Reflections on Study Space Cape Town

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REFLECTIONS ON STUDY SPACE CAPE TOWN
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During the last week of June 2016, I had the good fortune to participate in *Study Space IX: Cape Town*, organized by GSU's College of Law, working with the African Centre for Cities (ACC). It was an invigorating experience to sit with a diverse group of urban professionals, as they discussed and debated the issues they encountered during seminars and field visits. Although I have been involved with South Africa's urban issues for nearly two decades, *Study Space IX* allowed me to explore new perspectives on fundamental questions.

As the group discovered, Cape Town's history is rather unique. Although people lived in the area for centuries, the urban narrative about Cape Town begins in 1652 with the establishment of a fort and garden to grow fruits and vegetables for trading ships owned by the Dutch East India Company. This outpost grew, changed hands from the Dutch to the British, and over time incorporated various African groups, as well as slaves and exiles from what are now Indonesia and Malaysia. Today almost 4 million people live in the Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality, with the biggest population group being "coloured," a mixed-race group originating in colonial times. Black Africans are the second biggest group. Although only 15% of the population identifies as white, this group owns a disproportionately large share of privately held land, especially valuable and well-located land, either directly or as shareholders in property companies. Although it is an over-simplification, it is largely true that black Africans, and especially recent immigrants from other parts of Africa, are at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, whites are at the top, and coloured people dominate the middle range.

Around the world, of course, all cities have richer and poorer neighborhoods, and many have patterns of racial segregation. What's unique about South Africa is the degree to which this spatial differentiation was intensified, institutionalized and maintained through legislation, the physical demolition of neighborhoods, and the forced relocation of population groups. In places like District 6, poor coloured and black African people were removed so the land could be acquired and developed for white ownership. And today, Cape Town's pattern of spatial separation is an entrenched reality, even as now development projects are underway across the city centre.

As this new wave of development happens, poor and working class people often lose out to wealthier competitors for the use of space, intensifying existing

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patterns of racial and economic separation. Although significant amounts of new housing for the poor have been built in Cape Town and other South African cities, these are typically far from the urban center, in locations where land is cheap and opportunities are scarce. No new social housing has been built near the centre of town since the onset of democracy. Compounding the physical separation, South Africa's urban poor are often disconnected from institutions of government – they pay little or no tax, have limited access to public services, and are often left out of the political and budget contestation that shapes the policies and infrastructure of a city. This is strikingly different to the political and social reality of black majority cities in the US, such as Atlanta, Detroit, or Washington, DC.

Against this background, two interactions during the week resonated especially strongly for me:

1. POOR AND WORKING CLASS POPULATION GROUPS ARE NOW FINDING THEIR VOICE.

The *Study Space* group heard the most thought-provoking and potentially transformative ideas from Zackie Achmat, an activist who is best known for co-founding the Treatment Action Campaign, which led a successful campaign to force the government to provide access to retroviral treatment for South Africans living with HIV and AIDS. Recently, Achmat turned his attention to what he characterizes as the most pressing problem in South Africa today – the question of urban land. White ownership of the highest value land is a volatile situation, and for an increasing number of activists, it calls into question the overall legitimacy of the country's legal and constitutional structures, which protect the rights of property-owners, notwithstanding the historical background.

Rather than tackle the legitimacy of the system across a broad front, Achmat has focused on the public sector, which owns significant amounts of property, and manages significant amounts of investment capital. As one example, Achmat and the *Study Space* group discussed ongoing contestation over development of the Tafelberg site, a particularly desirable parcel in Sea Point, owned by the Western Cape Province. The Province and the City had approved the sale and development of the property for a private Jewish day school, but the sale was approved on a fast track, apparently without adequate public notice. A lawsuit followed, and activists have pushed the City and the Province toward an alternative plan, which would include the first new affordable housing in Cape Town's inner city since the end of apartheid. While this particular piece of land matters, it is not the only battle, and several civic organizations, including Reclaim the City, have been focusing attention on the use and disposal of public land in and near the city centre. Achmat and other activists want to see public land used to provide decent and safe homes, with access to urban opportunities, for the poor and working class majority.

An analogous contest is shaping up over the management of public investment. Achmat pointed out that the Public Investment Corporation, wholly owned by the South African Government, invests pension and unemployment insurance funds in shopping malls, luxury apartments, and office blocks – further reinforcing existing patterns of spatial separation. A social investment approach, in which social outcomes are considered alongside potential financial returns, could free up significant amounts of public capital to support spatially transformative development within South Africa's city centres.

2.   UNDERSTANDING RACIAL ISSUES THROUGH SOUTH AFRICAN EYES

For me, the *Study Space* interactions drove home the challenges of trying to interpret South Africa's urban challenges from a Western perspective. South Africa in general, and Cape Town in particular, continues to have a layered and complex racial pattern: black Africans were historically the most oppressed, with some 10 million going to prison under the pass laws. In Cape Town, labour preference policies privileged coloured workers over black Africans -- in the minds of apartheid planners, black Africans belonged in Bantustans, far from white cities. The historical picture is today complicated by the ongoing influx of immigrants from elsewhere in Africa. In recent years there have been repeated flare-ups of violence against foreigners in South Africa's cities. Targets have included traders and workers from Somalia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. With chronically high levels of unemployment, foreigners are accused of taking jobs from South African citizens.

In American cities, we know that established patterns of privilege and segregation are also shifting with the arrival of various immigrant groups and the ongoing demographic shift toward a majority non-white country. And so it was fascinating to see how different *Study Space* participants interpreted the group's visit to Cape Town's Two Rivers Urban Park. The "Oude Molen EcoVillage" charmed some participants, with its free spirit and small-scale enterprises, gardens, horseback riding activities, backpacker accommodation, and film industry services. Others would have preferred to see this well-located land developed as per the Province's plan for dense, mixed-use development, including affordable housing. Some simply saw black and white people working collaboratively, while others noticed a racial/social hierarchy: the workers cleaning toilets were Zimbabwean, women selling pies were coloured, and the bosses were white. No black Africans from South Africa were in evidence. Were we seeing a desirable, sustainable, integrated, low-impact spot of green in the city? Or were we seeing a rigid hierarchy that continues to exclude the biggest group of South Africans?

The City of Cape Town has difficult challenges that go beyond those of other cities in both developed and developing countries. Like most cities, it seeks economic growth while protecting the environment and quality of life. Unlike most

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cities, it has many islands of glitzy prosperity, set against a sprawling network of townships and informal settlements that entrench poverty and separation. It is the poorest areas that typically suffer most from episodic flooding and violent ethnic conflict. One is left wondering, how can Capetonians promote spatial and economic equity, and what are the consequences of success or failure in this endeavor?

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