Changing Space, Changing City

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In a bunna bet, talk is interspersed with silence and reflection. The coffee maker works between the table of empty cups, the fuel of the fire and the aroma of coffee and incense that permeates the room. She alternates visual checks with serving gestures, preparing the space to support interaction, fuelling encounters with caffeine, and creating a place like home. Her labour links this space to Ethiopia. In Jeppe.

Jeppe is in Johannesburg. Four city blocks condense the energy of the city and its flows into a sort of substance that is an intensification of its essential exchanges, moralities and demographics. The bunna bet presents a quiet moment in this urban swirl. You stumble out from a world of silent tasting, abuzz with caffeine, onto streets infused with visual and aural energy. Sound systems and bright displays of clothes and mannequins compete for the attention of customers. Customers and porters squeeze through the space between pavement stalls and shopfronts, lugging parcels of goods from vans or to the taxi ranks and stations to the north.

Since my first visit to this bunna bet in Joburg Mall, above Bree Street, I have been back to Jeppe quite often and never found it the same. The density and mood on the street fluctuates in response to the supply of goods and the threats of raids. New bunna bets come and go. The area grows, block by block. Moving upwards and inwards from the pavement, outwards from the intersection of Jeppe and Delvers streets, and into every lost space within the densest areas. Jeppe is more like an organism than a place. People produce this space through gestures and negotiations that revolve around the materiality of the buildings and the goods that they trade, as well as the immaterial connections that mark the trail of their translocated lives and assets.
Jeppe has convinced me and others of the inadequacy of the ways in which we describe and work in the city. From time to time I climb up, via rooftops and through the medium of mapping, to observe and outline the area. But more frequently I get lost in its interior, seeking contact with people beyond the thresholds of its thick commercial edge. The warmth of some of my bunnë bet encounters, and the pointed lack of invitations to share coffee from others, highlights the importance of the bunnë bet in framing the discussion and re-imagining of urban life; the bunnë bet gives one a taste of connectivity as a form of urban currency, something offered, negotiated or refused in an ongoing strategic positioning.

Jeppe is liminal. It sits between the inner-city’s CID and the tenement housing, taxi ranks and post-industrial voids that make up its unregulated eastern fringe. As a self-managed area and through the premium put on rentals, it offers landowners in the CID and its adjacent areas a sort of breathing space. Jeppe creates a physical and time-based buffer for the city to enact plans for upgrading without the threats posed by the absolute urban informality of its outer fringes. Jeppe is, in Yichtafel’s (2009) use of the term, a grey zone – a space with potential for formalisation that remains outside of a legislated framework to achieve this.

In its location, its functioning and at an entirely personal level, in the bureaucratic identities of its traders, Jeppe lies on the edge of the city’s logic. For those who can’t make it past the barriers to full refugee or residency status, it offers a limbo that lies between Johannesburg’s great opportunities and risks. Interactions between its traders, craftspeople and investors are set up with ingenuity, crossing between the formal and informal, the planned and spontaneous, the below and the above board. As a collectively conceptualised place, Jeppe is a strategic tour de force that responds with huge intelligence to Johannesburg’s broader dynamics.

I’ve held on to the bunnë bet as an analogy for Jeppe in all its dimensions. As my entry point to the area it remains the still point from which to negotiate the physical, social and conceptual flux thrown up by Jeppe. A bunnë bet is a space within a space, but one made by logics other than those that formed its shell. It can be unhinged from its setting, remade elsewhere, or it can work as a catalyst to transformations beyond its frame. Using this space as reference, I hope to evoke an image of spatial life that bonds physical and ephemeral processes, support and agency, localised and globalised practices. In this way, the bunnë bet reopens as a venue for the comprehension of urban change, and perhaps, through that, to a shared investment in its processes and spaces.

The bunnë bet as analogy can be unpacked into a number of elemental pieces. An infill typology, its elements are framed by generic (and voided) modernist space. The transformation of this space happens through the ongoing agency of the coffee-shop woman (Figure 27.1). Her presence is almost silent, but critical to the invention and maintenance of the bunnë bet. The shop layout changes with time, but her own location behind the table of cups is always oriented to survey her clientele’s space and choreograph their movement. Her tray of cups is a platform of availabilities to be distributed through the room, their handing out and collection a subtle reminder of daily rhythms. Her gestures in preparing
the coffee beans, heating the *jebena* and pouring the coffee into cups are repeated over and again, and she uses her time to consider options and rearrangements.

The pouring tray follows two possible patterns: the traditional circular shape or the modern rectangular one that locates the cups in a grid. Cups come in boxes of a dozen. Even, but divisible into groups of odd numbers. To extend the analogy, if the tray represents the grid of the city, the cups (in their passing out and collection) symbolise the fluid relationships between traders, dealt out through a sort of pattern and consensus. Each cup is branded, more often than not in the colours of Ethiopia’s national flag – red at the base, yellow in the middle, and green at the top – reinforcing a sense of nostalgia, but also offering a concrete representation of an identity distilled in the act of lifting a cup. The colours are said to represent essences, red being power or blood, yellow for harmony and encounter, and green for the land.

In my focus on Jeppe, I have held on to this detail. The concrete language of these forms and colours provide a medium for a wider interpretation. Somewhere, between the micro scale of the cup, in its intense distillation of translocated meanings through the fragile language of gesture, and the inexhaustible, complex layers of the city scale, is a scale that uses the *bunna bet* and its elements as a way of reading and rewriting Jeppe: its urban cultures as ritual, its buildings as cups, each band of colour mirroring the qualities of the urban context, in its mix of flows, connectivity and porosity (Plate 51 in the colour section).
Red

Jeppe grows from and intensifies flows of money, goods and people. The 1 000 or 2 000 diaspora traders are themselves in transit, imagining themselves en route elsewhere, maybe to the United States or back home. Their job is to enter into and manage the area’s flux. Jeppe is busy seven days a week, with a brief respite on Sunday afternoons. The turnover of trading spaces is intense, with key money paid to ensure the stability of a shop’s location for two or three years. This capitalisation of tenure is new to Johannesburg, replacing the custom of a deposit with the payment of a large cash amount to set up shop. The payment puts more cash into circulation, thus lending power to the collective buying arrangements that the traders make with the Asian and Middle Eastern suppliers.

In the longest-occupied buildings, where rental agreements pre-date these new arrangements, traders risk eviction at any time as shops can be subdivided and rented out to more and smaller stalls. Spaces adjacent to the street, as the closest visual interface between customers and salespeople, are the most precious and are rented out at shockingly high prices. As a result, the street has extended in a fractal pattern, gaining ever more surfaces as storefronts give way to niches within niches. Yet even this fractalisation is insufficient to meet the demand for display and contact. Extra stock, once held in a backroom at street level is moved to upstairs rooms, and even to areas outside of the district, so the dislocation of goods storage forms part of the transformation.

Display surfaces can extend right into the city blocks. Sometime after 2005, Joburg Mall was carved and constructed between Bree and Jeppe streets, joining the back of a building with a vacant site that was then built up to mirror the other half. The space now reinvents the arcades that were part of early Johannesburg, but at four levels, with shops in the basement, ground and first floors, and numerous restaurants and services on the uppermost level.

An overlay of mobile shops and trolleys creates further friction between people and goods. Fruit is brought from the City Deep market and sold from the back of trucks, straight into cartons and onto heads. The traders are also served with mobile services from tea and coffee carts, and injera deliveries. On Jeppe and Delvers, around the end of day, bargain clothes are sold straight out of boxes. By then the hawker-customers are dwindling, following their goods to the stations and taxi ranks, ported by the trolley pushers who pick up work from street corners. And flowing through all this is cash in quantity, carefully reinvested in further stock, in vehicles, in security, and in acquiring and fitting out new spaces.

Yellow

The flows and the connectivity of Jeppe intersect at its lift lobbies. While almost everywhere else on the city streets retail hugs the ground plane, here, the retail trade extends into vertical relationships with storage and manufacture, with the service shops and the social spaces of the restaurants. The crux is that in Jeppe, the lifts are maintained. The intensity of horizontal movement is balanced with vertical systems. Traders send stock up to the fourth or fifth floors and beyond and fetch it on demand.
Small-scale manufacturing happens between these levels. Despite the collapse of the city’s formal garment industry in the 1980s, there are hundreds of tailors at work producing soft furnishings and traditional clothes for rural and township homes. Jeppe’s specialities are bespoke drops of gilded voile curtains, and shweshwe pinafores. In a vertical collaboration, ground-floor shops will sell the drops made up by tailors higher up in the building, using fabrics imported by a third party and stored still higher. In another arrangement, tailors from southern Africa, salespeople from Ethiopia and fabrics sourced in China share third-floor shops. In the Majesty building, a small team of men working in one room produce the leather and fur sandals sold at street level, while their handmade wallets, Rastafarian accessories and beadwork are sold on the streets.

The upper levels of buildings are scattered with restaurants, as well as internet cafes, culture shops, travel agencies, bridal boutiques and hairdressers, making it entirely possible to organise a transnational business and personal life without leaving the building. In three buildings, residential space has been converted for retail use. Although typological arrangements differ, these arrangements seem to hybridise Asian high-rise malls with African street retail patterns within the limits of the concrete frame of 1960s high rises.

Green
The overwhelming density at street level is balanced with a surprising porosity at the back and tops of buildings. Jeppe’s central green space may lie just outside its boundary, but its presence is pivotal in its development. Thus the plaza and sunken gardens of Marble Towers, cut off from Jeppe and Delvers streets with a palisade fence and security guards, is both urban landmark and threshold. The tower block and garden offer a backdrop for street
photographers who work on the corner of Delvers and Jeppe, generating a stream of images of place that identify this corner with urban arrivals. The plaza also supports more permanent occupations that enhance this threshold function. The setback of the 1970s block provides a pause in the density of the older city fabric and the generous pavement space has allowed for the establishment of quite diverse but interlinked micro businesses. A ‘plate’ street food shop coexists with the arrival point for the Maputo taxi, braiders work alongside the photographers, and bag sellers support the trolley pushers and the general trade in the area.

The supply of open space in Jeppe is supported by the physical vacancies on the buildings, which are characterised by blank side facades, flat roofs and plinths. This architectural language fuels an imaginative appropriation that sometimes begins with an ephemeral action, like the shade cloth and sofas set out on Nadiba’s rooftop and since replaced with more permanent shelter. In Majesty, Delvers Square and Africa Mall, in similar ways, the developers of Jeppe have connected lost space into the area’s tissue by extending restaurants onto the first-floor plinth slabs. These points of porosity, the consequences of a forgotten design style, become opportunities for redesign, for further experiments in urban type. Hinged to these horizontal extensions of the pavement, slab and roof, the vertical surfaces of buildings also become available for recoding through multiple scales of signage. As shop facades become lateral displays to the street, so the model on the huge FUBU billboard, put up to flaunt her body to Jeppe Street in 2010, inverts the street into a collective plaza. As
the eyes of the young men who flank the street turn to this beauty, the inversion of urban space seems complete, the existing building a mere lining for this complicit, appropriated and lived place called Jeppe (see Figure 27.2).

Cup to tray
To return to the *bunna bet*: over time, I’ve gone from being a visitor here to its ad hoc architect. Called on to advise on public-health issues, difficult lease agreements, branding and alternative locations, I have been exposed to the very fragile conditions under which the space continues to operate. While the micro-techn of the coffee ceremony requires great skill, and the macro context of Jeppe remains beyond my control, my architect’s knowledge seems to offer some value at a scale between the two. Giving advice to people like the coffee woman involves moving between these scales of lived and conceived space, between the dyad that Lefebvre saw in the modernist outskirts of Paris. It involves being open to both material and cultural difference, to try to re-imagine spaces within and beyond the grid of the city and its structure, and to propose other rituals of use. And it involves emerging beyond that to reconnecting both these aspects of design to the city.

Jeppe as *bunna bet* interprets the built legacy of an apartheid city as a receptacle, not only as an obstacle. It does so by treating architecture strategically. Shaped by their own experiences of change and migration, Jeppe’s diaspora communities have found ways of being here that are fluid and highly productive. By spotting and appropriating this part of town they have demonstrated how, by virtue of its material nature, all spatial form is ambivalent and open to processes of inversion and subversion that can turn exclusion on its head. The discussion that needs to continue with them, over coffee, is how to work between the tiny and the macro scales, and between forms of space, built and lived, to transfer such flexibility into all visions of urban change.

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**Notes**

1 *Bunna bet* is the Amharic term for ‘coffee shop’.

2 The format of my initial response to Jeppe was remaking a coffee ceremony (Le Roux 2009). Similarly, the area has stimulated others to respond creatively, developing new strategies of communication with and about Jeppe. The performative artwork of Dorothee Kreuzfeldt and Bettina Malcomess (shown at the Afripolis Exhibition in Cologne, 2011), the historical research of Naomi Roux (Kerstin Pinther and Hanussek 2012), the transdisciplinary engagement with trolley pushers and film of Ismail Farouk (2008), and the writing and photo collages of Tanya Zack (2013 and online at [http://www.tanyazack.com](http://www.tanyazack.com)) are all traces of the area’s stimulating impact on Johannesburg’s self-representation.

3 City improvement districts exist to the west and, imminently, to the south of Jeppe.

4 This nod of recognition comes largely through engagement by property developer AFHCO, partly though the Johannesburg Development Agency’s interest, and partly through the promotion of Jeppe as a cultural destination for local tourism. See for example ‘Ethiopia
calling’ on the Jhb Live website. However, as of August 2011, there is no official forum through which the area and its representatives are engaging with authorities.

This is in effect my research methodology: I simply make myself available to deal with ongoing crises brought about by the city’s sporadic application of by-laws and, with opportunities for expansion through arts funding, new pop-up markets and partnerships.

References