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INTERVIEW



Bringing heart and vulnerability to urban storytelling: a conversation with Tanya Zack on *Wake Up, This is Joburg*

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ARTICLE HISTORY

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Tanya Zack is a South African planner and writer. Her career as an independent and reflective practitioner has straddled policy development, strategy development, practice, research, field study, creative writing, and academic reflection. For almost thirty years she has worked at the coalface of urban change in South Africa, both as a consultant to the various spheres of government—national, provincial, and municipal—but also as a reflective critic of emerging urban policies in post-Apartheid South Africa. She has worked on a range of development and urban issues and applied a cross-disciplinary approach to projects. She is the author of the photo book *Wake Up, This is Joburg* (photographs by Mark Lewis).¹

Tanya grew up on the edge of inner-city Johannesburg and has a particular passion for working in that central city space. Her projects there have included taking a lead in the development of an inner-city transformation policy, detailed investigations and proposals for particular precincts as well as in depth research into the phenomenon of cross border trade, migrant experience, informal trade, and informal work more broadly, density and communal living and social and spatial infrastructures.

She has at times worked with the city government, at others with research institutions, and at other times with public interest groups. She has used her research role and independent status in select activist roles, particularly in response to violent policing of migrant space in the inner city. Her experience of working closely with municipal officials across various sectors to develop common understanding and policy positions in housing include coauthoring Johannesburg's Inner City Housing Implementation Plan and the Inner City Transformation RoadMap. She undertakes academic research and writing as well as narrative nonfiction writing alongside her private practice as an urban planning consultant.

In harvesting stories in the inner city, her approach is part flaneur, part urban ethnographer. She's looking and listening. The stories in *Wake Up, This Is Joburg* are the product of five years of going back again and again to spaces and having multiple conversations with the protagonists we meet at ten sites in and around central Johannesburg. Of her personal relationship to the inner-city, Tanya says,

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¹Zack and Lewis, *Wake Up, This is Joburg*.

I have always lived in Johannesburg. I grew up close to the inner city, in Judith's Paarl, a small working-class suburb established east of the Central Business District in 1896. The neighborhood of my childhood was small and intricate. My worldview was concentrated in the knottiness of the two city blocks where we lived, went to school, shopped, and caught the bus outward (generally to the city center). We lived on the upper level of a two-storied apartment building. When I reflected later on the different homes I visited and played in on our short street block, they read as a study in low-rise housing forms. They included small houses set in concreted yards; semidetached, face-bricked walk-ups; large bungalow houses; and apartments. And the neighborhood included the house I loved. My friend's blue-and-white tiled house—mosaicked inside and out with the remains of her father's projects as a tiling contractor. The familiar spaces of my childhood also included the small rooftop servants' quarters, located above my bedroom, and accessible via the fire escape at the back of the building. The two blocks in which my daily life was concentrated would easily inform a map of neighborhood morphology. I walked to the school at the corner of the street. I remember the high street. I remember the lavender curtains of the hairdresser, the chime of the bell as you entered the pharmacy, the stepped display of fruit baskets at the greengrocer, the dusty smell of the wooden post office counter, the comic bookstand at the corner café, and the red wooden bus-stop bench marked "Europeans only."

This is the neighborhood in which I was an insider. It was a localized, parochial, formative experience. Perhaps it informed my struggle with seeing the big picture, and my need to start small. I have always been attracted to the local scale, more comfortable in a compact urban setting.

Relooking at an inner city I had frequented as a child, a teenager, a student, and a professional over forty years, and one that I had walked in, shopped in, and invested in, required leading with my ignorance rather than my analytical scrutiny. This was an attempt to look at my own city and the city I had worked in for over two decades in a fresh way. In this project, I was often aware of my tendency to lean into a didactic and normative stance, to think always about "what needs to be done." But these stories were collected from a different position. It was a project of entering parts of the city in a permeable way, with a focus on how places and stories looked and sounded and felt rather than what they meant against my urban planning toolset.

Listening required telling. In order to ask people to share their stories, I often first had to tell my own. These encounters highlighted my identities as a middle-aged white woman who now lives in a leafy affluent suburb, as a property owner in suburbia and in the inner city, as an urbanist, as someone who was born and raised in working-class near inner-city neighborhoods, as a mother, and as a writer. And my identity as voyeur. I stumbled through many variations of the question "Why do you want to know these things?"

Certainly, if I am to write about the city inside of me, it is the inner city and the neighborhoods that cling to it. These are spaces of my childhood. The familiarity and unfamiliarity of places in these neighborhoods swirl around the journeys these stories took me to.²

Caroline and Tanya met online on 8 March 2024 for a conversation about the background and approach to *Wake Up, This is Joburg*. Their conversation veered into the terrain of why and how they both do what they do in the world of urban stories.

Caroline Wanjiku Kihato (CWK): Tanya, thank you for saying yes to this conversation, and congratulations on your book! I initially read it in its serialized form, so

²A version of this biographical sketch appears in Zack and Lewis, *Wake Up, This is Joburg*, 17–18.

seeing it in a single volume adds a new level of depth. Could you please share some of the inspiration behind these stories?

Tanya Zack (TZ): I grew up near the inner city and had always been involved in peripheral work around there. In 2009, I got the chance to work inside the City Council in the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), focusing on the inner city for a year, which I loved. During that time, I was taken to places I didn't know at all, despite feeling familiar with the city. One particular experience was being taken to secret shopping centers in what had been medical buildings, which I later learned was the Ethiopian quarter. I could pin that awe-inspiring experience to the day. I had a deep desire to understand the city better, but going into those buildings bewildered me at the same time. I felt such a sense of humility that my ignorance of the city was exposed. This experience directed my energies for a long time. After my stint in JDA, I just took time out to walk the streets of the inner city, not just in the Ethiopian quarter, but around Park Station, taxi ranks, and other buildings as well.

Walking around as a curious white woman with no specific project did not afford me ready access to the people or activities. I needed a reason to be in the busyness of the inner city. I often carried a pocket camera and asked permission to photograph interesting details—like a street vendor's wares. These interactions sparked conversations and allowed me to collect stories and snippets about the city. I began documenting my experiences in diary form early on, with no intention of turning them into stories initially. Over time, however, I felt there were stories to explore in specific city spaces. A couple of years later, I met Mark Lewis, I put my pocket camera away when his fancier camera came out and I started focusing more on writing and words.

CWK: I'm curious about your process. You mention the secret shops and the illumination of a city you grew up and worked in but had no idea existed. I wonder, what was your motivation to write these stories? Did you want others to share in this newfound world of yours, or was your initial process just to explore and see the city you were born in?

TZ: Johannesburg has such barriers to access, which are codified and regulated. My white body gives me access but also denies me entry to spaces where languages other than English and Afrikaans are spoken. This in many ways excludes me from understanding much of the city.

CWK: And this is all a legacy of apartheid, isn't it? I mean, just like how black bodies were excluded from the same spaces you're exploring, right?

TZ: Entirely. In those spaces, my whiteness influences my position. I am often mistaken for a tourist and indeed I am often an outsider in my own city. Although I do bring some understanding of space in my conceptual toolkit of Johannesburg, I depend on observation, on looking more closely.

One of my frustrations as a professional planner involved with City strategy is the separation between the formal and informal worlds in conversations around urban management in the city. In my experience of municipal discussions about housing, economic activities, or transportation, there is a fixation with separating out what is deemed informal. Often, I have found the enquiry of the City around the crises in its CBD [Central Business District] to be skewed in favor of an image and a vision I don't recognize when I walk the city streets. And I am concerned that the

deliberations of the City either exclude or separate out the voices of the sorts of protagonists who populate these stories—taxi drivers, street traders, migrant entrepreneurs, cross border shoppers, informal workers. These are not only the majority users of the inner city but are overwhelmingly the reshapers of its form and function. We simply have to lean into what their motivations and innovations and aspirations are.

Over time, my desire to understand grew into a desire to tell these stories.

CWK: I find it fascinating because in describing your approach and the rationale behind it, it seems like you're trying to dismantle the epistemological frames within which Joburg, or cities like Joburg, are seen. You know, this idea that you're either formal or informal, and in that narrative, there's this desire to turn the informal into the formal, right? We want to create a "world-class city" of "law and order." If you reflect on how your project has unfolded and how it's now telling all these stories, what kind of epistemological contribution do you think the book is making? What kind of story is it telling about African cities like Johannesburg that are often left out of global discussions because they're not seen as global?

TZ: The themes that have emerged in the work were not premeditated. We do not set out in search of particular storylines or themes. But these issues have clustered around the stories. They include themes of the value and effort, of the shadow city, of home, of darkness.³

Home is a complex notion in the inner city. The obligations and hopes of migrants bind them to this arrival city as much as to elsewhere. The connections are urban and rural, and they are intergenerational. A tailor lives in Johannesburg while supporting his wife and children in Lagos; an informal miner builds a house in Bulawayo; a waste reclaimer is acquiring a herd of goats in Lesotho. A man's experience of feeding pigeons on a Johannesburg street reminds him of his former life in Bombay; Amharic music streams through Ethiopian coffee shops in Jeppe; an outsider artist decorates his house with friezes of Madeira.

I am also intrigued by the role of informal and extra-legal economic endeavor in the city. It is necessarily simultaneously innovative and destructive. In Johannesburg's inner city, informal endeavors undertaken by migrant entrepreneurs are proving to be more than registers of marginality and precarity. They are front and center of urban transformation and investment.

Regarding the idea of the "shadow city," I've always resisted that term. It's not the underbelly of Johannesburg; it's the part of the city we didn't understand or pay attention to. It's the ordinary city that's disregarded because it doesn't fit into our codes. Many activities cannot be neatly categorized as formal or informal. They are intertwined. The problem arises when the city council intervenes based on these terms, making blanket decisions that affect people's lives.

The theme of value and of its counterpart, effort, fascinate me. The statistics occupying the daily accounting of the poor pepper a number of the stories. How many platefuls of food can one cow head deliver? How many kilograms of waste can one man's sixty-one-kilogram mass drag up a hill? How many additional kilometers will a waste reclaimer drag that load to secure a few cents' additional profit from their sale?

³These themes are discussed in Zack and Lewis, *Wake Up, This is Joburg*, 10–16.

How many kilograms of gold-bearing rock can a man carry on his back as he crawls for several kilometers to surface from an underground rock face? How many buckets of water does each person in an apartment housing thirty-four people need per day, and how many containers can be stored in the corners not required for the rituals of sleeping, cooking, and daily ablutions. How many people can share a double bed in the same apartment? How much salt will keep food fresh for longer in spaces with limited refrigeration? They are also shadow worlds in which a food vendor's day begins at 2 a.m., an informal trader in a market works every day of the year, and a waste reclaimer wakes at 3 a.m. to begin his 34-km round trip by foot—until the day his feet will not carry him anymore. These statistics matter to the people in our stories. Paying attention to these numbers is part of the contribution that our stories make.

CWK: I love how you incorporate statistics into these stories. We often dismiss them as unimportant because they're informal, but you show how they actually contribute value to the city. By using economic tools and understanding value, you're including these people in a discussion about the city's value. It's a smart approach that removes the shadow we cast as middle-class people, seeing Johannesburg as a dark and unfriendly place.

You also mentioned something that struck me: the man feeding pigeons or sharing a room with someone who can't afford one. Even if you don't have many resources yourself, there's this idea of a nurturing city. Could you speak a bit more about Johannesburg as a nurturing place? Maybe share some encounters that challenged the way we typically understand it as dangerous?

TZ: Absolutely. The city offers sanctuary even as it excludes. A man asks himself, "Am I more Congolese or more South African?" And our visits to a one-bedroom flat with 34 people in Hillbrow really showed us a different side of the city and the nurturing and kindness that makes life possible and bearable against high stakes. In that intimate space, people from different backgrounds had to create their own rules and codes to coexist peacefully. Men, women, migrants, locals, rural and urban dwellers, and people of different sexualities all had to find a way to live together harmoniously. They had to manage privacy and intimacy in such close quarters. There were small but impactful gestures of kindness like someone being fed so they could take their HIV medication when they couldn't afford food. In another instance, a grandmother with two small children had a little raised section in the room to give them some extra privacy.

CWK: To me, these acts of kindness and nurturing really humanize the city. It's a stark contrast to the common perception of Johannesburg as dangerous and inaccessible. Your stories show the full range of human emotions and ways of being, going beyond the simplistic labels of dangerous or just a place for making money. Your stories allow this expression of humanity in so many different ways to come alive, and I really appreciate that.

TZ: It's also interesting at an aesthetic level, because the inner city, aside from its distant skyline, isn't known for its beauty. Yet, there are these moments of incredible beauty and serendipity. For example, we were taken into the first private Hindu temple in Johannesburg, which was on top of a Master Mansions. We expected to see

only remnants of the structure, but it was perfectly preserved as it had been 20 years prior when the mother of the family had last made puja there. It was this golden jewel atop an otherwise nondescript building in Johannesburg. It felt like the city was offering us a gift of gold, something truly unbelievable. Another example is Tony Martens who transformed his house using waste, creating a magical space that would be entirely illegal if inspected by a town planning official. Despite the city's hostile nature, there's a possibility for people to express themselves authentically in unexpected spaces.

CWK: Your work in *Wake Up, This is Joburg* demonstrates an interdisciplinary approach that combines visual elements and storytelling, which seems quite different from the traditional urban planning perspective that often takes a bird's-eye view. Instead, you bring a worm's-eye view, a bottom-up perspective. Can you tell me more about how this methodology aligns with your profession and training? Were you deliberately trying to flip the training due to frustrations you felt?

TZ: It has been liberating to work in the city as a story collector. While my questions lean into place and development they are not restricted to those lines of enquiry when I enter an environment as a writer. I am free to set up a conversation and let it lead where it will. And the circuitous route that the conversation takes often circles around elsewhere and personal stories that have little to do with this city or "planner" concerns. It frees me to listen more widely and to sense-make from a context that is not only in a spatial way but that may foreground a human or economic or emotional setting.

It also challenges my planner-ly sense of place. Several stories are set in places people have appropriated. They may be more or less proprietary about that site. Different people in one site respond differently to our presence. Some may flatly refuse our entry, while others in the same space welcome us, and a discussion excluding us may be conducted about our presence before we can proceed.

Walking the streets helped me understand something of the market activities that are actually at the forefront of shaping the city. It became clear to me that we need to immerse ourselves in the streets and buildings to truly understand how the city is changing and transforming. The transformation of spaces including spaces inside buildings are best examined through close observation and engagement with people on the ground. It's not something you can uncover through census data or desktop property value analysis.

And we need more nuance in our urban studies. In a complex arrival city like Johannesburg, we need to incorporate insights from fields like migration and mobility studies to truly grasp the complexity of its urban spaces.

CWK: In one of your media interviews, I remember you talking about the inspiration for the title *Wake Up, This is Joburg*. As you were discussing planning with me now, I wondered if the demand "wake up" was a rallying call for planners too? Can you tell me more about what that title means to you and why you chose it?

TZ: *Wake Up, This is Joburg* comes from a Zulu saying, *uvuka isiEgoli* which can mean "be careful, you're in Joburg, you better wake up and be alert." But it can also be said to someone who's dressed well, it's like they've woken up to the city. I love this because Joburg does both—it warns you to be careful, but also shows off its

glamor. It's a swanky city. The city often sees itself as second only to Paris or London, always striving to be world-class.

So, the title tries to capture this duality, urging those in the suburbs to wake up and see the real Johannesburg. To the City planners, my call would be "wake up, this is the real Johannesburg and the one to support!" It's frustrating to see such neglect in the urban environment, despite the city's potential and the money flowing in. There's a lack of basic maintenance—streets with water running down them, fallen traffic lights, and half-finished projects. It's appalling to me that our urban management is so poor when cross-border shoppers are spending 10 billion Rand a year in the inner city—which is twice the turnover of the biggest shopping mall in Africa!

TZ: I want to spin the question of storytelling approaches back to you, because your work also uses a narrative perspective and close up, grounded approaches.

CWK: I think that, like you, I've felt frustrated as a researcher of the city. With a background in planning and sociology, it seems like our research doesn't always connect with the spaces and people we're studying. Instead, it often speaks to an audience that doesn't really care. This frustration led me to think about how we could use research to broaden the debate and engage people with their lives and surroundings. I believe that storytelling, using visuals and narrative techniques, can humanize the city and the people in it. It can bridge the gap between research and social justice, connecting stories to larger questions like housing and social policy.

Storytelling also moves us away from purely rational thinking and into a space where we can connect with those who are often ignored or marginalized. It breaks down the barriers created by traditional social science methods, which tend to objectify people and places. Bringing back this emotional connection is crucial for us as researchers and planners. It reminds us of our responsibility to humanize our work and bring empathy and understanding to the forefront. In essence, it's about softening ourselves enough to truly care and take action.

TZ: I think what your work did [in *Migrant Women of Johannesburg: Life in an In-between City*], which was really pioneering, and something we try to do as well to some extent, is to bring out the voice of the protagonists.⁴ You had them taking photographs in their own spaces, which made them very active participants in the research. This might be a common methodology in social sciences, but it's not typically done in spatial sciences. This approach was crucial in illuminating the experiences of those in the city and highlighting their voices as central. It's important for us, and for those who will follow in your footsteps, to listen and acknowledge people as the protagonists of their own stories in the city. We've also made this a priority in our work, emphasizing the importance of including personal voices wherever possible.

I think what's really important is that when you're listening closely, you have to approach it with an open mind and a sense of empathy. Leading with questions can sometimes shut down the conversation, so it's important to be open to whatever story might emerge. When you enter a space, especially as an outsider, you have to be open to whatever you might find there. People generally want to share their stories if

⁴Kihato, *Migrant Women of Johannesburg*.

they feel safe and respected. I haven't encountered people who are unwilling to talk; it's more about creating the right atmosphere for them to open up. Starting from a storytelling perspective allows you to explore different angles and perspectives. You're not just looking at things from a spatial planning or housing point of view; you're letting the story guide you to new insights and understandings. And, you know, at the risk of sounding corny, it's all about approaching it with love and a genuine curiosity.

CWK: It's fascinating how this conversation has taken a different direction than I expected. You mentioned love being corny, but I actually believe love should be at the center of everything we do, especially in our work. I think that's key to decolonizing research and urban studies, and it's truly radical. Recognizing in our work that we're deeply intertwined with the lives of everyone we encounter, is essential. This might sound cliché, the concept of *Ubuntu*, "I am because you are," is actually profound. If we start with this as our foundational approach, our work takes on a deeply decolonial and radical dimension. This approach influences how we listen and the solutions we propose, leading to meaningful change.

TZ: Being in the field, in a posture of openness, really strips you down to your essence. It's liberating not to have my CV or other identifiers leading the way. What it comes down to is can you relate to me? Can I relate to you, to your inner bare humanity?

CWK: Working this way makes you really exposed. You don't have the protection of a title or a CV. You cannot hide behind your expertise. It is in the vulnerability of the methodology that an openness emerges.

TZ: I think vulnerability is exactly right. That's the essence of the methodology. It's about consciously being vulnerable, welcoming vulnerability in the space. It's about understanding that you are collecting stories, you are harvesting, and you have to be open to give and receive in a porous way.

CWK: What do you hope readers take away from your book?

TZ: I guess it would be fantastic if it inspires deep reflection on Johannesburg. We've loved creating and finding the narratives, along with the images. If they provoke readers to look at things differently, whether it's the reclaimers passing through the suburbs or whether it helps people explore the inner city, or to look at spaces in the binary frames that would be great. So, inspiring curiosity, and an affection for this city, are things we aim for.

TZ: Let me ask you one more question. You've engaged with various spaces in quite intimate ways, imagining, collecting, gathering, and creating stories. You've worked in inner city of Johannesburg, other cities, and even your birth town Nairobi, exploring spaces like Kibera. Each space must have had a unique impact on your approach. How did this shift affect your methodology? What identity is triggered for you when working with migrant women in Johannesburg, or in Kibera, or in Nairobi?

CWK: That's an intriguing question. What is my identity? I consider Nairobi and Johannesburg to be my hometowns. I've lived longer in Johannesburg than anywhere else. But there's a sense of being an outsider in Johannesburg because I'm not South African. So, I approach the city with a bit of caution due to my outsider status.

I was born not far from Kibera and grew up within walking distance to it in a middle-class neighborhood. Kibera was always seen as the shadow side of the city. My dad, driving me to school, would always say was dangerous. So, when my work took me to Kibera, I was both curious and afraid. I was excited to finally meet people, share a meal, sit down, and engage. It is this curiosity about meeting people, understanding myself and where I'm from, that drives me. This curiosity is how I approach both Joburg and my birth town, Nairobi, and spaces where I don't naturally belong due to barriers like race, class, nationality, language, or ethnicity. At the heart of it all, is the incredible sense of wanting to belong as humans that I tap into. I have to get out of my head and work with my senses.

CWK: Thank you, Tanya for your work and for this stimulating conversation.

TZ: Thank you, Caroline.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Caroline Wanjiku Kihato is a Visiting Fellow, Oxford Department of International Development. She possesses over twenty years research and policy experience on urban livelihoods, informal workers, economies, and governance in Africa and other developing regions. She undertook a five-year study on refugee and migrant women in Johannesburg, investigating their resilience and livelihood strategies in the context of political, economic, and social insecurity. She has experience in developing training materials for policy makers and practitioners. And a proven track record working as a development consultant on urbanization, land, governance with local and international agencies, such as UNDESA, UNDP, UN-HABITAT, City of Johannesburg, and the Government of South Africa.

Tanya Zack is a South African planner specializing in urban policy, regeneration, informality, and sustainable development. She has been an advisor and consultant in the development arena for over 30 years and has worked locally and internationally with senior level clients in government, academic institutions, the private sector, and directly with the communities. She has wide experience in establishing and managing teams on complex programmes integrating fields, such as housing, informal economies, city governance, and sustainable development with policy development, capacity building, and meaningful monitoring and evaluation. Her projects in the inner city including taking a lead in the development of an inner-city transformation policy, and on cross border shopping, have influenced City strategy and are recognized as ground-breaking interventions. She is the author of *Wake Up, This Is Joburg*.

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