in Lebanon and Jordan, we have asked people to bring in objects that are significant to them, including writing that is important to them. We’ve also shared archival and contemporary photographs of camps and cities with our colleagues and research participants without necessarily naming them as “this is Lebanon” or “this is Jordan”. The conversations that have emerged around the spaces and sites represented in the photographs, and the echoes becoming apparent in participants’ interactions with those images have pushed us away from comparisons. Instead, they have highlighted the extent to which “this could be us,” raising the question, what would it mean for this to be us?

TT: Your six-and-a-half-year-old daughter seems to be an active participant in some experiences during fieldwork and workshops with other co-authors and collaborators. What has her presence contributed to your own process and thinking?

EFQ: Bisou’s presence has been central on many fronts. I have come to know Baddawi Camp

very much with and through her. This is because of the obligations that come with parenting during fieldwork – and the obligations and concerns that I have imposed on myself in such situations. At moments of insecurity in the camp, I am probably more attuned to the insecurities by being there with Bisou than, say, if I had been there alone. Her reflections have changed through time, and my engagements with the space have also been influenced and guided in different ways through her vision of the camp and her representation of it. Last year she described the camps to me as green spaces full of trees and plants. This is not my vision of the camp. To me, it is a space characterised by narrow concrete alleyways and dangerous electrical wires, but to her, what stands out is the greenery and the beauty and the flowers and the plants in the space. I have been trying to view the camp through her eyes, with those obligations and responsibilities in tandem.

TT: In your work, where is there a space for intervening, if at all, in a context that seems protracted and based on impossible outcomes, especially given the condition of the camp itself? I wonder if an intervention could be precisely about documenting incremental improvements and setbacks, voices, and affirmative storytelling? At the same time, is there also a way of trying to hook into and contest the levers of structural power and institutions?

EFQ: In 2018 and 2019 Yousif and I held a series of workshops in Baddawi camp, with support from Philip Pullman’s charity Belacqua, with children displaced from Syria. These workshops are concretely not part of a research project, but

I have come to know Baddawi Camp very much with and through my daughter. This is because of the obligations that come with parenting during fieldwork – and the obligations and concerns that I have imposed on myself in such situations

Focusing on the structural inequalities and the structural barriers that prevent people from being able to identify and enact solutions for their own problems is particularly important to me

a series of sessions that we ran in the camp because we wanted to do something aside from research. We decided that it concretely should not be research and that the results and the process should not be part of our analysis. It was a series of encounters that we would run in our living room, to just have a space to do some drawing and some writing, and to share some food with these kids.

Focusing on the structural inequalities and the structural barriers that prevent people from being able to identify and enact solutions for their own problems is particularly important to me. I try to bring those structural conditions and barriers to the forefront in conjunction with documenting and archiving the protests, demonstrations, actions, conceptualizations, and the counter-narratives that are developed by people who have been displaced. These actions and counter-narratives challenge hegemonic humanitarian discourses and the political rhetoric that restricts people’s rights and freedoms.

TT: Your work involves the laudable commitment to, but potential complications of, collaborative authorship with many people in your research community. In activist scholarship and participatory endeavours, it seems crucial to include processes of collaborative authorship in the research design, but this isn’t obvious. I’m really curious about the politics as well as the behind the scenes logistics involved in co-authorship with one’s inter- or co-locutors. It’s precisely the complication that seems meaningful as it raises crucial questions about the production of knowledge, what knowledge counts, and what voices get heard and acknowledged in the authorship.

EFQ: From the start of our project, we have aimed to work with locally-based researchers as full members of our research team, not as fieldworkers who collect data and pass it on for analysis by the UK-based team. Our Palestinian, Syrian, Lebanese, and Jordanian colleagues have been involved in analysing, presenting, and writing up the findings of the research. In December 2018, for instance, we had a writing workshop in Beirut, where colleagues based in Lebanon, Jordan, Germany, and the UK came together to discuss the emerging themes and to examine potential sole- and co-authored writing projects.

The workshop enabled us to collectively discuss authorship guidelines and submission processes to identify levels and degrees of interest in different types of writing projects, as well as forms of support that people might like to receive. Since then, a number of our colleagues from Lebanon and Jordan have written sole-authored blog posts for our Refugee Hosts website, two

of our Jordan-based colleagues presented the findings of their research at an event hosted at the UK Houses of Parliament in March 2019, and those who were granted visas presented at our Refugee Hosts International Conference in October 2019. in the UK. Others will participate in our forthcoming conferences in Lebanon and Jordan in 2020. We used the Beirut workshop as an opportunity to brainstorm a number of themes and topics that we would potentially co-author across the team. We openly discussed the order of authorship and the politics of authorship in those processes.

However, it is also important to recognise that not everybody wants to write – or that they may wish to write poems rather than articles, as is the case of Abu Iyad, one of our colleagues from Baddawi. I think one of the tensions that arise in a lot of the externally funded research projects that are so attractive to academics today relates to this notion of capacity building and providing career development opportunities to researchers in the so-called global south.

That is central to my research projects and also central to the negotiations that I’ve gone through with funders such the European Research Council, who are not happy to view local researchers as full researchers, and seem to wish to maintain a neo-colonial relationship with people in the field as data collectors. In contrast, the UK Research Councils actively encourage co-authorship and the recognition of the intellectual contributions and rights of researchers from the global south.

This notion of capacity building assumes that capacity doesn’t exist, to begin with, and that European researchers

need to intervene to “build the capacity” of “southern” researchers. In turn, the notion of providing career development opportunities risks assuming that the kind of opportunities that I have in mind and that I can support are the kind of opportunities that people would select for themselves. That isn’t the case for all of the colleagues that we’ve been working with in Lebanon and Jordan. A number of our colleagues have been keen just to conduct interviews for the project and be paid for that. Others are interested in creative writing, and some in experimenting with academic authorship.

I think we have a very long way to go before these processes can be in line with what different people desire for themselves, rather than an “opportunity” that is offered or imposed from outside. The risk of reproducing the neo-colonial notion that this is a way of “providing a voice to the voiceless” is a very real and dangerous one.

There is also the challenge of writing across disciplines and the different approaches that might exist there. These are some of the challenges and questions that we’re exploring collaboratively. We’ll see how the process develops over the coming years 🖐

From the start of our project, we have aimed to work with locally-based researchers as full members of our research team, not as fieldworkers who collect data and pass it on for analysis by the UK-based team



LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

CARNIVAL REMEMBERS

Founded in response to racially motivated attacks against mostly Caribbean migrants in 1960s London, the Nottinghill Carnival has survived to become a symbol of endurance

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY BY YEPOKA YEEBO

A mas player in costume during the Notting Hill carnival

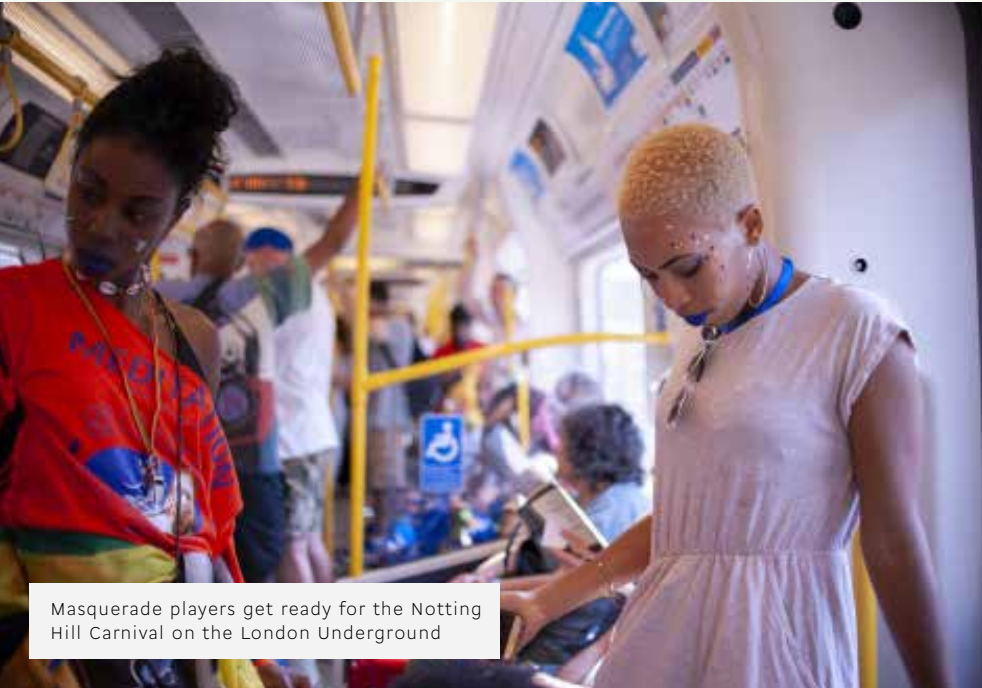
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y dawn, the streets of west London are already spattered with paint. It's the Sunday of a long holiday weekend. Steelpan bands are rolling through the streets; revellers throw paint, glitter and coloured chalk. The first bands struck up at 4.30am, well before sunrise. Many have been up all night. This is J'Ouvert, the beginning of the Notting Hill Carnival.

Cedric Taylor was blowing a conch shell. "We're welcoming the spirits from the ocean, from Africa, from everywhere," he said. He was dressed as an iconic carnival character, Jab Jab, covered in black paint.



Jab Jab players smearing each other with grease during J'Ouvert



Masquerade players get ready for the Notting Hill Carnival on the London Underground

Taylor, originally from Grenada, pointed to all the flags on display at J'Ouvert. His home, he said, was one of the few places that kept Jab Jab culture alive. When Jab Jab players covered their skin and wrapped themselves in chains, they thought about their ancestors being led out of their homes in West Africa to the waiting ships. "That's why we take it personal," Taylor said, "It's a reminder."

Taken from diable, the French word for devil, the story of Jab Jab begins with sugar, the crop that built empires for Spain, France and Britain. It was a brutal business. Its labour force was made up of people abducted mostly from west Africa, shipped

across the Atlantic and sold to the highest bidder. In the Caribbean, when the cane fields caught fire, enslaved people were forced to pick the sugar cane as it burned to save the rest of the crop. Some were thrown into pits of boiling molasses as punishment.

In Trinidad, the French planteurs (planters) had masquerade balls where they would dress up and mock the people they were brutalising by frolicking with burning sugar cane stalks – cannes brûlées – and covering their skin in stale molasses. The people they had enslaved were banned from participating. After emancipation in 1834, the people who had won their freedom took the masquerade

balls as a prize of war, imitating their captors imitating them. They covered their skin and paraded through the streets of Port of Spain, lit with burning sugar cane stalks. Cannes brûlées became the Kreyol Canboulay.

The celebrations were banned. But carnival does not die; it adapts.

The Notting Hill Carnival takes over a swathe of west London every year. For three days, the area's roads are lined with people selling food, souvenirs and alcohol. Local residents place speakers outside their front windows or sell homemade curried goat. There are drummers and dancers and groups of people playing capoeira. This is Europe's biggest street party, and the world's second-biggest carnival, drawing an estimated 2.5 million people over a three mile route.

After J'Ouvert, some revellers wander Carnival covered in paint for the rest of the day. Others go home, take a shower, pick up their kids and bring them back for the Children's Day, a miniature version of the main event. Children play mas, putting on full masquerade costumes, and join famous mas bands on the road.

Children's Day is how many children of Caribbean immigrants, and their friends and neighbours, first learn the traditions their grandparents brought to Britain. For a long time, it was organised by Lee Woolford Chivers. She received an honour from the Queen of England for services to the Carnival and in the Caribbean community.

On the Friday before Carnival, Chivers was sitting outside a community centre near Portobello Road, in the middle

of the carnival area. She had arranged a celebration for older residents of the neighbourhood. Police barriers made it hard for even the ones who live just minutes from the procession to get there.

Chivers sat by the gate greeting old friends. She wanted to make sure that older revellers could have some good Caribbean food, dance to some music and still feel part of Carnival, even if they couldn't be there. They had watched each other's children grow up and had turned their neighbourhood from a slum into the most desirable property in London.

In 1948, a ship docked in Kingston, Jamaica. Around 494 men, women and children from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Bermuda, would eventually join its voyage. The vessel had been a German cruise ship that provided cheap holidays to Nazis. During the second world war, it was used to ferry people to concentration camps. At the end of the war, the ship was claimed by the United Kingdom, and in 1947 it was renamed the Empire Windrush.

After the second world war, Britain was a ravaged wreck. The government started recruiting workers from the weakened empire to rebuild. They advertised cheap tickets – £28 (around £1,000 or \$1,260 today) for one-way passage to London on the Windrush.

The passengers who disembarked from the Windrush at Tilbury Docks on the 22 June 1948 would change British history. One, world-famous calypso musician Lord Woodbine, would later help a group of young boys from Liverpool get their start. He literally gave them rhythm, persuading them to hire a drummer. Locally, they were known as Woodbine's Boys. The



Grenfell Tower, seen from Latimer Road tube station

world would come to know them as The Beatles.

Another passenger was Lord Kitchener, Trinidad’s most famous calypso musician. As he got off the ship, a British Pathé news reporter asked the King of Calypso to sing. The song he had just composed – London is the Place for Me – would come to define the era.

“A beautiful place like the Caribbean, you come with the arts in your mind, consciously and unconsciously,” said Alex Pascall, a pioneering broadcaster who arrived in Britain in 1959. “When you come to a dim, dark place like Britain, you realise that you have to add some sort of life

and colour into a country that just came out of two wars.”

The children who arrived on the Windrush and on the ships that followed travelled on their parents’ passports. While their parents are still listed on the ship’s passenger manifest at the National Archives, the children are not. Landing cards recording their arrivals were destroyed by the British Home Office in 2010, triggering an international scandal.

An estimated 500,000 citizens from former British colonies – including the Windrush arrivals – moved to the United Kingdom before the empire collapsed. They were granted indefinite leave to

remain in the country in 1971. But when the Windrush-era records were destroyed in 2010, the British government made an entire generation of British residents into undocumented immigrants overnight. Many were wrongfully imprisoned. The government still doesn’t know how many were deported. The full impact of this action is yet to be revealed.

Back in 1948, when the Windrush docked, a man named Ivor Cummings was the only senior black civil servant in the Colonial Office. Cummings (who was openly gay at a time when this was dangerous and costly) arranged accommodation for many of the first arrivals in south and west London. He is the reason why they – and immigrants to this day – live in neighbourhoods like Notting Hill.

At the time, Notting Hill was run by slumlords. They charged high rents, but because few landlords were willing to rent to the new arrivals, they had no choice but to pay for the crowded housing.

“They were in shock,” said Isaac Eloï, a 26-year-old trainee solicitor and mas player whose grandmother arrived from Dominica. “They were colonised, they were lied to and brainwashed, so they thought England was this wonderful place, the streets were paved with gold ... They were ashamed, so they didn’t often tell the people back home what life was like,” Eloï added. “They didn’t want to say ‘Yeah, we’ve moved in, and we can’t go out at night because the Teddy Boys will attack us’.”

Facing these difficulties head-on, the Windrush generation changed

This is Europe’s biggest street party, and the world’s second-biggest carnival, drawing an estimated 2.5 million people over a three mile route

British law, culture, and society for the better, Eloï said. Their experiences led to the Rent Act, which was designed to shut down slumlords, as well as the Race Relations Act, the first British law that made it illegal to discriminate against people openly. “If they hadn’t migrated, who knows what Britain would look like,” said Eloï.

This year, as the Children’s Carnival wound down, the crowds swelled, quickly becoming older and tipsier. Sunday evening is

for Londoners; people turn up to see old friends and meet up with family.

“It’s really beautiful when you see the same faces walking down the street all the time. You become friends,” said Keith Franklin. Franklin is the DJ for KCC and the Rocking Crew, a sound system that has been playing house music at Carnival for 30 years. “Because we’ve been there for so long, we’ve seen people grow up. You’ve seen people come, they’ve met they’ve got married, now they’ve got kids, and their kids come.”

Sound systems emerged in Jamaica in the 1950s, some becoming mobile clubs, pioneering new genres of music like ska. There are 36 sound systems at Carnival, many of them London institutions devoted to a specific musical genre. Franklin DJed from the back of a truck parked under a tony (fashionable) new apartment building with Caribbean flags hanging from the balconies.



Jab Jab players during J’ouvert, at the beginning of Carnival

Franklin came to Carnival for the first time when he was 10. He was in awe of what he saw. “Initially, we were following floats, and there were bands and the costumes,” he said. “Then I stumbled upon a sound system. I’d never seen anything like it in all my life,” he added. “With the bass coming right through your body, and shaking you, it was amazing.”

Also, Franklin said he had never seen so many black men together in one place. “For me, growing up as a young kid in early 1970s London – which is a completely different place to what it is now – it was an eye-opener. It had an emotional effect on me that stuck.”

Carnival changed west London. Many of the first immigrants who moved into the area stayed. They built businesses, bought homes, raised families, and helped turn slums into attractive neighbourhoods. In 1995, a one-bedroom flat on Portobello Road sold for £168,000 (\$212,500). This year, it changed hands for £1.5m (\$1.9m). Some of these wealthy new arrivals asked that Carnival – and, implicitly, the people behind it – be moved out. “The people who want to move it moved in when it was already there,” said Franklin. “And they probably moved there because Carnival made it an attractive area.” There’s no way it could be moved from west London: “That’s where it started, that’s where it needs to stay.”

The neighbourhoods the Carnival passes through are just to the west of the historic centre of London. The right-wing local council, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, is notoriously apathetic towards its working- and middle-class residents.



In the early hours of the morning of 14 June 2017, a fire started on the fourth floor of Grenfell Tower. The 24-storey building, constructed in 1974, had just been cheaply refurbished. The tower had been covered in what turned out to be flammable cladding. The fire quickly spread over the outside of the building.

Residents were told to stay inside their homes in the event of a fire. While many residents managed to escape, others could not. It took hundreds of firefighters 60 hours to put the blaze out. People searched for their relatives for weeks, papering the neighbourhood with “missing” posters.

The passengers who disembarked from the Windrush at Tilbury Docks on the 22 June 1948 would change British history.

Residents had warned, repeatedly, that the building was not safe. It needed urgent repairs, including a £200,000 sprinkler system. The borough declined to pay. That year, the same authority had spent £200,000 on legal fees for two wealthy neighbours who were feuding over noise from a piano.

From most of the major roads along the carnival route, you can see Grenfell Tower. Each day of Carnival at 3pm, the sound systems are turned off, the bands stop playing, and everything stands still for 72 seconds – a second for each of the victims of the fire at Grenfell Tower. Carnival always remembers.

In London, Carnival was created to commemorate another atrocity. In the summer of 1958, a married couple had an argument outside Latimer Road tube station, near the area where Grenfell Tower would be built. A married couple having a row would have been perfectly ordinary, except the husband, Raymond Morrison, was a black man born in Jamaica, and his wife Majbrit was a white woman born in Sweden. The tension was in the air. Earlier that summer, Kelso Cochrane, a young man from Antigua, had been murdered by a mob of white men. Nobody had been arrested, and nobody was ever charged.

A group of white Teddy Boys (one of the stranger, ultraviolent subcultures of 1950s London) threatened to kill the couple. The next evening the same gang found Majbrit Morrison and

attacked her. The police stood by and watched before telling her to go home. When she refused, she was arrested. The mob, however, was allowed to carry on. Racist gangs rampaged through west London, randomly attacking black residents in the streets and in their own homes.

Secret police files would later reveal that 400 Teddy Boys had run riot through the streets. They were armed with knives, iron bars and belts weighted with nuts and bolts. Dozens of people were seriously injured. When black residents tried to defend themselves, they were arrested. The attacks lasted for weeks.

That September, Claudia Jones, the energetic, chain-smoking founder of the West Indian Gazette, decided something had to be done. Jones had grown up in Harlem, New York. When she became a vocal member of the American Communist Party, she was forced to leave the US and moved to London. London’s first Carnival was held on 30 January 1959. It was the middle of winter. It would have been absurd to parade through the streets in freezing temperatures, so Jones held it in a town hall, opposite St Pancras railway station. It was broadcast on the BBC later that year, at the same time as revellers celebrated Carnival back in Trinidad. Jones’s indoor carnivals ran for another six years, expanding in size each year until she died in 1964. “Claudia Jones’s carnival was for the victims of Notting Hill,” said Jak Beula. Beula runs the Nubian

Jak Community Trust, which builds monuments to Black British pioneers. One of his largest is a six-foot plaque commemorating 70 people who helped create the Notting Hill Carnival. The first name on the plaque is Claudia Jones. The second is Rhaune Laslett, who started a community fair the year after Jones died. The two women never met.

At the community fair, three steel pan players who had been at the very first event organised by Jones, Sterling Betancourt, Ralph Cherrie and Russel Henderson, played to a small crowd in a local park.

“And they say, ‘This isn’t working, bruv,’” said Beula. “‘We’ve been here all day, and nothing a’ gwan. Let’s take it to the streets.’” So they left the playground, she continues, “They went on a walk, for an hour, and changed the history of Britain forever.” The three attracted a crowd as they walked. People started coming out of houses and shops to follow them. When they got back to the playground, they decided they needed to do this every year, said Beula.

Chivers remembers Laslett’s carnivals fondly. “She used to have costumes borrowed from different theatres, and put them on people,” she said.

As time went on, the celebrations became more significant and more Caribbean in flavour, with music going on into the night. At the end of the evening, when all the sound systems were turned off, the steel pan bands would walk down the road playing a drumroll to end the festivities, said Chivers. People would follow them off the streets and go home: “That was beautiful.”



The UFO Steel Band commemorate the victims of the fire at Grenfell Tower

Each day of Carnival at 3pm, the sound systems are turned off, the bands stop playing, and everything stands still for 72 seconds – a second for each of the victims of the fire at Grenfell Tower.

This year, on Monday morning, there were signs of Carnival all over London. People clutched feathered headdresses at bus stops, and coaches full of mas players drove towards west London. Underground stations and Tube trains all over the city were filled with costumed revellers. At Ladbroke Grove station, it seemed like an entire parade spilt out of the train, a scene that would repeat hundreds of times throughout the day. The spirit of Carnival is that anyone can come, and anyone can join – but the event is also

a complicated logistical feat. In the 1970s, it became a more formal event with permanent staff, an office and an organising committee. Today, the organisers have to take into consideration everything from crowd control to emergency evacuation plans. Over 25,000 people are on the road, forming the procession.

Carnival generates 3,000 full-time jobs and £93m (\$118m) for the local economy. But most Carnival groups raise their own money, and the event gets less funding overall than other, smaller public events in London. “So we have black people using their own money to create an economy,” said Claire Holder, who ran Carnival in the 1990s.

London’s Metropolitan Police approach Carnival differently in comparison with other similar events. Every year after Carnival, the police send out a press release listing the number of people arrested for drug offences and knife possession. The police, Holder said, treat the event as a matter of public order instead of a festival: “It’s scandalous.”

All London’s officers are required to work during the holiday weekend, and some are dressed in tactical gear. “They lay out the carnival as though they are expecting a riot,” said Holder. “What has that got to do with the context of a celebration?” she added, “It’s total disrespect.” The police have even forced people at Carnival to go through metal detectors and used facial recognition cameras. “They don’t do that at gay pride, they don’t do that at Glastonbury.”

Other public events have a much lower-profile police presence, even though they have similar or higher rates of crime. The Royal Ascot horse races and the Glastonbury music festival routinely have arrests for more serious offences, including rape, assault and money laundering.

Creamfields, a dance music festival held over the same holiday weekend, had almost 10 times more incidents of crime reported. This year, people leaving the festival found their cars dismantled and stripped for parts. In contrast, this year’s Carnival had the lowest arrest rate of any major festival.

The way the event is reported in Britain’s newspapers has always been more about the institutional racism of the British media than the facts about what happens in Notting Hill.

“The media puts too much emphasis on it being a danger. It’s not actually true,” says Charlotte Mensah, an award-winning hairdresser who runs a salon near Carnival. “When you go to Glastonbury, there’s trouble, and they never speak about that. But when it comes to Notting Hill, it’s always very negative.”

Mensah, who was born in Ghana, grew up in the west London neighbourhood. She started going to Carnival when she was a teenager in the late 1980s. “I’d go home about 4am, and it was safe, we had a great time, there was no trouble,” she said. “This is the only festival that is just for the people.”

Mensah’s salon was one of a few high-end stores open for Carnival. Stylists were giving revellers quick braids, and Mensah was donating the proceeds to The Prince’s Trust, the charity that helped her start her business.

“The media portrays this image that it’s dangerous, they’re gonna ruin your shop, so a lot of people board up and go away,” said Mensah, “But I actually feel like it’s a good way to advertise your brand. There are millions of people on the streets of Notting Hill, they get to see you.”

At the other end of Portobello Road, past a corridor of stalls selling everything from jerk chicken to jollof rice and Peruvian food, is Happy Donuts. The owner, Jonathan Woldeab, had hired a DJ who was playing Lionel Ritchie’s All Night Long. Everyone passing the shop would stop to do a little jig.

“Every year we make record sales; there’s nothing like Carnival for business,” said Woldeab. “Carnival is like having a party and earning money, you can’t get any better than that. I love it, I wish it was three, four times a year.”

Claire Holder, the former director of Carnival, said it was important to remember that Carnival is more than just a good time. “For me, Carnival represents the reunification of the African diaspora, because you’re getting blacks from the Caribbean, who started it; you’re getting blacks from Latin America who went through the same brutality of slavery, and continental Africans,” she said. “We are all reunited within the context of the Notting Hill Carnival, where we celebrate each other.

“It’s part of the freedom that we fought for: to be reacquainted with our culture.” 🖐️



A costumed mas player participates in the parade



CHINA BISCUIT

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Adopted as a toddler, the author makes a trip to country of her birth and discovers that belonging is elusive

BY LEE MIDDLETON



lying north-east over the Horn of Africa, I am deep in a state of long-haul dormancy. The muffled roar of engines at 30,000 feet (breached only by the wail of a baby or the click of overhead bins) is the familiar soundtrack to this time-out-of-time. It will end only when I suck in the air of a world on the other side of the globe, in a place where day is night and night is day. There, everything will be opposite.

I have no memory of a time before such flights.

On my first, I was the crying baby. It was 1973 when the white and sky-blue of a Pan Am jet delivered me, 11 months old, from Seoul, South Korea to Honolulu, Hawaii. There I became Lee Middleton, the name my US passport claims for me as I now journey from Cape Town, South Africa – my unlikely home of the last dozen years – back to Seoul, the birthplace to which I am finally returning to attend a conference called the “Gathering”.

The vaguely cultish name puts me off, but I lack a better way to describe this mass coming together of some 500 Koreans, adopted and sent overseas, almost entirely to Caucasian families, and now arriving from Minneapolis, Stockholm, and Sydney, from New York, Oslo, and Rome. Just a percentage of a fraction of the 200,000 Koreans adopted internationally since the 1950s, we will descend upon a five-star hotel in downtown Seoul, where we will meet, eat, and play (the six-day itinerary includes a poker tournament, soccer match, and gala dinner with a K-pop performance). Some of us will attend workshops with titles like “parenting as an adoptee” and “immigration and citizenship”. Others will listen to academics presenting talks on identity

formation and the portrayal of motherhood in the Korean media.

Officially, I’m doing research for a book. And while I know there is more to it than that, I’m not sure what the more is. That we are gathering is the only certainty. The violet glow of imposed night transitions to gold, announcing another round of beverages and food. Addressing me in Korean, the slim, perfectly coiffed stewardess gestures to a pyramid of small plastic containers filled with something reddish. I’m not sure what is more diminishing: having to ask her to speak English, or realising that what I initially mistake for watermelon turns out to be kimchi.

Against Manhattan’s 1994 night sky, neon signs announcing barbeque joints and other Korean businesses illuminate West 32nd street from Broadway to 5th Avenue. My friends and I stomp up carpeted stairs in Doc Martens and Converse All Stars, past a fake waterfall, and into the reception of a large dining room the colour of yellow chrysanthemums, filled with the smell of caramelized fat, and packed with Koreans. It’s not that I have never seen Koreans before. Almost every time I enter a Korean grocer to buy cookie dough ice cream or a bagel-wrapped slab of cream cheese, a hearty “Angyanghasayo” rings out, and I wonder how they know.

But in an instant, this critical mass of eyes, noses, cheekbones and lips has solved the riddle of my face with the uncanny elegance of a mathematical formula. The words “my people” sound, unbidden in my head, just as the restaurant’s petite, middle-aged hostess zeroes in on me, letting loose a torrent of Korean.

I gape, mute as a fish.

“Table for six?” says my friend Leyla, whose idea this was.

Frowning, the hostess collects a stack of menus and leads our party through the dining room. I follow, staring at faces that all speak to me, even if I don’t know what they are saying.

I’m walking from my office, just a stone’s throw from Cape Town’s parliament to the Trafalgar Place flower market where generations of Cape Malay women have sold proteas, roses, daisies, tulips, lilies, floral-you-name-it, since 1890. The Cape’s clarified sunshine streams down, energizing my step as I weave through the diverse mix of humanity that is, in refreshing contrast to much of this still-segregated city, the norm in this neighbourhood. Then, only a minute into my three-minute stroll, I hear it. “Nihau.”

The speaker, a man in his twenties, looks possibly homeless. Not that I can really say, as instantly I avert my eyes and flee from this greeting that I have come to dread (and which the man’s tone and gaze turn into anything but welcoming). Rounding the corner, I swerve to avoid a flock of teenagers, a swirl of maroon and grey school uniforms, bookbags flying. I smile at their exuberance, and in that moment, one of the girls faces me, squinting her eyes and pulling a face.

“Ching chong chong chang,” she shouts to cascades of laughter.

Recently at a dinner party at the house of a famous South African photographer, said photographer asks if I speak Chinese.

“Why would I speak Chinese?” I say coolly, letting my host hang.

It turns out he had been studying Mandarin and was simply making conversation. When I consider this later, it makes me feel ungracious and wrong.

But what is the right way to respond to the sum of my parts being forever reduced to a face that confounds people’s expectations of the name-family-accent that should accompany it? If there is a graceful way to navigate the gauntlet of questions stirred by this confusion – an interrogation that ends only when I reveal the loss at the root of this curiosity which is me – I have yet to find it.

As far as I know – which is not very far – this is more or less the area I was abandoned 46 years ago. A baby in a basket with a note. An image whose mythic quality I have nurtured like an ember that I have tasked myself to keep alive

On my first day in Seoul I waded uphill through the sticky heat to the botanical gardens on the slopes of Namsan Mountain. The red and white spire of Seoul’s iconic beacon, the Namsan Tower, rises against the grey of clouds threatening to burst.

As far as I know – which is not very far – this is more or less the area I was abandoned 46 years ago. A baby in a basket with a note. An image whose mythic quality I have nurtured like an ember that I have tasked myself to keep alive.

In the garden’s electric green, elderly people stroll along paved trails that carve tunnels through the humid forest. A large stone slab marks the source of Seoul’s

only natural stream, which flows south to the Han River. I scan the horizon, comparing it with a photo taken in the early 1960s. It is almost impossible to reconcile the city today – dense with telephone wires and concrete as far as the eye can see – with the Kodachrome rice paddies and modest clusters of single-storey structures flanking the mighty river whose curves once defined this landscape. Today, skyscrapers obscure both the Han River and the mountains rippling upwards from its opposite bank. A whole world disappeared.

It keeps your bag from smelling like barbeque,” says an adoptee from New York, prying the pleather cushioned lid off a seat that is basically an elongated aluminium bucket, and depositing her purse inside. I follow suit, despite my impression that the exhaust pipes hanging from the ceiling like so many silver space-age arms are doing a great job. A dozen adoptees line either side of a long table where a pair of gas grills fires up. Based on the sheer volume of restaurants, markets, and signboards depicting dishes to be had down an alley or on the upper storey of an otherwise nondescript building, it’s clear that Seoulites are food-obsessed. For adoptees, the value of a meal can extend well beyond the pleasures of taste: each dish consumed and each name familiarized become keys in a series of doors behind which lies the hope of regaining a culture lost.

With that in mind, the task of selecting a restaurant that might satisfy everyone’s expectations on this first night out was one I was grateful to have had nothing to do with. The few among us who speak some Korean get stuck with deciding where we’ll dine. They also navigate the route here, order all the food, and generally

show us newbies the ropes (revealing the metal chopsticks and long-handled spoons that live in the wooden box or drawer gracing the table at every restaurant I will visit; passing out the weirdly thin, square serviettes that are not much bigger than a coaster and seem useful mainly as a surface on which to idle one’s chopsticks). Someone pours and passes glasses of soju and beer; someone else notes that these should always be offered and accepted with both hands. We all dutifully comply. Meanwhile, the waitress, at once brusque and mothering, elbows in with a platter of meat, efficiently slicing kalbi onto the grill with a frighteningly effective pair of kitchen scissors. Even if I still can’t speak a lick of Korean, I have learned a few things since my first New York City barbeque experience. I beam with the pride of a toddler who has successfully dressed herself as I wrap my grilled meat in a perilla leaf, dab some ssamjang paste on it, and throw a few pieces of kimchi in for good measure. Washing the whole thing down with a shot of soju, I relish the flavours almost as much as I savour being just another table of flush-faced Koreans, inhaling barbeque and drinking too much.

While blending in offers its own novel thrill, it is the outermost layer of a reckoning that cuts far deeper, unearthing what feels like an extraordinary secret: that we are all unlike everyone else here – or anywhere else for that matter – in exactly the same way. We all know the unique dislocation that comes of being the black-haired, slanty-eyed kid in a white family that tried to some degree or another to pretend we were not different.

Over the next few days, however, it becomes evident that as much as we may share

that foundational truth, each of us will have his or her own approach to figuring out what being in Korea means now. When first scanning the Gathering itinerary, I had wondered at the many gaps in the schedule. Now I am grateful for the space to experience this place on my own terms.

Seoul – a metropolis of skyscrapers and Buddhist temples, teahouses and plastic surgery clinics, of 24-hour spas, 14th century palaces, and what is arguably the best public transportation system in the world – can accommodate whatever curiosities, obsessions, hopes, or uncertainties you may bring her. Jongno-gu for astonishing historic architecture. Hongdae for drinking, dancing, and noribang (karaoke). Insa-dong for traditional crafts and sleek art galleries. Itaewon for tacos, pizza, and bars where English is spoken. Dongdaemun for designer markets. Mapo-gu for a DNA test that will be logged into the national missing persons database. Seodaemun to request a birth family search.

The daily breakfast buffet options speak volumes about our crowd. A bounty of smoked salmon surrounded by horseradish, capers, and lemon juice. Dim sum and make-your-own pho. A chef preparing eggs-to-order next to warming trays filled with bacon, sausages, and roast potatoes. Chilli fish, beef stir-fry, mushroom bulgogi, and mountains of white rice. Breakfast cereal, Danishes, strudels, and croissants. My plate heaping with the chilli fish and dim sum that have become my go-to morning meal, I end up sitting with a brother and sister who were adopted together to the US as toddlers. We bond over the fact that none of us has ever loved American breakfast

and enthuse over the revelation of a savoury spicy start to the day. I ask what they are up to today, and they share a conspiratorial look.

“We’re going to meet our birth dad,” the sister says, in a hushed but giddy tone. “It’s complicated, though. He’s brain-damaged,” the brother says. He explains that three days earlier they had visited their adoption agency, where, almost on a whim, they initiated a birth family search. The agency called back the following day to say their father, whose existence they had never even really considered – birth mothers tend to absorb the focus of adoptee imagination – was alive. However, having suffered a terrible accident a decade prior, he has since lived in a hospital for the mentally ill.

“But he remembered that he had kids who were sent for adoption, and said he wanted to see us,” the sister says.

I am flooded with a strange mixture of envy and concern. Like their number has just been called in a lottery we’re all waiting to win, even if the prize might break your heart.

We friend each other on Facebook, and a few hours later I receive an enthusiastic message from the sister as they are en route to their appointment. That evening I text back, saying they shouldn’t feel obliged to respond, but that I wanted to let them know I was thinking of them, and I hoped things had gone well. I don’t hear from or see them again.

While blending in offers its own novel thrill, it is the outermost layer of a reckoning that cuts far deeper, unearthing what feels like an extraordinary secret: that we are all unlike everyone else here

Something has shifted, and it occurs to me that when people ask me where I’m from, I might just save us all a lot of time and say Korea

The Gathering is over, but I’ve stayed in Seoul a few extra days, renting an Airbnb below the Namsan botanical gardens. It is my last day, and I’m riding the bus back to the apartment, damp umbrella balanced between my knees. One ear cocked for the electronic female voice that will announce my stop in both Korean and English, I take in the craft breweries and café-cum-art galleries that proclaim the trendiness of this neighbourhood. Here, once upon a time, I was abandoned and then fostered before being sent overseas.

Looking out the rain-beaded window, I realise that this is probably as close as I’m ever going to get to the blank in my story. For the first time, I wonder how much my resistance to people’s curiosity about my origins stemmed from my own lack of answers. Korea was always just a place on a map, the backdrop to a tragedy.

Getting off the bus, I pause, taking in the slopes of Namsan Mountain, forest giving way to roads lined with boxy, brick apartment buildings crammed around older, tile-roofed houses. All descend to the swath of green that is the Yongsan Garrison, which is two-thirds the size of New York’s Central Park. Ringed with skyscrapers, this now-prime piece of real estate has been occupied by foreign armies – first the Japanese, then the Americans – since 1910. By year’s end, the last stages of Yongsan’s return to the Korean government will supposedly be complete. Rumour has it that the freed land will be converted from symbol of occupation to a public park with a lake where people might paddle boats over what was once a shooting range or the commissary where Americans could buy frozen dinners for \$1.99.

With the halting progress of fingers groping for a light switch in the dark of an unfamiliar room, I perceive the edges of my piece of history in this piece of city. A newfound sense of gravity tethers me to the ground beneath my feet, and I am filled with something like relief as I exchange the mythic for the real.

It’s good to be home,” I say to the unsmiling immigration official at Cape Town International Airport. He doesn’t seem particularly interested in my sense of homecoming, but I am not bothered. Something has shifted, and it occurs to me that when people ask me where I’m from, I might just save us all a lot of time and say Korea. This makes me smile as I wheel my trolley through the airport, in a rush to get home to my family.

It’s not all happily ever after though. Among the mountain of gifts I bring back for my four-year-old son are a few boxes of wafer-style cream biscuits, individually wrapped in foil packets covered in Korean writing.

This morning I slipped one into his lunchbox. When I fetch him from school at the end of the day, he asks if he can have another “China biscuit” when we get home. “Why are you calling it that? What do you think ‘China’ means?” I say, deeply disturbed by what I can only presume was a comment from another kid (about the biscuit? about him?). He can’t yet read and there is no reason for the People’s Republic to be on his radar. He has no answer. He is four, and just wants a biscuit. When we get home, I give him one, explaining that it is from Korea, like I am from Korea, meaning he too, is from Korea. “Korea, Korea, Korea,” I say.

A few days later as I’m getting him out the door for school, he again asks for “one of those biscuits.” “Which biscuit?” I respond. “The China one?” he tries. I have no idea where this is coming from but find myself enraged. “You can have one if you can remember where they are from,” I say calmly, fully aware of how badly I’m handling this. His lip trembles, and tears splash from his eyes, hitting his gumboots. “Where was mommy? Don’t you remember?” I coax, even as I know I’m doing the opposite of creating a positive association with Korea.

I feel overwhelmed by my sense of history repeating itself – by my failure to teach my son about this part of his heritage, and my ignorance around how to help him see Korea as more than just a place on a map, an abstraction underlying our difference. I promise myself I will bring him to Korea, but it feels impossibly far away.

Look what I got for you,” my son says, rushing into the house with an armful of pine boughs.

It is just three weeks after the biscuit episode, and at the last moment, I have decided to celebrate Chuseok, the lunar harvest festival and most important family holiday on the Korean calendar. Described as “Korean Thanksgiving”, it is an occasion to pay respect to one’s ancestors by way of food, including a half dozen specific dishes, most of which I have never tasted. Among these is the all-important songpyeon, or sesame and honey filled rice cakes steamed on a bed of pine needles.

I spend three days reading recipes online and scouring Cape Town’s few Asian markets to source ingredients like doenjang (fermented soy paste), chapssalgaru (sweet rice powder), and saeujeot (salty shrimp). In the process, I discover not only that the city has a small Korean community, but that they are hosting a Chuseok-like event, 10 days after the fact on South Africa’s Heritage Day.

That the option exists to celebrate Chuseok with other Koreans fills me with hope. It also makes me wonder what else I’ve missed in this city that, like all cities, keeps changing and growing. I think about the relentless layering of new over old, so much in evidence in Seoul. How that drive, with its indifference to individual memory and loss, is also what cracks things open, letting the light shine in. What flourishes from there depends, at least in part, on us.

Looking onto a sliver of a view of Table Mountain, my garden table is laden with dwaeji bulgogi (pork barbeque), homemade kimchi, a half-dozen banchan (side dishes), japchae (sweet potato noodles), and haemuljeon (seafood pancakes). This spread for the ancestors is encircled by family and friends, none Korean, but all dear. The children run riot around the garden while we feast and drink and pause to remember those who are no longer among us. When I bring out my songpyeon, they are a chewy disaster, but it doesn’t matter.

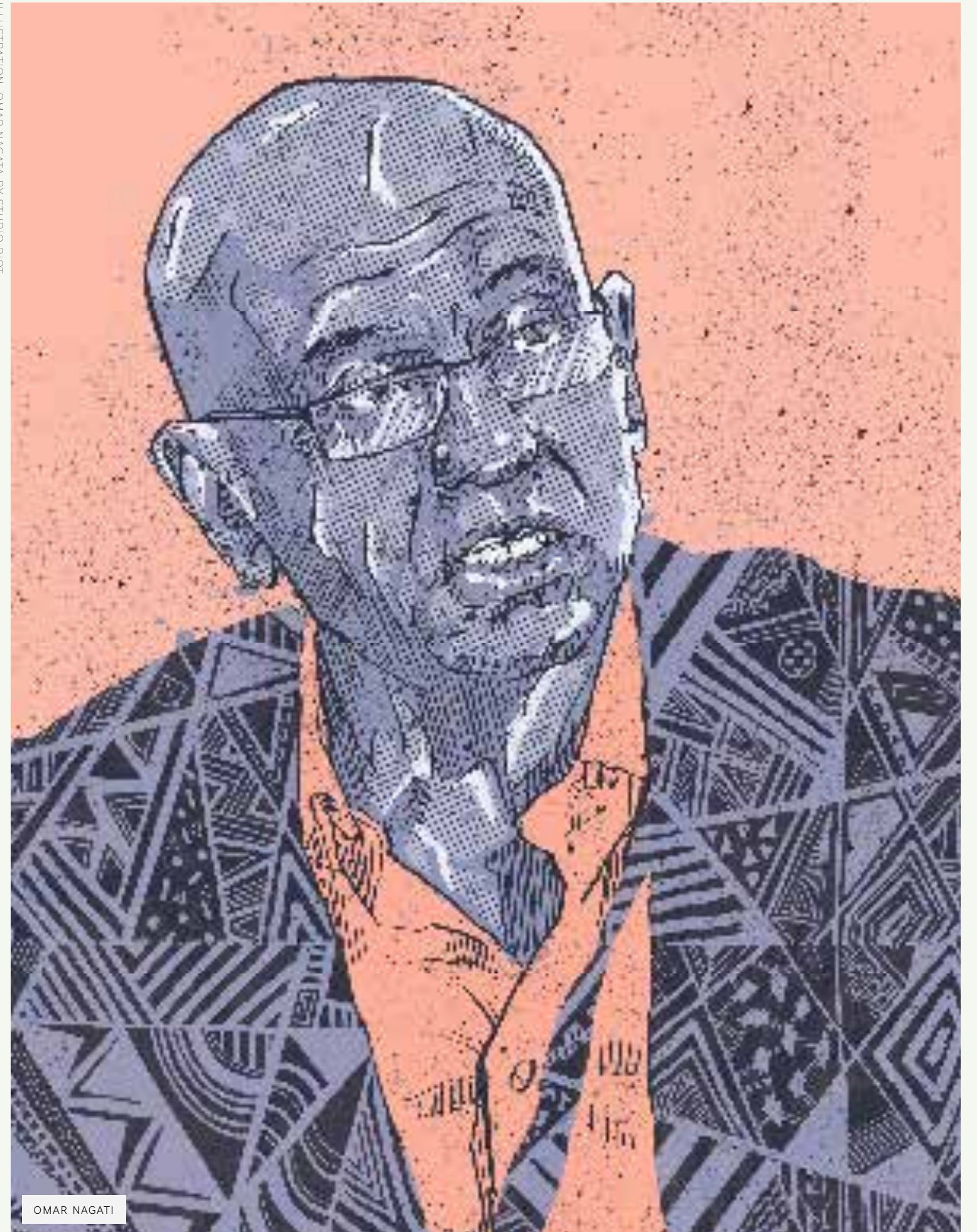
I breathe deep, awake to the possibility of a life beyond opposites 🖐️

This reporting was supported by the International Women’s Media Foundation’s Howard G Buffett Fund for women journalists.

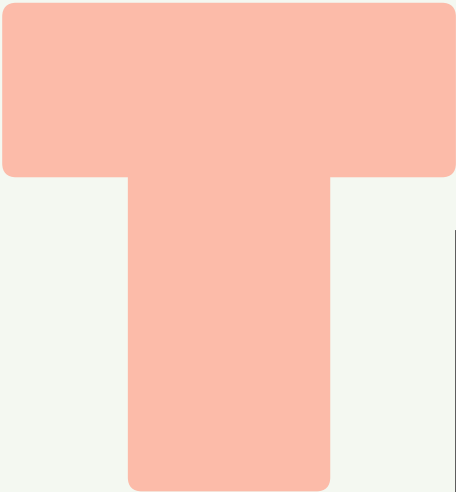
Re- imagining the city from the inside out

On the eve of the 2011 on Tahir Square, Architect and Educator **Omar Nagati** was completing a move into a newly renovated studio space a stone's throw away. As widespread protests began to gain steam, he found himself in the middle of a series of events that have defined the think-tank and research institution he went on to co-found after the revolution died down. He speaks to *Cityscapes* Editor **Tau Tavengwa** about embracing chaos and uncertainty

ILLUSTRATION: OMAR NAGATA BY STUDIO RIOT



OMAR NAGATI



au Tavengwa (TT): I wanted to start off in January 2011. It was such a pivotal moment, not only for the city but also for you and the founding of your organisation, Cluster.

Omar Nagati (ON): Yes, 2011 was a critical moment that kind of brought everything together. But I must say that for years before that, I had been interested in the question of public space – the conflicts and contestations around it. My interest goes back to my graduate studies in North America when I tried to understand what public space means in cities like Cairo and others across the region. Places where the city seems to not function according to any real formal regulation. Places where multiple things are happening, all in constant flux and constant negotiation. I had been interested in the question of informal practices from economic, anthropological, and urban historical perspectives for years. Before the revolution, when I returned to Cairo in around 2006, I joined several firms to work as an architect. It was a time of prosperity in terms of business for Cairo. I was making good money. But I was still, in the back of my mind, concerned and interested in these broader questions.

The idea of what’s since evolved into Cluster was conceived back then, but only on paper. I didn’t know exactly what it was going to be. I wrote some concepts about it being a platform for research, a local counterpart to international scholars, having a resource library, offering seminars etc. It was a bit sketchy in my mind, but I wanted to do something alternative, something that would be more grounded and outside the mainstream. It would allow me and like-minded colleagues to start to engage the city and public space in a more

meaningful and socially relevant way.

Cairo, like all other cities in the world and the region, was in a state of flux. A neo-liberal economic paradigm had taken hold. I had a few concerns and constant questions. I wondered what the role of architects and planners could be in this new economic order and how, as professionals, we could make a difference. I was trying to figure out how to come to terms with this future.

This was all percolating before the revolution started.

So, in 2010, I decided to quit and do something else with the money I had made from my work leading up to then. I found a space in Downtown, Cairo and I fell in love with it. I took a few years’ lease and began to refurbish it. I had been frequenting Downtown for ages. My friends and all my favourite hangouts were there. The city’s art scene, activists, and journalists still converge there. I was very familiar with Downtown, so I decided to establish an office there.

TT: Describe Downtown, Cairo a little bit.

ON: The culture and landscape of Downtown are complex. It also, in a way, epitomises the history of the city and the country. It was very cosmopolitan in the early 20th century. It was exclusive and became an enclave of European culture. After the nationalisation that followed independence in 1922, a lot of minorities who had lived in the area – the Italians, Greeks, Jews and Armenians – started to leave. They were losing the privileges afforded them during the colonial era.

From then, Downtown started to transform into more of a hub for locals. It still remained a place for the intellectuals but also lost some of the Europeaness it had had. Around 1970, with more economic transformation, the remaining elites also started to leave. Downtown went through a kind of flight. A process of, let’s say, degentrification where the middle- and upper middle classes began to move to new, trendy suburbs.

They were replaced by low-income communities, mostly surviving on low-income economic and other activities. What followed was a process of gradual decay and the deterioration of infrastructure because of rent control and other economic forces. If you want to adopt a nostalgic approach, by the end of the 20th century, Downtown was a shadow of its former glory.

But it was also a more democratic space. A cross section of many classes, many activities. You had not only the high-end, independent art scene, but also street vendors, small industries and crafts. There were also some middle-class civil servants. For me, Downtown was one of the most fascinating places in Cairo. It was a place of movie theatres, entertainment, coffee shops, restaurants, bars ... It evolved into one of the most diverse, but also inclusive sites in the city.

A new generation of youngsters started to “rediscover” Downtown at the turn of the millennium. They romanticised the old bars, the vintage hotels and cinemas. A revitalisation movement took place during that period.

This is the setting of what happened in 2011.

Downtown really is the backyard of Tahrir Square, its hinterland.

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Many of its inhabitants – the activists, artists and journalists – were the vanguard of what happened there. The rehearsals of the 2011 revolution, the smaller protests, were taking place in Downtown in the little alleyways and small squares before the actual revolution. That was the social and geographic setting of Downtown.

Finding an office space as I did was one of those rare moments when you really just are in the right place at the right time. I had in the back of my mind this idea of starting something. What was certain was it would be an independent urban platform. So in December 2010, I found this nice studio space and start to refurbish it. A few weeks after I finished my renovations, the whole thing erupted. It was serendipity.

TT: So, you landed in the middle of this melting pot. A place filled with these ideas. Suddenly this urban revolution, as you have referred to it, happens. One of the things that follow Tahrir Square is that there’s a transformation of public spaces across the city, more vendors on the streets, different kinds of graffiti plastered across the walls, and other forms of public expression become more defined. Explain a little bit about that process and how this transformation began to establish itself across the city.

ON: I said that there were activists, students, and artists at the start. They were an initial spark, but the revolution was much bigger than that. They were only the initial trigger. After the first couple of weeks, waves of the urban underclass started to come from the periphery to the city centre to participate, and in the process transformed Tahrir into the images that the world saw.

In the first couple of months, I was like many others. We were all just overwhelmed and, in a way, enthralled. Participation was happening without us even having a moment to reflect. Everything was just happening so fast. There was teargas, there were clashes everywhere. It was urban warfare. There were so many things happening all at once. We were just trying to keep up.

There was this exciting, emerging public sphere. You had masses of people sitting in coffee shops and discussing institutional reforms. It was as if all the literature I had read years before – ideas about change and revolution – was taking place in front of me in real time. It felt like one of those moments that happen once in a lifetime. You got lucky enough to be there and you’re seeing the city and society transformed, and you are part of it. I was overwhelmed by that.

Only about six months or so after the protests, when things started to settle down a little, I had more time to reflect. After being part of the protest every day for months, the question on my mind was: what else could we do? Again, what comes next?

The same question was being faced by filmmakers, photographers, journalists, artists, everybody. Everyone wanted to be part of the change, using their own skills.

In the first couple of years, the only thing we could do was try to make sense, to come to terms with a rapidly changing urban and political landscape

I was thinking about how we, as architects and planners, could be part of the change.

That’s when I met Beth (Stryker, cofounder of Cluster). We were introduced over Skype by a mutual friend. She was in New York. I was doing work on Cairo’s passageways, the spaces between, among other things in the studio. We quickly found this common ground. The idea of Cluster wasn’t even on the table yet. We decided to put together a series of proposals, the first of which was to do research on art in public space. At that moment, Cairo was teeming with all these new initiatives. Everybody was interested in the city and its public spaces. There were tons of initiatives and actors. There was also an incredible amount of international support for the emerging democracy.

There were also a lot of funding possibilities. So, Beth and I applied for a number of them. The first grant we were awarded was basically the seed of what is now Cluster. We had several projects in the grant proposal. One was Archiving the City in Flux, the other was Learning from Cairo, and another was a platform called Cairo Urban Initiatives Platform. That proposal was the beginning for us. The funding enabled us to hire a small team.

TT: Nine years later, what would you say your office has developed into? What sort of organisation is Cluster? You are involved in a wide range of activities; you are not necessarily an architecture studio, nor are you a planning studio.

ON: We define ourselves as an independent urban design and research platform, but our work goes beyond research and design. We develop programmes

that include conferences, web platforms and publications, and we offer training and an internship programme. Overall, action research and design intervention are the thrust of what we do.

In the first couple of years, the only thing we could do was try to make sense, to come to terms with a rapidly changing urban and political landscape. The first idea we had was capturing this moment of flux. A few months post-revolution, the state was very vulnerable and weak, and communities were very empowered. They were emboldened by the revolution and starting to reclaim the neighbourhoods and the streets. That manifested, as you said earlier, in art and graffiti, but also street vendors “taking over downtown”, as well as in more substantial infrastructure building and construction on state land. We were fascinated by this moment. We realised that this was a fleeting moment and that eventually the state would come back, and some sort of “order” would be restored. So, we wanted to capture the moment. A moment when the state was absent and the formal order was temporarily suspended.

We were interested in understanding how people could govern their own neighbourhoods. Who were the actors? What were their frames of reference, and which tools and methods would they adopt? We were interested in understanding the power they have and how it operated. So we began to measure, using different techniques, the maximised informality emerging in the absence of a formal order. Cairo is 70% informal, and most African cities are on a similar path. For us to remain relevant, we had to shift gear and be open to change the mindset, in terms

There was this exciting, emerging public sphere. You had masses of people sitting in coffee shops and discussing institutional reforms.

of education and practice. We realised that informality is not a marginal phenomenon. It’s the mainstream. It is not a state of exception. If we did not learn to deal with this reality, we’d become irrelevant ourselves.

TT: The period after the revolution has been referred to as the Restoration of Order. What was that, and how did that impact this new state of play you describe in Cairo?

ON: In the first two years after the revolution, there were endless possibilities. We could do almost anything without necessarily needing a permit or any form of approval. All we had to do was engage the relevant communities. The state was fragile. Around 2013 and 2014, there was this kind of “restoration of order”. I use this term very carefully for many reasons. Things started to turn around.

The state started to become more assertive, erasing all traces of the revolution. They began with street vending, which was one of the minor but significant manifestations of the revolution. Street vendors were symbolic of what was happening downtown. For the state to assert its power and its presence, they decided to push back against such activities and more.

That assertion of power began to define what was and wasn’t possible. In the first couple

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of years, we had been able to conduct extensive research, gathering material, mapping and driving specific processes. We could propose interventions in public spaces such as the passageways project. Suddenly things changed.

The possibilities became more and more limited, not only in terms of what you could do in public space itself but in terms of your practice. There are many laws and regulations governing what you can publish, what is legal in terms of NGOs, media and financial restrictions, and foreign funding, so all kinds of things suddenly started to become restricted.

So, our practice started to respond to that by shifting and we became a little more careful about how to frame our work to become ostensibly less political and more technical. We had to develop these tactics without any blueprints. We were just responding, trying to be resilient. These were survival strategies.

TT: As Cluster, you guys are making both policy and design recommendations as part of your work. Who are these recommendations aimed at? The communities you are working in or the state? What is your relationship with the communities that you work in, and with the government? How does the constant state of flux you described earlier determine how you deal with these constituencies? Who are your constituencies in the first place?

ON: Each project has been different. Early on, we positioned Cluster as a platform, a middle ground, and a broker between multiple stakeholders. That’s a theme that comes and goes all the time.

As for our constituencies, I’d say there are about three of them. The authorities – the city, local authority, or national government are one. In Downtown, it’s the private sector and real estate investors. Third are local residents and the broader community, including street vendors and everyone else. Between the three positions, we try to always negotiate a common ground so that whatever we propose is something that is at least agreeable with a little bit of concession from each side. Since the beginning, we have been responding to a condition where the city and the political process is going through processes of, let’s say, a zero-sum, extreme polarisation. Everything is black or white. Either street vendors are entirely left alone or evicted; the revolution is completely taking over, or it’s totally repressed.

In 2013, we had the religious extreme, and we had this authoritarian alternative. As a third space, as civil society, we are trying to find a third position where we can negotiate a middle ground. This middle ground is reflected in our recommendations.

Whether design or policy, our recommendations are targeted at peer-practitioners – planners, architects, even educators. We are also addressing policymakers like city-level authorities. We are trying to adopt a language that is not too pedantic and not overly technical. We are aspiring to develop a language that is also accessible to the mainstream, something students and the general layperson can understand.

I must say that at Cluster, unlike other actors on the scene, our work is less related to policy recommendations. We only do that every once in a while. Our main strategy is piloting.

We develop a framework, and then from this, we propose a small-scale implementation to showcase and demonstrate what is typically an alternative to what’s in the mainstream. Rather than write a policy paper, we prefer to build something on the ground and showcase it. This way, people can critique, engage with it, and explore how and whether they can do something similar or better elsewhere.

TT: So building is essential, and demonstration is a core part of the passageways project you have been working on for a while now. Let’s switch to that. Why have these alleyways been important for Cluster? Why did you choose them as a long term project and how have you have tackled them?

ON: The passageway or space in between, is, for me personally, always fascinating. It aligns with my near-obsession with negotiation or mediation as a mode of operation in life. Downtown has about 150 alleyways, depending of course on how you define them. Over time, they have evolved into something pretty complex. The network is not limited to the pre-designed commercial passage but includes setbacks between buildings, narrow streets that have become informally pedestrianised, and some streets that were pedestrianised officially by the state in the mid-90s. All together they form an intricate system of pedestrian paths from one end to the other. The alleyways are intriguing for many reasons. They are symbolic because they represent not only a physical gap but also space between the public and private spheres, which is something of great interest to us. They represent the distance between the formal, capital A Architecture, and informal vernacular expressions on

the ground. Lastly, they are also spaces of transition and the threshold between two conditions or two orders. So, the back alley is really the more interesting and inclusive form of public space.

We decided to use them as an entry point to reimagine the city’s Downtown area, the city from the inside out. Through its fissures, through the gaps, as opposed to the main armature. Also, metaphorically, particularly in a time when the revolution had failed and the possibility of a wholesale revolution had faded, we were confronted with the possibility of reform or working within the loopholes, the gaps in the system.

It’s both a geographical and political position of practice. The alleyways have challenged us to imagine a way to work with the already active as opposed to only thinking about confronting the whole system and subversively working within it. The passageways project is now six years old. What started out as a student project has evolved into something much more.

The stakeholders in these alleyways range from street vendors to shop owners and residents. You have big developers, women’s rights groups, and environmental groups as well as heritage protection groups. You even have the traffic police and security officials as stakeholders. It’s a broad spectrum of interests. After we mapped out who the different stakeholders are at the neighbourhood level, at city level we undertook an extensive interview process before we started the design process. We sought the opinions of representatives from each stakeholder position so we could understand their concerns. We realised quickly that

there are many conflicts and contradictions between these positions. These are based on class, gender and cultural background, among other things. We concluded that if our intervention could do only one thing, it should be to facilitate negotiation of the extreme differences we were finding. Remember that the context in which this is happening is one in which Cairo doesn't have some of what it used to in terms of resource and governance. Of course, the city was dysfunctional before the revolution, but since the revolution, there is still no city council. There are no formal participatory processes of any kind.

We saw this as an opportunity to develop and test an alternative model of local governance and democracy. We listened carefully to what everyone wanted and noted the areas in which they differed sharply. Out of this, we developed a design brief with which we challenged the design team to come up with a concept; a proposal whereby the essential streetscape elements, such as the bench and the tree and the lamp-post, became sites to negotiate these differences.

What we're trying to do is to develop a design framework where space becomes an active agent for a political resolution, offering an opportunity for a type of urban diplomacy, with trade-offs and concessions that enable everybody to get something. Everybody gets something; nobody gets 100%, and nobody gets zero.

TT: One thing that's always puzzled me is how a lot of people talk about informality in a way that sometimes flattens entire communities and strips them of whatever complexity they might hold. It's easy to universally

assume that just because you share a piece of ground, you harbour the same concerns and have aligned interests. I think what you are saying is that you have to find ways, as with this project, to deal with the complexity of each community – relationships, expectations.

You can't assume that everyone shares generic interests and that consensus exists on everything. You have done quite extensive work on two of the passageways – Kodak and Phillips. Whoever the state is now since there is no formal city government, how have they responded to these interventions? Do they see what you are doing as a threat to their authority or as doing something necessary? Do they support this work? How have you managed the tensions that come from not having clearly defined power structures and a set of rules to clearly follow? That's got to be tricky.

ON: We did it in quite sneaky ways. We had to be smart. As I said, part of the exercise is how to engage each stakeholder in a language that they understand. We wanted to create a little rapport with everybody as opposed to creating antagonism and confrontation. We had to gain trust and approval because the alleyways are public space. So, we had to get buy-in from the city authority as much as from those who live and work in the alleyways.

We told them, "Your Excellency, we're interested in developing Downtown, and we want to beautify it" – using the language that they wanted to hear. "It's also not going to cost you anything because we're bringing this support from the Danish Embassy, but it has to be under your umbrella." We pushed all the right buttons so they could feel that they owned the project. We didn't

talk about the democratisation of public spaces or engaging the multiple stakeholders. You don't bring this language. You talk about aesthetics, about beauty, about greening, etc. That's how we found common ground, in the language we used, without compromising our principles.

Of course, we had to make some concessions. For example, we had a big screen in one of the passageways to have public screenings. This idea was immediately shut down for security reasons, so we had to take that bit away. They had objections about benches from one of the private developers, and we had to tweak the design to make it look like a lighting fixture. Some of the shops were against putting up trees. So at every step, we had to make little compromises and concessions. But at the end of the day, when the project opened, everyone came together and was very proud of it.

When we worked on the Kodak passage, we wanted to capitalise on the role of art and culture as a catalyst. What would be the impact of cultural activities on the type of users and actors who would populate this passageway? That was one of Beth's main contributions because she has this extensive experience as an art curator. She's more sensitive to that scene and mode of practice than I am. So, we did a project to renovate some of the storefronts overlooking Kodak Passageway as part of a month-long exhibition by the artist Hassan Khan. That exhibition became a key milestone for us. Its success gave us the confidence that we could be more ambitious, and not limit the intervention to a storefront of private property, but actually, spill over into public space and do something.

TT: Has there been any attempt to adapt or replicate this as a model of what could be done with the remaining 148 or so alleyways?

ON: We have tried, but it's not been easy. There are a lot of factors at play. For a start, the passageways project could happen when it did because we secured the funding for it. It was another case of being in the right place at the right time. There have been several passageway developments that the city has undertaken, but they commissioned other consultants they chose to work with.

They copied some of our ideas, such as having the distinction between the main and sub-alleys, the greening, and even creating a management board for each passageway, which are all things we implemented in the original work. Even though we were not commissioned to intervene in other passages, I think that, in some way, the ideas we developed were influential for these more significant projects. One of the ideas we had initially was to have these pathways become a network for art and culture, greenways, bike lanes, book fairs. Some of these ideas are now slowly beginning to happen. We are currently involved in a project to construct bike lanes downtown. So we're still building on some of the initiatives.

We are content in operating with the awareness that things don't move linearly. You have to accept that there is a larger system at play which is beyond your control. You also have to be a little sensitive to the priorities, the shifting landscape, knowing who the decision-makers are, what their priorities are. Continuously working to salvage bits and pieces and fit them together is critical.

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it’s good that the state is finally taking notice and investing in the city, in road networks or new housing projects. On the other hand, why are we putting this investment outside? Why are we leaving the city to rot, deciding to start from scratch elsewhere?

TT: This new project – developing a network of bike lanes across the city – brings me to the next conversation I wanted to have with you. Cairo – the city at large – is both famous and infamous for various things. It’s a massive, awe-inspiring and chaotic yet ancient city. It’s gained some notoriety for its urban sprawl; it’s highly informal too. Cairo is trying to find ways to deal with challenges that a lot of global south cities are dealing with.

What, in your view, are the primary challenges the city faces? What other kinds of experiments, if any, are being undertaken at scale in an attempt to figure out some of the city’s problems? Who are the key actors shaping Cairo, at least formally, today?

Recently there has been talk of building a new capital. What do you say to that?

ON: These are very complex questions. I don’t know where to even begin. But I think if you want to give a broad-brush characterisation, the main issues facing Cairo are twofold. One is its sheer size and overpopulation and what comes with that – traffic, pollution, and housing problems ... Like any other megacity, we are faced with the issues of scale.

Another big problem is governance and where to allocate investment. The past three decades or so, after the neo-liberal turnaround in the mid-1970s, the state started to withdraw from housing, from transportation, from health, from education. During those years, we had massive development of informal housing, of self-built neighbourhoods, which make up around 70% of the city now. The past decade or so, there’s been an attempt to address that. The idea of building a new

capital is a very contentious one. If you think about it, Cairo has a history of attempts to leave the old behind and build new settlements. There have always been these attempts to leave. Egypt, geographically, is a very narrow valley of fertile land, with the rest being desert. There’s always been pressure to address such scarcity.

City planners and some politicians want to move outside this narrow valley and build outside so that they don’t build on that fertile land. There’s something positive about taking the density out of the concentrated valley and opening up. In principle, it’s not bad.

But the question is how to do it, when and at whose expense. It’s also essential to figure out who makes the decisions and who is included in the process. These to me are the most relevant questions. It’s not just about whether to build a new city or not: it’s the process.

In terms of who the decision-makers and the key actors are, it’s mostly a very top-down approach right now. Decision-making is very centralised. There’s an alternative argument that if you put this investment into areas that are built informally across Cairo, you would get a better return. These existing informal settlements are already pretty dense and already have an easy connection to the city.

I would add that there is also this paradox. Yes, it’s good that the state is finally taking notice and investing in the city, in road networks or new housing projects. On the other hand, why are we putting this investment outside? Why are we leaving the city to rot, deciding to start from scratch elsewhere?

It is good that finally the state is putting itself back and investing in urban development and infrastructure. But how can we advise the policymakers, the decision-makers to allocate at least part of this huge investment to Cairo itself and work to make it more viable and more liveable rather than leaving its city centre to deteriorate?

TT: In June 2019, South Africa’s president announced that one big project he would like to see is the country building a new city. It was astonishing to me that this was something that he felt the country needed. There seems to be this idea that rather than deal with what’s there, we can just leave it behind and start anew. To me, this seems like just avoiding dealing with the problem. There is a long history of this – Brasilia, Abuja, Chandigarh. Eventually, the reality you were running from catches up with you. Cairo, as you said, has had its share of this multiple times.

Egypt interestingly has been the largest of these North African countries that hold this middle space between the Middle East and the rest of Africa. In some way, it’s been looked at as embracing the Middle East more than it has sub-Saharan Africa. It seems Cluster has started actively trying to make connections to sub-Saharan Africa. Why have you felt that’s necessary? What have those engagements been like? Where do you hope they will go?

ON: There’s a strategic decision that we made a few years ago. Working locally is becoming more and more difficult, so we wanted to extend or expand our work regionally. We have projects in Beirut, Aman and Tunis for example, as part of our knowledge dissemination and library platform. But also, we have started looking at cities and

collaborations across Africa. The principle of looking at Africa and the global south, for me, is critical. In most of the projects that we have had, by virtue of the funding coming from Germany, the UK, Denmark, or the US, we have almost exclusively invited and collaborated with architects and artists from the north. We have struggled, for example, to make a connection between a public space in art and politics in Copenhagen and Cairo.

Sometimes it becomes so absurd because in many ways we have the inverse of what we find over there, where it’s over-regulated and there’s a lot of state support. So, we contrive parallels just because the funding requires that.

When you go to cities like Dar es Salaam or Lusaka, Abidjan and Joburg, or Karachi and Delhi, you quickly find these places are relevant to your own experience and conditions are very, very similar. They’re not exactly the same. Communities in these places are fully engaged in public space. People are out there. They are trying to figure out how to organise, how to regulate, how to negotiate. So, working in a few cities across Africa has been very inspiring. They are moving very fast. Much faster than Cairo, which is almost stable by comparison. Cairo is in a state of relatively consolidated informality already.

The African cities I’ve been to are changing fast as a result of new investments coming in. Some of what is happening there, Cairo has already experienced, so it’s familiar terrain to us. So, one is almost looking at parallel processes within a different kind of context. I think there are things that we have developed in Cairo from our work that could be shared, but there’s also enormous potential to learn from other cities across the global south 🖐

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PHOTO BY BY JAHl CHIKWENDU/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES



Juba Express, a money transfer office in Jubba, South Sudan

MORE THAN JUST MONEY

For the first time in recorded history, remittances have become the largest source of direct foreign investment in the developing world

ROBERT NEUWIRTH

Everyone knows how it is: he who has the gold makes the rules. Money breeds more money, and having it is power.

People cling to these clichés because they help to explain everything terrible in the world. They provide a natural “explanation” for the resource curse and outrageous corporate tax deals. They explain the enduring vestiges of empire that enable former colonial powers

like France to have what seems like an everlasting influence on its former vassals across Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. This helps us make sense of the enduring economic power of the white minority in South Africa, and insidious white privilege in the United States and across Europe. The clichés also rationalise China’s supremacy as a trading partner. All these ideas are based on perceptions of who holds the wealth.

Now there’s a challenge to these maxims, and it comes from an unusual place – the global diaspora.

This year, for the first time since economists started keeping data, remittances – money that refugees, political and economic migrants and other displaced peoples who have migrated abroad, send back to their home countries – will account for more money going into developing world countries than either foreign direct investment or development aid. The staggering amount exceeds \$550bn in total, according to the World Bank. However, this number only includes the remittances we know about – those sent through banks, traditional transfer firms like Western Union and MoneyGram, or digital startups like WorldRemit and others. It excludes the unknown number of cash-filled envelopes people smuggle across borders, the multiple Islamic hawala transactions and below-the-radar transfers that go on almost everywhere, as well as the in-kind donations made with products, not money.

A recent study by FinMark Trust, a South African non-governmental organisation dedicated to financial inclusion, suggests that informal transactions may account for a considerable share of remittances, particularly in insecure and conflict zones. For instance, more than 80% of the remittances sent to the Democratic Republic of the Congo are undocumented transfers, FinMark’s data shows. In a way, the fact that remittances will, for the first time, be the most critical source of money from abroad for people in the developing world is a triumph of ordinary people, those who never dreamed they could hold any real power. But this power brings with it some unexpected concerns. “There’s a political impact of remittances,” says Chipo Dendere, Assistant Professor

of Political Science in the Africana Studies Department at Wellesley College. “Remittances are providing a lifeline to authoritarian countries. Because the governments are so crappy, there is this focus on individual development – and remittances have tended to be very, very personal.” The net effect: remittances support individual family members, but that very help tends to sustain political repression.

At one point during the height of problems in her home country, Zimbabwe, Dendere publicly suggested that people in the diaspora consider holding a one-week remittance strike – a gesture that, though it could create some short-term individual hardship, would also help cripple the regime. The response from some of her countrymen, she recounts, was overwhelmingly negative. She was forced to take her post off the internet. “You want me to kill my parents,” she recalls one person responding.

Dendere also notes that the usefulness of remittances has been hit hard by inflation. “It used to be that I could send a couple of thousand dollars, and people could start to build a house or buy a car,” she says. That’s not possible anymore. As costs rise, remittances become more about survival than sustainability.

When Lemma Senbet, Professor of Finance at the University of Maryland, left Ethiopia for the US more than four decades back, Haile Selassie was still emperor. Because of the political situation in the country, Senbet didn’t return to Ethiopia for 17 years. Nonetheless, he continued to send money to his region and family as a private gesture of support and connection. “Remittances tend to be

disparate,” he says, “There’s no synergy, nothing that creates collaboration.”

Now, he’s part of an effort to change that.

Just three months after he took office, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed issued a challenge to the migrants who had fled the country and moved to the West. Abiy (who would go on to win the 2019 Nobel peace prize) was not well-known in the diaspora. He had stealthily worked his way up the ranks of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, the four-party coalition that has run the country for decades, but he was not a recognisable face of the ruling clique. When he became prime minister, he challenged his country’s diaspora – Ethiopia is Africa’s second-largest country, and its diaspora is proportionately huge – to bring their money home. “If we could get \$1m dollars a day from the estimated 3 million diaspora Ethiopians,” he said in a speech to the House of People’s Representatives in July 2018, “we could generate \$30m a month.” That was the seed of what is now called the Ethiopia Diaspora Trust Fund. The idea, says Senbet, who sits on the Trust’s Advisory Board, is to raise money from Ethiopians all over the world to make donations to worthy programmes. “We don’t invest,” he says. “Our target is inclusivity of growth.”

In its first year, the organisation – incorporated in the US and Ethiopia as a non-profit – has raised \$5m from more than 25,000 donors in 77 countries. While this is a far cry from the amount that could be raised at a dollar a day from all the Ethiopians living abroad (that would bring in more than 200 times as much), the fund’s organisers pronounce themselves

satisfied – though it should be noted that, in the coming year, they are planning to pitch to high net-worth individuals, including non-Ethiopians, to make donations to the fund.

“If you had asked me four years ago – or even two years ago – to take part in this, I would have said you are crazy,” says Bisrat Aklilu, an independent development advisor who formerly worked for the United Nations (UN). He serves as treasurer and a member of the Advisory Board of the Diaspora Trust. Like many in the diaspora, he was an opponent of the regime that previously ran the country, and he feels lucky to have left the country when he did. “If I had remained there, I am sure I would have been killed,” he says.

With the pledge that the Diaspora Trust will be independent, transparent, and totally separate from government, those previously in opposition were won over. The government doesn’t even pay for any of the Trust’s administrative costs. Instead, for the first three years of its operation, it is being funded by the UN. “The structure is totally independent of ethnicity, of ideology, of religion,” Senbet stresses. The Trust has already solicited applications for its first round of grants and received close to 400 applications, almost 10 times the number expected. It intends to allocate the money to recipients by the end of the year. “The idea is to spend what we have,” Aklilu says, “as long as you’re sure you have credible projects to spend it on.”

“Ultimately, what we want to do is to show a different way of working,” he adds. “We want people to demand transparency from the government. This is not a one- or two-year

Remittances are providing a lifeline to authoritarian countries

DR CHIPO DENDERE

thing. We’re establishing it as intergenerational. Irrespective of what happens with the government, this should continue.”

Other countries are paying attention. Aklilu says he has been contacted by many expat groups, including from the small Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, who feel that their region alone, with a population of around 50 million, could benefit from a similar diaspora trust fund. “Maybe we should trademark our infrastructure,” Senbet suggests jokingly.

Of course, it’s one thing for professors of finance and consultants to the UN to talk about donating to a trust fund. It’s something different for the average immigrant to actually do it. Many immigrants struggle to survive in their adopted countries, often sacrificing the education they have in pursuit of a livelihood that enables them to survive. What’s more, with the Trump administration’s antipathy towards immigrants in the US, contributing to a non-profit might be seen as inordinately risky.

Take for instance the situation of a man who came to New York decades ago from Africa’s largest country, Nigeria, which receives more than \$24.3bn in remittances. This amounts to \$127 for every person in the country and accounts for 6% of Nigeria’s gross domestic product. Now 47, he came to New York to study chemistry at Columbia University. After graduation, his plan was to go straight to medical school, but it didn’t work out that way. Something happened. He is not specific, saying only, “I messed up my sleeping habit, and the brain shut down.” Although he got his degree, he never applied for graduate school. For a while, he

Nigeria, which receives more than \$24.3bn in remittances. This amounts to \$127 for every person in the country and accounts for 6% of Nigeria’s gross domestic product

was involved in various import/export schemes, but ran afoul of Nigeria’s restrictive import laws. And so he spends most of every day on the sidewalk in front of the iconic Empire State Building on Fifth Avenue, dressed in a red suit. His job is to cajole tourists into buying overpriced tickets to special tour buses that will take them around New York without their ever having to ride the subway. He works on a commission-only basis and has no guaranteed salary or any benefits. He likes it this way. “If you are good,” he tells me, “there are some who make \$200 a day. It depends on your ability to stop people and your ability to get people to trust you.”

Despite the length of time he has been in New York, his education, and even the fact that he holds a green card and is a legal immigrant, he refuses to give his full name, preferring to be known only as “Peter”, because, he suggests, he doesn’t want to draw attention to himself. Like most immigrants in the US, he doesn’t want to speak of remittances – of course, people send money home, he said. Instead, he wants to talk about the anti-immigrant sentiment being stoked by Trump. “Immigrants didn’t take American jobs,” he says. “What took American jobs were robotisation and outsourcing.” He points to a round metal plate in the middle of Fifth Avenue. “The contract for that manhole was outsourced to India because it was cheaper.” He offers a bottom-up view of the importance of immigrants to people in the US: “Immigrants take care of the kids at home so people can go work. In this way, you can say that immigrants employ Americans, not the other way around. Immigrants keep Americans employed.” Anyway, he adds, “most of these people who are talking about

immigrants, their grandparents themselves were immigrants”. He shrugs. “You always blame the weakest link. And the weakest link here is immigrants.” Peter turns philosophical. “Culture is the way of life of a people. And racism is American culture. Whether you like it or not, it is the way of the people.” He shrugs, pausing to sell another bus ticket at a deep discount. Better to get some commission than none at all, he says. “There is a form of discrimination in every culture.”

Another Nigerian selling tickets for the same tourist buses, who asked to be referred to only as “Pastor Micah”, worked in a microfinance bank in Lagos until the business collapsed in 2016. He arrived in New York a year ago and may well be the only street vendor in the city who can cite the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow. “In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs,” Pastor Micah tells me, “food, shelter, and security come before self-actualisation. I can’t be thinking of the moon when I need shelter.” Then he laughingly admits that his everyday life consists of only three things – “work-house-church” – all quite low on Maslow’s list.

He says selling bus tickets to tourists on the streets is not all that different from working in the street markets of Lagos. “If I compared it to the credit and mortgage business I was in, I would say that here, sometimes we need to push, we need to show charisma, swagger, whatever, to attract customers.” Peter and Pastor Micah are busy hustling on the streets of New York. Their biggest concern is survival, not sending money back to their families in Nigeria. Other immigrant groups have severe conditions in their homeland to worry about.

In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, food, shelter, and security come before self-actualisation. I can’t be thinking of the moon when I need shelter

PASTOR MICAH

You could see this at a series of demonstrations outside the UN on 25 September 2019, while the General Assembly was in session. It was a party atmosphere but also a serious war of words. Two groups from Guinea had to be separated by police lines. One supported President Alpha Condé, the other denounced him. A large and raucous contingent of members of the Rosario family held incongruous signs asking Trump to pressure the government of the Dominican Republic to return a multibillion-dollar fortune allegedly stolen from their forebears and locked away in secret Swiss bank vaults. Yet another boisterous crew consisted of Nigerians from the country’s south-eastern region’s Igbo tribe. They were loudly advocating for the re-establishment of Biafra, the breakaway republic that seceded from Nigeria in 1967. This action led to a brutal two-and-a-half-year civil war, during which millions of people starved to death. The smallest group in the line – so small you could miss it among the long metal barricades that lined 47th Street – consisted of 20 Mauritians. They were protesting the continued discrimination against black Africans in their desert country. Some came from as far away as Ohio to make their statement at the UN.

Mauritania, which was subject to a military coup in 2008, is ruled by the Arabic-speaking sects that constitute a minority of the population. In the June 2019 election, the opposition split, running several candidates on the assumption that tactically, no single party could win an outright majority, and they would cobble together a coalition for the second round of voting. The second round never came because the ruling party, which has held power since the 2008 coup, simply declared victory,

asserting it won 52% of the vote. With the armed forces occupying the streets of Nouakchott and other cities, the opposition determined not to protest, though it still terms the contest a stolen election.

“Mauritania is always a country of risk,” says Bakary Tandia, an activist from Brooklyn who led the rally at the UN. Just a few weeks before the rally, Tandia had his passport confiscated and was detained at the Nouakchott airport. Although he was released within a few hours and got his documents back, he suggests that this might not be the case for a lesser-known member of the Mauritanian diaspora. “While I was at the airport, people were already on social media, asking why I was being detained. Imagine what could happen to an ordinary person who arrives without people knowing.”

For Tandia and others at the rally, a diaspora fund like the one Ethiopia has established does not even come up in thought. Their attitude toward remittances is similar to that of the people from Zimbabwe who complained about the idea of a remittance strike: this money is essential because it helps to keep desperate Mauritanian families alive. Perhaps the most significant challenge to using global remittances as a tool for development is the fact that the money transfer business is primarily private and for profit. Private firms are mostly responsible for the transfer fees agents charge remittance senders to move their money around the world. The World Bank reports that the average global charge levied by remittance transfer agents is around 7% of the cash transferred – which would mean that those remittance businesses will generate approximately \$38.5bn in revenues in 2019 alone.

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In fact, the high cost of sending remittances is critiqued in the UN Sustainable Development Goals. By 2030, the UN has committed to “reduce to less than 3% the transaction costs of migrant remittances and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5%.” That would be a revolutionary change, liberating \$22bn currently collected by the remittance firms and restoring it to people in developing countries.

The UN, unfortunately, doesn’t say what to do to implement the change. But there’s a possible way forward for the global agency to study.

Over the past three years, Shoprite Holdings, the African supermarket chain, has established a remittance programme between South Africa and Lesotho that charges a fee of only 2%. Senders drop off their remittances at a Shoprite in South Africa, and the recipients can pick it up at a Shoprite in Lesotho. FinMark Trust, which

helped establish the programme, says people have transferred R1bn (\$67m) and saved R80m (\$5m) in fees over the past three years. The service is obviously limited: people who are not located near a Shoprite store (488 of its stores are in South Africa; with another 177 thinly spread throughout the continent), or who live in countries where Shoprite doesn’t operate, are excluded from this initiative. Still, the current plan calls for expanding the programme to Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, and Eswatini.

Another matter the UN could tackle is countries that put a hefty tax on remittances to bolster their coffers. Some governments are desperate for cash and, according to local anecdotes, can siphon off as much as 40% of each amount sent through banks and other official channels in taxes. That, of course, forces people to move their money in secret. Taking on this issue could both encourage good governance and bring money transfers back into the open.

And here’s an idea for countries where people send remittances: offer a tax break to companies that dedicate a percentage of the fees they collect to a fund that would support non-partisan efforts to end human trafficking or slavery, and which promotes struggles to end oppression and boost transparency.

There’s no shortage of ideas as to how remittances can power an economic revolution from below. As the Ethiopians have done with the Diaspora Trust Fund, nations have to liberate their communities to figure out how to harness these assets 🖐

GANG RELATED

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA & MANAGUA, NICARAGUA

The parallels and differences between gang life, organisation, and activity in Cape Town and Managua are as stark as they are fascinating. They reveal sophisticated methods and institutions whose appeal goes beyond desperation and a penchant for violence by members. **Edgar Pieterse** spoke to **Steffen Jensen** and **Dennis Rodgers**, two academics who have collectively dedicated more than 3 decades studying the phenomenon in Lavender Hill and Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández*respectively

* This is a pseudonym employed by Dennis Rodgers in his work for confidentiality reasons

(Edgar Pieterse): Cities are shaped by an endless cycle of movement or desire to move someplace else, often in pursuit of opportunities or to escape the grind of everyday life. In the popular social imaginary, this usually involves rural to urban migration or conflict-induced displacement. You have been doing some pretty exciting work on the complexities of urban identities concerning gang cultures in two very distinct cities in the global south: Managua in Nicaragua and Cape Town in South Africa. Both reveal other dimensions of mobility, paths, and immobility.

DR (Dennis Rodgers): Movement and passageways and immobility have varied a lot over time in Managua. If you look at the city's historical development, it grew exponentially from 50,000 to 400,000 inhabitants in the 1940s to 1950s to 1960s through classic rural-urban migration spurred by industrialisation. In 1972, however, it was hit by an earthquake that killed 20,000 people and destroyed about 80% of its infrastructure. This led to a lot of local movement within the city in the years afterward as the urban fabric reorganised. Then during the 1980s, the civil war that afflicted Nicaragua led to new forms of rural-urban migration, which swelled the city to over 1 million inhabitants.

Over the past two decades, there's been much less movement both to and within the city. The city has also transformed spatially, becoming extremely dense and saturated. The only form of "getting away," in many ways, is now international migration. Nicaragua is a country that has a considerable amount of out-migration. About 20% of Nicaraguans live outside the country. Many Nicaraguans have left for Costa Rica and the US

although increasingly, also to Spain, and many of them have moved from Managua.

SJ (Steffen Jensen): This is a complicated question when it comes to Cape Town. There are so many different kinds of movement going on there. In recent fieldwork, I've been looking at three distinct, but very interesting groups of people, who have very different trajectories, all sharing the same space: the "coloured"* group of the townships; black South Africans with generation-long allegiances to the Eastern Cape province; and immigrants – foreign nationals – from across the African continent. Some of the movement is resource-based, some a result of conflict-induced forms of displacement. I ended up with those three because that's just the makeup of the research site Dennis and I are working on at the moment. Each group represents about a third of the population.

They have very specific forms of claims and histories. For example, many of the coloureds refer to themselves as “backyarders”. Before arriving on the site, they lived in makeshift structures in the backyards of formal public housing, in precarious sleeping arrangements in the homes of relatives, or moved from place to place. In this way, they have been displaced from the prospect of a formal house. This is a second-order displacement following the original forced removals back in the days of the Group Areas Act during high apartheid in the 1960s to 1970s.

We have been trying to follow some individuals in this group and track their movement back in time. This suggests that the kind of immobility we often see in the townships is mostly relevant for what we could call

ILLUSTRATION: PATRICK LATIMER





*The term “coloured” is an official racial designation referring to people with a multiracial heritage in South Africa. Racial designations are maintained to track historical redress according to the South African govenment

“front-yarders”: the people who actually own or have claims to their houses.

Those with roots in the Eastern Cape have followed very traditional rural to urban trajectories. I’m sure it is not always like this, but our interviewees maintained solid links to the Eastern Cape. No-one we interviewed in these projects had any certainty that they would remain in Cape Town, so there is a form of circular migration going on at the same time as this groups’ occupation in Cape Town is absolutely permanent.

The third type of migration comes from the rest of Africa. This has everything to do with the historical fact that the whole of Southern Africa has always been part of one economy. With the coming to power of the ANC in 1994, there was nationalisation of that Southern African economy, and that has meant people increasingly have come in in informal ways. This is also the case in our field site. Some are asylum seekers; some come, as they say, “with a passport”. A turn of phrase that can mean

different kinds of things. In most cases, this group has almost no rights. They have no right to the forms of resources and incomes that come via the social grant system, for example. This introduces a very different kind of dynamic.

EP: So, just to clarify, Steffen, that these three groups all coexist in this one research site? Also, Dennis, from your perspective, what is the cultural and social makeup of your research site? Help me get a clear context of the two neighbourhoods, Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in Managua and Lavender Hill in Cape Town.

SJ: Yes, the groups coexist, or rather, they live parallel lives. One of the questions we’ve been trying to ask over the last couple of years is: what are the interfaces or entanglements between these different ways of doing stuff? There are very different ways to cope ... It’s not cultural. It’s based much more on the imperatives of everyday survival. The coloured population, which has been displaced from within the city of Cape Town, have solid family

links in other townships in the city. That means that coping is, to a considerable extent, about how to activate those kinds of networks in ways that are really, often, very contentious. That’s because lots of those that they want to try to evoke kinship relations to don’t want to know of them anymore.

EP: Dennis, I was curious about your research site. What kind of stratification do you see within that community, or is it much more homogenous?

DR: So, I’ve been working for over 20 years in a poor neighbourhood of Managua that, in my writing, I call barrio Luis Fanor Hernández (this is a pseudonym). It’s definitely much more homogenous than the community in Cape Town that Steffen works in.

Historically, it was one of the most impoverished squatter settlements in Managua when it was founded in the 60s and through the 70s. During the 80s, it was rebuilt under the auspices of the Sandinista revolutionary government’s urban reconstruction and development programme but nevertheless remained within the bottom quintile of neighbourhoods in the city.

In terms of social makeup, it was relatively homogeneous when I first arrived there in 1996. There have, however, been processes of socio-economic stratification at play, mainly due to the rise of drug dealing in the early 2000s. Drug dealing led to gentrification in the neighbourhood as a result of the emergence of a local “narco-bourgeoisie”.

Although the drug dealing has moved on from the neighbourhood, it has left traces, particularly infrastructurally. So you have a community where

Although the drug dealing has moved on from the neighbourhood, it has left traces, particularly infrastructurally.

about 60% of the houses remain prefabricated wooden structures that are more often than not falling apart; they have not been maintained. But the other 40% are usually much more beautiful concrete houses, generally painted in bright and flashy fashion, which include features such as crystal chandeliers, Louis XIV Rococo mirrors inside, and so on.

A significant difference vis-à-vis the community that Steffen works in Cape Town is that racially, barrio Luis Fanor Hernández is very homogenous. This is partly because racial issues play a very different role, or are very different, in Nicaragua compared to South Africa.

EP: Dennis, you mentioned this idea of “narco-bourgeoisie” – a phrase which suggests that the investment that flows into the neighbourhood is through drug-related economies. Drug economies often go hand-in-hand with violence, for example, in the form of gangs. Could you both speak about how the threat of insecurity and fear shape and structure everyday life in these two neighbourhoods?

SJ: Absolutely. I think that the fear of violence is central to everything that goes on

in this particular Cape Town neighbourhood. It’s not the same all over the city, but it is fundamental for people that live here. Though the sources of fear are often the same, it’s being understood and experienced very differently across the three groups I mentioned earlier.

For the migrants from the rest of Africa, it is a daily hassle to live through an obvious extortion economy. As one person said to me: “We are money.” And that is true in a very real sense. They’re not only being robbed. They’re also being forced into participating in a rent-share economy where they’re the ones that are bringing the money into a rental economy that is, I think, only second to the drug industry. People who have some kind of claim to land on which people have settled informally have the ability to extort rent from occupants, mostly African migrants.

As we’ve also seen in Johannesburg over the last couple of weeks [September 2019], the threat of xenophobic violence is constant. Every time there is trouble, migrants experience heightened fear that it will turn into xenophobic violence, and their concerns are often justified. So there is a broader threat of insecurity all the time. At the moment, the Lavender Hill area



has a ferocious gang war going on. That means that all sense of knowing where violence could come from has been compromised.

Within the African communities [with Eastern Cape roots], one of the things that they’re worried about is the issue of kids being drawn into criminal organisations.

DR: Insecurity in Managua is experienced differently by different social classes. And the ways of understanding insecurity, fear, and violence in the city are very different, whether you’re looking at the city level or the neighbourhood level.

At a city level, the story of Managua over the past decade and a half has been one of urban “securitization” to benefit the elite. In the 90s, in the post-war period, Managua was nicknamed the Chaotic City. It was a city where you could get carjacked very frequently, and there were high levels of insecurity in the streets.

But for about 15 years, the city was explicitly reorganised

through forms of urban planning that have securitized various parts of the city. Walls have gone up around wealthy neighbourhoods, and these have been connected to each other via high-speed roads, which, effectively, have created a disembedded fortified network for the rich. The poor have been left to fend for themselves in areas where there has been very little intervention.

At the neighbourhood level, when I first arrived in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in the mid-1990s, the greatest fear was the fear of outsiders. A vigilante gang emerged to protect the neighbourhood. They would patrol the area and stop anybody whom they didn’t recognise to try and create some kind of safe haven for locals.

When the gang got into drug dealing, the fear of the people in the neighbourhood became a fear of insiders because the gang turned predatory against local inhabitants. Unlike in South Africa, where drug markets are very much localised, and so you see the drug gangs controlling neighbourhoods

mainly to control their market, in Nicaragua, the internal market in poor communities for drugs is limited. A majority of clients come from the outside.

This has meant that the gang no longer tried to stop outsiders from coming in but, instead, turned their violence against insiders, to make sure they wouldn’t try and stop outsiders from coming in.

EP: By “outsiders”, do you mean those from middle-class neighbourhoods in the city or beyond that?

DR: Well, both middle-class neighbourhoods as well as more impoverished neighbourhoods. Unlike Cape Town, where you have drugs being sold quite homogenously around a lot of different townships, in Managua, drugs are sold out of a limited number of neighbourhoods. So, you actually have to move to those neighbourhoods to buy drugs. Not every community has local drug dealers.

There has been a significant shift in Nicaragua. At the moment, there is more fear of the state. As you might know, Nicaragua underwent a popular uprising last year against the government, and it has been quite savagely cracked down upon. So, the primary fear in the city right now, particularly in poor neighbourhoods, is of state authorities or paramilitary authorities who arbitrarily patrol neighbourhoods and create a climate of fear to try and pacify the population.

The other thing I think is important to comment on is that fear and insecurity in the city is usually gendered. And this is something that is reflected in patterns of mobility. In Managua, you can see that there is a distinct divide. Men are much

more mobile than women in the city, and this is very much linked to the gendered experience of insecurity.

EP: Explain, briefly, the nature of gang cultures in the two cities. You have already intimated that there are quite different ways in which the drug economy operates. I presume there are also very different gang dynamics in the two cities.

DR: One of the reasons why we’re interested in gangs and why we’re engaging in this comparative work is because gangs are one of a small number of quasi-universal social phenomena. You find them all over the world, in pretty much

and a much more negative phenomenon partly as a result of Nicaragua’s drift towards a predatory elite oligarchy over the past couple of decades.

One of the exciting things we are finding from a comparative perspective is that there are some remarkable similarities between gangs in Nicaragua and in South Africa, in particular regarding how they have evolved and transformed over time. There are certain things which changed in very similar ways, including, for example, the role drugs and the drug trade play. There are also surprising similarities in the gang members’ lived experience, their corporeality, who they are. At the same time, there are also some

At a city level, the story of Managua over the past decade and a half has been one of urban “securitization” to benefit the elite

every society across time and space. They’re an interesting phenomenon to think about, to try and get to grips with basic human forms of organisation and social structuring, and doing so comparatively is even more insightful.

In Nicaragua, gangs emerged in the post-war period of the early 90s. It was within a context of discombobulation, and social breakdown and the gangs emerged as an alternative form of “bottom-up” order.

This “gang governance” is very volatile and changes quite rapidly over time. It’s an epiphenomenon that is influenced by broader social structures. Gang governance in Nicaragua became very predatory

significant differences. One of them is mobility. Gangs in Cape Town are much more mobile than in Nicaragua. In Nicaragua, the limits of the gangs’ world are their neighbourhood boundaries, more or less. In Cape Town, gangs move between different neighbourhoods and, to me, in incredibly surprising ways.

The most significant differences are not only in the occupation of space but also in the trajectories people who have been part of the gang take after they leave the gang. In Nicaragua, being a gang member often pays a dividend if you don’t die or don’t end up going to jail. It’s quite striking how gang members often end up better off than non-gang member peers. It’s partly because

of the skills that they learn as gang members – whether it’s in how to use violence in an informal economic context where violence is often a means through which regulation is achieved; or sometimes the skills learned as a drug dealer, which are transferred to other financial opportunities.

SJ: There is a considerable amount of discussion about whether gangs are primarily isolated to [only] coloured areas in Cape Town. Gangs indeed seem to be more prevalent within coloured areas than they are within [majority] African areas, but that is changing. Another, more temporal dimension to this, is prison gangs in contrast to street gangs. The relationship between street and prison gangs has changed and is under constant reformulation.

It’s probably true to say that until the end of apartheid, gang culture was relatively stable. It had been organised around the Mandrax (methaqualone) trade. Many of the gangs that emerged from District Six moved into the townships. They formalised during the time of the Mandrax epidemic. Something happened around the time of the fall of apartheid that was not necessarily due to the political changes. About that time, there was a reconfiguration of the relationship between the street and the prison gangs. Both had very strong cultures. It was a publicly known “secret” that the prison gangs were better organised. This started influencing the way that people on the street started thinking about themselves, and the extent to which you needed to have prison credentials to make it on the street.

This led to the street gangs becoming “corporatized”,

which has also changed them substantially.

I should add that there are at least two very distinct social categories on the Cape Flats. The one is the merchant, and the other is the street gangster. While they are related, we cannot assume a one-to-one relationship. It is a complex symbiotic dynamic.

So, when we talk about “gang culture”, it depends on where members stand in those hierarchies – both in relation to the prison and to the drug economies. This not only influences the way they organise themselves, but also the culture.

EP: How are the geographies of operation and movement in the two cities different? Dennis, why it is that the gangs in Nicaragua tend to be neighbourhood-based and cannot transgress those boundaries? Steffen, could you clarify the difference between a street and a prison gang? What do those two categories mean for gang mobility across the city?

DR: In Managua, there are several reasons why the gangs remain very localised. Part of it is because the gangs are residentially-based. So, you belong to a gang because you are part of a particular neighbourhood. There is a different logic in Cape Town, which Steffen will explain. So, in that sense, you leave the neighbourhood, you leave the gang.

The other thing to think about is the fact that Managua is a city that has evolved quite a lot in the last 50 years or so. One thing that has been really striking in the previous 20 years is how it’s become increasingly denser. There’s very little free

space within the city, so you have much less mobility. In the past, for example, you had a demographic overflow from the neighbourhood I work in, which led to two squatter settlements being set up in vacant land nearby. There is now very little vacant land to squat in the city.

The population of the neighbourhood has increased by more than 50% in the last 10 years because people don’t leave anymore.

The other thing is that the “securitization” of the city, which, as I mentioned earlier, has led to huge high-speed boulevards being built, crisscrossing around different places in a manner that limits people’s mobilities. People don’t go out of the neighbourhood so much. They just have more difficulty doing so, and this is something which has got even worse now that paramilitary and state authorities are patrolling areas.

SJ: In many ways, prison and street gangs are very different. Prison gangs are called the Number Gangs – the 26s, 27s, and 28s. Jonny Steinberg has done an incredible job describing the cultural underpinnings and ideological structure around the prison gangs in his book *The Number*.

I think that it’s fair to say that the gangs became really strong, and went from being neighbourhood youth gangs or defence groups, around 1975, which is the period when Mandrax came on the scene. The thing with Mandrax in Cape Town is that it is primarily sold at street level by gangsters to their friends. They have a “merchant” on top who is the distributor.

That was the relatively stable *modus operandi* until the



mid-1990s, or when what we retrospectively could call the Cape Flats war broke out. It included Pagad (a militant anti-drug/anti-gang vigilante group), the police, the gangs, and others.

Mobility in and out of the townships was quite limited, often because of the gangs themselves. This meant that the prison gangs could establish themselves, because they operated and organised through trans-local networks of ex-prisoners established in prison. So there was this insertion of the prison hierarchies onto the streets. In the end, one could only become a successful dealer or merchant if one had prison links. That has now changed remarkably over the last couple of years because it appears that the street gangs have become so rich that it is possible to buy your way into the prison gangs; you can buy your number.

Furthermore, some gangs are also beginning to work as Number Gangs outside prison, for instance, in Valhalla Park. In a sense, you could say that the clear distinction between what was prison and what was street

has started to disintegrate. That does not mean, however, that it’s not a useful distinction to hold on to for analytical purposes. EP: This brings us on to two issues, generational dynamics and the prospect of exit. Dennis, you mentioned the question of youth who seem to make up the most substantial proportion of members in the gangs. But you also said that there’s a moment of exit, that’s there’s an opportunity to leave. From the two contexts, what is the frequency of departure? Can people leave the gangs, and under what sort of circumstances? Also, what does that mean for the generational dynamics of these communities?

SJ: There is a huge difference between Managua and Cape Town concerning this.

There is an ideology on the Cape Flats that it’s impossible to leave the gang. However, it is possible to leave, but it takes the form of, for instance, religious conversion. There is also something that is called channelling, which is that, basically, you’re still on the outskirts of the gang. That means that you keep weapons and drugs, for instance.

Sometimes members just simply leave. They just don’t come anymore. Of course, that changes very radically in times of conflict. I just got a WhatsApp message from one of our friends in the area. She said with a certain measure of desperation that her son was now back in the gang because there’s a gang war going on, and everybody who carries the JFK gang tag is being called back into the gang.

DR: There’s less controversy about leaving the gang in Nicaragua. It happens in a variety of ways. In terms of the work I’ve been doing in Managua, some individuals have left the gang at very specific moments

There is an ideology on the Cape Flats that it’s impossible to leave the gang. However, it is possible to leave, but it takes the form of, for instance, religious conversion.

– typically after some kind of shock. At times this takes the form of getting badly injured or seeing a friend or a family member killed. But leaving the gang can also occur after less shocking moments. Some individuals have left after they have found a job, or when a girlfriend has fallen pregnant. They feel a macho need to become the man of the family and so on ...

It’s interesting to observe what happens after a member leaves the gang. There are a variety of strategies which former gang members engage in to leave

the gang life. One approach is conversion to evangelical Christianity – which is very powerful in Central America. An individual converts, and they become an evangelical Christian – they stop drinking, taking drugs, acting violently. It gives them an alternative structure.

The exciting thing is that conversion is not always permanent. Sometimes a reformed member will “fall”, as they call it, and start drinking, taking drugs, and being violent again, but then they reconvert and fall again, but this time only drinking and being violent. Then they reconvert and repeat the cycle, giving something else up. So, in many ways, conversion ends up being a strategy for changing lifestyle, you could say.

The same thing is true with migration, another “exit” strategy. Former gang members migrate but in no greater proportion than the rest of the population.

One interesting thing that I’ve been observing in Managua is the tensions that develop inter-generationally. In the 80s, there was a freeze in gang activity because of the revolution. Gangs, for various reasons, disappeared. The gangs that emerged in the 90s didn’t really have any kind of rivals. Now, as you’ve had successive generations, you have groups of older former gang members who are just as adept and violent as current gang members. So, when the gangs turned predatory, the only group who actually stood up against them were former gang members, whom current gang members are much more careful around. Former gang members actually end up being a regulatory mechanism for the younger generation.

It’s also important to keep in mind that, probably, together with a few other political languages like political Islam, the gangster language is one of the few truly oppositional political languages that exist.

EP: I want to not only get to this question of gang structures as a form of regulation in these communities but also to the entanglement between that form of regulation and state regulation.

DR: I think the thing to realise here is that gangs become forms of regulation by being very dominant within a local context. They fill a void when the state either has collapsed or has withdrawn. But they can also come to the fore in collaboration and collusion with the state. The state often outsources, whether tacitly or explicitly, its authority to gangs.

In terms of what’s happening right now in Nicaragua, It’s very telling that the Nicaraguan state turned to former gang members to recruit as paramilitaries. Partly because it was looking for those able to perpetrate violence, but also looking for those who were embedded, who would know the local context and so would be able to regulate and control it better.

SJ: It’s a huge question. I think the easiest thing to say is that the police in Cape Town have been absolutely compromised in many ways by the gangs. At the same time, if you want to be a successful drug dealer, you need to create relations with the state. So you have to find ways of accommodation with the state.

As the South African State is a functional state, you need state protection from it, so to speak. What it means for people on the ground is that it becomes complicated to figure out where a police officer’s loyalties lie. If you want to report anything that a gang has done, you need to be very careful because you don’t know who is on the take and where information will travel.

Inside the area, there are signs that the local gang will be starting to exert a fee for every household. This means extortion will extend from shopkeepers to ordinary residents, which would signal an advanced form of taxation or regulation.

Gangs form even closer relationships to the state in insidious ways. In his work in Brazil, Desmond Arias has talked about what he calls violent social networks in ways that are useful for our understanding of Cape Town. This entails being careful not to distinguish in absolute ways between gangs, police, community activists, and politicians. Instead, we need to understand how they are entangled in networks that connect the local councillor with the police, with the gangsters, with the community activists in really complex ways.

EP: Let’s shift to the global prevalence of youth gangs and globalisation of various illicit markets and flows. Would you care to reflect on how an understanding of this can help us think differently about the connections between cities?

DR: Pretty much all the early gang studies took place in the so-called global north. Nowadays, there is a shift in the intellectual centre of gravity about gangs towards the so-called global south.

It’s essential, however, that we look across both contexts, particularly in an era of increasing transnational flows and movements, if we are to understand what is it about gangs that makes them repeatedly emerge in contexts all over the world. Several things come to the fore. One, they are definitely associated, one way or another, with youth. Not all gang members are young, but the majority are. The majority of gangs are also urban. Now, there might be a straightforward reason for that. There needs to be a certain demographic mass of youth to have a gang emerge. At the same time, the fact that only 10% of youth in any context will join a gang invalidates the idea that gangs are the result of poverty or only specific kinds of context – how do you explain structurally why 90% of youth in any context does not join a gang?

But perhaps most importantly, it’s important to look beyond ideas about gangs that see them just as a form of destruction. Sometimes gangs can be forms of social structuration, but gangs are also embedded within particular regulatory political economies, both as actors, but also as elements that allow and that lead to certain forms of action, particularly by the state. Around the world, the forms of

urban repression that are going on are being justified because of the presence of gangs. And that’s something we repeatedly see in many cities around the world.

SJ: It’s also important to keep in mind that, probably, together with a few other political languages like political Islam, the gangster language is one of the few truly oppositional political languages that exist. In that sense, it helps the idea of gangs to spread globally because it is a way of opposing dominant structures both in the north and in the south. It’s not just wannabe Tupacs; there is a political language of opposition that is very strong around the notion of the gang.

EP: One last thing. As gang experts who have spent a long time coming to terms with the inherent complexity of these social forms and trying to build both theory and concepts to understand the subject better, what’s your view on the representation of gangs in popular culture – shows like *Narcos*? As a layperson who’s consumed it, I thought it was theatrically, incredibly compelling. Do you think popular entertainment like that helps or distorts our understanding?

DR: This is something I have been thinking about for a while, as well. It’s interesting that just after 2000, there was this explosion of gang films all set in the global south – *Tsotsi*, *City of God*, *Bronx-Barbès*, *Tribu*, *Gangster Paradise*, *Jeruselema*, and so forth.

These representations are hugely important. For most people, this is the first point of encounter with gangs, certainly, in the global north. The problem is, most of the time, they are quite stereotypical.

Take *City of God*, for example, it’s a really great film. But ethnographically, it’s absolutely abysmal. It offers terribly racialised stereotypes about gangs in Rio. Gang members are also represented as psychopaths, and the only person who looks any good in the film is the person who studies them and manages to leave the neighbourhood to survive. Yet it’s a film which is shown in a lot of US universities almost as a documentary. This is hugely dangerous, and we do need to be careful about representations of gangs in popular culture.

SJ: Probably the biggest fans of gang films are gangs themselves. They see themselves portrayed as they would love to be. Hence, this kind of cinema reproduces and reinforces the stereotypical gangster narrative.

I think that, in that sense, precisely as Dennis said, the best gang films are the ones that show the difficult dilemmas of living with drug addict gang members, or getting out of the gang.

DR: Ultimately, gangs worldwide are very volatile. They change. One of the things with a lot of gang studies – partly because of the methodological difficulties with understanding them – is that they are reduced to snapshots. And so, you just have this one, inevitably frozen moment in time. But, actually, gangs transform, change, become something different, dissipate, come back to the fore. And I think that’s something we need to get to grips with if you want to really understand what gangs are about, whether through academic research or popular culture 🖐

WIDE-ANGLE



Sit with me out on the street and share conversation



Keep moving, It's the transit

NOIR

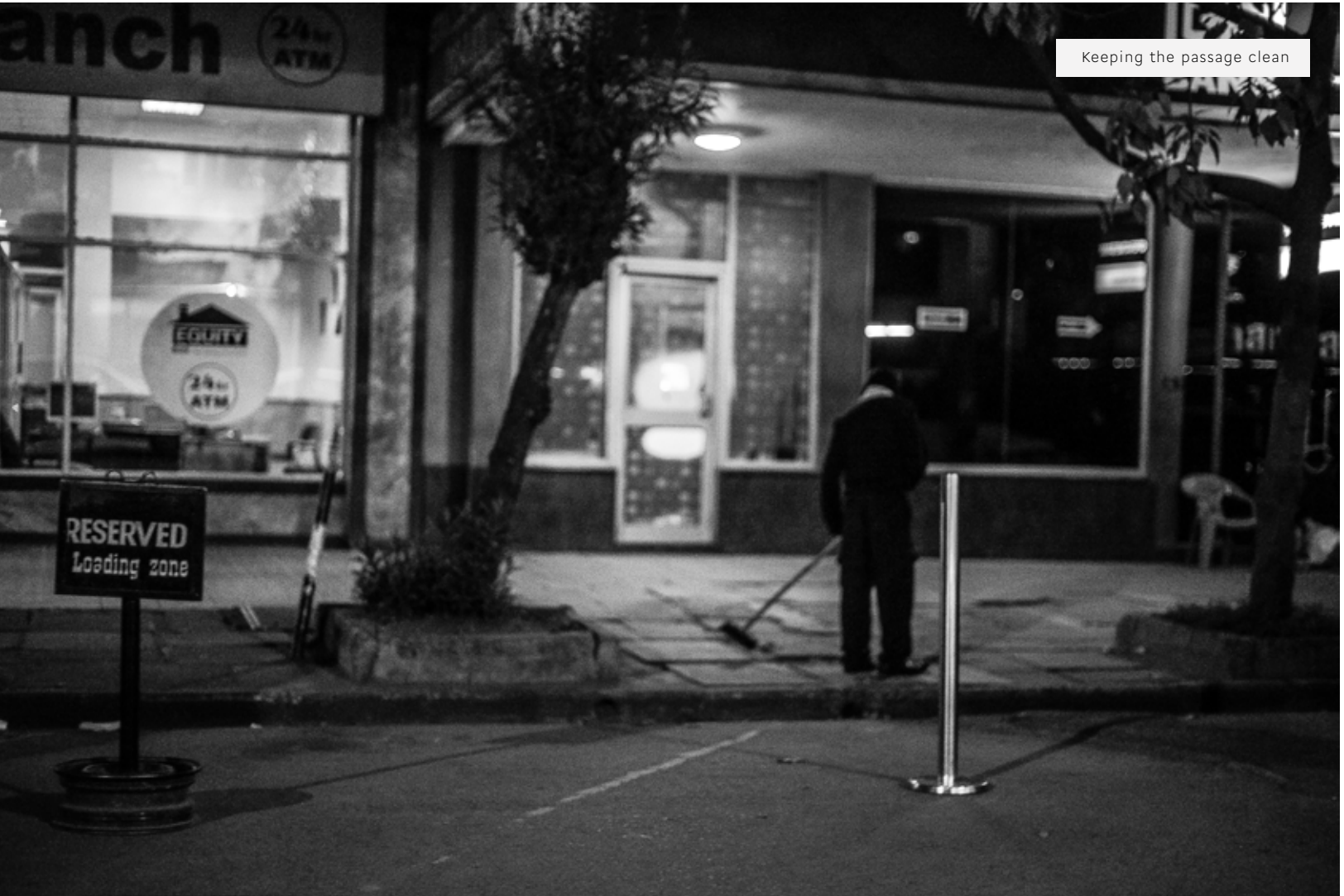
MSINGI SASIS

NAIROBI, KENYA

After living and studying film in New Delhi for 5 years, Msingi Sasis headed back home to Nairobi, where he stalks the night, camera in hand, capturing often quiet, fleeting moments that show various aspects of life in the city after dark. “Delhi influenced me to explore the juxtapositions and dualities of the Nairobi night,” he says, referring to the project *Nairobi Noir*, which he initiated in 2012. It was published in 2014 to widespread acclaim across the city. In 2015, the local press was abuzz with news of his arrest by the Kenyan Police. He was being accused of terrorist activity after he was observed taking photographs of various buildings at night as part of his by the then now-famous project, excerpted in the pages that follow. After navigating the legal and social minefield that followed, Sasis went back to work. *Nairobi Noir* has expanded and evolved into a multimedia project that includes music and a “24/7 live stream” of Nairobi at night. “I have always been fascinated and inspired by the Nairobi night. One night I realized that, without knowing and deliberately intending it at all, I had been creating this body of work and that it resonated strongly with an audience,” he adds



Walk hand in hand with a lover, and share memories







The entrance to a house in Yeoville is decorated with a painting of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. An influential leader, he advocated for the independence and freedom of Africa and Africans on the world stage and is revered as the returned messiah among the Rastafari movement

TERMINUS

MIORA RAJOANARY

JOBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

“I grew up in a country where creativity is not valued, and the pursuit of artistic careers is not encouraged...” Miora Rajoanary told *Insight*, the *Washington Post* newspaper’s photography blog earlier this year. She was talking about her life in Mauritius, a country she left for Joburg, South Africa, at age 29 in 2013. It was after this move that she discovered and pursued her passion for photography. In 2016, Rajoanary spent time speaking to and photographing the day-to-day lives of several migrants in Yeoville, a formerly middle-class neighborhood of Joburg that, following the arrival of democracy in the 90s, has become one of the city’s immigrant hubs. The new arrivals have changed the tone of the area, and in the process, it has gained notoriety. This has been fueled by the decline of the many art deco and other classic architectural apartment buildings and general infrastructure in the area. Rajoanary’s photo series, titled *Terminus*, rejects this narrative and instead captures and shows a vibrant neighborhood whose residents are involved in the ordinary, everyday struggle to make a life



Péto (second from the left) arrived in South Africa from the Democratic Republic of Congo as an 18 year old and was granted refugee status. Unable to secure employment, he is determined to become a professional boxer as a way to make a living and trains daily at the Yeoville Community Center



Yeoville is a place where you find people with all paths of life. It is the headquarters of Africa, with different cultures bound together, and something great is coming out of it, says 44 year old Alitta is a South African married to an Ivoirian man. She has travelled to the Ivory Coast to immerse herself in her husband’s culture with their child. She translates the masses of the King of Kings International Mission for Ivoirian Fabrice Debré in English, every Sunday



A cortege of bridesmaid make their entry in the church for a DR Congolese wedding in Yeoville. 20 November 2016

Joseph (far left), a migrant from the Democratic Republic of Congo, arrived in South Africa in 2004. He is manager of one of the many hair salons that have proliferated in Yeoville in recent years





A woman is entering a church in Yeoville. The church was founded by pastors from the Congolese community

WALKING WHILE BLACK

For a black man, the act of walking can be a privilege endured instead of enjoyed. Suspicion, fear and other forms of prejudice greet him along the way

GARNETTE CADOGAN

ILLUSTRATION: PATRICK LATIMER



“My only sin is my skin.
What did I do, to be so black
and blue?”—Fats Waller,
“(What Did I Do to Be So)
Black and Blue?”

Be So) Black and Blue?”
“Manhattan’s streets I saunter’d,
pondering.” —Walt Whitman,
“Manhattan’s Streets I Saunter’d,
Pondering”

My love for walking started in childhood, out of necessity. No thanks to a stepfather with heavy hands, I found every reason to stay away from home and was usually out—at some friend’s house or at a street party where no minor should be— until it was too late to get public transportation. So I walked. The streets of Kingston, Jamaica, in the 1980s were often terrifying—you could, for instance, get killed if a political henchman thought you came from the wrong neighborhood, or even if you wore the wrong color. Wearing orange showed affiliation with one political party and green with the other, and if you were neutral or traveling far from home you chose your colors well. The wrong color in the wrong neighborhood could mean your last day. No wonder, then, that my friends and the rare nocturnal passerby declared me crazy for my long late-night treks that traversed warring political zones. (And sometimes I did pretend to be crazy, shouting non sequiturs when I passed through especially dangerous spots, such as the place where thieves hid on the banks of a storm drain. Predators would ignore or laugh at the kid in his school uniform speaking nonsense.)

I made friends with strangers and went from being a very shy and awkward kid to being an extroverted, awkward one. The beggar, the vendor, the poor laborer—those were experienced wanderers, and they became my nighttime instructors; they knew the streets and delivered lessons on how to navigate and enjoy them. I imagined myself as a Jamaican Tom Sawyer, one moment sauntering down the streets to pick low-hanging

mangoes that I could reach from the sidewalk, another moment hanging outside a street party with battling sound systems, each armed with speakers piled to create skyscrapers of heavy bass. These streets weren’t frightening. They were full of adventure when they weren’t serene. There I’d join forces with a band of merry walkers, who’d miss the last bus by mere minutes, our feet still moving as we put out our thumbs to hitchhike to spots nearer home, making jokes as vehicle after vehicle raced past us. Or I’d get lost in Mittyesque moments, my young mind imagining alternate futures. The streets had their own safety: Unlike at home, there I could be myself without fear of bodily harm. Walking became so regular and familiar that the way home became home.

The streets had their rules, and I loved the challenge of trying to master them. I learned how to be alert to surrounding dangers and nearby delights, and prided myself on recognizing telling details that my peers missed. Kingston was a map of complex, and often bizarre, cultural and political and social activity, and I appointed myself its nighttime cartographer. I’d know how to navigate away from a predatory pace, and to speed up to chat when the cadence of a gait announced friendliness. It was almost always men I saw. A lone woman walking in the middle of the night was as common a sight as Sasquatch; moonlight pedestrianism was too dangerous for her. Sometimes at night as I made my way down from hills above Kingston, I’d have the impression that the city was set on “pause” or in extreme slow motion, as that as I descended I was cutting across Jamaica’s deep social divisions. I’d make my way briskly past the mansions in the hills overlooking the city, now transformed into a carpet

of dotted lights under a curtain of stars, saunter by middle-class subdivisions hidden behind high walls crowned with barbed wire, and zigzag through neighborhoods of zinc and wooden shacks crammed together and leaning like a tight-knit group of limbo dancers. With my descent came an increase in the vibrancy of street life—except when it didn’t; some poor neighborhoods had both the violent gunfights and the eerily deserted streets of the cinematic Wild West. I knew well enough to avoid those even at high noon. I’d begun hoofing it after dark when I was 10 years old. By 13 I was rarely home before midnight, and some nights found me racing against dawn. My mother would often complain, “Mek yuh love street suh? Yuh born a hospital; yuh neva born a street.” (“Why do you love the streets so much? You were born in a hospital, not in the streets.”)

I left Jamaica in 1996 to attend college in New Orleans, a city I’d heard called “the northernmost Caribbean city.” I wanted to discover—on foot, of course—what was Caribbean and what was American about it. Stately mansions on oak-lined streets with streetcars clanging by, and brightly colored houses that made entire blocks look festive; people in resplendent costumes dancing to funky brass bands in the middle of the street; cuisine—and aromas—that mashed up culinary traditions from Africa, Europe, Asia, and the American South; and a juxtaposition of worlds old and new, odd and familiar: Who wouldn’t want to explore this?

On my first day in the city, I went walking for a few hours to get a feel for the place and to buy supplies to transform my dormitory room from a prison bunker into a welcoming space. When some university staff

I imagined myself as a Jamaican Tom Sawyer, one moment sauntering down the streets to pick low-hanging mangoes that I could reach from the sidewalk, another moment hanging outside a street party with battling sound systems

members found out what I’d been up to, they warned me to restrict my walking to the places recommended as safe to tourists and the parents of freshmen. They trotted out statistics about New Orleans’s crime rate. But Kingston’s crime rate dwarfed those numbers, and I decided to ignore these well-meant cautions. A city was waiting to be discovered, and I wouldn’t let inconvenient facts get in the way. These American criminals are nothing on Kingston’s, I thought. They’re no real threat to me.

What no one had told me was that I was the one who would be considered a threat. I wasn’t prepared for any of this. I had come from a majority-black country in which no one was wary of me because of my skin color. Now I wasn’t sure who was afraid of me.

Within days I noticed that many people on the street seemed

apprehensive of me: Some gave me a circumspect glance as they approached, and then crossed the street; others, ahead, would glance behind, register my presence, and then speed up; older white women clutched their bags; young white men nervously greeted me, as if exchanging a salutation for their safety: “What’s up, bro?” On one occasion, less than a month after my arrival, I tried to help a man whose wheelchair was stuck in the middle of a crosswalk; he threatened to shoot me in the face, then asked a white pedestrian for help.

I wasn’t prepared for any of this. I had come from a majority-black country in which no one was wary of me because of my skin color. Now I wasn’t sure who was afraid of me. I was especially unprepared for the cops. They regularly stopped and bullied me, asking questions that took my guilt for granted. I’d never received what many of my African American friends call “The Talk”: No parents had told me how to behave when I was stopped by the police, how to be as polite and cooperative as possible, no matter what they said or did to me. So I had to cobble together my own rules of engagement. Thicken my Jamaican accent. Quickly mention my college. “Accidentally” pull out my college identification card when asked for my driver’s license.

My survival tactics began well before I left my dorm. I got out of the shower with the police in my head, assembling a cop-proof wardrobe. Light-colored oxford shirt. V-neck sweater. Khaki pants. Chukkas. Sweatshirt or T-shirt with my university insignia. When I walked I regularly had my identity challenged, but I also found ways to assert it. (So I’d dress Ivy League style, but would, later

on, add my Jamaican pedigree by wearing Clarks Desert Boots, the footwear of choice of Jamaican street culture.) Yet the all-American sartorial choice of white T-shirt and jeans, which many police officers see as the uniform of black troublemakers, was off limits to me—at least, if I wanted to have the freedom of movement I desired.

In this city of exuberant streets, walking became a complex and often oppressive negotiation. I would see a white woman walking toward me at night and cross the street to reassure her that she was safe. I would forget something at home but not immediately turn around if someone was behind me, because I discovered that a sudden backtrack could cause alarm. (I had a cardinal rule: Keep a wide perimeter from people who might consider me a danger. If not, danger might visit me.) New Orleans suddenly felt more dangerous than Jamaica. The sidewalk was a minefield, and every hesitation and self-censored compensation reduced my dignity. Despite my best efforts, the streets never felt comfortably safe. Even a simple salutation was suspect.

One night, returning to the house that, eight years after my arrival, I thought I’d earned the right to call my home, I waved to a cop driving by. Moments later, I was against his car in handcuffs. When I later asked him—sheepishly, of course; any other way would have asked for bruises—why he had detained me, he said my greeting had aroused his suspicion. “No one waves to the police,” he explained. When I told friends of his response, it was my behavior, not his, that they saw as absurd. “Now why would you do a dumb thing like that?” said one. “You know better than to make nice with police.”

A few days after I left on a visit to Kingston, Hurricane Katrina slashed and pummeled New Orleans. I’d gone not because of the storm but because my adoptive grandmother, Pearl, was dying of cancer. I hadn’t wandered those streets in eight years, since my last visit, and I returned to them now mostly at night, the time I found best for thinking, praying, crying. I walked to feel less alienated—from myself, struggling with the pain of seeing my grandmother terminally ill; from my home in New Orleans, underwater and seemingly abandoned; from my home country, which now, precisely because of its childhood familiarity, felt foreign to me. I was surprised by how familiar those streets felt. Here was the corner where the fragrance of jerk chicken greeted me, along with the warm tenor and peace-and-love message of Half Pint’s “Greetings,” broadcast from a small but powerful speaker to at least a half-mile radius. It was as if I had walked into 1986, down to the soundtrack. And there was the wall of the neighborhood shop, adorned with the Rastafarian colors red, gold, and green along with images of local and international heroes Bob Marley, Marcus Garvey, and Haile Selassie. The crew of boys leaning against it and joshing each other were recognizable; different faces, similar stories.

I was astonished at how safe the streets felt to me, once again one black body among many, no longer having to anticipate the many ways my presence might instill fear and how to offer some reassuring body language. Passing police cars were once again merely passing police cars. Jamaican police could be pretty brutal, but they didn’t notice me the way American police did. I could be invisible in Jamaica

I arrived in New York City, ready to lose myself in Whitman’s “Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus!”

in a way I can’t be invisible in the United States. Walking had returned to me a greater set of possibilities.

And why walk, if not to create a new set of possibilities? Following serendipity, I added new routes to the mental maps I had made from constant walking in that city from childhood to young adulthood, traced variations on the old pathways. Serendipity, a mentor once told me, is a secular way of speaking of grace; it’s unearned favor. Seen theologically, then, walking is an act of faith. Walking is, after all, interrupted falling. We see, we listen, we speak, and we trust that each step we take won’t be our last, but will lead us into a richer understanding of the self and the world.

In Jamaica, I felt once again as if the only identity that mattered was my own, not the constricted one that others had constructed for me. I strolled into my better self. I said, along with Kierkegaard, “I have walked myself into my best thoughts.”

When I tried to return to New Orleans from Jamaica a month later, there were no flights. I thought about flying to Texas so I could make my way back to my neighborhood as soon as it opened for reoccupancy, but my adoptive aunt, Maxine, who hated the idea of me returning to a hurricane zone before the end of hurricane season, persuaded me to come to stay in New York City instead. (To strengthen her case she sent me an article about Texans who were buying up guns because they were afraid of the influx of black people from New Orleans.)

This wasn’t a hard sell: I wanted to be in a place where I could travel by foot and, more crucially, continue to

reap the solace of walking at night. And I was eager to follow in the steps of the essayists, poets, and novelists who’d wandered that great city before me—Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Alfred Kazin, Elizabeth Hardwick. I had visited the city before, but each trip had felt like a tour in a sports car. I welcomed the chance to stroll. I wanted to walk alongside Whitman’s ghost and “descend to the pavements, merge with the crowd, and gaze with them.” So I left Kingston, the popular Jamaican farewell echoing in my mind: “Walk good!” Be safe on your journey, in other words, and all the best in your endeavors.

I arrived in New York City, ready to lose myself in Whitman’s “Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus!” I marveled at what Jane Jacobs praised as “the ballet of the good city sidewalk” in her old neighborhood, the West Village. I walked up past midtown skyscrapers, releasing their energy as lively people onto the streets, and on into the Upper West Side, with its regal Beaux Arts apartment buildings, stylish residents, and buzzing streets. Onward into Washington Heights, the sidewalks spilled over with an ebullient mix of young and old Jewish and Dominican American residents, past leafy Inwood, with parks whose grades rose to reveal beautiful views of the Hudson River, up to my home in Kingsbridge in the Bronx, with its rows of brick bungalows and apartment buildings nearby Broadway’s bustling sidewalks and the peaceful expanse of Van Cortlandt Park. I went to Jackson Heights in Queens to take in people socializing around garden courtyards in Urdu, Korean, Spanish, Russian, and Hindi. And when I wanted a taste of home, I headed to Brooklyn, in Crown Heights, for Jamaican food and music and humor mixed in with

the flavor of New York City. The city was my playground. I explored the city with friends, and then with a woman I’d begun dating. She walked around endlessly with me, taking in New York City’s many pleasures. Coffee shops open until predawn; verdant parks with nooks aplenty; food and music from across the globe; quirky neighborhoods with quirkier residents. My impressions of the city took shape during my walks with her.

As with the relationship, those first few months of urban exploration were all romance. The city was beguiling, exhilarating, vibrant. But it wasn’t long before reality reminded me I wasn’t invulnerable, especially when I walked alone.

One night in the East Village, I was running to dinner when a white man in front of me turned and punched me in the chest with such force that I thought my ribs had braided around my spine. I assumed he was drunk or had mistaken me for an old enemy, but found out soon enough that he’d merely assumed I was a criminal because of my race. When he discovered I wasn’t what he imagined, he went on to tell me that his assault was my own fault for running up behind him. I blew off this incident as an aberration, but the mutual distrust between me and the police was impossible to ignore. It felt elemental. They’d enter a subway platform; I’d notice them. (And I’d notice all the other black men registering their presence as well, while just about everyone else remained oblivious to them.) They’d glare. I’d get nervous and glance. They’d observe me steadily. I’d get uneasy. I’d observe them back, worrying that I looked suspicious. Their suspicions would increase. We’d

On many walks, I ask white friends to accompany me, just to avoid being treated like a threat. Walks in New York City, that is; in New Orleans, a white woman in my company sometimes attracted more hostility. (And it is not lost on me that my woman friends are those who best understand my plight)

continue the silent, uneasy dialogue until the subway arrived and separated us at last.

I returned to the old rules I’d set for myself in New Orleans, with elaboration. No running, especially at night; no sudden movements; no hoodies; no objects—especially shiny ones—in hand; no waiting for friends on street corners, lest I be mistaken for a drug dealer; no standing near a corner on the cell phone (same reason). As comfort set in, inevitably I began to break some of those rules, until a night encounter sent me zealously back to them, having learned that anything less than vigilance was carelessness.

After a sumptuous Italian dinner and drinks with friends, I was jogging to the subway at Columbus Circle—I was running late to meet another set of friends at a concert downtown. I heard someone shouting and I looked up to see a police officer approaching with his gun trained on me. “Against the car!” In no time, half a dozen cops were upon me, chucking me against the car and tightly handcuffing me. “Why were you running?” “Where are you going?” “Where are you coming from?” “I said, why were you running?!” Since I couldn’t answer everyone at once, I decided to respond first to the one who looked most likely to hit me. I was surrounded by a swarm and tried to focus on just one without inadvertently aggravating the others. For a black man, to assert your dignity before the police was to risk assault.

It didn’t work. As I answered that one, the others got frustrated that I wasn’t answering them fast enough and barked at me. One of them, digging through my already-emptied pockets, asked if I had any weapons, the question more an accusation.

Another badgered me about where I was coming from, as if on the fifteenth round I’d decide to tell him the truth he imagined. Though I kept saying—calmly, of course, which meant trying to manage a tone that ignored my racing heart and their spittle-filled shouts in my face—that I had just left friends two blocks down the road, who were all still there and could vouch for me, to meet other friends whose text messages on my phone could verify that, yes, sir, yes, officer, of course, officer, it made no difference. For a black man, to assert your dignity before the police was to risk assault. In fact, the dignity of black people meant less to them, which was why I always felt safer being stopped in front of white witnesses than black witnesses. The cops had less regard for the witness and entreaties of black onlookers, whereas the concern of white witnesses usually registered on them. A black witness asking a question or politely raising an objection could quickly become a fellow detainee. Deference to the police, then, was sine qua non for a safe encounter.

The cops ignored my explanations and my suggestions and continued to snarl at me. All except one of them, a captain. He put his hand on my back, and said to no one in particular, “If he was running for a long time he would have been sweating.” He then instructed that the cuffs be removed. He told me that a black man had stabbed someone earlier two or three blocks away and they were searching for him. I noted that I had no blood on me and had told his fellow officers where I’d been and how to check my alibi—unaware that it was even an alibi, as no one had told me why I was being held, and of course, I hadn’t dared ask. From what I’d seen, anything beyond passivity would be interpreted as aggression.

The police captain said I could go. None of the cops who detained me thought an apology was necessary. Like the thug who punched me in the East Village, they seemed to think it was my own fault for running.

Humiliated, I tried not to make eye contact with the onlookers on the sidewalk, and I was reluctant to pass them to be on my way. The captain, maybe noticing my shame, offered to give me a ride to the subway station. When he dropped me off and I thanked him for his help, he said, “It’s because you were polite that we let you go. If you were acting up it would have been different.” I nodded and said nothing.

I realized that what I least liked about walking in New York City wasn’t merely having to learn new rules of navigation and socialization—every city has its own. It was the arbitrariness of the circumstances that required them, an arbitrariness that made me feel like a child again, that infantilized me. When we first learn to walk, the world around us threatens to crash into us. Every step is risky. We train ourselves to walk without crashing by being attentive to our movements, and extra-attentive to the world around us. As adults we walk without thinking, really. But as a black adult I am often returned to that moment in childhood when I’m just learning to walk. I am once again on high alert, vigilant. Some days, when I am fed up with being considered a troublemaker upon sight, I joke that the last time a cop was happy to see a black male walking was when that male was a baby taking his first steps.

On many walks, I ask white friends to accompany me, just to avoid being treated like a threat. Walks in New York City, that is; in New Orleans, a white woman

in my company sometimes attracted more hostility. (And it is not lost on me that my woman friends are those who best understand my plight; they have developed their own vigilance in an environment where they are constantly treated as targets of sexual attention.) Much of my walking is as my friend Rebecca once described it: A pantomime undertaken to avoid the choreography of criminality.

Walking while black restricts the experience of walking, renders inaccessible the classic Romantic experience of walking alone. It forces me to be in constant relationship with others, unable to join the New York flâneurs I had read about and hoped to join. Instead of meandering aimlessly in the footsteps of Whitman, Melville, Kazin, and Vivian Gornick, more often I felt that I was tiptoeing in Baldwin’s—the Baldwin who wrote, way back in 1960, “Rare, indeed, is the Harlem citizen, from the most circumspect church member to the most shiftless adolescent, who does not have a long tale to tell of police incompetence, injustice, or brutality. I myself have witnessed and endured it more than once.”

Walking as a black man has made me feel simultaneously more removed from the city, in my awareness that I am perceived as suspect, and more closely connected to it, in the full attentiveness demanded by my vigilance. It has made me walk more purposefully in the city, becoming part of its flow, rather than observing, standing apart.

But it also means that I’m still trying to arrive in a city that isn’t quite mine. One definition of home is that it’s somewhere we can most be ourselves. And when are we more ourselves but when walking, that natural state in which we repeat one of the first actions we learned? Walking—the simple, monotonous act of placing one foot before the other to prevent falling—turns out not to be so simple if you’re black. Walking alone has been anything but monotonous for me; monotony is a luxury.

A foot leaves, a foot lands, and our longing gives it momentum from rest to rest. We long to look, to think, to talk, to get away. But more than anything else, we long to be free. We want the freedom and pleasure of walking without fear—without others’ fear—wherever we choose. I’ve lived in New York City for almost a decade and have not stopped walking its fascinating streets. And I have not stopped longing to find the solace that I found as a kid on the streets of Kingston. Much as coming to know New York City’s streets has made it closer to home to me, the city also withholds itself from me via those very streets. I walk them, alternately invisible and too prominent. So I walk caught between memory and forgetting, between memory and forgiveness👉

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IMAGINARY REPUBLICS

Dancing After Dark In Joburg
(1956–2010)

Dance venues – both formal and informal – have been a part of Joburg’s urban fabric since 1955. They have been spaces of resistance, loss and conviviality and are vital part of the city’s history

SEAN O'TOOLE

In 1956, Lewis Nkosi, a 20-year-old journalist who had just quit his job at the Durban-based Zulu-language newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* (*The Natal Sun*), arrived in Johannesburg to begin work at *Drum*, a new Anglophone African current affairs magazine. Nkosi, whose name still looms large in South African arts and letters, even after his death in 2010, immediately became part of the city’s jazz-infused high life. He made friends and socialised with the cosmopolitan intellectuals that staffed *Drum*, amongst them Ezekiel “Eskia” Mphahlele, Todd Matshikiza, Bessie Head and Can Themba. It was Themba, a gifted short story writer who Nkosi later remembered for his “detachment”, “wit” and

“romanticism”, who introduced the transplanted Durban writer to author Nadine Gordimer. In a 1986 interview Gordimer recalled Themba arriving at her home one day with “a rather snooty-looking young man”. Nkosi. He cultivated an indifferent air in Gordimer’s home. “Any music in this place?” he asked Gordimer at length. “Yes,” she said, gesturing to some vinyl records. “This is not music,” responded Nkosi. “It’s all classical!”

Nkosi was a man apart. At the time of his visit, he lived in Themba’s one-roomed house – dubbed the “house of Truth” – in Sophiatown. Invoking Sophiatown in a 1972 essay, Nkosi described the mixed-race residential neighbourhood northwest of the central city demolished by the apartheid government in the late 1950s as

a “folk institution”. It was, Nkosi elaborated, a place composed of “extravagant folk heroes and heroines, shebeens [unlicensed watering hole] and shebeen queens, singers, nice-time girls”. Nkosi though only bunked with Themba for three months. A developing friendship with a white woman saw him move into her home in the white suburb of Parkview. “He didn’t care a damn and would simply come out of that house in the morning always looking extremely well-dressed,” wrote Gordimer. “And nothing happened to him. He had a way of staring at people ... if whites started any nonsense, it just fell away.”

Nkosi arrived in Johannesburg during a remarkable flaring of black urban culture, a time of the “the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve – urbanised,

“I read it not singularly as a gesture of rapture but refusal; they are rejecting the political savagery disassembling their neighbourhood, a brutality happening more or less in tandem with the experimental modernism unfolding elsewhere on the continent” said photographer Jürgen Schadeberg of the expressions on the faces of this unnamed couple he captured in a Sophiatown jazz joint in 1955

eager, fast-talking and brash,” as he would later write. Music and dance – and in its own way, alcohol too – was central to the character of this cultural renaissance. Sophiatown, with its “swarming, cacophonous, strutting, brawling, vibrating life,” as Themba described it, was the epicentre of this scene. “There weren’t really any clubs,” remembers Jürgen Schadeberg, a Berlin-born photographer who extensively photographed Sophiatown during its heyday. The dance venues, he says, were very makeshift – informality and precarity persist as features of Johannesburg’s dance halls and drinking establishments. “There was this place, which was originally an old corner shop. The windows were covered with cardboard. They made a little stage with old pieces of wood. This is where people went and danced.”

One night in 1955 Schadeberg walked into this Sophiatown dancehall with his Rolleiflex camera. He was 24 and had a head full of jazz. Amidst the melee of bodies moving around the room that night, he spotted one particular couple dancing. The photograph he took offers a valuable clue about the character of dance and revelry during the formative years of high apartheid (1948–90). She wears a beret and twinset, he a flat-cap and beige boiler suit. Their manner distantly echoes the smartly dressed couple dancing barefoot in one of Malian photographer Malick Sidibé’s many photos of Bamako’s post-independence joie de vivre. But in Schadeberg’s photo, taken a decade earlier than Sidibe’s photo, the couple’s expressions are less joyous, more concentrated. The two dancers’ eyes are pinched shut. I read it not singularly as a gesture of rapture but refusal: they are rejecting the political savagery disassembling their

neighbourhood, a brutality happening more or less in tandem with the experimental modernism unfolding elsewhere on the continent.

Photography is essential to this essay, which attempts to write a history of the many dance venues – both formal and informal – that have been a part of Johannesburg’s urban fabric since 1955, the start of mass evictions from Sophiatown. Photography offers an important means to visualise, as much as imagine, the topsy-turvy world Nkosi arrived upon in 1956. On the one hand, the late 1950s was a period of intense civic agitation. News photos from the period show men and women of all races gathered in huddles conversing, often amiably. The locus of struggle was typically the formal city, in particular, its courtrooms, more often than not the grand staircases and public areas that typify these places of the law. The 1960 Sharpeville massacre and jailing of the country’s anti-apartheid political leadership four years later, both well-known events, however, marked a shift towards a more physically balkanised and repressive society. But, and this is important to recognise, for all the repression and violence that marked the apartheid years, there was also music, dance and pleasure – an ideology that embraces refusal. Joburg was, as it still is, a city infected by music, dance and alcohol. These three phenomena – music, dance and drink – have been central pillars of Johannesburg’s social and economic culture since its hasty formation in 1886 following the discovery of gold.

While South African writers across a range of disciplines are actively digging in the muck of history to write new stories about the country’s racially divisive past, there is no definitive history

of Johannesburg’s nightclubs and dance venues, nor for that matter a defining study of the habits of this city’s contradictory moods after dark. This essay is a contribution towards this still nascent area of study. Embedded in the narrative is a secondary focus, my research drawing attention to those few spaces, some only loosely identified as dance venues, that challenged an increasingly hard-line white racism after 1948. Often without explicit political agenda, these spaces – many of them short-lived and forgotten, some more musically experimental than others – offer a way to read Johannesburg’s history at its most convivial and joyous, as well as its most embittered and unstable. Much of what is chronicled happened at night or at least gained its form and meaning when Johannesburg was at leisure, relaxing, dancing after dark. The night is a time of diversionary pleasures, of respite, pause – but not release – from the city’s acquisitive and mercantile logic. Behind the filigree of joy offered by music, dance and alcohol remain the sobriety of a city characterised by exploitation, oppression, alienation, violence and enforced strangeness.

An amalgam of vanquished Boer republics and English colonial outposts that unified under a single flag in 1910, South Africa’s modern history – political, economic, social, musical, right down to the basics of finding pleasure after dark in clubs and dance halls – is defined by an overarching narrative of racial antagonism. This narrative was decisively shaped by the 1948 election victory of DF Malan’s majority Afrikaans-speaking National Party. The outcome of this whites-only poll, which gave the National Party (operating in an alliance

with NC Havenga’s Afrikaner Party) a slender parliamentary majority, initiated a new chapter in an already sullied history of white colonial conquest and racial subjugation. Very quickly, the National Party instituted a technocratic programme of racial discrimination and forced separation, summarised by the term apartheid. Amongst the varied aims of this pernicious ideology and system of social engineering was the extradition of the black body from the white city, to peripheral ghetto locations and ethnic Bantustan republics propped by the apartheid state.

However, despite increasing state oppression and social engineering, notably through mechanisms like the new Immorality Act of 1957, which criminalised sex (or even the verbal suggestion thereof) between white and black people, there was significant socialising across the social and physical divides that marked where and how Johannesburg’s residents socialised. Gordimer, for instance, accompanied Drum magazine’s proprietor Jim Bailey to various mixed-race venues in Doornfontein, an important inner-city neighbourhood for socialising in the post-war narrative of clubs and dancing in Johannesburg, as well as in Sophiatown.

“It was a time of tremendous, memorable parties I’ll never forget for the rest of my life,” said Gordimer. “We danced kwela solidly. There was a great crowd of musicians, and that’s how I met Todd Matshikiza.” In addition to his journalism, Matshikiza was also a composer and jazz pianist. “If there was a piano, Todd would play like a dervish all night. Todd was the first black man I ever danced with. He had the distinction of being even smaller than I am.

South Africa’s modern history – political, economic, social, musical, right down to the basics of finding pleasure after dark in clubs and dance halls – is defined by an overarching narrative of racial antagonism

We were quite a midget couple.” Gordimer’s anecdote is revealing. This hedonism and mutuality, which endures, was less an expression of political resistance than of shared interests and shared values. Music and dance drew people together, as it still does, however fleetingly. In Johannesburg, this togetherness has long served as a means to escape the city’s mercenary and often arid mercantile culture.

A city founded on and sustained by a faith in quick wealth, Johannesburg is an unromantic setting for bohemian excess. For Nkosi, Johannesburg was a desert, a far-flung metropolis cut off from the western cultures it desperately aped. Underlying the habits and routines of post-war Johannesburg’s inhabitants, Nkosi intuited “an appalling loneliness and desolation”. Writing in his 1965 essay “Home and Exile”, he added that these very reasons “made it so desperately important and frightfully necessary for its citizens to move fast, to live very intensely, to live harshly and vividly, for this was the sole reason for their being there: to make money, to spend it and make more”. His insight chimes

with an earlier statement by one of the city’s original get-rich rabble. “We are none of us here for the benefit of our health,” wrote a miner in a letter to a Johannesburg newspaper in 1893. “Money making and money-grabbing is the alpha and omega of those residents on these fields.”

These boisterous descriptions are fundamental to understanding Johannesburg, a city of fraught natural environments and baroque thunderstorms, of tremulous first arrivals and wistful exits, of trade, plunder, theft and sudden death, of love, heartbreak, friendship and brittle mutuality. The grim years of high apartheid, which spatially reinforced existing segregation and saw the rollout of an institutionalised Protestantism, added a further layer of complexity to the character of Johannesburg. Escape from the city and its complexities took one of two forms: literally leaving the city, which meant defeat or freedom, or, as most inhabitants did and continue to do, retreat – to the shebeens and nightclubs, haunts and hangouts.

Sometimes referred to as “Little Harlem,” Sophiatown occupies an critical symbolic place in the club history of Johannesburg. Described as a “bastion of nontribal urbanity” by Ansell, and an “exciting cultural Bohemia” by Nkosi, its terraced Edwardian homesteads recall an earlier urban formation of the city. Founded in 1904 as rental-only living space for black residents forcibly evicted from the mixed-race neighbourhood of Brickfields following a reported outbreak of the plague, by the 1950s, when its dance scene was in full swing, Sophiatown was a congested mixed-race suburb pressing up against its white working-class neighbours.

While its energy radiated outwards, Sophiatown was also a centripetal force, the centre of an experimental and syncretic form of modernity. In the late 1950s, dancers in Johannesburg’s numerous temporal and imaginary republics were actively shunning the manners and graces of Imperial England in favour of the optimism and jauntiness of the United States. For people like Nkosi and his cohorts, Sophiatown – with its jazz-infused tsaba-tsaba dance scene and two big cinema complexes, Balansky’s and Odin – functioned as a kind of ground zero for this new urban sensibility. Notwithstanding its slum-like qualities and thriving criminal underclass, Sophiatown offered residents community and infrastructure, the latter generally lacking in the new black settlements formalised by city officials on the southwestern periphery of the city.

“We listened to Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Stardust, Frank Sinatra, and lots of others,” said singer Dolly Rathebe in 1997. Rathebe, along with Dorothy Masuku and Miriam Makeba, forged her reputation in Sophiatown’s dance halls, including the white-owned Odin. “Sophiatown was like the sunny side of the street.” Rathebe’s music checklist is useful in highlighting a new orientation amongst black Johannesburgers, who were less inspired by the confidant polyphony emitted by newly independent black African states than by the United States and its cool modernist sounds. “America had a huge influence on black South Africa, mainly through the movies and music, which had developed into a kind of subculture,” remarked jazz writer Don Albert in 2007. As a young man, Albert frequented the jazz scene. “I was fascinated by these hip black people dressed in

their peg-bottom trousers, snap-brimmed hats and American-style raincoats jitterbugging or dancing almost in slow motion, at half tempo that was almost suggestive.” Sophiatown and its particular brand of high-life represented the culmination of four decades of musical innovation, one in which American ragtime and swing merged with indigenous sounds to create an authentic local idiom – jazz for short. This sound would deeply figure and influence the dance scenes that followed, the culture it spawned still a vital reference point for contemporary musicians, fashion designers and photographers. It is important to recognise, though, that the adoption of American attitudes and sounds was never a wholesale process: it was “never a one-way traffic,” as music historian Gwen Ansell wrote in 2012. Still, the love affair with America was, in a sense, monogamous.

Another historical anecdote underscores this point. Shortly after the launch of Drum magazine in 1951, editor Anthony Sampson met a man at the Bantu Men’s Social Centre, the influential social club in central Johannesburg. “Tribal music!” spat the man in a floppy American suit. “Tribal history! Chiefs! We don’t care about chiefs!” He was responding to the patronising scope of the first few issues of Drum. “Give us jazz and film stars, man! We want Duke Ellington, Satchmo and hot dames! Yes, brother, anything American. You can cut out this junk about kraals and folk-tales and Basutos in blankets – forget it. You’re just trying to keep us backward, that’s what.” No doubt embellished for the purposes of Sampson’s 1983 biography, this story does, however, vest a broader insight: urban Johannesburg was literate and impertinent, and also interested

and knowledgeable about the world – especially America, that faraway place with a sound and image that resonated in Sophiatown.

But, concurrent with this new optimism, and compelled by its own internal energy, was the apartheid juggernaut. In 1955, a battalion of armed policemen entered Sophiatown and forcefully expelled residents defying eviction orders issued under the Group Areas Act of 1950, a key apartheid law. Indian residents were despatched to the new suburb of Lenasia, mixed-race Coloured people to Eldorado Park, Chinese inhabitants to central Johannesburg, and the majority black population to Meadowlands, a new settlement forming part of a jigsaw puzzle of exclusionist urbanism established in 1904 at the former Klipspruit sewage dump. In 1963, three years after Sophiatown was entirely demolished and its 65,000 inhabitants relocated, this new urban formation on the southwest edge of the city was collectively renamed Soweto. Johannesburg was entering a new phase of its history.

In 1964, eight senior African National Congress (ANC) leaders were found guilty of treason and sentenced to life in prison. The increasingly oppressive political regime of Hendrik Verwoerd, the hard-line nationalist elected prime minister in 1958, also prompted a mass exodus of artistic talent from the country. Nkosi, who would graduate to chief reporter at Drum’s Sunday newspaper, the Golden City Post, accepted a fellowship to study journalism at Harvard University in 1961; Bessie Head moved to Botswana; and Themba moved to Swaziland, where he died a drunk in 1968. By the mid-1960s, many jazz musicians had left the country. Those who opted to stay found it

difficult to improvise in the new government planned townships, essentially labour compounds serviced by the bare minimum of civic necessities.

The material impoverishment of Johannesburg’s townships nonetheless contributed to distinctive forms of night-time entertainment, the provisional and ephemeral character of which cultivated “specific orientations toward, knowledge of, and practices for, dealing with urban life,” to repurpose a quote by urban theorist AbdouMaliq Simone. In other words, people found new ways of negotiating privation. As has so often been the case in Johannesburg’s history, music and dance played a crucial role in negotiating the new, the strange, the unknown. An example of this improvisational practice that emerged in mid-twentieth township culture was the “concert-and-dance” phenomenon. Drawing on the institution of tea meetings, polite community events devoted to song, township residents repurposed schools and church halls for all-night entertainment. Starting at 8pm and continuing until the early hours, concert-and-dance events began with a seated vaudeville concert before the hall was transformed into a dance area.

“Concert-and-dance employed large ensembles, modelled on American swing bands, whose sound, unlike marabi, was big enough to fill the communal halls newly built in the townships,” writes Gwen Ansell in her pungent story of urban black music, Soweto Blues (2005). Predating the demolition of Sophiatown, similar events were also staged in more upmarket versions in city venues like the Bantu Men’s Social Centre (BMSC) and Inchcape Hall, both in the CBD. Notwithstanding the forced

removal of black citizens to its margins, Johannesburg relied on black labour to function. Although largely fashioned to serve as a white urban centre, Johannesburg’s CBD nonetheless included after-hours entertainment venues catering to the city’s black working men, many employed in clerical and physical labour jobs.

Where trade unionist Naboth Mokgatle danced at Inchcape Hall, BMSC was equally convivial. Founded in 1924 by Reverend Ray E. Phillips and a group of white liberals and black professionals, BMSC’s members included Mandela and Sisulu. It included a library and recreation (billiards, chess) facilities, its main hall used as a meeting venue for political organisers and dance venue by night owls. Walter and Albertina Sisulu held their wedding reception at BMSC in 1944; Mandela was best man and the Merry Blackbirds, Johannesburg’s “most polished” black jazz ensemble, provided music. Todd Matshikiza and his wife Esme were also regulars. “In a way, the BMSC was quite formal then, although you did have the jitterbug and music from America post-1945,” stated Esme in a 2006 interview. “We had very formal dances with the Merry Blackbirds band with their bow ties. Solomon ‘Zuluboy’ Cele’s Jazz Maniacs were less formal, more like people’s music – and then came the cheeky college boys of the Harlem Swingsters.”

In 1958 playwright Athol Fugard staged his first full-length play, No-Good Friday, at BMSC. It was not an isolated instance. In Johannesburg, politics, theatre and musical performance have long co-existed, often in the same space. An excellent example of this overlapping occurred next door to BMSC, at Dorkay House, a new training venue and administrative centre

established in 1958 for Union Artists, an all-black drama group. Dorkay House staged talent contests and small shows. One aim was to develop large touring concerts. Todd Matshikiza’s 1959 jazz musical, King Kong, which launched the international singing career of Miriam Makeba, was its most celebrated creation. King Kong initially played in the Great Hall at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Being a private institution, the university was able to circumvent the race laws of the time and offer the show to multi-racial audiences. This tactical victory over apartheid saw this liberal English-speaking university emerge as a key venue for musical experimentation and cross-cultural contact in the decades to come.

In 1961, The Jazz Epistles, a short-lived bebop band that included Dollar Brand (later known as Abdullah Ibrahim), Kippie Moeketsi, Jonas Gwangwa and Hugh Masekela, won first prize at the Cold Castle Jazz Festival, held in the Johannesburg City Hall. Phillip Tabane, an extraordinary guitar virtuoso and in later years accomplished musical experimenter, was awarded a prize in the solo category. Founded in 1958, the itinerant jazz festival was the next year staged in Soweto’s Moroka-Jabavu Stadium. By then Masekela, Gwangwa and Brand were already in exile. But a new vanguard was emerging. Chris McGregor and his Septet – a precursor group to the influential Blue Notes – performed to 4,000 Soweto jazz fans, including “tight-panted girls twisting on the football pitch”. Jazz in Soweto was not merely an important modernist musical form; it was also enraptured dance music. The 1964 Cold Castle Jazz Festival confirmed the popularity of jazz in Soweto when 40,000 punters packed into the Orlando Stadium,

The 1970s not only marked the blossoming of Johannesburg’s white bohemia, there was also a “renaissance of black opposition

WILLIAM BEINART

a football ground. The Malombo Jazzmen (which included Tabane) shared the first prize with the Early Mabuza Quartet. The festival’s success was, however, marred by violence. Six men were killed outside the festival gates as rival gangs fought, prompting the withdrawal of the title sponsor. It would be the last of these influential, era-defining jazz concerts.

North from Soweto, over the sulphurous yellow mine dumps that still separate the former township from the CBD, jazz culture was also taking hold, particularly in the residential neighbourhood of Hillbrow. Built on a northern ridge overlooking the city, Hillbrow was by the 1960s being likened to the Latin Quarter in Paris and New York’s West Village. Its vibrant jazz underground was ambiguously greeted by mainstream culture. “Hillbrow and Berea, which were once fashionable residential suburbs, have now become a favourite field of activity for bebop addicts, brazen jazz hounds and bar-smashing youths,” wrote psychiatrist Louis Franklin Freed in his book Crime in South Africa (1963). Jazz photographer Basil Breakey, who offered members of the mixed-race Blue Notes jazz sextet a floor to crash on in his Hillbrow flat after gigs, recalled the neighbourhood’s jazz years very differently.

The Verwoerd government, which was spearheading a policy of separate development, was actively policing pass violations. For the Blue Notes, this complicated the practicalities of their 1963 residency at the Downbeat, a jazz venue near the Chelsea Hotel in Catherine Street. “We had to be secretive because they [black jazzmen] were not allowed to be in the white area, as they didn’t have a pass to work,” said Breakey in 1993.

“They were meant to be in the location.” Despite the mythology that has grown up around the Blue Notes, who transformed into a free jazz outfit in Europe after they went into exile in 1964, their stay in Hillbrow was unremarkable. Downbeat drew a predominantly white audience, although black patrons were not unheard of. “It was never really full, and was struggling to survive, with the guys playing there about three times a week,” wrote Breakey. “Downbeat never really made money. The music was very avant-garde ... It was not just entertaining stuff, it was very expressive, very expressionistic, reflected the society at the time.” The venue lasted six months.

As the 1960s progressed, Hillbrow’s bebop addicts and Johannesburg’s white rockers, who in a 1959 Schadeberg photo are shown lethargically dancing at the Rand Easter Show during the city’s first brush with rock ‘n roll, were being updated by a new generation of nightcrawlers. This new generation looked to England, not America, for inspiration. In his autobiography Boy From Bethulie (1993), well-known actor Patrick Mynhardt describes visiting a club called Marrakech at the then upmarket Summit Club in Hillbrow, where he found himself “mesmerised by a go-go girl in a mini-skirt dancing in front of a mirror”. Her name was Zaza Zimmerman; there was also a Felicity Fouché, and the DJ was named Neville Peacock. “There were psychedelic and ultra-violet lights, and if you stood under the latter, all your klein goed [small things] shone like a beacon for all to see,” remembered photographer Anne Lapedus Brest, a former patron. Flashing lights, like smoke machines, lasers and video projections, is a hallmark “upmarket” entertainment, and in Johannesburg keys into

a history of formalised dance venues with liquor licenses. For much of the city’s history, these formalised economies catered to principally white patrons. Other Hillbrow clubs cashing in on the youth culture boom of the 1960s were Club-a-Go-Go, Yellow Submarine and Purple Marmalade, which also featured soul acts like Francis “Zorro” Kekana and The Miracles, both from Pretoria. There were also discotheques at the Ambassador Hotel (Friday and Saturday) and Chelsea Hotel (nightly). Hillbrow’s white heterosexual nightlife may have been boisterous, sometimes even prone to spill over into violence as class differences led to brawling, but in the main, it did not represent a significant destabilising threat to the prevailing social order. By distinction, Johannesburg’s gay party scene did.

Roman-Dutch common law, which was imported to the country by Dutch colonisers in 1652, criminalised sodomy. In 1966, police raided a private home in the wealthy northern suburb of Forest Town. Nine men “masquerading as women” were arrested. The raid was discussed in parliament, prompting a threat to extend anti-homosexual legislation. “The result, in opposition to this threat, was the instigation of the Homosexual Law Reform movement, whose sole aim was to prevent the proposed anti-gay bill from becoming law,” write Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron in Defiant Desire (1994), an important study of gay culture during apartheid. By the mid-1960s, they write, there were several gay-owned men-only dance clubs. The Farmhouse, north of Johannesburg on the road to Pretoria, was the most popular. Closer the CBD, there was the Hideaway in Berea and “hippyish” Midnighter in the

central city.

The submersed but convivial nature of the white gay scene existed in marked distinction to that in Soweto, where the outlets for gay socialising – let alone dancing – were limited. One documented form of socialising for gay men, this in a society where the traditions of patriarchy endure, were the Monday night stokvel parties. A long-established alternative way of pooling wealth amongst black South Africans either denied or unable to access formal banking, stokvels remain a vibrant part of township life. Lenders contribute to a shared pool that intermittently pays out the collection to each member. Stokvel meetings, which mix the earnest business of money with the sale and consumption of alcohol, are hospitable affairs, albeit closed to outsiders. It is this aspect, their essential privacy, which has long made them gay-friendly socialising spaces. Although poorly documented, the decades-old existence of stokvels as gay socialising venues complicates the flippant white narrative of dancing during the apartheid years.

The legacy of the 1960s in the west, in particular, its utopian ideology, had a marked impact on white South Africa. White prosperity, the product of an extended post-war economic boom, saw white middle-class youths begin to experiment with alternative identities sponsored by the proliferation of western musical subcultures. In the 1970s, the city’s underground scene took shape around jazz, folk and blues groups, with “acid-astral rockers” Freedom’s Children playing to enraptured Hillbrow audiences at Club 505 and the Ambassador Hotel. The Out of Town Club, a dance venue north

of Johannesburg, played host to open-air music festivals in the mould of Woodstock. These concerts were sometimes marred by hooliganism. “Most of those doing the fighting, or at least starting the brawls we were later to find out, were policemen,” said Dave Marks, whose Third Ear sound rig became a feature of the segregated outdoor festivals of the 1970s.

Inspired by his encounter at Woodstock, Marks approached the event’s legendary sound engineer, Bill Hanley, to donate some of the Woodstock speakers to his fledgeling sound company. Hanley agreed, on the proviso, the speakers were not used at segregated festivals. The condition was not always honoured, white promoters offering lucrative usage fees. Nonetheless, Marx largely honoured the spirit of the original transaction, his Third Ear rig providing the sound for the Free People’s concerts, an annual music festival produced by Wits University throughout the 1970s and 80s, as well as in Soweto. “Unlike city festivals, township shows were a pleasure in the 1960s and 1970s,” Marx has stated. “There were no fights inside the playing field. People squeezed every last drop of enjoyment out of their hard-earned rands.”

The 1970s not only marked the blossoming of Johannesburg’s white bohemia, there was also a “renaissance of black opposition,” to quote political historian William Beinart. With a population approaching one million, Soweto in the 1970s remained an oppressive labour dormitory. It had one hotel, one cinema, and only one established nightclub. The newly upgraded Jabulani Amphitheatre, a 15,000-seater outdoor cultural and sporting venue built in the suburb of Moroka in 1952,

became a key site of political congress and after-hours carousing. Currently disused, it hosted concerts by African-American performers such as The Staple Singers and Dobbie Gray, as well as the four-day long 1974 Soweto National Jazz Festival. The latter event, which featured the Third Ear rig, included a performance by Malombo, Phillip Tabane’s genre-defying jazz-fusion trio.

In 1976, television was introduced to white South Africans. In the same year, Soweto students revolted against the state-led implementation of Afrikaans as the language of instruction. The revolt, which keyed into a far deeper disaffection with the status quo, saw numerous state-owned properties destroyed. Tellingly, the Jabulani Amphitheatre was left untouched. Ironically, students affiliated to the ANC’s underground network in Soweto bombed its only nightclub. Founded near the Orlando railway station in 1972 by Lucky Michaels, Pelican was a meeting place of “clevers, socialites, wannabes and hangers-on,” according to journalist ZB Molefe. Its iconic status was reinforced by its visual prominence. “Until the 1980s no building could be built higher than one story; for a long time, only the unlicensed Pelican nightclub had a second floor,” writes Bill Nasson in *All, Here, and Now* (1991). Routinely packed, the Pelican offered food, music and dancing. “For a few hours, from 10pm until 6am, the sea of swirling bodies on the dance floor and the tables would forget apartheid,” wrote Molefe.

Dancing bodies late at night express a different solidarity to bodies tightly packed in a political march. The bombing of the Pelican reinforces the difference. According to veteran journalist Harry Mashabela,

the Pelican, along with another shebeen on Mapetla Street, was bombed when owners overlooked student appeals not to sell liquor. “Students wanted shebeens to identify themselves with the struggle by abstaining from selling drinks,” writes Mashabela in *A People on the Boil* (2006). A somewhat obscure historical footnote, the Pelican bombing highlights the submerged tensions between South Africa’s struggle culture and the pursuit of individual pleasure. In white Johannesburg, the complicated relationship between dance and political dissidence became a facet of Johannesburg’s increasingly hedonistic gay club scene.

In contrast, the Dungeon, an enduring icon of the gay club scene, “funkier clubs with more guys, more adventurous music and more camping” emerged, write Gevisser and Cameron. They included the Anaconda, Mandy’s, Blood and Zips, venues whose “dark disco” was “blatantly sexual” and “throbbed with sensuality and defiance,” as one regular has put it. Journalist Matthew Krouse, a regular patron as a teen, says there was a definite political edge to attending these clubs. Artist Steven Cohen agrees, although carefully calibrating the nature of the political edge. “Emerging into the radical (not quite none but less racist) gay fuck clubs of the 1980s, and the wild cruising world of shops, clubs, toilets, parks and bushes was an education in exploring the limits of civil liberties and the delicate aptitude of downright law-breaking which has become so useful in my work.”

The low-rent nature of the venues, adds Krouse, also allied them to the tradition of prohibition-era speakeasies in the US, where entrance was strictly regulated. While many

of the gay clubs enforced a “no blacks” policy, Mandy’s didn’t. Rechristened New Mandy’s when it relocated to 96 End Street, the venue was raided by police during the bustling summer Christmas holidays in 1979. Homosexuality, while tolerated, was still illegal. White patrons were maltreated, photographed and verbally abused, while an even harsher treatment was meted out against the few black gay men present at the club. The event, which heralded a period of renewed police harassment, galvanised the gay community. “Many South African gay people refer to the 1979 Mandy’s Raid – and not the 1966 Forest Town Raid – as South Africa’s Stonewall,” write Gevisser and Cameron. After the closure of Mandy’s in the mid-1980s, this End Street address became a fashionable new wave club, Idols, and later still, in the late 1990s, the up-for-it white rave club ESP.

In 1986 Shifty Records, an independent record label founded musicians Lloyd Ross and Ivan Kadey, released *Live at Jameson’s*. A live recording of the Cherry Faced Lurchers performing during their residency at Jameson’s, a jazz and rock venue in the CBD a year earlier, the set included *Do the Lurch*. The song humorously describes the growing alienation of Johannesburg’s white underground through the jaunty narrative of one of its key protagonists, James Phillips, formerly the vocalist with punk band Corporal Punishment. The song is a masterpiece of vernacular punk. In the song, Phillips tells of his attempt to enter Q’s Supper Club, one of a handful of upmarket white discos and high-energy clubs that thrived in the CBD (and also included Xanadu, Caesars Palace and Raffles). The doorman points to Phillips’s cheap sports shoes. Phillips responds by

name-checking a well-known white music producer and is instantly welcomed into a world of “flashing lights” and “DJ in misery”.

None of Shifty’s diverse catalogue, which included white rabbleroising rock and afro-jazz fusion, received airplay on the two white-owned independent radio stations, Capitol Radio 604 and Radio 702, established to challenge the state broadcaster’s ruthlessly segregated and musically dour radio programming. Jameson’s, which possessed an archaic albeit still-valid Boer republic liquor license allowing it to serve mixed-race audiences freely, functioned as one of a handful of redoubts against segregated pleasure. Managed by Herbert Scheubmayr, a gay former Olympic swimmer from Austria who previously ran a club in the Chelsea Hotel with Dave Marks, Jameson’s shared Shifty’s freeform musical tastes. With its diverse line-up of acts, it represented an idealised republic in a segregated society. Another key venue in the central city was DV8, based in the Dawson’s Hotel in Hillbrow, which provided a platform to musical acts *éVoid* and *Via Afrika*, whose brand of ethnic new wave briefly found favour with New York club DJs.

“We wanted our music to be a visual experience of textures, cultures and language – a celebration of the wonders of being African and the realisation of this privilege,” said René Veldsman of *Via Afrika* in 2000. This suturing together of musical forms, fashion idioms and dance styles remains a character of Johannesburg’s fringe clubs. But in the 1970 and 80s, musical syncretism and cultural cross-pollination were disapprovingly reviewed by the state. In Soweto, shebeens and informal club spaces faced routine harassment, not only from authorities but also

from the Makabasas, a police-armed gang based in Orlando who targeted political activists. The harassment sometimes extended to white musicians and venues. Folk singer Roger Lucey’s career was famously sabotaged. “It was a time when jolling [dancing and carousing] was dangerous, where police tear-gassed clubs and right-wingers slashed tyres at Rhythm Against Detention gigs,” says music promoter Deon Maas. Music and dancing, rather than being spontaneous expressions of culture, were eyed with suspicion by the state.

“The police and the state security apparatus seemed to generally view musical preferences as a political rather than a personal choice,” wrote music historian Anne Schumann in 2008. State power, while notionally omnipresent, is markedly sedentary and reactive. This is a strategic weakness. In February 1990, the African National Congress was unbanned and its leadership released from prison. A tense and protracted negotiation between black and white politicians ensued over the next four years. This interregnum, which witnessed a great deal of violence in the townships and the rapid repurposing of Johannesburg’s ailing CBD, was also the source of flourishing new dance scenes. Echoes of the electronic music dance revolution that was sweeping across Europe were already a part of the DJ mixes at clubs like Idols and Thunderdome in Johannesburg. At Kippies, the small jazz nightclub built next door to the Market Theatre and run by legendary 1980s pop star Sipho “Hotstix” Mabuse, exiles mingled with old friends in a venue named after the Sophiatown saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi.

Established in 1976 and located in the city’s former Indian fruit market, the Market Theatre hosted Johannesburg’s earliest rave, Luna-Sea, in a disused retail annex. Held in February 1992, its organisers, the Activ8 DJ crew, played a mix of European trance and British hardcore/breakbeat. Key members of the mostly Pretoria-based collective included G-Force (Graeme Hector) and DJ Christos (Christos Katsaitis). In 1992 Activ8 DJs provided the music at key early warehouse raves held inside the disused Piccadilly Theatre in Yeoville, vacant Wembley Arena in Turfontein, and an empty light-industrial tower block on End Street. This informal and itinerant scene rapidly formalised. In 1993 the club Fourth World opened in Doornfontein. It was the first Johannesburg dance venue to focus entirely on “machine-made, acid-laced and 4/4-propelled grooves,” to quote music critic Greg Bowes. Jointly founded by Eric Kirsten and Preston van Wyk, who had recently returned from London where he worked as a fashion designer with dance music pioneer Jazzie B of Soul II Soul, Fourth World initially ploughed a lonely furrow. Its ethos was millennial, druggy and optimistically non-racial, even though it attracted few black ravers.

The fast-paced tempo of Fourth World’s club scene demanded in part by the ecstasy and LSD-fuelled drug culture, was by 1995 being copied and commercialised by rival promoters. Peter White’s large corporatised Mother events typified the endgame of a commercialised white rave scene and recalled the shrewd niche programming of Clive Calder’s white folk-rock events north of Johannesburg in the early 1970s. Many of Fourth World’s original DJs retreated from the

increasingly cynical white rave scene, some preferring to focus on black audiences. Christos Katsaitis, dubbed the “godfather” of South African house, was variously involved in cofounding the record labels Kalawa, House Afrika and Phat Kat in the early 1990s and is an established hit-maker.

In the early 1990s, as new black dance music was being honed by Arthur Mafokate and M’du Masilela, Katsaitis entered the emerging black electronic dance music scene. In its earliest manifestations, kwaito was formulated and defined at informal parties and record label sponsored events in the townships that satellite Johannesburg, Pretoria and Rustenburg. According to one account, a community hall in Tembisa, a township northeast of Johannesburg, hosted the first version of a township rave. In the central city, which since the mid-1980s had witnessed an exodus of white corporations to increasingly far-flung new premises north of the city, formerly white neighbourhoods like Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville were transforming – both aurally and demographically. Solly Rametsi’s Razzmatazz in Hillbrow and Tandoor in Yeoville both became closely associated with the kwaito sound.

Established in 1991, Razzmatazz launched the career of Oscar Mdlongwa (aka Oskido and Oscar Warona). Cofounder of Kalawa Records, with Don Laka and Christos, and an early mentor to current afro-house sensation DJ Black Coffee (Nathi Maphumulo), Mdlongwa’s biography is a typically Johannesburg story of rags to riches. After ditching a job as a technician at a car dealership, Mdlongwa set up a food stand on the pavement outside Razzmatazz, primarily

because of his interest in music. He was invited to play in the club a week later when the resident DJ failed to arrive. During his early residency at the club, Brenda Fassie, the queen of 1980s bubblegum pop and an early adopter of the kwaito sound, frequented Razzmatazz.

Like Hillbrow, which rapidly transformed into a predominantly black neighbourhood by the end of the 1990s, Yeoville, a bucolic white bohemia formerly populated by lower-income Hasidic Jews, also changed complexion. House of Tandoor on Rockey Street became a key venue, both for kwaito and ragga. Once an Indian-themed restaurant neighbouring a popular neighbourhood bar, by the late 1990s it had transformed into a multi-space live music venue. Bongo Maffin’s Adrian Muphemhi (aka Appleseed) played here. Kwaito’s quick succession from underground sound to mainstream soundtrack was not without its problems. “What kwaito lacks thus far is an underground of the underground,” observed journalist Themba ka Maathe in 2003. He contrasted its poetics and generative potential with hip hop, which was founded on a kind of literacy. “If you look at most of the kwaito stars like Mandoza, he was a carjacker. Kwaito helped those guys to get out of the traps of the township, the crime the drugs. If it had not been for the excitement that the people had about the new democracy, kwaito would never have happened. The music was and even now still is, a celebration.”

The celebration was capped, at least musically, by the establishment in 1997 of youth radio station YFM. Based in the inner-city suburb of Bertrams, within one month of its first broadcast 600,000 predominantly

young black listeners in the greater Johannesburg and Pretoria metropolitan area had tuned into YFM. Initially managed by Dirk Hartford, a former labour activist who has since returned to his trade union roots, YFM, in its early incarnation at least, was an important beacon for a kind of music-inspired intellectualism. S’busiso “The General” Nxumalo, who together with Sifiso Ntuli in 1996 founded the Politburo Sessions, an itinerant nightclub project, was the first editor of the radio station’s print publication, Ymag. YFM also provided a valuable platform for hip hop through its Rap Activity Jam sessions, which pitted rival MCs live on air. New talent discovered on this live show included Pitch Black Afro (Thulani Ngcobo), a classically trained musician who switched to hip hop in 2000.

Audiences for hip hop were always smaller than for kwaito, which despite its lyrical paucity and basic musical structure came to define the post-liberation moment. At early Rap Activity Jams young MCs delivered rhymes that rehearsed gestures, themes and phraseology from American hip hop culture. Bands like Skwatta Kamp, formed in 1996, helped create a more indigenous sound. Their 2003 hit “Feel like Dancing” drew heavily on kwaito style, offering a rudimentary bass and uncomplicated lyrics with simple styling (T-shirts and jeans). Despite the uptake of hip hop, in the early 2000s Johannesburg only had one hip hop club, Rippingtons, which hosted open mic sessions on Saturdays. By the mid-2000s, Soweto’s Orlando West neighbourhood claimed a small hip hop scene, with the Slaghuis (Butchery) operating as a live venue in Diepkloof. In 2007, Skwatta Kamp’s Nkululeko “Flabba” Habedi acknowledged: “Hip hop is still young, cats are still learning, and people are still

trying to get into the groove of local hip hop.”

The informal, hard-to-track nature of the Soweto hip hop scene is matched by the even smaller indie rock scene, which for a time in the late 2000s, flourished at a private home in Pimville, Soweto. It is safe to say that by the early noughts, the rigid typologies of apartheid life that had determined who could like what kind of music and dance in what locality were being upended. Anything was possible. Okmalumkoolkat (Smiso Zwane), one half of the electro-pop outfit Dirty Paraffin, whose sounds blend French electro with Zulu musical idioms, summarised the unpredictable, open-to-change spirit underlying young Johannesburg in a 2012 interview. “The local music scene is trying to find itself,” said Zwane, whose band has played at the Alexander Theatre, part of a network of hipster dance venues that include Kitchener’s and SubLevel, both in Braamfontein. “Gatekeepers are old, and they want the same damn song. Gatekeepers are not in touch with what the youth is currently fond of and up to. We are not competing locally; we are competing internationally.”

In 2007, the Maponya Mall, a private development named after Soweto entrepreneur Richard Maponya, opened in along a main axis road through Soweto. The mall’s aim was not philanthropic: it aimed to tap into Soweto’s estimated R4.3-billion consumer market. There are many markers of Soweto’s transformation, ranging from bus stations to the newly opened Soweto Theatre, a venue with three performance spaces seating 430, 180 and 90 patrons. While many in Johannesburg mourn the closure of The Bassline in Melville (2003) and Kippies (2005), two key jazz venues, the legacy of Johannesburg’s

The informal, hard-to-track nature of the Soweto hip hop scene is matched by the even smaller indie rock scene, which for a time in the late 2000s flourished at a private home in Pimville, Soweto

jazz scene figures still figures prominently in the manners of Johannesburg’s nightlife. Sophiatown continues to loom large in the imagination of Johannesburg, partly because it represents a brief-lived black urban renaissance that is now a realisable long-term possibility.

In June 2012, a month after the opening of the Soweto Theatre, Zakes Bantwini, a big second-generation kwaito star, hosted a one-night-only musical at the venue. Titled Upfront, it was billed as “a tribute to Sophiatown” and followed a familiar concert-and-dance format. “It was one of the most extraordinary nights in my theatre career, in the sense that he sold the place out, online, in two days, gone,” said Carl Johnson, the theatre’s general manager. “He filled the 430-seater main venue with tickets priced at R300 per head.” For a young generation of upwardly mobile professionals, the price was the equivalent of a modest meal for two at any city eatery. Bantwini’s show included a 13-piece band, dancers, string section, styled VJ’ing on a video wall and roster of guest performers, including DJ Black Coffee. The audience came

dressed in suits and ball gowns as if headed for the Bantu Men’s Social Centre or Odin Cinema. “Growing up,” stated Bantwini in a pre-concert statement, “I was told about the great musical stories of Sophiatown, and as a musician, I want to bring this culturally-rich era to life. This was a time in our nation’s history that was brimming with musical talent and where legends were born.”

Navigating contemporary Johannesburg, a city of fitful moods and glaring income disparities, requires something between unbridled optimism and calculated scepticism. This place of fragile natural environments and baroque thunderstorms, of tremulous first arrivals and wistful exits, of trade and plunder, of love, heartbreak, friendship and brittle mutuality, and, irreducibly, of night and day, this place is also a city of sudden endings and unexpected death. In 2008, a wave of anti-immigrant violence took shape and spread out from a township on Johannesburg’s eastern outskirts. As has always been the case, locals retreated to their preferred haunts. There was a diverse array to choose from. Privileged white youths could seek out the bland corporatised leisure entertainment offered by Tiger Tiger, an imported brand concept of British nightclubs. Hipsters could lurch at The Woods or Kitchener’s. Thesis, then a newly launched fashion retailer in Soweto, was about to host its first Social Jam Sessions, a monthly live music platform echoing the concert-and-dance formula. In Hillbrow, young women prepared for another night’s reveal at the Summit Club, now a strip club. Different names, different sounds, similar patterns: that’s Joburg for you. But this city leaves no room for complacency. **Onwards** 🖐️



Buying and selling goods inside the binational Dajabon Border Market in Dajabon, Dominican Republic, Monday, Aug. 23, 2019.

PHOTO BY TATIANA FERNANDEZ GEARA



