

3.3 Borders of Precincts: Unpacking the Politics of White Neighbourhood Identities in the Post-Apartheid Black City

Denver Hendricks¹ and Alona Martínez Perez²

Abstract: The middle-income white precinct in Melville, South Africa, and Johannesburg's predominantly black post-apartheid city are still separate entities. This threatens the democratic production of space in a post-apartheid city like Johannesburg. Through a city-funded “bottom-up” approach, the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) funded a Community Participatory Design (CPD) project, known as the Melville Precinct Plan. This plan involving the Melville Residents Association (MRA) helped voice a different opinion about how the urban area is envisioned concerning the Strategic Area Framework (SAF) set out by the City of Johannesburg.

Several questions were central to this research. First, why does the MRA disagree with the Metropolitan Development Framework? To what extent do race and fear play a part in the argument? Second, how can a sustainable and equitable post-apartheid city be achieved? Third, what are the values of the government? How do they relate to policies, filter down to the municipal level, and make a difference on communities on an urban level? (Marinova and Hossain, 2013, p. 347).

The relationship between pro-liberal urban development and planning projects and the responses of a resistant minority group in Johannesburg in 2017 are considered in this light. The post-apartheid city and the pertinent arguments for and against development are contextualized. What kind of development is important on the city's borders, what fears are synonymous with that, and unfair and exclusionary practices are also considered? Melville Precinct Plan serves as a case study to examine its framing policies and the general outcomes to unpack how the borders, peripherals and edges are used politically to undermine generous public participation processes in planning a new vision of a community.

Key Words: City; Precinct Planning; Values; Neighbourhood; Residents; Exclusivity

Introduction

“This will not be another Hillbrow.”³

This was one of the statements made by the Melville Resident Association (MRA) members at a participatory community design (CPD) session concerning the Melville precinct in Johannesburg in early 2017. This statement is problematic because it contradicts the post-apartheid government's spatial planning policies and exhibits exclusionary values. a CPD process should be used to ascertain the on-the-ground values and understand their fears and aspirations (Marinova and Hossain, 2013, p. 343). CPD sessions are not only an opportunity for the community to articulate their collective vision of the city, but it is also a process where the community, consultants and the city officials learn from each other, share ideas, build capacity and develop a sense of community (Marinova and Hossain, 2013, p. 346).

¹ Department of Architecture, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

² Leicester School of Architecture, De Montfort University Leicester, United Kingdom

³ Hillbrow was an affluent white only inner city neighbourhood. During the 1980s political uprising that led to the first 1994 elections, it was known for its crime and rubbish-strewn streets and became a slum.

Johannesburg's planning policies and its urban development projects aggressively address the post-apartheid city's concerns, segregating people by race. Today, the long-lasting dire effects of spatial inequality are still experienced by the marginalised. The "Corridors of Freedom" scheme is a unique project initiated by Mayor Parks Tau a few years ago and aimed to re-stitch the city again. Among many other policies that echo the same anti-apartheid values, the SAF exhibits progressive socio-economic place-making strategies and mainly focuses on three main transport corridors around Johannesburg. The Empire-Perth corridor connects Johannesburg Central Business District (CBD) and the township of Soweto. Along this corridor, on the border of the CBD, Melville is a white middle-income neighbourhood. The JDA was commissioned to undergo a CPD for a new vision of the precinct to support Freedom Project's Corridors. However, the project received resistance from the MRA due to the imposing effects of urban densification on the precinct.

The research draws directly upon personal experience. In 2015, we won a bid as urban design consultants to facilitate a precinct plan for the Melville suburb in Johannesburg. The precinct plan is guided by the growth and development strategy's overarching values, Spatial Development Framework, Regional Spatial Development Framework, and the Strategic Area Framework (SAF). These framing policies are guides and allow the application to differ in regions, areas and precincts. The Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) was the city's implementing agent and the client. The project's objective was to facilitate a series of CPD workshops to solicit a new urban vision for the Melville precinct and support the SAF's Empire-Perth Corridor. CPD processes can be rewarding and pose complex challenges due to conflicting interests. This particular CPD process was challenging as the MRA threatened to stop it. The MRA's values and ideas did not align with the city's SAF. The underpinning reasons for this are multi-layered and will be discussed later.

Ways in which communities envision their urban environment and how this relates to the broader SAF is considered using the Melville Precinct Plan⁴ as a case study. This consideration not only contextualises the broader socio-economic, political and historical issues of planning in a post-apartheid city, it examines ways in which the new pro-liberal planning policies and values are interpreted into a tangible vision of the neighbourhood scale (i.e. with precinct plans). However, before unpacking the Melville Precinct Plan (MPP), it is essential to contextualise the broader dynamics of white resistance in three categories of fear: post-apartheid, crime and the Corridors of Freedom.

The Fear of Post-Apartheid

The apartheid and post-apartheid eras are essential influencers in understanding white fear and the white resistance for pro-liberal post-apartheid planning. The 1950's Group Areas Act was a spatial policy responsible for the forced removal of black South Africans from the city's borders to the city's outskirts into featureless and undignified informal townships as Orlando in Soweto.

When the Group Areas Act was repealed in the 1980s, many black⁵ people from the rural areas subsequently flocked to the city for economic opportunity. This led to white property and business owners fleeing Johannesburg's high-density inner city for its northern suburbs,

⁴ Melville Precinct Plan provides detailed design and development guidance for specific local areas, nodes and corridors. (for more detailed information: <https://mra.ilovemelville.co.za/melville-precinct-plan-2017/>)

⁵ In South African the term 'black,' in political terms, refers to all races other than white.

such as Sandton⁶, Hillbrow. In the 1980s, this place became a slum due to an influx of rural black people and neglect by property owners. Initially a thriving clean, and prosperous inner-city suburb where white people lived, shopped and worked (Figure 1). To some of the privileged white home and business owners of Hillbrow, this downturn symbolises the first experience of white fear and the failures of anti-apartheid values.



Figure 1. Left: Orlando was one of the first black townships established as part of the relocation policy in 1960 Chipkin, Clive (1993). Right: Hijacked buildings in Hillbrow. Photo credit L. Krige

The Fear of Crime

In the 1980s, Johannesburg gave rise to the northern suburbs peripheral gated community model, which mushroomed around these and other competing versions of Sandton (Dirsuweit, 2009, p. 77). This model directly responds to crime and fear in the post-apartheid era (Landman, 2004, p. 151) and actively fragments, segregates, and isolates communities with shrinking public space and restricting access to the public roads. As Landman (2004) argues, this is due to the political transition, post-apartheid poverty, crime, and increased unemployment; thus, an agglomeration of gated communities mushrooming in other peripheries occurred.

Today, Johannesburg is a multi-centred patchwork of different places (Murray, 2011, p.180). It has a dominant central nucleus and dependent residential suburbs dividing it into a polycentric, post-industrial metropolis. This heterogeneous assemblage of highly differentiated and relatively autonomous “edge cities” comprises commercial clusters and business nodes that have blossomed along the urban fringe (Murray, 2011, p.180). It is an assemblage of unplanned and market-driven urban forms and insular sovereignty (Murray, 2011, p.181). The obsession with fortification results from the city's failure to create safe environments. Although Melville residents are security conscious, they enjoy the privilege of not living in an enclosed lifestyle

⁶ Sandton was established in the 1970s to recreate a new financial district away from Johannesburg Central Business District. Today it is the most expensive real estate in South Africa.

estate. However, due to its proximity to the city and its relationship to the Corridors of Freedom, Melville plays a significant role in creating a sustainable and compact city.

Suburbs are often associated with prosperity, the refuge of the white middle class in America that wants to escape downtown's poverty and crime. This *white suburbia* is very different from a busy New York neighbourhood with community stores and cafes where residents meet. However, Jane Jacobs ideas concerning the neighbourhood's spirit are no longer present in the gentrified areas emerging in downtown New York or even Johannesburg (areas like Maboneng, a district in the downtown that now is changing) the new creative classes are welcomed. Alan Ehrenhalt (2013), a leading American urbanologist, explains in 'The Great Inversion' that emigrants now move to the suburbs. The new creative classes move back to the centre to gentrify these downtown areas. Ehrenhalt writes, "*Much of what Jacobs loved and wrote about will never return: The era of the mom-and-pop grocer has ended for good. We live, for the most part, in a big-box, big-chain century*" (p. 21). The reality in Johannesburg is somewhat different. The centre, which used to be prosperous in the 1960s with white European communities in Hillbrow areas, is now full of emigrant communities that come and settle illegally from other parts of Africa or South Africa. It is a city where crime and fear make everyone vigilant in the white middle class, and the new emerging wealthier coloured and black new creative classwork in the city.

Consequently, affluent communities move to the suburbs, where the houses look suburban but are full of fences and gated communities. However, Johannesburg is also an exciting metropolis, a city that emerged from gold and mining exploitation and attracted thousands of emigrants to work and search for a better life. The chapter focused on the vibrant city of Melville that lies in the borders, in the suburbs, in the areas between the downtown and the periphery where exciting things happen.

As Lindsay Bremner (2000), the South African architect, writes about Johannesburg: "The restructuring of the economy and increasing political pressure had resulted in a city whose economic base was declining and in which the social and economic exclusion upon which it had been built was no longer sustainable. This resulted in successive attempts by the urban authorities to reinvent a city which could claim a position in the mainstream global economy and become a city all its citizens could feel part of" (p.185). In this critical affirmation of post-1990's Johannesburg, Bremner mentions a city in economic decline but suggests that its citizens should be at the heart of this process to reinvent the city. In this critical approach, the Melville project as a case study is relevant because the work involves different community stakeholders. Moreover, it shows that the existing conflicts in the city in border areas are subject to change.

Bremner writes that in the 1970s: "The city's image was an exclusive one that celebrated white dominance and brushed aside the alternative black experience of the city" (Rogerson, cited in Bremner, 2000 p.186). This is a critical point evident in resistance that white residents expressed about the alternative black experience of the city in the Melville case study meetings. This is a critical point in a modern South African democratic context where any decisions involving existing communities in the urban context should involve all sectors of this community. However, here in Melville, the concept of a multi-faceted community was confronted with opposition from the white South African residents.

As architect-academics from South Africa and Europe, our personal experience complements this research. Notably, as a European, my observations were critical.

'For me, as a European walking and living in Melville when visiting South Africa, all my previous preconceptions and knowledge disappeared. I felt I was in front of a new city. In this new place, the borders meet those tensions between the resistances of the

previous white suburban neighbourhood, which is now becoming a laboratory where new creative people are coming into the neighbourhood, and mixing with African and even European emigrants who are looking at this fascinating city as a place of opportunity. The city in front of me today is the same vibrant place full of opportunities, full of hidden tensions and opportunities, a city of gold full of interesting people and places looking for opportunities. What I see in the city today as a European is what attracted thousands of European emigrants to work and make the city their home.'

Practitioners and academics see this new emerging city, a city where we find tensions between different social groups. This is the legacy inherited from the spatial segregation left after the apartheid city when the culmination of colonial power informs the settlement and how the community is created. Much literature has been written about this, and there is also an autobiographical element in observing the city. Aldo Rossi (1981), in his later book *A Scientific Autobiography*, departs from his earlier work and connects different fragments of his work to illustrate his oeuvre. In his earlier work from the 1960's he tried to arrive at a theory of the European city in the book *The Architecture of the City* (1984) using a structuralist approach to understand the city. This departure offers different ways of looking at the metropolis.

Bremner (2000) writes: "The depression of the 1930s, which saw the abandoning of the gold standard in 1932, resulted in foreign capital flooding into the country and transformed Johannesburg into a little New York, or if not New York, then at least Chicago or St. Louis" (De Kiewiet, 1966, in Chipkin, 1993 cited in Bremner, 2000 p.186). This comparison with New York or the American metropolis shows an exciting process. The inner city that attracted white Europeans in the 1960s is now a black city with illegal settlements in abandoned buildings such as Hillbrow and a mix of new gentrified and diverse areas such as Maboneng. In today's Johannesburg, the border areas, the leafy suburbs, such as Melville, close to the centre and has a nice high street, but is also far enough to have a different character, have become critical spaces in the suburban areas. Here the suburban typologies, inhabited by white residents during and post-apartheid, are also secured to protect the residents from crime. This is a city where a wealthy suburb is a safe place. There is daylight and a gated community, which becomes essential as the private home or the controlled environment is safe, but at the expense and absence of a remarkable public safe space.

Post-apartheid segregation is still present in the physical form of the areas in the city and is even more embedded in the psychology of space and ways in which people live and walk in the city. Notably, as a European, the multiple security layers that the city possesses are always evident and evident from the way one enters one's home to the way one projects one's car. These means are necessary to separate oneself from both crime and poverty.

Confronting all these issues is critical to planning a community where both the public realm and the inclusion of all community sectors can help frame urban design strategies that will not resolve all these issues but will allow a community to be a lot more inclusive. Johannesburg is a fascinating city, a city full of tensions and interest. The city neighbourhoods' borders are the perfect place to understand the issues and the conflicts left in the city after the apartheid. Separation is connected to segregation when a system is in place for an extended period. The social change required to effect integration and equality is complex and to incorporate processes that deal with such complexities takes time.

However, society demands decolonisation and integration in modern South Africa. Urban strategies have to incorporate a different approach to urban development and master planning, and community consultation is one of the most successful ways to achieve this. Design Surgeries or Community Participation Workshops are great ways to ensure integration and inclusion are at the heart of urban change processes. These issues are still relevant in today's

South Africa. The Gauteng City-Region Laboratory has carried out numerous studies at the city-region level of these discrepancies, and they mention some of these challenges in the Gauteng region:

“These include high levels of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion. South Africa is one of the world's unequal societies, and this stark reality is particularly evident in Gauteng cities and towns. There remain spatial concentrations of huge wealth alongside large informal settlements. Moreover, although there is gradual integration, the concentration of different population groups in specific areas previously designated for them by apartheid remains to this day” (GCRO, 2019)

Fear of Trust: The Corridors of Freedom

The Corridors of Freedom (City of Johannesburg, 2013) was a mayoral initiative based on the Curitiba model of the Bus Rapid Transit System. It was framed within the SAF in early 2000 and implemented through three routes across Johannesburg to link disenfranchised parts of the city, catalyse urban nodes, and stimulate public and private sectors to create a high-density mixed-use corridor. Although the Corridors of Freedom Project's intention echoed anti-apartheid and inclusive values and ethics of urban planning, the project started with insufficient community participation and an overly aggressive densification plan. Up to six storeys were prescribed as a blanket along the corridors and across the adjacent neighbourhoods like Melville. The MRA subsequently took the city to court, and the MRA won the court case to scale down the densification plan. As a result, the city had to revise its density in the SAF to a more strategic and nuanced plan.

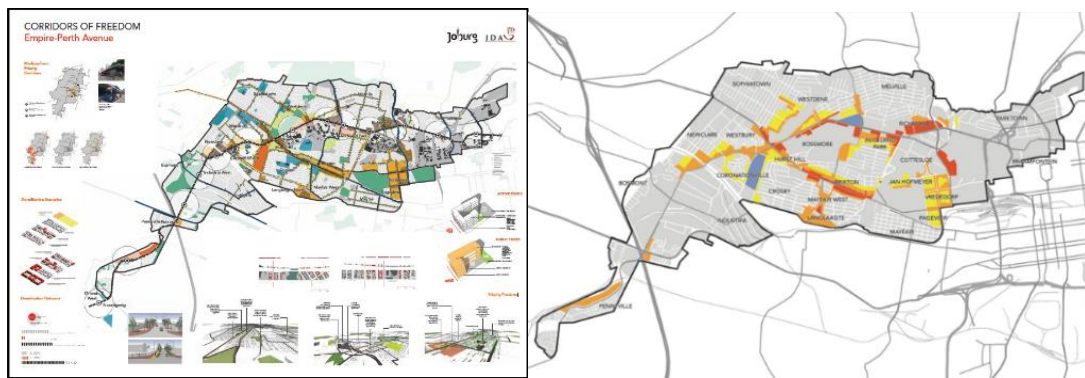


Figure 2. Corridors of Freedom, Empire-Perth Avenue. (<http://www.corridorsoffreedom.co.za/>, 2018)

This was the third encounter of the white fear experience. These are real fears experienced by the privileged white and their economic investments in Johannesburg City. However, as a progressive city, we need to understand the broader socio-political context of advanced planning. These issues are deeply rooted in several intersectional concepts of white, black, rich, poor, fear, aspirations, values, planning, policy and economics.

If all these pro-liberal planning policies exist, is the argument exempted from the city's planning policies as a legitimate argument? What is the argument which the MRA is putting forward? Landman (2004) quotes Vanessa Watson (2003)...” urban restructuring efforts in this period of transition have been mostly ineffective, and many South African cities are almost divided, spatially, economically, as was in the days of apartheid...(Landman, 2004, p.165).

Fataar (2012) questions whether all the post-apartheid policies which enhance the recalibration of the city socio-spatial condition is enough to “inspire the spatial restructuring and in particular densification” (p.7).

The Melville Precinct Plan

To begin to answer some of these difficult questions, allow me to reflect on the case study. The Melville Precinct Plan is part of The Corridors of Freedom⁷ 2040 Johannesburg Strategic Planning and feeds into a broader corridor (Figure 2 and 3). It is envisaged that this project would address apartheid planning aggressively and dramatically improve people’s lives daily. “...safety, comfort and economic well-being are placed at the core of planning and delivery processes. This will reduce poverty for most of the city’s residents (<http://www.corridorsoffreedom.co.za/>, 2018).

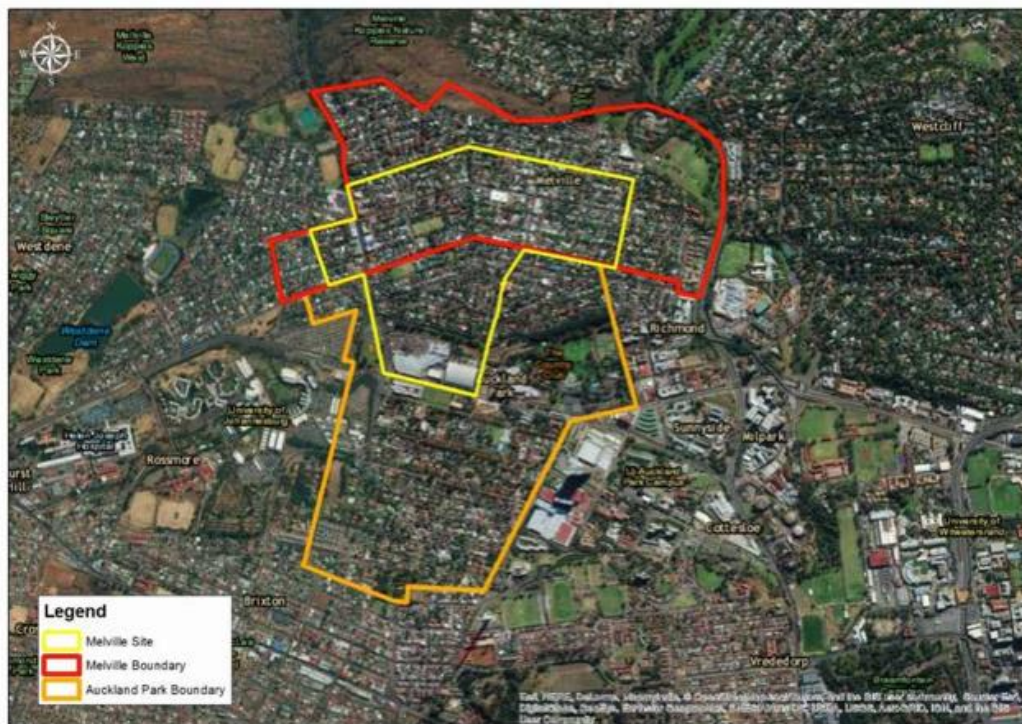


Figure 3. Corridors of Freedom, 1993: Authors own.

Melville is located about five kilometres North West of the inner city of Johannesburg, on the border of the inner city periphery. A middle income, mostly white neighbourhood. It is still one of the few public-orientated walkable neighbourhoods. It has the further advantage of being located adjacent to Johannesburg’s only two public institutions⁸; parastatal and private media houses and the natural attraction of an archaeologically significant hill known as the Melville Koppies.⁹ Due to its location, it is susceptible to high transience of visitors, academics,

⁷ <http://www.corridorsoffreedom.co.za/>

⁸ The University of Johannesburg and the University of Witwatersrand initially registered mostly white students but today reflects the true demographic of South Africa- that being predominantly black.

⁹ Refers to the Afrikaans term for ‘peak’.

students, musicians and entertainers. Therefore, cultural and social networks are unique, and due to their location, it cannot exist in a vacuum- it is an extension of a democratic city.



Figure 4. Melville Community Participatory Design Session. Photo credit: Marina Meyer, 2017

The MRA is a voluntary body that represents the voices of the general residential community. It is not a legal entity. However, the residents voted to represent the collective interests and communicate information to the larger body. It is also important to note that the MRA is only one of the many stakeholders required to be consulted through the process. The other stakeholders were the businesses, traders, students who attend university in the adjacent neighbourhood, frequent social spaces, places of education, religious instruction, the homeless, organisations, patron of social places, institutions, and sports facilities that engage or are affected in Melville.

An initial misconception about the MRA was that their opinion counted more than any other stakeholder. They argued that they had *more to lose* as they had financially invested in Melville. This idea was discouraged by the city and framed the engagement of the CPD going forward (Figure 4). Another pertinent issue that arose was student accommodation. There is an imminent fear that policy and CPD would encourage student dormitories. Student dormitories are viewed as places of high density, noise and disturbance. The MRA employed tactics through social media using excuses like heritage preservation and the celebration of architectural style to avoid the possibility of developing a mixed, use vibrant and close-knit community. Petitions stating: “do you want to live next to a student dormitory?” and “I don’t want to live in another Hillbrow” were slogans punted in meetings and via emails to the residents. The MRA wrote petitions and initiated surveys to persuade the city not to develop.

The relationship between knowledge and power is a crucial sub-theme. Members of the MRA include professional lawyers, journalists and other white-collar citizens. This means that they can analyse, understand, and argue spatial confrontations through resources. They are searching for loopholes, using technical arguments to preserve the homogenous urban environment. The MRA argues three main points which pertain specifically to the borders.

Borders

The research was well-rooted in the knowledge of the urban and its spatial policies. The client, the JDA, earmarked a precinct mainly concerned with the high street of 7th street, which falls within Melville's suburb and its relationship to the main arterials (The Corridors of Freedom). However, the high street overlaps with the adjacent precinct of Auckland Park. There are three ways the MRA used the borders as a tool during the project to dampen its momentum. One of the initial disputes and misinterpretations of the broader precinct plan project was that the MRA rejected this project because it was suspicious that Melville was the only suburb earmarked for a Precinct Plan. The MRA further suggested that this project is a façade to help developers grab properties and convert them into high rise student dormitories. Whether this claim was valid or not, it raised to fear.

First, the MRA argued that the project must remain demarcated (the yellow border). This limits the extent and scale of the project. Containing the project's planning meant that the community could ensure that the 'affected' area would not spill over or creep into other areas of development. However, the general community saw this demarcation as flexible (and so did the client). The community's enthusiasm framed exciting links and relationships between the Melville precinct and the adjacent leisure and sports facilities. The MRA did not well receive this idea. Second, the MRA argued that the project's mandate only falls within the boundary of the stated brief.

Second, the SAF states that the new post-apartheid urban agenda is to condense, diversify and capitalise on the current economy. The MRA felt that the Melville suburb should not apply to the SAF general intentions to oppose the hegemonic urban condition and facilitate the community that encourages mixed racial profiles. Third, concerning the high street (7th street), which has a distinct low rise architectural character of parapet walls, pedestrian overhangs and classic columns, they articulated that 7th street has high heritage value and should remain this way. They fear that the character will be destroyed. Therefore, the densification should remain outside this precinct boundary.

Third, the MRA was instructed to include the Auckland Park adjacent community towards the end of the community design process. This community was briefed and was unhappy about late engagement. During presentations, they were less conservative than the Melville community.

Conclusion

The statement "This will not be another Hillbrow" refers to several historically complex socio-political layers which directly translate into the dichotomy of interests in public and private productions of space. The South African government planning policies aptly recognise and guide progressive urban planning values. However, the responsibility falls on the city, the municipality and the community to interpret and implement them. This has proved to be challenging when white fear becomes present. White privilege requires a big fight and to resist the city's forces to protect the private interests within the public domain. Unfortunately, the approach by the MRA is underhand. It undermines the democratic processes of the country by being obstructive.

The production of space and borders are powerful tools within the CPD processes, and it is intertwined with the skilful use of knowledge and power. Khan states that "citizens and strangers are controlled through the spatial confined of the divided place, these geometries- the

spatial categories through and in which the lived world is largely mapped, experienced, and disciplined- impose a set of internalities and externalities” (Goldberg (1993), cited in Kahn 1993, p. 185).

He discusses the dichotomy between “the condition of modernity: the dichotomy between public and private...” (p. 185) Goldberg/Khan (1993) points out that racism has become institutionally normalised in and through spatial configuration and that it has become customary to associate a geographical location with racial practices. Therefore, social spaces inherently become labelled and identified (p., 185).

Furthermore, the Melville Precinct Plan case study highlights that exclusionary practices still prevail in the most subtle and indirect ways. Although the city is living up to its mandate of the “good city”, deepening its democracy, developing good governance, and caring about its citizens, the same white fear still prevails in manipulating the CPD process. The minority again influences and maintains the South Africans spatial patterns, which today the shoddy urban battle with every day to survive. The urban environment is complex. We are not advocating for extreme and irrational overtly dense and unsustainable cities but at least afford Melville's residents an untainted opportunity to debate and design multiple facets of their precinct to live, work and enjoy.

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