



**South African urbanism:  
Between the modern and  
the refugee camp**

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**Dark      Roast      Occasional**

**Roast Series**

No. 17



**Dark Roast Occasional Paper Series** is a project of Isandla Institute. The aim of the project is to create a discursive space of interface between academic and policy communities in various fields of development policy and practice. The papers reflect ongoing research of Isandla Institute staff, associates and interested parties in the interest of debate and more informed development practice. The papers are meant to provoke passionate debate and creative aromas of thought. We welcome any comments and feedback.

*Published by:*

Isandla Institute, PO Box 12263 Mill Street, Gardens, 8010 – Cape Town, SA. Email: [isandla@icon.co.za](mailto:isandla@icon.co.za)

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ISSN 1810-8202

ISBN 0-9584751-3-X

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# **South African urbanism: Between the modern and the refugee camp**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past ten years, South African urban policy makers have made concerted efforts to address the fractured nature of South African cities stemming from apartheid planning. Whereas ten years is hardly enough time to redo this architecture, it is increasingly clear that current urban planning interventions themselves generate fracturing effects. Ironically, perhaps, it is within this fractured urban landscape that urban residents – particularly those who find themselves excluded from modern urban existence and whose lives are analogous to those in refugee camps – are asserting their right to the city, that is, the right to pursue their aspirations. Whereas there is a need for urban policy, infrastructure and economic development interventions to address particular dimensions of disarticulation, the right to pursue multiple aspirations is not something that can be ‘managed’ or ‘fixed’ by structures of governance. Rather, it is embedded in the practices and survival strategies of urban residents themselves.

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# South Africa urbanism: Between the modern and the refugee camp

AbdouMaliq Simone<sup>1</sup>

## **THE URBAN LANDSCAPE: FRACTURED AND FRACTURING**

South African urbanism during the past decade in most respects reflects some of the most innovative policy and institutional narratives and manoeuvres applied to cities anywhere. From integrated development planning, cross-subsidisation of urban services, the massive overhaul of local authorities to the selective deployment of infrastructure projects to facilitate social integration, interventions have substantially remade the urban landscape with limited capital budgets and enormous challenges embedded in highly fractured and discordant cities. Yet in significant ways, the apartheid city past is as indicative of general urban futures as the repairs and innovations of the past decade.

Cities everywhere exhibit a capacity to have a smaller percentage of their productive capacities, populations and physical territories generate the significant portion of their economic product – and thus their viability. Cities everywhere are increasingly skewed in terms of spatial development, resource investment and infrastructural composition. Cities, as domains of publicity, as arenas of socialisation for national belonging and as facilitators of social cohesion among heterogeneities of all kinds, are functions that have substantially been eroded during the same decade that South African cities have simultaneously tried to become more coherent as contained urban systems and more connected to regional and global economies.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the South African Cities Symposium at Wiser, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 20 May 2004.

The intensified divergence of these trajectories—on the one hand more compact and integrated urban systems and on the other hand the greater integrations of those urban systems in multiple networks of decision-making and economic transaction—pose critical dilemmas for South African urban policymakers. For despite local and national frameworks, practices and interventions, the reorientation of the country's largest urban areas to various facets of region-wide management and service provision generates its own fracturing effects that compel the need to rethink what the right to the city actually is. Cities everywhere become increasingly articulated and interwoven with cities elsewhere. At the same time, the internal coherence of discrete cities is substantially fractured, in part, by these very articulations and as such many unanticipated threats, difficult to detect and track, can ramify far beyond the administrative border and ecological domains of a given city.

#### **TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE AND URBAN INTERACTIONS**

Such a notion of the right to the city has to be rethought in terms of three levels of technological change. At the first level, there are technological changes at the service of inducing greater capacity for cities to both extend their reach and to consolidate spaces of economic capacity and extensiveness regardless of the histories, livelihoods and aspirations of the majority or urban residents. At the second level, the fragmentation of cities, and the unbundling of public infrastructure, service delivery systems and institutional life in general, generates a wide range of local initiatives aimed at low-cost provisioning of essential urban services through the deployment of appropriate technologies. The development of such initiatives almost exclusively takes place within very circumscribed territorial parameters that tend to reinforce notions of urban community in cities largely operating against the sustainability of community life. At the third level, the disarticulation of urban spaces and the increased inability of key state and municipal institutions to engender frameworks of governance applicable to cities as a whole generates a vast array of economies centred around repair, the illicit or unconventional use of built and institutional environments and piracy driven by specific amalgamations of technology that enable these economies. While remaining largely within the realms of local survivalist orientations, these economies can also attain significant transnational reach.

These levels of technological change generate specific modulations in the relationships between residents and the urban environment, between the city and cities elsewhere, and among the flows of goods, information, capacities and powers. They institute their own specific rhythms, speeds and time frames, reworking the value of urban financial investments, infrastructure, space and human resources in terms of the various interactions that can be brought together between different markets, production systems, money trains, consumption styles and media. In its simplest terms, the value of a given property, a given life, or institution and skill can radically change depending on how it is made known in relationship to other sites, structures and lives in the city, and increasingly everywhere else. Changes can be made without precedence; everything that exists in a city can be potentially an object of speculation. At times it appears that the only options for urban residents are to quickly do whatever they can to normalise themselves in standard levels of middle class consumption, or to become marginalised and disappear off the radar screen.

Urban environments are increasingly dependent on complex information and communication systems and infrastructure inputs tailored to enabling economic transactions conducted in real time. Yet, this dependency ends up maximising the potentially countervailing and destructive effects of low technology, readily accessible to the use of most urban residents. In urban environments concentrating investments in privatised premium infrastructure, public grids and reticulation systems fall into increasing disrepair. As municipal institutions find it increasingly difficult to offer and enforce an overarching administration of the urban system, different populations making up the city are left to “go their own way”. Many compensate for the lack of public infrastructure and production opportunities through economies of repair, privacy, subversion and “heretical” uses of the urban environment. Prolifically discrepant uses of the urban environment facilitated by the variable intersections of high and low technologies related to communications, transport, repair and power far exceed the ability of urban government to specify how the city should be used.

#### **THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ASPIRATIONS**

South African urban policymakers have tried hard to fill in the gaps engineered by apartheid, the gap between a modern urban existence for a few and the life of a refugee camp for the majority. As enormous resources were spent to enforce a fractured urban

landscape, ten years is hardly a sufficient amount of time to redo this architecture. The question becomes: with limited resources, how does one proceed to remake South African cities in the future? What kinds of speeds are involved? What constitute strategic sites of intervention with maximum multiplier effects? To what extent can and should the infrastructures of connection—between the township, the peri-urban, the downtown, the economic enclave, the high and low-density residential areas—be specified, and by whom? Given the extent to which a highly fractured landscape remains and is reproduced in new spatial dimensions, what kinds of connections can take place between different facets of the urban environment and over what period of time? What kind of time is at work in the eastern CBD of Johannesburg, where illegal housing in mothballed office buildings meets an emerging regional fashion district meets the fortified enclaving of the ABSA Bank district meets the refashioned muti market meets new social housing developments meets the largely informal appropriation of the former light manufacturing district for artisanal production? As the central business district combines the discrepant speeds of the haemorrhaging of business headquarters to the Northern suburbs, the entrenchment of Anglo American in a particular corner of the western CBD opening up to a reinforced cultural precinct, the continued occupation of commercial office space for residence—how are these divergent trajectories going to meet over time; again, what kind of time is involved?

Like much of Africa, the discernment between night and day, present and past is minimal for many South African urban youth. Without any prospect of employment, there is no platform to signal progression from youth to adulthood; little likelihood of viable social reproduction—of family, cultural value, memory. Their lives are analogous to those of refugee camps—an endless present unavailable to politics, unavailable to the elaboration of institutions and ways of life capable of marking a passage of time, of rendering what one does today in some larger framework of purpose and meaning.

The right to the city is not in the end reduced to the right to be maintained in the city—that is to be housed and serviced. Rather, these are critical elements of the right to use the city as an arena through which one can realise specific and usually mutable aspirations without necessarily having to recompose the characteristics of those aspirations in terms of other ones at work in the city. While accommodations are necessarily viewed as spatial ones, the right to pursue aspirations are, perhaps more fundamentally, matters of time—

that people have time to pursue particular ways of living and being that are not judged within specific imposed temporal frameworks as having a definitive value or efficacy.

Critical to this unfolding of different ways of using and being in the city as the means of realising certain aspirations is the divergent composition of the city itself—its very own movements toward decline and ascendancy, its varied juxtapositions of planning and improvisation, of business and residence, of security and insecurity. Viewing the right to the city as the right to pursue multiple aspirations ensures that no structure of governance can ever really manage the activation of this right. In other words, it can never grant the resources or the platform on which different kinds of residents in the city can equally pursue their aspirations. While urban government may guarantee as best as it is able that the pursuit of aspirations entailed in acting on the right to the city neither harms, injures or marginalises specific residents, it can neither be the purveyor of a specific aspiration nor the patron of all aspirations.

#### **CONSTRUCTING URBAN CONNECTIVITY IN A DISJOINTED ENVIRONMENT**

The pursuit itself again largely depends on what kinds of connections residents can put together between the diverse infrastructures, spaces, populations, institutions and economic activities of the city. The more governments attempt to specify those connections, attempt to develop a fixed overarching map of just how integration is to take place and how spaces are to be used, the more it tends to contract the possibilities diverse residents have of finding a way to pursue this right. This pursuit stretches over varying time spans, with many changes along the way. When cities specifically ask residents to fix themselves to a long term commitment to a particular way of living urban life—whether it be by encouraging home ownership with long-term bonds, to not use residential space for commercial activity—a wide range of claims are made on the future, thus depriving it of certain resourceful flexibilities.

While urban policy, infrastructure and economic development interventions are important tools to cross the gaps of disarticulated cities, it remains the presence of urban residents themselves and their varied uses of each other as instruments to realise particular aspirations and imaginaries that constitute the most significant form of urban connectivity. Individual urban selves mark both the gap and the connection in interwoven

economies—material, symbolic, and spatial. The gap is between what buildings, people, spaces, objects and gestures can be normatively or customarily used for and how they can be put to task to do more than what is specified. At the same time, selves act as connections among disparate uses and users. Here, urban persons constitute themselves as unavoidable insertions into operations of all kinds—transport, eating and drinking, supplying or theft, employing a range of specific technologies, from cell phones, to religious media, divination rituals, to electronic equipment under a nearly constant state of improvised repair.

Cities everywhere then are a patchwork of increasingly dense infrastructures—optic fibre cables, surveillance systems, bundled packages of diverse services and highways dedicated to private use—and vast expanses of decayed or underutilised built environments. The city in its very physicality has been largely disjoined and deprived of an overarching institutional logic or public discourse capable of tying its heterogeneous residents together in some conviction of common belonging or reference. As such, there is little to deter the proliferation of many different impressions and interpretations concerning what is taking place in the city and, as such, there are a wide range of discrepant imaginaries about the built environment, how it operates, what it looks like and what takes place within it.

If we take the inner city of Johannesburg, residence often means living in buildings that frequently lack basic amenities and security, or where provisioning of both requires substantial financial and personal investments. In addition, residents have to cope with an incessant preying upon their own vulnerabilities. For the inner city is an environment of trickery and deception, where at the same time the need to forge solid relationships of mutual dependency exists. Because such dependency is often relied upon in order to make ends meet, residents are all the more vulnerable to deception. Fellow residents who otherwise might look out for each other can also give information to thieves about who may not be in their apartments at certain times. Sexual partners are especially held in suspicion as the rights each individual in the couple would normally grant also leave them vulnerable to being taken advantage of. The desperation for jobs has cultivated an enormous industry of fake employment agencies and shakedown schemes. Residents are conscious about displaying any weakness and continuously watch what they say about themselves, what they wear, the routes they travel and the company they are seen with.

Even in cursory relationships with neighbours or associates, a person cannot be construed as having significant relationships in the event that others to whom these associates may owe money or are perceived to have been harmed in some way decide to hold that person as somehow culpable. What will this look like over time; what kind of urban citizen is constructed; how will new forms of sociality be created, and what time is required?

### **INSURGENT PRACTICES AND THE PROSPECT OF CHANGE**

In some areas, such as the inner city of Johannesburg, the extent of demographic shifts is certainly unprecedented in contemporary urban history. Also unprecedented is the degree to which social boundaries are marked by spatial arrangements in high density quarters and the ways in which the physical trappings of wealth and security can be penetrated by “roving bands” of “opportunists” taking whatever they can. The intense levels of contestation over who has the “right” to do what in South African cities produce a situation where things can happen very quickly. Urban dwellers do not, as a result, feel constrained by the sense that specific places and resources belong to only certain kinds of uses or identities. There are constant and often violent arguments in apartment blocks, on streets, in taxis, in schools and in stores about who can do what where. Such argumentation can open up places to greater flexibility as to their use, but it also can break down the integrity of places and a sense of propriety, which in turn makes them vulnerable to incursions and distortions of all kinds.

Drawing on urban survival strategies used during apartheid to avoid pass laws and other forms of state surveillance, populations proficient in sending the “wrong” signals can continue to do so in order to “win” spaces of autonomous action. Who is a “real” police-person, security guard, domestic worker, gardener, deliverer, and who is not is increasingly hard to discern. In any event, in many cases it does not matter as levels of complicity between the real and the “pretender” intensify. At other times, things move slowly, since urban residents know that many people are paying attention to what they do. They then try to conform to some sense of what can pass as conventional in order not to stand out. So in South African cities, spaces can change very quickly and also not at all.

The intersections of low-level computing and telecommunications with the capacity of many urban residents, out of the loop of regularised formal employment, to develop a

finely-tuned sense about the flows in the city—people coming and going from residences and businesses, changing shifts, loading and unloading trucks, flows of cars from auto parks—give rise to unexpected ways of intervening into urban space. Whatever their legal nature, however fraudulent the intent, the remarkable proliferation of scams and schemes of all kinds across urban South Africa not only point to the desperation people have of finding employment and places to live, but also the capacity of residents to converge in all kinds of combinations and generate money on the basis of almost nothing. While I am not encouraging the elaboration of such illegality per se, it does point to how generative other kinds of experimentations with minimal technological investment could be in converging different kinds of actors under a variety of circumstances. This is particularly the case as more and more people do not live as conventional families, do not work conventional jobs and see themselves as prepared to be many different kinds of things for many different kinds of people. It is similar to what Franz Fanon talked about in the *Wretched of the Earth*—the notion that the time lost in allowing people to find their own vernaculars and practices for realising themselves as creators of life (and not just consumers or victims of it) is recuperated in the advent of real collective change.

For all the suffering it generated, for all the ways it ripped off the best years of entire generations and deprived people of having aspirations to pursue, the very fracturing which is the unavoidable legacy of many South African cities may actually be a blessing in disguise.