Kwere Kwere

A Story of a Resilient Inner City Neighborhood in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Neighbourhood change in Hillbrow is not concomitant with linear processes of urban decline and economic resurgence. Instead, change is shaped by the history, politics and economics of the local context, in addition to the activities of local actors. Despite severe physical decay, a history of redlining, and limited public sector support, Hillbrow remains a resilient port-of-entry neighbourhood to Johannesburg for many who desire to engage in local and transnational economies.

Introduction

Kwere Kwere traditionally is a derogatory term used by South Africans to label Other foreign Africans. It literally refers to the sound of foreign African languages now 'flooding' South African cities, and it is a term that I first came across in Johannesburg's most densely populated and socially diverse inner city neighbourhood, Hillbrow. Of significance is how this term instills disrespect for, and a fear of, the Other. Referring to others as Kwere Kwere has become associated with contemporary Hillbrow because most foreign nationals from other African countries, whether documented or not¹, first establish themselves in this inner city neighbourhood. But Hillbrow also attracts many South African citizens who equally hope to engage in Johannesburg's perceived employment opportunities. Hillbrow therefore functions as a port-of-entry to Johannesburg and to the country of South Africa: for the purpose of this paper, Kwere Kwere is used to recognize this role and its importance. One of the proofs that Hillbrow functions in this way is the fact that at least 39 percent of Hillbrow's current residents are foreign-born (Leggett, 2003); 68 percent of its total population moved to this neighbourhood in the last five years; and 90 percent of Hillbrow's current residents did not live here in 1994, when the apartheid regime was officially dismantled (Simone, 2004).

Since the ending of apartheid, neither an inclusive cosmopolitan inner city context nor a pan-Africanist consciousness has emerged to replace politics as division. Instead, the City of Johannesburg is responding to Hillbrow's transitional character by demonizing this neighbourhood, and by implementing urban regeneration policies with the purpose of "cleaning-up" the inner city (CoJ, ICRC, 2007). Accordingly, "Hillbrow is renowned for two things: immigrants and crime. It is arguably

the most feared neighbourhood in the entire country" (Leggett, 2003: 25). Immigrants and crime are thus conflated; and "dealing with" immigrants and crime entails implementing "intensive urban management" strategies via regular police raids in Hillbrow.

The Johannesburg Area Police Commissioner claims that:

The only way to stop the mayhem is to tackle criminals head-on with military-style raids on crime-ridden buildings in Hillbrow. It's neither pretty nor easy, and it sparks mayhem of its own. Often innocent people's rights get trampled. But, there is no other way to save the city from sliding irrevocably into the abyss. When we have returned to normalcy we won't need to crack down anymore.

(Financial Mail, 2003: 13)

This media account discloses the dominant political realities at play in Hillbrow to the exclusion of any other understanding of this port-of-entry context. It buys into the prevailing perception of chaos. Only a partial reference is made to the majority of Hillbrow residents

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who are not involved in "criminal activities," who are being placed in situations of fear and anxiety, and whose daily lives are continually disrupted by these actions.

Furthermore, this media report spotlights the City of Johannesburg's current urban regeneration aim. Thirty years of disinvestment and white flight from the inner city of Johannesburg recently prompted the municipality to implement a plethora of investor-friendly policies to re-attract private capital and middle class households (see Winkler, 2009b). Contrary to global North experiences, however, decades of capital and white flight resulted neither in a depopulation of Hillbrow nor in a vacant, boarded-up landscape. Rather, informal socioeconomic activities coupled with a significant inward migration of job seekers have transformed Hillbrow. Today, the great majority of Hillbrow's residents are poor. Many rely on the informal sector to survive, and many reside in physically dilapidated buildings. But informal socioeconomic activities, physical deterioration, assumed pathological problems, and a doubling of Hillbrow's resident population are perceived by municipal officials and politicians as undesirable obstacles in achieving their "World Class African City" vision (CoJ, ICRC, 2007).

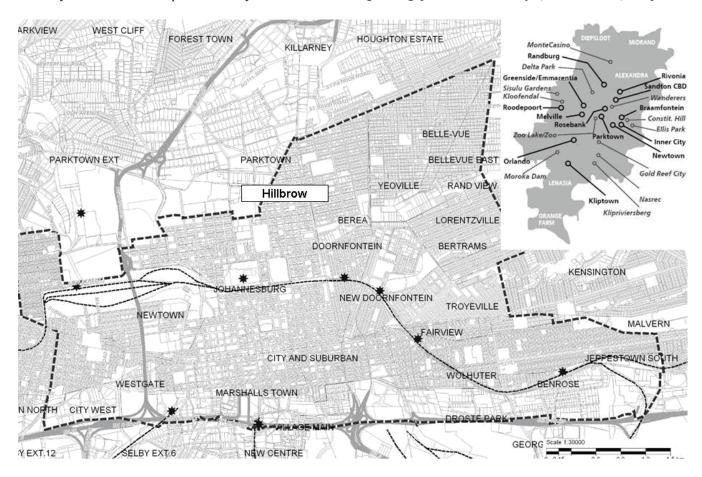
By means of an in-depth case study combined with

personal observation, this paper conceptualizes Hillbrow as an ever-changing but resilient neighbourhood, in order to present an alternative understanding of this context. Despite rapid socioeconomic and political change, Hillbrow continues to thrive albeit in a manner different from state officials' understanding of thriving. Research findings presented in this paper are based on 33 openended interviews with community leaders, development facilitators, residents, and senior City of Johannesburg officials.

The paper's first section discusses the landlord and tenant responses to a series of laws that had great impact on Hillbrow, and the second section describes how the neighborhood has resisted marginalization by finding and maintaining an important role in the life of the city. The sidebar on page 11 explains well-known South African terms that may be unfamiliar to American readers.

Revisiting Hillbrow's History of Change

While the 1960s saw an unprecedented boom in the construction of high-rise apartments in Hillbrow, by the late 1970s the supply of residential units began to exceed demand due to an economic recession and growing political instability (Brodie, 2008). Up until



The inner-city region of Johannesburg. The insert illustrates the City of Johannesburg's entire jurisdiction. *Source: CoJ, Spatial Development Framework, 2008: Map 1.*

then, Hillbrow also functioned as a desired port-of-entry location for a steady flow of European immigrants to Johannesburg. However, "in the short period between 1978 and 1982, the racial composition of Hillbrow was altered" (Morris, 1994: 821). Before the late 1970s, few landlords would have risked renting apartments to black tenants in racially segregated White Group Areas like Hillbrow². But by the end of the decade the South African economy had collapsed, and the apartheid state was no longer financially able to build houses in Coloured, Indian and African Group Areas. An oversupply of accommodation in Hillbrow, and a chronic shortage of housing in Coloured, Indian and African Group Areas, forced black households to seek alternative accommodation in Hillbrow. This prompted the first wave of white flight from Hillbrow. Additionally, the Soweto uprising of 1976 profoundly altered the political and economic landscape of South Africa. On a micro scale, Hillbrow, with its sizeable European immigrant population, witnessed a rapid exodus of white foreigners following the uprising.

The exodus of white tenants from Hillbrow was further fueled by changes in the Rent Control Act in 1978. This allowed for landlords to charge marketaligned rents to new leaseholders only, as rent control continued to apply to units occupied by original tenants. According to Morris (1994), landlords employed various covert tactics to "encourage" protected tenants to vacate their apartments. These tactics included terminating maintenance contracts on buildings to force original, white tenants to move. Landlords hoped to fill vacant apartments with tenants who would not be in a position to challenge the legality of rent increases: namely, Coloured and Indian (and later African) tenants, who were illegal under the Group Areas Act and were desperate to find accommodation. Leasing to such households, while Hillbrow was still classified as a White Group Area, resulted in the exploitation of new residents by landlords "who would charge illegal tenants considerably more than the going rate" (Morris, 1994: 826).

The municipality's initial response to the demographic change in Hillbrow was restrained. And prior to a media exposé of "the new phenomenon taking place in Hillbrow," tenants had not been charged with contravening the Group Areas Act (The Star, 1982). For the state, this "phenomenon" of non-white residency alleviated a housing crisis. However, once the story broke, the City Council was forced to react by issuing Coloured and Indian tenants with eviction notices. But tenants refused to move, as they had nowhere else to go. Instead, they began to organize themselves by seeking legal representation from the Action Committee to Stop Evictions (ACTSTOP).³ This collective community action began to change the balance of power, and by March 1981, charges against 157 households were withdrawn (Morris, 1994). Hillbrow's Indian and Coloured tenants ultimately clinched their victory in 1982 when, in the milestone court case of Govender versus the State, Judge Richard Goldstone declared Group Area evictions unjust. "This practice has to be halted unless suitable, alternative accommodation is available," he said (Goldstone, cited in The Star, 1982: 32). The financially strapped apartheid state found no alternative accommodation, and consequently Coloured and Indian residents secured their right to live in a White Group Area. However, this victory did not lead to the abolition of the Group Areas Act. Instead, Hillbrow was officially reclassified as a Grey Group Area, and this reclassification prompted financial institutions to redline Hillbrow.⁴

Nor was the victory of reclassification successful in preventing landlords from exploiting tenants, particularly when property values plummeted after the neighbourhood was redlined. To recoup their losses, landlords then turned to black South Africans, who were not protected under the Govender ruling. At first only a few black South Africans moved to Hillbrow. But from the mid 1980s onward, many more sought accommodation there due to the intensification of violence in segregated black townships and the scrapping of the Influx Control Act.⁵ Hillbrow offered them an improved quality of life, access to inner city facilities and job opportunities, and a "sense of escape" from implosive township politics (Gotz and Simone, 2003). Nonetheless, "landlords escalated rents significantly once black tenants moved in, and in some cases the rent more than doubled" (Morris, 1999: 517). Crankshaw and White (1995) argue that in order to meet inflated charges, many tenants had no option but to resort to subletting their apartments. Subletting practices, in turn, created severe overcrowding, and overburdened the already stressed infrastructure.

After the apartheid era ended in the early 1990s, South Africa's border controls were relaxed. As a consequence, transnational migration from other African countries began. And for many who sought work and other opportunities in Johannesburg, Hillbrow became the preferred entryway into the new South Africa (Crush and McDonald, 2002).

A final key piece of legislation was the Sectional Titles Act of 1971. This Act enabled landlords to sell individual apartments within a building. In terms of the Act, individual apartment owners automatically became members of a Body (management) Corporate, which, in turn, was responsible for collecting levies for general building maintenance projects and for paying municipal rates, taxes and services. Converting buildings to sectional title became a widespread practice in Hillbrow, and by the late 1970s almost 70 percent of Hillbrow's buildings were under this ownership (Morris, 1999). Initially, most units were owner-occupied, but "by the mid 1990s only 16 percent of apartments were occupied by their owners" (Morris, 1999: 515), and most Body

SOME KEY TERMS IN APARTHEID HISTORY

Group Areas Act (1950): Following on the heels of the Population Registration Act which divided residents into White, African, Asian and Coloured races, this law assigned separate residential and business areas for each race in all urban settings. Although legally subject to prosecution, many non-whites began slowly moving into White areas in the 1980s. Hillbrow was the first location to be officially designated as a "Grey Area," where different races were allowed to live together.

Soweto Uprising (1976): A student strike began in the African township of Soweto, southwest of Johannesburg, when students protested mandatory Afrikaans-medium education. The protest turned violent and 23 students were killed by the police, sparking more riots and massive police response. The event galvanized the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and abroad, contributing to economic instability and a renewed international media focus on the apartheid regime.

Influx Control Act (1923, abolished in 1986): Officially called the Native Black Urban Areas Act, this law established cities and towns as white domains into which black Africans were allowed only as labor. All blacks were to reside in townships outside white urban areas, the only exception being domestic workers who were allowed to stay with the families that hired them.

Corporates had disintegrated.

As a result, necessary maintenance projects and municipal debts were neglected. Sectional title buildings are currently in the worst state of decay, and they are millions of dollars in municipal arrears. Moreover, many landlords have abandoned their apartments. To address this problem, the City of Johannesburg is facilitating a Better Buildings Programme (BBP), discussed in the next section.

Conceptualizing Hillbrow's Vibrant Role in the City

Since the late 1970s, Hillbrow's population has increased by 130 percent, without a complementary growth in the provision of physical stock (Statistics South Africa, 2004). Here, more than 100,000 residents try to eke out a livelihood with inadequate resources, scant public sector support, and barely discernible urban infrastructure (Tomlinson, 2003). Resident incomes vary from zero to \$32,000 per annum. But 69 percent of Hillbrow's residents earn between \$130 and \$500 per month, which barely covers the cost of renting an apartment as rents range from \$130 to \$200 per month (Winkler, 2008). Moreover, 39 percent of Hillbrow's South African residents are officially unemployed, and at least 10 percent of the unemployed rely exclusively on the informal economy to survive (Leggett, 2003).

Hillbrow has also become an anchor for conventional and unconventional small- to medium-sized trading across the continent (Crush and McDonald, 2002; Simone, 2004). Cross-border traders from other African

countries travel back and forth, often on two-week visitor visas, to buy and sell commodities (Simone, 2004). For these mobile traders, "home" in Hillbrow is often a long-stay hotel. At the same time, Hillbrow is viewed as a temporary destination by refugees from war-torn African countries (Landau, 2005). A significant number of residents, whether South African or not, are therefore transient and do not perceive this neighbourhood as a long-term investment, either financially or emotionally. Rather, Hillbrow is perceived as the place from which migrants can start to access economic opportunities that may enable them to return home with enhanced purchasing power (Englund, 2002; Gotz and Simone, 2003). But this rarely happens.

If residents happen to stay in Hillbrow for a long time, it's not because they intend to do so. They want to improve their economic conditions to a level [from] where they can move on without investing in the place itself. Residents always talk about going home.

(Interviewee 3, community leader, 2004)

For all of these reasons, municipal officials and local politicians define Hillbrow as a "dysfunctional" neighbourhood in desperate need of regeneration. "Hillbrow really is a major problem. And because it is such a big problem it impacts negatively on the regeneration of other parts of the inner city" (Interviewee 25, municipal official, 2004). From this perspective, Hillbrow has become a threat to the City Council in



Example of a "bad building" in Hillbrow. Photo by Guy Tillim.

achieving its desired "world class city" vision: "Strategic interventions, by way of zero-tolerance law enforcement, will therefore normalise Hillbrow to restore private sector confidence in the area" (CoJ, RSDF, 2003b: 75). Strategic interventions include, among a host of other urban management strategies, facilitating the Better Buildings Programme (BBP). This involves the writing-off of arrears on identified "bad buildings" and transferring the ownership of these buildings to private sector developers for renovation.

"Bad buildings" are abandoned by their sectional title owners, but they are occupied, informally, by residents who are unable to find affordable accommodation through the private housing market (Winkler, 2009a; 2009b). While living conditions in these buildings are abysmal, "they house the poorest and most vulnerable residents of the inner city" (Wilson and du Plessis, 2005: 3). At least 250 "bad buildings" have been identified by the municipality for its BBP. However, "new developers want empty occupation because they can't fix a bad building unless we get rid of the people" (Interviewee 22, municipal official, 2004). As a result, "the City of Johannesburg exercises its power in terms of the National Building Regulations and Building Standards Act, of 1977, which empowers a local authority to order

the evacuation of a property that poses a threat to the health and safety of those occupying it" (Wilson and du Plessis, 2005: 4). Hillbrow's "bad buildings" are currently occupied by approximately 25,000 residents, and capital investments required to renovate dilapidated buildings exclude many evictees from being able to afford renovated building rents (Tillim, 2005). Of equal concern, legislation promulgated under the apartheid regime is still used to empower local authorities in performing evictions. Since 2002, 125 inner city buildings have been cleared, resulting in the eviction of thousands of residents without the City Council providing suitable alternative accommodation for evictees (Wilson and du Plessis, 2005). History repeats itself because municipal officials and politicians fail to learn from past experiences. In February of 2008, the Constitutional Court ruled in favour of inner city tenants who, with the assistance of another public interest law group (the Centre for Applied Legal Studies), took the City Council to court on the basis of unjust evictions (Winkler, 2009a). Consequently, the City of Johannesburg was ordered by the Constitutional Court to provide "the occupiers of [bad buildings] with alternative, affordable and safe accommodation in the inner city where they may live secure against eviction" (RSACC, 2008: 2).

This development suggests that Hillbrow may continue to hold out in the face of political processes based on asymmetrical power relations. This is because in spite of severe physical decay, a history of redlining, and limited public sector support, Hillbrow continues to function as a popular port-of-entry to Johannesburg for many who desire to engage in local and transnational economies. Port-of-entry neighbourhoods typically facilitate readjustment, enable some degree of normlessness, and allow diverse cultural customs to be practiced (Abu-Lughod, 1994; Wacquant, 1999). They are temporary places of abode, a place where people can "land", find their feet, and strengthen their networks before ultimately moving. While a portion of residents may be settled in such neighbourhoods for many years, another segment will constantly be on the move (Winkler, 2008). Hillbrow is such a neighbourhood: a popular, transitional, and continuously evolving urban realm. As one resident said:

Hillbrow will continue to be popular, and it will always be the first place for whoever wants to make it. They will come to Hillbrow. Life in Hillbrow is tough. It is also a place with many foreigners. But people get the wrong information about Hillbrow. Not all foreigners are involved in illegal businesses. Most are hard working people. I like all the different people who live here: that's what makes Hillbrow a special place.

(Interviewee 10, resident, 2004)

Theories such as Hoover and Vernon's (1959) "neighbourhood life cycle model", Schelling's (1972) "invasion and succession model", Grigsby's (et al. 1987) "filtering hypothesis", and Quercia and Galster's (2000) "neighborhood threshold change model" are inadequate conceptual frameworks for a Hillbrow-specific case study. Conceptual models subscribe to a presumed linear inevitability of neighbourhood decline before an economic resurgence may be envisaged, and in the process they ignore the complexities of human affairs and situated socio-political structures. They also ignore the unjust consequences of gentrification and they oversimplify the ability of the liberal economy to rationally distribute urban populations.

Hillbrow has grown accustomed to rapid structural, demographic, political, economic, and social change. While some changes have disempowered residents, others have opened opportunities for residents to access the city and to share in its resources. For some residents, Hillbrow offers a needed anonymity; for others, more freedom of choice; and for still others, the ability to claim rights denied elsewhere. These variables alone nullify a presumed linear inevitability of Hillbrow's future. Abu-Lughod (1994) and Wacquant (1999) argue

for a ruthless deconstruction of the "one-dimensional poor neighborhood" concept, typified as a no-go zone with unbridled pathological problems. Wacquant's (1996) study of inner city neighborhoods in Chicago demonstrates how dominant socio-political structures systematically deny residents access to mainstream economic and political powers. Accordingly, Wacquant dismisses a "blame-the-victim" ideology implicit in "culture of poverty" discourses, which is how City of Johannesburg officials currently view Hillbrow.

Similarly, Abu-Lughod's (1994) study of the East Village in New York provides an alternative understanding of neighborhood change. Like Hillbrow, the East Village is a quintessential transitional neighborhood, if density, heterogeneity, relative anonymity, informality, a large proportion of tenant occupiers, and geographical mobility define such a type. However, transitional neighbourhoods are usually perceived by state officials as dysfunctional, and their response to this perceived "dysfunctionality" often leads to zero-tolerance law enforcement. Zerotolerance strategies, in turn, heighten feelings of mistrust between the local state and neighbourhood residents. In addition, like Hillbrow, the East Village has always been a port-of-entry for newcomers to the city. To some extent, the present population diversity found in the East Village represents a cross-section of temporal succession, with newer groups overlaying earlier ones. This is equally true for Hillbrow. Stability in both of these inner city neighbourhoods has therefore always been a fragile construct. Still, diverse resident constituencies lead to shifting networks of cooperation and conflict that have their own rhythms and fluctuations (Abu-Lughod, 1994). This alerts us to seek variables other than sheer diversity to explain urban change and resilience. It also requires uncovering the underlying causes of change and resilience that are shaped by a neighbourhood's history, politics, and economics, and by the activities (and agencies) of local actors.

Conclusion

Research findings have shown how neighborhood change in Hillbrow did not conform to free-market rationalities or to linear processes of decline and economic resurgence. Instead, change was shaped by the political and economic crisis that was taking place in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s, and this crisis led to the reclassification of Hillbrow as a Grey Group Area. As a consequence, Hillbrow was redlined by financial institutions while public maintenance and services deteriorated. In addition, landlord greed, neglect, and the mismanagement of property all contributed to change and the subsequent physical degeneration of Hillbrow. Findings have also shown how legislation and neighbourhood change are intrinsically entwined and how legislation has profound (and destructive, in the case of Hillbrow) spatial ramifications. Some of the underlying causes of neighbourhood change and resilience were discussed, demonstrating how history, politics, economics, and the activities of the state and residents—rather than a simple assessment of diversity—have been and will continue to be major determinants of change in Hillbrow.

Today, despite the implementation of intensive urban management strategies, property values continue to depreciate, service industries are not returning to the neighbourhood, and the exploitation of tenants by landlords persists. Regardless of these findings, Hillbrow remains a popular inner city neighborhood and the demand for accommodation continues to exceed supply. However, high rates of unemployment, residents' chronic stress levels, xenophobia, physical decay, and crime collectively warrant a critical view of Hillbrow's

future. Although authorities persistently view Hillbrow as a dysfunctional neighborhood that can only be "saved" via zero-tolerance, Hillbrow's strengths as a functional port-of-entry to Johannesburg are not recognized through this lens. Only by reconceptualizing this neighborhood can the city begin to support, enhance and celebrate the fact that Hillbrow provides newcomers and transitional residents alike with opportunities to access the city, share in its resources, and experience freedoms and rights unknown in their places of origin.

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View of Hillbrow looking East. Photo by Tanja Winkler.

Endnotes

- 1. For the South African state, "legal" foreign nationals are either in possession of a work or a student permit. Legal status is also awarded to refugees via the issuing of a Refugee Identity Card, while asylum seekers awaiting their refugee status are issued temporary Section 22 permits. All other foreign nationals residing in South Africa are deemed "illegal" or undocumented by the state.
- These landlords were all white as black South Africans were precluded from owning property in designated White Group Areas.
- 3. ACTSTOP constituted fifty members of Johannesburg's legal fraternity who volunteered their time to defend Hillbrow's residents charged with transgressing the Group Areas Act.
- 4. The Group Areas Act was only abolished in 1990.
- 5. The scrapping of the Influx Control Act allowed black South Africans to move freely between urban centres (Morris, 1999).

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