SOUTH AFRICAN URBAN IMAGINARIES: CASES FROM JOHANNESBURG

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Photograph by Mark Lewis

Photograph by Rolihlahla Dilata
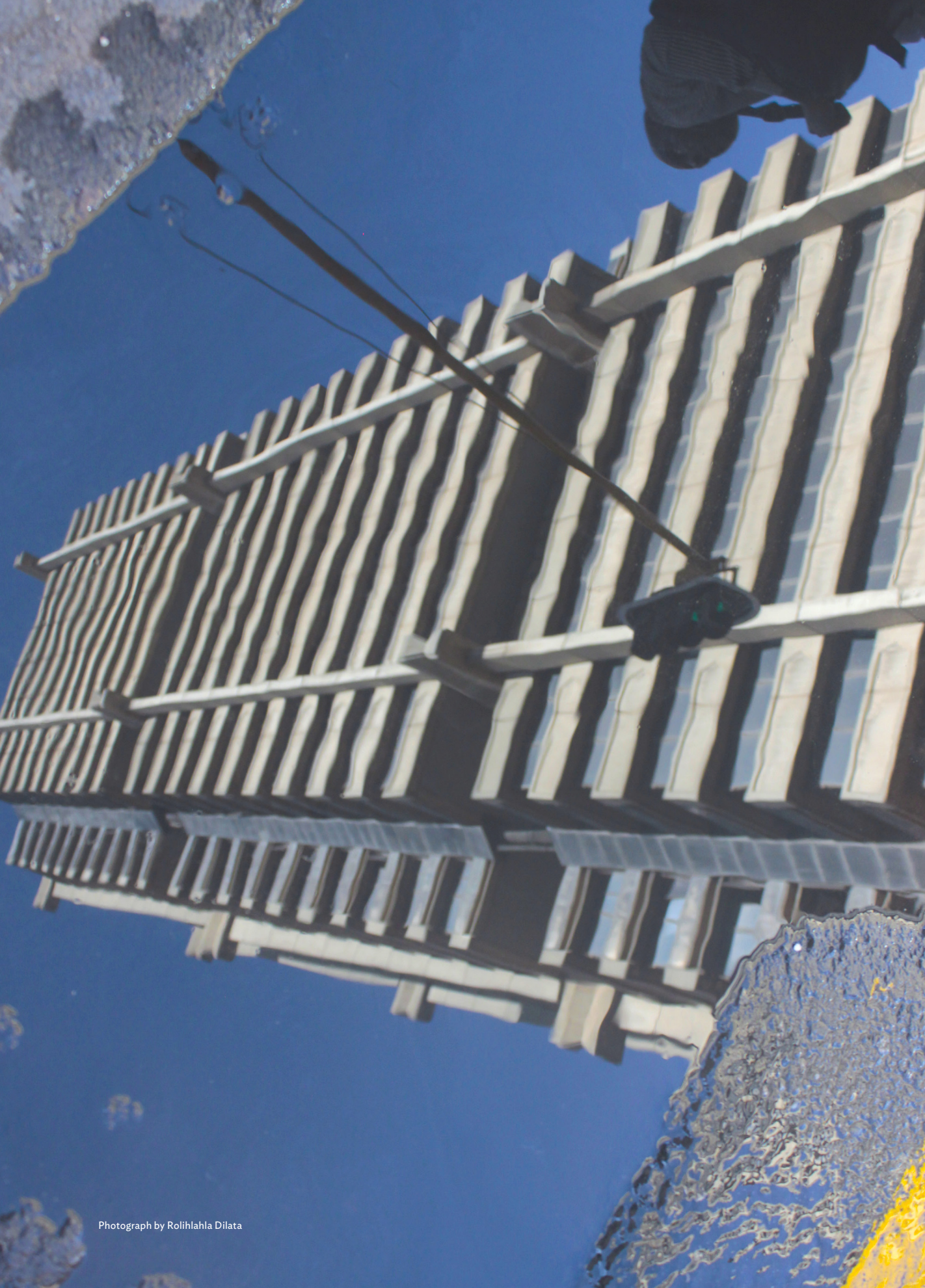
Chapter 1

Introduction: The urbanisation of imagination in South Africa

RICHARD BALLARD AND SANDISWA MAPUKATA

Abstract

As the introduction to this volume, this chapter argues that imaginaries are useful objects of study, connecting ideals, agency and the material world. It offers an itemisation of urban imaginaries in South Africa, juxtaposing diverse ways of thinking within the white minority before democracy, the various imaginaries of those who were not in the white minority and post-apartheid urban imaginaries. Finally, it provides an overview of the following six chapters.

Introduction

How do government officials, elected politicians, powerful economic actors and ordinary people think and talk about cities, towns, villages and rural areas? How do they describe change that is happening in such places? Do they consider these changes to be good or bad? How do they think such places should change? What do they do to try to bring about the changes they desire?

Competing answers to these questions have been at the centre of South Africa's urban development. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, white minority governments struggled to reconcile two divergent imaginaries, both racist but with quite different implications. On one hand, conservatives believed that Africans were predisposed to lead 'traditional' lives in rural areas [Figure 1.1, Imaginary 1], and that if they moved to urban areas, their 'detribalisation' posed a threat not only to themselves but also to the urban (white) modernity there (Mamdani, 1996; Dubow, 1995; du Preez, 1983). On the other hand, authorities with a liberal outlook [Imaginary 2] believed that although rural Africans were not, in the first instance, compatible with urban life, it was possible to accommodate those whose salaried jobs would allow for a reasonable standard of living and acculturation (Crankshaw, 2005; Marks and Trapido, 1987).

Neither of these imaginaries alone defined the governance of South Africa's cities throughout their evolution under white minority rule. Rather, the self-interest of the white minority meant that it needed in some way to accommodate the African labour upon which it had become dependent (Crush, 1994; Maylam, 1982). Those who were interested in economic growth but not the assimilation of Africans into modern society had to find ways of securing labour productivity while preventing labourers from claiming full urban citizenship (Magubane, 1996). This was resolved most notoriously in the Stallard Commission of 1922 [Imaginary 3], which stated that Africans could only come to cities when they were needed by employers, and when not required they would return 'home' (Lemon, 1991). We are all too familiar with the way in which this imaginary was imposed on South Africa, particularly under apartheid (1948–1994), through the registration of people according to their state-determined race, the creation of ethnic

homelands, influx control, and racial restrictions on land ownership, jobs and the right to vote.

Imaginaries are a perennial theme in urban research because they are a useful way of thinking about the relationship between the visions of urban space that people hold in their minds, the way in which they form and communicate these visions and the production of space. They invoke the interior world of the mind's eye, and the human capacity of conjuring spaces virtually. Imaginaries are, furthermore, social in that they are socially produced and socially held (Watkins, 2015).

The literature on imaginaries reiterates the dialectal relationship between imaginaries and the material world (Lefebvre, 1991). As Cooper notes, hegemonic 'imaginative projects have material consequences' (Cooper, 1996, p. 457) and can shape the 'boundaries of the possible' (Cooper, 1996, p. 5). They shape the way that people inhabit, avoid and act on space. Yet, the reverse relationship also applies: the material world shapes our imaginations of it.

We can examine the way in which different imaginaries are co-present in any given context, each with its own genealogy and social positionality. We can examine, too, the way in which people evaluate these various imaginaries quite differently; orders of thinking and acting that seem normal and right to some are profoundly unjust to others (Gregory, 2004; Said, 1979).

Specific imaginaries become elevated to the position of official policy for periods of time while others remain alternative, vernacular or subaltern. Hegemonic imaginaries are received in various ways by society at large – some buy into them, others are alienated by them. Meanwhile, imaginaries that were once legitimate and dominant can have complex afterlives even long after they have been discredited (Hamann and Ballard, 2018).

This research report, along with other outputs from the Gauteng City-Region Observatory's (GCRO) spatial imaginaries project (Ballard and Harrison, 2020; Ballard and Rubin, 2017), offers a series of Gauteng-related cases on imaginaries. Before briefly summarising the following chapters, this introductory chapter resumes the task of identifying some of the significant imaginaries through which South African cities have been understood and shaped.

An itemisation of imaginaries

The imaginaries of white minority rule were enormously consequential. However, they were neither universally held, nor did they accurately reflect urban realities in their entirety. Large numbers of people who were imagined by racists to be primarily tribal and rural did in fact lead urban lives (Bonner and Nieftaghodien, 2008; Hyslop, 2008; Mbembe, 2008) [see Figure 1.1, Imaginary 4]. And notwithstanding apartheid's imaginary of racially separate development, critics noted the way in which 'white society' was not separate from those from whom it claimed social distance. Rather, there were economic relationships across 'colour lines' that underpinned the accumulation of wealth and opportunity by those classified as 'white' and at the expense of those who were not (Wolpe, 1972) [Imaginary 5]. Contesting the normalisation of segregation by apartheid, many opponents of apartheid understood it clearly to be an untenable monopolisation of political power, wealth, land and social status by a minority that was, in effect, sustaining a kind of internal colonialism while conventional colonialism was falling elsewhere (Chipkin, 2007).

Opponents of apartheid imagined alternative social orders in which racial classification would not be used to stratify society and determine people's ability to move to cities, live in a particular suburb, study, work and vote. These imagined alternatives to apartheid took the form of multiracial pluralism, in which races were equal and could cooperate [Imaginary 6]; non-racial universalism, which rejected the notion that there were different races [Imaginary 7] (Maré, 2014); or the more explicit re-humanisation of black people in the face of relentless black subordination (Mngxitama et al., 2008) [Imaginary 8]. The left hoped for a redistributional post-apartheid society [Imaginary 9], presuming that the free market would continue to enable hoarding by a minority rather than sharing by the majority (Chipkin, 2007; Smith, 1994; Johnstone, 1982). Others expected that South African society after apartheid, for better or worse, would be capitalist [Imaginary 10].

Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Michel Foucault (2008, 2004, 2002) are instructive in explaining which imaginaries hold force in any given society. Where governed populations identify with and support the

Figure 1.1: Itemising South Africa's urban imaginaries

Colonial and apartheid imaginaries

1. Conservative: Africans are at home in rural areas and not in cities.
2. Liberal: Africans with good jobs or property could be accommodated in cities.
3. Stallard/Apartheid: When it was needed, African labour to be accommodated in segregated sections of cities but sent 'home' when no longer needed. All people to be assigned to a race and sub-national, racially specific territories established.

Vernacular, anti-apartheid and liberation imaginaries

4. Urban modernity was not only an aspiration for many of those defined out of it by white minority governments, it was also a lived reality.
5. Those segregated racially were not 'separate' as apartheid would have it; they connected daily, often in highly exploitative relationships. Apartheid was a kind of internalised colonialism.
6. According to liberal multiculturalism, races could be social equals, and could cooperate.
7. Doctrines of non-racialism imagined a society in which people would not be grouped by racial type.
8. Black consciousness sought to respond more overtly to the subordinate position in which white supremacists tried to hold black people.
9. The left hoped for a redistributional post-apartheid society, presuming that the free market would continue to enable hoarding by a minority rather than sharing by the majority.
10. Others expected that, for better or worse, South African society after apartheid would be capitalist.

Post-apartheid imaginaries

11. Democracy. Removal of official racial discrimination and the monopolisation of preferential opportunities by the white minority. Economic growth, economic participation, upward mobility, home ownership, and spatial and institutional integration. 'African Renaissance'.
12. Actualising 'one city, one tax base'. Investment in townships.
13. Limited social support, but no comprehensive welfarism because people were expected to work.
14. Structural unemployment. Youth unemployment. Inequality. Crisis of social reproduction.
15. Informal accommodation as an innovative response by working-class residents to address their housing needs.
16. Informal accommodation seen as undignified housing that should be replaced with formal, planned settlements.
17. State provision of housing at scale to address the backlog of housing needed.
18. Early post-apartheid housing on the peripheries viewed as providing poor quality living environments and exacerbating spatial mismatch.
19. State to deliver human settlements that are internally integrated, providing for a mix of income levels, social services and income.
20. Imaginaries of new cities that would 'get it right this time'.
21. Fixing existing urban spaces through densification and integration. Transit-oriented development. Urban regeneration.
22. Vernacular imaginaries, including senses of belonging, home elsewhere, desires for influx control, xenophobia, cosmopolitanism.

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ideas, norms and practices of authorities, most people do not have to be compelled to follow the rules. Where governed populations do not identify with or support the ideas norms and practices of government, larger numbers of people do have to be forced to do what their government expects of them. White minority rule did not claim to govern by popular consent and did not seek the endorsement of the black majority at the ballot box. The militarised state had been very willing to coerce people to follow its unpopular dictates by relocating people forcibly and, where necessary, repressing open rebellion violently. By the 1980s, though, it could not keep up with the broadening rebellion, in which rebels sought to make apartheid cities ungovernable (Hart, 2020). Apartheid no longer functioned as a 'hegemonic ideology' (Norval, 1990, p. 140) even for its own narrowly defined constituency.

In an attempt to augment its legitimacy, the apartheid state incorporated some elements of Imaginary 2 into its rhetoric and practice. It implemented reforms, allowing unionisation from 1979, repealing the job reservation statutes in 1981, allowing limited representation by those it classified as 'coloured' and Indian through parliamentary reform, scrapping influx control in 1985 and repealing the Group Areas Act in 1991. It recognised a permanent black urban workforce while hoping new migration from rural areas could be restricted (Huchzermeyer, 2003), and it stopped building new houses in townships from the 1970s (Parnell and Pirie, 1991). Late-apartheid society replaced increasingly untenable ideas of racial hierarchy with more (globally) palatable support for free enterprise (Posel, 1987), and society found new euphemisms for referring to social difference (Dubow, 1994; Sharp, 1988). Racism lost its legitimacy, but imaginaries of socio-spatial stratification found new expressions, many of which were hardly post-racial (Durrheim and Dixon, 2005).

In 1994, a situation that had until then only been imagined became real: South Africans at large voted. For those who adhered to socialist principles, the transition was a frustrating capitulation to

free-market interests. The powerful leverage that the privileged minority held over the economy forestalled any wholesale redistribution of wealth and property for fear of undermining economic growth (Marais, 2001). In urban spaces, efforts to lock in privilege included the fortification of neighbourhoods, countering some of the freedoms of movement sought through the transition from apartheid (Bremner, 1998).

For its part, the first democratic government's wager was that the well-resourced lives previously monopolised by a racially defined minority could be extended progressively to others [Imaginary 11]. There were a number of interventions geared to drive 'transformation' (Reddy, 2008), including the outlawing of discrimination and proactive measures such as employment equity, Black Economic Empowerment and land reform. The state would also direct more resources to poorer South Africans. New large municipalities could aggregate taxes across an entire city and spend revenue on townships (Clarno, 2013) [Imaginary 12]. However, in the prevailing 'Third Way' ideology following the transition, the state rejected any notion that it should be a welfare state (Seekings, 2008) [Imaginary 13]. Social support measures targeted the non-working populations, including children, pensioners and people who could not work because of disabilities. There was no coverage for working-age people – the undeserving poor – because waged labour was imagined as the basis through which they would sustain themselves (Barchiesi, 2011).

Imaginaries of the de-racialisation of the good life have been borne out in some lives and some places. Once 'white' suburbs were increasingly deracialised (Crankshaw, 2008), as were newly built cluster housing developments within and alongside historically white suburbs (Chipkin, 2012). For those unable to access suburbs they were previously excluded from but still keen to raise a mortgage and buy a house, the private sector has laid on vast entry-level suburbs, often alongside legacy townships (Butcher, 2016).

Imaginaries of the de-racialisation of the good life have been borne out in some lives and some places

Yet, the upward mobility possible for some was not possible for the majority of those who had been excluded through apartheid (Seekings and Nattrass, 2006). Cities have attracted migrants (Turok, 2014), who tend to experience improvements in income (Visagie and Turok, 2020). However, structural unemployment has still meant that many job seekers are surplus to the requirements of formal-sector employers [Imaginary 14]. Those who worked in non-unionised jobs received extremely low wages that made even life in a shack hard to afford. As Barchiesi notes, 'Imagined connections between waged employment, emancipation, and social advancement were no longer obvious' (Barchiesi, 2011, p. 8). Liberal hopes that 'the black middle class' would normalise and stabilise politics and space (see Ballard, 2012) run up against liberal fears that the economy and state support could not adequately facilitate the upward mobility of the poor majority (Bernstein et al., 2014). Political economists identified a 'crisis of social reproduction' (Bezuidenhout and Fakier, 2006) in which marginal incomes are not sufficient to meet the basic needs of those who earn them, let alone for them to acquire assets and enjoy upward social mobility. Despite the structural nature of unemployment in South Africa, the state has declined, at least until the COVID-19 emergency of 2020, to implement mechanisms of income support for the unemployed (Meth, 2004). South African cities have remained among the most unequal in the world, and different income strata are segregated spatially along the spatial logics that apartheid established (Ballard and Hamann, 2021; Hamann and Cheruiyot, 2017).

The prevalence of poverty, and the under provision of housing by the apartheid state in its final decades, has had an enormous impact on the material form of South Africa's cities. Large numbers of workers and job seekers can only afford rudimentary accommodation: shacks in informal settlements and rooms in back yards. Some informal structures are constructed by those who occupy them, although much informal accommodation is commodified in that it is rented out by owners who are able to derive a vital source of income (Rubin and Charlton, 2020). The place occupied by shacks could result in further, quite divergent, imaginaries: some regarded shacks as the symptom of conditions beyond the control of those who build and live in them, and shack building as an innovative response by the poor to an urban system otherwise unable to accommodate them [Imaginary 15]. Others regarded shacks as a problem in and of themselves, with those who build them as acting seemingly in bad faith, spoiling the realisation of a dignified post-apartheid urban vision (Huchzermeyer, 2011) [Imaginary 16].

Where the democratic state has been reluctant to provide general income support for low-income households, it has set out to accommodate people properly in cities. As it came to power in 1994, the first democratic government promised to build a million low-cost houses in five years. If enough houses were built, then the 'backlog' could be reduced and large numbers of people would not be consigned to informal shelter [Imaginary 17]. After two decades of democracy, the state reported that 3.7 million subsidised housing opportunities had been delivered (The Presidency, 2014), many as basic, free-standing houses given away to those below the stipulated income threshold. Settlements such as Bram Fischerville, north of Soweto, which was an early project of the post-apartheid period but was conceived by authorities in late apartheid, were later dubbed 'ghettos of poverty' for being badly located, badly serviced and homogeneously poor (Harrison and Harrison, 2014, p. 300) [Imaginary 18]. Extending the original ambition to correct the deficit of formal shelter for low-income residents of cities, the housing sector now set out to produce integrated human settlements that would house residents with different incomes and offer a variety of services and economic opportunities (South African National Department of Housing, 2004) [Imaginary 19].

Cornubia in Durban, the N2 Gateway project in Cape Town and Cosmo City in Johannesburg stand as three significant examples of larger-scale, integrated human settlements (Sutherland et al., 2015; Haferburg, 2013; Millstein, 2011). They function as a model for the national Department of Human Settlements, which proclaimed in 2014 an even more concerted effort to build dozens of other projects of this nature around the country (Ballard and Rubin, 2017). The Gauteng Provincial Government announced a plan to build 'new cities' around the province and that these self-contained settlements would distribute investment in both accommodation and opportunity to people and places that needed it [Imaginary 20]. The spatial imaginaries behind larger-scale, integrated human settlements can be located within a long tradition in urban planning, including the garden city movement

beginning in the late 19th century. Here, planners wish to fix deleterious or deficient urban patterns by starting again in well-planned and self-contained settlements away from existing cities (Haferburg, 2013). The private sector, too, has offered idealised forms of urbanism by building new suburbs or cities 'from scratch' for more affluent markets (Ballard and Harrison, 2020; Herbert and Murray, 2015; Murray, 2015; Hook and Vrdoljak, 2002).

Against the orthodoxy of housing provision stands a concern that it should not occur through urban sprawl (Katumba and Everatt, 2021; Götz et al., 2014). This would place further costs on those least able to afford it, as well as on the environment. In contrast to the imaginary of building new cities, many urbanists aspire to repair South Africa's cities as they are inherited [Imaginary 21], improving connections between different parts of the city-region, densifying along transit corridors (Todes et al., 2020) and incentivising the inclusion of more affordable housing in otherwise financially exclusive projects (Klug et al., 2013).

Imaginaries that circulate amongst those attempting to steer urban development towards a post-apartheid future exist in relation to a province of more than 15 million people. Decision-making on a day-to-day basis, and during key moments in the lives of households, does not happen within the frameworks of policy (Caldeira, 2017). The search for income, shelter, land and services drives a production and use of space that tests some official post-apartheid ideals. Furthermore, ordinary people can invest emotionally and financially in 'home here' and 'home elsewhere' (Landau, 2018, 2013). They develop imaginaries about the people with whom they share space. Some of these imaginaries approach a cautious cosmopolitanism (Landau and Freemantle, 2010) while others are intolerant (Misago, 2016). Many residents of the province are alienated, describing their acquisition of citizenship as empty given their material poverty (Ballard et al., 2021).

Summary of chapters

In Chapter 2, Richard Ballard provides a conceptual framework for urban imaginaries. Imaginaries appear, in the first instance, to be features of the mind, functioning to form impressions of places, people and so on, even when we are not directly sensing

them with our eyes and ears. However, the extensive literature on imaginaries shows that they are not simply private interior phenomena; rather, they are *relational*. They relate to the material world through our direct encounters with places around us, and these encounters inform our mental conceptions of that world. Imaginaries are also formed through our relationships with other people, who represent how they see the world in the conversations, writings and images that we encounter. Finally, imaginaries are relational insofar as they impact on the way in which we act in and upon the urban environment around us – our choices on where to go, live, or how we might build accommodation for ourselves or for large numbers of people and activities.

Alexandra Parker considers the role of film in our imaginaries of Johannesburg. Filmmaking processes have a two-part relationship with imaginaries: they reflect the imaginations of filmmakers, and they also inform the imaginations of those who watch these films. Our reading, hearing and viewing of the depiction of the world creates social meaning – interpretations of the world around us that we develop together through communication. Films hybridise fiction and material spaces in the narratives that they tell and help constitute a recursive relationship between the city as it is and our imaginaries of it. Our encounters with material spaces are informed by the ideas we have accumulated about the spaces depicted. Meanwhile, our consumption of representations – such as films – is informed by our encounters with material spaces, those directly represented and others not represented. The depiction of Johannesburg has shifted in telling ways over time. Johannesburg's skyline signifies aspiration in some films, through its association with metropolises elsewhere in the world and as a site of consumption and becoming. However, Johannesburg's geography changed with the appearance of Sandton, 12 km north of the 'historic' downtown area. In the 1990s, many businesses and people decamped from the city centre to Sandton, which acquired a significant skyline of its own. Accordingly, recent films have used Sandton as the setting of aspiration and of South Africa's social transformations in race and gender.

Aidan Mosselson shows how suppliers of accommodation imagine themselves to be businesses that function within a market, even in the case of social-housing providers whose products are state supported. This has important implications since

many of those in need of accommodation do not fulfil the requirements of customers in a market given their inadequate or irregular incomes. Residents who are not the target market for accommodation are liable to be displaced from buildings that are being redeveloped. Yet, developers are not narrowly extractive; they also seek to contribute to a virtuous cycle in which revenue contributes to the payment of services, maintenance of buildings and broader neighbourhood improvements. This process articulates with their business model insofar as it increases the viability of living in these neighbourhoods for those to whom the developers market property. They also seek to offer affordable housing rather than price their products to be exclusive. In these ways, the conduct of developers responds to the realities of Johannesburg's inner city. Their work is not only dictated by abstract imaginaries, their imaginaries are also shaped by the social difficulties of the spaces within which they attempt to create viable property markets. Mosselson contrasts these imaginaries of property providers with the more heavy-handed impulses of state actors, revealing the way in which the state can be out of touch with inner-city realities.

Sandiswa Mapukata explores the dialectic between the imaginary of public-sector officials and professionals ('technocrats') and their attempts to intervene in particular spaces. She does this through the recollections of officials and professionals involved in the Alexandra Renewal Project during the period after its launch in 2001. The chapter shows the way in which officials understand Alexandra township as a space that is the legacy of a complex history of dispossession, segregation, internal division, location and densification. Given this complex history, officials and professionals understand Alexandra as a place that requires intervention in order to bring about improvements, including processes to relocate people from overly dense spaces, and to improve connections with the rest of Johannesburg. However, their recollections also consider the limits of the agency of authorities to bring about improvements given the intractable nature of problems such as crime and social division. Some officials and professionals were all too aware of the way in which the programme's policies have, in their assessment, had counter-productive consequences.

Sally Crompton's chapter provides an analysis of imaginaries of class and racial diversity in Brixton. Brixton is a small suburb 4 km west of Johannesburg. It has transitioned from being designated as a white suburb under apartheid to a mixed suburb today. The study offers six imaginaries of the social composition of Brixton. The first is the historical imaginary of Brixton as a white residential area. Although this imaginary is now out of kilter with democratic South Africa, it remains a reference point in recounting the history of the neighbourhood and has a complex afterlife today. The second narrative is that Brixton has undergone a transition in which large numbers of people who would once have been excluded on the basis of race now live there. Third, although it is mixed, Brixton is also frequently imagined as a bifurcated space between an affluent and a working-class section. Fourth, residents hold an imaginary of there being at least some trust and interaction across social and economic difference within the suburb. Fifth, city officials enfold Brixton in larger-scale imaginaries of diversifying and densifying the city through transit-oriented development. Sixth, however, some Brixton residents believe that city imaginaries fail to take account of the way in which the suburb *has* transformed.

In the last chapter, Rosa Sulley provides a case study of a particular effort to connect the historically segregated spaces of Sandton and Alexandra. Between 2015 and 2017, the Great Walk/Kopanang pedestrian and cycle bridge was constructed to enable thousands of commuters from Alexandra to get to their places of work in and around Sandton. This initiative began as part of the broader Corridors of Freedom initiative intended to 'restitch' the segregated city back together. As such, this intervention was simultaneously practical and symbolic. However, some commentators have observed that although the Kopanang Bridge enables an easier commute for the working class, it transforms neither inequality nor segregation, both of which endure.

In contrast to the imaginary of building new cities, many urbanists aspire to repair South Africa's cities as they are inherited

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Chapter 2

Imagining South Africa: A conceptual framework

RICHARD BALLARD

Abstract

This chapter reviews conceptual and theoretical aspects of spatial imaginaries in order to establish a framework for this research report. The first section of the chapter examines the nature of the imagination in general and spatial imaginaries in particular. It considers the complex relationships between 'imaginaries' as mental constructs and the material world around us, showing how spatial imaginaries can correspond to the world accurately in some cases and differ entirely from the world as it actually is in others. The second section examines influences on our imaginations, showing that our imaginaries are informed by our sensory intakes of and experiences in the world on one hand, and also by our engagement with other people's representations of the world through pictures, texts and film, on the other. The third section reviews three key effects of spatial imaginaries: that they inform our understandings and evaluations of space; that they inform how and why people try to produce new buildings, infrastructure and other elements of the built environment; and that they shape the way in which ordinary people use space.

Introduction

[A]ll we know about time and space, or rather history and geography, is more than anything else imaginative. (Said, 1979, p. 55)

[T]hrough imagination, *we build things acting as they were abstractions, and build abstractions acting as they were real things*. (Giambattista Vico's argument cited in Tateo, 2015, p. 157, emphasis in original)

Via imagination, we are able to safely explore new hypotheses, or try out new strategies, without the commitments that come along with actual implementation. (Kind, 2016b, p. 8)

Our fertile minds are [...] a mixed blessing [...] If we had less imagination, we would feel more secure. (Tuan, 1979, p. 6)

[T]he biggest obstacle is not imagination or an unwillingness to dream. The real source of continued urban blight and exclusion is governmental intransigence, intergovernmental bickering, insularity and a fundamental incapacity to work collaboratively with citizens, social movements and the private sector. I guess my dream is that our political leaders can truly see all the unrealised potential and opportunities that we already have and not be seduced by glitz and glamour of 'smart solutions' that are little more than a mirage. (Pieterse, 2019)

While imagination seems most naturally to be an object of analysis in philosophy and psychology, it has also been a perennial interest in the social sciences and humanities, and, for the interests of this report, in urban studies and geography. Imaginations are, in the first instance, located in the minds of those who

hold them. The term imagination refers to the mind's capacity to conjure something up as if it were present, even when it is not. For example, our minds are able to deliver to us the feeling of being somewhere when we are not actually there. Imaginations are particularly intriguing because they are not 'constrained' by truth (Kind, 2016b, p. 3). Our minds are also capable of rendering an impression of something that really exists in the world – more or less as we picture it – and something that does not exist at all in actuality. Sometimes we, as holders of an imagination, are well aware of the difference between these imaginaries and sometimes we are not. While attention to the 'accuracy' can be a valid interest, it often misses what is most important about imaginations and imaginaries: that we can game out scenarios irrespective of whether or not the thing we are exploring with our minds exists in actuality or whether we ever intend for it to exist.

Imaginations may seem to be a property of mental functioning but are in fact indivisible from the social and material world around us. The way we encounter and experience the world allows us to build up images and models of particular kinds of spaces, in other words, the *imaginaries* that are the content of *imaginations*. Thus an individual can imagine what a school might look like even though they have never visited it, because they themselves went to schools and so can extrapolate from those experiences what schools in general might be like. Beyond the influences of our direct experiences of the world, our imaginations are also shaped by the systems of communication in which we participate: conversations that we have, news that we read, television that we watch, art that we see, and so on. Here we are not acquiring our ideas about the world around us so much through first-hand experience, but rather through someone else's reporting of their encounters with the world or even their depiction of worlds that do not exist, but which they have developed in their imagination.

Along with the inputs to imaginations such as direct experience and participation in various kinds of communication, this chapter also considers some of the effects our imaginaries have over the world around us. It shows how our imaginaries become important for the way we understand space, for example, by being able to differentiate

between different kinds of spaces. It shows also how imaginaries influence the building of spaces, whether these be a small shack or a vast 'instant city' (Herbert and Murray, 2015). Finally, this chapter considers the way in which imaginaries influence the use of space by ordinary people.

Imaginaries are not a total explanation for urban processes, and indeed they articulate with other kinds of processes such as the political economy of policy and personal choices. However, using spatial imaginaries as our starting point allows us a different perspective on the forces that shape our world. It allows us to reflect on the ways in which we arrive at seemingly solid understandings of the world which might or might not be 'accurate', but which might nevertheless be revealing about the architecture of our assumptions. The capacity of our imagination to be unconstrained by truth can lead us in many directions – it can enable us to transcend present realities and imagine alternatives, some of which may lead to breakthroughs for society as a whole, or for narrow interests at the expense of society. It is useful for understanding the way in which people relate to one another and produce the urban space they inhabit.

Imagination and imagining space

According to the *South African Concise Oxford Dictionary*, imagination is 'the faculty or action of forming ideas or mental images; the ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful' (Kavanagh et al., 2002, p. 576). The word 'imagine' is derived from the Latin terms *imaginari*, meaning 'picture to oneself', and *imaginare,* meaning 'to form an image of', both of which are in turn derived from *imago,* meaning 'image' (Kavanagh et al., 2002, p. 576). We use our imagination insofar as we 'see' something with our mind's eye. Through imagination, we are able to take familiar spaces with us in our heads even when we are not at those places, or to picture places that we have never visited. We are also able to conceive of spaces that we might like to create, whether this is to plant a garden or to build a new rail system. We are able to imagine spaces that do not exist in reality and that we will never create. Our imaginations shape our ideas about the way in

which the world is spatially configured, how space is differentiated and how these different spaces relate to one other.

Spatial imaginaries can be illustrated in five ways.

- First, it is possible for a person to have an impression of a place that exists but which they have not been to. People who live in Gauteng but who have never been to Mamelodi or Fourways might nevertheless be able to offer a description of the kinds of people that they think live there, what the landscape looks like and what life might be like there.
- Second, through the historical imagination, people are able to develop an idea of what places were like in the past through records or through conjecture (see Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992, on historical imagination).
- Third, it is possible to have an idea of a place that does not exist. Through fictional storytelling, we are able to construct worlds in our minds that are partly or wholly *imaginative*. In a different way, planners and architects engage in acts of imagination, conceiving of roads, malls, neighbourhoods and economies that have yet to come into being, and many of which are never built (Ballard and Harrison, 2020; van Noorloos and Kloosterboer, 2018; Watson, 2014).
- Fourth, spatial imaginaries invoke the way in which we use our imaginations when we think about or encounter spaces that we know well (Sartre, 2004). When asked to draw maps of places they know well, people tend to exaggerate certain features that are more important or familiar to them. In other words, actual spaces that we know well are known *subjectively*. Our first-hand experience of the places we inhabit is partial. We might think we know the suburb that we live in, but we only know a small number of people living there and have only ever been to a fraction of the

homes there. We use our imaginations to fill in the blanks with spatial imaginaries of what we cannot detect directly through our senses and to extrapolate from what we can.
- Fifth, we use our imaginations to see social and geographical entities that are too large to take in with our senses. Anderson (1983) argued that large 'communities' such as nations are necessarily imagined since their members will never meet most of the other members of the community, let alone form personal bonds with them. Even a territory such as the province of Gauteng is too big to 'see' and has to be imagined, then mapped and marked on the ground with signposts (Hartshorne, 1939, as discussed in Sutherland, 2016). We are able to develop social imaginaries on our 'social existence', how society works, how we fit into it, how we are positioned in history, and how we relate to the economy and to those in power (Taylor, 2003, p. 23).

Imagination as a mental process

Imagination seems intangible, but imaginations are ultimately located in the neural networks of brains.

- Brain scans show that when we imagine an object with our eyes closed, we use visual circuitry in the brain: 'the same neural pattern lights up, just slightly less strongly than when you are actually seeing it' (Grinnell, 2016).
- Some capacities of our brains allow us to daydream, to 'time travel' to the past through our memories, and to hypothetical futures (Østby et al., 2012).
- We also have the ability to take a hypothetical possibility and develop a representation of it, as in writing a novel or drawing up plans for a new building.
- We have the ability to take plans and try to turn them into reality, yielding, amongst other things, the vast cities we live in.

Through imagination, we are able to take familiar spaces with us in our heads even when we are not at those places

These processes are evolutionary adaptations that help constitute the back and forth relationship between the interior mind and the world around us. They allow us to combine different memories, experiences and ideas into larger wholes, to apprehend the relationships between disparate elements, to build models of complex systems and to conceive of alternative possibilities (Tateo, 2015). They allow us to make sense of the world, constitute our emotional relationship with our environments, and figure out how to act in them. Imagination is a word that reifies – and indeed helps us to *imagine* – these diverse neurological processes.

In a philosophical review of imagination, Amy Kind suggests that understanding imagination through the metaphor of the mind's eye can be misleading (Kind, 2016b). The brain is indeed capable of picturing things even when they are absent, but imagination refers to a far broader set of capacities, some of which are not visual in nature. In broad terms, imagination is one of a number of representational mental processes. It is representational in that it is about some *thing*, and the mind is able to represent the thing that is being represented to the person who holds the imagination in question. Other representational mental processes

include belief (Sinhababu, 2016), knowledge, memory, perception and emotion (Kind, 2016b) (Figure 2.1). Although imagination overlaps with aspects of these other mental states, it cannot be reduced to them. For example, there are ways in which belief is like imagination – they are both representational in that they are mental processes in which the mind uses symbols to represent something. Arguably, belief relies extensively on imagination and many beliefs are essentially expressions of imagination. However, belief and imagination do not overlap entirely; it is possible to have an imaginary of something that one does not *believe* to be true.

At its core, imagination has an ambivalent relationship with the material world. On one hand, our imaginations are at work when we apprehend that which is actual, tangible and ordinary (Daniels, 2011). A city, for example, is simultaneously actual and virtual (Isin, 2007). In other words, imagination is deeply implicated in what we regard as knowledge about the city. For example, when we describe segregation, urban sprawl, land invasions, the city-region, or even simply a route to a destination, we are assuming that the places we imagine with our minds correspond with the material world as it is. Even though our minds are thinking of actual spaces,

Figure 2.1: Imagination and other mental states
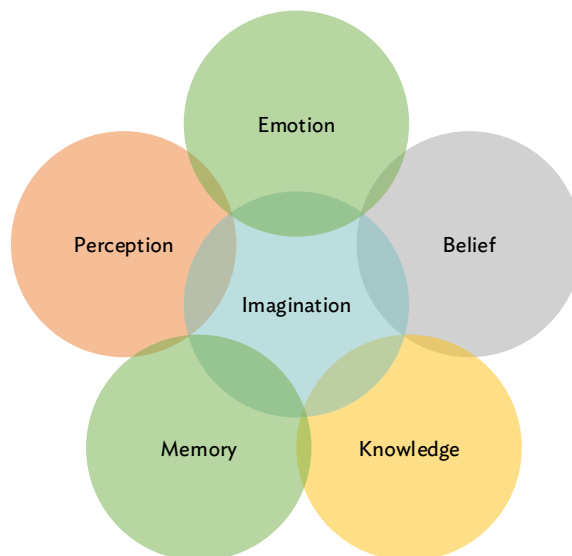
the representation that arises within our minds is by and large an act of imagination. As Edward Said puts it, 'all we know about time and space, or rather history and geography, is more than anything else imaginative' (Said, 1979, p. 55).

On the other hand, imaginations allow our minds to picture things that we know do *not* exist in the material world. As Kind notes, 'imagination is not constitutively constrained by truth' (Kind, 2016b, p. 3). When we read fiction, we know that what we are taking in is a story that does not exist beyond the words on the page. Similarly, when we dream of our ideal home, neighbourhood or even city, we are aware that this is a speculative *thought exercise*, and that the spaces we imagine are hypothetical.

Within this basic dichotomy between imaginaries of actual places and imaginaries of hypothetical places, there are important complications. At a basic level, we can say that people's certainty about the accuracy of their imaginaries about the material world can vary. Many people who have not been to a place would readily admit that their idea of what that place is like is impressionistic and uninformed. Others who have spent time in a particular place or researched it consider themselves to be well informed about it. In other words, people in general would be able to distinguish between places they know well and places they do not know well.

Furthermore, people often think they know a place well, but the reality of a space diverges in some way from the imaginary they have of it. Many people have had the experience of setting out on a route to a destination only to get lost and to realise that different places did not join up in the way that they expected. Many people have also experienced the *uncanny* feeling that arises when we encounter a space that we think we know well but seems somehow strange and unfamiliar (Gelder and Jacobs, 1995). And we have all had the experience of describing a place in a particular way only to find that another person describes the same place in a different way.

Fiction in truth and truth in fiction

Calls for evidence-based policy-making articulate the desire to ensure that our policies are based on as much data as possible. In and of itself, this is a reasonable call; our models become more accurate if they get more inputs. We can reduce our ignorance about processes and places around us if we learn about them. Our imaginaries of a real place will become more textured and detailed if we are exposed to it directly, talk to people there and absorb secondary information about it. When the world that we encounter does not match what we expect to find, we might have to adjust our assumptions and expectations. However, our brains are not always good judges about what counts as valid information, and, in terms of the phenomenon of confirmation bias, we are often far more receptive to information that confirms what we already think. In other words, our spatial imaginaries can be extremely path dependent; they reproduce themselves by selectively assimilating information from the world that fits that which we expect to see.

When we believe that we are well informed about a place, we might in fact be biased or misinformed. The very nature of imagination is that we do not always distinguish between what we perceive through our senses and what we 'see' through our mind's eye. This results in an illusion – we think something is present when it is not, and we think we are seeing something when we are in fact imagining it (Sartre, 2004). As Sartre notes, one can be so absorbed in a story or dream that it is not always easy to distinguish figments of the imagination from reality (Hopkins, 2016). Our media, political discourse and social discourse is awash with 'fake news' or misrepresentations which can lodge in our minds as truth even when they are not. Xenophobes are not very interested in whether or not some foreigners might in fact not be involved in crime because their imaginaries are highly invested in foreigners, in essence, being criminal. Their actions related to such imaginaries can have devastating real-world consequences even though their imaginaries are not fair representations of the world as it is.

Notwithstanding the significance of such breakdowns between reality and imagination, it would be limiting to assume that spatial imaginaries are necessarily defective if they are not aligned with reality. Some fictional accounts are naturalistic and so construct impressions that are quite plausible even though they are presented to us through sets and actors, or words on a page

Figure 2.2: Truth or fiction? *District 9* wallpaper

(Suvin, 1972). Others do not attempt to be plausible as such; we can hold impressions of the world or even other worlds that we know to be strange, surreal and fantastical. Even these unreal elements of imaginaries are not necessarily wrong in all respects in spite of their not mimicking the world literally. For example, science fiction 'extrapolates' forward from present conditions and offers 'future allegories' with which to look back at the present (Graham, 2016b, p. 395). The 2009 film *District 9* shows bizarre scenes of aliens interned in camps in Johannesburg (Figure 2.2). As viewers, we know these to be the trickery of filmmaking and we are invited to suspend our disbelief to enjoy the story. But this unbelievable content nevertheless represents important *truths* about the way society identifies and interns 'alien' others. In this way, we can see that spatial imaginaries need not correspond precisely with material reality in order to give us insights about ourselves (Suvin, 1972). Distortions and exaggerations of reality do not only mislead; they can draw our attention to features of our lives that we otherwise take for granted.

The gulf between the material world and the fictions we construct is the site of human playfulness and inventiveness. In some parts of the world, adults trick their children into believing (as if it were fact) that there is a red-suited man who spends the year in the North Pole before distributing gifts across the globe on Christmas Eve. Here the delusion functions to excite children and to conjure a sense of magic. We would miss the point to say simply that children are misled; they also acquire a capacity to conceive of things they cannot see and to project them onto the world as a virtual layer of actors and activities.

Although children realise at some point that they have been tricked, it is telling that this is disappointing for many of them. Fairy tales, myths, belief systems and ideologies deliver certain kinds of gratification to our brains, and we sometimes prefer to entertain them despite the absence of any evidence to support them. By investigating imaginations, we can identify narratives and ideas that people find soothing and attractive, and those that we find unsettling and repulsive, and consider the important

issue of why some ideas are so appealing to some sets of people when they seem wrong or morally untenable to others. Edward Said makes this argument in relation to racist imaginaries held by the west about 'the Orient'. He argues:

> One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away. I myself believe that Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient. (Said, 1979, p. 6)

To put the point differently, the truth revealed by imaginaries is not always in the content of the imaginary itself but in the way they expose the social interests that are served by the imaginary, and of the power of the imaginary to shape history and geography (Gregory, 2004).

Imaginaries and affect

If imaginaries do not need to be inaccurate to be wrong, neither do they have to be accurate to be right. Through future-oriented imaginaries, we construct goals that we would like to see realised (Appadurai, 2013). The fact that such visions do not exist in reality now is resolved through our hopes and plans to bring them about in the future. Such capacities become fundamental to the way in which we can envisage alternative and better ways of organising society. The dream of democracy and a more egalitarian society has driven epochal social changes seemingly against the odds (Anderson, 2006; Merrifield, 2006). The World Social Forum invites both imagination and action with its slogan 'Another world is possible'. Notions of development are infused with imaginaries of progress, modernisation and improvement (Mitchell, 2002). And ordinary people themselves can have the 'capacity to aspire', to think about a future that they do not yet have but would like to bring about for their individual and collective lives (Appadurai, 2004). This kind of aspiration can be normative (what the holder thinks reality should be even if it is not yet) or affective (an as yet unrealised desire that is entertained in the mind), or both (Kind, 2016a).

In general, spatial imaginaries can have emotional and affective dimensions. Seemingly technical processes such as planning can be infused with desires and fantasies (Assche et al., 2014; Larkin, 2013). Individual behaviours are shaped by the emotional aspects of spatial imaginaries. Prospective migrants to Gauteng might imagine it to be a more exciting or job-filled place than their current home (Kihato, 2013). The thought of a long commute might result in a sense of weariness, frustration or anger. Particular neighbourhoods might be thought of as dangerous (Tuan, 1979). Some of our words for emotions are expressly spatial, as in 'disorientation' (Graham, 2016a, p. 10). Even where they are not, the entire emotional repertoire feeds into our mental conceptions of spaces and places: feeling daunted, defiant, elated, peaceful, envious, anxious, empowered, unsettled, threatened, aspirational, resentful, disgusted or joyful can all be differently experienced in relation to different places.

Familiarity with a place can provide a sense of orientation which can help a person feel confident about navigating the social and physical spaces around them. Ideally, one's home provides a kind of 'emotional shelter' from the challenges of the world outside (Atkinson, 2006, p. 827), a place where one feels a sense of belonging, and the freedom to *be oneself* (Griffiths and Prozesky, 2010; Ahmed, 2000). Fortification, for example around gated communities, does not simply provide the promise of physical security, but also of a 'psychological buffer' (Low, 2003, p. 89). People's identities and senses of self are bound up with particular places, and positive or negative emotions may be stirred when people's sense of self aligns or diverges from their sense of space. A middle-class resident of the city may feel anxious about the appearance of squatters in close proximity to their home in part because it challenges their claim to their supposedly middle-class social position, which they imagine as modern and civilised (Ballard, 2004; Bénit, 2002). To take a different example, when it was announced in 2005 that Khutsong would be transferred from Gauteng to North West province, many residents protested angrily because they identified with Gauteng and imagined their prospects to be better in that province (Ngwane, 2011).

Influences on spatial imaginaries

While it is possible to locate imaginaries in the synapses and neurons of our brains, imaginaries exist in various kinds of relationships beyond the brains within which they occur. Henri Lefebvre argued strongly against isolating mental constructs and focusing on the interior mind as if it existed in isolation. He argued that mental conceptions about space and physical space cannot be separated from each other because 'each of these two kinds of space involves, underpins and presupposes the other' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 14). These relationships shape an individual's imaginaries, and they have a variety of effects.

In order to be more precise about the relationships between our spatial imaginaries and the world around us, Figure 2.3 recognises that, on one hand, an individual's imagination is influenced by their direct encounters with the world around them (arrow 1a), and through the representations by people in texts, film, television and social interactions on the other (arrow 2a).[1] It shows the way in which an individual's imagination influences their behaviour in the world (1b) and also the way they talk about,

Figure 2.3: Imaginaries as relational
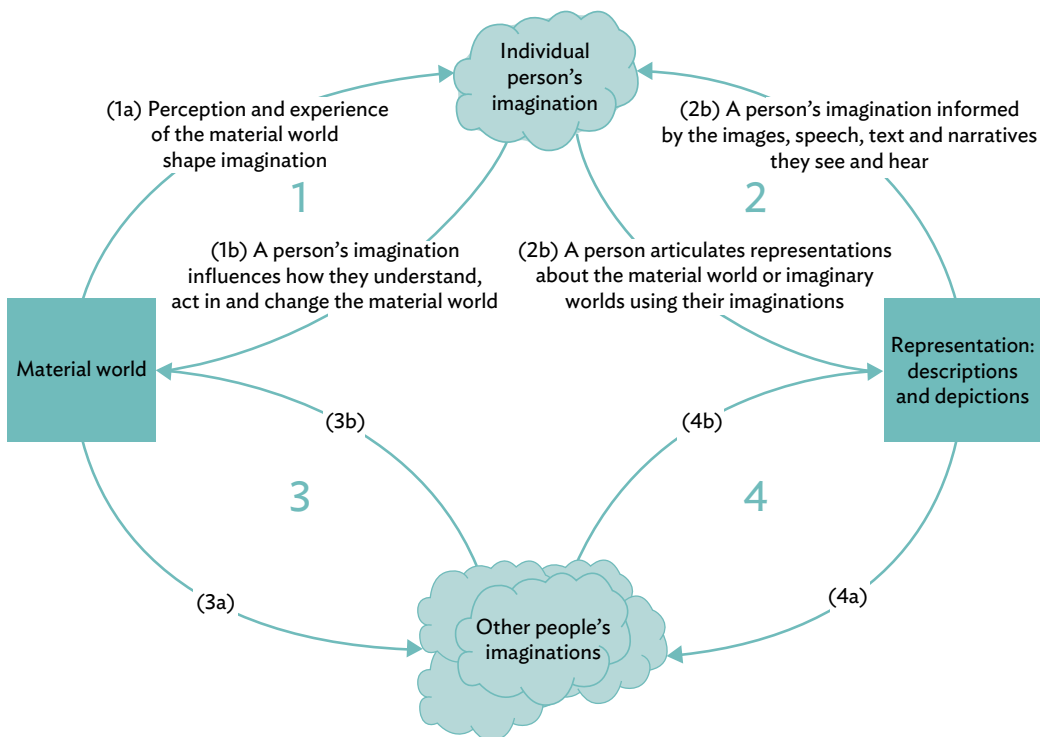
write about or in other ways depict the world to other people (2b). It also accommodates the fact that these exchanges are repeated across the whole population of people (3a, 3b, 4a and 4b). This set of relationships helps us to reflect on where we get our imaginaries from and how they influence the way we act in and on the world.

Sensory experience

A fundamental relationship for our imaginaries is that they are formed through our embodied encounters with the environments we occupy (arrow 1a in Figure 2.3). People build up complex mental pictures of the world through their sensory experience of it (Jackson, 2015; Amin, 2012; Braun, 2008; Saldanha, 2007; Massumi, 2002). When a person

> arrives in an unknown country or city, [they] first [experience] it through every part of [their] body – through [their] senses of smell and taste – as (provided [they do] not limit this by remaining in [their] car) through [their] legs and feet. [Their] hearing picks up the noises and the quality of the voices; [their] eyes are assailed by new impressions. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 162)

Crucially, our experiences of space are unique to our biographies, and shaped by the ways in which different kinds of bodies encounter space differently. As Lefebvre astutely notes, whether or not one experiences a place from a car or on foot makes a difference because each form of encounter produces a different kind of sensory experience. Car-owning commuters experience their mobility around the city quite differently to those who do not own cars because they move through and occupy the same spaces using divergent or conflicting channels and modes (Sheller and Urry, 2006). The ways in which we sense space is shaped by the components of our social identities, including nationality, race, class, gender and sexuality (Pilkey, 2013; Ahmed, 2007; Saldanha, 2007). In turn, the raw material that forms the basis of our imaginaries is shaped by our social position and identity.

Communicating with images

The second way in which we acquire imaginaries is through communication, which is to say our exposure to other people's representations of the world (arrow 2a in Figure 2.3). Millions of people who have never been to Paris would nevertheless be able to conjure an image of the Eiffel Tower because they have repeatedly seen it in photographs, on TV or film. In these cases, we have acquired a mental impression through our senses, by seeing a picture for example. However, this sensory intake is mediated by those making and distributing a representation. The person who is depicting the Eiffel Tower may have been there themselves to take the photograph (arrow 3a) or they may be relying on still other people's depictions of the Eiffel Tower (arrow 4a), or some combination. The person who is depicting the Eiffel Tower has their own imaginaries about the Eiffel Tower, about travel, about how they wish to be seen by others, and so on, and these imaginaries may shape how they depict the Eiffel Tower (arrow 4b).

As in the example of the Eiffel Tower, a widespread form of representation is imagery, including photography, maps, plans, rendering or artwork. Images seem to provide tangible representations which can appear very 'life like', even of places that do not in fact exist. John Berger's classic text *Ways of Seeing* (1972) shows that images are not neutral even where they strive for realism. Designers of architectural computer generated images (CGI) are instructed by their clients to create more 'atmosphere' in order to enable observers a more immersive sensory experience (Degen et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2014). Property marketing relies on particular visual tropes, such as 'glossy, sharp-edged, over-focused "hero shots"' of intended buildings (Degen et al., 2015, p. 14). As Degen et al. further explain, the eye-catching ability of CGI images derives in part from their luminosity, as if they are backlit. Designers are instructed to include more 'magic' (Degen et al., 2015, p. 14) in their images, perhaps washing their landscape with the light of a setting sun and 'god rays' radiating across the image (Degen et al., 2015, p. 19). Reality is, to coin a phrase, augmented by the curatorial decisions of those creating a representation, and by the technologies that they deploy in the process.

Figure 2.4: Advertisement for apartments in The Beacon, Illovo, distributed as a flyer on street corners, September 2015

Property marketers brand future spaces by pitching a lifestyle identity calculated to appeal to their market, or indeed to produce demand that does not yet exist (Harvey, 2010; Klingmann, 2007; Fainstein, 2001). The advertisement in Figure 2.4 is one side of a pamphlet advertising a building in Illovo (Johannesburg), then called The Beacon, that was launched in 2015 and completed by 2019 (its branding had changed by the time of its launch). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, a great deal of high-end property development occurred in the form of cluster development and gated communities on the urban periphery in which bucolic suburbia was constructed as an ideal (Hook and Vrdoljak, 2002). The Beacon, by contrast, capitalises on a more recent interest in living in flats in core areas, and promises 'the best of apartment lifestyle'. It gives an idea of what this building will look like from the outside and what some of the apartments and facilities will look like from the inside. The images are not merely technical but are made lavish by flowering jacaranda trees, blurred clouds and dramatic lighting. The imaginations of prospective buyers are being engaged in other ways too. After all, the two largest images in this advertisement are not of the building at all, but fashion magazine-style photographs of women whose association with the building is not self-evident. By contrast, the only men on the page are headless figures in suits who seem to be striking a business deal. Property marketers are a major source of imagination about Gauteng, drawing on and reproducing imaginaries of gender, race, class and place.

Communicating with words

Alongside the circulation of images, our imagination can also be acquired through the circulation of words. Like images, words are not neutral transmitters of information about the world. The words we use do not have universal meaning across time and space (Foucault, 2002). Words shape and constrain the kinds of thinking that are possible and define the world around us. They can invoke ideologies and other systems of thought. For example, when some white South Africans described changing central business districts as 'African' and 'third world' in the 1990s, they were assessing the post-apartheid city in terms of colonial and modernist imaginaries (Popke and Ballard, 2004).

Language is important for imaginaries because it works by categorising and classifying the world around us into types, and by developing meaning by associating different words with one another. Naming and classifying people, places and activities does not merely describe the world but shapes how we might think about the world and therefore act in relation to it. Terms that emerged during imperialism naturalised the 'knowledge' that there were different races, and notwithstanding the subsequent rejection of this knowledge, post-apartheid society continues to use language that naturalises the idea that there are different races (Maré, 2014). Categorisations necessarily flatten complexity and might function as crude stereotypes. Particular places might be known through class-oriented descriptions such as 'up-market', 'hipster' or 'slum'. They might be known by ethnicity, such as 'Chinese', 'Indian', 'Coloured', 'Afrikaans', 'Xhosa' and 'Nigerian'. These kinds of classifications appear as a kind of shorthand so that we can 'summarise' and know the complex world around us, but they are not neutral limitations of the ways in which our brains work (Durrheim, 2015). To describe a neighbourhood as being full of foreigners is loaded with political and social meaning, and sometimes has deadly consequences.

Telling stories

With words and pictures as our representational building blocks, people use narratives to tell stories. We are all, in various ways, involved in producing and reproducing representations of the world, and in consuming these representations as an audience. These occur in conversations with friends and family, listening to the radio or podcasts, in newspapers and magazines, advertisements, neighbourhood groups on Facebook or WhatsApp, Twitter, books, research reports, soap operas, sitcoms, documentaries, reality TV, TV news and online videos (Parker, 2016).

In telling and absorbing stories, we draw heavily on archetypes and tropes. Archetypes such as students, racists, criminals and politicians each have the baggage of socially familiar ideas that allow us to infer fuller descriptions of such people: unemployed youth, militant students, white racists, foreign criminals and corrupt politicians. Tropes function as default understandings of particular aspects of the world and are repeated, sometimes verbatim, like clichés: protests in South Africa are violent, migration to cities is bad for those cities, good governance leads to effective service delivery and South African cities are fragmented. Many narratives about African cities are dystopian, thereby reducing the complexity of African urban experience to a limited set of narratives and foreclosing more hopeful imaginations about future possibilities (Robinson, 2010). In the context of the United States, Avila (2004) examines the genre of film noir as a particular representation of urban disorder in the post-war period during which white people moved in great numbers to suburbs. Thus, film helps to create impressions of certain people and places through the repetition of particular tropes and themes (Parker, 2016). Fanon noted in 1952 that a European *imago* of 'the Negro' was reproduced and circulated in fiction or on screen (Fanon, 2008).

Although our imaginations would not be possible without first-hand experience of the world around us, the circulation of representations means that our imaginations take on further content, the subject of which we might not have directly experienced ourselves. Through genres of storytelling, we rehearse and habitualise our imaginaries. Through various kinds of communication, imagination becomes a decidedly social exercise where we 'collaborate' (Kind, 2016b) in the production, circulation and storage of imaginaries. These representations reflect and reproduce society's social structures, economies and ideologies.

Implications of spatial imaginaries

This section focuses on the 'b' arrows of Figure 2.3 – 1b, 2b, 3b and 4b. It examines three important effects of spatial imaginations: how our spatial imaginaries inform our understandings of the world; how they relate to the way in which we try to intervene in space to change it; and how they can shape the way in which we use space. There is a danger, perhaps, in thinking of imaginaries as the origin for how we understand, intervene in or use space. As the 'a' arrows of Figure 2.3 show, this is a dialectical relationship. Our imaginaries are shaped by our encounters with the world, and imaginaries shape the world.

Understanding and evaluating space

Given that our imaginations help us to make sense of the world around us, what in more specific terms do we do to make sense of space? One important kind of spatial imaginary is that we differentiate space and we delimit units of space. For example, we do this through:

- Systems of property ownership and tenure, in which particular spaces with precise boundaries are owned by particular individuals or organisations and from which others might only be able to use that space on a long-term basis by renting it;
- Units of governance (jurisdictions for local, provincial and national government); and
- Sorting people across space according to linguistic, ethnic and national characteristics.

From this brief list, we can make five analytic observations. First, although there are many imaginaries that seem to be normalised understandings of the way the world is, they do in fact have particular origins and paths of development. For example, the 'wall-to-wall' system of local government in South Africa was only consolidated in 2000 with the finalisation of local government reforms and was a response to liberation movement demands in the 1980s for expanded municipal jurisdictions to enable redistribution (Cameron, 2006; Swilling et al., 1991).

Second, there are quite different imaginaries at work alongside one another. Multiple imaginaries of property might coexist even in the same city, with private property existing alongside legal but untitled ownership, communal arrangements, informal land markets and 'illegal' occupations.

Third, some imaginaries can be more dominant than others. Under apartheid, an imaginary of sub-national ethnic territories was operationalised to produce national territories for Africans and to define urban areas as European. The hegemonic status of these imaginaries reflected the social, political and economic power of those who proffered them.

Fourth, even dominant imaginaries can be contested. Apartheid's spatial imaginary was largely enacted by force and policing, and an opposing imaginary of a united national territory was operationalised at the moment of democracy in 1994.

Fifth, spatial imaginaries can be explicitly or implicitly normative – an idea of the way space should

Photograph by Richard Ballard

be configured, or an idea of which kinds of spaces are good and which are bad. Some forms of urbanism, such as the garden city movement, are utopian in that they try to produce certain kinds of urban spaces that are meant to produce virtuous social orders (Parikh, 2015; Pile, 1999).

Transforming and producing space

These various kinds of spatial imaginary have a powerful impact on processes that result in the production of space. Between 2001 and 2016, the number of residential buildings in Gauteng increased by 60%, from 2 million to 3.5 million (Hamann, 2018), and the number of commercial buildings increased by 30%, from 97 842 to 126 923 (Naidoo, 2019). In Gauteng, public-sector planners have worked to bring about new roads, a rapid rail system, various bus rapid transit systems (Wood, 2016) and integrated human settlements (Ballard and Rubin, 2017; Charlton, 2014; Haferburg, 2013). Within the private domain, people produce their domestic spaces by building new rooms, renovating, gardening and demarcating their spaces with perimeter fences and walls. Suburbs are the collective effect of thousands of individuals acting – within town planning parameters – on their drive to create a family home. Sometimes these efforts can be coordinated, where better-resourced populations of people club together in order to make their own spaces as in gated communities (Herbert and Murray, 2015; Chipkin, 2012; Landman, 2012; Lemanski et al., 2008; Hook and Vrdoljak, 2002). Developers attempt to anticipate these demands for property

and produce housing and malls on the expanding urban fringe. Meanwhile, whole new markets have been opened up for affordable new housing for first-time home buyers (Butcher, 2016). Other developers have also attempted to generate and respond to demand for more centrally located accommodation, including mid- and high-rise accommodation in high-end nodes (Dirsuweit and Schattauer, 2004), refurbished accommodation for working-class residents in Hillbrow (Mosselson, 2019), or explicit efforts at gentrification in Maboneng (Nevin, 2014). Less well-resourced populations of people also take actions that reshape urban spaces, such as establishing informal settlements or constructing backyard shacks (Hamann, 2018; Turok and Borel-Saladin, 2016).

Adams and Tiesdell (2010, p. 187) state that 'place-making requires robust connectivity between vision and delivery'. Until a plan is implemented, it remains a representation, at least insofar as the individuals behind the plan have codified it in some form. Depending on the scale, a complex machinery of political endorsement, funding, technical capacity and labour is required for any plan to be implemented (Ballard and Butcher, 2019). As any architect or planner knows, many plans only ever exist 'on paper' and are never actually implemented (Ballard and Harrison, 2020). Even where projects are approved, the path from mental conception to physical reality is not a simple linear implementation of the original spatial imagination. Plans are reshaped by constraints on resources, governance arrangements (e.g. building regulations), technical limitations, and so on.

Illustration of Zendai's Modderfontein development

A wide variety of actors are engaging in place-making activity across the Gauteng City-Region (Ballard, Hamann and Mosiane, 2021). These actors are motivated to build in relation to a range of spatial imaginaries:

- Some are driven by desires to produce spaces that they would personally like to live or work in.
- Developers are influenced by ideas of what kinds of places their potential market would like to live and work in, and where opportunities for returns lie.
- Those producing new buildings or infrastructure hold imaginaries about desirable and undesirable locations for their intended production of space. The changing position of central business districts during the democratic transition has been well documented (Goga, 2005).
- Other actors hold imaginaries about desirable and undesirable forms: whether 'Tuscan' styles or high-rise apartments are going to be desirable and viable.
- Public- and private-sector planners are infused with ideas of good urbanism: compaction, new urbanism, social integration, functional integration, inclusion and the facilitation of daily mobility.
- All actors have imaginaries about what is possible and what is not: what the regulatory landscape allows or how this might be circumvented; what kinds of developments are financially viable; and where land is available to build.

Using space

People's engagements with the city are shaped by their spatial imaginations. Our everyday practices are informed by our mental conceptions about space. To be sure, imaginaries are not the only factor determining how people use space. People very often follow daily routines that are to some extent automatic. Imaginations do not determine behaviour in any absolute sense. Nevertheless, they certainly influence behaviour. Commuters might choose one route to work over another in order to avoid what they imagine to be a dangerous space (Conway and Leonard, 2014). Job-seekers may target a particular

area because they have some impression that there is the possibility of getting work. Home buyers choose to buy in one neighbourhood over another because they have strong imaginaries about where they will enjoy better living conditions, more secure financial assets and better status.

These actions devolved across the population are, as Lefebvre (1991) so powerfully showed, an important reason why urban spaces look and function the way they do. Cities are not merely the product of the work of planners and other authorities; they are produced by the way in which ordinary people conduct their lives within them. To the extent that spatial imaginaries shape what cities look like, it is not simply the imaginaries of those who are positioned as being in authority that matter.

Researching spatial imaginaries

The spatial imaginary is an object of interest within geography, urban studies and critical studies because it provides an entry into the feedback relationships between individuals and the world around them. This exercise allows us to pose a series of questions about these relationships:

- What is the content of our spatial imaginaries?
- How do our spatial imaginaries relate to the actual spaces around us?
- How does our direct experience of the world and exposure to it through our senses shape our imaginaries?
- How does our participation in systems of communication (as producers and consumers of representations) inform our spatial imaginaries?
- How do our spatial imaginaries shape and constitute our understanding of how the world is differentiated and how spatial processes work?
- How do our spatial imaginaries influence the way in which people build elements of the urban environment such as buildings and infrastructure?
- How do our spatial imaginaries shape the way inhabits of urban spaces use them?

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Chapter 3
Places of gold: Imaginaries of aspiration in Johannesburg films

ALEXANDRA PARKER

Abstract

South African films have long captured the imaginations of residents through images of the high-rise towers and skyscrapers of Johannesburg's central business district (CBD). These images of the city have projected the imaginaries and aspirations of residents of the city and the country onto the urban form. In the early films, the meaning of aspiration embodied in the bustling metropolis was in tune with the reality of Johannesburg's inner city functioning as the economic powerhouse. However, since the 1990s, the Sandton business node has functioned as the country's commercial and retail centre, surrounded by some of the wealthiest suburbs in the country. Over the last decade, Sandton has seen intense and continued construction that has produced glass-clad and iconic skyscrapers to stand alongside the original Sandton City Tower of the 1970s. Exploiting this new skyline is a recent film, *Happiness is a four letter word*, set in the Sandton CBD. The film explores the spaces of aspiration and affluence, and connects visual references of Sandton's urban form to the meaning of aspiration and modernity. This chapter traces the representations of Johannesburg's two principal business districts, their skylines and the associated meanings of aspiration, consumption and modernity in South Africa's largest city to reflect how imaginations are embedded in the built landscape.

Emerging places and imaginaries

South African films have long captured the imaginations of residents through the images of high-rise towers and skyscrapers of Johannesburg's central business district. In early films set in Johannesburg, the symbolic meaning of aspiration embodied in the bustling metropolis accurately matched the reality of Johannesburg's inner city or central business district (CBD) as the nation's economic powerhouse. However, since the 1990s, through the decline of the historic CBD and the rise of the Sandton business node, the imaginary of the inner city as the only site of aspiration and modernity has been at odds with the growing reality of Sandton as a major commercial centre, surrounded by some of the wealthiest suburbs in the country. Images portrayed in Johannesburg films produced in the last 20 years have lagged behind this significant shift. However, one recent film set in the Sandton area does explore the spaces of aspiration, affluence and modernity. This comes after a period of intense and continued construction in the Sandton node that has produced several glass-clad and iconic skyscrapers now standing alongside the original Sandton City Tower.

The imaginaries and aspirations of residents of both Johannesburg and South Africa are connected with an urban form that signifies notions of the metropolis and of the modern city. In a reflection on how urban imaginaries are embedded in the built landscape, this chapter traces the representations of the two principal business districts of South Africa's largest city – the historic centre and the newer, commercial node in suburban Sandton – with a focus on the associated imaginaries of aspiration, consumerism and modernity.

This chapter is primarily based on doctoral research conducted between 2011 and 2013. The research focused on feature films set and filmed in Johannesburg since 1994 and included a historical review of the representation of Johannesburg in films from the late 19th century. The research also examined the reception and influence of Johannesburg films for residents of the city through 200 surveys and nine qualitative interviews conducted in four case study areas: the Johannesburg CBD, Fordsburg, Chiawelo and Melville. The films discussed in this essay were selected as prime examples of the representation of Johannesburg's urban form in film, with the exception of *Happiness is a four letter word* (Moleya, 2016), which had not been produced at the time of the original study. At the time of writing this chapter, *Happiness* was the first major feature film to be set in Sandton.

Film as urban imagination

Planners, media scholars, historians, geographers and architects have all documented the representations of urban landscapes and the city in films, frequently pointing out the interrelation between film and the environment (Hallam, 2010; Mathews, 2010; Bruno, 2007; Alsayyad, 2006; Clarke and Doel, 2005; Lukinbeal, 2005; Schwarzer, 2004; Penz, 2003; Lamster, 2000; Clarke, 1997; Denzin, 1995, to name but a few). This research frequently illustrates the interrelation between film and the environment. Far from being purely fictional, film is a means of encountering reality (Clarke, 1997) and 'cinematic landscapes heighten awareness of

real places' (Schwarzer, 2004, p. 210). Hybrid cities created in editing rooms combine real locations, fictional worlds and narratives (Schwarzer, 2004). This interrelation leads to a blurring between the world of film and the lived experience of the urban environment. There is the material city that exists and is experienced on one hand, and the city of people's minds on the other – with substantial interaction between these two realities. Cinema is simultaneously a mode of perceiving reality and a portion of reality itself (Clarke, 1997). The city of the mind is informed by all the different representations of the city and the activities occurring therein that films reconstruct, reimagine and edit, influencing our understanding of our urban spaces (Parker, 2016). Environmental psychologists show that the process of cognition (the way in which people make sense of, and simplify, all the information present in any one environment) does not distinguish between these different environments, meaning that the way in which we understand spaces in reality and spaces in films is the same (Ittelson et al., 1974). In fact, our analysis of urban spaces is often based on meanings that have been socially defined through collective processes such as the dissemination and absorption of cultural media (Ittelson et al., 1974). Other scholars identify this entanglement as a gap or 'intermediate worlds' that combine the fiction of film and the reality of the city (Blothner, 1999, quoted in Escher, 2006, p. 311). As another form of representation (still to be imagined), this gap exists between the idea of the city (the city that is represented) and the city that is real (the city that exists) (Kahn, 2002).

In the blurring between fiction and reality, narratives and screen images (including those of films and documentaries) contribute to a collective knowledge and memory of spaces and places in the city. Images of the city on film give symbolic meaning to urban spaces by defining purposes and activities for a large audience, and by simplifying and interpreting reality for the viewer. This is significant in the context of a city like Johannesburg. Despite complex crossovers (Kruger, 2006), Johannesburg's urban form continues to be divided and fragmented in ways that reflect the legacy of the segregated apartheid city. Although racial divisions have diminished in some parts of the city, its fractured

pattern continues to reveal itself in spatial, social and economic inequalities (Tomlinson et al., 2003). As mentioned in Chapter 2, it is impossible to know and grasp a whole city (even just the physical component), and this is exacerbated in Johannesburg because of its spatial divisions. Most people only experience their city in terms of the limited spaces in which they live, work and socialise; and residents of Johannesburg, in particular, experience their city as fractured.

Urban images in films can provide audiences with models for both social and spatial interactions (Kennedy and Lukinbeal, 1997). Several scholars have shown how films can shape and change people's perceptions by tracing these changes in subsequent films (Hallam, 2010; Bullock, 2003; Clarke, 1997). This reiterative process contributes to the 'mythologisation' of place (Hallam, 2010). However, filmmaker Patrick Keiller (2003) cautions that films very rarely present radically new concepts or places, and that the industry is generally conservative. Thus, changes and shifts may be limited, and in many cases, reality might outstrip a film's representation of it. An example of the gradual development of one such urban imaginary is the focus of this chapter.

Johannesburg's historic CBD on film

Johannesburg's first significant appearance in film is the story of Jim coming to Johannesburg to seek out a better life for himself. This plotline has become something of a trope in South African film but one that reflects the journey of many who come to Johannesburg for better opportunities. In the film *Jim comes to Jo'burg* (aka *African Jim*) (Swanson, 1949), the skyline of Johannesburg's city centre is the image that greets Jim as he arrives in search of a better life. This skyline is of the buildings and skyscrapers of the late 1940s, with electrical and telephone poles and wires shown intermittently in the foreground.

These opening images in *Jim comes to Jo'burg* are an example of 'establishing shots', which filmmakers use to depict the setting or location of the narrative and characters in a film. Establishing shots are long-distance or wide-angle shots that portray the landscape or location of the film and can include aerial imagery. This technique, used even in films shot largely in studios or interior spaces, adds a sense of authenticity to constructed
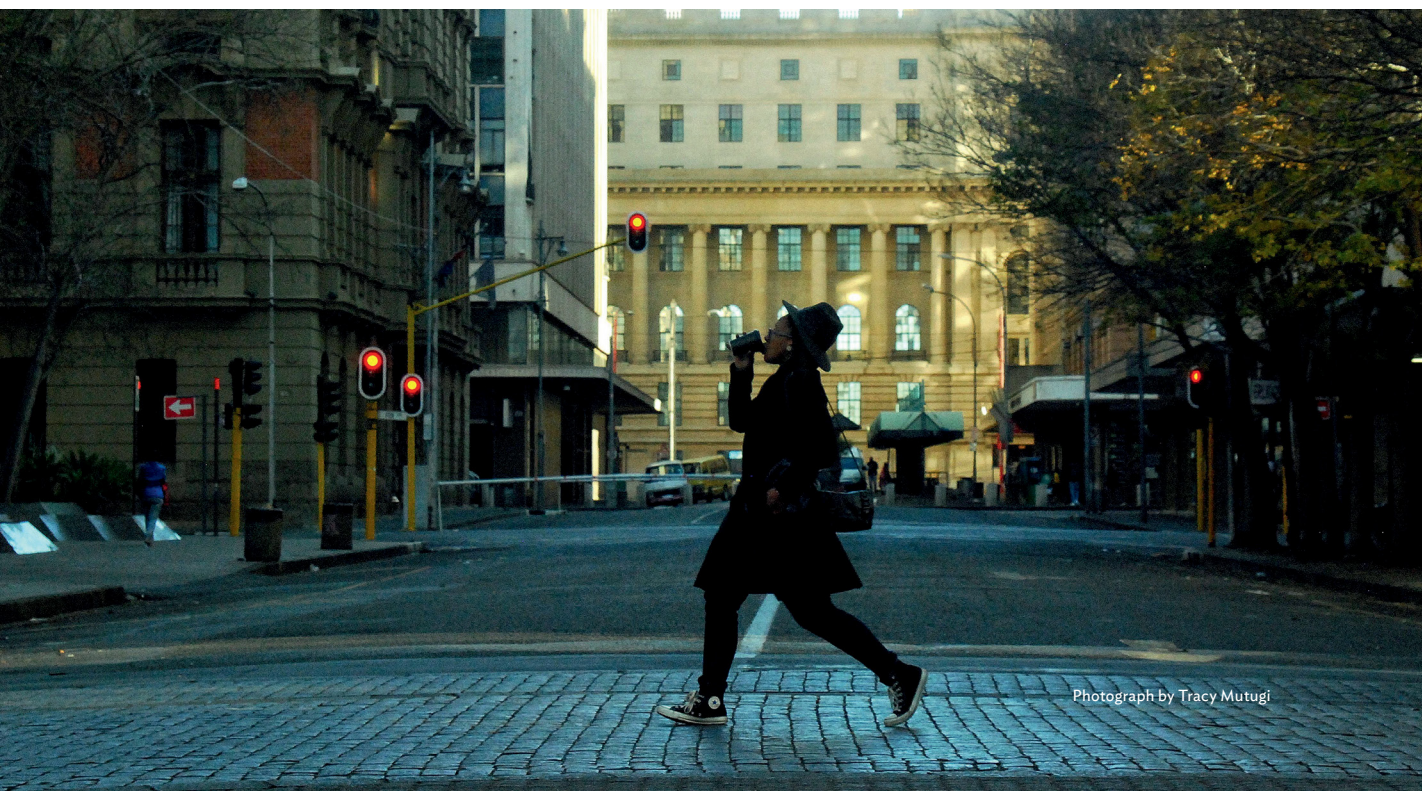
Photograph by Tracy Mutugi

sets and studio locations. Films rely heavily on this locating imagery to convey meaning, frequently stitching together different geographies to achieve the desired effect. Establishing shots, therefore, also contribute significantly to the symbolic meaning and interpretation of the film – they can set the film's tone, context and focus. Filmmakers need to ensure that the imagery of the film aligns with the intended meaning – an important consideration for how landscapes are incorporated into films.

In *Jim comes to Jo'burg*, the establishing shots of the skyline and telephone poles (Figure 3.1) are a metaphor for technology and modernity, which serves to emphasise the stark contrast between Jim's rural background and this new, overwhelming city (Parker, 2016). The establishing shots therefore represent Johannesburg both as a metropolis and as a site of aspiration and modernity. The visual images of the city cement the CBD as a space of possibility and fulfilment, and the narrative reinforces this symbolism as Jim embarks on a career as a singer at the end of the story. It is Africa's version of the American Dream.

Johannesburg's formative appearance in *Jim comes to Jo'burg* was filmed more than 70 years ago, long after gold had been discovered on the Witwatersrand and fortune seekers began settling on the farmland that was to become the 'city of gold'. This time lag was not due to a lack of filming facilities, however; the screening and producing of films was prevalent in Johannesburg before the

Figure 3.1: The establishing shots of Johannesburg, the metropolis, in *Jim comes to Jo'burg* (1949)

1899–1902 South African War (Gutsche, 1972). The issue, as I have argued elsewhere (Parker 2016), is that the city did not yet look like the bustling metropolis that it in fact was. This only materialised with the building boom of the 1930s, the results of which are reflected in those first images in the film – the scenes of high-rise buildings and electrical wires sliding past the train. It is these images of the urban form that connect the imaginary of aspiration with the landscape (skyline) of Johannesburg in this early film.

Although *Jim comes to Jo'burg* showcased the modern urban fabric of 1940s Johannesburg, it was only during the economic boom of the 1960s that the skyline of Johannesburg rose into what it is today. A number of factors contributed to this boom: the city

council relaxed building controls that had restricted the height of buildings; the small plots laid out in 1886 were frequently combined into superblocks; and the economy was buoyant (Beavon, 1998). In the same period, two telecommunications towers were constructed, becoming the tallest structures in Johannesburg. The first tower, erected in Brixton in 1961, was called the Albert Hertzog Tower, named after the late apartheid minister of posts and telegraphs (today it is the Sentech or Brixton Tower). The tower, sitting atop a ridge just west of the city centre, is a distinctive tapered column. In 1971, this column was paired with, arguably, the most identifiable tower of Johannesburg's skyline. See Figure 3.2 for the depiction of this second tower in the film *Jerusalema* (Ziman, 2008). Despite its

Figure 3.2: Images from *Jerusalema* (2008) repeatedly depicting the 'Hillbrow Tower'

location in Hillbrow, a little to the east of the city centre, this tower, known as the Telkom or Hillbrow Tower today (originally named after J.G. Strijdom, the prime minister of the 1950s who shaped early apartheid), is often considered to be part of the CBD – and its main signifier. The terrain between these two towers (in the areas of Hillbrow, the inner city and Braamfontein) is packed with high-rise apartment blocks and office skyscrapers that were mostly erected in the 1960s and 1970s.

Images of this clustered and mature skyline in Johannesburg films not only signify the city as a location and setting, but also embody imaginaries of the metropolis, modernity and aspiration. The imaginary of aspiration is conveyed in Johannesburg's appearances on cinema and television screens through both genre and storylines. Johannesburg is the location and setting for the majority of the country's television soap operas, a primarily aspirational genre. In more recent films, the image of the modern metropolis has been reinforced in both the films' visual depiction of the city and in their narratives.[1]

In research[2] on the reception of Johannesburg films by its residents, two respondents compared film images of Johannesburg to those of New York.

> Phila: Not in terms of the space. But in terms of the gestures. For example I know that Jo'burg is a really busy place and a film could present New York or whatever, you know making the same kind of suggestions that reminded me of Jo'burg. But not because that space looks like Jo'burg somewhere, not in that sense.

> Sizani: I don't know about films. But I've been to places. Certain cities that have reminded me, like, architecturally as well. Movies as well. Especially movies, for example, that are set in New York. Like the hustle and bustle sort of remind you of Johannesburg.

Johannesburg is compared to New York here in terms of its busy-ness and energy as well as with reference to its built form. These comparisons locate Johannesburg within a network of large global cities and equate the city's modernity with that of New York. Indeed, Sizani makes the connection between film images of both cities. Thus, the image of Johannesburg on the screen – the historic CBD with its skyscrapers – complies with common imaginaries of urbanity that include New York. The comparison between the two cities demonstrates the power of stereotypical images and urban landmarks to create a conceptual imaginary that is stronger than materiality. I have shown elsewhere (Parker, 2017) how filmmakers create and make use of spatial stereotypes to quickly convey place and symbolic meaning.

Drawing on the trope established in *Jim comes to Jo'burg* of the country bumpkin coming to the city, *Max and Mona* (Mattera, 2004) reinforces the imaginary of inner-city Johannesburg as a site of urbanity and aspiration more than 50 years later. Max arrives to further his studies but instead ends up living with his uncle in Soweto. He is accompanied by a goat, a bleating reminder of his rural roots. When Max is co-opted to become a professional mourner to help his uncle pay off debts, he is whisked back to the CBD to purchase a suitable wardrobe (Figure 3.3). In this scene, the CBD denotes both his arrival in the big city and his transformation into an urban man through buying new clothes. This consumption reinforces the CBD's connotation as a site of aspiration. Although fictional, this depiction connects consumption and consumerism with aspiration and freedom. The inclusion of this connection in a popular medium such as film is significant because of the way films shape the relationship between consumers and consumerism (Iqani, 2016).

The depiction of the CBD as a space of consumerism is seen in many other Johannesburg films. Another example of this imaginary is depicted in *Hijack stories* (Schmitz, 2000) when Sox, the

1 It should be noted, however, that Johannesburg has not only been a site of aspiration in South African films. In parallel with these depictions, Johannesburg has also represented the site of vice and corruption, most notably in both versions of *Cry, the beloved country* (Korda, 1952, and Roodt, 1995). In these films, Johannesburg's skyline is not featured, thus shifting the meaning of the landscape.

2 This research examined the reception and influence of Johannesburg films for residents of the city through 200 surveys and nine qualitative interviews conducted in the CBD, Fordsburg, Chiawelo and Melville. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of research participants.

protagonist, joins Bra Zama and his gang on a spending spree in the CBD's Carlton Centre after making money stealing cars. While the men are shopping for clothes, they are joined by a group of women seduced by their flashy display of wealth (Figure 3.4). It is significant that these aspirational scenes take place in the CBD. Other scenes take place in suburban Rosebank, where Sox resides, and at one point Sox and Zama are seen exiting one of Rosebank's shopping centres.[3] Nevertheless, the primary site of consumption – and

aspiration – remains the CBD despite the fact that the characters are shown to have access to other – suburban – shopping malls.

In both *Max and Mona* and *Hijack stories*, made respectively in 2004 and 2000, the CBD as a space of consumerism is intertwined with an imaginary of modernity (Figure 3.4). As such, the CBD offers the characters an opportunity to forge an urban identity through their consumption. However, at the time of filming both stories, the CBD itself had long since ceased to serve as the city's premier retail space.

Figure 3.3: Images showing the city's connection with consumerism in *Max and Mona* (2004)

SOURCE: Mattera (2004)

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3   It is interesting to note that in Nuttall's (2008) discussion of new identities that navigate between the township and the suburb, Rosebank, specifically its retail spaces, is the site of this exploration. This theme is one that the film *Hijack stories* addresses, although the film does not depict Rosebank as a site of consumption.

Figure 3.4: Johannesburg CBD as the site of gangster consumerism in *Hijack stories* (2000)

Emergence of the Sandton CBD

Beginning in the 1960s, decentralised shopping centres were erected in the suburban areas of Robertsham, Killarney, Rosebank and Sandton (Beavon, 2004). The once-famed Eloff Street in the city centre could not easily compete with the suburban convenience of off-street parking and less traffic congestion. Although the Carlton Centre – a massive superblock containing the tallest building in Africa at the time, a hotel and a shopping centre – was completed by 1973, it never achieved its intended success (Beavon, 2004). By this stage, the decline of the CBD had already begun.

In the 1970s, a demographic shift in the CBD resulted in black employees outnumbering their white colleagues. Black South Africans also constituted a large proportion of the shoppers in the city centre (Beavon, 1998), a development that was further fostered by the lack of shopping amenities in surrounding 'township' areas such as Soweto. Since 2001, the province of Gauteng has seen enormous growth in shopping centres and malls (Khanyile and Ballard, 2018). In the last decade, various shopping centres, on a par with shopping centres of the northern suburbs, have been constructed in Soweto, including the Jabulani and Maponya malls. Research has shown that these two malls are viewed favourably by Soweto residents, with the effect of shifting their patterns of consumption (Zondi, 2011). Despite such changes, these Soweto sites have yet to emerge on the screen, another lag in the imaginaries of

Johannesburg's spaces. This fact may have less to do with how Soweto functions as a site of consumption and more to do with its underdevelopment as a dormitory area. Consequently, images of the township to date are unlikely to embody concepts of aspiration or modernity.

In comparison, the Sandton business node rose in parallel with the slow decline of the CBD. However, this should not necessarily be viewed as cause and effect since Sandton was on the up before the inner city started its decline. As Larsen (2005, p. ii) explains:

> The Sandton Business District's competitive edge was established in the 1970s, with Sandton City providing a high-profile focal point along with then forward-thinking town planning. During the 1980s Sandton Business District emerged as the premier decentralized office address in Johannesburg. The so-called 'crime and grime' phenomenon in central Johannesburg only reared up during the 1990s, which is when the major exodus of business commenced and was accelerated by political changes, municipal capacity constraints, and a dearth of applied planning policy. The demand for space in Sandton Business District was exacerbated in the early 1990s when major corporates left the Johannesburg CBD and relocated to Sandton propelled by the escalating centrifugal forces.

The Sandton business district was deliberately located on the high point of a ridge with the objective of maximising the height of any future high-rises and skyscrapers – and thus the area's visual prominence (Larsen, 2005). This planning decision is noteworthy for the ways in which topography and landscape can be incorporated into the spatial imaginaries of both urban planning and films.

In 2000, the Johannesburg Stock Exchange moved from the historic CBD to the burgeoning commercial node of Sandton to the north

(Larsen, 2005). This was seen as a confirmation of the CBD's decline and the parallel rise of decentralised Sandton. Sandton has gone on to exceed expectations for growth and development (Larsen, 2005) and is now the de facto commercial centre of Johannesburg and South Africa, with significant retail space in the Sandton City and Nelson Mandela Square developments.

Today, Sandton is the premier economic node of Johannesburg, and South Africa, and is arguably one the country's primary sites of retail consumerism.[4] The wide streets accommodating the latest in expensive vehicles, the glossy shopping centres and the modern building facades contrast starkly with the Johannesburg CBD, with its tired elevations and streets clogged with minibus taxis and informal traders. For affluent shoppers, the hustle and bustle of the city centre has been replaced with the ordered, air-conditioned offices and malls of Sandton. For many, Sandton now functions as the site of aspiration, consumption and modernity, and has since at least the mid-1990s. However, this has not been depicted in films set in Johannesburg until recently.

Happiness is a four letter word (Moleya, 2016) is a romantic comedy set in the Sandton business node, which is clearly depicted as the new site of consumption, aspiration and modernity. The film follows the lives of three successful black women living and working in Sandton, exploring their relationships with each other and the men in their lives, their professional careers and their lifestyles. These women enjoy the good life afforded them by their status and position, and they are shown finely dining and luxuriating in spa treatments. Significantly, the film establishes the centre of Sandton as the backdrop to all these activities.

The timing of this depiction coincides with a recent building boom in the Sandton business node that has transformed the skyline and the urban form. As mentioned, the site of the Sandton node was specifically chosen on a hill to enhance the

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4   Using metrics of retail rentals, Sandton City shopping centre became the most expensive rental per square metre in South Africa in 2016 (BusinessTech, 2016).

visibility of any future skyscrapers or high-rises (Larsen, 2005) – but this construction has only been actualised in recent years. Films require visual signifiers for conveying imaginaries of aspiration and consumption, and thus the representation of Sandton in the films of Johannesburg was delayed until an appropriate image of its modernity could be projected.

The emergence of Sandton as a site of suitable visual signifiers of modernity began with the completion of the Michelangelo Towers in 2005, which dramatically altered the skyline with a total height of 153 m. The building is advertised as offering 'Manhattan-style living' (Legacy Hotel Group, 2010), echoing the research respondents' imaginary of the modern urban lifestyle embodied by New York.

A pair of distinctive and iconic towers at 15 Alice Lane contributed to the skyline in 2010, joined shortly thereafter by several glass-clad buildings with ultra-modern curves and silhouettes. The tallest building in Africa, the Leonardo Tower, was completed in 2019. It is these new developments that have provided a suitably modern and aspirational built form that can be exploited by cinematic productions.

Happiness is located in Sandton's urban core through the establishing shots of the opening title sequence – images showing the newly completed office buildings (Figure 3.5). In so doing, the film makes clear that Sandton is distinct from Johannesburg's CBD. The historic city centre is referred to as a ghetto by Zaza, a lead character, and the film imagery and characters' storylines

Figure 3.5: Sandton skyline in *Happiness is a four letter word* (2016)

reflect this. The shot that introduces us to Leo, an artist living and working in Johannesburg's CBD, begins with images of an adjacent building that has broken windows. The camera zooms out to reveal the interior of Leo's studio. The inner city with its ageing buildings is then viewed from within his studio – and this shot is repeated multiple times throughout the film. In fact, much of the film takes place inside buildings, but Sandton's smart offices and houses all have framed views of the up-market city beyond.

The film begins to equate the location of Sandton with glamour and success, although somewhat hesitantly. While the film clearly draws on the pioneering series *Sex and the city* (1998–2004) through the narrative of three successful women shopping for shoes and discussing men, it does not engage with the urban environment beyond the few establishing shots; and, in any case, many of these are taken from inside buildings. Characters and scenes are restricted to interiors, with the street and other urban forms mediated through windows or limited to aerial footage.

The depiction of Sandton in *Happiness* is an acknowledgement of the shifting economic activities in Johannesburg as well as of its multiplying sites of affluence and aspiration. In this way, *Happiness* generates nuance in the representation of Johannesburg's urban landscape by not relying on the spatial stereotype of the historic CBD. Alternative sites of consumption and aspiration in the city now have corresponding images in this film set in Sandton, even if these images are hesitant and rely on interiors.

Multiple endings

This chapter has illustrated – starting with the first images of Johannesburg in *Jim comes to Jo'burg* (1949) and closing with the shift to the images of Sandton – that films require particular urban forms to provide a setting for projecting imaginaries of modernity and aspiration. In this manner, the built form of Johannesburg serves as a foundation for the narratives about the African Dream.

As this chapter has shown, Sandton's depiction in film is a shift towards a more nuanced representation of Johannesburg, one that moves away from the CBD as the only site of aspiration. This development has been facilitated by the construction in the last decade of a built form that more readily encapsulates ideas of success and affluence in South Africa. As densities continue to increase and high-rise towers go up in other suburban nodes such as Rosebank, we can hope for a diversity of skylines in future films set in Johannesburg.

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Chapter 4

Vernacular imaginaries: Regenerating Johannesburg's inner city

AIDAN MOSSELSON

Abstract

We are accustomed to thinking about the ways in which planners and developers shape urban space. However, a close analysis of their practices also shows that they are equally influenced by the spaces in which they act. This study considers a set of developers who, since the 2000s, have established and run residential properties in Johannesburg's inner city. It shows how these investors have been shaped by the difficult conditions in the inner city. They reject a model of up-market gentrification which would render the space unaffordable to many of those who currently live there. They are also pragmatic in response to the various constraints they confront, and rather than trying to reorder the environment, they adapt their imaginaries and practices to it.

Introducing the vernacular imaginary

A great deal of attention is paid to what Lefebvre (1991) has termed 'conceived space' – the space that is envisaged or imagined by planners, architects and governments. Powerful groups' imaginaries, strategies, plans and visions have palpable effects on urban spaces and the social relations which form inside them. However, Lefebvre (1991) also reminds us that space is never empty and cannot simply be acted upon, no matter how influential the people involved (also see Schmid, 2008). As much as space can be shaped by powerful visions and interests, it also exerts influence over people who inhabit and act in spaces (see Chapter 2 of this volume for a discussion on this recursive relationship). Spatial imaginaries are thus the results of dynamic processes in which visions, ideals, interests and actions shape space, but space simultaneously shapes the types of imaginations, aspirations and practices which are possible. This chapter will use the urban regeneration process in inner-city Johannesburg to illustrate this point.

Drawing on several months of fieldwork in the area and interviews with a variety of actors involved in housing provision, regeneration and urban management efforts there, this chapter will show that the visions and strategies which these actors adopt are influenced by the spaces they are active in and are seeking to change. Thus, regeneration strategies adapt over time as housing providers find ways to improve distressed buildings and public spaces, negotiate with informal traders, pursue profit and simultaneously achieve inclusionary and developmental outcomes. Hence, it will be argued that the regeneration visions and practices being pursued are vernacular[1] as they are expressions of, and responses to, the specific context and the various

1   In this chapter, I draw on the notion of vernacular regeneration as developed by Mosselson (2019a).

challenges which it holds. Thus, the process does not simply impose visions onto the area but rather evolves as a contingent and adaptable response to, and reflection of, the prevailing spatial circumstances.

Imagining a rejuvenated inner city

Johannesburg's inner city has undergone momentous change over the last three decades. A dramatic and destructive process of capital flight and urban decay started in the 1980s. Businesses and residents, in what was originally a whites only zone, began to feel increasingly pessimistic about the state of the country, and slowly started disinvesting from the area (Beavon, 2004; Morris, 1999a). At the same time, increasing numbers of Black people[2] started to move into the area as housing shortages in the townships grew more acute and political conditions became more violent and unpredictable. Initially middle-class, Coloured and Indian families moved into high-rise inner-city neighbourhoods such as Berea and Hillbrow. Generally educated and employed in white-collar professions, these households were able to afford the rents being charged in residential buildings (Crankshaw and White, 1995). Although some white residents were mistrustful of their new neighbours and alarmed by the racial changes taking place around them, the weakening of segregation was largely tolerated at this point (Morris, 1999b). However, in the 1990s more and more Black African people moved into the area. This proved intolerable to the remaining white residents and a drastic process of white flight ensued. Newly arrived Black tenants were poorer than Indian and Coloured families and had to resort to subletting and overcrowding apartments to afford rents (Crankshaw and White, 1995).

Although overcrowding put severe strain on the already ageing infrastructure in high-rise buildings, white landlords were eager to accommodate this new, as yet untapped, demand. The accelerated flight of white residents had left them with many vacant apartments and significantly reduced income streams. By overcrowding apartments, they were able to extract as much rent as possible. This practice was partly driven by greed and racist attitudes but was also forced on many landlords by commercial financial institutions who, feeling increasingly pessimistic about the inner city, started to redline the area. Redlining prevented new investment and also meant that owners were refused the loans they needed to maintain their properties (Oelofse, 2003; Crankshaw and White, 1995).

A combination of ageing infrastructure, increased occupancy levels and lack of money to carry out maintenance or make new investments precipitated a spiral of decay, and slum-like conditions quickly took over. The situation was exacerbated by hostilities between Black tenants and white landlords. Rental boycotts and vandalism became common as tenants vented their frustration at the poor conditions they were living under and the broader political situation in the country. Many landlords eventually lost control of their buildings and tenant committees took over (Morris, 1999c). In many cases, committees were unable to effectively manage buildings and were captured by criminal syndicates. These syndicates would convince tenants to pay them in return for looking after the buildings. However, rather than using tenants' rent for maintenance, in most cases they simply pocketed the money and ran the buildings through extortion and intimidation (Zack et al., 2009). Over time, property regulations and general law and order fell apart and the area became an infamous den of fear, marginalisation, violence, crime and poverty (Leggett, 2003).

2   In this study, 'Black' refers to all people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds who were excluded under apartheid. In cases where more specific detail is required, the apartheid terminology of Black Africans, Coloured and Indians is retained. This is done with awareness that these are constructed and imposed categories, but that they are also salient features of people's identities and senses of self in contemporary South Africa.

Efforts to arrest the decline and regenerate the inner city were begun in earnest in the early 2000s. As rejuvenation was declared one of the six mayoral priorities, authorities, policy-makers and the metro police began paying closer attention to the inner city. In keeping with the neoliberal agenda shaping economic policy in South Africa at the time (see Gumede, 2007; Bond, 2000), ambitions focused on recovering the commercial viability and economic vitality of the area. Although the process was initiated by the government, private-sector investors and developers were accorded primary roles. The Inner City Regeneration Charter was unveiled in 2007 (City of Johannesburg, 2007). The Charter, although not serving as an actual policy document, spelled out the main ambitions underlying the regeneration project, as well as pathways through which these goals would be realised. Overwhelmingly, the emphasis was on attracting private investment back into the inner city. This was to be achieved by local government making investments in infrastructure that would improve the area's image and send positive signals to investors. Local government also committed to addressing the factors which detract from business confidence, particularly 'crime and grime' issues and order maintenance (City of Johannesburg, 2007).

Following the principles set out above, several high-profile infrastructure development projects were undertaken by local government in the inner city. These included the creation of the Newtown Cultural Precinct, the Diamond and Fashion Districts in the eastern segments of the central business district, and construction of the now-iconic Mandela Bridge (Figure 4.1). These were all commissioned in the mid-2000s and were intended to show the private sector that government

Figure 4.1: Nelson Mandela Bridge connecting Braamfontein (lower left) to Newtown and the CBD

Photograph by Clive Hassall

was paying renewed attention to the inner city and that their investments there would be secure and profitable (Viruly et al., 2010).

Importantly, these projects respond to and produce particular imaginaries of the area. They focus on visualising it as an investment destination that is clean, economically productive, managed and marketable. For instance, the Fashion District was launched with promises to attract 'fashion-conscious suburban shoppers, downtown shoppers who work in the central business district, and tourists' (JDA, n.d.). Key features, including colourful public artworks, boutique shops and an outdoor ramp and amphitheatre for hosting fashion shows were constructed to distinguish the Fashion District from the area surrounding it and give it a unique, appealing identity. This intervention, like others, including the construction of the Ellis Park Sports Precinct, shows that rejuvenation efforts were driven by imaginaries that envisaged and appealed to wealthier, more 'desirable' classes of urban consumers (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2009; Gaule, 2005). Most importantly, these imaginaries did not only operate in the conceptual realm but also materially reordered and produced space, with telling consequences for those who did not fit into the dominant visions.

As efforts to realise the imagined inner city have taken shape, increased focus has been paid to policing and addressing issues of 'crime and grime'. In the Inner City Regeneration Charter, petty crime, lack of by-law enforcement and general uncleanliness are highlighted as factors which make the business community less likely to invest. The Charter therefore makes policing and managing the area priorities for local government. As a result, highly visible policing campaigns are periodically launched in the inner city. Undocumented immigrants and informal traders have borne the brunt of these 'crackdowns', which are intended to send signals to private investors that the City of Johannesburg is serious about safeguarding their interests (McMichael, 2015; Winkler, 2006; Reitzes, 2002; Klaaren and Ramji, 2001). While these campaigns have been episodic and generally do not

make lasting impacts on the area, private security has also been extensively deployed and CCTV cameras have been installed in many parts of the inner city (Peyroux, 2006). These measures are intended to bring more visible, sustained policing to the area and to create a semblance of control and regulation. Again, the targets of these policing measures have generally been 'undesirable' people – predominantly informal traders, homeless people and beggars – who are seen to detract from business confidence in and the attractiveness of the area (Bénit-Gbaffou et al., 2012; Didier et al., 2012).

Creating a capitalist space

These efforts at reimagining the inner city contribute to producing it as a space which is defined by, and augments, the capitalist market. The overall goal of the inner-city regeneration scheme is to 'raise and sustain private investment' and maximise the profits which can be generated from real estate in the area (City of Johannesburg, 2004, p. 10). Intentions therefore revolve around embedding orthodox market principles in the way the area is produced, run and inhabited. With this in mind, the imaginaries and practices of actors involved in regeneration projects reflect firmly what can be referred to as the 'commercial–entrepreneurial habitus' (Mosselson, 2019b). This refers to the set of dispositions and practices that embody the values and qualities espoused by neoliberal ideology, including belief in competition; trust in the market as the best mechanism for regulating society and solving social problems; a disavowal of reliance on the state or welfare; and an overtly economistic view of the world (Bourdieu, 2005). Reflecting the predominance of imaginations that prioritise commercial, entrepreneurial values, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the City of Johannesburg's social housing company declares that 'We formulate our business model on normal real estate principles. We are a business, not a municipality.' In this case, he exemplifies the ways in which even social housing,

Efforts at reimagining the inner city contribute to producing it as a space which is defined by, and augments, the capitalist market

a social, state-supported good, is being imagined and produced through the market. As a result, many people still find social housing hard to access even though it is intended to benefit those who survive on restricted incomes.

Of respondents in the 2020/21 Quality of Life Survey (GCRO, 2021) who lived in the inner-city areas of Hillbrow, Berea and Doornfontein and who provided information on their household income, 53% said that their household income was between R3 201 and R12 800, while 27% said that their income was between R801 and R3 200. However, the rates charged in social and affordable housing vary from R800 for a room in a communal development provided by the City, to R4 500 and above for a three-bedroom apartment in a private-sector development.[3] Consequently, there is a shortage of accommodation for people in lower income brackets even though they make up the bulk of the area's population. In addition, even when people can afford the rents, there are a number of conditions in place which make social and private-sector housing inaccessible for many people. People applying for social or private-sector housing units have to pay one month's rent upfront as well as a deposit equal to a month's rent. They also have to provide identification documents certifying that they are either South African citizens or legally permitted to reside in the country and letters confirming that they are gainfully employed and have regular incomes. They are also only permitted to make payments through bank transfers. These conditions exclude a large number of inner-city residents, many of whom make their livings in the informal sector, do not have regular sources of income or bank accounts and lack formal identification documents. Reflecting on housing companies' stipulations, a researcher working at a legal advocacy group that defends communities facing evictions from inner-city properties, complains that housing providers in the

area operate with 'middle class ideas of income, that people have a salary cheque every month'.

Over time, the market-based visions and practices which have shaped the regeneration process have taken hold. Research commissioned by the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) points out that where the JDA have made public infrastructure interventions, property transactions, levels of investment and land values have risen (Viruly et al., 2010). There is now intense competition for the remaining building stock in the inner city and housing developers are competing 'tooth and nail' with one another, as one developer puts it. A result of this increased competition has been an increase in rents as more formal housing operating under the conditions outlined above has replaced informal arrangements, and many communities have been evicted from properties in the area, sometimes brutally (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2016). As the reality imagined by the commercial-entrepreneurial habitus has taken hold, many people have been displaced and forced to move to derelict and abandoned properties on the edges of the inner city. The CEO of the Trust for Urban Housing Finance (TUHF), one of the key agencies driving the provision of housing and regeneration in the area, thus points out that 'the space of living for free has been closed down to almost zero; the displacement of the poor has been rampant'.

Reflexive imaginaries

Powerful commercial interests, and the imaginaries underpinning them, are having real impacts on the ways in which inner-city rejuvenation is proceeding. But, as pointed out in the introduction, it is vital that we continue to apprehend spatial imaginaries and processes as dynamic. Our analyses

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3   Social housing is rental housing catering to people earning between R3 500 and R7 500 per month. It is provided in multi-unit buildings by state-subsidised, non-profit institutions. Rents in social housing developments in Johannesburg range between R700 and R4 000 per month. 'Affordable housing' is a more contentions category, and generally targets the 'gap housing market' – households whose monthly incomes are above the maximum thresholds required to qualify for free state-provided housing or subsidised rents in the social housing sector but are too small to allow them to gain access to housing in the commercial market. Rents in affordable housing in the inner city range between R1 200 and R7 000 p/m. These rates are lower than other commercial developments but remain beyond the reach of a substantial proportion of the inner-city population.

of interventions and moments of urban change need to foreground the interdependent relationship between spatial imaginations and experiences in space. In the inner city, actors are not only able to impose their imaginations and visions onto space, but also to reflexively adapt their outlooks, ambitions and practices in light of the spatial realities they encounter. The ways in which housing developers formulate their ambitions for the inner city provide a clear example of this process at work.

While the commercial imperatives of the regeneration project are well established, housing providers and actors involved in regeneration efforts also place considerable emphasis on making socially beneficial interventions into the area. Because of the area's severe decline, social problems proliferate. Levels of unemployment, homelessness, crime, violence and substance abuse are extremely high in inner-city neighbourhoods such as Hillbrow and Berea. There are also many communities living in hazardous conditions in decayed buildings that lack functioning water and electricity connections. Housing providers are not oblivious to these conditions and actively factor them into the ways they approach regeneration. Thus, the CEO of Johannesburg Housing Corporation (JHC), when asked why the company decided to focus its efforts on the inner city, explains their decision as follows:

> If you look at the amount of people that live here and work here, in absolutely horrendous conditions, why not the inner city?! So the focus was to try and do two things with creating units within the inner city of Joburg: there were a lot of slumlords within the inner city, old investors abandoned their buildings, slumlords moved in, people paid a fortune to these slumlords but lived in absolutely horrendous conditions, so it was to try and create quality units where people need it, within the market that we defined, and also play a role in urban regeneration. So that was very crucial to us and that was what drove our decision.

Housing companies therefore do not concentrate solely on the infrastructural aspects of regeneration. Rather, they accept that they have a role to play in improving social life in the area, even if this is outside of their commercial agenda and places additional costs on them. As one housing provider simply puts it: 'We don't cater to wealthy people with free resources.' Social housing companies ensure that social services are available to all their tenants; they provide counselling services, financial support to clients who face difficulties, homework facilities and supervision for tenants with children and also organise social activities for tenants, including sport days and cultural activities for children during school holiday periods. Thus, a JHC employee who is in charge of new investments at the company, and therefore has a firmly economic job description, describes the company's role and ambitions as follows:

> The definition for us as a whole is seeing lasting impact, changing neighbourhoods and areas. We have done great things where what used to happen and where we are now are worlds apart. We are creating homes, working with communities. We're a property management company, sure, but overall it's really about community development.

Private housing companies have also invested in social amenities in the area and buildings they own. One company has pioneered playgrounds on the roofs of its buildings and also invested in a school in the inner city. Other private companies also provide crèches and childcare facilities in their buildings, which are very helpful for working parents. Together, housing companies have combined to found the Ekhaya City Improvement District (CID) in the southern section of Hillbrow. This is a voluntary association of property owners who contribute levees every month to a non-profit management company, which is responsible for hiring cleaning and security services, liaising with City officials and taking care of day-to-day management issues in the spaces which fall within the boundaries of the management district (Mosselson, 2019a). The district does not have formal demarcations or borders but has come into being sporadically through cooperation among social and affordable housing companies that own properties in close proximity to one another, as Figure 4.2 shows. Although not all properties falling within the district are members of Ekhaya, the initiative is able to exert control over space by clustering and sharing resources, exchanging information and working

Figure 4.2: Cluster of buildings forming the Ekhaya City Improvement District, Hillbrow

Map by Janet Alexander

Gauteng province within South Africa

Hillbrow within the City of Johannesburg

Cluster of buildings forming the Ekhaya City Improvement District
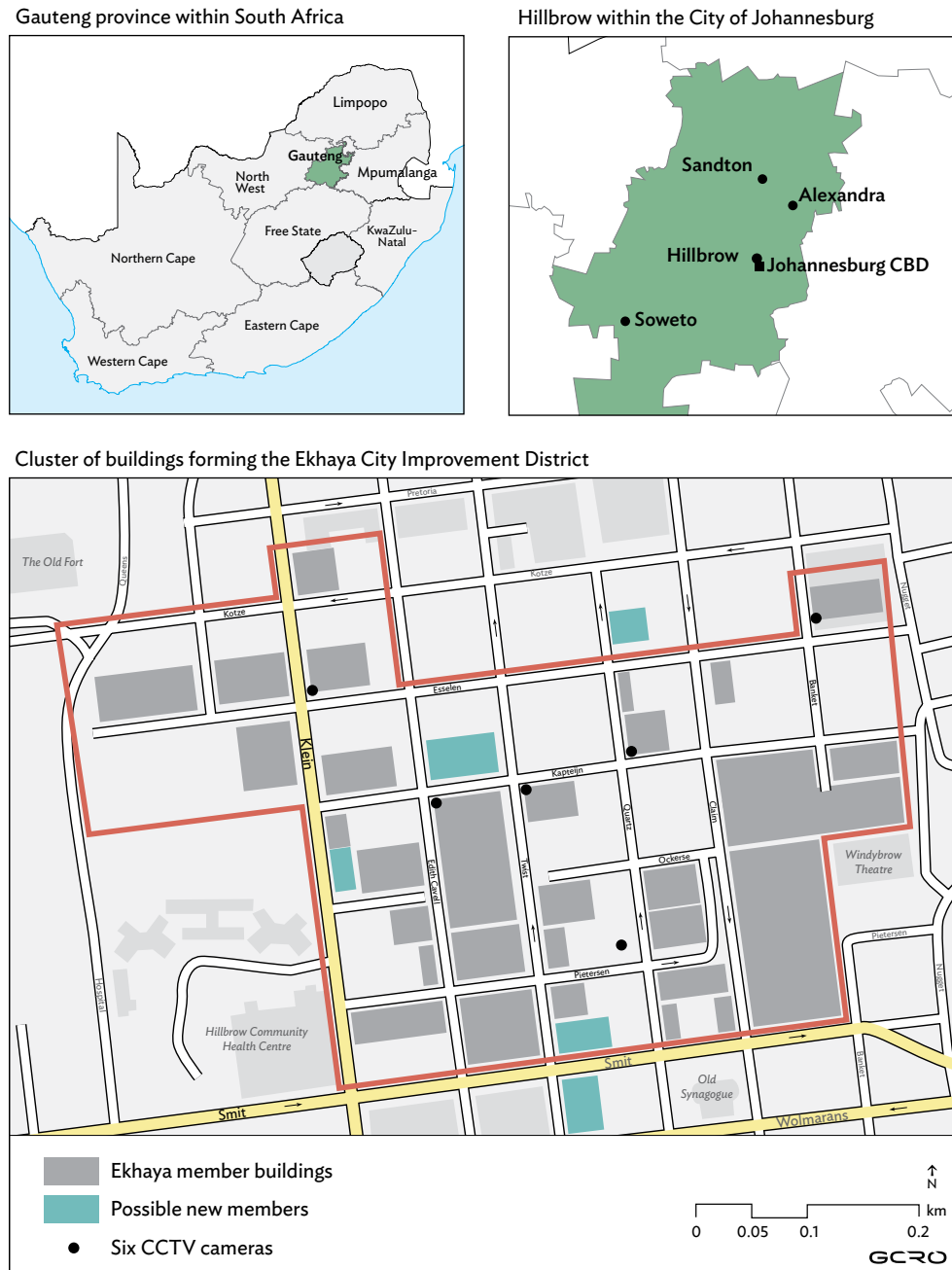
towards a shared vision for the neighbourhood (Mkhize and Mosselson, 2019). While it is primarily conceived of as a vehicle for augmenting property values, the informal CID also plays a role in supporting communal life and improving social relations.

The Ekhaya CID hosts events for children during the school holidays and festive periods and promotes cultural activities such as life-skills theatre and inter-cultural festivals. It therefore attempts to introduce opportunities for socialisation into the neighbourhood and create an atmosphere that is conducive to interactions, friendship and communal life (Mosselson, 2018). The CID also takes responsibility for managing Ekhaya Park. This park was established on a previously disused parking lot and now boasts a playground and an artificial soccer pitch, which was donated by the JDA. It is located on Claim Street, in the centre of Hillbrow. Hillbrow is one of the densest residential areas in Johannesburg and has an alarming lack of recreation facilities and green spaces, particularly now that it is home to a very large population of families with young children. The park has become one of the centres of communal life in the area, and children

are constantly playing in it under the supervision of private security staff employed by the Ekhaya CID. Events are also organised where soccer teams comprising children, and occasionally adults, from the surrounding buildings come together to compete (see Figure 4.3). In addition to providing welcome entertainment, physical activity and recreation, these events, according to the CID's coordinator, also help foster friendly relations between tenants in residential buildings, and therefore help reduce the anonymity and indifference which characterise social relations for many people in the neighbourhood (Malcomess and Wilhelm-Solomon, 2016; Götz and Simone, 2003). Thus, rather than attempting to impose preconceived imaginaries and commercial desires onto the area, housing developers have formulated approaches and responses to regeneration that deal with the lived reality of the inner city.

This response to the area's lived realities means ambitions and achievements are understood in pragmatic ways which take the area's history and contemporary difficulties into account. Hence, when the founder of the private security company that

Figure 4.3: Ekhaya soccer day, Ekhaya Park, Hillbrow, 4 May 2014

Photograph by the author

manages the Ekhaya precinct and provides security in many of the participating buildings is asked what he saw as the moment in which regeneration efforts in Hillbrow first started to succeed, he does not point to increasing property values or declining crime statistics, although both of these do indeed matter to him and the clients who he works for; rather, he speaks about the first soccer tournament held in Ekhaya Park, and describes this as the moment when a community took shape and efforts at regenerating the area really bore fruit. While this response paints a rather sanguine picture of the process, it also illustrates the spatially embedded and reflexive approaches that have come to the fore in the inner city. The commercial imperatives cannot be overlooked or understated, nor can the conflicts which the regeneration process has engendered, particularly around evictions and the policing-out of particular populations or behaviours. At the same time, the ways in which imaginaries and responses are forged in reaction to lived spatial realities also remains practically and conceptually indispensable.

In some cases, housing developers arrived in the inner city with clear ideas about how to make socially beneficial improvements. In others, their imaginaries and practices have been shaped reflexively through lived experience and learning from others. The company that would go on to become the largest provider of affordable rental housing in the area initially planned to renovate units and then sell them on. However, under advice from the National Housing Finance Corporation,[4] they were persuaded to maintain ownership of the units and rent them out instead. This was a pragmatic solution since the majority of people who need to live in the inner city cannot afford to purchase their own properties. Past experiences also demonstrated the need for committed, rigorous management of residential properties (Oelofse, 2003). The current regeneration process is therefore an effort to incrementally learn from and adapt to lived realities in the area.

Thus, although housing developers are extremely powerful actors who have considerable power to shape physical and social space, they are also constrained by the realities with which they are confronted. The reflexivity that is required has also come to shape how they evaluate regeneration efforts and measure success. While commercial concerns remain imperative, developers and actors involved in regeneration also make assessments based on what is most appropriate and likely to make a valuable contribution to improving the area and its liveability. For instance, when reacting to the Maboneng precinct, a fashionable, high-end, gentrified development on the western edge of Jeppestown (see Nevin, 2014), they dismiss it as 'artificial' and ill-suited to the environment and context surrounding it. The head of the largest affordable housing provider in the inner city explains that the focus of housing provision should be on expanding the supply of affordable units rather than on creating elite, expensive developments:

> If we get into gentrification where the prices start getting pushed out of the realms of affordable housing, we run into trouble because then where are the masses going to live? What we don't want to do is push them back out to the Sowetos of the world, out to the rural areas because that's the only place they can afford. If gentrification starts making what was previously affordable housing too expensive because the demand is coming from higher earners, I think we're just going to exacerbate the housing problem in this country.

Similarly, the head of another private affordable housing company explains that their focus is on 'safe, solid, basic accommodation' because that is what best serves the needs of people in the area. Thus, while they are able to make considerable changes and impositions

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4   The National Housing Finance Corporation (NHFC) is a government subsidiary that provides finance to support the construction of affordable housing in South Africa. It provides finance, technical assistance and project support to individuals, other state entities and private housing developers. End-beneficiaries of NHFC support are households earning between R1 500 and R15 000 per month.

to the spatial reality, their abilities to produce space are restricted by the socio-economic and demographic contexts they operate in. Rather than seeking to indiscriminately alter this reality, they elect to make contingent, incremental changes instead.

Urban management – between producing and adapting to space

It is therefore clear that the regeneration effort has been formulated as a response to the localised conditions that developers and housing providers encounter. Their imaginations are not imposed onto the area but develop out of close, situated engagements with it. Housing providers place a great deal of emphasis on being present in the inner city and gaining first-hand experience of its social realities. As the operations manager for one social housing company explains:

> If you're talking management in the inner city, you cannot have remote control management, you've got to have someone on-site there, living with the people, interacting on a daily basis, giving them service, hearing rumours and stuff and reacting to it before it becomes a problem.

All the private and social housing companies that participate in the Ekhaya CID have offices located in the inner city, close to their residential buildings. They also employ building managers who live in residential buildings and are able to provide responsive, on-site management. The management practices and approaches to regeneration that have emerged are therefore situated responses that adapt to local conditions and contexts. They are not driven by imaginations and practices formed at a distance but are shaped by specific spatial conditions and experiences. As one private developer proudly declares, 'We're here, we live it every day.'

The approaches to urban management which have been adopted in the area reflect the incremental, adaptable and localised nature of regeneration efforts. While crime blitzes and crackdowns are spectacular displays of force and have disruptive, harmful consequences for those who fall victim to them (McMichael, 2015), these bursts of activity are episodic and differ drastically from day-to-day management practices. The strategies adopted by housing companies are based on careful engagements with the inner city and its diverse populations and are more accommodating and adaptive. While their management and policing strategies do enact particular forms of order and regulation, they also

Photograph by Alet Pretorius

shape the space in more careful, pragmatic and incremental ways.

Efforts to remove traders from the streets of the inner city have been ongoing since the 1980s (Beavon and Rogerson, 1986). Despite these efforts, this informal practice remains a ubiquitous feature of the area. Punitive, heavy-handed clean-up operations signal government's inability to come to grips with it. Housing developers, in contrast, adopt more tolerant approaches. While the official position adopted by the Ekhaya CID is that informal trading within the precinct is not permitted, in practice urban management personnel tolerate it and even actively collaborate with traders. As Mkhize and Mosselson (2019) document, housing managers responsible for buildings that are part of the Ekhaya project actively work with traders who operate outside of their buildings, using them to keep an eye out for crime and even advertise vacancies in their buildings. This practice stands out as a contingent and creative adaptation to the particular social space of the inner city. It therefore demonstrates a spatial practice which is not imposed onto or concerned with reordering the environment but rather adapts to and takes its cues from it.

Another example of this contingent response is found in the discourse which has developed around the inner city. While it was originally conceived and governed as an exemplar of white, settler-colonial modernity in Africa, the area has changed drastically in the post-apartheid period and now embodies African urban modernity and sociality (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2008). Rather than resisting this change, housing providers have actively altered their spatial imaginaries and practices to fit better with the environment in which they operate. Thus, when discussing informal traders, an area manager employed by the largest affordable housing company explains that, while officially they are not permitted to trade outside of any buildings that he is responsible for, in practice he allows them to. He admits that he has come to recognise the importance of trading as a livelihood strategy but also as a reflection of the urban reality he is operating in. He explains his approach as follows:

> You're kind of inclined to close a blind eye, because remember, that's their livelihood, that puts food on the table for them on the end of the day. It's a 50-50 scenario; do I let them stay there and live or do I kick them off and tell them to get knotted? And don't care? Sometimes in life you need to close your eyes and accept what's coming your way, unfortunately. And this is Africa, you need to.

He therefore illustrates how his understanding and imagining of the space has changed, and how this has come to shape his practices.

Inside the buildings, too, although they tightly control the space, housing providers adopt somewhat flexible practices. The conditions housing companies impose on prospective tenants have been outlined above; at first glance, they do indeed prevent many from accessing housing. In practice, however, these conditions are not as rigid and exclusionary as they appear. A building manager running a private development in Berea explains how she persuaded the company she works for to tolerate subletting as it allows more people to access housing and afford the rents being charged. She narrates:

> We've got one-, two-, and three-bedrooms. For a two-bedroom [flat] there must be four people, but when we sit down with my boss I said, 'Allow them to be at least six [people sharing] but provided they don't have children.'

She further elaborates on how subletting allows people who otherwise would not be able to access accommodation to find a place to stay:

> When they sign the lease, the lease said they must not sublet so now as you can see more and more people [living in the building] are working at restaurants, people are the securities [security guards]. Even if you see their pay slip, their money cannot manage to afford the rent of this building. So it's better if they combine their slips – maybe your payslip and my payslip, we can afford.

Subletting is now permitted in almost all housing developments in the inner city, enabling people who lack regular forms of employment, incomes and legal identification documentation or residency status to access decent housing. The fact that building managers are able to give input into management decisions exemplifies the ways in which housing providers learn from people on the ground and

adapt their practices over time. Subletting, then, is a practice that reflects the social realities of the area rather than the economic imaginations and considerations of housing companies. It also helps to explain why, despite the disparities between the economic profile of the inner-city population and the rents charged, vacancies in the inner city are almost non-existent.

Rules inside the buildings are also approached with the flexibility required to accommodate complex lived realities. The same building manager explains that when tenants are more than three weeks overdue on their rent, they are locked out of their apartments and are not allowed back in until they have made arrangements to pay the outstanding amount. Although she is extremely strict and positions herself as a disciplinary figure within the building, she also explains that she finds ways to avoid locking tenants out and always gives them opportunities to make arrangements so that she will not have to. In another case, a building manager working for a different company had no choice but to lock one of her tenants out as her rent was more than a month overdue. However, she arranged for the tenant and her child to sleep in her apartment until some of the outstanding money was paid. Thus, while she maintains that 'rules, they are made for them to be followed', she demonstrates how interpersonal relationships and recognition of the difficulties people endure are also factored into the ways in which she enforces the rules and manages the space of the building.

Because buildings are high-density spaces that bring varieties of people into close contact with one another, they also have strict rules about music, parties and consumption of alcohol. Although oppressive to some, these rules help people live together with some degree of order and shared sense of home. However, managers also exercise their discretion and permit social events at certain times. A building manager running a social housing development on the edge of Hillbrow narrates an

'If you do urban regeneration, you must be very careful that you don't push poor people out'

occasion when he was approached by tenants who wanted to organise a braai to celebrate the end-of-year festive period. He recounts how tenants combined resources to buy supplies and gifts for children in the building. This event was a departure from the usual strict atmosphere in the building, and again shows that management has to be adaptable and respond to the ways in which people make homes for themselves. As the supervisor recalls, 'We don't allow such things in awkward times but there's some times when you must leave tenants to enjoy themselves.'

Reimagining urban regeneration

It therefore becomes apparent that new understandings and practices of urban regeneration are emerging in the inner city. While urban regeneration has conventionally been associated with processes of gentrification and urban cleansing (Lees et al., 2015; Butler, 2007; Smith, 1996), in Johannesburg alternative processes are taking shape. Although the process in the inner city does share some similarities with international experiences, the motivating logics, everyday practices and end results are not foregone conclusions or simple reiterations of gentrification experienced elsewhere. Due to the dynamic interaction between space, imaginaries and practices, a contextually embedded, reflexive form of regeneration is emerging. Not only does this call into question the salience of predetermined categories such as gentrification or revanchist renewal, which imply fixed rationalities, logics and outcomes (Ghertner, 2014; Lemanski, 2014; Maloutas, 2012), it also highlights the role that experiences in space play in shaping the processes through which space is produced and moments of urban change unfold.

Hence, in the inner city, housing providers' imaginaries, which are fundamental to shaping the way urban renewal unfolds, are influenced by the experiences they have in the space. They are not formulated in vacuums or out of nothing but emerge out of reflexive and dynamic encounters with and in space. Thus, in explaining what regeneration means and how it should be done, the CEO of JHC references the current South African and international policy

vogue for mixed-income communities. However, as she explains, it takes on very different forms in the inner-city context:

> If you do urban regeneration, you must be very careful that you don't push poor people out, because if you gentrify a city too much and push out poor people, that's not urban regeneration, in my view. So it doesn't help for us to strive towards bringing in high-end people in the inner city and Manhattan-type developments and they don't want to live alongside poor people. So if you do urban regeneration within a precinct there needs to be a bit of everything, and that's what we try and do in our buildings so that there's not poor people living in one block and high-end people in another block.

In this case, mixed income is not simply a term used to sugar-coat the harmful effects of gentrification and displacement of the poor from social housing estates, as has been the case in other contexts (Watt, 2009; Butler and Lees, 2006). In the context of inner-city Johannesburg, it is a process that actively tries to include lower-income households and ensure that people gain access to housing in a centrally located area. Thus, she goes on to explain what 'mixed income' means in South Africa's socio-economic context: 'It's not high-end mixed income, so it would be low-income, social, affordable and maybe just a little bit above [i.e.] normal market rental. We don't have high-end rental in the inner city of Joburg yet.' This point again illustrates the vernacular form which regeneration is taking and how it has emerged in the context of Johannesburg's inner city, which has its own specific challenges, attractions and tensions. It shows how processes of urban change do indeed follow global trends and imaginaries, but that these are inflected with localised concerns and the desire to avoid recreating failed or segregated forms of urbanism seen elsewhere. It demonstrates that Johannesburg's post-colonial urbanism is not only mimicry (Mbembe, 2008) but actively learns from and improves on experiences from elsewhere in light of the prevailing conditions.

The ability to formulate contingent and localised responses is also illustrated by a for-profit developer, who, when articulating his ambition or vision for the

inner city, draws firmly on a neoliberal imaginary and shapes his response through his position as an entrepreneur. At the same time, however, he hybridises this with a social commitment born out of and in response to the inner city's socio-spatial conditions. Hence, he declares that:

> We want to be if not *the*, certainly perceived as one of the premier rental housing businesses who are offering good, solid accommodation, who look after their tenants properly and we're doing a fair deal and we're running a fair business. That's what I want to achieve, and it's very unsexy and very boring but you get it right and the blooms will come.

Again this illustrates the ways regeneration is focused on achieving incremental changes and making the area liveable rather than pursuing grand imaginaries of urban upgrading. Grander visions are not absent, but again they are formed in response to the realities of the area and the needs of the people inhabiting it. Thus he elaborates on his long-term visions by stating that:

> We get that right [the provision of basic accommodation and the stabilisation of the area] and in two years' time we've got a 2 000 m^2 retail outlet, high-end, proper, not a spaza shop, a proper outlet … You have that, you have some other line stores, maybe take these offices and convert them, do something like put an AIDS clinic in here, a business incubation centre. I'll provide the space, I want Liberty Life and TUHF to sponsor the computers … let's get some community stuff going, let me take a place over there and take hawkers and say, 'Right, here you go, I'm giving you two years rent-free. In April of 2015, you're going to have to move into a shop or make space for the next guy.' So I'm again trying to create mixed use, hopefully this is a piazza, now suddenly we can get some traction.

Here he shows that international imaginaries of public space are adapted to local needs and conditions, and hence become vernacular. While the neoliberal worldview comes to the fore as business and entrepreneurialism are heralded as the solutions to poverty, he also shows social awareness and cognisance of the potential for regeneration to respond to the prevailing social problems. Commercial imperatives thus sit alongside developmental needs in his and other developers' visions, demonstrating the ways in which the process is not another iteration of a global trend or phenomenon, such as gentrification or neoliberal urbanism, but is a real attempt to imagine and create a city that responds to the new needs of its inhabitants.

Conclusion: For vernacular pragmatism

In some cases, inhabitants' needs are dire and immediate, and regeneration cannot afford to have grand ambitions as it must tackle critical and systemic neglect and physical decay. A housing supervisor draws on the prevailing physical conditions in the inner city and explains regeneration as an effort to improve the area. In his view urban regeneration means

> maintaining the infrastructure here in the city, taking care of those abandoned buildings, renovating them and making them habitable – a place that humans can go and habitate them, that's what urban regeneration means to me. Making the whole city habitable.

At the same time, confronting these harsh conditions entails more than physical upgrading and has results beyond the built environment. Just as the spatial landscape inculcates ways of thinking, seeing and acting, improvements made to it also extend further and take on broader socio-political significance. Thus, another housing supervisor demonstrates the social commitment which is at the heart of the regeneration process and how this tempers commercial concerns. Significantly, he points out how social commitments include helping people establish senses of belonging and community:

> By regenerating [the inner city], we are making it better and taking on new buildings that are

old, making them new and trying to make people being comfortable and welcoming them into buildings. Then you will make them feel better. And your rental settings, also it counts a lot ... when you do your rental settings, they must be affordable. You don't just become a skyrocket, then your buildings will stay empty because people can't afford that.

Therefore, it becomes clear that regeneration is not simply about imagining and producing an entirely new, exclusive city as per the current neoliberal worldview. Rather, it is a complex, and at times contradictory process, which entails adapting to and intervening in the space that actors encounter. The inner city is shown to be a space in all its sensuousness that embodies, reflects and produces multiple trajectories and realities, one which thus shapes imaginations and actions as much as it is shaped by them. The urban imaginaries which emerge in it, then, are shown to be dynamic, changeable and spatially embedded.

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Chapter 5

(Re)Imagining Alex: Reflections of 'technocrats' on the Alexandra Renewal Project

SANDISWA MAPUKATA

Abstract

Initiated in 2001, the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP) was an effort to upgrade the township of Alexandra ('Alex') in Johannesburg, South Africa, and was part of a broader national programme of urban renewal in eight central urban nodes. The focus of this chapter is on the views of the officials and professionals ('technocrats') involved in the project. In-depth interviews with 15 key actors sought to gauge how their individually and collectively held ideas about Alex affected their material practices. These 'spatial imaginaries' are grouped into three themes. First, respondents had detailed imaginaries about the way in which Alex's complex and unique history has generated a series of important legacies affecting the township in the post-apartheid era, including that it was segregated, internally differentiated and overly dense – but also well located. Second, respondents expressed imaginaries on the possibilities of intervening positively in Alex by de-densifying certain sections of the township and integrating it into surrounding parts of Johannesburg. Third, respondents' imaginaries addressed the inherent limitations of the project, arguing that Alex's social problems are complex and somewhat intractable, and that some of the upgrading interventions were themselves counterproductive.

Imaginaries of renewal

The Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP) was launched as part of the nationwide Urban Renewal Programme which was announced by former President Thabo Mbeki during his 2001 State of the Nation Address. The ARP's main objective was to rejuvenate the historically significant township of Alexandra ('Alex'), notorious for its 'depressed social conditions' (Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008, p. viii). Despite the professed intention to improve residents' lives, the ARP has instead become known for slow delivery and the considerable dissatisfaction this has caused.

There has been a fair amount of research conducted on the perspectives of the Alex community (e.g. Kotze and Mathola, 2012) as well as on the ARP's failure to develop channels for meaningful community participation (Sinwell, 2009). However, actors who have received less attention in the literature are the officials and professionals ('technocrats') responsible for implementing the project – the urban planners, development consultants, structural engineers and urban designers working within both the public and the private sectors. The perspectives of this group of actors are the subject of this chapter, with a particular focus on their individually and collectively held ideas – their spatial imaginaries – about Alex itself as well as their efforts to upgrade it through their involvement in the ARP.

As the following quote from Respondent UA (a former ARP director) shows, officials deployed to transform parts of the city are themselves transformed by their encounters with that space. In particular, the excerpt shows officials' intense spatial imaginary of Alex, informed by the intense experiences they had there.

> I spent my life in Alexandra, I was there day and night. You know, I was in the hostels at midnight negotiating all sorts of things with quite hectic people. I was there during all the times of starting of violence between foreigners and … I was there through all sorts of issues. I was there when schools were opened. I was there when foreigners were attacked. I was there through a whole range of different things … As a [complete] outsider – I was privileged to reach an incredible amount of site engagement through the organisation. And also, I worked with community liaison people who had a real feel for the place, and this enabled me to really connect with ordinary people in the township. Yeah, so my perceptions of the place … I learnt a lot from Alex. (Interview with Respondent UA, former ARP director, 21 November 2017)

There is a considerable body of literature on the relationship between officials' perceptions of a particular place and their interventions within those spaces (e.g. Li, 2007; Mitchell, 2002). However, the relationship between officials' spatial imaginaries and their urban planning practices is under-researched (Watkins, 2015). This dialectical relationship is the focus of this chapter. In addition to analysing key policy documents produced throughout the ARP, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 key stakeholders, which included the professionals mentioned above as well as state officials and Alex-based community activists.

The imaginaries expressed by the officials and professionals are grouped into three categories. First, the participants reflected on the way in which Alex's history of segregation, internal differentiation, its location and its density have produced the particular characteristics of the township today. Second, they discussed the ways in which professionals like themselves could exert positive agency to bring about spatial improvements by, for example, de-densifying certain areas and integrating the township with the rest of Johannesburg. Third, they also examined the ways in which their agency was constrained and disrupted by Alex's intractable social problems, as well as by the counterproductive effects of certain policy choices within the project itself.

Alex and the ARP

Through the second half of the 20th century, the apartheid state relocated those it classified as black (i.e. African, Indian and 'coloured') to the south of Johannesburg's mining belt, which runs east–west through the city's downtown area. As a result, there are now major settlements to the south, including Soweto. Although apartheid planners thought they could remove all black settlements north of the city centre (Figure 5.1), their dream was never fully realised. A space that often frustrated the apartheid government's objective was the Alexandra township, commonly known as Alex.

Established in 1912, Alex's existence as the sole surviving black township with freehold property rights has led to its cultivating 'a distinct social ethos' in black urban society (Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008, p. 1). Its freehold status is rare considering that white supremacist South Africa restricted property ownership among urban Africans through the 1913 Native Land Act and the 1923 Natives (Urban Area) Act. This restriction was rooted in the pre-apartheid and apartheid-era state's belief

Although apartheid planners thought they could remove all black settlements north of the city centre, their dream was never fully realised

Figure 5.1: Alexandra township within the City of Johannesburg and Gauteng

Map by Janet Alexander

Gauteng province within South Africa

City of Johannesburg within Gauteng

Alexandra township within the City of Johannesburg and Gauteng
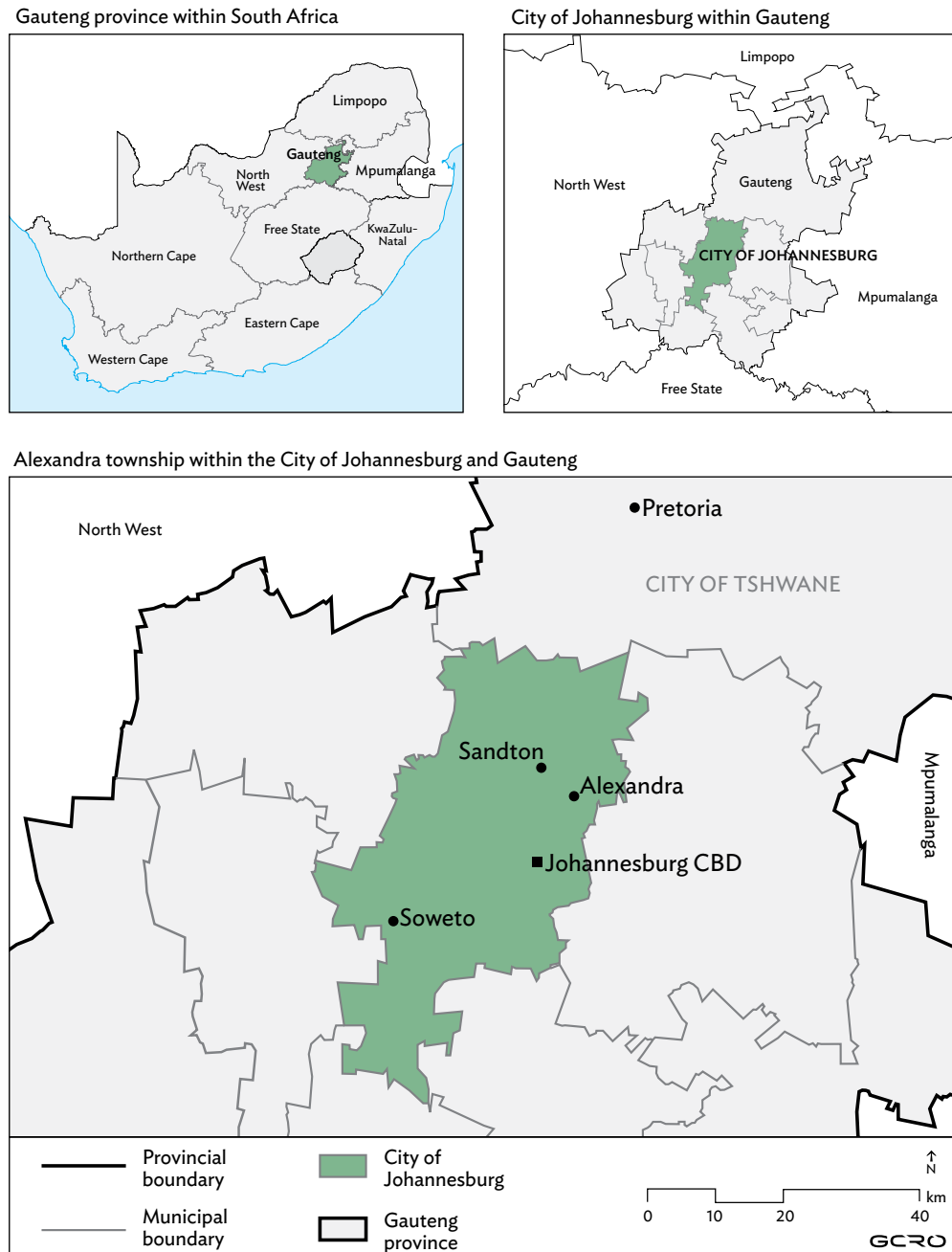
that Africans were temporary sojourners in white urban South Africa (Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008; Parnell and Pirie, 1991). Following the Natives Act of 1923, the urban areas where Africans could legally reside were restricted. In Johannesburg, the areas of legal occupation for Africans were the new municipal 'locations' (which included the new Western Native Township) and the freehold areas of Sophiatown and Alex (Parnell and Pirie, 1991). During the pre-apartheid period of 1910–1948 (the Union of South Africa), property ownership laws allowed the mostly African homeowners in Alex to identify as *bomastandi* – freehold landowners. In turn, the *bomastandi* identity enabled property owners to claim respectability among other urban Africans, and further bolstered their claims to the right to self-governance and political representation. These demands were particularly made during the 1946 Alexandra Squatters' Movement, which was a critical moment in the crystallisation of tensions between Alex tenants and property owners, who often subsisted on the rental income they earned as landlords (Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008).

Locating Alex

In the post-apartheid context, Johannesburg was categorised in 2017 as an upper-middle income economy, with an average monthly income per capita of just under R9 800. With a Gini coefficient of 0.74, Johannesburg is one of the most unequal cities in the world, and, in contrast to the average, Alex residents' monthly income per capita is R1 251 (CoJ, 2017). Unsurprisingly, Alex is almost exclusively discussed in terms of its significant socio-economic challenges, including high crime rates and low levels of social trust that have erupted in the form of inter-ethnic clashes. As a case in point, Alex was at the centre of the May 2008 xenophobic attacks that occurred in many townships across South Africa (Harrison et al., 2014; Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008). Bonner and Nieftagodien (2008) argue that because of this more recent socially and economically deprived imaginary of Alex, many have forgotten its proud

history as a black freehold township that resiliently resisted the numerous pre-apartheid and apartheid-era attacks on its existence.

Alexandra Renewal Project

The ARP was launched by the post-apartheid government in 2001 in an effort to rejuvenate Alex and better manage its social challenges through various initiatives and interventions (Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008). These included the provision of housing to eligible residents through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP);[1] the development of programmes to support entrepreneurship; and the improvement and development of infrastructure such as street lighting and roads. One additional objective became the subject of enduring contestation, namely the aim to de-densify the township. The announcement of the ARP generated significant interest, with a summit held on 18 and 19 April 2001 that attracted about 450 representatives from community-based organisations (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector (Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008). The programme was dedicated to 'people-driven development' (Sinwell, 2009, p. 163) and was expected to make efficient use of the political support and resources invested into the implementation of the project's aims and objectives. The ARP was meant to be undertaken over seven years (2001–2008) and was intended to be a joint initiative between the three spheres of government, NGOs and CBOs (CoJ, 2007). In 2008, the project was extended for another two years, and again in 2010. By 2013, the ARP had been downscaled and absorbed into the broader governance structures of the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality (Harrison et al., 2014). It is currently operating within the direction of the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), which is responsible for the facilitation and management of infrastructure development projects within the metro (Interview with Respondent EE, 23 October 2017).

Harrison et al. (2014) argue that the ARP has had both successes and failures. It was successful

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1   'The RDP is a plan to address the many social and economic problems facing our country – problems such as violence, lack of housing, lack of jobs, inadequate education and health care, lack of democracy, a failing economy' (ANC, 1994).

in delivering two of its core objectives, namely de-densification and providing new housing. However, the project has failed to change the 'face of Alexandra'. The cause of this failure is attributed to Alex's socio-spatial complexity and the difficulties in acquiring land from neighbouring areas (Harrison et al., 2014). Moreover, this ever-changing and complex socio-spatial landscape makes ARP implementation a 'moving target' and therefore a necessarily long-term project (Harrison et al., 2014, p. 365). According to Harrison et al. (2014, p. 366), there needs to be greater analysis into 'the role of Alexandra in the wider city, and the contribution that Alexandra as a place makes to the lives of its people'. They also argue that a comprehensive review of the ARP is required to appropriately respond, first, to the opportunities provided by Alex's proximity to urban opportunities, and second, to the township's lack of social cohesion (Harrison et al., 2014).

In the first half of 2019, demonstrations in Alex were common, many organised by the Alex Total Shutdown movement, which represented frustrated residents. The demonstrations, which included the burning of tyres and blockading of roads, were an iteration of the service delivery protests occurring frequently in townships and informal settlements across South Africa. Between April and June 2019, the Alex Total Shutdown movement gathered momentum, culminating with one hundred or so residents marching to the municipality offices in neighbouring Sandton to hand over a memorandum. Instead of a municipal representative, the residents were met by armed officers from the Johannesburg Metro Police Department and the South African Police Service. Their demands included greater intergovernmental prioritisation of the development of Alex; the removal of informal housing structures; universal access to housing, electricity and municipal services such as refuse removal and water provision; support and development for small, micro and medium enterprises; the establishment of local technical and vocational education and training colleges; and opportunities for entrepreneurship (Nyoka, 2019). The leaders of the movement expressed their frustration at the ARP's failure to actualise these demands. And as a result of this failure, the leaders argued that widespread protests were clearly necessary to ensure their demands were met.

Roles of ARP 'technocrats'

There has been a considerable increase in the literature on development experts in recent years. Li (2007) uses the phrase 'will to improve' to describe the ideology that guides work conducted by technocratic personnel. The 'will to improve' means that the technocrats occupy the role of trustees who 'claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need' (Li, 2007, p. 4). Goldman (2005, p. 11) argues that this trustee role is the result of development projects building upon 'prior colonial and imperial architecture [working in] coordination with powerful postcolonial institutions of capital and state power'.

Various authors have addressed the way developmental problems seem to require technical solutions, including a more scientific management of resources and the use of new technology, to overcome the 'simple' problems experienced by the global South (Li, 2007; Goldman, 2005; Mitchell, 2002). This technical approach can de-politicise development and developmental expertise, which is problematic for several reasons. First, multiple and shifting forms of expertise are critical to the reconfiguration of political/economic institutions, ideas and techniques: 'Knowledge and expertise are linked to political power in diverse and distinctive forms' (Larner and Lamont, p. 223). Second, development becomes a rational planning exercise that is conceived as separate from spatial imaginaries (Mitchell, 2002).

A further problem is the exclusion of non-state actors from addressing developmental issues (Anand, 2011; Li, 2007; Ferguson, 1994). As a consequence, developmental projects then implement solutions that either fail to address the community's practical problems, or are unsustainable in the long run (Li, 2007; Ferguson, 1994). Moreover, the de-politicisation of development fails to consider how the workings of the professional technocratic class (Moodie, 2009) are in fact characterised by ideological conflicts (Flyvbjerg, 2002), which may be interpersonal or related to greater political processes 'out there' (Anand, 2011; Moodie, 2009). Finally, the de-politicisation of development does not account for the local contestations that challenge developmental experts' attempts to remain apolitical technocratic actors.

Research methodology

Between October 2017 and January 2018, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 key stakeholders (i.e. professionals, state bureaucrats, community activists) who were directly and indirectly engaged with the ARP's operations. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insights into (1) how these stakeholders came to be involved in the ARP; (2) their role in the ARP; (3) their reflections on the successes and failures of the ARP; (4) how they imagine Alex and its relationship to the city more broadly; (5) how they imagine Alex's potential as a place; and (6) their opinions on township renewal schemes more broadly.

The research participants included three development consultants (Respondents AA, OO, AT), two former head consultants of the ARP (Respondents IO, EA), the former executive director of Development Planning and Urban Management for the City of Johannesburg (Respondent HA), two former directors of the ARP (Respondents EE, UA), an urban designer connected with the ARP (Respondent OL), a structural engineer for the Alexandra Interpretation Centre (Respondent EH), two community liaison officers for the ARP

(Respondents MA, NA) and three community activists based in Alex (Respondents HO, HE, LH). Eight participants were white and from middle-class backgrounds. The remaining participants were black and from working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds, with the exception of two from middle-class backgrounds. Five of the participants were female while the remaining ten were male. Five respondents were either originally from or currently living in Alex. To identify and recruit the participants, the purposive sampling technique was used first, followed by snowball sampling.

Imaginary 1: Historical legacy

The first of three imaginaries presented in this analysis is the way in which Alex's history shapes the context of ARP involvement. Several research participants referred to Alex's rich history and its significance within Johannesburg's post-apartheid socio-spatial landscape. Most participants made a point of stating that their awareness of Alex's rich history had informed their heightened sense of responsibility towards the township.

Used with permission from Museum Africa
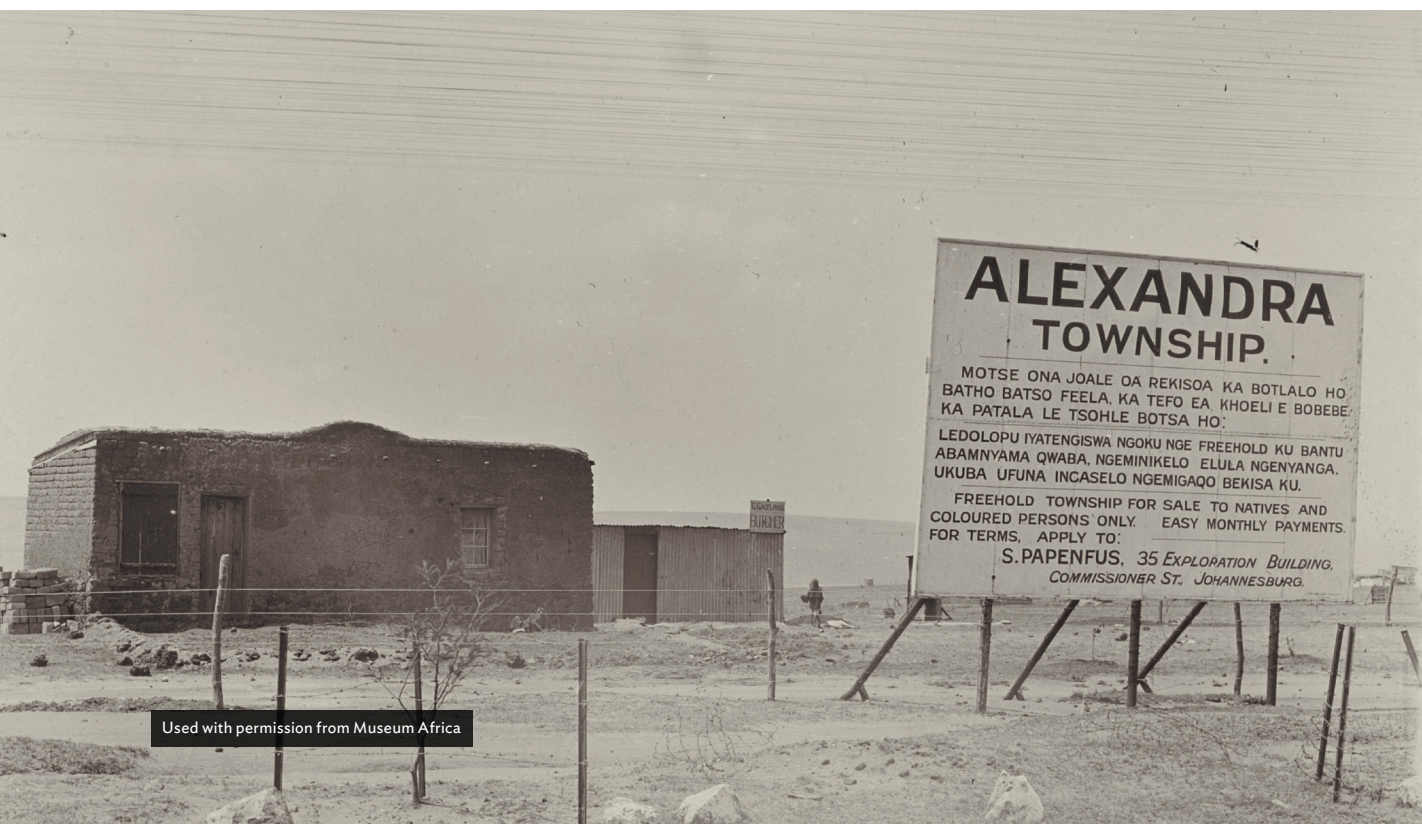
Apartheid dispossession

Three respondents referred to the historical dispossession of Alex's *bomastandi,* when the apartheid government expropriated their property in the 1970s and 1980s. All three argued it was important to consider this historical episode when trying to understand Alex's current socio-spatial dynamics. Respondent AA remarked that 'we can't underestimate the history of people who weren't allowed home ownership' (Interview with Respondent AA, development consultant, 4 October 2017).

Apartheid segregation

In addition to the legacy of dispossession, both professionals and officials referred to Alex's racial segregation and dislocation from the broader urban area within which it is located. Respondent AT lamented the continuation of apartheid's segregated urban form in many South African cities (including Johannesburg) by remarking that:

> I wish we didn't have these historical places because one tends to be aware of the segregated nature of many of these historically 'black' spaces. (Interview with Respondent AT, development consultant, 10 November 2017)

Even though racial segregation ended in 1991, the imaginary of Alex residents is still one in which they are disconnected from Johannesburg's broader urban fabric because of their marginalised socio-economic status.

Socially differentiated

Not only do professionals and officials regard Alex as being disconnected and racially segregated from the rest of the city, but they also consider it to be internally divided. Nine research participants acknowledged that Alex was a deeply divided community, with Respondent HA remarking that 'there's always been an insider–outsider game in Alex' (Interview with Respondent HA, former executive director of Development Planning and Urban Development, 12 October 2017).

During the 1980s, the Riekert Commission adopted a reformist developmental agenda to accommodate the landowners and families who

qualified to live there (Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008; Jochelson, 1990). The reforms included a masterplan for Alex that recommended the installation of basic infrastructure, the construction of stormwater drainage and tarred roads, as well as the construction of income-differentiated housing that was to include an elite suburb, East Bank (Jochelson, 1990). East Bank was framed as a development that would create a tax base enabling a financially self-sufficient local government (Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008; Jochelson, 1990). However, Respondent HE, who lived in Alex during the 1980s, asserted that East Bank was developed to 'divide the people of Alex because the people of Alex were united. So, it was used as a class thing' (Interview with Respondent HE, community activist, 30 November 2017).

In spite of this internal differentiation, Respondent HE noted significant moments of unity during the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, Respondent AT, a development consultant, argued that because of its rich history, Alex could serve as an example of mixed-use housing for lower- and middle-class black people within Johannesburg's township spaces.

Alex as well located

In the assessment of officials and professionals, a key advantage for Alex is its location, and that its beneficial development potential was largely the result of its favourable location compared to other townships further away from key business nodes. This particular spatial imaginary motivated most of the research participants during their ARP involvement. Respondent UA exclaimed that 'Alex is Alex because of its location', explaining that:

> It's got good location now – for the middle class in Alex – to the Gautrain with commuting opportunities. So its location is incredibly good within the city, and I do think that [fact] needs to be properly recognised. (Interview with Respondent UA, former ARP director, 12 October 2017)

Respondent MA further discussed how Alex's excellent location, and close proximity to the affluent corporate node of Sandton, made it

a key strategic point within Johannesburg's broader urban fabric:

> It's at a very strategic point ... it's the only township that's at the richest part of Africa. And, uh, like from all points, it's a point where many things can happen ... that is why you will find there's more talent [in Alex] ... It's so small but you will never leave it somewhere because it has people that are very vibrant. (Interview with Respondent MA, ARP community liaison officer, 24 November 2017)

Two participants (Respondents AA and EA) mentioned that the value of land per square kilometre is actually higher in Alex than in Sandton, which Respondent EA attributes to Alex's excellent location. He expanded on this further:

> And remember that Alex per square meter is far more expensive than Sandton. It's very expensive ... You know, a person will rather live in Alex where he will have quick access to town – Joburg [is] 12 minutes, quick access to Randburg, Kaya Sands – 12 minutes, quick access to Sandton – 5/6 minutes, quick access to Pretoria – 30/45 minutes, quick access to Germiston – 35 [minutes], airport, anywhere. When you look at your overall development framework, you can see where it is located. It is quite central. (Interview with Respondent EA, ARP head consultant, 6 November 2017)

Alex as too dense

Because Alex is so well located, it is a highly desirable place to live for workers and job seekers whose other options are much further away. As a result, Alex is extremely dense, problematically so for some officials and professionals. According to Respondent EH:

> [Alex] has got massive potential which is limited by a lack of space in the urban context. I think the people who live in Alex are such [an] incredible mix; the biodiversity of people creates huge potential in the area, but they are just so constrained by where they are and the lack of space. (Interview with Respondent EH, structural engineer for the Alexandra Interpretation Centre, 14 November 2017)

Alex's perceived overcrowding in contrast with the wealthier surrounding areas is one reason the area is pathologised (Interview with Noor Nieftagodien, academic and author on Alex, 30 June 2017; Harrison et al., 2014).

Imaginary 2: Development interventions

ARP officials and professionals believe that Alex needed intervention given its complex socio-economic challenges. However, they were also mindful that wholesale gentrification could displace many people no longer able to afford to live there. Most of the research participants argued for a developmental regeneration approach that prioritised mixed-income development to augment the existing backyard rental system serving Alex residents of various income levels. Most of the participants accepted Alex's identity as a low-income area with a burgeoning informal backyard rental economy. Development interventions in Alex, therefore, had to alleviate its difficult material conditions and unlock opportunities in the rest of the city.

De-densification through relocation

In 2001, the core ARP consulting team decided to move Alex residents living along the banks of

Alex's perceived overcrowding in contrast with the wealthier surrounding areas is one reason the area is pathologised

the Jukskei River to the then peripheral locations of Bram Fishersville (in the south, near Soweto) and Diepsloot (to the north, near Lanseria International Airport). Both Respondents EA and IO explained that the decision was unavoidable because of the unsafe living conditions along the river. Furthermore, Respondent OO took care to explain that the ARP prioritised the removed residents' other socio-economic needs to ensure that the relocation was as minimally disruptive and traumatic as possible. Nevertheless, the legitimacy claimed by the urban planning professionals to make the decision to relocate people was still fraught, as Respondent EA explained:

> So it was quite hard, very hard. I spent sleepless nights trying to resolve the issue and even the politicians were not happy [with the decision]. But there was no other way ... Because sometimes you've got to leave unfortunately. (Interview with Respondent EA, former ARP head consultant, 6 November 2017)

Integrating Alex within greater Johannesburg

Most of the research participants imagined Alex's ideal future as one where it was integrated into Johannesburg's broader urban fabric. In this idealised world, township residents would be able to more easily access the socio-economic benefits (i.e. employment opportunities, access to reliable amenities and services) that are readily available to the residents of the wealthier (historically white) suburbs neighbouring the township.

Respondents AA, OO and UA believed that taking advantage of Alex's location would prompt the reindustrialisation of neighbouring Kew, Wynberg and Marlboro. Both Respondents UA and AA asserted that this reindustrialisation would prove critical in addressing the high levels of unemployment and skills shortages within the township. Respondent UA further emphasised the need to fully exploit the tracts of available land surrounding the township, arguing that the combination of its advantageous location and the nearby unused land gave poor Alex residents access to various opportunities. However, these tracts of

land have not been fully put to use towards Alex's renewal. When reflecting on his involvement with the ARP, Respondent AU alluded to this omission as one of his regrets.

The high market value of the unused land around Alex has the potential to be exploited to facilitate greater integration with the city. Accordingly, the City of Johannesburg's Regional Spatial Development Framework 2010/2011 (CoJ, 2010) argues for the development of Frankenwald, a tract of neighbouring undeveloped land owned by the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). However, the best use of this land has been contested by community leaders as well as by the City and Wits.

Respondent AA argued that Alex's proximity to neighbouring Louis Botha Avenue and the suburb of Wynberg also needed to be exploited to the township's benefit. Both of these areas are key commercial and industrial zones that have provided employment opportunities to Alex residents over the years:

> I mean, the first potential, obviously, is its location. It is extraordinarily well located. We need to improve that connectivity, keep building that connectivity ... there's an under-realised potential around its connection to the Gautrain. I think taking businesses into the space, leading Louis Botha [and Wynberg] businesses into Alex would be important or making stronger connections over there in terms of those are already established businesses. (Interview with Respondent AA, development consultant, 4 October 2017)

According to Respondent OL, successfully integrating Alex into the rest of the city requires a collaborative process:

> Because, also, that [collaboration] brings new energy and that is what city life is about. Just harnessing that energy of the people that are really looking for opportunities. And the ones that understand how to get there. You put those two minds together and really the opportunities, the options are endless. (Interview with Respondent OL, urban designer on the ARP, 10 January 2018)

Imaginary 3: Limitations and unforeseen consequences

Notwithstanding the position expressed by many respondents that they, and people like them, could help to improve a place such as Alex, there were various moments when they acknowledged the limits and difficulties to this kind of enterprise and the way in which it can have counterproductive effects. Respondent AA argued that the preoccupations of the politicians and technocrats about Alex resulted in their becoming complacent about what kind of development Alex actually needed:

> When you're dealing with areas that have been so marginalise[d] and so deprived for so long that there's a long list of needs that the planners and the politicians … have a set of assumptions around what those needs are and that, because there is such a long list of needs, anything you do can look like its useful. (Interview with Respondent AA, development consultant, 4 October 2017)

According to Respondent AA, this resulted in the ARP being implemented in ad-hoc ways that were not sustainable over the long run. Combined with the socio-spatial contestations among residents that preceded (and were exacerbated by) the ARP, the ARP's successes were going to be limited in terms of both their impact and sustainability. Respondent AA argued that politicians' tendency to make big promises to the citizenry was a further major hindrance, with technocrats consequently having to work within overly ambitious time frames.

In some cases, traumatic events experienced while working on the ARP increased the technocrats' doubts that developmental interventions could succeed. One such event was a fatal robbery at a hospital at which Respondent OO was based. She subsequently remarked, 'Sorry, I'm not going to tell you that [Alex has] got a glowing future … I don't know. I'm not that hopeful.' When asked whether she ever felt unsafe during her involvement with the ARP, she remarked, 'You'd be an idiot if you didn't!' (Interview with Respondent OO, development consultant, 25 October 2017).

The link that Respondent OO made between her imaginary of Alex and her traumatic encounters there clearly demonstrates the dialectical relationship between individuals' experiences within a space and their perceptions of that space.

Photograph by Ihsaan Haffejee

Deeply divided Alex

In May 2008, xenophobic violence erupted in Alex and soon spread to other parts of Johannesburg and South Africa. It has been argued that one of a number of causes was the deeply entrenched division between insiders and outsiders within the community (Harrison et al., 2014; Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008), with particular groupings within the township categorised as belonging to the township while strangers and visitors to the township were seen as outsiders. According to Respondent UA, many of the challenges he encountered or witnessed were the result of this insider–outsider divide in the township. He went on to add that the May 2008 xenophobic attacks were a flare-up of resentment Alex residents held towards foreign migrants. He argued that the accusations Alex's residents levelled against foreign migrants were

> more of an imaginary issue than a real issue. It was definitely an issue that took a lot of ground, but it was something which I'm not quite sure where it was rooted and why it was so bitter. It wasn't borne out of facts. It was borne out of a mythology and the story that went by – it certainly wasn't borne out of the facts. (Interview with Respondent UA, former ARP director, 21 November 2017)

Land-restitution complexities

Another significant conflict ARP officials experienced was with the land-owning families represented by the Alexandra Land and Property Owners' Association (Alpoa) (Harrison et al., 2014; Sinwell, 2009; Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008). Alpoa took an interdict out against the City and the ARP that prohibited any spatial interventions involving the renovation of the backyard structures historically owned by the *bomastandi* in 'old' Alex. It is important not to hold Alpoa solely responsible for this impasse.

The land-restitution process has always been incredibly complicated due to Alex's settlement patterns[2] – and in spite of the government's belief that the issue could be resolved easily. As Respondent EE explains:

> On every, each of the 2 500 yards that were dispossessed, you find an average of 19 households because the yards were big. They were just under 1 200 m^2. Nineteen households. So, this is a restitution process [where] you cannot go and now restore the land to the former owner because what do you now do with the other 18 families? (Interview with Respondent EE, former ARP director, 23 October 2017)

This impasse over land with Alpoa had significant repercussions for the ARP plans, halting any further development to do with *bomastandi* backyard structures. As result, the land remaining for potential ARP development was significantly reduced. Respondent EE explained that

> the reason then that Alex was not developed – the reason that we have development in the East of Alex, we have today … areas that is called Tsutsumane Village, Far East Extension 7 – the reason we have that is [that] the government could not do anything [in old Alex] in anything because of the interdict. (Interview with Respondent EE, former ARP director, 23 October 2017)

The ARP was consequently forced to work with a smaller area than it had originally anticipated, much to the frustration of all the research participants. To enable them to upgrade the township, ARP officials had to adopt innovative material practices, which included a block-by-block approach to RDP housing allocation.[3]

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2   This refers to the restoration of property-ownership rights to the *bomastandi,* who had been stripped of the right to own their freehold land by the apartheid government during the 1970s and 1980s when Alex was designated a whites-only area through the 1950 Group Areas Act.

3   Instead of using the waiting list approach normally used for RDP housing allocation, the block-by-block approach involves the allocation of RDP housing on the basis of location. Therefore, an entire block will receive RDP housing rather than one household at a time.

Possible harms caused by development interventions

Some officials among the respondents challenged certain colleagues' policy choices and actions. The decision to relocate residents from the Jukskei River banks in a bid to de-densify the area was one such controversy. Respondent HA criticised this strategy by asserting that greater densification meant that more of the urban poor could access economic opportunities in nearby parts of Johannesburg. In corroboration, Respondent MA stated that 'everybody feels if they are in Alex, it's easy to get employment. You just walk to where you are looking for a job' (Interview with Respondent MA, ARP community liaison officer, 24 November 2017). Respondent MA is arguing here that higher densities are not necessarily negative. High-density locations accommodating the poor, the underemployed and the unemployed do, in fact, give marginalised people greater access to urban opportunities. This demonstrates how debates within the group of officials and professionals themselves arose from their diverse spatial imaginaries as to whether the township's density is a problem or a virtue.

Competition with other townships

A further of limitation discussed by the research participants was that Alex is just one of a number of urban spaces requiring municipal intervention. Respondent HA noted that the township no longer enjoyed the political significance it once did. This is partly because of the increasing socio-political importance given to other townships, such as to Soweto. Respondent AA remarked that Soweto's increasing socio-political significance was further entrenched when one of the City's former mayors prioritised the regeneration of Soweto, which resulted, in some instances, in post-apartheid Soweto being regarded as well run.

(Re)Imagining successful renewal

The three broad imaginaries outlined in this chapter show: (1) how officials and professionals understood the historical evolution of Alex as producing a series of development imperatives in the post-apartheid era; (2) how they understood their agency to improve the space; and (3) how they understood the limits of that agency.

The research also surfaced particular moments when these actors' direct encounters with Alex shaped their imaginaries – in some cases as former or current residents, or as professionals who spent a great deal of time in Alex working on the project. This set of imaginaries were shaped in various ways by the difficulties of implementing an ambitious programme in a complex environment.

Despite these difficulties, the ARP officials and professionals still maintained that such renewal programmes could make a positive difference that could in turn further shift collective imaginaries of Alex. As Respondent HA explained:

> I do think that in terms of infrastructure provision, the ARP had a very significant role and did transform Alex. The 'Dark City' without electricity [was no longer an accurate way of describing Alex]. (Interview with Respondent HA, former executive director of Development Planning and Urban Development, 12 October 2017)

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Chapter 6

Imagining diversity in Brixton, Johannesburg

SALLY CROMPTON

Abstract

Brixton is a small suburb 4 km west of downtown Johannesburg. It was established in the first years of the 20th century and designated for white residential occupation. Since the 1980s, it has transformed more than many formerly white suburbs, accommodating residents with a range of income levels and many who would once have been excluded on the basis of race. The purpose of this chapter is to identify different imaginaries of social diversity in Brixton. It outlines six imaginaries that exist alongside one another, and that all reflect aspects of the social history of Brixton and its present status. The first imaginary is Brixton's history as a once racially exclusive suburb. The second relates to Brixton's transformation since the 1980s and the reasons for this transformation. Third, Brixton is imagined as a bifurcated suburb with one section that is relatively affluent and the other working class. Fourth, Brixton is nevertheless also understood and experienced as a space where neighbours trust one another, and where encounters and relationships across difference are possible. Fifth, Brixton is one of a number of suburbs targeted by the municipality as part of a grand imaginary of spatial transformation in which transit-oriented development is meant to drive densification and diversification. Sixth, this official vision is engaged critically by residents whose imaginary of Brixton claims that the neighbourhood is not given enough credit in this grand narrative for the transformation it has already undergone.

Locating diverse imaginaries in Brixton

Walking along Brixton's High Street one sees stark contrasts in the rubbish-littered street while brightly coloured flowers planted and tended by the Brixton Community Forum sit placidly in the traffic island. Taxis blast past. Music leaks out of Yankees Groove Lounge into the hot midday air. A boy standing on a street corner offers pamphlets to join the Brixton branch of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. The smell of cooking oil filters out into the street from one of the many fastfood outlets. Mechanical clunks echo from the car service and repair shops. Tyres lie discarded on the pavement. Above the ground-level stores, people live in blocks of flats two or three storeys high. Washing dries on balconies. High Street is the centre of Brixton's economy. Only six blocks away on the northern side of the suburb, the landscape is glaringly different. Indigenous plants fill Kingston Frost Park, which borders a row of mostly double-storey houses with panoramic views towards the northern mountains of

the Magaliesberg. Home-owners drive down Putney Street and shut themselves behind high walls and electric fences.

Brixton is located on the Witwatersrand ridge along the east–west axis of the city and is made up of six parallel streets, with High Street forming the southern boundary with the Mayfair West suburb, and Putney Street the northern boundary with Auckland Park (see Figure 6.1). Brixton provides transit routes into the central business district as well as into Soweto to the south-west. Although generally a suburb of detached bungalows, Brixton features prominently on Johannesburg's skyline. Standing at 232 m, the Sentech Tower or Brixton Tower, originally called the Albert Hertzog Tower, was erected in 1962 to broadcast radio programmes and later television (see Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3). Brixton is one of Johannesburg's older residential areas, developed as a 'white' neighbourhood from the early 20th century. Broadly representative of the population at large today, containing a mix not only of race and nationality but also of income levels, it is an excellent site for considering imaginaries of diversity.

This chapter offers an assessment of the way in which residents and other actors imagine social diversity in Brixton. It is based on interviews with over 40 residents and people living and working in Brixton in 2016 over a month-long observation period. An analysis of this material suggests six distinct imaginaries of diversity in Brixton that are differentiated by historical timing, who holds the imaginary and the object of their imaginary. The first imaginary is one that was once dominant and legitimate but is now side-lined and discredited: the historical idea that Brixton was a residential area for white residents. The second imaginary is that Brixton has, since the 1980s, transitioned into being a mixed suburb. The third describes the suburb as mixed but bifurcated between more affluent and working-class sections. Fourth, respondents offered imaginaries of community trust and interaction across difference. Fifth, municipal officials imagined transforming the broader city through transit-oriented development, an initiative that considered

ways of densifying parts of Brixton near to transit routes. Finally, some residents hold an imaginary that believes the municipal proposals were blind to the transformation that had already taken place in their neighbourhood.

Imaginary 1: Brixton as a white suburb

Brixton tells the story of a past very different to its present. Proclaimed for residential housing for whites in 1903, it is one of the older suburbs in Johannesburg and therefore has a rich history. The neighbourhood was a site of action during the 1922 Rand Revolt, in which white miners rebelled against their weakening position as labour, and which was crushed by the military. Miners (some of whom lived in Brixton) fought running battles with police and the army, both in the suburb and nearby Fordsburg, in their attempt to resist mine owners' plans to reduce their wages and replace them with cheaper black labour (Krikler, 2011).

During the early decades of Johannesburg's development, segregation was at a smaller scale than during the second part of the 20th century. Brixton was in close proximity to 'African' or 'native' settlements of Sophiatown, Martindale, the Western Native Township, Newclare and the Malay location (Parnell and Pirie, 1991). The white working class was threatened by the presence of African residents in the Malay location because of its unsanitary conditions and the competition for low-skilled jobs its residents presented (Parnell 1991). Following the 1918 outbreak of the 'Spanish Influenza', they were able to secure greater recognition for their segregationist desires in local and national government. In 1918, the state established the Native Western Township further west. However, urban expansion meant that, before long, this township was also too close for the comfort of segregationists. The advent of apartheid in 1948 led to the systematic pursuit of much greater segregation and the protection of white employment. Christopher (1994) shows that in the

Figure 6.1: Brixton street map

Map by Janet Alexander

Gauteng province within South Africa

Brixton within the City of Johannesburg

Brixton street map

H	Hospital
P	Police station
R	Recreation centre

Figure 6.2: Looking south towards the Sentech Tower/Brixton Tower, showing Auckland Park in the foreground with the South African Broad Casting Corporation building on the left. The suburb of Brixton runs along the ridge to the right of the tower. In the background is former mining land, once intended as a barrier between the city environs and the Soweto 'township' beyond the horizon

Photograph by Clive Hassall

1950s, 33 000 people were relocated to Soweto from Sophiatown and 13 000 from the Western Native Township. Brixton, and the new white areas that now surrounded it, were immediately north of the mining belt dividing the white northern suburbs from Soweto (see Figure 6.2) (Haferburg and Huchzermeyer, 2017).

Brixton as a white suburb is a historical imaginary that was once hegemonic but is now discredited. It also featured in some interviews as an anachronistic imaginary attributed to conservative residents or former residents with segregationist sensibilities. As we shall see in Imaginary 6, it is also an imaginary that some residents feel the municipality falsely attributes to the neighbourhood.

Imaginary 2:
Brixton in transition

Brixton's evolution from a white to a mixed area had already begun in the latter years of apartheid, and the suburb continues to transform into a multi-ethnic community. Brixton's social structure is now made up of a majority working-class black population, a small number of 'coloured' and Indian families, a shrinking white middle class, a significant number of black university students and immigrants from various African countries. The suburb has a high proportion of students living in communes because of the two large universities nearby, the University of Johannesburg and the

Figure 6.3: East facing view of the Sentech Tower/Brixton Tower with the Johannesburg skyline in the background and the University of Johannesburg and Helen Joseph Hospital in the foreground. Kingsway Avenue (an artery of the Empire-Perth Corridor of Freedom) is clearly visible in the foreground

Photograph by Clive Hassall

University of the Witwatersrand. Census data from 1996, 2001 and 2011 shows the continuous transformation of the suburb. Diversity in Brixton is evident from the range of classes, ethnicities, ages and nationalities among its inhabitants (see Figure 6.4). This diversity, in turn, influences their imaginaries on how each group conceives, perceives and inhabits Brixton.

Between 2001 and 2011, the population of Brixton as a whole increased by 51%. In the same period, the proportion of people renting accommodation there increased by a similar percentage (53%). The data shows that by 2011, there was an increase not only in South Africans but also in citizens from the South African Development Community (SADC) and the rest of Africa (Quantec, n.d.) (see Figure 6.5).

This rapid demographic transformation into a diverse space is also evident from other sources. Interviews with longstanding employees of shops on Brixton's High Street confirm this point. One white woman interviewed in 2016 had worked at Brixton Furnishers for 36 years. She explained her perceptions of how Brixton had changed over the years:

> This used to be a [white] middle class, railway workers, post office worker area. When the ANC came in [white] people started moving out, selling their properties … It's become majority black, a lot of students, properties are not looked after, a lot of shebeens and taverns, a lot of drugs. (Interview with Vendor 5, 18 April 2016)

Figure 6.4: Racial breakdown of Brixton inhabitants, 1996–2011

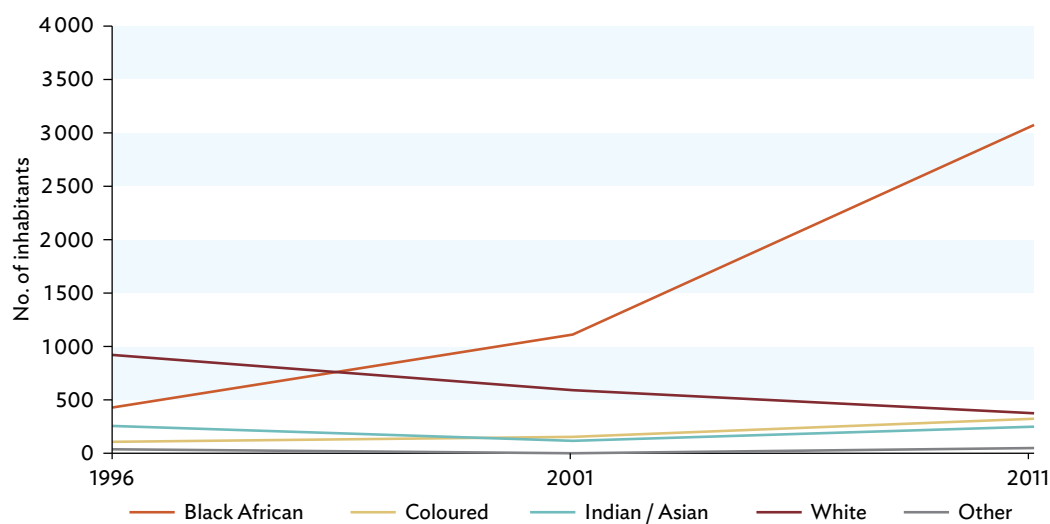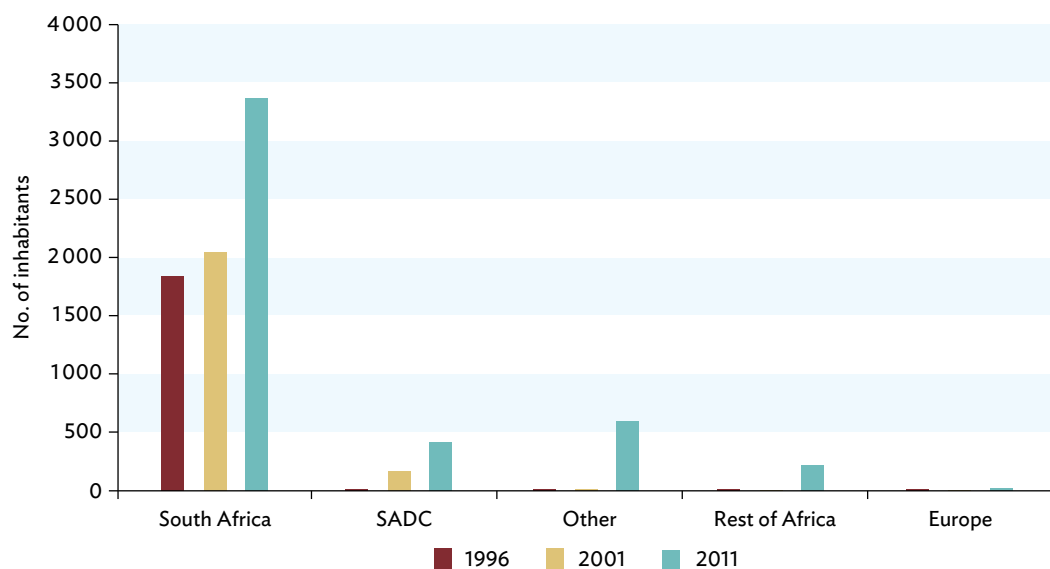**DATA SOURCE:** Quantec (n.d.)

Figure 6.5: Citizenship of Brixton inhabitants, 1996–2011

DATA SOURCE: Quantec (n.d.)

This interview illuminated a trend of disinvestment by white property owners and emerging diversity that picked up speed during the transitional years. As a Cameroonian man, who had run his own electronics repair store on High Street since 2000, put it: 'People who have economic power have left' (Interview with Vendor 6, 18 April).

While some former residents departed from the suburb, others were attracted by Brixton's close proximity to the Johannesburg central business district and places of learning, and also by cheaper housing prices compared to neighbouring areas. Haferburg and Huchzermeyer (2017, p. 1) attribute these lower housing prices to 'redlining' by financial institutions that deemed Brixton as 'not credit-worthy' in relation to bonds, which has in turn 'prevent[ed] investment and create[d] a self-fulfilling trajectory towards crime and grime'. They argue that 'the translation of socio-spatial perceptions into financially excluding techniques' has 'effectively devalue[ed] a process of unplanned socio-economic integration of over two decades' (Haferburg and Huchzermeyer, 2017, p. 1). This combination of factors has resulted in Brixton's housing prices staying consistently lower than in some nearby suburbs, allowing such a wide range of the population to inhabit it. As a comparatively diverse place in Johannesburg, how people interact within the space in the post-apartheid era is a particular focus of this study.

The second imaginary of Brixton's diversity, then, is that it has undergone a transition that had two causes. First, there was an exodus by white people, or those described as having 'economic power'. Second, Brixton was attractive to an incoming population because of its proximity to universities and the affordability of property. This affordability is underpinned structurally by banks, whose discouragement of investment in the suburb suppresses prices.

Imaginary 3: Brixton as a bifurcated suburb

Although Imaginary 2 describes Brixton as a mixed space, many residents alluded to an internal differentiation along the lines of wealth and demography. Putney, Barnes and Fulham roads are largely inhabited by white middle-class people, while Caroline, Collins and High streets are home to predominantly black working-class residents and university students. Walking across these sections of the suburb, the general shift is detectable as the well-maintained properties transition into more crowded, run-down habitations. The renting of backyard rooms is common across the whole suburb; however, the level of densification south of Fulham Road is comparatively higher.

While many Johannesburg suburbs have residents' associations, Brixton is unusual in having a community forum (the BCF), which emerged in the post-apartheid period. A BCF member explained that 'it's barely formal enough to have members' but is rather a 'grouping of people' who volunteer to carry out the functions a residents' association would normally deal with, and other issues that they would not usually. The main members of the BCF are 'very distinctively middle class' and typically white (Interview with Resident 1, 19 March 2016). They have generally lived in the area for longer periods of time and have a vested interest in their ideas about improving and being involved in the suburb. Out of all the university students interviewed, only one knew that the BCF existed, and his initial description of the group was that 'from far, they were like white people hanging out in the park' (Interview with Resident 22, 17 April 2016).

Interviewing a number of the middle-class residents in the area confirmed that they had little to no contact with the working-class and student residents of Caroline, Collins or High streets. Indeed, I was unable to find university students to interview when snowballing from the middle-class residents I had spoken to. Instead, I walked to a university student residence and started a new snowball from there. It became apparent that university students similarly lacked interactions with people north of Fulham Road.

Only one resident that I interviewed was unusual for the way in which he traversed both realms. He had been a student in Brixton approximately ten years previously and returned in 2015 to continue his studies and live near friends. He volunteered to do security foot patrols with the BCF and in this way,

he was able to connect with both sides of the divide. He described the bifurcation of the suburb in the following manner:

> The white people are staying from this side and the black people are staying the other side. The dirtiest street is starting from Caroline to Collins and High Street. Not a lot of white people that are staying in those streets. It's the *darkies'* side [colloquial for black]. You cannot find a property owner that side, from Caroline, Collins, High Street, you'll never find them. It's not because of the property prices. Hijacked properties – those are the people that are staying that side … They call me a double agent. One guy said I'm a double agent because whenever I go to the other side, because I know everyone and I greet. They think I am reporting on them, while I'm not involved. I just mind my own business. (Interview with Resident 22, 17 April 2016)

This resident claimed he was the only person able to enter both social realms. Even if there are others, they are likely to constitute a small minority of residents.

The third imaginary, then, is that Brixton is bifurcated between a more affluent section and a poorer section. This imaginary articulates with material differences in accommodation, the differentiated residential population, experiences of social interaction and the social barriers between these different segments of the neighbourhood.

Imaginary 4: Brixton as a space of trust and social encounters

So far, we have seen that Brixton has been imagined as (1) a segregated white suburb until the 1980s, (2) a mixed suburb since the 1980s and (3) an internally bifurcated suburb. A fourth imaginary is that Brixton is a space of community trust, identification with place and engagement across difference.

The interviews helped to surface understandings of how Brixton is a lived space. Emanating from Brixton's informal economy comes the story of a woman from Limpopo province who has been selling fruit, vegetables, *mazimba* (chips) and cigarettes on the corner of Fulham and Isleworth roads since 2003. Her interaction with the space and community in Brixton is particularly fascinating. She states:

> They know me, all the people here … if they go somewhere when the children are at school, they give me the keys [and say] you must give the children the keys. (Interview with Vendor 1, 11 April 2016)

Photograph by James Puttick

In other words, the community trusted her to safeguard their house keys. Her familiar face is a symbol of a locus of common trust which she has built through social capital and the community's perception of shared space. This lived experience shows the outcomes of sharing a space through which positive perceptions can form.

The Brixton Recreation Centre was another area of shared space used by members of the community throughout the years. The Centre hosts a range of activities, meetings and hobbies for the community to engage in together. How people perceive the Brixton Recreation Centre as public space to be shared has enabled integration in this diverse suburb to occur. The Hugenote Amateur Boxing Club, run by middle-aged Afrikaans mechanics at the Centre, has trained many young men and women from the surrounding area, and even a national champion or two. It is a space allowing a diverse range of people to take part in sport and grow together. In addition to the Brixton Recreation Centre, various performance spaces have opened up for a time, including the House of Ntsako, Afrikan Freedom Station and the Roving Bantu Kitchen.

Some residents expressed positive identification with the neighbourhood itself. A student residing in Brixton, who had grown up in the township of Vosloorus, likened it to the township environment of his childhood:

Melville is like too suburban for me, because Vosloorus is like a township, so Brixton is … I feel like home here, it's like Vosloorus. (Interview with Student 5, 14 April 2016)

Meanwhile, some middle-class residents are particularly invested in Brixton's diversity and the way in which their neighbourhood has enabled peaceful co-existence:

We really have in Brixton what I think South Africa should be like – total integration. We are all living together in peace and harmony … we are very close to the South African dream. (Interview with Resident 5, 22 March 2016)

When considered together, a complicated relationship is discernible between Imaginaries 3 and 4. On one hand, the recognition that the neighbourhood has poorer and more affluent sections can be experienced as a kind of social barrier. On the other, social connections across class and race difference, or even the peaceful co-existence of these groups in recreational settings, are nevertheless referenced and celebrated.

Photograph by James Puttick

Imaginary 5: Brixton and spatial transformation

The fifth imaginary is held by politicians and planners working for the City of Johannesburg and relates to their broader vision for spatial transformation through urban development. The particular focus of this section is on the vision of the Corridors of Freedom initiative. Launched in 2013 by then Mayor of Johannesburg Parks Tau and implemented by the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA, 2013), the Corridors of Freedom project is an attempt to redress the institutionalised discrimination inherited from apartheid urban planning. In order to counter urban sprawl, the Corridors of Freedom project aims to make substantial investments in new transport networks combined with the densification of central urban areas. Describing the project, Tau said:

> The shape of the future City will consist of well-planned transport arteries – the 'Corridors of Freedom' – linked to interchanges where the focus will be on mixed-use development – high-density accommodation, supported by office buildings, retail development and opportunities for leisure and recreation. The 'Corridors of Freedom' will transform entrenched settlement patterns which have shunted the majority of residents to the outskirts of the City, away from economic opportunities and access to jobs and growth. In this way we will be re-defining and re-stitching our City together to create a new future. (CoJ, 2016, p. 1)

This reconfiguration of Johannesburg through new transport networks has already begun in the form of a bus rapid transit (BRT) system (known as Rea Vaya), which has dedicated bus lanes and connects the outlying areas of Johannesburg to central nodes of business and commercial activity.

This large-scale plan is a step towards addressing the spatial legacy of the apartheid city, which has continued to segregate and discriminate against portions of Johannesburg society. A consequence of apartheid social planning is that those who can least afford it are spending the highest percentage of their income on transport. In general, the poorer populations of Johannesburg tend to live in southern areas that were previously designated as apartheid townships whereas the wealthier middle class live in the northern suburbs (Budlender, 2016). In mitigation, the City of Johannesburg envisions the Corridors of Freedom initiative as giving people opportunities for upward mobility, aiming to radically alter persistent spatial segregation by providing new housing closer to jobs, cheaper transport and densifying the use of land around public transport stations and routes. To make the BRT system viable, transport lanes will be constructed within zones of developing commercial activity and housing opportunities (Pieterse, 2019).

An early impact of the Corridors of Freedom project on Brixton, in 2015, was the installation of bicycle lanes down Fulham Road (Figure 6.6). Adding to the bicycle lanes, one of the BRT system's feeder routes would then be constructed through Brixton's High Street. The City's proposal also included rezoning Brixton to densify it further (Empire-Perth Working Group, 2013, p. 1), which will require a massive upgrade of municipal infrastructure for the suburb such as electricity and water provision. A longer-term proposal was termed the Brixton Social Cluster, which provided for upgraded public spaces – including a swimming pool, library and tennis courts – that the higher-density of people could enjoy.

After this research was conducted, in August 2016, Parks Tau's government dramatically lost the local government elections, resulting in a local authority being predominantly governed by the opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA). The DA-led government has abandoned the Corridors of Freedom label while continuing aspects of this project under the more generic description of 'transit-oriented development'. The implications of this political exchange for spaces such as Brixton have yet to be fully articulated but may entail new kinds of spatial imaginaries.

Figure 6.6: Fulham Road with bicycle lanes

Photograph by James Puttick

Imaginary 6: Brixton as misunderstood by authorities

In order for the City to implement the Corridors of Freedom initiative in Brixton, it first had to embark on a public participation process, which took place in three stages. First in 2013 and then twice in 2015, plans were presented to the community to give them the opportunity to weigh in on the proposed changes. A Brixton resident, who is an architect by profession, explained her experience of the public participation process that began in November 2013: 'The City expected it to be a much easier process, that they would take it to the community and that people would just accept it, but it wasn't very well received' (Interview with Resident 3, 19 March 2016). In fact, there was a significant backlash from the middle-class section of the community against the plans.

And one resident, highly involved throughout the participation process, described his interpretation of the City's plans in the following manner:

> What the City wants of Brixton, what the City thinks of Brixton, because those are two different things. The City thinks Brixton is still of the old apartheid days in some ways, the enclave of white racists. The census will obviously prove you wrong as to who lives in Brixton. Obviously, the middle class whites are the most vocal because they have the most access. (Interview with Resident 1, 19 March 2016)

This opinion contains two relevant points. First, the City's development imaginary of Brixton (Imaginary 6) is overlaid by historical imaginaries

(Imaginary 1) which, as the respondent suggests, are no longer valid. And second, it shows how the middle class in the area were able to successfully organise a unified response. Brixton is home to a high number of architects, spatial planners and academics attuned to changes within urban space. Some of these residents worked together with residents from surrounding suburbs (such as Melville, Rossmore, Auckland Park, Westdene and Crosby) who were all going to be affected by the Corridors of Freedom plan. They formed the Empire-Perth Working Group and compiled a report on the Empire-Perth Corridor Strategic Framework, which listed their comments on the initial plan put forward to the community in 2013 (Empire-Perth Working Group, 2013).

The predominantly middle-class working group agreed that densification needed to take place in Brixton. They agreed to this knowing that many of the more conservative residents of Brixton were likely to decry their approval. Their stance on densification shows that the urban planners and architects in the working group were attuned to the needs of the wider population and saw Brixton as part of a much bigger process. The report made it clear that there were pros and cons to the development proposals, stating that densification could be positive for the area. What they found objectionable was the lack of consideration, planning and control of the process and the lack of understanding of what was needed to manage densification (Empire-Perth Working Group, 2013). The working group's main objection was to the blanket re-zoning approach, which would allow for the erection of 12-storey blocks of flats in a number of suburbs. This developer-driven densification plan would threaten the vested interests of middle-class home owners in the area. This debate shows how the City's conception, from the 'top', clashed with the spatial imaginaries of those 'below'.

After the initial public participation process, the City accepted the report from the working group and presented a new plan in August 2015, to which it received further feedback and then presented an amended plan in December 2015. The City considered the working group's objections to the densification plan and agreed with their recommendation of a varied height restriction dependent on the streets' proximity to nodes of transport and economic activity. The varied height restriction directly mirrored the organic bifurcation of the suburb and sought to entrench it in many ways. The plan was that buildings on High Street could be six or eight storeys high, on Collins Street they could be four or six storeys, and on Caroline Street, two or four storeys high. In this way, the densification scales downwards towards the middle-class residential properties to the north. The varied height approach was a clear example of how the perception of space directly affected an urban planning proposal that was intended to 'transform entrenched settlement patterns' (CoJ, 2016, p. 1). Instead, it appeared to further echo smaller, denser accommodation for lower-class residents and larger property sizes for the middle class.

Integrating competing spatial imaginaries

This outline of various spatial imaginaries about the diverse social composition of Brixton allows us to draw several broad conclusions.

First, we can see the way in which spatial imaginaries are shaped by material conditions and by hegemonic ideas about segregation and integration.

Second, the research also shows the way in which residents' conceptions of the neighbourhood are shaped by social, geographic and historical positionality.

Third, and conclusively, it allows us to move beyond any easy equivalence between diversity and integration while simultaneously allowing for the possibility of mutual accommodation across diverse groupings sharing a neighbourhood.

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Photograph by James Puttick

Chapter 7

Linking Alexandra and Sandton: Bridging the divide?

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Abstract

Using the literature on urban imaginaries, this chapter explores how new urban spaces are conceived through planning and design. By focusing on post-apartheid urban development in Johannesburg, it examines the challenges of overcoming entrenched apartheid spatial legacies through the use of infrastructure. Based on primary research in 2015 on the Great Walk bridge (now renamed the Kopanang Bridge) between affluent Sandton and working-class Alexandra (Alex), this chapter investigates how urban spaces are produced and reimagined through city planning and how these imaginaries are perceived, experienced and altered by people on the ground. The bridge forms part of the City of Johannesburg's Corridors of Freedom initiative and was completed as part of the bus rapid transit project in 2017. It aims to physically, symbolically and socio-economically connect the once segregated spaces of Alex and Sandton . However, the chapter concludes that this symbolic infrastructure project has struggled not only to address the socio-economic barriers which limit the quality of life for poor residents but also to overcome entrenched social attitudes.

Overcoming spatial divides through infrastructure

In 2017, two new bridges across Johannesburg's M1 freeway were opened to non-motorised commuters moving between Alexandra township (Alex) and Sandton. The northern bridge is the Marlboro Rea Via Bridge, which carries pedestrians and, since 2018, a new bus route. Crossing the M1 freeway 1.3 km to the south is a second bridge for pedestrians and cyclists known initially as the Great Walk, which has since been renamed the Kopanang Bridge. Kopanang is a Sotho word meaning 'where people meet' (Sandton Central, 2018). These bridges connect affluent suburbs, including Sandton, once reserved for white occupation, with Alex, a largely working-class residential space allocated for black occupation under apartheid. In Johannesburg, the social architecture of apartheid was heavily scripted into the physical layout of the city; and enforcing racial segregation through urban design was a primary tool of the apartheid government to control everyday life and society. These bridges are thus simultaneously practical and symbolic because the M1 freeway was historically used to reinforce segregation. Johannesburg is therefore a context in which the idea of a city as being both real *and* imagined is particularly evident.

Lefebvre's (1991) understanding of space posits social space as a product of society, politics and power that is designed to manipulate and shape the lives of those who exist within such spaces. One way this materialises is in urban development, where urban designers, architects and planners conceive of space and attempt to bring their visions into reality. Although Lefebvre particularly focused on capitalism's role in this process, his theory has been extended into wider arenas of urban life and

applied to apartheid South Africa. For example, the materialist and practical apsects of imaginary urban geographies have been used to explore the future potential of the city through the imagined role of physical infrastructure. This approach is complemented by insights on the material and social force of physical space and how political imaginations are exerted through urban regeneration (Simone, 2015).

This chapter uses urban imaginary literature as a lens to understand Johannesburg's spatial history and to explore the potential for overcoming spatial divides through infrastructure. This is achieved by, first, exploring the divided history of Alex and Sandton and the need for physical connection, and second, by interrogating the origins and aspirations for a bridge that could overcome spatial and social divides. The real-life experiences of targeted users of the bridge are then investigated, before concluding that while the bridge may have an important safety and accessibility role, it struggles to challenge entrenched socio-spatial legacies.

The findings are based upon primary research undertaken in Johannesburg in August 2015,[1] comprising interviews with multiple stakeholders and focus groups, and an analysis of official City of Johannesburg documents, online articles and newspaper articles. The focus of this research was on the Great Walk/Kopanang Bridge. Interviews were held with residents of Alex and Sandton, as well as with key stakeholders in the City of Johannesburg and the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA).[2] Interviews with Sandton residents were organised through residents' associations whereas Alex residents were contacted through their places of work in Sandton. This group of Alex residents was deliberately chosen as they were most likely to use and benefit from the Kopanang Bridge. The research was conducted for the purposes of an undergraduate dissertation project and, as a result, the findings are necessarily limited in depth and breadth.

Bridging a divided history

During apartheid, segregation in the north of Johannesburg (particularly in the Sandton area) permanently scripted race into urban space through the concentration of a wealthy white population in Sandton and the designation of the Alexandra township – Alex – as a settlement area for black residents (Tucker, 2009; Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008; Beavon, 2004; Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell, 2002). In fact, Alex is somewhat unusual in being a major residential area for black residents in close proximity to the white northern suburbs. Given that they are just 3 km apart, the six-lane M1 freeway running between Alex and Sandton helped to form a barrier between the two areas (see Figure 7.1). Although formal segregation was abolished in 1991 and apartheid ended in 1994, this racial imaginary of the city has remained entrenched in the urban landscape, preserving a spatially segregated city (Christopher, 2001). Alex and Sandton continue to be characterised by extreme difference: Sandton is one of the most affluent areas on the continent and the financial and economic centre of South Africa whereas Alex continues to be characterised by poverty and a lack of basic infrastructure. This stark juxtaposition has produced feelings of anger among Alex residents, some of whom say that nothing has changed since the end of apartheid. As one Alex respondent said, 'When you look at Sandton and compare it to Alex, all you can think is how could this place be so near to Sandton?' As a result, contemporary urban development planning and policy are heavily influenced by these apartheid legacies.

Through a number of different interventions, the municipal government and the JDA[3] are reimagining the spatial layout of the city to try and achieve reintegration. One such policy response is the Corridors of Freedom project,[4] which focuses on transport-orientated development to re-connect the historically fragmented city. This includes the

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1   When this research was undertaken, construction had only just started on the bridge.
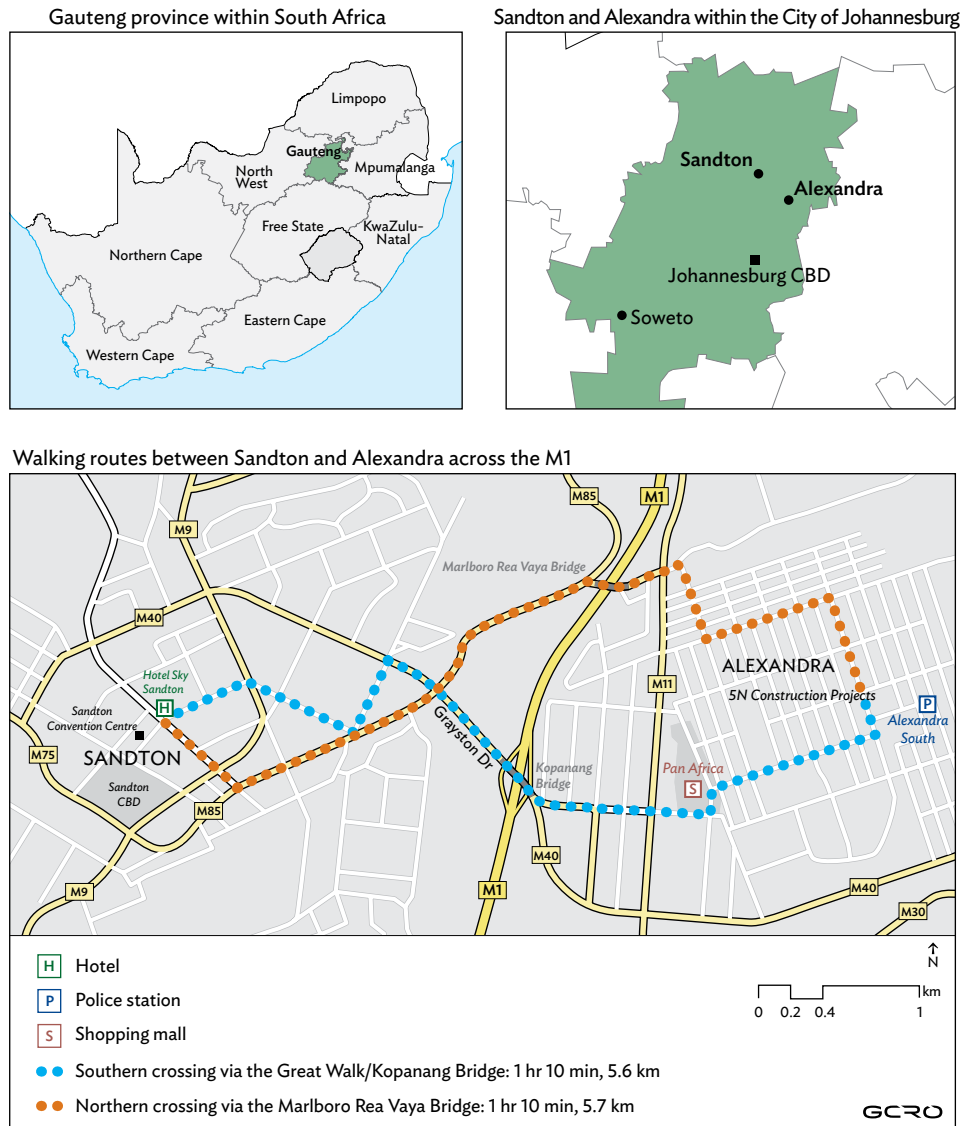2   In total, 23 interviews were held, comprising 15 Alexandra residents, five City officials and three Sandton residents. One focus group was also held with ten Sandton residents.
3   The JDA is the 'implementing' agent in Johannesburg that manages and facilitates infrastructure development projects on behalf of the City.
4   A City of Johannesburg initiative to extend and improve the City's public transport network.

Figure 7.1: Walking routes across the M1, from the Sandton Convention Centre on the left and central Alex on the right. The Marlboro Rea Vaya Bridge is the northern crossing and the Great Walk/Kopanang Bridge is the southern one

Map by Janet Alexander

Gauteng province within South Africa

Sandton and Alexandra within the City of Johannesburg

Walking routes between Sandton and Alexandra across the M1

Rea Vaya bus rapid-transit (BRT) system[5] to improve public transport provision alongside a wider agenda to improve pedestrian and cycling mobility through non-motorised transport initiatives. This chapter focuses on one element of the Corridors of Freedom project: the Kopanang Bridge (also referred to as the Great Walk or Grayston Drive Bridge).

During the initial scoping and research phases for the BRT system, a study by Royal HaskoningDHV found that over 10 000 people were walking or cycling from Alex on a daily basis to access economic opportunities in Sandton.[6] Many Alex residents were 'jumping the freeway'[7] by walking precarious and dangerous routes across the busy motorway or dodging between cars on the Grayston Drive interchange (Kekana and Allison, 2019). Many others relied on minibus taxis, which can be unreliable, unsafe and overcrowded (Alfreds, 2019). When asked about their current commute to work, three respondents from Alex made the following comments:

> We get taxis to work but they're not good, we get in late to work. Some people walk but there's a lot of accidents happening on the road.

> Some of us don't get paid enough so transport is quite a challenge. Most of us have to walk.

> The taxis in Alexandra are awful, often there's no guarantee of a taxi from Alex to Sandton.

The inability of many Alex residents to access parts of the city, particularly their places of work, is a key determinant of the lack of basic rights for the township's poor black population (Beall et al., 2002), entrenching historic poverty and inequality. As a result, in 2014, the City of Johannesburg decided to formalise a walking route between Alex and Sandton as part of Phase 1c of the BRT system. This resulted in the construction of a R176 million, part publicly funded bridge to connect Alex and Sandton physically over the M1 freeway, providing a safe walking route for many people (see Figure 7.1). As one Alex resident who commutes to Sandton daily stated: 'This bridge is going to be a lifesaver for us.'

The objectives of the broader Corridors of Freedom project were to create 'safe neighbourhoods designed for cycling and walking' and to facilitate 'rich and poor, black and white living side by side' (CoJ, 2015, p. 6). The idea of a 'Great Walk' can therefore be understood as both imagining and producing a particular type of space, one which extends beyond simply facilitating getting from A to B. While enabling safe access between two parts of the city, the project also focuses on integration and transcending the divide between Alex and Sandton.

Symbolism of the Kopanang Bridge

Examining the planners' imaginary for the Kopanang Bridge uncovers a vision of connectivity and spatial compaction that would tackle fragmentation. As part of the Corridors of Freedom initiative, the bridge is intended to help physically 'bridge the gap' (Interview with JDA senior development manager, 2 September 2015) between Alex and Sandton and 're-[stitch] our city to create a different future for our residents' (CoJ, 2015, p. 1).

While the bridge fulfils a practical and economic need for the thousands of people who will be able to safely navigate the city and access employment opportunities in Sandton, the human experience of urban space is also deeply embedded in imaginaries of the Kopanang Bridge. In particular, it is positioned as something that could help to address prejudiced thinking about Alex. During apartheid, Alex was scripted as a dangerous 'no-go' area, especially for the white

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5   A guided bus route forming part of the Corridors of Freedom project.

6   Since 2015, this article has been deleted from Royal HaskoningDHV's website. However, the figure of 10 000 pedestrians is referenced in a recent article on their website, see https://www.royalhaskoningdhv.com/en-gb/news-room/news/royal-haskoningdhv-commended-at-2019-fulton-awards/9937

7   This phrase was mentioned by a number of the Alex respondents.

population residing in neighbouring Sandton. As explained by the JDA senior development manager (Interview, 2 September 2015) plans are being discussed for a bus interchange with office and residential space on the Kopanang Bridge route in Wynberg to help bring economic opportunities to the other side of the road and to encourage Sandton and wider Johannesburg residents to cross over the freeway.

The symbolic potential of the bridge is palpable. As Amin (2014) notes, spaces can be governed as a spectacle, and the material world can be used as an icon of visible progress. Since apartheid ended, investment in and the privileging of visible solutions as a response to urban challenges have become increasingly popular among urban planners in South Africa. Designing an iconic bridge was a crucial part of the Kopanang Bridge plan, which was intended to exemplify the imaginaries the project was attempting to portray (see Figure 7.2). A senior development manager from the JDA described the meaning of the bridge's design as follows:

Alexandra is a township known for its political struggles, and Sandton resembles a confident entrepreneur and is the biggest business hub in Africa. So the bridge is meant to pull the two together, the pylon resembles Sandton and the cables are trying to pull it towards Alex. (Interview, 2 September 2015)

Th JDA official's opinion presents an understanding of the bridge as not only physically and practically connecting Alex and Sandton but as also having symbolic power. This reimagination of space is inherently political. Even the name of the wider Corridors of Freedom project has strong socio-political connotations, imaginaries and expectations prescribed to it. Such language speaks to an apartheid past while suggesting a brighter future by binding urban space to an experience of freedom in the city. This acknowledges both the reality that many city dwellers do not currently experience urban freedom and the aspiration to change this by ensuring the universal 'right[s] to a spatially integrated and united city' (City of Johannesburg Mayor Parks Tau, cited in Todes, 2014, p. 83).

Figure 7.2: Artist's impression of the Great Walk/Kopanang Bridge

SOURCE: Photograph supplied by the JDA senior development manager

Localising world-class imaginaries

Johannesburg's urban development planning and the Kopanang Bridge also sit within wider global 'world-class city' imaginaries. The creation of the Joburg 2040 Growth and Development Strategy and a five-year integrated development strategy (CoJ, 2011) have aligned local imaginaries with global ambitions of economic growth and urban sustainability, resulting in the Corridors of Freedom initiative as well as projects such as Jozi@Work.[8] However, as Robinson (2013) notes, notions of world classness are not simply reproduced; rather, they change and become specific to the South African context. This echoes Lefebvre's (1991) notion of conceived spaces being produced not re-produced and illustrates how urban imaginaries are reflexive and based on alternative practices to account for local everyday experiences and realities.

In Johannesburg, urban development approaches must have a pro-poor focus and aim to improve the socio-economic quality of life for the millions of residents living in absolute poverty. As a result, planning and imagining Johannesburg as a 'world-class city' is founded on an interplay between traditionally 'northern' economic agendas of growth and the traditionally 'southern' agenda of poverty reduction (Lemanski, 2007; Parnell and Robinson, 2006). The purposeful inclusion of 'African' in the traditional 'world-class city' slogan in CoJ policy is a visible way of highlighting the attention to local context in the policies that underpin the Kopanang Bridge (Götz and Seedat, 2006). This also acts to distance these imaginations from other 'world-class city' interventions, such as infrastructure developments in Mumbai and Delhi where the needs of the elite and middle classes are privileged (Ghertner, 2015; Harris, 2013).

As is increasingly the case across the world, a fundamental aspect of urban development in Johannesburg and the Corridors of Freedom project

has been the focus on community participation. The post-apartheid emphasis on 'participatory democracy, accountability, transparency and public involvement' (see RSA, 1996, sections 70b and 116b) has put negotiation and cooperation at the forefront of urban policy-making and infrastructure planning (Mathekga, 2006; Houston and Liebenberg, 2001). This has resulted in a community-based planning approach to the Kopanang Bridge project, representing a departure from past approaches. For example, during initial consultations, local residents highlighted the importance of CCTV cameras and street lighting because of concerns about crime, which resulted in a greater focus on safety in the designs.

From planning to reality: Contradictory urban imaginaries

As Visser (2001) notes, there is some evidence that planning spatial and social connection in this way can be successful in South Africa. In analysing the example of Tygerberg just outside Cape Town, Visser discusses how 'abstract goals are redefined into concrete things' (2001, p. 1682). He finds that visions for city integration have been achieved by linking high-intensity nodes through public transport infrastructure. This reimagining represents how 'the apartheid city form could be restructured for the post-apartheid era' (p. 1683), ascribing new meanings to old spaces. Central to this project has been the language of a 'city of opportunity', resonating with the discourse of freedom evident in the CoJ's plans.

However, as Beall et al. argue, 'uniting the divided city [...] means not only looking back at the injustices of apartheid, but also understanding the current interplay between structural and institutional forces and the *actions of people*' (2002, p. 196, emphasis added). Indeed, as has become increasingly called for in urban literature, particularly in the work of Graham and McFarlane (2015), it is essential to

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8   A programme run by the CoJ to get Johannesburg residents into secure employment. Participants are also offered training, advice and support. See https://www.joburg.org.za/media_/Newsroom/Pages/2016%20&%202015%20Articles/Jozi-at-work.aspx

appreciate the 'lived realities of urban systems' (Pieterse and Hyman, 2014, p. 203) and the everyday experiences of the population. Despite admirable planning aspirations, there are concerns that localised issues have not been resolved through this project, challenging what appears to be a successful imaginary of the urban future.

Graham and Marvin (2001) note that the spaces of exclusion and inclusion in the city are not fixed; the dynamic, interdependent nature of conceived space with wider society is generally evident. The successful reimagination of urban space not only depends on the planners' expectations and imaginaries of space but also on the attitudes towards it, who will actually use it and how it is perceived in society. Urban spaces are changeable, adaptable and vulnerable to the processes and realities of wider factors – the Kopanang Bridge will not only influence but also *be influenced* by everyday society. For example, some of the Alex respondents said they would still get taxis to work rather than use the bridge because of perceived and real concerns about public safety at night. Others said they would still 'jump the freeway' rather than go out of their way to use the bridge, especially after long working days.

The idea of a bridge being able to overcome entrenched social divides and inequalities in the city was also questioned by a number of Alex respondents who still live precarious lives today. A *Newsweek Magazine* interview with an Alex resident in 2016 captures this scepticism, finding perceptions of the bridge as

> reinforcing the hierarchies established during apartheid that still govern South African society today. [The Alex resident said:] 'Basically, this bridge will help me walk to the rich side more safely so I can work for them ... How is this supposed to help us? It's a nicer walk to our prisons, not to freedom.' (Bohn, 2016)

Certain literature on urban poverty reduction assumes that poverty arises where people are unable to participate in the economy. Therefore, greater economic participation, such as through better connection to economic opportunities in Sandton, is assumed to be unambiguously good for the poor. However, Hickey and du Toit (2017) argue that in situations where workers are reliant on jobs that exploit them and leave them unable to rise out of

Photograph by Ihsaan Haffejee

poverty, incorporation into the economy can be detrimental rather than beneficial. Genuine socio-economic emancipation and freedom in the city for Alex's poor residents would need to challenge the reality of economic participation, which currently exists in the form of low-paid, low-skilled and often insecure work in Sandton. However, as captured in a news article, the bridge has merely become a facilitator for the status quo; rather than 'jumping across the freeway, many of [Alex's] residents stream into Sandton every day on a bridge over a highway to work in upscale shops or homes' (Anna, 2019).

Many stakeholders were also sceptical about the ability to create social cohesion between the Alex and Sandton communities. Interviews with Sandton residents in 2015 found a significant reluctance to use the bridge because people were concerned about crime levels, for example. One respondent said: 'There's no reason to go to Alexandra, we all shop locally, also there is the safety issue'; while another said: 'We won't use it as we drive everywhere.' This suggests that divergent identities and entrenched everyday practices are potentially stronger than the power of changing or reimagining physical space. While the potential of the Wynberg BRT interchange (at the time of writing, yet to be built) to attract movement towards Alex remains to be seen, there is unlikely to be two-way movement across the bridge until there is significant investment and opportunity within Alex itself. As summarised by one Sandton resident: 'There would need to be something very special in Alexandra to make us visit.' Nonetheless, the Sandton respondents were positive about the potential safety benefits for Alex residents as well as about the environmental benefits of walking and cycling infrastructure. Many were concerned about the numbers of people they see dangerously crossing the freeway, particularly those Alex residents who work in their homes and neighbourhoods.

Despite these negative findings, the constant pressure to tackle growing feelings of frustration about a lack of physical change in the post-apartheid city pushes large-scale and symbolic developments such as the Kopanang Bridge to the fore. In addition, the need for urban development to show that the

local government is making progress is high on the political agenda during a particularly turbulent time in South Africa. Delivery of the bridge was delayed by competing political priorities,[9] and was then suspended for months after a section collapsed onto the freeway in October 2015, killing two people and injuring 23 (SA People, 2015). As a result of these delays, the overall cost of the bridge increased from an original estimate of R148 million to R176 million. In 2015, the *Sandton Chronicle* asked whether the bridge was the right development priority for Alex and whether public money could have been better spent (Siso, 2015).

A bridge not far enough?

The Corridors of Freedom project forms part of a vision for the city that emerged in response to an entrenched apartheid spatial legacy in which reimagining the physical layout, use and social meaning of space has been privileged.

One key aspect of this – which particularly speaks to an understanding of physical space as possessing both a social and political force – is the iconic design of the Kopanang Bridge project. A purposeful consideration of the meaning of the actual shape of the bridge adds a deeper layer to the Kopanang Bridge imaginary beyond the practical vision of service provision in the city. The bridge, as well as the wider Corridors of Freedom project, hopes to transcend apartheid's legacy. This imaginary not only characterises a new urban vision but also the new urban planning policies of South Africa, where a pro-growth *and* pro-poor approach challenges the norms of urban development that exist elsewhere.

Whereas such investments can enable a safer and easier commute for working-class residents, some observers note that this does not fundamentally transform the nature of inequality in and of itself. Unless social attitudes are challenged and economic opportunities created within Alex, there is concern that the Kopanang Bridge may simply formalise a historically entrenched, one-way direction of travel from Alex into Sandton.

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9   The bridge was commissioned by an African National Congress-led city council but eventually finished by a council led by the Democratic Alliance.

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