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The Durban Art-Deco residential aesthetic upon a Casino complex

Re-activate “entanglements”¹ of Urban Memory Durban, a South African City

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Abstract: Some specific places in Durban have been changing identity and functions throughout history and today these places can be still considered as “places of changes”. Durban’s precolonial origins suggests opportunities for introducing new perspectives on space, sociality and life in an African city providing a conceptual tool for shifting the interpretation from precolonial to post-apartheid Durban. The spatial and social creolisation of the pre-colonial period has left an important legacy in Durban and beyond. Any cultural analysis must thus take into account of mutuality and entanglement in these places.

Key Words: Entanglement, modernism-apartheid, inner-city, outer-city.

Most research work on the themes of South African cities tends to document and explain urban places as products of political ideology, post-colonialism narratives, spatial and racial divisions, apartheid. This is mainly a consequence of the dominant coding impressing for about fifty years a modern image of many South African cities – each with a specific social and economic character – which is an evident physical consequence of the historical events, indeed. One of the most effective schemes (Fig. 1) – especially from the architects’ point of view – describing the historical urban growth of Durban was elaborated and published by Rosenberg Len, Vahed Goolam, Hassim Aziz, Moodley Sam, Singh Kogi, in the book *The Making of Place: The Warwick Junction Precinct*² in 2013. They demonstrate the growth of Durban since the BoerBritish camps layout during the 1870s to the early 1900s and up to the formation of the Warwick circle as described in the Harrison map of 1903. However, it is particularly interesting to explore also the view of a geographer like Dianne Scott and the South African geographical research arguments in examining “historical landscapes as an integration of concerns with the broader discourses of modernism with more established concerns about the production of racial discourse”. She wrote, in fact, in her paper *‘Creative Destruction’: Early Modernist Planning in the South Durban Industrial Zone, South Africa*: “Space was reconstructed in South Durban in

1. The concept of entanglement applied to the city is developed in Orli Bass, *Palimpsest African Urbanity: Connecting pre-colonial and post-apartheid urban narratives in Durban*, in Abdou Maliq Simone, Edgar Pieterse, (ed.), *Rogue Urbanism*, ACC & Jacana Media, 2013, pp. 162. Quantum entanglement is a physical phenomenon which occurs when pairs or groups of particles are generated or interact in ways such that the quantum state of each particle cannot be described independently of the state of the other(s), even when the particles are separated by a large distance – instead, a quantum state must be described for the system as a whole.

2. ROSENBERG, GOOLAM, AZIZ, SAM, KOGI 2013.

this way through a process of abstraction and simplification, where only key elements, relevant to the local political, social and economic goals of the dominant whites, were included. [...] Planning systems that evolved in South Africa were greatly influenced by British planning concepts with the functional ‘town and country planning’ tradition established in Britain by the early twentieth century.”³

This approach reveals the contradictory attitude in the decolonization processes applied also in other countries (North Africa or India). An in-depth analysis of these issues was developed by Maristella Casciato and Tom Avermte on Casablanca and Chandigarh.⁴ The most relevant aspect of their work is that the “self contained and balanced community” ideas by the British planners and theorists of the Garden cities movement, applied also to the Chandigarh projects, in a country like South Africa were self-spontaneously built in the townships.

By 1980 there were perhaps 180,000 industrial workers in Durban, but the economic logic of this industry, little of which produced anything for export, was based on the harbour and the availability of imports. A significant example of modernist planning in Durban is the Kenneth Gardens Estate, originally designed and created in the 1940s as a public housing estate for low income whites: it is Durban’s largest municipal housing estate. The estate was created as part of the Apartheid government’s mission to care for poor whites and to make them ‘respectable’. As Monique Marks summaries in a working paper: “In the late 1980’s as apartheid was coming to an end, people from all government categorised ‘race’ groupings were able to access housing in Kenneth Gardens. Over the past 25 years, Kenneth Gardens has become one of the most diverse living spaces in Durban, in regard to race, religion, ethnicity and age. The diversity of Kenneth Gardens makes it a unique and vibrant space. However, the social and economic problems of residents of Kenneth Gardens have worsened as the municipal Housing Department has become less and less interested in intervening in ensuring that the estate is well maintained and that public goods are accessible. Social workers are no longer seen in Kenneth Gardens and the nearest public hospital that residents are zoned for is now more that 20km away from Kenneth Gardens. Drug and alcohol abuse continues to rise and unemployment in Kenneth Gardens, particularly amongst young people, is probably comparable to rates in the general population i.e. around 35%. The once beautiful gardens that characterised the estate are now sandy spaces with little thought about its purpose and how to enhance this”⁵ (fig. 2).

The literature on Durban city transformation from the architects’ view is still limited with respect to the studies published on a sociological and anthropological base. And this is particularly understandable not only because of the historical events related to social segregation but also because of the most recent turmoil determined by migratory flows coming from central Africa toward South Africa. This is clearly outlined by Abdoumalik Simone in his chapter *Going South: African Immigrants in*

3. SCOTT 2013, p. 239-240.

4. AVERMAETE, CASCIATO 2014 / 2015.

5. MARKS 2014.

*Johannesburg*⁶, which offers studies on new waves of African immigration after 1990 that have settled around Johannesburg and their impact on the changing of the South African economic and cultural landscape. Similar discussions could be traced also for a city like Durban as it is documented by a number of World Bank surveys⁷: the majority of the migrants come from Congo, Nigeria and Ethiopia and some of them are mostly involved in informal work as street vendors. In the paper *Palimpsest African Urbanity: Connecting pre-colonial and post-apartheid urban narratives in Durban*⁸ Orli Bass highlights a number of useful elements: Durban is best understood as a palimpsest space. "Durban, a city situated on east coast of South Africa in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, has always been marked by layered, imbricative and intricate meanings. [Durban is] a space of multiple, accumulative rewritings that simultaneously reflects latent histories and previous features.[...] Durban provides a rich site from which to explore intricate processes of creolisation, connection and entanglements. [...] This enfolds layers of contested and contrasting meanings that jostle to shape the relationships between identity and urbanity." Orli Bass draws on the work of Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael, *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies*⁹ considering the concept of entanglement as an analytical approach which "enables a complex temporality of past, present and future; one which points away from a time of resistance towards a more ambivalent moment in which the time of potential both latent and actively surfacing in South Africa, exists in a complex tandem with new kinds of closure and oppositions."

Entanglement and discontinuities: The Point / The waterfront / Warwick

Moreover in his dense essay Orli Bass links also two apparently separate instances in time introducing new perspectives on space, sociality and life in an African city providing a conceptual tool shifting the interpretation from precolonial to post-apartheid Durban: "The spatial and social creolisation of the pre-colonial period have left an important legacy in Durban and beyond [as it is documented also by the writings of Henry Francis Fynn, an English trader]. Identity in the space known as Durban has always been co-constitutive. Any reading of culture must thus take into account of mutuality and entanglement.[...] Durban's pre-colonial foundations underpin the current pattern of social and spacial relations in the city [...] of shared processing of space and creolisation. [...] In this manner the narrative of Durban's precolonial origins suggests there are cultural and creative resources that can assist in the rebuilding of post-apartheid South African society and cities. These fragments coalesce into the foundations of a new city, which is historically preceptive and sensitive to the shared paths and common experiences of urban life."¹⁰

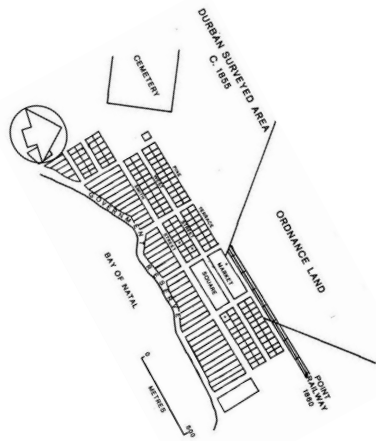
6. SIMONE 2000, p. 426-42.

7. SEGATTI, LANDAU 2011.

8. BASS 2013, pp. 162.

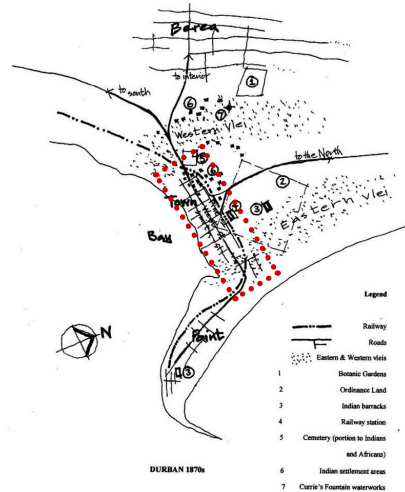
9. NUTTALL, MICHAEL, 2000.

10. BASS 2013, cit.

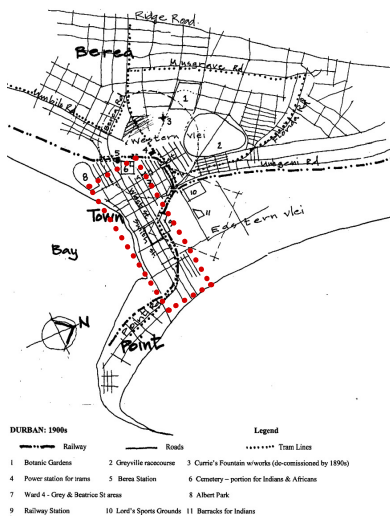


A nodal settlement pattern emerged with the British camp centred among clusters of primitive dwellings among the bush in the landscape.

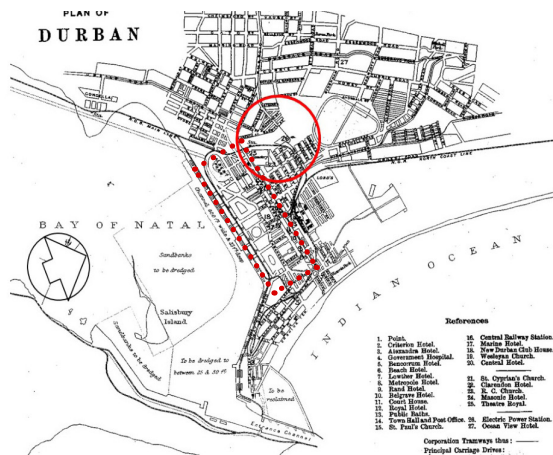
Boer Plan of Durban 1885.



The town of Durban, 1870s.



Durban 1900s.



Map of Durban in 1903 (Harrison 1903)
(Rosenberg et al 2013) WJP circled.

Fig. 1. Durban Urban Growth



Fig. 2. Kenneth Gardens, Low income whites' public housing estate, 1940s.(Photo: Anna Irene Del Monaco)

The correlation process has happened in Durban in some specific places which have been changing identity and function throughout history and which still are the “places of changes”.

In particular the urban systems:

The Point/The waterfront/Warwick represents an important physical spine of the historical city pattern that today is underdeveloped and lives a complex transition phase due to the presence of immigrants and squatters generating social insecurity and instability.

The Point: Indian settlers were brought to Durban as laborers in 1860 to work in the cane fields and mines, under the indenture system. They settled at The Point in barracks and later moved into the suburbs where they were allowed to be landowner¹¹. This is probably the main important reason why “The Point” (Fig. 3b) – although it was the edge of the inner city during the Boer-British time – became an area of discontinuity in the most recent urban developing process. The significant presence of Indians – Durban has the widest community of Indians living outside Indian national boundaries – making Indian goods highly requested: some of them became merchants and lived in the Indian market Quarter (Victoria Street Market, Fig. 5) – shopping arcades with dwellings above. Today “The Point” is a place of new residential developments, marine theme park uShaka Marine World, newly regenerated old colonial buildings transformed in restaurants and hotels.

The waterfront: The point is physically connected to the waterfront (Fig. 3a) which presents unsolved conditions considering that the presence of a railway track connecting the old harbor to a logistic area nearby The Point (today the MSC Cruises N-Seh Passenger terminal) which cuts the physical relation (especially pedestrian) between the old grid-city and the sea inhibiting a potential development. The waterfront is the sea-front of the CBD (Central Business District) which once was inhabited by whites and now, during the night is almost empty or abusively occupied by immigrants, contributing to raise the complexity of this space with social problems and implications for the physical transformation of that part of the city. “Unlike Cape Town, Durban’s growth is entirely tied up to the emergence of gold mining and the rise of Johannesburg and the complex of surrounding towns on the Witwatersrand some six hundred kilometres deeper in the interior. Durban is the port for this inland urban complex, with a partly artificially opened harbour and a roadrail-air network efficiently and impressively built up through the twentieth century.”¹² (Fig. 4)

Warwick Junction: is the area with which more Durban is identified today, reflecting the actual “image” of the city. It is located at the intersection of urban different functions and infrastructures, where the primary public transport interchange for train coming from the countryside is located, on the edge of Durban’s former colonial inner-city-grid limit, occupied in modern time by the CBD, the Victoria Market (Indian

11. Among the Indian townships in Durban: Phoenix, Durban, Chatsworth, Verulam. Other Indians are located in suburb like La Mercy in the Durban’s airport King Shaka precinct.

12. FREUND 2007, p. 186.

traders quarter). In Warwick Junction several different kind of markets are settled: the Early Morning Market, the Herbal Market and other informal markets connected and enriched by an art-work bridge designed by the office Design Workshop. As Professor Keith Hart, the anthropologist who coined the phrase “informal sector”, affirmed: “Warwick Junction has provided exhilarating proof of how poor people, in sensitive collaboration with urban planners, can enliven a city centre, generate employment for themselves and expand services for the population at large.”¹³ (Fig. 6).

The townships and the rural peripheries

According to what is reported by Bill Freund¹⁴, during the 1980s Durban was more financially secure and had more capacity for urban development. So, the newer suburbs extended themselves on “garden city lines and where the shabby, the indeterminate, and the irredeemably poor tended to be entirely left out of the city plans”. Today, however, visiting the townships inhabited by “black” and “colored”, it expresses the presence of communities with strong identities where emerging leaders play a relevant role in the social and political arena. Today most “white” South Africans live in Cape Town. Durban has much less white-inhabitants than some decades ago, since many of the whites – especially the young generation – have migrated to Europe or moved to Cape Town – as you understand talking with people. The high middle class and the richest population – which today is not only made up of whites – live on the hill surrounding the inner-city in a very pleasant environment of individual villas or high-rise condo enriched by the proximity of a gorgeous Botanic Garden closer to the inner-city and a Japanese Garden located close to a upper-class residential areas in Durban North. Beyond the hills surrounding the inner-city a territorial city made up of townships (Fig. 7) spread for kilometers of independent or semi-detached houses. A bird's eye view of the outer city it looks like a whole comparable to ‘fine dust particles’ made up of townships interrupted by or connected to gated-communities (Umhlanga Ridge, La Lucia). These communities are currently the most inhabited places in Durban and the built evidence of the trend inversion of urban growth: the informal city is overtaking the formal city. This is confirmed also by the fact that emerging political and administrative representatives today come also from the townships. The vitality and social creativity of Durban’s townships was present also during apartheid: “Notwithstanding the hegemony of racial segregation under apartheid, Durban has always been a space in which boundaries have been crossed and a site of interwoven relationships. [...]”¹⁵

The evolutionary age of the city and the future challenge of the open-city

As Nnamdi Elleh writes in the essay *Perspectives on the architecture of Africa's underprivileged urban dwellers*¹⁶ building on John Epstein’s study *Brasilia, Plan and*

13. DOBSON, SKINNER, NICHOLSON 2009.

14. FREUND 2007, p. 186.

15. BASS 2013, cit.

16. ELLEH 2013, p. 102.



*(Photos:
Anna
Irene Del
Monaco)
Fig. 3a*



Fig. 3b



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Reality: A Study of Planned and Spontaneous Urban Development (1971) chronicling the slums which accompanied the inauguration of the new federal capital city of Brazil: “James Holston’s book, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* (1989), which expanded on the story, are proof that the problems of squatter settlements in Africa are universal experiences of modernity which different nations undergo in different ways, and for which different solutions have been proposed but without the magic answer being found.”

Also ancient cities like Beijing and Rome had experienced and still experience the presence of informal settlements and ghettos in their historic urban fabric. Several Chinese cities today include “Villages in the city” – peasant villages – now surrounded and embedded within its urban texture.¹⁷ During the fascist regimen the “Borgate Ufficiali”¹⁸ in Rome were informal residential boroughs where lower class inhabitants were confined. The Rome and Venice Jews ghettos were places generated by modernity as Richard Sennet explains in his book chapter *Fear of Touching: The Jewish Ghetto in Renaissance Venice*.¹⁹ So the Tartar City laying to the southwest of the Mongol city of Dadu (Beijing) is another relevant example of confined population into a specific part of the urban texture or the foreign concessions in China which are analyzed by Robert Nield in *China’s Foreign Places: The Foreign Presence in China in the Treaty Port Era, 1840–1943*²⁰ documenting more than 60 examples of Chinese cities which during one century – a century of humiliation – were ruled by foreign population. Nield also reasons on the fact that China was ruled by people who originated from outside its borders: the Jin (from present day Russia), Yuan (Mongol) and Qing (Manchu) dynasties. All the ghettos are places of resistance which developed in time peculiar physical and social characters because of the alienation histories. These events modeled for centuries the identities of these places making them *attractive* after the end of the confinement process for further developments.

Going back to Africa, we find other scholars as Nnamdi Elleh supporting the idea that informal housing and modernity are part of the same process: “The question on how and why underprivileged housing persists in different African cities is the problem of modernity. In this context of usage, ‘modernity’ is defined as the experience of becoming part of the productive force within the world economic order, a process which always reorganises the spatial and the experiential landscape of each society. [...] It is universal, it has no specific centre from which all things originate; [...] Consciously and unconsciously, and collectively and individually, each locality and geographical part of the world has learned from the others to continuously shape and remake its own modernity”. Hilde Heynen provides a definition that can expand on our position: “Modernity constitutes the elements that mediate between a process of socioeconomic development known as modernisation and subjective

17. For further information on the concept of “villages in the cities”, see contributes by Chinese scholars in FRASSOLDATI 2008.

18. VILLANI 2012, *passim*.

19. SENNET 1996.

20. NIELD 2015.

responses to it in the form of modernist discourses and movements".²¹ Heynen adds two components to the definition of modernity, "an objective aspect that is connected to the socioeconomic processes and a subjective dimension that affects personal experiences, artistic activities, or theoretical reflections." In this regard, Nnamdi Elleh affirms, "the type of houses that are prevalent in the underprivileged parts of African cities represent the artistic dimension of African cities..."²²

There is an argument to be made on parallel tracks. Manfredo Tafuri in his book *Architecture and Utopia Design and capitalist development* of 1976 was reflecting on the contrast between the built utopian nature of Siedlungen, peripheral neighborhoods, and city centers. Siedlungen were conceived as oases at the edge of an urban reality, "experimental quarters or settlements, [...] very little conditioned by [...] the historic centres and the productive areas of the city. [...] And these were in large part contradictions that soon became more decisive than the means architecture had devised to control them".²³ This is important to reflect on the everlasting and ever-changing dialectic relation between urban center and margins – where the margins could be located both at the center and the periphery of urban systems as Victor Gruen taught us in his book *The Heart of Our Cities: The Urban Crisis, Diagnosis and Cure*.²⁴ And this is confirmed throughout a more *open* and optimistic approach by Lucio Barbera's concept in his essay *The City in the Evolutionary Age* when looking at the contemporary megalopolis – especially the Southern American, the African and the Chinese cities, – he argues: "Perhaps the time has come to truly study the world's metropolises as individuals in the midst – or at the beginning – of their evolutionary age seeking to establish their stage of development and that of their parts, in the concreteness of reality."²⁵ To bring some perspective, it is worth adding that there are some analogies between Barbera's approach and the concept of Open City through the lens of Richard Sennett when he maintains that "Cities are becoming close systems. There is homogeneity of urban form... it is difficult to understand whether you are in Frankfurt or in Shanghai. The globalization has standardized urban form and the typologies used globally... We are losing freedom. Our experience has been flattened out and infantilised becoming much more one-dimensional."²⁶ These ideas are stressed in the book *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, in which Sennett reveals other insights: "an open city would work with its complexities, making, as it were, a complex molecule of experience. The role of the planner and architect would be both to encourage complexity and to create an interactive, synergetic *ville* greater than the sum of its parts, within which pockets of order would orient people".²⁷

21. HEYENEN 2000, p. 10.

22. ELLEH 2013, cit.

23. TAFURI 1976, p. 109.

24. GRUEN 1964.

25. BARBERA 2014, p. 5.

26. SENNETT 2016.

27. SENNETT 2018.

After the apartheid phase Durban has grown up spontaneously toward a model that presents the potentiality to enhance toward an *open city system*, both physically and socially. Durban is probably the most African among the South African cities, it is a cogent African city experiencing a turbulence phase due to internal African migrations and a new requests for dwelling and inhabiting the city, whose resilience condition will be highly solicited for further verifications.

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