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Occupying The Divide: Investigating a Justice-based Approach to Urban Design in the Former Western Areas of Johannesburg

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Abstract

Spatial Justice has emerged in the last half-century as a popular concept in geography, economics and the social sciences. Throughout the world, we find examples of spatial injustices and how they have been overcome through group efforts. Key theorists of Spatial Justice such as Ed Soja make explicit reference to South Africa as a country of 'unjust geography' (2010: 39). Looking at development efforts in post-Apartheid Johannesburg, this thesis aims to identify the extents to which Spatial Justice is being realised in the city, particularly at the community scale.

A key theoretical focus in this thesis is the presence of justice within the field of Urban Design. Several local and international methodologies are studied with the intention of developing a toolkit for the practice of so-called 'just' urban design.

The geographical focus area of the thesis is the former 'Western Areas' of Johannesburg, a district which has seen immense physical and social change over the last 100 years. The primary empirical research conducted in this thesis relates to what has been termed the 'morphology of injustice'. This research looks to map the Western Areas from its status in the 1940's as a reasonably 'just' landscape to the situation today which is characterised by severe physical and social barriers to justice.

The design component of the thesis begins with a critical analysis of an existing urban framework for the area which is driven primarily by the recent development of the Rea Vaya BRT network and places extreme importance on densification in the area. The alternative framework proposed in this thesis looks to place as much importance on existing zones of civic/ communal activity as on transport nodes, in a low-impact structural plan for the area. The detailed design component looks explicitly at Main Road, imagining it as a neutral public space for the communities of Westbury and Sophiatown.