

Of merchants and mercenaries and their way through the city:

Thoughts on the African Urbanism Colloquium, Cape Town April 2009

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THIRTY-THREE MERCHANTS ARRIVE IN A CITY (that exists wherever they gather). Each with a digital suitcase of wares to display, and other wares to hold back, for the moment. All of them feeling the inner buzz of their own multiplicity – who will they reveal themselves as, in this space? Philosopher, anthropologist, painter, architect, storyteller, map-maker, bricklayer, customs officer, photographer, pickpocket – speaking with one of these voices, feeling the others press against their tongues.

None of them says, 'I am one of the people you have to build a workable city for.' Except Uche, who lives inside his own anthropology of Lagos, looking back at his own camera.

The African Urbanism Colloquium set out to inspire a dialogue between artists and academics on how to think and theorize the specificity of African cities. At the root of the litany of, and frustrations with, ongoing urban poverty and local under-performance lies a set of assumptions about African cityness that asks to be challenged. 'Unless we can imagine and develop a more credible account of everyday urbanism, the desire for urban improvement will remain a frustrated yearning' (Edgar Pieterse – founder of the initiative).

In an interdisciplinary dialogue, the initiative aims to open up new lines of thought and imagination able to offer more complex and persuasive accounts of contemporary African cityness. Capturing the complexities of everyday urbanism, including its affective dimensions, requires an engagement with the city through various media, from text to sound, to pictures and choreographies.

Photographers and architects, planners and soundscape artists, choreographers and writers, geographers and sociologists see the city with different eyes. Over three breathtaking days they shared their ideas and pictures, their records and texts, their frustrations and their laughter with each other. Many participants had themselves engaged in an interdisciplinary personal journey. Indeed, there was a peculiar form of self-representation amongst the participants that expressed a strong refusal to squeeze oneself into the corset of any particular academic discipline or artistic form.

A selection of the most notorious **'I am's'**:

- '...a full professional hybrid' (Pep Subiros)
- '...a mercenary and live in Brooklyn' (AbdouMaliq Simone)
- '...I don't have a PhD but I live in Lagos' (Uche Iroha)
- '...I am undisciplined and proud of that' (Dominique Malaquais)

Framing Cityness

What do we talk about, when we talk about cities? Is our concern about the 'bad elements' of urban structure and process a nostalgia for an (imagined) past or a yearning for a new imaginary? Is it our need to avoid a 'noir/dystopic' narrative of African cities, to read them as positive, 'on their own terms' – which of course are terms we imagine existing, as part of our own city imaginary?

Edgar Pieterse kicked off the debate with some framing thoughts on African urbanism: The African city, he argued, inspired by Mbembe's, Nuttall's and Robinson's writings, has been conceptualized by development theories and ethnographies as *the other*, the abject, the underdeveloped, as the failing example of something else. Yet, the challenge of exploring and theorizing African cityness is much more complex. The sensory expansiveness of social practices and the everydayness of urban life are at the centre of what he set out as promising foci – five vectors along which he suggested we unpack and read the material and sensory dynamics of everyday urbanism in Africa.

First, the **senses of belonging** that citizens 'feel, display, mobilise, invest in and invariably ambiguate when the need arises'. How does the work of belonging impact on the spatiality of the city, i.e. when new places of congregation, association and leisure become the 'gravitational points in subtle and highly malleable geographies of affiliation and distinction?'

Second, citydwellers' **attachments** to people, identities, things, desires that shape their lives in the city. How do conflicts arise over these attachments, how are they embodied and what spatial geographies of attachment are discernable?

Third, the multiple **zones of contact** across social and identity boundaries. What are the zones of (sometimes counter-intuitive) interaction arising out of necessity and experimentation even in the most divided contexts?

Fourth, the practices of **deal making**, as they play out in the various processes and agreements to cooperate and to achieve access to favours, information, cash and other goods. The arts and violence of deal making can also help in rethinking the political.

Fifth, the various **lines of movement and transection** that ordinary people use to read and navigate the city. How can we remap the geography of connectivities across the city, drawing the pathways of belonging and attachment of those who make this journey all the time?

An additional frame was set by AbdouMaliq Simone. The questions he raised revolved around the dilemma of **African cities still existing for something else/somebody else**, and of Africa remaining always 'other' to itself. To whom and what are African cities available and for what purpose? What platform of mutual recognition exists? Why *African* urbanism? If cities in Africa are continuous trading points for Gulf-based development corporations, or Indian and Chinese enterprises, **what does this urbanism do, and to whom?** Will these spaces simply house an increasingly large number of discrete firms that have little to do with each other, or can (African) actors progressively use these spaces as a vehicle through which they exert an impact on a larger domain of economic activity? How do the **circuitries of possession and dispossession** and those of ceasing and being ceased function? How come the most marginal populations are often the most transversal, who know most of the city? **Who gets left behind?** And how do people implicate their lives in others and have their lives implied by those others?

These vectors and questions created a powerful background for the debates; many operated with them or pushed them further. In the *sotto voce* interchanges between neighbours around the table, the question passed back and forth – 'what is the African city, anyway?' Tau Tavenga asked, 'how can one resolve a problem that cannot be

defined? Pep Subitos would offer a way to close this open circle at the end of the colloquium, when he suggested that cities in Africa are just a manifestation of the contemporary city everywhere and the problems therein might be more acute but represent the problems of every city. In their engagement with the particularities of the cities they know and love, many of the participants seemed less concerned to pin down a definition of an African city than to touch its complexity, and find ways to make it breathe more easily.

The bazaar of themes

Themes are spread out in this bazaar for consideration, for possible purchase or exchange. Passed through the fingers of the customers, returned tinged with new curiosities and doubts, slightly curled or folded, decorated with questions that may or may not match the underlying pattern of each theme.

Among the themes that different participants unfolded in their own language, and echoed in each other's –

The **spatiality** of the city, and the planning, use, mapping, imagination of urban space intrigued everybody in this colloquium. Jenny Robinson emphasized that the spatiality of the city must be imagined as fluid, open and loose: 'diverse urban contexts are linked together by the objects, people and meanings that circulate through them and sometimes travel directly from one to the other.'¹ In the same vein, Matthew Barac laid out his thoughts on slow topography, where everything is linked with everything, from the township living room to the inner city. Gabi Ngcobo's manje-manje projects collective has created elements of such connected topographies, through collaborative art events with local and international artists, including one called 'Centre of the World: Where in the world are you?' and another, 'Scratching the Surface Vol.1', that link different sites in downtown Cape Town and residential areas around the city – a lively example of Edgar's 'zones of contact', where the visitors to the different galleries travel to places they would not usually set foot in. Zones of contact (and rupture) were central in Jay Pather's public performances thematising dissonance and consonance in South African cities. Many reflections were shared on the (somewhat disturbed) imaginary of the whole city, by urban-dwellers, politicians and researchers. Uche Iroha, photographer and initiator of the photo-garage in Lagos, quoted people that he photographed: 'So you are saying they want to make Lagos a megacity?' The consciousness of the own city is splintered, not only amongst residents but also amongst most city makers.

Many pointed to the dilemmas of fractured imaginaries and practices throughout the city. Others argued that progressive engagements with the city can also start within and be piloted by particular communities (Mark Swilling talked about the Stellenbosch eco-village he helped to found, and where he lives). And if people do not imagine their city as a whole, it is even less likely that 'someone in Lagos wakes up and thinks of Abidjan' (Maliq Simone).

Movement space, mobile maps, and trans– ... city making as mobile. In her keynote speech about Cairo, Martina Rieker developed the notion of 'mobile cities' that are in part removed and replanted somewhere else – the social and political engineering of city authorities, and the responses of the citydwellers moved there which can subvert the official notions of what these new city zones should do and be. City making happens through movements between cities, Dominique Malaquais argued, notably through intersections of migration, commerce and related diasporic practices. Animating buildings (Iain Low) or bricks (Dave Southwood), re-assembling balconies

¹ See also Robinson, Jenny. 2007. Inventions and interventions: Transforming cities – an introduction. *Urban Studies* 43(2): 251–258

in photographs or depicting gates (Rana El Nemr) that project dream places onto the bare landscape, are all attempts to give meaning to the mobility of what is usually seen as geographically fixed: urban space. Movement and navigation are then also the mode a researcher or an artist has to engage with, and they recall at the same time the motif of attachment.

The theme of mobilities in the city feeds into a wider notion of urban flux (Malaquais), elusiveness (Mbembe & Nuttall)² and movement space (Thrift)³ – anything ‘trans-’. From jumping scales in ‘City Body Continent’ (Julia Raynham) to transgressing memories and identities in ‘city.identity.trans.nacionality’ (Patricia Anahory) to transforming places and their meaning (‘common spaces and uncommon events’ – Hilton Judin). Trans– could be the gel involved in Edgar’s zones of contact and Maliq’s and Dominique’s deal making. Or is it flux that needs to focus our attention – Mark Swilling asks why there is such resistance amongst those who plan and make the city to confronting the real prospect of environmental collapse, and what this will do to urban form and practices.

(In)visibility is a force – ‘Cities are often invisible to the outside world... because they function in ways that we are not used to seeing and therefore go unnoticed’, writes Filip de Boeck.⁴ Artists and academics always have a choice about what stories to tell – watching out for themes and people, for forms of behaviour that are made invisible in the city. A powerful example is the absence of urban dysfunctionality in Nigerian Nollywood movies, and the popular imaginary connected to this absence, as described by Akin Adesokan. Ghanaian writer and architect Lesley Lokko depicted an invisible gap ‘between almost everything that counts: between dream and reality, modernity and tradition, “developed” and “developing”, chaos and order, Europe and Africa, and yes of course and almost inevitably, between black and white’. In soundscape artist Emeka Ogboh’s project in Lagos, city sounds are recorded that people would usually not be consciously aware of. By placing them in quiet galleries, they are given a second life – and allowed to endure, as the city itself eliminates them in the process of ‘development’. Dominique Malaquais described her project on African deals across the globe through a lens of making visible something that usually becomes layered over with something else. While media attention on Africans going global focuses on the desperate attempts by migrants to reach Europe’s shores on leaky boats, little is known about African business people buying into apparel factories in China. Edgar suggested telling stories of connection rather than following the ongoing litany of stories of disconnection.

Another cross-cutting theme was the notion of **crisis, panic, and even ghosts** who take over the city. Urban panics (such the urban anxieties of massification in Cairo) or the plague of the so-called Bad Buildings, as described by Graeme Gotz in Johannesburg, are central drivers of everyday politics: the African city as icon of irresolvable crisis. The idea of a ghost taking over the city needs more exploration. It feeds into the interest in the urban occult that Achille Mbembe demarcated as one important mechanism to make sense of the contemporary urban.

The city is an archive and a site of nostalgia. How are urban pasts being told and what is the romance of recovery? How does the concern for national heritage conflict with people’s struggles for survival (as when the latter squat in the former), as Martina Rieker recounted from Cairo? How can city sounds tell a story of the past (Emeka Ogboh) and what is represented and what not? And what is the role of the storyteller, photographer, choreographer in this? How can we think ‘the presentness of the past while making way for the “new”’ (Mbembe & Nuttall)?

² Mbembe, Achille & Nuttall, Sarah. 2008. Introduction: Afropolis. In Nuttall S & Mbembe A (eds) *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press

³ Thrift, Nigel. 2004. Movement-space: the changing domain of thinking resulting from the development of new kinds of spatial awareness. *Economy and Society* 33(4): 582–604

⁴ ‘Invisible Urbanism in Africa’. Vyjayanthi Rao in conversation with Filip de Boeck and AbdouMaliq Simone, p. 87

There need to be **new scripts for writing the political**. What is the place of the state in this complexity? Is it closer to reality or just sexier to talk about ‘deals’ than about state bureaucratic processes? Yet these are surely interlinked – cities can’t be seen as autonomous beings. The ‘will to govern’ (plan, neaten, organise, make functional) and the ‘will to survive’ co-exist in the urban environment – we need to understand the interface of these distinct rationalities, need to recognise how people ‘warp’ government interventions to help them survive – this is the most creative moment in the ‘urban planning’ process (Vanessa Watson).

Cities rise up in our eyes and around our bodies as collections of everyday practices and interconnected circuits so complex that life seems to get reproduced without the oversight or control of ‘recognisable institutions’, or in terms of ‘long-term narratives of accumulation and work’. Making order in the urban space – what is **‘the structure of uncertainty’**? (Iain) – how to maximise freedom without losing structure and legibility? The state is not the only, and far from the most important, player in everyday urban politics. Yet the state is rarely absent. Much less than through a structure of laws and orders, the state often occurs in personae, often read as violent, as Sophie Oldfield learned from community activists engaging the state on a local level. Or else, the state occurs through a variety of small-scale practices of deal making. As Edgar pointed out, it is always involved in urban residents’ everyday calculations; yet people don’t necessarily call it the state. This opens up the question of how to frame, and to discover in the first place, the political in the city.

‘At the heart of it all is the deal’, Dominique Malaquais summarized her and Kadiatou Diallo’s project ‘Net/Works’. The deal is where objects, people and places come together that on the surface may seem to have nothing to do with each other. ‘Net/Works’ depicts the manoeuvres, tactics and performance of deal making. Another of their projects seeks to disentangle how African cities actually ‘work’, where they connect and make space for connection, rather than where they fail.

The deal was very prominent in this colloquium and so were its protagonists: the micro-entrepreneurs, players, tricksters. It also raised the question of what kind of deal maker the intervening artist or researcher is. Fake is a compelling aspect of deal making: What is fake and what contrasting versions of ‘truth’/reality does it operate with? If ‘everything is fake’ (Dominique Malaquais) is the concept still useful (Achille Mbembe)?

The urban citizen as ‘entrepreneur’ of the self – is this always true? Is it true of the ‘breadline survivor’? Is the girl-child – subject (object?) of all the latest development campaigns – the new proto-entrepreneur for the whole global South? Those with capital resources can impose an ‘idea of the city’ through mega-projects; those who have none create their ‘city’ through daily adventures of survival and are not necessarily committed to any grand narrative of urban life.

It is not surprising that the theme of **affect, aesthetics, intimacy** comes up in a colloquium of artists, architects, and writers. Yet, affect and aesthetics became a strong, underlying theme also, and especially, brought up by social scientists. Nnamdi Elleh, for example, pointed to the aesthetic meanings of architecture in the African ‘modernist city’. (His questions throughout the colloquium drew threads of connection between the aesthetic and theoretical themes of many different presentations). Christine Hentschel described how city makers draw on the affective and aesthetic potential of urban space in order to make the city safer. Edgar prominently set the ‘sensorial expansiveness of social practices’ as a central theme for cultivating new registers and languages about urban life. Unless we can observe how cities seduce or attract, how they shape or are shaped by people’s dreams and impulses, expectations and exhaustions, their humour and their traumas, we miss important parts of urban life and urban politics.

Massification vs. intimacy becomes a challenge, to theorising and to city making practice. The ‘intimate assemblages’ that students of the urban take note of – is this a romance or an actual complexity? The fascination of analysts and artists with the detail of the chaotic urban perhaps misdirects attention from what are more structural/systemic underlying processes. Violence and corruption are always present within intimacy, in the urban setting – but so is the individual genius for reading

possibilities offered by ‘people as urban infrastructure’. Is the chaos of daily mutability the same thing as ‘the freedom of the city’? ‘Every city has its own objectivity’ (Matthew Barac) – multiple layers of practices that can’t be flattened into one version of what it is about.

Hybrid belongings – the notion of ‘belonging’ entails constantly realigning oneself to ‘belong’ in different ways, for different purposes; de-familiarisation is a source of freedom, but at the same time there’s the constant need to construct a sense of belonging by aligning to social practices that, in the urban context, take the form of consumerism and religion (Edgar Pieterse, Lesley Lokko). Having ‘no fixed address’ from which to ‘address’ the world, to speak as a citizen, is simultaneously a political and physical weakness, and a source of freedom and strength to manoeuvre in the urban world (Maliq Simone). Elvira Ose’s ‘Africalls’ project asks artists to re-appropriate the gaze of others turned on them, the outsiders, and portray themselves in the cities where they work but are not (apparently) at home. N’Gone Fall turns her dreams of being a high-heeled curator in a white-cube gallery into work on the pavements of Dakar, a shape-shifting gallery for artists who use plastic water bottles instead of marble because that’s the material that the African city offers for aesthetic work.

Seeing, performing and saying: urbanist methodologies

The need to find a methodology that can hold all the modalities of ‘city being’ in the same gaze is the challenge that lies on the table throughout these three days of show-and-tell. How do we engage with this urbanism? – are we looking at the ‘right’ things through the ‘right’ lenses? Whose interests are we serving?

How can we see /hear the city?

By climbing up a pole? (Dave Southwood)

By walking the city? (Iain Low)

By cycling the city? (Lesley Lokko)

By recording the ‘sonic kinetics’ that drive the city, as Emeka Ogboh realizes for Lagos?

Or by being courageous enough to step outside of our islands of safety, exemplified by Julia Raynham’s admiring remark about a choreographer that ‘his work was not safe’? Prominent was the call for an ethnography of everyday life, (ironically) especially from the side of planners. Vanessa Watson highlighted the need for the ‘interface’: how technologies of governing (through planning) interact with ‘situated struggles over land, livelihood and claims to place’. The challenges consist in ‘unlearning the iron boxes’ (Edgar Pieterse).

From where are we looking at the city? ‘From where to operate?’ (Hilton Judin) ‘Where is the centre of the world? Where in the world are you?’ (Gabi Ngcobo)

How can we say it? Durban writer Imraan Coovadia deplored the little curiosity and ability to wonder that South Africans seem to have for their own history and for each other. Achille Mbembe linked this to the increasing poverty of our linguistic dictionaries. We simply do not have the words. Maliq Simone gave the counter-example of a Nuji dictionary of expressions for new touches, new senses, new fashions of walking.

What correlations / maps / trajectories are we drawing, and what for? Truth? Laughter? De-familiarization? Making reality better? Unveiling the absurd, the unjust, the unrevealed?

And is this 'bridging intellectual solvency and artistic sensitivity and creativity ... trying to cross-fertilize and to go beyond the usual specialities and departmental confines' (Pep Subiros) already part of the solution?

In a more general sense, an important question cutting across all themes was **how to engage with the city?** Is it about understanding as closely as possible the realities that urban residents in Africa face every day? About making visible what has been (made) invisible beforehand? Or is the important engagement with the city directed at making it better – either 'for real' (as in Mark Swilling's village) or 'for imagining' (as Rana El Nemr shows with her photographic series of painted balconies in Cairo that she reassembles into colourful balcony worlds)? Is it about the testing of theory through practice and taking action out of the university into the city, as Iain Low tries in his 'Design Build Research Urban Lab' for strategies of careful urban renewal?

Are we observers or are we becoming 'meta-planners', correlating chickens with minibus taxis in graphs that suggest absurd (yet plausible?) connections between things that are happening in the city (Karen Press)? Inventing games is another way of making up the city anew, without the constraints that any real-life transformation might involve. Architect Hilton Judin phrases the challenge this way: 'Taking a position in the urban, I am forced to imagine and develop a response; is it to be reflective, representative, descriptive, critical, or even comical?' His project faces this challenge by bringing common spaces into dialogue with uncommon events – the wars and hurricanes that rampage through ordinary life – and by looking directly at the parts of the city we always try to blank out, the shopping malls, the security guard cabins, the scruffy unravelling edges of the urban terrain.

Writing the world from Africa – what then, are the ways of writing African cities into theory, or of writing the 'worldliness of the African city' (Mbembe & Nuttall)?⁵ An important impulse was pronounced by Dominique Malaquais, Edgar Pieterse and Achille Mbembe: We want to generate theory about cities in general, starting from African cities. While theory-building is still predominantly done in the North, the African Urbanism initiative sets out to be a generator of thoughts and imaginaries from the South: this finds its parallels in art projects such as 'City Body Continent' (Julia Raynham) bringing African performances onto the international stage.

The de-pathologization of African cities is part of a process of re-conceptualizing these cities. Pep Subiros argues that we should vote for either the unexceptionality of African cities or for saying that every city is exceptional, and then admit that many 'African cities in an extreme and crude way play out the essential contemporary urban issues' of all cities (Pep Subiros).

And what is then the particular *African* aspect of (looking at, performing in) urbanity? How much essentialization is adequate, needed, revealing or useful? Maliq Simone made the point that it is important to sometimes keep a strategic essentialism – we learned this from feminism – while avoiding the trap of essentializing Africa's assumed otherness.

Locating 'urbanism' in different geographic contexts and recognising how this changes what is understood as normal/paradigmatic/ collapsed/deviant leads us to ask whether the African city is 'non-functional', or only so in northern-hemisphere terms? Is it 'differently functional' (as we have been taught to speak not of 'the disabled', but of the 'differently abled')? When is a 'bad building' not really a bad building? There's a suspicion that pressures to 'repair' elements of the city are sometimes just 'investment ploys' on the part of the global or local bourgeoisie; but does this take away from the need for the repairs themselves?

When we exemplify urban experience we often do it through the practices of the man or woman negotiating deals, identities, opportunities, trading off squalor for location, sexual oppression for career dreams, bling for the absence of safety and landscape. But

⁵ Mbembe, Achille & Nuttall, Sarah. 2008. Introduction: Afropolis. In Nuttall S & Mbembe A (eds) *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press

what if we were to think of ‘the household’ as the unit of urban survival – the space in which old women try to earn enough money to keep their grandchildren fed, in which schools try to get kids to do their homework, in which sick people try to get healthy again? Would that change what we think about the mechanisms of survival, accumulation, stabilisation, intimacy, cooperation, deal making?

Beyond modernism?

Can a radical reading of the South-centred modern(ist) city-for-itself, flowing and growing in the image of its inhabitants, unapologetic and eager, include a commitment to arguing for functioning sewage and sanitation, safe streets, spaces for children, anti-corruption governance, a kind of grace and potential for stillness inside the vibrating skin of this urbanism?

A key concern for some participants is the tension between celebrating non-Western/modernist ways of operating, and romanticising what are actually destructive living conditions for those forced (choosing?) to operate in these ways – the need to avoid exoticising chaos, to recognise common baseline human needs.

Many remarks raise a critique vis-à-vis the modernist conception of the city. The modernist gaze has prevented appropriate theory-building about African cities (Jenny Robinson, Edgar Pieterse, Achille Mbembe). A critical genealogy of modernism’s aesthetics, plans and other truths can be part of turning this bias around. Drawing on a wide range of examples from architectural history all over the continent, Nnamdi Elleh shows what constitutes the modernist city in Africa. Nigel Tapela demonstrates how in many cities across Africa, the nature of mining shaped the face of urbanization.

Part of the confrontation with African urbanist modernism is to shake its assumptions, as Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe phrase it in their book on Johannesburg: ‘to unfix, rather than to fix the meaning of the African modern’.⁶

The language we use trips us up, we keep needing to jump aside and try to dodge its implications. The African city is an ‘imaginary’ (ours?) and a ‘lived experience (but whose?); the city is a patchwork of modernist comfort/achievement and ‘pre-modern’, ‘criminalised’ conditions (that also reflect the *real* modernism of the current global experience? – all urbanisms are ‘modern’...). We know that we need to recognise and read the everyday of African urbanism in relation to the global political economy processes that call these practices, and the cities themselves, into being; but the discourses we have used to do this seem to permit only mono-focal vision, whereas our naked eyes know there’s a multi-focal world out there.

The article ‘Invisible Urbanism in Africa’ opens with a quote from Filip de Boeck: ‘...the infrastructure and architecture that function best in Kinshasa are almost totally invisible on the material level.’⁷ Doesn’t this beg the question of what it means to ‘function best’? We merchants of urbanist theories and art forms are inspired by the bohemian chaos of the urban South, so blatantly disobedient of bourgeois housekeeping rules and morality; but we also know at some level that health and harmony are functions of material conditions that can be named, and created. ‘Africans,’ Maliq Simone writes, ‘do make cities that, in many respects, work’.⁸ So what does ‘work’ mean, and for whom?

⁶ Mbembe, Achille & Nuttall, Sarah. 2008. Introduction: Afropolis. In Nuttall S & Mbembe A (eds) *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press

⁷ ‘Invisible Urbanism in Africa’. Vyjayanthi Rao in conversation with Filip de Boeck and AbdouMaliq Simone

⁸ Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2007. Pirate Towns: Reworking social and symbolic infrastructures in Johannesburg and Douala. *Urban Studies* 43(2): 357–370, p. 358

The fact that a forum such as this colloquium is so happily able to engage artists and theorists in a shared conversation is a sign not of a superficial hybridity of practice, but of a deeper sense of shared respect for the cultural/artistic/aesthetic dimensions of urban experience, and the survival strategies that they offer – the ‘urban imaginary’ that they allow struggling individuals to inhale as they fight their way through the days and nights of city life. But do we turn to these dimensions of urban experience because it is easier to recruit the agile, the playful, the adventurous aspects of urban practice to characterise a ‘non-Northern’ modern urbanism, rather than the less attractive realities that have always been the stuff of developmental concerns – material need and suffering?

Making oneself visible

What were we doing when we were talking this talk, with so much tangible tenderness for the objects of our enquiry, so much concern to celebrate and honour even the most troubling aspects of this ‘urbanism of the south’? The febrile chaos we try to capture is an expression of our love for this reality that is also our own private reality – we are its citizens, as much as any others are, we’re caught up in it, implicated in the production of its deals and circuits, its gaps and ephemeral safety zones.

Some of us went home from Cape Town with a head full of questions...

Where are the urban studies merchants themselves, ourselves, in the city we were trying to grasp? Are we its products, its citizens? Are we its ‘poor’, its ‘social’? Are we mere witnesses of cityness? Patricia Anahory, in her project on the diasporal city, makes herself the object of her own inquiry around nostalgia, displacements, departures and returns. Featuring her own return to her island, Cap Verde, she reflects on the meaning of borders and belonging. In his group portraits of Lagos youth, Uche Iroha brings himself into the picture, aligned with everybody else, looking out at those who look in at Lagos.

The unease we express about ‘romancing the city’s past’ by writing it, painting it, taking photos of it, is perhaps a way of saying we’re too close to our subject – because in the end it’s true of any subject that you study, the moment you write down anything about anything you’ve made it a ‘past’, re-cast in your own image. Why are we frightened of what we do?

Is it because we know that inside all the ‘modern’ ‘richly fragmented’ ‘multiple’ ‘hybrid’ ‘everyday’ urban realities that we inhabit and celebrate for their ‘different rationality’ from the one we grew up to obey, there are core elements that are indeed amenable to moral/ethical judgement – that the city is a place where harm gets produced that must be countered, that this harm can be named in terms of some ethical concerns that surely need to exist, no matter where on the planet we locate ourselves, urban or rural, north or south – and the materiality of the city is not only in the atomic-level creative energies of the individuals surviving there, but also in the molecular-level alliances that commit to material practices for communal good or ill? In our art, in our theory, do we not need also to be able to say: these are things the city must eliminate? these are ways in which the city must change, to eliminate them?

New deals?

‘The experiment worked.’ – Edgar Pieterse

Where does our (political) unease, as urban theorists and artists, find hope? Colloquium participants leaned towards some sources – the ideas of ‘the commons’, of ‘creative warping’, of ‘the city as its own objectivity’, of ‘the endless richness of the detailed, lived everyday’, of having the courage to demand and impose ethical/normative criteria on urban processes and plans – and left at the end of three days without giving any

simple answer to the question of what the good city can be – but with what seemed to be an understanding that it exists, embryonically at least, within every city’s imaginary and actual being.

The future deals are passionately awaited. The first ideas started to circulate: Dominique suggests working on imaginary, non-functional maps. Mark is inspired by an ethnography of food and the city as a collaborative project with a photographer. Karen wants to create more adventurous fantasies that will provoke real plans and cityscapes, and instigates everybody to share promising planning material on a new website being created by the African Centre for Cities. Matthew is interested in a typology of practices as expressed in particular spatialities. Jenny has instigated a project on Durban seen from the different vantage points offered during the colloquium. Tau will create an amazing internet platform for the project. Dave wants to make a book about the deal.