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Cape Town: Negotiating the Public in the Neoliberal City

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Figure 1
The Imagined City of Spectacle

Abstract

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa's economic policies and governance models have become increasingly neoliberal. The concern of this paper is how those policies and governmental modalities play out and shape the city of Cape Town. The paper utilizes the analytic of 'public' to examine how a formerly apartheid city has been remade – and contested – as a neoliberal city. The analytic of public is employed as a 'terrain', across which neoliberal policies, privatizing practices, calls for redistributive programs, and negotiations for citizenship and the right to the city are negotiated. Examining the fields of service provision, housing, and privatization, it is demonstrated that the analytic of 'public' provides an entry into the task of theorizing and locating the post-apartheid project in South African cities such as Cape Town.

In 1996, the South African Government, led by Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC), radically rewrote its economic – and thus governance – policy. The policy on which the ANC had based its transitional government was RDP: the Reconstruction and Development Programme. RDP had been a combined redistribution and growth-based policy that focused upon providing minimum subsistence for citizens, particularly those ‘disadvantaged’ under apartheid. Upon implementation, however, RDP quickly showed ‘strain’ⁱ. In 1996 it was replaced by GEAR - Growth, Exchange and Redistribution - which instead emphasized fiscal discipline, reduced expenditures, and enhancement of private sector expansion (Hart, 2002, p. 18). By initiating policies that encourage rapid economic growth, tightening the labor market, driving up wages, and luring private investment, GEAR shifted the model for economic governance in South Africa from that of a welfare to a neoliberal state.



Figure 2 Cape Town's Natural Beauty

In Cape Town, the shift in governance has colluded with the city's natural and man-made beauty to produce a neoliberal city of tourism and spectacle. However, the city of spectacle is also a city of spatial divides and pervasive inequities, ones not yet resolved by democracy and the equality legislated since the end of apartheid. The intent of this paper is to examine how negotiations between neoliberal policies

and calls for redistributive programs have reshaped the terrain of the public in Cape Town.

Before proceeding, however, I feel it necessary to reflect upon the description of Cape Town as a neoliberal city: is neoliberal a term too easily tossed around? How does the neoliberal classification relate to the 'post-apartheid'? It seems difficult to discuss Cape Town, or any site in South Africa without thinking of the 'post-apartheid'. Yet, fifteen years since the end of apartheid,

we still lack a literature that theorizes what the post-apartheid project means and entails, particularly as a critical, unsettling, post-colonial project. Most often, the term is used temporally, to refer to the period after apartheid. It is in response to this 'missing' literature that I have turned to the analytic of 'public', in my project of identifying and characterizing the negotiations through which contemporary Cape Town is being produced. I have conceptualized the public as a terrain, upon which to locate neoliberal policies, privatizing practices, calls for redistributive programs, and negotiations for citizenship and the right to the city. I have invoked the structure of a terrain in an attempt to avoid binaries and dichotomies, and instead understand the city as a discursive field. If the apartheid city was a space of difference and separation, perhaps the post-apartheid city can be understood through conceptualizations that disrupt those binaries. This attempt to see the city through negotiations draws upon Jennifer Robinson's work, in her writings about urban studies in general (2002) and South Africa in particular (1998), in which she asks that we imagine both the apartheid and post-apartheid city as a space of crossings and possibilities. I am attempting to do so by examining fields which illuminate the nature of the claims and practices through which Cape Town is critically produced.

Service Provision and Advocacy

Service provision and advocacy provides one of the most potent fields for uncovering the public in Cape Town. Services mark the nature of governance of Cape Town, with key questions emerging around which services - and their associated fees - the state provides and which private organizations and individuals are expected to provide for themselves. Reading this field from a Foucaultian perspective of governmentality (Rose, 1996), we see a dialectic playing out, between a state that attempts to produce 'entrepreneurial subjects' and the claims made upon the state as an agent of the transition from apartheid. This agent is framed by its constituents as responsible for creating the conditions requisite for redistribution and equality, and thus for overcoming the inequities of apartheid. Yet, the state is also framed by other subjects - businesses, the wealthy, and the emerging black middle class - as an insurer of their growing

prosperity, and thus the growth of the nation's economy. This latter set of subjects and their framings have led Cape Town to be itself seen as an entrepreneurial subject, or what David Harvey calls 'the entrepreneurial city' (1989).

One of the most compelling spheres of service and advocacy relates to HIV/AIDS and the distribution of anti-retroviral medication. As is widely known, South Africa is suffering from a horrifying AIDS pandemic. For some, what is equally horrifying is the government's reluctance to distribute ant-retroviral medication – ARV's – to HIV positive citizens. Key to this lack of distribution has been the position taken by national leaders – such as former President Thabo Mbeki and his Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang – in denying the relationship between HIV and AIDS and asserting their 'mistrust' of anti-retrovirals in combating 'disease'. This position has not gone without protest: public figures, such as prominent comedian Pieter-Dirk Uys, accuse the ANC government of completing the job apartheid began, by allowing AIDS to decimate the black population of South Africa. Complimenting this public outcry is the advocacy work of non-governmental organizations, particularly those whose work has imprinted space, citizenship and bodies in Cape Town.

One of the most prominent of HIV/AIDS advocacy NGOs is TAC – the Treatment Action Campaign. TAC “advocates for increased access to treatment, care and support services for people living with HIV and campaigns to reduce new HIV infections” (TAC). The organization has



Figure 3 Bringing the Discourse of Aids to the Street.

not only successfully lobbied both the South African government and pharmaceutical corporations to provide ARV's at affordable costs; additionally, TAC has become the moral voice of the nation, usurping that role from both the state and any sort of religious body. Through its 'HIV Positive' campaign, the organization has enabled its members to transform their HIV status from a stigma and death sentence to

a mechanism for reclaiming life and asserting the discourse of disease into the very public realm of the street. This has been accomplished through public marches, which literally bring AIDS to the street, and the 'HIV Positive' t-shirt, worn by those both HIV positive and negative alike



Figure 4 HIV Positive Shirt

(Robins, 2006). What we see with the HIV/AIDS and anti-retroviral terrain is not simply a neoliberal government withdrawing from provision of services. Instead, we see a charged public sphere, in which modern medicine, the diseased body, multinational corporations, and traditional healing practices contest the limits and practices of governmentality.

The Provision of Housing

As anti-retroviral distribution ushers the diseased body into the public terrain of the city, the provision of housing demonstrates the collusion between a typical neoliberal withdrawal of the state and the role that apartheid-era NGOs have grown into under a post-apartheid epoch. Housing additionally represents a material and symbolic field in South Africa. The need for shelter is material and desperately unrealized for many South Africans. The right to housing also is intrinsic to the ANC Freedom Charter of 1955 and the South African Constitution, and represents a vital aspect of the right to the city.

In the project of exploring the terrain of housing, I have examined two representative cases in Cape Town. The first concerns the role played by non-governmental organizations, particularly the uTshani Fund. uTshani is the funding arm of the South African Homeless People's Federation, a prominent group in operation since the early 1990's. uTshani operates primarily through microfinance savings schemes; historically, the organization seen its role as empowering and building capacity rather than building homes directly. Unlike TAC, uTshani has adopted a role as partner with the South African government since the end of apartheid, enabling the shift

from government delivery of housing – which had been the policy initially established under RDP – to the provision of housing “opportunities” (Huchzermeyer, 2001, p. 306). uTshani collaborates with the government by supporting “sustainable examples of broader asset mobilization, blending loans, savings, and social capital and linking all this to the state housing subsidy system”. uTshani acts as the bridge between the state and citizens, administering government subsidies and working with savings groups, whom are ultimately responsible for constructing their own homes (uTshani, p. "Brief History"). As the government’s housing policy has evolved through the shift from RDP to GEAR, we see an NGO such as uTshani dovetailing its historic mission with contemporary modes of governance, and thus creating a neoliberal private-public partnership.

However, while the state has come to predominantly rely upon organizations such as uTshani, it has not completely withdrawn from actually building housing units. The second case examined is one in which the State has responded to the housing shortage in Cape Town – as well as needs of other agents in the city – by strategically delivering units in the form of a housing ‘spectacle’. This case is the N2 Gateway, an ongoing housing project adjacent to squatter settlements and apartheid-era townships. Announced as a pilot housing project soon after South Africa was awarded the 2010 World Cup, the N2 Gateway builds permanent housing along the N2 highway, replacing the shacks that had hugged the slopes of the highway that connects the airport to the city center. Scheduled to provide 22,000 units of housing (Ministry of Housing), the N2 meets the material need for housing, while also meeting the political needs of various agents in the city. The project illuminates the complex negotiations between interests and parties across the city: between the state, the local government, citizens in need of housing, business interests, and tourism.

I label the project a spectacle of housing for a variety of reasons. The first concerns the project’s location: hugging the N2 highway in a long, narrow swath, the project presents a façade of permanent housing, hiding behind it scores of townships, informal settlements and shack dwellers who will continue to wait for the promise of permanent housing. Additionally, as seen from Figure

5, the N2 Gateway is located on the periphery of the bulk of Cape Town's townships. The project thereby does little to disturb the colonial and apartheid-constructed dichotomy between the wealthy, 'white' suburbs along the slopes of Table Mountain, and the impoverished 'black' and 'Coloured' townships on the Cape Flats.

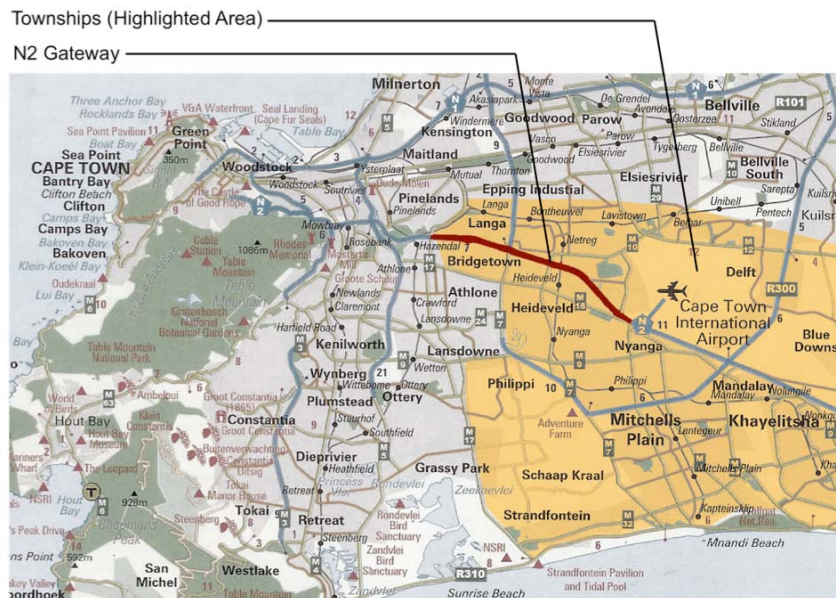


Figure 5
N2 Gateway Location

Additionally, the project participates in a larger project of selling Cape Town, of placing the city on a global stage, competing for the attention, finances and tourists of the world (Harvey, 1989; McDonald, 2008). Situated along the N2 highway, the project displaces shack dwellers – only some of who will receive units in the N2 Gateway – in order to sterilize the view of Cape Town first encountered by tourists upon leaving the airport. The project contributes to a spatial narrative in which Cape Town is constructed through framed views of Table Mountain, 'world-class' modern architecture – such as the Cape Town International Convention Centre, the showpiece at the end of the N2 highway as you enter the center of Cape Town - and a heritage of 'Cape Dutch' architecture. There is no space for enduring poverty or inequity in this vision of South Africa as the 'Rainbow Nation' (Witz, 2007, p. 273), thus requiring the cleansing of shacks: not from the city itself, but from the gaze of the tourist.



Figure 6
Framed Views of
Table Mountain



Figure 7
The Cape Town Convention Centre



Figure 8
'Cape Dutch' Architecture

The figure of the tourist introduces an additional agent into the terrain of the Cape Town 'public', one critical to the conceptualization of Cape Town as a neoliberal city of tourism and spectacle. Within Cape Town, the nation-wide shift in economic governance has intersected with the city's promotion of itself as a tourist destination. This identity is not new to the city; it has attracted visitors since the nineteenth century, representing itself as an idyllic holiday destination (Vergunst, 2001, p. 33). Yet, the figure of the tourist has been elevated since the end of apartheid; governance in the city has shifted from the imposition of racial separation to the attraction of tourism and foreign investment (Robins, 2007, pp. 25-26). As David McDonald demonstrates in his work on Cape Town and neoliberalism (2008), municipal-level governing decisions, such as the rates charged for utility services and the partnering with private organizations, are made in the effort to retain wealthy residents and businesses and attract further investment, often at the cost of dispossessing poor residents.

Negotiating the Privatization of the Public

The N2 highway is not the only space in Cape Town being cleansed of images of poverty; public spaces in the center of the city – known as the City Bowl – are also subject to sanitizations and privatizations. Increasingly streets and public squares are guarded by private security firms whose job it is to protect tourists and shoppers from unwanted interaction with "street kids, panhandlers and informal traders" (McDonald, 2008, p. 211). The privatization of security is just

one sphere of privatization occurring in Cape Town. Space, sadly, is increasingly privatized: since the end of apartheid the city has witnessed an increase in privatized shopping and leisure spaces, as well as the 'gating' of residential neighborhoods. Additionally, while the municipal government has maintained a commitment to not privatize essential services such as water and electricity, provision of those services has been increasingly 'corporatized' (McDonald, 2008, p. 202) and key municipal functions have been 'outsourced' in recent years (McDonald, 2008, pp. 212-213).



Figure 9
Private Security in 'Public' Greenmarket Square



Figure 10
Spatial Claims Made by Informal Traders

However, within this terrain of privatization and contesting claims of responsibility for service provision, there does exist articulation of claims of citizenship and the right to the city. These claims are well documented in the South African constitution, widely considered one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. Spatial claims in Cape Town are made by, amongst others, informal traders. Daily they remake the space of the city, through their inhabitation and temporal commerce along sidewalks, in public squares and at transit interchange stations. These remakings of space can be read in a Debordian fashion, as either spectacles or as *détournement* (Debord, 1994), or as claims to means of earning a livelihood and the opportunity to purchase goods much more affordably than sold in shops. This latter point is critical in Cape Town, where over 25% of the residents of the city are unemployed (McDonald, 2008, p. 43) and the 'thriving' formal economy puts goods outside the reach of even many working residents.

Additionally, the fact that the provision of housing – whether through ‘opportunities’ or the actual delivery of units – is claimed, as a right, points to the consciousness throughout the city of the distribution of the ‘right to the city’. Yet, that right, as proposed by Lefebvre, may be considered under threat. Increasingly the rights of property owners – and potential property owners – are prioritized over the right to the city, in order to attract the capital necessary to maintain the operation of the city (McDonald, 2008).

Conclusion: Negotiating the Public

In conclusion, I have attempted in this brief paper to introduce some of the actors and practices indicative of the discursive nature of the public terrain in Cape Town. Now that it is no longer dominated by the preservations and contestations of apartheid, the city has become a space in which demands for services – whether housing or provision of anti-retroviral medication – collude with and play against the administrative need of the city to attract investment and sources of income. This terrain, however, is not only one of economic claims; claims of citizenship, ethical claims and claims of the body are equally critical to the discourse of the public. We see this terrain expressed through the friction and distance that has developed between formal citizenship, universally granted by the constitution, and substantive citizenship, a type of citizenship modulated by the reality of life in the city (Holston, 2008). In the face of the current lack of theorization of the post-apartheid project, perhaps this discursive public terrain offers a point of origin for locating the post-apartheid, and beginning to explore what its project entails.

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Figure Sources

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- Figure 9 <http://lh3.ggpht.com/lightningwolfe/RmVBzDP5qGI/AAAAAAAAABbY/wjf90JMSfb0/Cape+Town+Anti-Busking+Squad.jpg> (Accessed May 1, 2009).
- Figure 10 http://image38.webshots.com/38/0/31/38/299803138jyUBUU_fs.jpg (Accessed 1 May, 2009).

ⁱ 'Strain' referred to both the effectiveness of and the political pressures placed upon the policies. See Gillian Hart, 2002, Chapter 1.