

# *To Embrace or to Contest Urban Regeneration? Ambiguities of Artistic and Social Practice in Contemporary Johannesburg*

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## **Introduction**

Johannesburg's inner city has undergone major changes in the years after apartheid, a process keenly observed, commented on, and negotiated by many local artists. There were apocalyptic and dystopic<sup>1</sup> discourses of "urban decay" in the early years of the transition, followed by celebrations of "urban regeneration," when the city authorities intervened rigorously through private-public partnerships like Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Interventions like BIDs promise a better city, but they also appear to reinforce social injustice and spatial control. The reactions of artists in Johannesburg to both periods were ambivalent if not contradictory. In both phases, many artists conducted socially sensitive art practices that varied significantly from one artist to another. Some documented and commented on the visual changes in their physical and social environment, while others tried to understand the newly emerging informal social and economic networks and included them in their art practice, occasionally shaping these networks at the same time. This often involved opposing the increasing regulations imposed by the city authorities and police. Others discovered business opportunities by offering their creative, administrative, and collaborative expertise to the city authorities and engaging in public art projects.

After a brief summary of the history of urban change in Johannesburg, the first part of this paper presents two examples of artistic practices that both aim

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Robinson, "Living in Dystopia. Past, Present, and Future in Contemporary African Cities," in *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*, ed. Gyan Prakash (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 218–240.

at a “better city,” albeit by different means. Ismail Farouk (b. 1973, Durban) and the Trinity Session (founded 2000, Johannesburg) have both been active in the inner city neighborhoods of Braamfontein, Hillbrow, Berea, Yeoville, Newtown, and the Central Business District (CBD) since the first decade of the millennium. Ismail Farouk has sought spatial justice for participants in the informal market, such as trolley pushers, who were marginalized and criminalized in the process of urban regeneration. The Trinity Session, on the other hand, as commissioning agent of the public art program of the City of Johannesburg, was (and still is) an active contributor to the implementation of the urban renewal policy of the City of Johannesburg in parks, playgrounds, and public space. Both positions are seemingly opposing but interrelated approaches to art as a means of affecting urban change in Johannesburg and in other cities undergoing major transformation in contemporary Africa and beyond. Even if the former calls for social justice and civil rights for people pushed to the margins and the latter works with public and semi-public institutions that are influential in the neoliberal drive for urban regeneration, the apparent contradiction is levelled in similar aims, methods, and the social practice of artists as urban dwellers beyond their profession as artists. Both positions are therefore imbricated in complex and confusing parallel processes of embracing and opposing urban renewal.

In the second part of this paper, the discussion shifts from artistic aims and practices towards artists as “ordinary”<sup>22</sup> users and consumers in the city who play a role in gentrification at various levels. Willingly or not, artists are an integral part of these developments. They tend to be co-opted in the renewal or revitalization of neighborhoods through affordable living and studio spaces, art galleries, and opportunities for art commissions. Even if artists critically reflect on and at times contest gentrification and neoliberal policies in their artwork, they are inevitably involved in these processes as residents, consumers, and members of what Richard Florida has called the “creative class.”<sup>23</sup> Thereby, the particular artistic and the everyday social practices of artists converge and interfere with each other, more often than not in contradictory ways. While artists may protest gentrification in their art practice, they may be complicit in such trends by the mere fact of being part of the art system—or just being a city dweller. Nonetheless, art research only very rarely conceives artists as social individuals who participate in and shape the city beyond their artistic practice.

2 Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (London: Routledge, 2006).

3 Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (North Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2003).

Their ambivalent role and entanglement is discussed through the example of the Maboneng district, a recent property investment project that co-opts artists and the creative class as urban dwellers in the process of urban redevelopment.

### **Urban change in Johannesburg**

The Trinity Session and Ismael Farouk—like many other artists preoccupied with Johannesburg—refer to the strong influence of segregation in the history of this city and its impact on post-apartheid urban change in social and infrastructural terms. In order to understand these artistic approaches, it is necessary to first summarize the post-apartheid development of the city.

Considering its short existence of about 130 years, Johannesburg has undergone intense and impressive political, social, and urban changes. Built on the foundations of gold mining and the exploitation of black labor, its urban history is essentially also a history of social disparity and exclusion.<sup>4</sup> This history of pre-colonial, colonial, and even post-colonial social and racialized inequalities is reflected in the way the city has been planned from the beginning up to today, even though recent segregation owes more to economic than racial differences.<sup>5</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, apartheid laws consolidated the pre-existing system of urban segregation, and the urban landscape of Johannesburg still bears their mark. Many perceptions of and discourses about Johannesburg are fundamentally shaped by this urban history, combined with the massive changes that took place during the democratization process after 1991.

Many commentators and researchers describe Johannesburg's post-apartheid era as a sequence of collapse and resurrection. Lindsay Bremner and Keith Beavon speak of a pre-2000 phase in which decay dominated, and a post-2000 phase when the city authorities implemented a rigid plan to give the city an internationally competitive infrastructure, economy, and standard

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<sup>4</sup> See Jo Beall, Owen Crankshaw, and Susan Parnell, *Uniting a Divided City: Governance and Social Exclusion in Johannesburg* (London: Earthscan, 2002); Keith Beavon, *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2004); Lindsay Bremner, *Johannesburg: One City, Colliding Worlds* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004); Lindsay Bremner and Pep Subirós, eds., *Johannesburg: Emerging/Diverging Metropolis: New Urban Venues in the Emergent World* (Mendrisio: Accademia di Architettura, 2007); Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavić, eds., *Architecture, Apartheid and After* (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 1998); Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, eds., *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, special issue, *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2004); Richard Tomlinson et al., eds., *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Beavon, *Johannesburg*.

of living.<sup>6</sup> The first phase started as early as the 1980s but became particularly visible in the mid-1990s after the demise of the Group Areas Acts<sup>7</sup> and the opening of South Africa's borders to African migrants. African residents from townships, small towns, and other urban centers across the continent moved to Johannesburg's inner city, where they hoped to live closer to employment opportunities and workplaces. Simultaneously, the racial paranoia so successfully facilitated by apartheid found its post-apartheid expression in white residents and white-owned business leaving the newly black city center and setting up their homes and offices in the northern suburbs or even abroad.<sup>8</sup> Other factors contributed to the difficulties arising with these trends in residential reshuffling. The South African economy suffered a deep crisis, which saw a decline in industrial production, the South African currency lose value, and skyrocketing unemployment. As a result, the municipality of Johannesburg found itself close to bankruptcy.<sup>9</sup> This led to the collapse of public transport and the emergence of a newly thriving but heavily competitive informal minibus industry.<sup>10</sup> Many residents' hopes for a better life in the inner city were met with economic desperation along with violent and armed crime.<sup>11</sup> Homeless people and slumlords occupied residential, industrial, and office buildings abandoned by their owners, often without water or electricity due to lack of maintenance. These are only some of the most prominent aspects of this first transitional phase in post-apartheid Johannesburg. It is worth considering the many other, indirect factors that had also contributed to the

6 Lindsay Bremner, *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg* (Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2010).

7 The Group Areas Act is an umbrella term for numerous legal acts under the apartheid government of South Africa between 1950 and 1984. It assigned racial groups to different residential and business sections in urban areas and thus limited freedom of movement and place of residence. It reserved the city center for white residents and forced non-white workers to commute large distances between the residential area assigned to them and their workplaces in white areas. It also led to a large number of forced removals and permanent police control particularly of the non-white population.

8 Beavon, *Johannesburg*.

9 Beall, Crankshaw, and Parnell, *Uniting a Divided City*.

10 Public transport services have since been re-introduced, but still cannot replace the informal bus system entirely.

11 Beall, Crankshaw, and Parnell, *Uniting a Divided City*; Claire Bénit-Gbaffou, "Who Controls the Streets? Crime, 'Communities' and the State in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg," in *African Cities: Competing Claims on Urban Spaces*, ed. Francesca Locatelli and Paul Nugent, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 55–79; Lindsay Bremner, "Crime and the Emerging Landscape of Post-Apartheid Johannesburg," in Judin and Vladislavić, *Architecture, Apartheid and After*, 49–63; Alan Morris, *Bleakness and Light: Inner City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1999).

new situation, as discussed by Beall et al.,<sup>12</sup> Beavon,<sup>13</sup> and Bremner, such as the introduction of novel cultural practices through immigration from neighboring African countries, the ongoing circulation of weapons from apartheid times, shifts in the employment market for skilled and unskilled labor, and many more.<sup>14</sup> The conjuncture of all these factors created a precarious situation that forced the new residents in the inner city to self-organize and replace the failing infrastructure with new improvised, non-official, and sometimes illicit modes of management.<sup>15</sup> Most of the academic literature published in the 1990s and early 2000s about Johannesburg, however, fails to consider how informality kept the inner city running. Informal businesses such as hawking, car repairs, shoe cleaning, street photography, or working as a driver in the informal minibus industry contributed considerably to making the city habitable for its new residents.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to many apocalyptic descriptions<sup>17</sup> of this first phase of transformation—which certainly had its downsides, including the formation of a new class of urban poor and a skyrocketing crime rate—the new residents found ways of “making do”<sup>18</sup> in the neglected city, introducing parallel infrastructures that, at times, replaced the former public services.<sup>19</sup>

The second phase started around the turn of the millennium, when the city government introduced several measures to gain control over Johannesburg’s spatial and transactional activities and to reintroduce safety and cleanliness into public spaces. The aim was to attract investors to refurbish

12 Beall, Crankshaw, and Parnell, *Uniting a Divided City*.

13 Beavon, *Johannesburg*.

14 Lindsay Bremner, “Reinventing the Johannesburg Inner City,” *Cities* 17 (2000): 195–293; Lindsay Bremner, “Closure, Simulation, and ‘Making Do’ in the Contemporary Johannesburg Landscape,” in *Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos, ed.* Okwui Enwezor (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 153–172; Bremner, *Johannesburg*.

15 AbdouMaliq Simone, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 407–429; AbdouMaliq Simone, “Pirate Towns: Reworking Social and Symbolic Infrastructures in Johannesburg and Douala,” *Urban Studies* 43 (2006): 357–370.

16 Christian M. Rogerson, “African Immigrant Entrepreneurs and Johannesburg’s Changing Inner City,” *Africa Insight* 27 (1997): 265–273.

17 Martin J. Murray, *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Martin Gnad, *Desegregation und neue Segregation in Johannesburg nach dem Ende der Apartheid* (Kiel: Geographisches Institut, 2002).

18 Bremner, “Closure, Simulation, and ‘Making Do.’”

19 Simone, “People as Infrastructure.”

residential and commercial buildings and thus reclaim the city.<sup>20</sup> With urban regeneration, an upgrade in security systems and the subsequent reduction of crime, the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality hoped to re-attract capital and wealthier residents to the inner city.<sup>21</sup> Crucial drivers of this change were private investors, who cooperated with the city in projects such as the BIDs in Newtown<sup>22</sup> and Braamfontein,<sup>23</sup> the refurbishment of Main Street as a pedestrian-friendly banking district, and Gandhi square, a public space refurbished by a private property developer and surveilled by a private security company. Many of these projects had actually started in the early 1990s. A key moment was the setting up in 1992 of the Central Johannesburg Partnership (CJP) between the formal business community and the urban authorities, with the aim of getting companies and capital back to the city center. It can also be considered a precursor of the later public–private partnerships due to its exclusion of the informal market and other activities that marked an essential part of the city’s economy.<sup>24</sup> Neoliberal urban planning was the principle with which they hoped to renew the city, propagated with the slogan “world-class African city.”<sup>25</sup> In this process, Johannesburg’s sister city New York often served as a model, as it has throughout Johannesburg’s history.

Several measures have been taken by the city to facilitate both physical regeneration and crime prevention. Crime needed to be visibly combated in order to regain the trust of potential investors and attract wealthy

20 See also Demian Van der Reijden, “Operation Hleka Aims to Regain Control,” *Independent Online*, August 22, 2006, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/operation-hleka-aims-to-regain-control-290408>.

21 Beavon, *Johannesburg*; Gerald Garner, *Johannesburg: Ten Ahead: A Decade of Inner-City Regeneration* (Craigall Park: Double G Media, 2011); Philip Harrison et al., eds., *Changing Space, Changing City: Johannesburg After Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014); Susan Parnell, “Politics of Transformation: Defining the City Strategy in Johannesburg,” in *The Making of Global City Regions: Johannesburg, Mumbai/Bombay, São Paulo, and Shanghai*, ed. Klaus Segbers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 139–167; Susan Parnell and Jennifer Robinson, “Development and Urban Policy: Johannesburg’s City Development Strategy,” *Urban Studies* 43 (2006): 337–356; Tomlinson et al., *Emerging Johannesburg*.

22 Ed Charlton, “From Liberation to Liberalization: Newtown, the Market Theatre, and Johannesburg’s Relics of Meaning,” *Interventions* 17 (2015): 826–838.

23 Elisabeth Peyroux, “City Improvement Districts in Johannesburg: An Examination of the Local Variations of the BID model,” in *Business Improvement Districts: Ein neues Governance-Modell aus Perspektive von Praxis und Stadtforschung*, ed. Robert Pütz (Passau: L.I.S., 2008), 139–162.

24 See Beavon, *Johannesburg*, 237–268.

25 Teresa C. Dirsusweit, “Public Space and the Politics of Propinquity in Johannesburg,” in *Representation & Spatial Practices in Urban South Africa*, ed. Leora Farber (Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg, 2009), 53; Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

potential residents. Environmental design and the introduction of CCTV represented one strategy that aimed to limit opportunities and maximize constraints on crime in public space. Another strategy involved an intensified engagement in heritage preservation in order to raise awareness of the historical value of the city.<sup>26</sup> All these measures have indeed been quite successful. Between 2006 and 2011 (the main period of my research), not only the physical appearance of the city changed, but also its perception. I observed that increasingly middle class people re-discovered the inner city of Johannesburg, its parks and playgrounds, trusting in the fact that the city had indeed become safer for them. Social-housing projects provided for reasonably priced shelter for some lower-income families. However, the regeneration programs have done little to reverse the marginalization of the urban poor, and could also be criticized for trying to re-create a nostalgic image of Johannesburg's gold rush and economic boom that ignores the history of institutionalized racism and social exclusion.<sup>27</sup> Bylaws are enforced that prohibit informal trade, street hawking, or "loitering," a term that can apply to anyone who stands or sits on streets or squares without obvious reason, defined at the discretion of police or private security.<sup>28</sup> These bylaws criminalize people whose income is largely *on* the streets and not somewhere inside the adjunct buildings. As a consequence, informal activities are gradually being illegalized and the redevelopment projects emerge as socially and ethically problematic.

### Negotiating urban change and urban regeneration in art interventions

During both phases of perceived decay and urban regeneration, there was a particular kind of city dweller who observed these changes attentively: the artist. In many cases, the artist's role in the process of urban transformation—both the deregulated and the regulated periods—was rather ambiguous. While some celebrated the new Johannesburg as a formerly

26 City of Johannesburg, "Public Art Policy," Arts, Culture and Heritage Services, Johannesburg, 2006. [http://www.joburg-archive.co.za/2006/pdfs/public\\_art\\_policy.pdf](http://www.joburg-archive.co.za/2006/pdfs/public_art_policy.pdf). [Accessed on April 18, 2018].

27 Fiona Siegenthaler, "Imageries of Johannesburg: Visual Arts and Spatial Practices in a Transforming City" (PhD dissertation, University of Basel, 2011), 102.

28 The bylaw on loitering was introduced in 1996 and is drafted in such a way as to give the police a vast space of interpretation. Loiterers are defined as people who "unlawfully and intentionally lie, sit, stand, congregate, loiter or walk or otherwise act on a public road in a manner that may obstruct the traffic" (Section 13(1) of Notice 832 of 2004: City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality Public Roads and Miscellaneous Bylaws); quoted in Bénit-Gbaffou, "Who Controls the Streets," 74–75.

European city becoming African,<sup>29</sup> they were aware of the socio-economic precarity of most inner-city residents as well as the fear and insecurity their presence caused amongst those who had experienced and enjoyed the racial privilege of the strictly regulated apartheid city.

In the following, I present and compare one artist and an artist duo who were involved in these processes of urban change in different ways in the late 2000s: Ismail Farouk developed activist projects that campaigned for informal entrepreneurs and their right to the city; the Trinity Session cooperated with the City of Johannesburg to refurbish parks and playgrounds and develop a public art program in densely populated inner-city neighborhoods and the CBD. While the former questioned the means and socially exclusive consequences of urban regeneration, the latter worked in line with the city's urban renewal policy.

#### Contesting urban regeneration: The Trolley Pusher Initiative by Ismail Farouk (2008–2009)

Ismail Farouk is an artist and urban geographer currently based in Durban. Until recently, he worked as a research officer at the African Centre for Cities in Cape Town. When I met him in Johannesburg in 2008, he had just completed an MA in geography,<sup>30</sup> having previously acquired a BA in fine art at the University of the Witwatersrand, and was still based in Johannesburg. The knowledge and skills he had acquired at university, combined with practical work in a Johannesburg-based architectural office and as an independent consultant for diverse cultural projects,<sup>31</sup> served him as a basis for socio-politically informed interventions in public space. His work in the architecture office familiarized him with the difficulties and conflicts of urban regeneration, and he developed a critical stance against many of the city's urban politics. While not losing his connections to these institutions, he chose artistic interventions and the formation of stakeholder groups to express his criticism against the illegalization of informal markets in favor of BIDs.<sup>32</sup>

29 Mbembe and Nuttall, *Johannesburg*.

30 See Ismail Farouk, "The Network Approach to Urban Regeneration: The Case of Yeoville, Johannesburg" (MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2007).

31 One such project was [www.sowetouprisings.com](http://www.sowetouprisings.com) (2005; accessed on October 3, 2016). As a young researcher at the Hector Pieterson Museum in Soweto, he teamed up with Babak Fakhramzadeh to create a publicly accessible map of the route of the protesting students and the locations of the various incidents of the Soweto Uprising as recollected by witnesses in 2005.

32 Ismail Farouk, interview by Fiona Siegenthaler, August 1, 2008, in Johannesburg (unpublished).

Ismail Farouk has an interdisciplinary approach to the city that blends the analytical and systematic methods of urban geography with an experimental approach to urban and social questions. In Johannesburg, he used design, activist aesthetics, and action-based interventions to draw public attention to social grievances and bring about socially responsible and inclusive change in urban politics.<sup>33</sup> As a starting point, Farouk generally used methods typical of sociology and social work, including network analysis, rhythm analysis, and participant observation, as well as conversations, interviews, and workshops with the people affected by the implementation of urban regeneration projects or the associated bylaws. Network analysis in particular, an approach following AbdouMaliq Simone's notion of "people as infrastructure,"<sup>34</sup> allowed Farouk to understand the logic of informal and sometimes also illegal modes of life, economies, and tactics in the inner city of Johannesburg. Farouk tried to give broader visibility to the ingenuity with which people organize their lives and thereby generate an understanding for such informal structures and their contribution to the city's functioning. Inspired by scholarly discussions of spatial justice and the right to the city,<sup>35</sup> he claimed this right for people active in informal businesses and infrastructures, for instance by challenging the state's designation and criminalization of a range of street level activities as loitering.

Although it only represents a fragment of his diverse projects and practices, I will present one particular project, the *Trolley Pusher Initiative* (2008–2009), to illustrate his working strategies, their social and aesthetic impact, and what problems might be entailed in such practices, especially with regard to the role of the artist as a socio-political activist.

During the first phase of transformation in Johannesburg, when much of the city's public services had collapsed and the inner-city population was establishing informal infrastructures, a new profession came into being: The trolley pusher (Fig. 1). Trolley pushers are men who push heavy baggage in shopping carts for clients from one transportation hub to the other, mainly between the Park City taxi rank and the Jack Mincer

<sup>33</sup> Siegenthaler, "Imageries of Johannesburg."

<sup>34</sup> Simone, "People as Infrastructure."

<sup>35</sup> David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27 (2003): 939–941; Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968); Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003).



**Fig. 1:** Trolley pusher activity, January 2009. Photo: Ismail Farouk. A Mozambican trolley pusher helps a customer requiring baggage-carrying assistance.

taxis rank in CBD and Hillbrow/Berea.<sup>36</sup> They are mostly Mozambicans, Zimbabweans, and South Africans. Farouk explains:

Trolley pushing activity in the city provides an invaluable service to people needing to transport heavy baggage between transportation hubs. A major problem with the activity has been the illegal nature of the trolleys used to transport goods. Most trolleys used are stolen. However, the trolley pushers are not responsible for the theft of the trolleys. There are gangs who supply trolleys to pushers. Stolen trolleys are sold for R50 on the street.<sup>37</sup>

Since the majority of trolley pushers are immigrants from neighboring countries, often without residence permits, they are generally unaware of their rights and vulnerable to police harassment. It is an open secret in Johannesburg that some police officers exploit the illegal status of migrants, threatening them with arrest and confiscation of their work tools if they do not pay a bribe. One aim of the *Trolley Pusher Initiative* was to formalize the trolley pushers' activities in the city and to provide them with a sense of agency and empowerment. The project would inform

<sup>36</sup> At the time of the project, no women were involved in this profession.

<sup>37</sup> Ismail Farouk in Hans Winkler, *Keleketla Walking Newspaper Johannesburg, A Forum for Public Art, Interventions and Small Departures* (Johannesburg: Media 24, 2008), 14. In 2008, R50 corresponded to ca. €5 (today, it is ca. €3.40).

them of their rights and of how to avoid illegal acts, and, most importantly, give them pride in their work by bringing them together and thereby amplifying their voice. For example, Farouk organized a protest march, the *Johannesburg Trolley Pusher Protest* (2008) (Fig. 2), in which trolley pushers marched to the gates of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), where police had regularly arrested migrants, often on specious grounds. The march facilitated a dialogue between the two parties involved and led to the decision to introduce a licensing system for individual trolley pushers. The idea, in principle, was to formalize and thus to de-criminalize the trolley pushers' activity.

As with most of his projects, Farouk collaborated with an academic institution, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and its Wits Law Clinic. Together with the NGO African Diaspora Forum, they offered workshops for the trolley pushers at the Drill Hall. The result was that the Law Clinic won a number of civil lawsuits thanks to the detailed documentation of the trolley pushers' arrests.<sup>38</sup>



*Fig. 2:* Keith and the protestors, May 2008. Photo: Ismail Farouk. A protest action against the criminalization of trolley pushing in Joubert Park demonstrated that the trolley pushers are united against police harassment. During the protest, trolley pushers addressed members of the police force and highlighted the fact that they were creating jobs and were not mere criminals.

38 Cara Snyman, "Künstlerische Arbeit mit und im Raum: Der Stadtgeograf Ismail Farouk untersucht die Logik der Ungleichheit," in *Zeitgenössische Künstler aus Südafrika*, ed. Peter Anders and Matthew Krouse (Göttingen: Steidl 2010), 198.

In recognition of his engagement with the rights of the trolley pushers, Farouk won the Sylt Quelle Cultural Award in 2008. This included a cash prize of €10,000. He used this sum to commission four custom-built prototype trolleys designed specifically for this project (Fig. 3). These served to de-criminalize the trolley pushers as they replaced the stolen trolleys, thereby providing an opportunity to escape the vicious circle of owning stolen property. In addition, these trolleys were used to distribute information regarding the trolley pushers' rights and the legal action they could take if arrested for loitering, the most frequent pretext for police intervention. Farouk concluded the project with an exhibition at GoetheOnMain, one of the exhibition spaces established in Arts on Main in 2009, in what today is known as the Maboneng district.<sup>39</sup> The exhibition included a video of the streets of Johannesburg's Inner City, which displayed shots taken by a camera being pushed in a trolley, as well as works made by the trolley pushers themselves. The works included the *Cigarette Paper Diaries* (2008) by Mthobane Dlodlo, a trolley pusher and cigarette vendor who had participated in one of Farouk's workshops where the informal economies of Johannesburg were captured with individual city "maps."<sup>40</sup> The exhibition targeted an art audience whose inner-city experience was that of a drive-by commuter at best and to whom the city center continued to be a chaotic, messy, unpredictable, and therefore threatening place.

In Farouk's view, formalization above all means supporting "existing positive networks" and economic activities that contribute to a more equitable distribution of resources than neoliberal corporate privatization.<sup>41</sup> With the simple provision of legally produced and acquired trolleys, trolley pushers could avoid one of many small offenses against the existing laws and bylaws. In addition, the *Trolley Pusher Initiative* attempted to establish formal partnerships with the police and city administration to provide trolley pushers with documentation and to teach them their rights.

Furthermore, similar to the art exhibition at Arts on Main, guided *Trolley Pusher Tours* reached out to people who were unfamiliar with the inner city or who normally would avoid it. Trolley pushers guided visitors around the parts of the city where they worked. The tour began in Joubert Park at the

<sup>39</sup> This district is itself subject to controversial debates regarding urban regeneration and gentrification. See later in this essay and Alice Nevin, "Instant Mutuality: The Development of Maboneng in Inner-City Johannesburg," *Anthropology Southern Africa* 37 (2014): 187–201.

<sup>40</sup> Snyman, "Künstlerische Arbeit mit und im Raum," 195.

<sup>41</sup> Farouk, Interview.



*Fig. 3:* Hansa rides the new trolley, 2009. Photo: Ismail Farouk.

Drill Hall and wound its way through the sidewalks between Noord and Park City taxi ranks. The newsletter promised that visitors could

[...] expect to see ‘bad buildings,’ street markets and meander through dense pedestrian traffic; hear the beat of wedding songs, fashion diva’s [sic] and Africa’s rhythm; smell the aromas of Mozambican stew, braaied kebabs and fast food.<sup>42</sup>

Because this area is particularly contested and suffers from a bad reputation, these tours sought to establish trust, while also offering suburbanites and visitors insights into the working of a rapidly growing urban center based in no small part on informal activities. Farouk states:

We hope to expose people to the urban contradictions present in the city and are attempting to address the need to walk in the downtown area of Johannesburg. Walking in Johannesburg is strongly linked to class, race, crime, fear and paranoia. The proposed tours attempt to address these challenges, whilst getting people thinking and contributing to a conversation related to the politics of public space in the city.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> E-newsletter for Trolley Pusher Tours, May 15, 2009. *Braai* is a South African term for grilled meat/barbecue. See also <https://trolleyworks.blogspot.de/2009/05/abyssinia-coffee-tour.html> [Accessed on March 5, 2018].

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

These tours were promoted on the Trolleyworks website and aimed at a middle- to upper-class local and international audience interested in exploring this unfamiliar neighborhood within an organized framework that they perceived as safe.<sup>44</sup> Even though such advertising at times risks exoticizing such areas and their residents, and feeding into the capitalist pattern of promoting cultural consumption, the purpose was to show the very ordinariness<sup>45</sup> of this area, where hundreds of thousands of people live and work on a daily basis. Farouk called into question the dominant discourse of an inner city beyond control by offering the visitors an immediate live experience.<sup>46</sup>

The project came to an unfortunate end a few months later due to the unreliability of some trolley pushers. For Farouk, this was a very difficult moment because his major aim had been to formalize existing structures and markets and thus to secure both their legal legitimacy and their sustainability. The project failed for a variety of reasons related to the volatility of the informal economy and the unpredictability of everyday challenges encountered by the trolley pushers. However, this does not change his opinion that art is an important incentive for social change. Essential for such change is the understanding that people do not only inhabit space, they produce it. This Lefebvrian<sup>47</sup> idea drives Farouk's work. By researching and analyzing the everyday and the problems faced by people living and working in particular neighborhoods, he tried to "support positive networks"<sup>48</sup> and activate energies, ideas, and communities with the aim of creating a better city in the immediate future. He did so by strengthening the voices of those Johannesburg residents who are still structurally excluded as citizens.

#### Embracing urban regeneration: The Trinity Session's playgrounds and public art program

In contrast to Ismail Farouk, who in his own words has been "a thorn in the side" of the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA; Farouk in Siegenthaler and Farouk 2008), which is tasked with implementing

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<sup>44</sup> The web address was [www.trolleyworks.net](http://www.trolleyworks.net). However, the site has relocated to <http://trolleyworks.blogspot.ch/> [Accessed on October 12, 2016].

<sup>45</sup> Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

<sup>46</sup> For a critique of such "subaltern urbanism" approaches, see Ananya Roy, "Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35 (2011): 223–238.

<sup>47</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>48</sup> Farouk, Interview.



*Fig. 4:* Refurbished playground in Pieter Roos Park, Parktown/Berea. Photo: Fiona Siegenthaler. February 15, 2011.

the City's Growth and Development Strategy, the Trinity Session has had a longstanding cooperation with this institution.<sup>49</sup> As the long-term commissioning agent for the City of Johannesburg and the JDA, the Trinity Session has been involved in the urban regeneration program with the refurbishment of playgrounds and parks in densely populated inner-city areas, the design of the new Rea Vaya bus stops, the conceptualization, commissioning, and execution of the public art program, and numerous other commissions in Johannesburg and other towns in South Africa. The Trinity Session was founded in 2001 by Stephen Hobbs (b. 1972, Johannesburg), Marcus Neustetter (b. 1976, Johannesburg), and Kathryn Smith (b. 1975, Durban). It began as an artist collective that drew on the academic, technical, and artistic knowledge of its members to initiate diverse independent projects in visual art, design, social networking, and other art-related activities. The Trinity Session has been based in

<sup>49</sup> For more info on the Trinity Session, see their website, [www.onair.co.za](http://www.onair.co.za); Andrew Lampecht, "The Trinity Session," in *10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*, ed. Sophie Perryer (Cape Town: Bell-Roberts, 2004), 374–377; Trinity Session, *Onair. The Premises* (Johannesburg: The Bureau, 2008); and Siegenthaler, "Imageries of Johannesburg." For the JDA, see <http://www.jda.org.za> [Accessed on October 4, 2016].

different spaces in the city, with the group also running an independent exhibition space for several years. When Kathryn Smith left the collective in 2004, Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter decided to turn it into a “money-making business.”<sup>50</sup> Since then, they have offered their expertise and services as consultants to companies, schools, artists, and architects, and have a track record that reads like a permanent investment in the post-apartheid development of Johannesburg.



**Fig. 5:** *Decorated bollards at Main Street, Banking District, CBD. Photo: Fiona Siegenthaler. February 1, 2011.*

The work of the Trinity Session, which is now a small team consisting of the directors, Hobbs and Neustetter, along with a handful of collaborators, approaches the city's challenges, such as crime in public parks or the visible decay of buildings and road infrastructure, in a manner that is compatible with Johannesburg's official urban policies. This work runs parallel to their more independent collaborative

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter, interview by Fiona Siegenthaler, August 20, 2008, in Johannesburg (unpublished).

artist work as Hobbs/Neustetter, and the experiences they gain in both fields of practice feed into each other.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, each also follows his individual career as an artist. In the following, I focus on one example of their commissioned work as the Trinity Session, but take account of their independent work where it is useful.

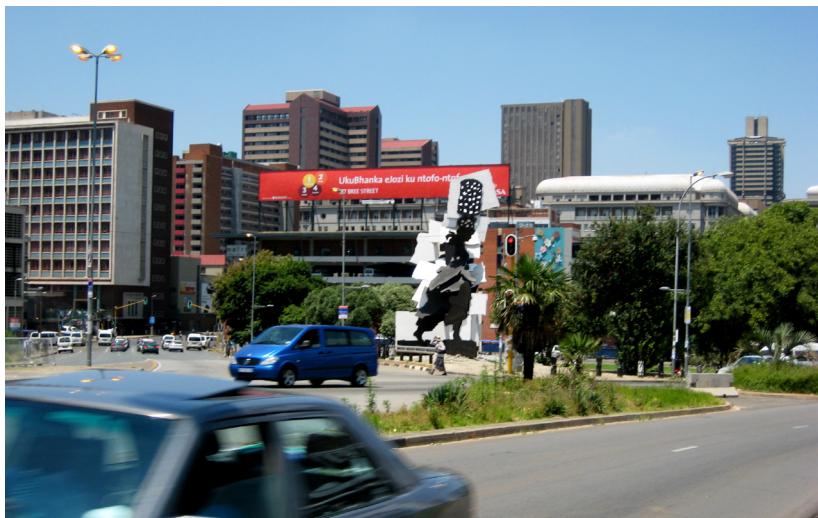
The public art commissions by the City of Johannesburg and the JDA include numerous physical and infrastructural interventions within public space in order to make the city safer and more beautiful. Two different kinds of aesthetic interventions were adopted for art in the inner-city public space. One is of a rather functional nature and can be described as urban furniture design (Fig. 4 and 5),<sup>52</sup> while public art in the form of sculptures and murals takes on a major symbolic importance for the site or even the city as a whole (Fig. 6). Major projects of the first kind include the upgrade of playgrounds as well as the introduction and refurbishment of public furniture through participatory design in the high-density neighborhoods of Berea, Hillbrow, and Yeoville in the inner city (later also in Diepsloot, Kliptown, and other areas), and at important transport junctions and Rea Vaya bus stops across Johannesburg (Fig. 7).

In the years prior to the refurbishment, the playgrounds had a bad reputation. Drug dealers and prostitutes used them as trading points, and sexual assaults and murders occurred in the bushes or badly illuminated corners of the parks. Thus, besides beautifying the place and making it visually more attractive for the users, the refurbishment also served as a form of crime prevention. It took place in two phases: one between November 2007 and July 2008, and another between July 2008 and June 2009, and involved different collaborators and partners, including many artists. Some artists—among them Ismail Farouk—served as initial research assistants, while others participated by creating works for the Hillbrow Berea Yeoville (HBY) playgrounds.

The team developed several designs in collaboration with neighborhood residents, including children who use the facilities. The resulting works serve diverse functions, such as providing playful entertainment and aesthetic beautification, and as a result, safety and trust. They are also conceived in such a way as to prevent undesired behavior within the

<sup>51</sup> See for example Marcus Neustetter, “urbaNET Hillbrow/Dakar/Hillbrow,” in *Representation & Spatial Practices in Urban South Africa*, ed. Leora Farber (Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg, 2009), 164–169.

<sup>52</sup> Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* (London: Routledge, 1997).



**Fig. 6:** *Fire Walker* (2009) by William Kentridge and Gerhard Marx at the southern end of the Queen Elizabeth Bridge, Johannesburg. Photo: Fiona Siegenthaler. February 14, 2011.



**Fig. 7:** Rea Vaya Bus Rapid Transit station at Carlton Center, Johannesburg CBD, designed by Hannelie Coetze. Photo: Fiona Siegenthaler. February 18, 2011.

playground space. For instance, South African designer Claire Regnard's tree sculpture in Pieter Roos Park (Fig. 8) plays a dual role: The tree provides protection from the burning South African sun, but it also prevents homeless people from using it as a shelter because it does not offer sufficient surface to sit or lie comfortably at leisure.<sup>53</sup> The playground furniture is intended to facilitate an overview of the park and avoid creating hidden corners where criminals can hide. An important aspect of the entire plan for renewing the playgrounds was the idea that this beautification would help to restore trust, get the people out into public spaces again, and thereby provide a social control that would contribute to fighting crime, preserving safety, and creating a sense of community. With its aims and strategies, it is reminiscent of the Peace Parks that township inhabitants introduced in the mid-eighties to reinstate safety and peace within the violent context of the state of emergency and the anti-apartheid struggle.<sup>54</sup> However, in contrast to the established townships that have reached a more or less stable residential setup, it is difficult to identify a particular community in HBY due to the high rate of migrational flux in the inner city.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, "community" here is primarily understood to be the families who live in the buildings next to the playgrounds.

While the actual process of upgrading the playgrounds involved workshops with resident children, the general setup of the workshops and the implementation were directed by the workshop facilitators in cooperation with the JDA. This suggests a top-down approach, allowing only little space for artistic agency beyond the paradigms of beautification and safety, but it proved successful considering the reaction of the people I talked to in these parks. For many, beautification, decoration, the use of bright colors, and the sense that somebody had made an investment in these parks, was a sign of recognition and appreciation not only for the space but also for the communities living in the neighborhoods. For many, this kind of refurbishment was indeed a reason to reconsider visiting such parks. Children and women, who had felt especially unsafe due to the bad or nonexistent illumination of the parks and too many potential hideouts for sex

53 This is common practice in cities in many parts of the world. See also Miles, *Art, Space and the City*.

54 Steven Sack, "'Garden of Eden or Political Landscape?' Street Art in Mamelodi and Other Townships," in *African Art in Southern Africa: From Tradition to Township*, ed. Anitra Nettleton and David Hammond-Tooke, (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1990), 191–210.

55 See Loren B. Landau, "Transplants and Transients: Idioms of Belonging and Dislocation in Inner-City Johannesburg," *African Studies Review* 49 (2006): 125–145.

offenders and criminals, appreciated the clean and manageable facilities and visited them either after school while waiting for their parents to come home from work or as a place to have lunch during office hours. Other users, like unemployed men or homeless people, also spent time in the parks, at least during daytime. However, their activities there were limited due to the strict rules and regulations indicated on signboards in most of these parks. For example, cooking, sleeping, trading, setting up a tent, or making a fire is strictly prohibited (Fig. 9).



*Fig. 8:* Performance Platform Sculpture by Claire Regnard in Pieter Roos Park, Parktown/Berea. Photo: Fiona Siegenthaler. August 20, 2008.

While the playgrounds and their functional and aesthetic refurbishment through design is widely appreciated, especially by their users in the residential areas, the more representative public art program in the inner city has provoked controversy, especially in the case of specific commissions. High-profile commissions may reflect the aspirations and ambitions of the city, but because of their symbolic relevance, they can inadvertently become ironic comments on urban policies that ignore the call for social and spatial justice. This is the case with the *Fire Walker* (2009) by South African artists William Kentridge and Gerhard Marx, which was commissioned by the JDA as an agent for the City of Johannesburg with Trinity Session

as intermediaries and has become an integral part of Johannesburg's city branding (Fig. 6).<sup>56</sup> According to the press release, it is a "monument to the everyday, the overlooked, and to the entrepreneurial activities" that have taken place on its site for many years.<sup>57</sup> The pride with which those in charge of this project refer to the *Fire Walker* shows that it is considered a piece of prestige and an actual milestone in the city's ambition to become a "world-class African city."<sup>58</sup> However, this iconic sculpture has also been the subject of criticism. Firstly, it is one of the most costly post-apartheid public sculptures in Johannesburg,<sup>59</sup> and secondly, it monumentalizes a profession that in recent years has been subject to bylaw enforcement and near extinction: the brazier carrier.<sup>60</sup>

Brazier carriers provide the owners of small stalls with the hot coals on which maize, sheep heads (*smilies*), or sausages are fried and sold to passers-by (Fig. 10). These informal *braai* stands and their suppliers first appeared in the early 1990s, but they were being evicted from the streets of Johannesburg in the name of urban regeneration when the artwork was commissioned.<sup>61</sup> The sculpture is, therefore, a paradox to many observers, as it monumentalizes a profession that is being concurrently eliminated from the streets of Johannesburg by the very institution that commissioned it. This corresponds to the paradox that the informal market of Johannesburg is perceived by many as the most African aspect of post-apartheid urbanity, but it does not fit the city's ambitions of becoming a world-class African city. The "world class" designation primarily relies on a formal and neoliberal economic policy wherein informal African economies are reduced to merely symbolic representation.

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56 See [www.onair.co.za](http://www.onair.co.za) and [www.joburg.org.za](http://www.joburg.org.za) [Accessed on August 22, 2016]. See also: Oliver Barstow and Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, eds., *Fire Walker: William Kentridge, Gerhard Marx* (Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2011).

57 Press release in a newsletter by the Trinity Session, August 2009. See also <http://www.newtown.co.za/heritage/art> [Accessed on March 5, 2018].

58 Dirusweit, "Public Space and the Politics of Propinquity in Johannesburg," 53; see also Monitor Group of iGoli 2010, quoted in Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 138.

59 Personal communication with the Trinity Session, 2011.

60 See Mpho Matsipa, "Urban Mythologies," in *Fire Walker*, ed. Oliver Bartow and Bronwyn Law-Viljoen (Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2011), 60–69.

61 Many of these evictions are officially accompanied by city support to formalize the businesses (see City of Johannesburg, "Plan to Help Informal Traders," press release June 14, 2011. <http://www.joburg.org.za> [Accessed on August 23, 2016]). While formalization certainly has advantages, it also comes with financial risks that many informal traders cannot afford.



**Fig. 9:** Sign of City Parks in Ernest Oppenheimer Park illustrating the dos and don'ts in the use of the park. Photo: Fiona Siegenthaler. February 10, 2011.



**Fig. 10:** Andrew Tshabangu, Carrying Brazier, Johannesburg 2004. Copyright: Andrew Tshabangu. Courtesy of Gallery MOMO.

There is also a contradiction in the activities of the Trinity Session before cooperating with the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality and its agents. Stephen Hobbs was one of the very few white artists who embraced the first phase of urban change that was generally perceived as decay, and explored the inner city thoroughly at a time when many companies and white inhabitants had fled. His individual body of work, consisting of photography, video, installation, and multimedia objects, has been shaped by his trips through the city and by his interest in the transitional urban aesthetics. He also managed the Market Theatre Galleries in Newtown in the mid-1990s, at a time when all other galleries in the inner city had relocated to the northern suburbs.<sup>62</sup> It is this pioneering work and his knowledge about the early phase of the transforming city that qualified him to work with the authorities of Johannesburg toward a future city involving art in public space as one among several strategies of urban regeneration. By cooperating with the JDA, however, he also somewhat shifted his position from understanding and partaking in the new informal urban logic to being a part of the official regeneration program that combats informality. The Trinity Session undoubtedly follows an inclusive agenda, but by cooperating with the JDA and thus adhering to the current urban policy, their scope for socio-political criticism is limited. On the other hand, this secure source of income allows them to do other, independent, and often more critical work on an individual basis as artists and as the artist duo Hobbs/Neustetter. They travel nationally and internationally, encounter other social and artistic contexts, and thus make different experiences that can find their way into the public art projects.

### **Social and aesthetic values in artistic practice: To embrace or contest urban regeneration?**

The artistic positions of Ismail Farouk and the Trinity Session have several aspects in common. Firstly, they try to contribute to the creation of what Ash Amin describes as a “good city.”<sup>63</sup> Of course, the notion of a good city is open to different normative ideas and imaginations underlying their practices. While the Trinity Session aims for safe and inviting communal spaces and a beautification of the public space catering to working- and

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62 See Stephen Hobbs, *Grey Area: Multi Media Works* (Johannesburg: The Workers' Library and Museum, 1996); Hobbs, “Erasing Roadmakings at Crns. Bezuidenhout and Jeppe Streets,” in Judin and Vladislavić, *Architecture, Apartheid and After*, 301–303; Hobbs, “Art in the ‘No Go Zones’: the Project Tour Guides of the Inner City,” in *Total Global: Umgang mit nicht-westlicher Kunst*, ed. Samuel Herzog (Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2000), 13–20.

63 Ash Amin, “The Good City,” *Urban Studies* 43 (2006): 1009–1023.

middle-class families, Farouk imagines a “socially just city” as formulated by Don Mitchell<sup>64</sup> and Susan Fainstein,<sup>65</sup> which would involve the decriminalization of informal practices currently open to prosecution. Secondly, both interventions choose spaces accessible to the public as sites of intervention, including the street, the playground, and the taxi rank. Thirdly, both approaches have a sense of restoring or defending places and practices that have been neglected or challenged either by the urban authorities or by particular groups of the urban population, such as the legacy of apartheid segregation, the infrastructural neglect of playgrounds, and the harassment of informal practitioners by police. Fourthly, they consider social visibility a contribution to a better city. This contribution may involve community building by researching and formalizing informal activities or by making squares and playgrounds safe by providing a spatial overview, illuminating dark areas, and beautifying communally shared space.<sup>66</sup> Finally, the methods of both kinds of intervention are directly or indirectly predicated on research typical of the social sciences such as the tracing of networks, the observation of social practices in the public realm, and community consultation.

Apart from these overlaps, there are some important differences, too. While the playground designs tend to neutralize social disparities by creating functional spaces for a normatively imagined urban life, the interventions of Ismail Farouk point to a series of diverging values that come into view, especially within the contested relationship between new urban practices and the regulatory mechanisms of the authorities. Therefore, while some of the Trinity Session’s projects may appear to have a utopian purpose, Farouk’s interventions should be seen in terms of a critical approach. In his introduction to *Art and the Public Sphere*, W. J. T. Mitchell conceives these two categories as follows:

[...] a dialectic emerges between what I will call ‘utopian’ and ‘critical’ relations between art and its public: on the one hand, art that attempts to raise up an ideal public sphere, a nonsite, an imaginary landscape (we might imagine here the classical image of a temple entrance or plaza filled with wise women and men engaging in enlightened discourse); on the other hand, art that disrupts the image of a pacified, utopian public

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<sup>64</sup> Mitchell, *The Right to the City*.

<sup>65</sup> Susan S. Fainstein, *The Just City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

<sup>66</sup> On the role of social and technology-based visibility in safety discourses, see Andrea M. Brighten, *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

sphere, that exposes contradictions and adopts an ironic, subversive relation to the public it addresses, and the public space where it appears.<sup>67</sup>

Independent and socially engaged artists mostly adopt the activist and politically critical, or in Chantal Mouffe's terms, "agonistic" perspective,<sup>68</sup> supporting the cause of sectors of society that are victimized by the capitalist system, or in the case of urban regeneration in Johannesburg, by neoliberal politics. Art interventions commissioned by urban authorities as part of urban regeneration, on the other hand, tend to adopt the utopian perspective. They pursue the official visions of a better city by beautifying it according to hegemonic norms rather than challenging normative ideas.

However, it is too simple to put Farouk or the Trinity Session into any of these categories. While many artists like Farouk criticize normative imaginaries of the city and its residents in their artistic practices, they often are as much subject to such normative imaginaries as their fellow urbanites. Conversely, artists like the Trinity Session appear to act in line with urban politics, but they do so with a lot of experience from other, earlier, and more experimental engagements with a transforming city generally perceived as moribund but in their eyes also bearing enormous potential.

In both cases, the general socio-political changes, the vicinity of workplaces to the inner city, along with personal and artistic interest triggered the decision to experience parts of the city that are avoided by Johannesburg's middle and upper classes. In both cases, the artists had been inhabitants of this city themselves and they related their own city experiences of the past and the present to this post-apartheid change. Finally, besides engaging with the transforming city in their art—whether with a utopian or a critical approach—they also were and are common city dwellers and therefore part of the urban regeneration trends, though often unconsciously.

<sup>67</sup> William J. T. Mitchell, "Introduction: Utopia and Critique," in *Art and the Public Sphere*, ed. William J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>68</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art & Research* 1 (2007). <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html> [Accessed on August 23, 2016].

### **Artists as city dwellers**

On the one level, artists are politically and socially informed agents who choose aesthetic practices to react to and intervene in urban change. This artistic agency is normally in the focus of art scholars, art theorists, and art critics when they analyze and interpret the role of artists in urban change and urban regeneration. However, on another level, artists also have a life as common city dwellers, as residents who live, commute, and consume like any other urban resident. They are involved in urban life and politics not only as artists but also as inhabitants. Moreover, these social practices also shape urban policy.

For example, some artists in Johannesburg were pioneers in the 1990s and early 2000s when they decided to rent or buy a building in the city and create a working space for themselves and their artist friends.<sup>69</sup> Property prices were low at that time and therefore offered artists who rejected the fear and panic created by discourses of urban decay, crime, and apocalypse an interesting investment opportunity for shared studio space. August House in End Street is an established example of such pioneering initiatives. In 2006, Bie Venter, an artist and cultural practitioner, converted this former textile factory into a studio building that became a lively place for artists to live and work. August House was one of the first such studio buildings in the eastern end of town, but the Bag Factory artist studios, the Artist Proof Studio, and Market Photo Workshop in Fordsburg and Newtown in the western part of the city had done the same in the early 1990s, followed a bit later by the Joubert Park Project (ca. 1996–2011).<sup>70</sup> These initiatives were not meant to generate money, but to provide cheap working and living space for artists willing or even keen to work in the city center.

However, studies in other cities such as New York show that artists and cultural producers who explore and even shape spaces that middle and upper class residents tend to avoid are the perfect clients for property investors who want to establish entire neighborhoods as trendy

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69 There are several similar cases worldwide of artists involuntarily acting as vanguards of gentrification, see for instance Rebecca Solnit and Susan Schwartzenburg, *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism* (London: Verso, 2002).

70 For information on the respective institutions, see <https://www.facebook.com/BagFactory>; <http://www.artistproofstudio.co.za>; <http://www.marketphotoworkshop.co.za> and Pamela Allara, “Johannesburg In and Out of the Museum: The Joubert Park Project, 2000–2001,” *Nka* 18 (2003): 28–33.



*Fig. 11: Main Street Life seen from behind in its Jeppestown neighbourhood context.*  
Photo: Fiona Siegenthaler. February 3, 2011.

and noteworthy.<sup>71</sup> The Maboneng district in the immediate vicinity of the August House in Johannesburg is a case in point.<sup>72</sup> It shows how investors build on the art world, including commercial art galleries, international cultural institutions like the Goethe Institut, professional printing workshops, design shops, and the artists themselves as consumers of urban services and commerce. The Maboneng district is a major urban regeneration project spearheaded by Jonathan Liebmann, a young property developer in cooperation with the JDA in the eastern part of the city historically known as Jeppestown, right next to Doornfontein, where August House is located. In the years of Farouk's and the Trinity Session's interventions in other parts of the inner city, he bought several blocks in this area and reconfigured the interior of these industrial

<sup>71</sup> Aaron Shkuda, *The Lofts of SoHo: Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950–1980* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989); for Braamfontein, see also Mary Corrigall, "What Happens when the 'Pioneers' set up Artistic Enclaves?", *Incorrigible Corrigall* (blog), <http://corrigall.blogspot.com/2010/11/what-happens-when-pioneers-set-up.html> [Accessed on November 4, 2010].

<sup>72</sup> Nevin, "Instant Mutuality."



*Fig. 12:* Entrance area of Main Street Life. Photo: Fiona Siegenthaler. January 23, 2011.

spaces into hotels, commercial spaces, apartments, and studios. Main Street Life, for instance, is a fashionable apartment house for artists and people of the creative industry (Fig. 11 and 12). The building contains 178 apartments for rent and sale (including office spaces), an independent cinema, a restaurant, a sports room, a rooftop bar, and an upscale Boutique Art Hotel.<sup>73</sup> The corridors serve as exhibition spaces for artworks. It is a lifestyle place where cultural and artistic exchange and sociability compensate for the restricted personal space in the small studio apartments (with the exception of a few large loft-like flats). The contrast between the building's slick interior and the street life outside was extreme in the beginning. Accordingly, artists' attitudes towards Maboneng as a property development project diverged. In informal conversations conducted in the years between 2009 and 2011, many artists felt that it was extremely generic within the industrial and largely neglected neighborhood context, which was dominated by small commerce and informal activities like the collection and recycling of garbage and

<sup>73</sup> See <http://property.co.za/property/main-street-life> [Accessed on March 5, 2018].

paper.<sup>74</sup> For others, and for young female artists especially, the interior of the building was a safe place to be in the inner city.<sup>75</sup> Many artists and art institutions moved in, but some have moved out again for different reasons, such as rising rents. This building complements a complex launched earlier in 2009, called Arts on Main (Fig. 13), which is located a block away. It hosts the inner-city project space of Goodman Gallery, the GoetheOnMain project space, David Krut Print Workshop, and other design shops and art galleries, including a restaurant. As one of the first to settle, William Kentridge established his studio in Arts on Main, and in the meantime, the complex has become an important place for the local and national art scene as well as for foreign art-loving visitors to meet, connect, exhibit, sell, and buy design objects and artworks.



*Fig. 13: Central courtyard of Arts on Main. Photo: Fiona Siegenthaler. September 26, 2009.*

74 See Nevin, "Instant Mutuality."

75 This emerged in several informal conversations I conducted during fieldwork between 2009 and 2011.

In the beginning, Arts on Main and Main Street Life constituted an insular kind of cultural hub in the middle of an inner-city neighborhood dominated by informal business. However, soon more cultural institutions like the Museum of African Design (MOAD) and restaurants and shops, as well as residential buildings, complemented these beginnings, expanding the hub to several blocks. They are designed according to a consistent architectural and visual pattern and therefore create a new neighborhood aesthetic. Liebmann is clear about his purposes: “It is possible to contribute to the city’s cultural regeneration and make money while doing it.”<sup>76</sup>

Attracting investors to the inner city has had a large impact on the local art scene. Refurbished buildings that offer residential and working spaces appropriate for middle-class standards next to the city center are attractive for artists who want to live and work centrally and link up with new urban trends. Since the inner city had been in disrepute for almost two decades, even flats in the refurbished buildings were affordable for middle-class incomes. This attracted artists and cultural producers who typically explore and even shape spaces that others sometimes avoid.

This is exactly what happened with the Maboneng district, which has now become a place to go for foreign visitors interested in the cultural production of Johannesburg and for suburbanites who would come to buy organic food at the Sunday market, or go for dinner in one of the many fancy restaurants. The Trinity Session have had their offices in the neighborhood since 2011 and Neustetter owns an apartment there. Living and working there, they essentially contribute as consumers to the success of such regeneration projects, but also to their exclusive nature against parts of the population who do not have the means for such consumption.<sup>77</sup> Although even Ismail Farouk and his underprivileged collaborators accessed Arts on Main when they attended the opening of their *Trolleyworks* exhibition in the GoetheOnMain project space, it is not unlikely that, if the trolley pushers wanted to enter the precinct some days later and without his company, they would have been sent away by the security guards policing the gates.<sup>78</sup>

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76 In Nia Magoulianiti-McGregor, “Innercity Artwork,” *Visi*, <https://www.visi.co.za/innercity-artwork> [Accessed on February 4, 2011].

77 Nevin, “Instant Mutuality.”

78 Similarly, people who want to ask shop managers for employment as cleaners, cooks, or other low-wage jobs are often prevented from even entering the precinct. Also, the artist Senzeni Marasela, who wears a *seshoeshoe* dress typical of Sotho migrant laborers as a “permanent performance” was identified as a member of the poor urban class and denied entry (see John Peffer, Press Release for “Think of Number 6: Exhibition Curated by John Peffer, with Bettina Malcomess,” Johannesburg, 2015. <https://thinkofnumber6.wordpress.com> [Accessed on August 23, 2016]).

There are gatekeepers who decide who has access and who does not, and this is what enables the visitors, consumers, and residents of such spaces to feel safe. There is, therefore, a small step between challenging urban regeneration as an artist in one neighborhood and indirectly tolerating its exclusionary mechanisms in another.

Artists are not only the avant-garde that (voluntarily or not) prepares the soil for property investors by establishing studios and cheap living space in rundown areas of town. They are also active participants in this economy once it is established, using the cafés as meeting points, living in the apartments, and working in the studios at an affordable rent, at least in the beginning of the redevelopment. Moreover, they are commissioned to create artworks to decorate hotels and design furniture in the apartment blocks, or they sell their work to the property investors and their cooperating banks.

Artists thus contribute to the gentrification of the areas, and thereby often also to a significant rise in prices, which then become unaffordable even for the artists themselves. August House, for instance, was revalued by the City of Johannesburg some years ago at a price that far exceeded the price it had had in the mid-2000s. The property owner in 2013 confronted renting artists with the termination of the lease agreement because he wanted to sell the building according to the highly lucrative revaluation. However, while some artists moved out and sought studio spaces in other parts of the city, the building did not sell at the overvalued price. In this case, the story ended to the advantage of the remaining artists because later, another property investor bought it who preferred to maintain its function as an art studio building. Since he is an art collector himself, some artists even pay their rent by giving artworks until they can afford to pay in cash.<sup>79</sup>

Such redeveloped neighborhoods have a severe impact on artists as city dwellers, because they are sites of social life and exchange, of parties and business meetings, frequented by collectors and gallery owners, as well as local and international art critics. Indeed, many artists follow these trends and opt for a studio, an apartment, or just exhibition opportunities in these redeveloped areas. Apartments, artist studios, art galleries, design shops, and cafés offer the artists a place in the inner city that provides the infrastructure and safety they need for their work and facilitates meeting points, workspace, and a locus for artistic exchange and production. While many artists are skeptical of the initial insular nature

79 Stefanie Jason, "August House: The Home of Jozi's Rising Sons and Daughters," *Mail & Guardian*, September 11, 2015. <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-09-10-august-house-the-home-of-jozis-rising-sons-and-daughters>.

of such urban development projects, they are happy to have a place in the center of the city. The artists working and living there feel safe and enjoy sharing time and space with other artists in a city where distances between studios, exhibition spaces, and other institutions can be long. The social background of many artists is working- or middle-class, and as they succeed in entering the art market, they can afford to rent a space—at least during the early stages of the regeneration process.

## Conclusion

This essay discussed the ambivalent position of artists in a transforming city. Because they are not just artists but also ordinary city residents, with a desire for exhibition opportunities, affordable workspace, inspiring surroundings, and safety, their own social practice often stands in contradiction to the message they try to convey in their artwork. As social agents, they are deeply entangled with the issues they deal with as art professionals.

Ismail Farouk consciously tried to raise awareness of the implications and social consequences of urban regeneration, opting for socially informed and activist interventions to direct attention to the criminalization of people involved in informal business. By emphasizing the role informal professionals have played in establishing alternative social and economic infrastructures when the city was bankrupt and deprived of public services, he hoped formalization would be inclusive of such practices. However, these interventions were only partially successful and sometimes even facilitated gentrification and the expulsion of these very actors from their neighborhood streets. For instance, organizing tours in areas of the city that had been understood as dangerous no-go-zones for the middle and upper class has become quite fashionable in the meantime. Diverse new stakeholders, including property investors, now engage in activities of this kind in order to attract potential clients as well as tourists to developing areas.

The Trinity Session developed a specialized knowledge about the city in the 1990s when their research was largely autonomous and informed by personal interest, mainly that of Stephen Hobbs, whose oeuvre consistently explored the nature of urban change in post-apartheid Johannesburg. Now, his practice as an individual artist continues partly this way, but his practice as a businessman and part of the Trinity Session follows the rules of urban regeneration. He and Marcus Neustetter make use of their previously acquired knowledge and social sensitization in their cooperation with the JDA by adopting community-oriented methods with which

they are familiar. Meanwhile, their JDA-related work provides them with data and experiences that they can feed into their more independent work as Hobbs/Neustetter.

While many artists in Johannesburg—and in post-crisis cities worldwide—are critical about the social implications of neoliberal urban renewal strategies, they find themselves in an ambiguous position between embracing and contesting urban regeneration. At times, even socially sensitive or critical artists are co-opted into gentrification and exclusionary practices. This ambiguous position is apparent on several different levels. On the one hand, the social criticism they express in their artworks speaks to liberal and educated middle- to upper-class citizens and therefore successfully attracts the latter's attention to urban spaces hitherto ignored or avoided. By doing so, the artists also contribute, consciously or not, to bringing in the solvent class and marginalizing the poor. On the other hand, in their social praxis, many artists tend to embrace urban regeneration as a matter of fact that contributes to their own quality of life, even if they reflect these contradictions and ambivalences in their art, sometimes in a more symbolic, sometimes in an immediate, politically engaged way.

Artists in Johannesburg have a strong social consciousness that stands in conflict with the personal ease that evolves with the reduction of crime, grime, and related feelings of fear. For most, the social aspects of neoliberal gentrification remain an ambivalent and difficult issue, and some artists are even affected themselves because the initially cheap spaces that provided new opportunities are becoming increasingly unaffordable. The ambivalence in their attitude towards urban renewal thus also has to do with their own economic and social position, which, as many artists are aware, is a privileged one.