Nearby Albert Park.

Albert Park
A world in a city block

Kira Erwin

Urban Futures Centre, Durban University of Technology,
kiraerwin@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: Literature on South African cities walks a tightrope between extreme imagery of both hope and despair. This essay aims to discuss some complexities in relation to Albert Park, located in the port city of Durban on South Africa's east coast. Like all South African cities, Durban remains a concrete manifestation of past apartheid segregation policies, but the built environment is also being shaped by new forms of social and political relations. The text offers the reader an overview of the built environment and social relations within this particular urban space. In doing so it outlines how particular groups of people have been popularly linked to urban decay both in the past and in the contemporary.

Key words: Durban, Albert Park, urbanization, regeneration, informality, race and class.

Literature on South African cities walks a tightrope between extreme imagery of both hope and despair. On the one hand after the end of apartheid in 1994 South African cities are seen as "strategic arenas for development of a new citizenship based on a new social contract between citizens and the state".[1] On the other they can be typecast into "an emblem of irresolvable crisis".[2] An intense urbanization across the country has corresponded with rapidly growing of disparities within cities.[3] Analyzing city spaces outside of these binaries raises the complex task of "writing about the politics of hope in Africa without losing sight of its severe sufferings".[4] This essay aims to introduce some of these complexities in relation to Albert Park, located in the port city of Durban on South Africa's east coast.[5] Like all South African cities Durban remains a concrete manifestation of past apartheid segregation policies,[6] but the built environment is also being shaped by new forms of social and political relations. At the south-east corner of Durban's central business district is the area popularly known as Albert Park. The area takes its name from the large public park on its southern border and has the dubious honor of being called Durban's "inner-city". Albert Park is primarily a high-density residential area characterized by multi-

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1. Grest 2002, p. 38.

2. Mbembe and Nuttall 2008, p. 5.

3. Boraine et al 2006, p. 272.

4. Appadurai and Breckenridge, 2008, p. 352.

5. The greater Durban area has around 3, 44 million people (http://www.citypopulation.de/php/southafrica-ethekwini.php).

6. Beall 1997, p. 4.

story residential buildings and small formal and informal businesses. The area has a fascinating story of urban change, and continuities, both before and after the end of Apartheid in 1994. It is a dynamic and heterogeneous space shared by long-term residents and transient visitors. It is also synonymous with urban decay, high levels of crime, drinking holes and drug abuse; all of which has earned it a reputation as one of Durban's dangerous neighborhoods. For well over a decade Albert Park has been earmarked for urban regeneration, although very little of this has actually happened. This text offers the reader an overview of the built environment and social relations within this particular urban space. In doing so it outlines how particular groups of people have been popularly linked to urban decay both in the past and in the contemporary. In problematizing this linkage it highlights what some of the hidden features of this decay may be. The observations and analysis are drawn from newspaper articles, as well as ethnographic field notes and interviews (the later taken during from my doctoral research in Albert Park during 2008 – 2011). Albert Park is more than its infrastructure and locality; it is brought to life by, reshaped and re-imagined through the countless interactions of people. Taking as a starting point «space as a practiced place»[7] this chapter explores the matrix of relations between people and people, and people and their material surroundings. As Ronald Sundstrom argues it is not only people's actions and interactions that should constitute a spatial analysis but also the acknowledgement of how "place inhabits us".[8] At the end of this chapter the question of urban regeneration in Albert Park is revisited. An urban regeneration project that learns from, rather than that ignores or erases, the precarious and informal nature of Albert Park would, it is argued, go a long way in opening up imaginative and creative possibilities for this dynamic city space.

A World of Difference in a Street Block

Two main streets characterise Albert Park; St. Andrews Street (now known as Diakonia Avenue) and St. Georges Street (now Maud Mfusi Street). If you stand on a sunny day where St. Andrews Street meets Broad Street (Dr. Yusuf Dadoo Street) you would be forgiven for thinking you were looking at a postcard of Miami (Fig. 1-2). Tall palm trees line the middle island providing perfect symmetry for the 1950s high-rise apartment blocks. A number of these blocks have beautifully maintained art-deco designs. At this end of St. Andrews Street an urban regeneration project was spear-headed by the Inner City eThekwini Regeneration and Urban Management Programme (*iTrump*). For the most part this took the form of creating a small "cultural precinct" around the historic buildings clustered at this end of the street, a cosmetic facelift of palm trees, street lighting and new sidewalk paving was done. *iTrump* also contributed financially towards an outdoor stage for the Durban music school, located here, which is used for an annual street music festival.[9] As you walk along St.

7. De Certeau 1984, p. 117.
8. Sundstrom 2003, p. 90.
9. *Interview with iTrump officials,* 21th July 2010.

Andrews Street towards the park an increasing mix of formal and informal businesses can be found at pavement level; a vegetable and fruit store, a grocery shop, a laundry, an internet café, a Kentucky Fried Chicken, a car mechanic working out of a back yard. Beyond the "cultural precinct" the residential apartment blocks are a mixture of well-maintained and rundown buildings. Whilst this mix appears organic the contrast between well maintained and dilapidated blocks is stark. The last block on St. Andrews Street called *Ana Capri* has received a lot of attention. It is often referred to as an example of what happens when a block goes *bad*. In 2010 a newspaper article reported that the ten-story block had no working lifts for 14 years. Residents, it was reported, carried water in buckets from the municipal standpipe on the ground level up to their units.[10] The large backlog of levies left no funds for maintenance and with rates owing to the municipality the block eventually went under legal administration due to health and safety risks.[11] Yet within this context of decay there was a sign of entrepreneurial urban innovation. A Mr. Zuma was interviewed for the same article, for a small fee he could be hired by residents to deliver water from the standpipe to your doorstep. Unfortunately, Mr Zuma was injured when «a 5kg metal step broke off the rusty fire escape» in *Ana Capri* and hit him on the head.[12]

Directly across from *Ana Capri* is the entrance to the park itself. The park now has a metro police station fenced off on one corner, and next to that a children's playground. If you had visited the area before the 2010 FIFA World Cup you would have seen a large group of homeless men who lived in the park; sleeping or sitting talking in circles, clothes drying on the trees and small fires to keep warm and cook. Just before the World Cup the police *cleaned* the park out and these men migrated to the banks of the railway lines about 500 metres away from the park entrance.[13] In the past the park has been used as an annual music festival, and as a space for an *unofficial* church gathering in a large tent.[14] It used to house a cricket stand but that has since been pulled down by the municipality as vagrants repeatedly used it for shelter. A few years back the municipality erected a large sign attempting to 'control' the activities in the park (Fig. 3). Today the park is a vastly underutilised public space. On weekends it is fairly busy with informal soccer games, but for the most part there are seldom many people within it and particularly not families and children. Turning into Park Lane from *Ana Capri* and crossing over McArthur Street you arrive at St. Georges Street. Here there has been no attempt at regeneration or beautification (Fig. 4-5-6). The number of well-maintained blocks diminishes greatly and almost all have pavement shops of various types. Rooms for short term rent and daily rates are advertised on doors and windows. The street is a busy vibrant space with street

10. *The Daily News,* 5th November 2010.

11. *Interview with Legal Administrator,* 4th August 2010.

12. *The Daily News,* 5th November 2010.

13. This group of people were since moved from the railways and ended up in another nearby park in the area, which subsequently became known as "whoonga Park" due to the high levels of brown heroin (whoonga) being sold and smoked in the park.

14. *The Mercury*, 15th March 2012.

traders and *sisha nyama* (the isiZulu word for an informal barbeque where you can buy a piece of cooked meat, or pay to get your own cooked). Often bags of garbage and empty bottles from the bars pile up on the roadside. For many residents living in the Albert Park area there is a spatial and social distinction between what is still referred to as the St. Andrews Street side and the St. Georges Street side of Albert Park. In 2010 Sanele, a young man who had grown up in Albert Park commented that:

"We call from St. Andrews Street to that side we call it suburbs. From Russell to this side we call squatter camps. Because of the people who are staying there and the flats are clean that side. From this side, the people they taking their clothes in the windows and everything, so it's very bad you see, so that's why we call that side the suburbs and this side the squatter camp".[15]

Local descriptions and explanations of these micro-level contrasts between the streets in Albert Park mirror the imagery of spatial inequalities found on a national scale, between suburbs and vast informal settlements. South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world.[16] This includes the harsh spatial inequalities between rural and urban geographies, and township, informal settlements and middle-class suburbs.[17] Sanele's use of imagery also hints at some of the social tensions in the area, particularly with reference to *good* and *bad* residents. This linking of the built environment in Albert Park to groups of people who live there is a historic and contemporary practice.

Contested Space

Social identities are always intricately tied up in defining space, without the ability to prescribe imagined boundaries to social identities they may become *insecure* or viewed as dangerous.[18] South Africa's spatial segregation according to racial groups was an example of just how horrific the linking of space and identities can become. The apartheid Group Areas Act in 1950 legislated racial segregation in South Africa. *Black*, *indian* and *coloured* people were prohibited from living in the city and Albert Park was zoned as a *white* residential area. In the 1970s Albert Park housed working to middle class *white* residents. In the 1980s however many owners started to contravene this act in the city. This was primarily driven by a lack of housing in designated *non-white* areas and an abundance of empty flats for rent in Albert Park.[19] Many of these new residents classified as *black*, indian and *coloured* belonged to an emerging professional class for whom close proximity to the Central Business District brought numerous benefits. This pattern was very similar to that analysed in other inner city areas in South Africa at the time.[20] The local government however

15. *Interview with Sanele,* 5th March 2010.
16. National Development Plan 2030, 2011.
17. Towards an Urban Integrated Development Framework, 2013:16
18. Bauman 1993, p. 234.
19. Maharaj, Mpungose's 1994, *passim.*
20. Morris 1997, *passim*; Christopher 2001, p. 457.

did attempt to enforce evictions of *disqualified* persons in Albert Park.[21] Despite sporadic evictions by the 1990s Albert Park had unofficially become an integrated city space. As early as 1989 newspaper reports warned that Albert Park would turn into Durban's first *ghetto* (see for example *The Natal Mercury*, 30th March 1989); newspaper articles bemoaned the state of the streets, buildings and illegal activities that plagued the area. Contrasted against its former glory as a 'nice neighbourhood', these articles set the tone for the majority of newspaper reports going forward. Although no longer discussed in blatantly racist terms racist undertones continued through implicitly linking the demographic population shift with the degeneration of the area into a "seedy inner city neighbourhood" containing drunkenness and prostitution.[22] In 1999 the city proposed to move a state run homeless shelter called The Ark into Albert Park. This potential new influx of what was seen as mostly *white* homeless people was strongly resisted by Albert Park property owners, residents, and eventually the local politician. This move was portrayed as contributing to further degeneration of an area that was already battling urban decay.[23] Then five years into the transition to democracy the resistance against the Ark's relocation was couched in the protection of Albert Park as a unique racially integrated space. Bouillon notes how the metaphor of a rainbow nation was mobilised were "the community of Albert Park [was] a successful but fragile rainbow mix whose success should not be compromised by inconsiderate interference upsetting its delicate balance".[24] In this instance a discourse of "racial harmony" was successfully used to protect class interests against the homeless. The Ark was eventually moved outside of the city limits and in 2003 Albert Park was earmarked by the city for regeneration.[25] The most visible outcome of this regeneration is the cultural precinct described earlier.
This did little to change the negative perception of Albert Park in the media; articles continued to focus on urban decay, loud drinking taverns, bad buildings, xenophobia and more recently high levels of drug abuse.[26] In February 2014 the mayor of Durban was reported as saying that the "challenges of vagrancy, loitering, drug-abuse and criminal elements at Albert Park had to be dealt with as a matter of urgency as this not only tarnished the image of the city, but also reflected the socio-economic challenges facing society".[27] Unofficially these challenges are often attributed to *foreigners*, particularly people from other African countries. The influx of people into cities, from within and outside of South Africa, has rapidly increased, as indeed have the number of repatriations.[28] Durban is no exception to this pattern.[29] South

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21. *The Post*, 28th September – 1st October 1988.
22. *The Daily News,* 19th April 1989.
23. Mohamed 1999, p. 2.
24. Bouillon 2002, p. 23.
25. *The Sunday Tribune,* 31st August 2003.
26. *The Mercury,* 21st May 2007.
27. *Berea Mail*, 28th February 2014.
28. Peberdy 2001, p. 19.
29. Maharaj, Moodley 2000, *passim*.

Africa has a long and rich history of migration and immigration, a flow of labour and skills without which South Africa's current wealth and infrastructure would not exist.[30] Yet it is only since the building a new nation project started in "1994 that this influx has taken on crisis proportions in the official and public mind".[31] For a property investor who owned single units and entire blocks in Albert Park in 2010 and who lived in the wealthy north coast suburb of Umhlanga at the time, these changes conjured up exotic foreign imageries of Albert Park. He states:

"I've never really been there in the night time, like walking the streets, it must be unbelievable, like on a Friday night or something with all the cooking. It's like being in another country".[32]

This touristic fantasy of "being in another country" 20 minutes' drive from your front door constructs a discourse of foreignness used to classify both people and the inner-city as belonging to elsewhere. In 2008 South Africa was marred by violent xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals from other African countries.[33] Albert Park was no exception; in 2009 a mob of Albert Park residents entered a building in Albert Park known for housing *foreigners*. By the end of the night two men had lost their lives and many more were seriously injured.[34] Here urban decay and imaginings of regeneration intertwine with discourses of race and nationality to construct explanations for change. These discourses build on and reconstitute each other rather than sit on a simple causal trajectory. For example, whilst the fear of racial mixing seen in the late 1980s and early 1990s are no longer used to explain urban decay, similar discriminatory strategies and language continue to construct divisions between those who belong and those who don't. In South Africa the legacy of lived experiences under a racist state has created a "prior vocabulary" of race thinking, one easily mobilised and referenced to justify alternative forms of exclusion.[35] These exclusionary practices are embedded in the material realities of deep urban inequality. In Albert Park there is a matrix of desperate and exploited tenants, absentee landlords, profiteering entrepreneurs, manipulative and dangerous tenants, and exhausted city officials, all of whom respond to and produce urban decay and precarious livelihoods in the area.

Precarious Livelihoods

Whilst bad tenants are blamed for creating "bad buildings" it is frequently irresponsible and unethical ownership that contributes to decay. This problematic ownership comes in many guises in Albert Park. Some apartment units have literally been abandoned by owners. Believing their initial investment, no longer worth the effort, perhaps unable to sell due to a lack of maintenance in the block,

30. SHARP 2008, p. 1.
31. MAHARAJ, MOODLEY 2000, p. 152; PEBERDY 2001, p. 19.
32. *Interview with Investor Owner 7th July 2010.*
33. WORBY, HASSIM, KUPE 2008, *passim.*
34. *The Daily News,* 6th January 2009.
35. MARÉ 2007, *passim*; GREENBURG 2010, *passim.*

or unwilling to fix-up or pay rates these owners have absconded. Since the owner is the legally recognised authority for the property, their absence or disinterest creates opportunities for rent seeking activities from illegal *owners* or *tenants* who compound non-payment of levies and rates in the block. Such lack of responsible ownership is rarely penalised except when the matter is taken to the High Court to have the building placed under legal administration by the municipality, a process that is extremely arduous and can take years.[36]

Another type of ownership practice is unethical profit seeking. The steady high demand for low rental accommodation in the city has seen some landlords turning their buildings into illegal, overcrowded, boarding houses. The conditions in these buildings are abysmal and contravene health and safety regulations. The rent per day rooms, available in buildings in Albert Park, offer limited – if any – ablution facilities, illegal and unsafe electrical connections and always carry the threat of forced removals by police raids (see for example the raid on an Albert Park block in *The Daily News*, 20 March 2014). The most frequent contact many South African and foreign national residents living in these squalid and precarious conditions have with city officials are not with the social service departments, or home affairs, but with the police. This is a historic exploitative practice in the area. Under the Group Areas Act unscrupulous landlords in Albert Park exploited tenants classified as *disqualified* through high rents and neglecting maintenance. Tenants were often subjected to "subhuman conditions"[37] but could not take any legal recourse for fear of being evicted and/or arrested. Today "foreigners" who do not hold full citizenship are easy prey for these unscrupulous landlords. The denial of rights to people living in a country who are not deemed citizens traps people into precarious living environments in which they are frequently harassed by the police.[38] This is not to suggest that all tenants are victims. There are many stories of tenants refusing to pay rent increases (sometimes due to legitimate protest at the conditions of the building), hijacking neighbouring apartments,[39] as well as being responsible for overcrowding against the wishes of the owners or block supervisors. Recently a social housing company who provides subsidised rental won a legal case against tenants withholding rentals, the lack of rental payments was jeopardising the company in terms of repaying its bonds.[40] One of these cases was in Albert Park and eventually over 90 residents were evicted.[41] Wealthy owners who can afford to protect their investments have started to install new strategies to safe guard buildings from *going bad*, such as biometric finger print scanners.[42] For the working class owners who live in their unit being in a *bad building* transforms property ownership from wealth accrual to precarious liability.

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36. *Interview with iTrump officials,* 21th July 2010.

37. Mohamed 1999, p. 3.

38. Greenburg 2010, p. 75.

39. High-jacking is a colloquial term used for stealing a car at gun point from an owner. Here it is referred to stealing an apartment, usually through aggressively asserting one's illegal ownership.

40. *The Star*, 22 January 2013.

41. *Daily News*, 28 January 2014.

42. *Interview with Investor Owner,* 7th July 2010; Murray 2008, p. 207.

When non-payment of levies and rates reaches a tipping point in the block the last remaining responsible owners join in the non-payment or abandon their units. After a long and tiring legal process driven by the city or banks who steps in to protect their investments many of these owners face the possibility of losing their home. Block supervisors who work in functioning buildings run very tight ships in terms of rules and regulations, largely in response to the view that if the tenants and/or owners start to bend the rules the block itself will soon turn *bad*. Marcelo de Souza's writings on the complex negotiations of urban living in Brazil may well be used to describe the experiences of many Albert Park residents, where residents "have to learn to be countervailing power not only regarding the state apparatus and the legal side of capitalist economy, *but also in relation to the ordinary criminal forces*, which are usually totally adapted to capitalist values (for instance, consumerism) capitalist 'logic' (orientation towards maximization of profit), and capitalist patterns of behaviour".[43] Discourses of *bad* buildings, and *bad* residents, weaken solidarity around shared experiences of "overcrowded living conditions and unstable subletting agreements"[44] by immigrants and South Africans. A focus on these discourses mutes critique of the structural inequalities that shape and constrain livelihoods strategies. This is true not just of Albert Park. Bourdieu for example, writing on the rising anti-foreigner sentiments in France, observes that xenophobic discourse works to "generate hatred out of the misfortunes of society – unemployment, delinquency, drug abuse, etc."[45] In response to these misfortunes the city municipality initiated, and continues to talk about, an urban regeneration project in Albert Park.

Precariousness as Imaginative Lens

The city has had various initiatives over the years to work towards urban renewal and regeneration to sort out what the then mayor of Durban says "tarnishes the image of the city".[46] For the most part urban designers in South African cities follow "global trends in vogue in other aspirant world-class cities" by actively courting private property development and real estate to realize the visions of order, efficiency and financial wealth attributed to cities that hold global value.[47] National government initiatives like the Urban Development Zones offered tax breaks in demarcated areas in the city to investors who refurbish buildings that have been declared derelict.[48] But what do these initiatives mean for the people living in Albert Park? Modern urban gentrification often involves the displacement of the poor,[49] in what David Harvey calls a process of "accumulation by dispossession".[50] These

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43. De Souza 2009, p. 44, emphasis in original.
44. Greenburg 2010, p. 71.
45. Bourdieu 1998, p. 16.
46. *Berea Mail*, 28th February 2014.
47. Murray 2008, p. 7.
48. *Interview with Investor Owner,* 6th October 2010; Murray 2008, p. 204.
49. State of the World's Cities 2012/2013, 2013, p. 109.
50. Murray 2008, p. 34.

ideas hold sway for city officials in Durban, such as in the comments below from an interview with an iTrump official:

"Because what we are looking at the end of the day is to turn the city around back to its former glory, of what it should be, law and order, respectable buildings, facilities and buildings working like they should do. And that's what it should be, turning it to a world class city again, instead of having it as a slum.".[51]

But this nostalgic inspiration of urban regeneration as a return to a golden age gone by can have unintended consequences.
For example whilst *iTrump*'s interventions of palm trees and new paving in St. Andrews Street may have been appreciated by some residents, in practice it served to reiterate existing spatial and social divides between St. Andrews Street and St. Georges Street. Classifying and beautifying an area of St. Andrews Street as a *cultural precinct* inadvertently contributed to the urban myth that foreigners in St. Georges Street are the causal agents of urban deterioration. The classification of space by city officials here directly impacts on the classification of people living in related spaces. This micro-level differential geography mirrors the continued spatial segregation that mars South Africa. "Modern urban planning has failed to integrate the urban poor into the socioeconomic fabric of the city",[52] and Albert Park is no exception here. In this small example regeneration serves to entrench rather than reduce micro level spatial inequalities.

But can we imagine an alternative vision of urban regeneration. Returning to the challenge stated in the introduction, a form of regeneration that encompasses hope whilst recognising despair? Doing this requires an urban vision that incorporates rather than rejects how people are "generating quite new institutions and forms or social organization",[53] even if these practices are radically different from conventional urban planning ideals. Shifting the regeneration paradigm from pavements and palm trees, to people and possibilities asks first what we can learn, and then build on, from existing precarious everyday practices. Acknowledging the complexities of social issues that require attention in Albert Park, we should also acknowledge the ingenuity and vibrancy that exists there. Albert Park offers a number of so-*called best practice* approaches to sustainable cities many of which have developed organically; high-density residential spaces, vibrant street life, successful mixed use areas and a large green public park that holds vast potential. Retreating from the obsession with an ordered, formal and *progressive* urban landscape we should dare to imagine how the creative, informal, transient and entrepreneurial activities of the street reposition the lens of urban regeneration. This new lens does not allocate blame onto groups of people, nor does it design them out of the master plan. Instead it calls for a designing in of innovative informal livelihoods; this in itself may forge an alternate, and socially just, path to dealing with inner-city urban decay.

51. *Interview with iTrump officials,* 21st July 2010).
52. State of the World's Cities 2012/2013, 2013, p. 109.
53. Mbembe, Nuttall 2008, p. 6.

Fig. 1-2. St. Andrews Street meets Broad Street (Dr. Yusuf Dadoo Street) you would be forgiven for thinking you were looking at a postcard of Miami.

Fig. 3. Albert Park, Durban. A few years back the municipality erected a large sign attempting to 'control' the activities in the park.

Fig. 04-05-06. Turning into Park Lane from Ana Capri and crossing over McArthur Street you arrive at St. Georges Street. Here there has been no attempt at regeneration or beautification.

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