

Humanizing Urbanism. On Embracing Informality and the Future of Johannesburg

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Abstract This paper aims to give an evocative rather than technically descriptive portrait of the city of Johannesburg, attempting to reveal how a logic which structured the city around control and segregation is disrupted more by the informal flows of life than by the rhetoric of spatial and economic transformation that characterizes the city since the demise of apartheid. In the face of a specifically engineered physical dispersion and segregation, and in tension with both physical realities and government policy, the urban poor have been *re-territorializing* the city, undermining the legacy of rigid apartheid spatial segregations. This is opposing the paradigm of a world shaped and controlled by power and rational social planning with one built around relational networks and basic needs, and characterized by informal practices. The paper argues that if liberated by the vocabulary of a hegemonic Westernized culture, informality can reveal itself to be a counter-strategy capable of generating a means of response to the failure of certain urban mainstreams tied to a market economy.

1 Divide et Impera

Johannesburg, also called Jozi or Jo'burg, is a city of walls and fences. Historically shaped by a strong racially charged vision of population control, it is a city in which the legacies of racial divide are still strongly visible in its spatial characteristics, as well as in the socioeconomic divide still prevalent in the city (Bremner 2010). The city speaks clearly about the difficulty of living in its space, marked by highways and fences, as well by racial and social divides.

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Under apartheid, public space and urban life were racially and spatially segregated and, even when overlapping, “black and white inhabited different worlds, or rather the world they inhabited meant very different things,” producing “a dual city and a dual nation, diverse urban worlds existing side by side in the same geo-graphical space” (Bremner 2006, p. 9). Planning and design were key tools in shaping the apartheid city—a kind of racially engineered planning and design seeking to partition the city into controllable and disconnected zones. Districts—corresponding to precise racial groups—were meticulously divided by using natural barriers (rivers, hills, ridgeways, etc.), constructed barriers (highways, railways, walls, mine dumps, etc.), or simply by open buffer spaces. More than twenty years after the dismantling of apartheid, contemporary Johannesburg is still a highly fragmented, sprawling city, where segregation, inequalities, and sociospatial divides manifest themselves in what Lindsay Bremner calls a precise “spatial doubling pattern” (Bremner 2010).

Jo’burg apartheid street patterns—a web of linear corridors, converging at the center—reveal a physical means of segregation and control. There was little chance to cross the city from east to west or north to south without passing through the city center: a clear symbol of hegemonic control manifested in a physical system. Upon the fall of apartheid, the movements of previously controlled populations became unimpeded, beginning a process described as the *re-territorialization* of the city (Bremner 2010). As the stage set of an all-white city crumbled, the population supporting its *fictional world* fled from the city center, driven by a sense of decreasing security and control (Shepard et al. 2008) the very same apartheid urban structure led the center to be the city’s first *re-territorialized* area (Bremner 2010). The *suburban poor* took to the center, moving from deprived suburbanities to old office buildings in the former central business district, so forming the more than 1000 vertical slums of Johannesburg where people—especially illegal migrants—live in miserable conditions and that the municipality identifies as “bad buildings.”¹

But the new urban dwellers also settled in residual spaces of the city, re-populating abandoned industrial buildings and occupying mine dump wastelands in the peripheries, forming the well-known landscape of townships made of myriads of shacks, aggregated in the suburban areas and infilling the pockets of the city. Furthermore, the same radial pattern of streets and highways, connecting the city center to Cape Town, Durban, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, turned the city inside out, centering the post-apartheid urban life in a “sprawling city of white enclaves”:

¹The Municipality of Johannesburg officially identifies these building as “bad buildings.” Even though there are not official estimations of the numbers of these vertical slums, activists keep their number and conditions under control «Bad buildings are poorly maintained buildings, usually in the inner city, which threaten the health and safety of occupants. Johannesburg has approximately 1500 bad buildings and at least 180 informal settlements», from “Cities Need to Plan with the Poor, Not for the Poor,” by *The South African Civil Society Information Service* (<http://sacsis.org.za/s/story.php?s=1564>).



Fig. 1 Informal traders in Jo'burg inner city (Photograph by L. Burocco)

gated residential communities, golf courses, casinos, and shopping malls. A new kind of “speculative commercial landscape” began to reshape the city (Bremner 2010).

Jo'burg is a former gold mining city, and still today, its past remains visibly readable in the deep spatial scar of the mining belt: a large, mostly un-urbanized tract of land containing the gold deposits that helped generate the city's wealth². The mining belt remains today as a symbolic and physical representation of the divide between the wealthy white north and the poor black south, a metaphor expressing an unresolved relationship and the persistence of a still strong socio-economic apartheid (Fig. 1).

²In 120 years, more than 40,000 tons of gold have been extracted from the Witwatersrand basin, along with cadmium, uranium, cobalt, copper, zinc, manganese, titanium, and other heavy metals (Rossouw et al. 2009). Mining activities and dumpsites occupy approximately 12,200 km² of land area in the Witwatersrand basin: some of which now serves as residence for a dense urban population in Gauteng Province, including a large part of the Johannesburg area, defining the *mining belt*. While much of this land is occupied by informal settlements, a rapid formal conversion of buffer areas around the dumps to residential land use is taking place, mainly operated by former mining companies trying to reposition themselves as real estate developers, while the gold reef is being depleted.

2 The Hidden Face of a City of Cities

In Jozi, if you ask someone where he/she is from, you will often get a response with the name of a neighborhood. This habit speaks about the many souls and faces of Johannesburg. There is no one single *city* in the imaginary of people, in which everyone recognizes him/herself. In some ways, the fragmentation of apartheid planning resulted in a contemporary Johannesburg lived and perceived as a mosaic of social status, races, circles, and precise *geographies of separation* (Harrison et al. 2004). And while the extremely rich—but often neglected—social fabric of the poor districts and informal areas is something common to many African cities, what is unique in Jo’burg is a sort of perceptible tension beneath the ordered surface of the city. This tension disrupts the rules of a rigid spatial planning linked to social control—the legacy of the apartheid—and negates their boundaries through the movement of people across the city. It dilates, conquers, and fills highly controlled spaces, bringing life to them, contrasting the still spatially prevalent technocratic and highly engineered vision of the world with a pulsing, swarming, and multi-colored humanity (Bremner 2010).

This appears as the strongest dichotomy informing contemporary Johannesburg: a city with a very thin public-realm, highly car-oriented, and substantially connoted by a structural lack of spaces for socialization (other than private enclosures). Regardless, people, especially the poor, are *re-territorializing* the city with “their movements, their squatting, their informal living, and their progressive conquering of new spaces in a transforming society” (Bremner 2010). People are undermining the legacy of the rigid apartheid spatial segregations and use of space, and in doing so, they are revealing the human face of a strongly engineered and highly fragmented city. Even informal settlements, while being the lived embodiment of exclusion from development opportunity in South African cities, are buzzing and lively neighborhoods that represent the capacity of the urban poor to adapt, manifest agency, and build livelihoods and social relations, appropriating and modifying their environments against the odds, in very harsh conditions and with limited resources (SACN 2014).

The hidden face of Jo’burg is therefore subversive to the city’s physical structure. It opposes the paradigm of a world shaped and controlled by power and rational social planning with a vibrant, teeming humanity that builds space around relational networks and basic needs (Simone 2012), where social and spatial orders are interlinked and respond to precise site-specific instances and community dynamics: infilling, adapting, moving, trading, building, and inhabiting. And informality—in all of its forms—is the way in which this face manifests itself.

3 Informality and the (s)Pace of Life

Informality is the simple “practice of enabling people to find multiple venues and devices to feel connections with each other and a firm workable solidarity” (Simone 2012). It is the prevalent mode of urban production in many cities of the world, and certainly, in Africa it is the dominant one (Simone 2004; Pieterse 2008). Informality in Jo’burg takes many forms. It provides the city with great flexibility, allowing homeless residents to house themselves, those who fall out of formal employment to continue earning money, and those without “formal” skills to continue contributing to their communities. It is very difficult in South Africa to find a job if you are outside the wheels of bureaucracy. For instance, illegal immigrants—constituting a big quota of informal residents—have no visa, no documents, and therefore no documented skills: This makes them unemployable. Furthermore, informal dwellers have no legal residence and if not “formalized” they cannot access the formal welfare system or even just open a bank account. But informality provides a safety valve in the urban system: accommodation for new comers, people that do not qualify for subsidy, and the very poorest. Informality provides shelter flexibility for diverse forms of household and provides for those the formal system is unable or unwilling to house (Harrison 2009).

Expressions of informality can be highly responsive, quick and temporary, self-empowering, and highly effective, innovative, and inexpensive. Informality empowers individuals and communities until the gears of formal governance finally provide for them, and allows groups to occupy spaces and depict alternatives to the ways in which society functions. Even the daily commute still mostly relies on what was born as an informal transportation industry: Maps of the routes correspond to a table of hand gestures. During the apartheid, private minibuses—commonly known as “black taxis”—filled the service gap between the need for urban transport and the capacity of the state system. In the post-apartheid era, they have been legalized and are still the backbone of the transportation system for most townships. Due to the sprawling structure of the city, and to the long tradition of private transportation, mobility is still one of the biggest issues in terms of integration. Despite the efforts of increasing public transportation through a series of new programs and projects such as the Rea Vaya (the local Bus Rapid Transit) or the Gautrain (a high-speed train connecting the northern districts of Jo’burg to Pretoria and the Airport), a structural lack of integration and intermodality still precludes the development of an efficient and inclusive public system, able to cover and reconnect the city. While the informal taxi industry thrives, offering a wide network with large coverage of the city’s neighborhoods (Fig. 2).

Recalling Ananya Roy—who defines informality as “*liberalization from below*”—we can say that here, more than in other places, informality is a *liberation from below*: a rebellion, an alternative way to set up a socioeconomic and spatial system that relates to human needs. It is a democratization of spaces and economies



Fig. 2 One of the many informal recyclers streaming the city streets searching for trash (Photograph by L. Burocco)

that shapes itself through the life and movements of people across the interstices of bureaucracy and control (Roy 2012). It does not merely consist of and pertain to the life of the poor or marginalized; it is an *alternative organizing logic*—one responding to the laws of life. It is a counter-practice that is more human-centered than the dominant one, and which has the power to become a “counter-strategy against the dominant mode of space production” (Ibid). In the informal spatial paradigm, the concept of order bends to necessity, responsiveness, and creativity. Conversely, government typically sees informality as a negative phenomenon due to the urban mainstream envisaging of order, comprehension, and optimal functioning as the only way into the urban future (Pieterse 2008, 2014). But if liberated by the vocabulary of a hegemonic Westernized culture, informality can reveal itself to be a counter-strategy capable of generating a means of response to the failure of certain urban mainstreams tied to the market economy (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Composition showing the skyline of Jo’burg inner city from a residential neighborhood, characterized by fenced and walled spaces, and by a graffiti expressing people’s claims for a different city (Photograph by B. Boshoff)

4 Architecture of Segregation, Re-Segregation, or Integration?

In Jo’burg, about the 20% of the total households are informal, between shack settlements, backyard shacks, and squatted buildings (South Africa Census Data 2011). At least one in every four of Jo’burg citizens fall outside the regulatory system of government and do not have the protection in terms of health and safety enjoyed in formal areas (Philip Harrison 2009). In this scenario, informality—and especially post-apartheid townships—represent the main challenges faced by the City government as well as by all levels of South African government on matters of housing, service delivery, and effective local governance. Since the current South African Constitution was enacted in 1997—with an implicitly perceived promise of giving a house and yard to every South African citizen—an unsustainable, somewhat self-defeating mechanism has been put into place. Poor people migrating to the city began building “temporary” shacks, mostly with found or cheap materials: a provisional home while waiting for the government to provide a house for them.



Fig. 4 Shot of one of the many “bad buildings” in Johannesburg’s inner city (Photograph by L. Burocco)

However, awaiting a so-called *RDP house*³ could even last for 20 years (Marx and Royston 2007) (Fig. 4).

In anticipation of an *RDP* house that may never materialize, people often put few resources into improving life conditions in the townships, starting with their shelters, leaving them vulnerable to floods and winter fires. Much of the townships are in fact located on what would have been considered unsuitable land for more formal development. During the summer rainy season, much of this land ends up in runoff areas prone to flooding. During the winter, residents often heat their houses with charcoal, leaving entire neighborhoods vulnerable to fire. The *RDP* housing model has indeed been highly disruptive to the quality of the city and the living environment. Typically, state-provided housing for the poor in SA is poorly located, repetitive, and produces “sterile” environments: There exists no mix of functions,

³The *Reconstruction and Development Program* (RDP) is a post-apartheid policy framework set in place for responding to the extensive housing stock deprivation for previously disadvantaged citizens. Between 1994 and 2001, the RDP delivered over 1.1 million cheap houses, accommodating 5 million of the estimated 12.5 million South Africans without proper housing. Critics of the RDP point to poor housing quality as the chief problem being faced. Critics also note that new housing schemes are often dreary in their planning and layout—to the extent that they often strongly resemble the en masse bleak building programs of the Apartheid government during the 1950s and 1960s.

typologies, or social classes (Huchzermeyer 2011). Despite the formal delivery of 2.5 million houses, the nationwide housing backlog has increased from 1.4 to 2.5 million since 1994–2009 (Tissington 2011). The majority of the black population still remains in what were once called “homelands,”⁴ denouncing the lost chance of reshaping the social and racial divides through the reshaping of the city.

If at the end of apartheid South Africans were promised townships to become towns, the ruling ANC party has for two decades replicated the old housing strategy of building “bedroom communities,” while evicting informal settlers and/or putting people on a waiting list for a state-delivered house (Findley and Ogbu 2011). Although moved by different intentions, the post-apartheid South African government has been trying to respond to the unattainable promise of giving a house and a yard to everyone by repeating the same mistake: building low-quality houses on poorly located land. Not only is this an unmatched challenge, it sends a very wrong message by de-dignifying human agency. But the truth is that government does not build the city; it builds housing. People build the city. And government must play the role of driving city development for the inclusion for the poor, as what people want is the right to develop themselves, as human beings (Roy and Al Sayyad 2004).

There is a need for a big shift in the way the issue of housing the poor is faced, and this shift should probably start with the townships, as a series of more recent national programs like the NUSP are trying to frame. In the last few years in fact, the South African government has tried to change the focus from delivering housing to enabling human settlements—starting from renaming the responsible national department—and has developed policies focused on in situ *upgrading*. With this intention, the National Upgrading Support Program (NUSP) was conceived in 2009 to support the National Department of Human Settlement (NDHS) in its implementation of the Upgrading Informal Settlements Program (UISP). The program was very innovative for South Africa, pushing for in situ and integrated, participatory upgrading, with a strong focus in integrated community development. Nevertheless, little was done in implementing the program correctly, mostly due to the mind-set of both the governmental institutions and their officers, to the overlap and power struggles among different Governmental Agencies, and/or for incapacity to manage conflict with and within the communities.⁵

To transform the spatial legacy of apartheid into a landscape able to better reflect the multiracial aspirations of South African cities, townships must incrementally evolve, building common spaces, empowering and supporting its inhabitants, leaving space to residents’ need to be engaged in the socioeconomic and spatial

⁴*Homelands* were areas of land set aside for black residents during the apartheid era. It was intended that all black residents be relegated to a particular homeland.

⁵There are, however, a series of good practices in terms of in situ, participatory upgrading—fruit of the work of NGOs, universities, and research centers, as well as capable and motivated professionals. But these approaches remain far from being understood and brought “at scale,” also due to a substantial overlapping in the different levels of Governmental agencies, often conflicting each other and approaching upgrading in very different ways.

challenges (and opportunities) of building a collective vision for the future. In these terms, the RDP mechanism has been lacking to engage—and in some way atrophying—the most powerful resource of informality: people and their agency (SACN 2014). The way in which the City of Johannesburg has faced—and will face—the issue of housing the urban poor can ultimately either reinforce apartheid spatial patterns or help to dismantle them, reshaping the city into a more inclusive, humane, and just one.

5 Sweep the Poor Out: New Mayor, Old Story

Another emblematic aspect related to the institutional inability of dealing with informality emerges from the way in which informal traders and poor residents in the inner city are seen and treated by the municipality. In October 2013, informal workers were cleared out of specific areas of the city center by the municipal government in a series of forced actions known as the “Mayoral Clean Sweep”⁶ brought forward by former ANC mayor Parks Tau. Consequently, a number of the legitimate informal workers took the City to court for loss of income in one of those typical, long legal battles advocating Constitutional rights—often the only weapon of the urban poor. Most recently the new mayor, Herman Mashaba, elected in August 2016 and belonging to the Democratic Alliance, the main ANC opposition party, has been running a “shock and awe” campaign around the removal of thousands of unauthorized inhabitants from *bad buildings* in Johannesburg’s center. Mashaba said his goal for downtown Johannesburg was to move people out of “hijacked” buildings, and get private companies to renovate them⁷. Of Johannesburg’s 5-million residents, about 400,000 live in the inner city, attracted by the proximity to occasional work opportunities, schools, healthcare facilities, and reduced transportation costs (City of Johannesburg 2013). They are the invisible labor that support Johannesburg’s daily functioning (car guards, domestic workers, taxi drivers, cleaners, informal recyclers, and informal traders), and many of them live and access basic economic opportunity through informal economy, and by squatting or renting illegally occupied building from slumlords.

Informality is the popular idiom of African urbanization. It is a mode of production of space and must be understood as a logic through which differential

⁶For more detailed information about the *Mayoral Clean Sweep* and the sanctions system applied to street sellers, see Tasmi Quazi and Richard Dobson, *Redefining “Clean-up” of informality*, from the blog: *Asiye Etafuleni* (<http://aet.org.za/2013/11/redefining-clean-informality-2/>).

⁷For more detailed information about the new Mayor Herman Mashaba’s approach to inner city regeneration, see Dennis Webster and Alana Potter, “*Herman Mashaba’s pro-poor plans for Joburg seem a bit rich*” (available at <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2017-05-12-herman-mashabas-pro-poor-plans-for-joburg-seem-a-bit-rich/>), and Keaton Allen-Gessesse and Lwazi Mtshiyi “*The poor pay the cost for Joburg’s inner-city overhaul*” (available at <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2017-06-01-the-poor-pay-the-cost-for-joburgs-inner-city-overhaul/>).

spatial value is produced and managed (Roy 2005, 2009). City government is clearly in crisis in regard to the urban management of informality. Its ad hoc responses range from authoritarian “cleanup” operations to revised bylaws with increasing sanctions. This worsens tensions between urban regulators and informal workers and residents, building on the rhetoric of “cleanups” to create a system based on harassment of informal workers and evictions of informal residents. It is true that many of these people live in terrible conditions. But the response of the municipal institution is often either nonexistent or violent. While the search for long-term solutions for housing the poor and allowing them to use the city to earn their living are nowhere to be seen, gentrification aggressively displaces the poor, causing the most vulnerable to be rounded up and tossed onto the streets (Fig. 5).

Planning for the post-apartheid Johannesburg requires accessing a human dimension. It requires the de-structuring of the hypocritical rhetoric of inclusion to really embrace the people and their needs, discard fears and distrust, and let a new public life flow into the city, bridging sociospatial divides. It requires something that is thousands of miles from the reproduction in vitro of a fake urban life, as it happens in some new development areas of the inner city: gentrified small pockets of the former CBD, where young businessmen are trying to s(t)imulate a comprehensive urban regeneration process (Walsh 2013). A well-known example of this ongoing gentrification—controversially sold under the rhetoric of inclusion—is the Maboneng Precinct, a recent development that foresees to transform more than 50 squatted and/or abandoned buildings in the new pulsing heart of the inner Johannesburg. Maboneng is the brainchild of Propertuity, a private developer founded in 2008 with the vision of transforming the entire area into a racially integrated, mixed-use community and a comprehensive and mixed-income residential offering.



Fig. 5 Recent eviction in the inner city, under Mayor Mashaba new regeneration plan (Photograph by S. Sibanda, June 2017)

Truth is that Maboneng was carved out of Jeppestown, a working-class neighborhood in Johannesburg's CBD. And while Property's experiment has been developing rapidly since 2009, the surrounding Jeppestown is still mostly occupied by low-income black people that are not all that welcome in the highly controlled four city blocks constituting the Maboneng Precinct and its upmarket bars, fashionable restaurants, creative work spaces, and loft-style apartments. Maboneng represents that kind of development is that often leads cities to become more and more spatially unequal. These spaces are more like a "diorama of city," with pretended social mixing, induced mixed-use, and smiling, ubiquitous armed security. And while lower classes are welcome to fill the middle-class needs for cheap labor, at the same time, these very same low-income residents are pushed further and further in the search for affordable housing close to job opportunities (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Famous street in the Maboneng Precinct (Photograph by L. Burocco)

6 A City at the Crossroad: From Housing the Poor to Building a Humane City

The underlying narrative in contemporary Johannesburg is the one of a double-souled city. A city whose past, still strongly written in its spatial characters, clashes with its aspiration of social integration and spatial transformation toward a less divided society. The antithetic dialectics of colonial/postcolonial, apartheid/post-apartheid, and formal/informal still actively shape this duality and require a deep interrogation on how to move beyond them. To what extent has Jo’burg worked for integrated townships? To what extent has the city been integrating informal economies in the mainstream of city life? And, to what extent have RDP interventions and post-apartheid housing programs been reassembling and re-stitching the city, redefining a public realm that has the power of really transforming society?⁸ All these questions seem to remain wide open, constituting a problematic framework that the city is striving to address.

A possible answer is that Johannesburg should start to substantially invest in the commons, in the public space, in services, and in supporting mechanism and policies, leaving a rightful space for action to the agency of people—to the human ability to shape its own living environment. This starts with the reconsideration of space in South Africa as a benefit for all, as the most important common to be defended and made equally accessible. It also requires a reconsideration of “informality as the place of resilience, of important livelihood strategies and of urban people staking their rightful claims to the city” (Meintjies 2013).

Recognizing the need to re-center African urbanism around human needs, and building a new vocabulary for *informal adjectives*, is indeed linked to an emancipation of a postcolonial identity of African cities (Pieterse 2008, pp. 108–109). Nevertheless, Johannesburg struggles to let informality pump life in its veins. A postcolonial take of informality should therefore seek to disrupt the formal/informal binary (Valrey 2013) and look at it as a possible pathway to reconsider community dynamics and demands in order to encourage co-production and co-management of collective urban landscapes, adding more modes of organization and action into the (urban) political arena (Amin and Thrift 2013).

But the gap in engaging informality is still large, beginning with understanding the phenomenon itself, especially when switching from single good practices to policies at scale. For the post-apartheid city of Jo’burg, the key instrumentality is therefore a kind of human-centered planning and design: a planning and design for the people and with the people. Without understanding and engaging informality, the city will most likely deepen exclusion and inequality, and keep struggling with

⁸From an interview with Prof. Phil Harrison in *The Urban Challenge*, documentary released in occasion of the World Architecture Conference “Sustainable Human(e) Settlements,” held in Durban (South Africa) on September 2012 and available at <http://vimeo.com/47652514>. Phil Harrison is the South African Chair in Spatial Analysis and City Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand, and he is a member of the South African National Planning Commission.

the duality of its identity. It is time to respond to fragmentation and the spatial underpinnings of inequality. It is time to re-give dignity to human agency and to charge the politics of planning and design with the task of dismantling apartheid sociospatial legacy, shaping a more humane and less divided city.

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