

Reconciling Urban Spaces in post-Apartheid South Africa Glimpses of Cape Town's 'liberated' landscape

By Jessica Tepper

This paper explores the transforming urban landscape of Cape Town in the wake of 1994's national liberation. For 350 years authoritarianism manipulated the social geography of the now-urbanized Cape Peninsula, carving a landscape of habitual segregation and inequality. The advent of democracy offers South Africa prospects of free movement and expression, but the last thirteen years has seen the "freedom" of myriad dreams materialize only in the realm of the *free market*. Immediately after coming to power in 1994, the newly-formed democratic government established a neoliberal groundwork in order to launch the fragile nation into the global economy; however, this rigid economic policy compromises the realization of social equality envisioned by many at the dawn of the new South Africa. In an atmosphere of increasing local disillusionment, this paper explores the difficulties of achieving the ideal society—where people at the margins can embrace the promises of democracy—within the still-erect structures of spatial alienation and unbending inequality that characterize Cape Town's landscape today.

CONTEXT AND THEORY OF A STRATIFIED METROPOLIS

The "official city" of Cape Town was born of conquest, conceived in the seventeenth century as a harbor for entrepreneurs seeking "new world" fortunes. In the following centuries, British and Dutch settlements expanded by militaristic claiming of

territory. In the modern period, the conquest of landscape continued with apartheid's manipulations of areas through the creation and destruction of communities. From the first imperial footsteps that tread the beaches of Table Bay through today's fury of post-authoritarian urban eruption, Cape Town's history weaves common threads of conquest and dispossession.

John Western's theories of space and society form the groundwork of my research. In *Outcast Cape Town*, Western describes the symbiosis of *social relations* and the *physical spaces* in which they preside: society mirrors space and space mirrors society. This notion reflects apartheid processes of "social engineering," wherein urban planners reengineered South Africa's physical landscape with the objective of creating a "utopian" society of racial separation. The *Group Areas Act* of 1950 authorized the State to destroy neighborhoods and forcibly remove communities for the construction of an entirely segregated landscape. The *Group Areas Act* remolded society by deliberately manipulating space, and the legacy of those spatial arrangements continues to shape life after apartheid. In this paper, I use the term "landscape" to encompass both physical layout and its presiding social activity. According to spatial analyst Manuel Castells, "place by itself is an insufficient condition for producing social meaning; it's in relation to processes of social mobilization that places and the spaces which define them become carriers of meaning" (Soudien 98).

As revealed in conversations with my informants, a discussion of today's landscape entails discussion of past landscapes for conceptualizing a place in its current semiotic relevance. Furthermore, discussions with my informants revealed the extent to which the social landscape of Cape Town has remained unchanged in the years since

1994's political transition; the white population still controls prosperity rooted in the city's central business district while the "non-white" population remains pushed to the periphery, alienated spatially from places of employment and from capital. Thus, Cape Town's current stratifications along racial and economic lines echo the spatial legacy of apartheid.

Understanding the process of achieving social cohesion within a newborn city requires comprehension of the barriers that inhibit reconciliation of places. The new South Africa is coming through immense turbulence predicated on dislodgement, pain and enforced cantonization. Colonialism relegated the majority to the margins and removed them from the familiar spaces that spawned unique cultural identity.

The counterpoint to this narrative, however, smolders in the movements of resistance that have fermented throughout the centuries—climaxing in the mass insurrection after the Soweto uprising of 1976 and culminating with the negotiated political solution in 1994. The South Africa of today sits at the horizon where these two historical narratives collide. The collapse of apartheid's authoritarian censorship, which isolated South Africa from the world, further complicates the present moment as liberation has allowed global forces to seep into the fabrics of individual livelihoods.

As journalist and social activist Zenzile Khoisan revealed over the course of several meetings, the events of history have given birth to an awakened society. Such a population will not sit silent within the parameters of unrelenting inequality. After political reclamation, the battle now lies in the task of rebuilding and creating a more harmonious landscape.

THE GROUP AREAS ACT: APARTHEID'S MANIPULATION OF SPACE

The *Group Areas Act* aimed to create hegemonic social order by way of spatial organization under the presumption that manipulating space will mold society (Western 6-7). Segregation implies domination wherein a superordinate group claims more desirable territory as its own exclusive domain (Western 60). The regime, however, did not implement this Act for the sole purpose of giving whites prime land; *They didn't like the way we lived in District Six*, museum curator Noor Ebrahim told me during a personal interview, referring to his diversely integrated neighborhood in downtown Cape Town that was later destroyed under this law. *We proved to the apartheid government that it's possible for people of all different cultures to live together in peace*. On February 11, 1966, the government declared District Six a “white area”— a motion that would forcibly remove 60,000 members of the community. Ebrahim writes in his autobiography:

This is a day I will never forget. The newspapers were filled with the news. District Six buzzed with talk about its future. Friends and family began to worry about how life would change. The uncertainty made me feel empty. But nothing happened immediately and after the initial shock life went on as usual (8).

To bolster the ambiguous *who's who* denoted by blurred social distinctions, the Group Areas conception offered a definitive *who's where*. In this way, *place* came to shape identity. From 1960-1983, 860,400 people throughout South Africa lost their homes, their livelihoods, and senses of being as a result of forced removals (Western 42). Eventually most whites came to accept this segregation as normal—a division of nature, argues Michael Morris in *Every Step of the Way* (162). The *Group Areas Act* forced non-whites out of downtown Cape Town and into new racially homogenous residential

areas, most of which were located in the city's sand dune periphery known as the Cape Flats. Anthropologist Crain Soudien describes the predicament of blacks living on the margins: "The Cape Flats, where the physical and the built environments, in their absolute insufficiency and hostility, conspire to deny people the ability to remake themselves," (104). Forced removals—the destruction of place— disintegrated entire communities and tossed individuals into unfamiliar, alienating areas.

Ebrahim grew up on 247 Caledon Street in District Six; the house was home to four generations of his family. In our meeting he recalled the excitement of the congested streets, the familiar faces, and the solid backdrop of Table Mountain. *There was never a dull moment in District Six*, he told me. Ebrahim writes,

We were ordinary people, living a rich and satisfying life. We cared for each other and about each other. And when it ended, I thought my happiness had received a blow from which it would never recover (83).

In our discussion he recalls the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness at the sight of bulldozers destroying the neighborhood. *What could I do? We had no choice*, he remarked sadly.

THE LEGACY OF GROUP AREAS

And in the structure of space there exists a parallel: for in the central city space mirrors society, and the Coloureds have been distanced geographically as the Whites have repudiated them societally. – John Western, *Outcast Cape Town* (139).

Despite the *Group Areas'* dismantling in 1993, current arrangements of Cape Town's inhabitants echo the spatial legacy of apartheid. During a personal interview, Judge Siraj Desai remarked: *Today the problem is this: it's still a white city with blacks*

living on the periphery. Most businesses and places of employment remain in the center of town, far from the townships of the marginalized Cape Flats. The huge buffer zones between communities of different races and classes—the product of militaristic urban planning—remain intact in the architecture of the city. Cinemas, shopping malls, and supermarkets are located in predominantly rich, white-populated areas. The continuation of white dominance takes current form in an ethic of expansion, maximizing economic growth in a capitalist framework. Businesses cluster in blocks and shops congregate in complexes of malls. Abdulkadir Ahmed Said, a filmmaker and social activist, relates this central clustering of industry to the city’s larger mindset of insecurity that propagates the frenzy of *strength in numbers*. Western, too, argues that fear and the search for territorial safety are the bases of contemporary patterns of Cape Town’s space (269).

The foreboding task of dismantling structures of residual segregation thus obstructs the process of building anew. Here, we are confronted with the question of whether the loss of place can ever be reversed, or if the reality of dispossession is too complex and absolute for it to be recovered in concrete and social terms (Delpont 40). Said dubs the city “Keep Town,” as in *keep it white and keep it light*. He gives an Orwellian prognosis to the current circumstances of Cape Town; *the parameters have shifted, but the game remains the same*.

A LIVABLE CITY?

The torrents of modernization and profiteering inundating Cape Town’s terra firma have added another dimension to the task of reclaiming spaces. Unfettered capitalism, the current means of prestige for nation-states, enslaves democratic polities to

the accumulation of cash. The ongoing tides of competition breed a vulnerability of nations upon prospects of potential avenues of wealth. In this maelstrom, the tugboat of South Africa rocks amid the waves of global market forces. Mainstream macroeconomics equates modernization with success; but what does modernization amount to on the micro level? According to Western, “Humanistic geography, among other things, implies looking at the city through the texture of the lives of its inhabitants. Seen this way, the astonishing physical beauty of the Cape Peninsula is metamorphosed into a remarkably bleak experience of living for many Capetonians,” (327).

After the dismantling of *Group Areas* in 1993, property values in white communities multiplied exponentially. Basil Coetsee, a local activist, commented: *As segregation crumbled, property values soared to keep me from moving there* [to prime neighborhoods]. *And it still happens because whites own all of the capital.* Legal efforts to inject life back into the city center by constructing a residential node have become swamped by market imperatives. As a result, attempts to transform Cape Town into a “more livable city” imply creating a more welcoming space for the rich.

The central business district of Cape Town has witnessed major developments in the conversion of under-utilized commercial buildings into residential apartments. Michael Morris, senior editor of the *Cape Argus*, attributes this transformation to the notion that the city must *live* to survive. The Economic and Human Development Strategy anticipates that by the end of 2006 approximately 2,700 new private apartments will be built and transferred, bringing the total number of apartments in the central business district to 3,500. These new flats sell for astronomical prices. Ron Martin, cultural heritage officer, remarked in a personal interview that the smallest, cheapest flat

in Mandela-Rhodes place (a housing corporation) costs R4.5 million (\$750,000). *And it's a tiny apartment! But that buys the privilege of living in the city center*, he commented.

Cape Town has one of the fastest growing real estate markets in the world, yet this market excludes the ordinary South African. Housing prices rise even as most people remain entrenched in residual disempowerment. Consequently, 80% of the new and improved city property is being sold to foreigners. Martin continues: *We live 36 kilometers from Cape Town and we can't come any closer than that*. Here arises the question of where ordinary South Africans will fit in when the city center becomes transformed into a space for the very wealthy. *Such a transformation*, Morris mentioned, *could translate to a celebration of Cape Town in a way that's not the Cape Town we want to celebrate*. By catering to the rich, the current redevelopment of the central business district translates to a reclamation of *white spaces*. Martin remarks, *We were racially alienated from Cape Town. It continues today, but this time it's capital alienation*. In this sense, money has become the new apartheid with cash as the access metaphor (Khoisan, personal contact). Here arises the predicament of how to increase social stability when the national economic model is predicated on profit.

WHOSE SACRED SPACES?

“But in whose image is space created?”

—David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*

According to Martin, *prime land in South Africa means white land. But prime land is where we used to live*. Martin refers to the conquest of indigenous Khoi sacred spaces and the claiming of this land as colonial territory during the seventeenth century. At present, many sacred spaces remain inaccessible to Khoi descendants as the land has

since become private property. Says Martin, *We are culturally estranged from land which gave us our history, religion, and cultural practice*. Centuries ago, Dutch colonizers annexed a major Khoi settlement and built an imperial fort upon the area. Today this castle stands erect at the center of Cape Town, a symbol of colonial victory. The castle functioned as the establishment of imperial authority: the setting for the signing of dubious treaties, and as such, the groundwork of broken promises. Though several Khoi images have been introduced to memorial exhibitions, the castle by in large commemorates a one-sided account of history. One-time chambers of imprisonment today reside behind closed doors in forgotten corners of the castle, nearly invisible to the tourist. Underground, the dungeon erodes in shadows of anonymity. The castle—a sacred space for descendants of those prisoners—presently stands tribute to the narrative of colonial glory, perpetuating the alienation of cultural heritage. *The earth determines who I am*, remarks Coetsee. *But the land associated with our culture is not accessible to us*.

Fr. Michael Weeder, a local priest and personal assistant to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, grew up in Vaterkant—a recently-gentrified area of the city. The grounds of his childhood have since become the property of a man from California. *That's what hurts*, he remarked in our discussion. *I am a child of the soil. We inherited the land and it's been stolen from us on a variety of levels*.

NARRATIVES FROM THE BO KAAP

Marris posited that 'community' (whatever it may be) has two salient qualities: (1) the notion of community as acknowledgment—living in an area where people accept responsibility for one another, almost a 'microcosm of human

experience;’ and (2) the notion of community as territory—appropriating the familiar places that have become comfortable. They become a resident’s stamping ground, his or her space, where he or she can say, ‘I am known and can find my way about.’ The combination of these two qualities results in what Wild (1963) has called ‘fields of care.’

– John Western, *Outcast Cape Town* (164)

I am not happy here in Bo Kaap, says Laysa Jabaar. I sit in her whitewashed living room along with Shireen Narkidien in a flat on Bantam Road in Bo Kaap, a close-knit Muslim neighborhood constructed by the *Group Areas Act*. The three of us sip tea and discuss the ebb and flow of community life in this dynamic district. Jabaar remarks:

Before, the whole community took part in raising children; everybody helped everybody. We were brought up by one another, caring for one another. Today it’s ‘my kids are better than your kids.’

Jabaar refers to the “modernization” creeping into Bo Kaap lifestyles since the collapse of apartheid’s walls of censorship that isolated South Africa from global influences. In these changing tides tumbles the small community of the Bo Kaap.

Since the authorization of media broadcasts from outlets outside South Africa, these two women describe how residents of Bo Kaap, especially younger generations, attempt to mirror the world viewed on television. *But they don’t know what the outside world is like*, Narkidien remarks. *People tell you ‘in London you have to phone your neighbor to make an appointment to visit.’ Whether that’s true or not, people follow the trend.* In its mystique, the outside world—inaccessible for so long—cultivates hope and respite for residents here; adornments and references to “modern” life are met with subconscious applause. *People feel that the outside world represents status*, says Narkidien. Washiela Adams, another resident of Bo Kaap, echoed similar sentiments regarding the changing attitudes of community members. She told me:

People in Bo Kaap are now more like the Jones'. It's all competition. They have a hell of a lot of attitude. I don't know what makes them think they're better and on higher levels. Why? On the Day of Judgment we're all the same! But people know your business far better than you know yourself. I don't care how my house looks out front. It's nice and warm and the welcome is on the inside.

Adams, Jabaar, and Narkidien speak of the growing sense of individualism creeping between established threads of community since the global market's recent intrusion into South African life. As Khoisan articulated in a meeting, by its very nature capitalism disrupts cultural and social solidarity and prevents one from having a sense of holistic community. This new current of mercenarism begets cognitive dissonance, rupturing social fabric and placing everybody in positions of competition. Furthermore, manifestations of capitalism in places in which there was once great social and political ferment precludes any sense of social cohesion. Said remarks: *You don't have to create cultural and psychological alienation for South Africans for the sake of the economy! This paralyzes South Africans while the American economy gets stronger.*

In the wake of political liberation, Cape Town remains a landscape of colonial architecture: an urban sphere comprised of a vast, marginalized black periphery ever-repressed by a hegemonic white nucleus. Given this context, can the new South Africa overcome the alienations of its stratified terrain? According to Said, this is not a question of land but a question of *mindset*. The task does not involve building a new city, but working creatively within the existing parameters of stratification to transform individuals' orientation to place. *There cannot be progressive change without changing fundamental ways of thinking and behaving*, Said continues. *People are still in a shell. But reclaiming must come from the people; it must be a natural process from which bottom legislation paves the way.* Reclaiming spaces requires individuals to see

themselves as integral parts of society, defeating the complex of self-alienation. The transformation of mindset constitutes a major step in the course of reconciling Cape Town as a meaningful and accessible place for all.

TRANSCENDING STRATIFICATIONS; FINDING MEANING IN THE LANDSCAPE

Fr. Michael Weeder relayed the following story during our discussion: In the beginning, the rich African soil gave birth to a beautiful panther. The green land was to be his playground, his sanctuary. But then a crushing force came from the outside placing a collar around the pup and his power was restrained. The panther spent his life chained to the fence of his oppressor. He never came to know the smell of the wet forest. The collar and the world surrounding his chain were all he experienced of life. *The same is with us*, remarks Fr. Weeder. *I am brought to this continent in chains and as a commodity. But now the chains have been dropped. And it takes a lot of courage to venture into the dark—everything is so mysterious, so unknown. But darkness may be a friend. Life is not just being a chained panther; there is life in the forest.* Reclaiming places involves venturing into the wilderness and creating spaces of expression within the unfamiliar.

Fr. Weeder currently preaches at St. Phillips Church, one of few edifices left standing after the destruction of District Six. Spirituality gives him strength and fuels his perseverance after a painful past. He comments,

Spirituality is the consequences of what we do and how we respond to what is done to us; the consequences of broader moments of uncertainty and recollecting the range of things working together. Sometimes shit happens. Sometimes

*spirituality enables you to learn from it and to cope with it.
Spirituality helps you find you.*

Fr. Weeder founded the December 1st movement, an effort to rekindle the experiences of slavery in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries of colonial South Africa, during which time millions of people were brought from Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and other areas of Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands and sold to white plantation-owners as human chattel. He recalls the nature of slavery, noting how the spectacle of state-sanctioned punishment has consequences long after the practice ceases; *sustained acts of terror have become part of our spiritual DNA*, he remarked.

Having devoted his early life to the struggle against apartheid, Fr. Weeder endures now by assembling grains of meaning into the canvas of a spiritual existence. *Spirituality preceded apartheid*, he commented. *Theology comes from the first Africans on this soil. It is there in the understanding of the dance, in the way we hunted and killed. As life bled into the ground we asked forgiveness for having to do this—that was the spirituality of the hunt.*

During services he burns ancient Khoi herbs to invigorate the ecology of African ancestry. Rituals like this work to dissolve the colonial cultural legacy associated with Christianity in South Africa. *My mother internalized Western faith and I inherited a dialectic of that. Essentially we're all spiritual beings without any formal doctrine of religious belief.* In this way Fr. Weeder integrates African spirituality into the institutionalized religious system which once served as the moral edifice of oppression. Within St. Phillips Church, Fr. Weeder reconciles the two worlds—the opposing historical narratives—and within this space people come together to find spirituality beyond the tribulations of the worldly.

Conclusion

In spite of segregation's lasting legacy of economic and racial stratifications, Cape Town remains a city in transition. The initial stage of political liberation challenges the centuries-old European monolith which dictated the Cape Peninsula since its inception as an "official city." As Khoisan articulates, the first triumph was the creation of democracy; however, other manifestations of apartheid still must be dismantled in this new era. Overriding global market forces uphold conditions of inequality, evident as efforts to turn the central business district into a "more livable area" have emerged as a modern avenue for perpetuating racial and economic segregation across space. While unfettered free-market policy has helped but a few citizens, within the dynamics of capitalism there still exists space for human expression. As Said keenly articulated, the reclaiming of the city requires a transformation in the way people orient themselves to place.

Fr. Weeder preaches the following anecdote to his congregation: A baby eagle falls out of his nest and lands in a farmyard. Seeing this stranger in their yard, the chickens and hens laugh at him because he looks different and ugly. The baby eagle cannot go anywhere so he is raised in this ranch of humiliation, never knowing himself as anything other than a farmyard animal. One day, however, he catches a glimpse of the rising sun, and he felt such a power in himself that he started spreading his wings. And soon he was soaring about the farmyard. Fr. Weeder remarks:

There must be a moment of engagement where we can look into the sun and discover who we truly are. Unfortunately lots of people died not knowing who they were, and this is

incredibly frightening to me. You've got to point the eagle toward the sun; that's education—to imbue the understanding that one has the potential to fly.

And by an understanding of inner strength, one has the potential, the confidence, to transcend the pettiness of the farmyard. This consciousness will crumble all barriers—the visibly spatial, and the hypothetically social. *In spite of what they wanted us not to be, we are who we are*, remarked Khoisan. The new era wages an epic battle against the residual presence of segregating structures. Within the slow process of change, there exist pockets of discontent and pockets of wakened consciousness; the two must find each other in order to make what was backwater mainstream and to bring what was marginal into the center.



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Jessica Tepper is a senior at Hamilton College majoring in cultural anthropology with a particular focus on mainstream American public discourse and its discontents. She has traveled and studied in Uganda and South Africa and this paper is the culmination of an independent study conducted in Cape Town. After graduation Jessica plans to continue traveling and working abroad and hopes to study anthropology in graduate school.

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