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CITY REGENERATION AND THE MAKING OF AN URBAN EXPERIENCE
- THE NELSON MANDELA BRIDGE AS SCULPTURE.

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Social Sciences/Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Anthropology.

Johannesburg, 2006

I declare that this dissertation/thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Anthropology in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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____ day of _____, 2006

ABSTRACT

"Nation building without city building is a senseless exercise"
- Tomlinson *et al* (eds.) 2003: x.

What is the nation in the 21st century and how is it represented in the urban built environment? This question underlies an anthropological investigation into the meanings of the Nelson Mandela Bridge project - a simulacrum for the making of a particular Johannesburg experience. The multi-million Rand fantasy of the urban imagineers showcases a post-apartheid inner city revival through the personification of a mayoral dream for a world-class city. The city's textured socio-cultural and political-economic urbanity, its haphazard mining town origins and the aggressive apartheid urban politics, filter into its post-apartheid urban reconfiguration. The artful juggling of socio-cultural, political and economic elements launches the project as physical and symbolic entry-point into a new urban and historical era – a new urban frontier.

The project's technological innovation and slick excesses mirrors 21st century capitalist thinking – a packaging of local experiences into a marketable landscape commodified for moneyed consumption and participation. The privatisation of public space through modes of urban gentrification elicits elitist urban engagement in a partitioned and generic urban space. The latter conflicts with the project's official branding as: "[being]'for the good of all'. This research interrogates the adaptation of international best practices, the machinations of trans-nationalism in setting up urban experiences that contest individual constitutional and democratic rights. Contrasted here are the un-narrated voices of the city's dark underbelly, the uncertainties of a marginalized majority struggling for a meagre existence in the inner-city in the face of the grand-scale urban regeneration project.

Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes.

- James Clifford, ‘Partial Truths’ in *Writing Culture* 1986:3

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I dedicate this work to the countless voiceless and struggling poor on the inner-city streets – a flotsam and jetsam challenge to urban development and planning

PREFACE

The official agenda for Johannesburg's postapartheid inner city redevelopment contains the ambiguities of post-industrial urban planning in its capitalist-rich settings, especially in terms of new urbanism trends that disregard public ownership of land. The development of elitist or moneyed spaces supersedes the needs mostly of an urban poor majority. This anthropological research underlines the arbitrariness of official urban planning and decision-making processes as shown in urban agendas. The research searches for the meanings in the making of the Johannesburg inner city urban regeneration mascot, the Nelson Mandela Bridge (NMB). The meanings of the project are looked at through the significance of the project's 'for the good of all' intimation in the slogan: '*we* are putting billions into *your* future' (italics added by the researcher)[1].

The analysis of the NMB project falls within the ambit of Foucaultian insights on a genealogy of power. In the case of the inner city, the end of Apartheid did not stunt neo-liberalist capitalist drives but the inner city regeneration is a product of the latter. Foucault suggests that in society there exists a disciplinary space in which those in power decide over others, often a less informed majority. I intend exploring a politics of power that becomes evident in the self-conscious manoeuvrings of urban elites who drive ideals for Johannesburg's inner-city revival as a world-class economic centre. I take a critical perspective by searching for the meanings of Johannesburg's unfolding urban scenario in the presence of the Nelson Mandela Bridge. The ethnography unfolds from my position as an observer standing at the interstices of the grand development planning and that of the ordinary lives and hardships of people on the city streets. This research concerns a critical look at the grand-scale inner city rejuvenation through the particular form it takes in its branding: an elitist urban space for selected experiences. The latter contrasts sharply with what I see as the uncertain future of a multitude of homeless men, women and children … lost on the margins of development.

The research stems from my intrigue with the processes chosen by the inner city's urban imagineers[2], the manoeuvrings that set aside a specific inner-city spatial arrangement that is not necessarily *of* the place itself (cf. Setha Low). My research reveals that the inner city's urban project is a kind of transmutation, a product imported from elsewhere. The contrived efforts of urban imagineers produce generic experiences of city-ness, perhaps even flavourless and antiseptic. The inner city as product of transnationalism is a contrivance of progressive international best practice directed at socially engineered inner-city changes. The latter is packaged through mass-mediation for the consumption. The stamp of approval that the inner city's reinvention carries is that of international best practice and the product none other than a local variation of global urban planning and renewal models of the post-industrial urban world. This is the backdrop for my interrogation of the NMB's

[1] An updated advertisement professing 'on the road to economic recovery' has a later incarnation: 'innovative economic thinking' (February 2005).

[2] Johannesburg's inner-city redevelopments are linked to the private-public initiatives of the city's 'imagineers' with the latter referring to the designers of fantasy landscapes in the Disney Studios in the late 1980s (cf. Moore 1999: 12).

meanings: the inner city's reinvention in line with western capitals elsewhere in the world. It is my contention that the social arrangements that are prompted through mass branding and mediation are similar to what Daniel Boorstin refers to as the role of the 'pseudo events', a staged event in the 'manufacturing experience' (Boorstin 1962). In *The Image* (1962) Boorstin analyses the role of television in the propagation of mass experience (cf. Boorstin 1962; also Edward & Chomsky 1988).

What I attempt is to explore the catalytic effects of such hyper-mediation by taking a critical look at the NMB project as an engineered urban and social artefact. I am interested in the branding of the re-imagined inner city space as I feel it capitalises on the country's 'miracle' transformation from a racially segregationist society to one that promises freedom and democracy. I argue that the inner city developments give rise to specific senses of belonging; ones that reflect its radically reconfigured past through processes of urban gentrification. I will attempt to reflect on the ambiguities that result from Johannesburg's contemporary urban planning models by placing the NMB project under a spotlight. The discriminatory categories of race appear to be replaced with the bourgeois foibles of a growing middleclass. My preoccupation is the meanings of the NMB project in terms of the urban imagineers' vision for an imaginary global entity, a world-class city.

I have benefited from the patience and enthusiasm, the critical encouragement of my supervisor Dr. André Czeglédy: from right in the beginning of my research project and especially in the writing up thereof. Throughout I was motivated to explore deeper and to discover multiple perspectives, especially those that lie outside the project's much-publicised and popular representation in the media. I searched for meanings for the project by engaging with people on the street, the meanings through the ordinary expectations of people. Dr. Czeglédy, mostly through his own writing, encouraged me to reflect on Johannesburg's unfolding urban scenario as the production of a specific urbanity mirrored in the late-capitalist post-industrial and technologically orientated world. Through his work I have become concerned over the shrinking of the public domain especially in the face of real estate management and that of private enterprise developments. What concerns me is a loss or absence of public opinion and participation in events/decision that appears to be happening under the banner of democratic decision-making.

The theoretical concepts that underpin this research are those taught by Dr. Julie-Kate Seirlis who, with Dr Czeglédy, was responsible for an imaginative interdisciplinary discourse on the built environment (University of the Witwatersrand SOCA 540: 2004). The course on the socio-cultural meanings of the built environment highlighted the importance of space/place in critical anthropological thinking and research. Dr. Seirlis's introduction of the Situationist theorists encouraged me to take a critical perspective on Johannesburg's inner-city developments. I am grateful too to her for introducing Tim Ingold's notion on a distinction between 'building' and a 'dwelling' perspective in the built environment, which guides the conclusions of this research. The theories on space/place/time and lived experience taught formed a basis for Dr. Czeglédy's structured explorations of Johannesburg's built environment. As a whole the course compliments my research on the NMB project.

This research attempts to complement other postgraduate courses in Anthropology too. With regard to understanding the notion of a politics of place, Dr. Rehana Ebr.-

Vally's post-graduate lectures on Nationalism and Transformation (2003) and Political Anthropology (2004) reaffirmed the Ernst Renan adage: 'the nation as daily plebiscite'. Professor Robert Thornton's introduction of Anna Louwenhaupt Tsing's *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1993) illustrated the importance of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault and Marshall Sahlins's work in interpreting everyday events, especially that of being on the margins of a dominant society. Also, I was able to broaden my understandings of the culture concept to include comparative urban studies, the commodification of social experiences and capitalism itself. I am thankful to Professor David Coplan for his lectures on Southern African ethnography, the work of Max Gluckman and also that of James Ferguson on the development industry.

A postgraduate public culture course (2003) at the University of the Witwatersrand taught by Ms Liz Delmont has stimulated my interest in the use of spatial tactics in the making of contemporary trans-national spaces. The course with its emphasis on the nitty-gritty of heritage planning and management looked at urban development programming through a series of presentations. I was fortunate to listen to presentations by the makers of the New York Holocaust Museum Ralph Applebaum and Gail Lord on the importance of past injustices in the creation of "living heritage" spaces. As part of the course I also attended a workshop on heritage making by Newcastle-on-Tyne consultant Chris Bailey. For Bailey icons in society play a significant part in the promotion of urban regeneration programmes. His workshop stressed the importance of the sculptor Anthony Gormley's *Angle of the North* in the re-making of the post-industrial Gateshead urbanscape, especially to lure people back in the formerly run-down and abandoned part of Newcastle.

The course's link between heritage and place making revealed a trend across the post-industrial western where the art of place making is synonymous with the making of public sites of iconic significance. In terms of post-apartheid urban regeneration developments in Johannesburg's inner city, in this case that of the NMB, the project has a specific context, that of urban regeneration itself. The development of a critical stance towards the use value of propaganda in the making contemporary spaces, especially that associated with heritage management and planning, is part of the research aim. The research into the meanings in the making of the NMB relates to Johannesburg's urban regeneration agenda. The agenda consists of heritage and place making as intertwined features, the making of commodified urban experiences from the reworking of historical narratives.

I benefited from the seminars and lectures at the University of the Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research (Wiser), especially a colloquium entitled: 'The Promise of Democracy' (2004). I would like to mention here the presentation by anthropologist Paul Gilroy for a need to integrate within "[an emerging] new cosmopolitanism" a kind of "democratic humanitarianism". For Gilroy South Africa and its "dizzying transitions and blacked revolution, [the] unsteady ensemble of civic, ethnic, ethical and economic possibilities bolted disorganically together [needs to] generate an alternative sense of what our networked world might be or become" [3]. Gilroy mentioned how "the history of Apartheid can serve the re-making of

[3] Gilroy who is the chair of African-American Studies at Yale University is also the author of several books, to mention but two: *There Ain't N o Black in the Union Jack* and *The Black Atlantic.* He was a speaker at a conference on 'Global perspectives on South Africa's decade of democracy: Freedom and its practices (University of the Witwatersrand, Wiser 2004).

Johannesburg [into] a habitable public realm".[4] Besides Gilroy I also have been able to refer in this research to a lecture at Wiser by visiting anthropologist Johannes Fabian on 'Memory and Counter-memory" (2004).

As a native South African the contradictory statuses of people as result of the country's racists policing of, in this instance, urban experience has been engrained on my consciousness. I have worked as a journalist in Johannesburg since the 70s when, as a court reporter I witnessed the destructive affects of the spatial segregation on the lives of people in apartheid Johannesburg. I reported on the conveyor belt proceedings and humiliation experienced by people charged under the Group Areas Act at the Johannesburg Magistrates' Court. I also reported on other forms of urban racial discrimination, that of the Separate Amenities Act that ordered ordinary experiences in Johannesburg's inner city.

Post-1994 I celebrated the changes in urban mobility but remained a curious observer of these inner-city developments. It was in mid-2000 after attending selective seminars at the *Urban Futures 2000* conference (Johannesburg: July 10-14 2000) that I experienced high-handedness in suggestions made by 'experts' to reclaim Johannesburg 'from urban decay' and to make it functional again (see Taffy Adler and other experts at the World Bank, Washington DC: http://sunsite.wits.ac.za/urbanfutures). What I noted then was that these orderings against the backdrop of reconstruction policies through participatory relation between civil society and municipalities left the role of the public in decision-making processes rather unclear. Intrigued by Robert Beauregard's depiction of a future Johannesburg reacting to the need to be a global competitor if it wished to prosper, I was curious about his notion of a prospering Johannesburg as a 'Detroit … London or Paris.' At the time of the conference I observed the cleaning-up or clearing operations in Johannesburg's inner city (especially Newtown) in anticipation of the arrival of the conference delegates. Also, busloads of delegates were shuttled around a newly sanitised city. The lectures I attended then and my personal observations have influenced me to take a critical perspective on the unravelling the Nelson Mandela Bridge's local and global meanings.

I am intrigued by the politics involved in the making of urban-space and especially the presentation thereof for public approval. I have reservations about urban renewal programming based on gentrification especially as the courting of public opinion appears *de rigueur* of a way of life for professionals. Whilst doing fieldwork at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in the weeks leading up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) I noticed the frenzied fixing of urban pavements, the ticketing and restriction of mini-buses from around Joubert Park in preparation for the arrival of approximately 40 000 delegates from across the world. The 'cleaning-up' operations involved confiscating peoples' temporary shelters on pavements in the inner city and exercising controls over street vendors.

As a curious observer of these cleaning-up operations in preparation for the World Summit in Johannesburg I attended an address on sustainable development by the Heinrich Boll Stiftung Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand. The paper entitled 'The Jo'burg Memo – fairness in a fragile world' presented at the

[4] *ibid*

Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Scientific Research (Wiser) emphasised Johannesburg's need for self-scrutiny in the face of 'sustainable development' projects. A critical question posed then was: Is the international community ready to face the challenges posed by chronic poverty and resource-hungry affluence? This question appears particularly apposite in terms of Johannesburg's urban regeneration.

The perspective I take on the meanings of the Nelson Mandela Bridge develop from the conflicting ways in which Johannesburg has been viewed: The World Bank's ideas for re-development in order to create a 'functional city' (*Urban Futures* 2000) which run counter to the appeals by Heinrich Boll Stiftung Institute (2002) for self-reflection and urban poverty relief. These conflicts surface repeatedly in my research in terms of visible clashes between public and private interests in the inner-city developments.

CONTENTS

Title page	i
Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	v
Dedication	vi
Preface	vii
Table of Contents	xii

1. CHAPTER ONE: Mapping Thoughts and Establishing Direction	1
1.1 Introduction	2
1.1.1 Framing the research	11
1.1.2 Chapter outline	17
1.2 Methodology	23

2. CHAPTER TWO: A New Historical Frontier	29
2.1 Chapter overview	30
2.2 New spaces from past experiences	33
2.1.1 Black spots and ‘whites only’	38
2.1.2 Anecdotal histories	42
2.1.3 Belonging/identity in a white society	45
2.2 Johannesburg as transitional global space	47
2.2.1 Living Museum	52
2.2.2 After alienation, a city re-imagined	57

3. CHAPTER THREE: Ongoing Urban Restlessness	64
3.1 Newtown – a restless urban-space	65
3.2 The Bridge and Newtown	68
3.2.1 Clashing public and private notions	70
3.2.2 Newtown’s early history	77
3.2.3 Newtown - 1970 onwards	80
3.2.4 Dreaming about new-Newtown	81
3.2.5 Agitation for peoples’ space in Newtown	85
3.2.6 People versus official interests	88

4.CHAPTER FOUR: Regeneration – The Story Of The Bridge	91
4.1 The Nelson Mandela Bridge (NMB) project	92
4.1.1 Blue IQ and the bridge	97
4.1.2 Private and Public partnerships	102
4.1.3 Tenders and Contractors	105
4.2 The NMB and its name	113
4.2.1 The NMB as landmark	116
4.3 2030: City Vision	122

5. CHAPTER FIVE: The Opening Of The Bridge 128
5.1 The Bridge as metaphor 129
5.1.1 Making a link 134
5.1.2 Bridge to freedom 135
5.1.2 The Marathon 141
5.1.3 First impressions 143
5.1.4 First arrivals 145
5.1.5 Street scenes 147
5.1.6 Grim reality 154
5.2 Everyman's opinion 156
5.3 NMB as representational space 163
5.1.1 Organising spaces – power/culture relations 166

6. CHAPTER SIX: Urban Contradictions 170
6.1 Contradictory experiences 171
6.2 Constructing narratives 176
6.2.1 Mediated experiences 181
6.2.2 Inherent contradictions 184
6.2.3 Dissipated News 186
6.3 Public poll 188
6.3.1 Emblem as message 192
6.4 'Bridge in limbo' 194
6.6 City stage 195

7. CHAPTER SEVEN: Concluding Thoughts 199
7.1 Connecting threads 200
7.1.1 Mediated democracy 205
7.1.2 Manufactured subjectivities 211
7.2 Bridge as urban sculpture 213

8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

9. APPENDIX