

## **coffeemanifesto: sampling instant and slow spaces in the African city**

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**Abstract:** In the inner city of Johannesburg, Ethiopian traders and their landlords have occupied and redefined empty modernist buildings, creating a rich and dense urban market area. The fabric of the existing buildings and open spaces allows an arrangement of spaces and functions that support a community in transformation, allowing dynamic changes while also evoking stable images of home in a series of safe and networked social spaces. This rich urbanism is proposed as a positive alternative to its tough surroundings, and to the sterility of developer led urban renewal. The paper describes a process of designerly research in the area, including performative work, that intends to represent and advocate for official recognition of the ambivalent nature of these spaces, and their transformative potentials.

**Keywords:** Johannesburg; urban change; visual urban research; spatial appropriation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The traders from the Ethiopian diaspora that have (re)located themselves quite recently in the existing buildings of Johannesburg's downtown, serve up to us, in the form of fragile spatial gestures, a fresh vision of the city's potential to reinvent itself. As coffee ceremonies are carried out in fifty year modernist buildings, their blending of instant and slow space evokes a sense of liveability that contrasts both with the toughness of its immediate urban context, and with the sterility of commercially developed and municipally sanctioned, inner city renewal. This situation suggests that a multiplicity of spatial frames and agents has managed to produce a new form of urbanism. What is this urbanism, that lies somewhere between the expectations we have of the informal city and urban renewal, and through what processes and agents is it produced? To what extent can its constructive practices be evoked as a model for design, in that they mirror designerly practices such as participatory planning, adaptive reuse and minimal form making; and to what extent do they evade an operational interpretation, and instead critique authored processes of spatial production? Lastly, how to use acts of reading and representation both as urban activism, to provoke a positive recognition of the area, while regenerating architectural practice itself.

### **THE CONTEXT**

The area where the Ethiopian traders have located is a part of the inner city with a strategic position along Jeppe and Bree St, south of the Union Square taxi parkade and ranks, north of long distance bus stops and Faraday station (Figures 1, 2). The high volumes of pedestrian traffic, the multiple functions in and surrounding the area and the access to transport gives it potential for diverse uses, including hotels, flats, retail, warehousing, education and social services. The robustness of the building structures makes them suitable for renovation, and some of them have been refurbished, primarily for social housing, as well as for retail uses.

The local and immigrant traders in the area have added a layer of uses to the area that sets it apart from malls and other parts of the city; for hawkers, who buy bulk goods in the area, the low prices and wide range are complemented by the system of trolley pushers who assist in moving goods to the public transport terminals (Farouk 2009). For casual shoppers and local workers, there are unique goods like hand made Rastafarian gear,

high street fashion at low street costs, CMY shops making customised curtaining on the spot, beauty salons, communications businesses and a fair choice of ethnic restaurants and coffee shops. The density of retail space, which reaches up to 6 storeys into the buildings, is unique in the inner city and offers competition and choice to consumers. The trader community has also organised security for the area through an association, The Horn of Africa, that shares information, interacts with the community policing forum, and hires a South African security company to guard the streets.

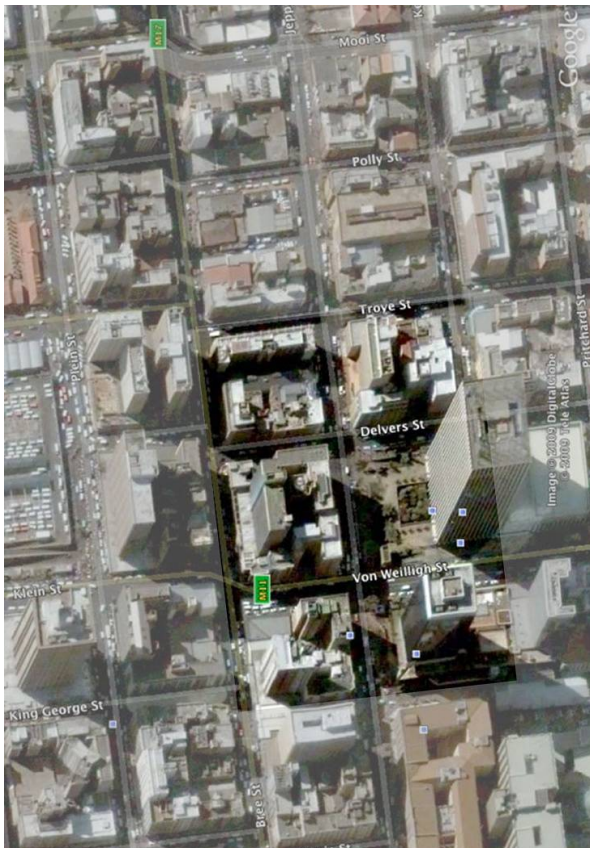


FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2

The area has become an economically active part of the city, with money passing from local shoppers to the traders, to Asian wholesalers/importers, and to the landlords. There is a waiting list for shops above basement levels and below the third floor. Landlords charge rentals that are equivalent in some places to rental rates at premier suburban malls, while the alleged 'key money' paid to third parties, suggests that this rental is only one aspect of the area's economics (Negash 2009). Moreover, the instances where space has been modified and dedicated to traders, such as the stalls around Marble Towers and the mid block redevelopment called the Johannesburg Mall, have created new commercially viable and lively markets within previously open space.

The stability of the present situation in the area is however tenuous. These dynamics are driven in part through council and state driven incentives to renew inner city building, through social housing finance and tax incentives. At least one building in the area, Delver Square, once offices, and currently housing curtaining, clothing and service businesses, will shortly be redeveloped as a residential block for social housing. The marginal legal status of some traders, who have refugee identity papers that explicitly prohibit employment, and the general lack of compliance with building and fire regulations, makes the current situation equally vulnerable to the state or council's control. Moreover, most, if not all of the traders are tenants, or sub-tenants, in buildings owned by non-Ethiopians, on short leases of six months, and hence vulnerable to eviction.

## URBAN LAYERS

Documenting this part of town calls for intersecting diverse modes of reading and being in it. The multiplicity of spatial actors, the overlap between discourses, and the physical experience of the space present multiple

narratives. To engage at the intersection of these 'representations of space' and 'spatial practices' (Lefebvre 1991), this study involves performative research practices as a way of exploring those positive potentials that seem to exist in the real, but not in the official representations of the city. When this practice includes creative work, this form of urban research dissolves the distinctions between professional and research roles, and between city readers, makers and users. By including research in the path of practice, and by reflecting on practice itself, a more complex identification between the researcher/designer, and the different urban agents, begins to develop. In this way, perhaps, it becomes possible to work without absolute judgement about roles played by the different agents producing space and to focus, instead on their combinatory outcomes.

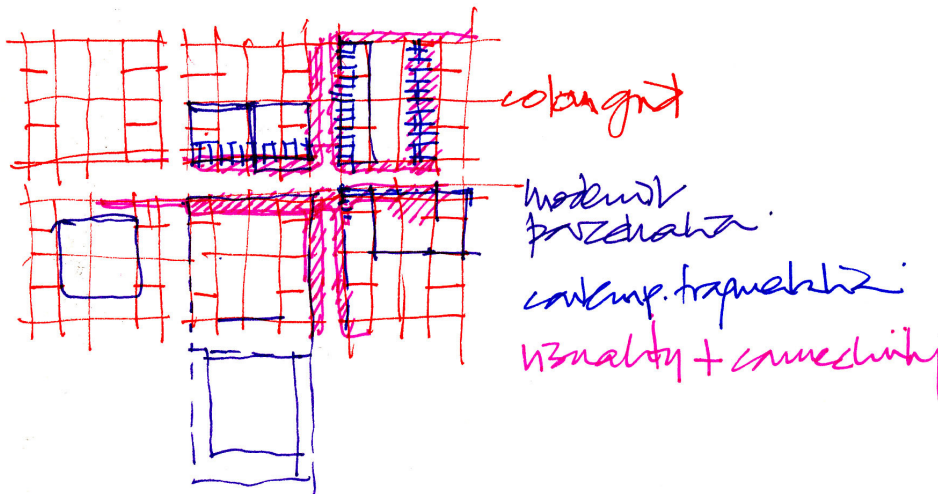
Part of the research involves a reading of the area as a layered geometry, acknowledging the layers formed through colonial, modern and contemporary periods. These translate simply into three epochs of investment in spatial production. The traces of the layers intersect and interrelate in a complex play of gestures that reassert, erase, or intersect with the previous period's geometries. The outcome of these readings will be developed as a matrix and as a series of mappings, using visual information to engage with the formal qualities that result over time.

The area is formed as much by overlapping temporalities as it is by layered formal and visual tropes. These rhythms can be explored and represented with narrative media, texts, films and photographic work. The temporalities are also paradoxical, defying any split of the area's activities or forms into categories of new or old. Is the new shopping not old, in the way that old trading practices are inserted into new contexts?; and as the original subdivisions of the city blocks reappear as larger modernist spaces that are subdivided to accommodate ever more traders. In the absence of secure physical tenure, some of the more marginalised urban agents make a living by fitting their presence around the rhythms of the city and so amplify them. Others, including property investors and the council, have chosen to slip out of the unmanageably rapid cycles of the street traders and instead act through intermittent, large scale shifts of capital, policy or agents in the area.

**MAPPINGS**

Putting data on a map can open new spaces for action, and new options for intervention, as the often-unseen shapes and forms of life in the city becomes visible. Design, here, is less like a tool and more like a language, a practice that shapes the outcomes and understandings of the things we do. (Spatial Information Design Lab 2009)

There are no existing maps of the area of the Ethiopian traders: there are only archival drawings that represent the buildings as originally planned. The first set of images we are creating will contest the authority of these drawings as a representation of the area, by mapping out the historical sequence of the area's development and redevelopment (Figure 3).



**FIGURE 3**

The colonial trace remains in the street and city grid and its parcellation into erven (property stands). In this period, the primary spatial production was of individual buildings, mostly single or double storied, on a single erf (about 16 x 16m). The area was located midway between the high street shopping of Eloff street and the inner city tenements of Doornfontein. In the period after World War II, the town was extensively redeveloped, largely

with speculative rental development of offices and residential buildings. This period saw the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1951, which segregated urban areas along racial lines. This section of town became a White Group Area: Asian and Black shop owners were no longer allowed to trade in the area, with the nearest shops available in Market Street, some four blocks to the south, which developed as a destination for clothing and fabric shopping for black consumers.

The buildings from the modernist period of the 1950's and 60's were built on consolidated erven, creating an uneven cluster of larger blocks of between 16m and 66m. The new buildings tended to continue the street edge with cantilevered canopies and shopfronts onto the pavement. The ground floors contained shops, restaurants and services, and most of the upper floors accommodated medical suites, offices or apartments. The Rand Inn, a hotel, was developed on Bree Street.

Larger scale developments, involving the consolidation of two city blocks, happened in 1973 with the development of the Sanlam Centre (now Marble Towers), a 33 storey building built in 1973 to house the insurance company Marble Towers, and the Sun International hotel (1985). Both these buildings were introverted in relation to the street, with a plaza at the base, and with facades set back.

The area's white tenants began moving out of the area from the late 1970's onwards, as the racial segregation of the city began to dissolve under a combination of political, economic and spatial forces (Morris 1999). The condition of many buildings deteriorated, the upper floors of non-residential buildings became vacant, and the streets became associated with crime and sex work. With the closing of the Sun Hotel in the 1990's, the main remaining economic function of the area was ground floor retail activity.

At an urban scale, the spatial impact of the modernist period was to introduce a differentiated mass of large and relatively underdetermining spaces into the area. The 'centres' and 'towers' of this period created contrasts between open and built spaces, although the use of canopies and shopfronts kept the northern edge of Jeppe Street intact as a continuous shopping strip. As tenants moved out, the plaza spaces and upper floors became significant urban voids. Several buildings changed hands, many being bought up at low prices by property speculators.

The Ethiopian traders have been in the area for at least ten years. Ethiopians began immigrating in numbers after the 1991 elections in Ethiopia and the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. In the mid to late 1990's the area, like most of the inner city, saw the arrival of many street traders (Le Roux 1999), and over the last decade this activity has been formally organised, and moved into the adjacent blocks. Our ongoing research will try to trace the sequence of the area's redevelopment under this specific group of tenants. The first building to house trading on upper floors was Johannesburg Wholesale Centre which houses retail activity from basement to fourth floor level, and curtaining shops and restaurants on the fifth and six, with the upper six floors rented as storage space for the traders.

The tenancy of Ethiopian traders has brought spatial qualities to the area that are often different to the original life of the modernist buildings. The reuse of the upper floors as market spaces has both relied on and sustained a community of traders who compete and collaborate. An incredible density of retail space has developed in the narrow gap between the back of former shop windows and street edges. At the same time, certain individuals have identified the need for slow spaces, places that allow a respite from trading and facilitate networking. These spaces include coffee shops, restaurants and prayer space.

The fragile spatiality that overlays the existing spaces of the modernist buildings can be read as a constructed trace of a community that is in social and economic transformation: quickly and fluidly reshaping itself around accessible spaces, digital technologies, administrative services and retail patterns, while placing activities and images that construct references to stable images of home. Both sets of practices support the establishment of networks within a difficult new context, by allowing the pursuit of distant connections with investments in presence to happen at the same time and place.

Four areas have been singled out for a more detailed mapping and analysis through three different visual media: diagrams reflecting the enduring physicality of the modernist structures that frame the new uses; photographic images of the gestures made by its tenants; and combining these, a set of montaged scenes of spatial moments where the formal frame and emerging uses come together. The montaged images, that make manifest the potentialities of such sites in supporting social change, may also suggest a vocabulary of practices that can be used in design.

The graphic and conceptual models for this proposed treatment of modernist space are drawn from the early period, as an aesthetic movement, within the schools of de Stijl and Constructivism, and later in the movement of Concrete Art. These images tend to be based on axonometric projections, with translucent and partially rendered surfaces. In their work, the architect/artists involved in the representation of space were interested in a dematerialisation of spatial envelopes in favour of a more open set of platforms, backdrops and services, which would support a fluid form of life.

In contrast, the models for photography will consider the genres of realist photography of human subjects. What representational techniques can be adapted to highlight the significance of temporal gestures in creating space? How do these intersect with other narratives, such as diagrams that explore and map social connections, or individual and collective imaginaries?

The intention with the technique of montage is to map the ambivalent nature of spatial use in the context. By overlapping these two genres of images of the area, drawn respectively from a disciplinary language and an intimate, situational record of social and commercial interactions, I intend to move closer to a representation of the area as a *series of scenes*. This fluctuating representation of intimate and fragmented human gestures, and the translucent rendering of built space intend to put into question their relative hierarchies. This method will try to foreground those gestures and render its background as an abstract, but material structure that may or may not contain them. It also considers the spaces through the eyes of users who are unfamiliar with their histories and conventions, trying to understand which surfaces and areas become support for their imagined use of the space, and which recede as insignificant form.

Rendering the contexts through montage creates an imaginary space that is analogous to a designerly conception of space. By representing the buildings as three dimensional open structure and void, and considering their lived occupancies as a series of scenes, they become apparent as *frames*, and their capacity for further reworking becomes evident. They become spaces-in-progress in which functional meaning is lost, abstract surfaces and supports explored, and images of new uses are evoked.

#### DESIGN PROJECT: COFFEEMANIFESTO

As an initial project to explore the designerly qualities of the Ethiopian trader spaces, I commissioned TG, an Ethiopian immigrant and trader, to perform the coffee ceremony business during the Cubes/ACC Cities Conference in a prepared space. After my first visit to TG's existing coffee shop, I made a photoshopped image that edited the view to her sister's silhouette, the coffee cups, and lines from cupboards they've built to screen the storeroom and washing area (Figure 4). Three versions of the image were rendered with the red, yellow and green colours of the Ethiopian flag as backgrounds. The elements in the image proposed a vocabulary for the design of the conference project.



FIGURE 4

The intention of the conference project, as a contribution to an event about cities, was to make manifest some of the formal, physical and affective gestures that have transformed the spaces of the inner city. The siting of the coffee ceremony within the foyer of the 50 year old building was deliberate and created an analogy with spaces in the contemporaneous inner city buildings. The project was also intended to catalyse activity in the foyer, supporting the informal networking that happens at conferences. The design drew on the imagery of the montages, but matched and located them in the new space in relation to the form and ephemeral uses that already existed in those spaces.

Three spatial gestures made up the project (Figures 5, 6). These were, firstly, the negotiation of a space, a double column bay within the foyer, as the site for TG's coffee ceremony, as well as a source of water, sinks and storage space. The ceremony uses portable objects and surfaces: the floor is laid with palm leaves, a table, stool, and brazier are set up, and the ephemera of the ceremony, the coffee itself, cups, coffee pots and decorative objects, and the substances of incense and smoke from the roasting process.



FIGURE 5



FIGURE 6

The second gesture was the shooting and assemblage of a large photomontage of TG's inner city coffee shop onto the wall at the south end of the foyer. This image also mirrored an existing object in the basement of the John Moffat building, a photographic mural image of a piazza in Europe. The final gesture was the making and furnishing of three upholstered, cushioned benches, in red, yellow and green, that were placed along an outside ledge on the south east edge of the foyer, where students and staff regularly sit, particularly in the morning. These seats, in their placement and their vinyl material, mirrored the parallel seating within the auditorium inside.

Three broad strategies from the inner city were used to produce the project: in physical terms, the installation used *minimal* means, including appropriation of an existing space; the authorship was *participatory*, in that it opened the physical installation to a second layer of authorship by TG and a layer of use by conference goers; and lastly it was a *temporal* space, lasting in its entirety for the two mornings of the conference, being reconstructed on the second day, with a trace remaining afterwards in the photomontage left behind on the back wall.

### THE DESIGN CRITIQUES, THE THREATS, THE LIMITS

The process of working through the sequences of research and designerly engagement with the spaces of the Ethiopian traders intends to create a more vivid representation of the complex nature of the inner city spatial production. This representation is communicated both through the mappings and through the process of realising the mirrored space at a small, temporary scale.

The more complex question engages with the capacity of a representative process to become a productive one in the city at large. If images of the inner city can show its capacity for ambivalence, transformation and multiplicity, does the translation of these qualities into a designerly representation suggest that they can be reproduced elsewhere?

The discourse on design as a critical practice would suggest that this translation from reading to making is only an ideal for practice, and not an assured outcome. The political and economic processes through which environments and objects are created inevitably limit design's capacity to lead social change. In this area of the inner city, however, the very dynamic nature of political and economic change has constructed a situation within which two often opposing rights to the city, those of *ownership* and *appearance*, have temporarily reached an

accommodation. Without the voiding of large buildings on the 1950's to 70's through the shifts in property markets in the 1990's, there would be no possibility of the staging that constructs the traders' domains. Yet without this staging there would only be abstract, vacant space where today a thriving market exists. In this situation, the impulses of the building owner/developers and traders are interdependent.

The entry of a third party, most likely in the form of a local authority, would alter the stability of this situation. But within the range of choices such an agency might make in acting on the area, from eviction to tolerance, there lies the potential for an intervention that acknowledges and stimulates the gestures that have created the current situation. The role of designerly research, through mapping, image making and performative practice, is to inform such a choice, by evoking the transformative capacity of its ambivalent spaces.

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## INTERVIEWS

Minga Negash, email dated 17 August 2009.

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