

## Article

# Saving or Seizing the City: Discursive Formations in Cape Town, South Africa

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**Abstract:** ‘Neoliberalism’ is the dominant theme pervading numerous studies of post-apartheid urban development in Cape Town. This often renders invisible the many nuances and complexities embedded within its transitions. Via critically examining the assumption of the neoliberal usurpation of urban governance in Cape Town’s policy formation, this paper highlights critical historical contingencies from 1994; contingencies framing a discursive formation as less the choreographies of global capitalism and more the committed and sincere mobilisation of a local, grassroots movement to ‘save’ the city from urban decline. Largely unacknowledged in the literature, its exploration is crucial to transiting from a putative and omnipotent neoliberalism as a bottomless well of explanation to admitting and appreciating subjective agency in the origins, evolution and trajectory of the city’s urban development. This, in turn, furnishes insights about the metamorphosis and mutation of the original—ostensibly sincere—discursive formation into the particularly powerful and potent form of market-led urban regeneration sponsored in Cape Town today.

**Keywords:** urban regeneration; neoliberalism; public-private partnerships; agency; engaged pluralism



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## 1. Introduction: Neoliberalism Or?

Cape Town’s dramatic turnaround from the plunging spiral of crime and grime into a top tourist destination, an attractive home for business and investment, and a ‘safe space’ for consumer citizens is attributed to city improvement districts (CIDs); camera surveillance systems coupled with foot- and mounted-security patrols; removal of informal parking attendants and the introduction of a new parking management system; dramatic expansion in municipal policing; and ‘zero tolerance’ to crime. The turnaround in the City’s fortune is reportedly rivalled only by New York’s ‘transformation’ wrought by the notorious mass black jailor Mayor Rudi Giuliani. The difference, according to Michael Farr, the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Cape Town Partnership (CTP), is that ‘New York took five years to transform itself; our turnaround has been very visible in two years’ [1].

After studying almost one thousand CIDs worldwide and their operational efficiency over a decade (2000–2010), Lorlene Hoyt of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology concluded: ‘Comparatively speaking, CID organisations in Cape Town set new standards’ [2] (p. 20). Cape Town’s public-private partnership is hailed as ‘more detailed and more advanced’ than models prevalent in both American and European cities [3].

Alas, market-led gentrification in Cape Town has become ‘a well-established process’ and a ‘major force in [its] remaking and re-imagination’ [4] (p. 201). The city’s area renewal strategy presents a ‘very clear danger’ of ‘fueling instability and division’ [5] (p. 278) between a ‘vibrant City Bowl’ surrounded by ‘affluent and leafy suburbs with exceptional amenities’, and the majority not featured in the glitzy tourism pamphlets and investment brochures of the ‘more advanced’ internationally precedent-setting public-private partnership. The unfeatured poor majority live in the ‘patchwork of intensely crowded informal

settlements barely tolerated in various parts of the city', the 'unauthorised shanty towns', and the 'austere and inhospitable dormitory settlements on the treeless sandplains of the Cape Flats' [6] (p. 73).

A substantial body of work documenting and explaining Cape Town's turnaround pivots on the neoliberal (re)making of the city and urban governance regimes [7–17]. These scholarly works are undoubtedly indispensable in refining and advancing (northern) urban theory. Simultaneously, however, there have been calls, for some time now, emphasising the need for more provincialised arenas of knowledge; arenas where local patterns and processes are unshackled from the chains of global political economy and transnational elite machinations [18–25]. Theorising embedded in autonomy and derived from agency is directed at 'valoris[ing] the myriad efforts that residents put forth to live and thrive in the city' [26] (p. 283).

Notwithstanding numerous appeals for careful conceptual application and deployment of the term 'neoliberalism' [27–31], its ubiquitous and indiscriminate use 'across numerous disciplines' [32] (p.359)—an 'increasing number of urban geographers' included [33] (p. 467)—has regrettably degraded it, coming to 'mean almost anything bad or disagreeable' in the social sciences [30] (p. 573); 'an improvised and shape-shifting repertoire' [34] (p. 3). Collectively, the abuse has translated into a marked diminution of its explanatory power and analytical potency [35]. Even the more restrained 'hybridised' [36] and 'variegated' [37] versions are frequently 'impossible to falsify' [38] (p. 542); 'a set of social, economic and political arrangements that continually transform to resolve and absorb criticism' [39] (p. 627). Birch asks the searching question: If the notion that neoliberalism, even as a process, is something we can actually identify; if it is hybrid, if it is uneven, how do we know it is neoliberalisation and not another process? [30] (p. 579). This question is central to the theme of this paper. In Cape Town, key historical junctures were uncritically associated and unrestrainedly conflated with (the literature on) global capitalism. Over time, analyses have sedimented, generating an often-unquestioned account of the city's development discourse and projected trajectory.

Section 2 comprises a discussion of the qualitative case study methodology, methods and instruments employed in the paper. Novelty of the data gathering are referenced in passing because they are not the mainstay of the paper—a notable concern of the prescriptions of natural science research but not necessarily social science inquiry (a point returned to shortly). Section 3 furnishes a brief overview of the urban regeneration literature (with truncated commentary on Cape Town's intervention) and then proceeds to explain South Africa's in/voluntary embrace of regeneration as a key post-apartheid policy and planning tool. The overview is brief because the paper's primary concern is with interrogating the theoretical underpinnings of political economy and postcolonial readings of Cape Town's urban regeneration intervention. The paper is not a comparative study of urban regeneration at national and international levels. Rather, it is about appreciating exceptionality in a specific context—place sensitive specificity—as an end in and of itself in relation to planetary urbanisation although not at the expense of comparison (not the paper's lodestar). Section 4 ('Seizing the City') introduces 'context of contexts' to foreground the literature of Cape Town's regeneration as an externally imposed and/or top-down process, i.e., the city as prisoner of the global political economy [40,41]. Section 5 ('Saving the City') surfaces contingencies, framing the process in an alternative light, indicating that current understandings may unwittingly obscure the many nuances embedded within the city's transition thereby devaluing the agency of those both involved and implicated. Untangling the local urban experience from the 'tendrils of global processes' [42] (p. 591) reveals multiple realities and diverse subjective processes moulding cities. Section 6 turns to the theoretical implications, proposing a platform for the reconciliation of conceptual dichotomies, i.e., the (re)integration of postcolonial urbanisms with the structural concerns of political economy. Engaged pluralism and a shared vocabulary with mutual points of convergence could possibly enhance theoretical navigation of conflicting discourses, and progressively negotiate the contradictory realisms of urban regeneration in Cape Town.

The theoretical foundation of the platform is preceded by comments on the utility and limitations of the methodological approach.

## 2. Methodology

This paper combines inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches—the latter pooling perspectives and the former integrating them—with critical theory occupied with critique of mainstream ideas and practice, and the potential for resistance (amongst others). Critical theory spans a spectrum of thought and practice including critical rationalism (encourages open-mindedness and anti-dogmatism); Marxism and neo-Marxism (probes and uncovers structural sources of power), and postmodernism/post-structuralism trained on deconstruction and discursive analysis (the power-knowledge-order nexus) [42]. The theoretical orientation of this paper derives from the sub-/fields of political economy, human geography, and urban planning. In sum then, the paper blends together inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches with critical theory to dissect social relational fields bolted together by political economy, social processes, spatial dynamics, governance regimes, and discursive adaptations [43].

When the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred, and where the nature of issues under discussion are not always immediately obvious, studies aimed at explaining the circumstances of how or why—the CTP's evolution, metamorphosis and mutation—is best served by qualitative case study methodology [44] that scrutinises contemporary phenomenon in their real-life context [45]. Providing insights into the case in a natural setting [45], case study research is unique amongst research methodologies. Firstly, much to the chagrin of the natural scientists, there is no objective or required format to follow [44]. Secondly, the format is for the social scientist to develop [44] and not the natural scientist to prescribe, inevitably risking imbalances as evidenced in this paper's record/ing of preliminary research findings.

Accordingly, the paper marshals three case study strategies to explore (the sequence of events in Cape Town's regeneration to identify causal relationships), explain (events through clarifying causal relationships), and describe (what happened in Cape Town) after [45]. Exploring, explaining and describing, it is argued, permits fluid, flexible, context-sensitive investigation [46] of events and their relationships [47], and assists in questioning old and volunteering new theoretical relationships [48].

The paper is founded on the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individual's interaction with their world [49]. Human experience and the ordering of social reality is a rich source of data, constantly exposing the hubris and ignorance of scientists who believe that (simplistic) measurement of existing physical phenomenon is the only true research or discovery [50]. The world or reality under observation is not a fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon. Instead, this paper records multiple constructions and diverse interpretations of the urban regeneration intervention that were varied, transforming over time and space [51].

Unlike natural sciences, social research cannot be value-free for as long as social sciences is part of the social world wherein social phenomena occur [52]. The unfathomable complexity of the social and cultural presents problems to researchers as it cannot be easily subjected to the same methods of investigation as the natural world [51]. It is for this reason that the paper occupied itself with understanding the interpretations that social actions have for actors [51], treating theory as 'emerging out of the collection and analysis of data' [53] (original emphasis) and data as a test of theory, i.e., inductive and deductive and inductive reasoning, respectfully. Deductive reasoning is used to identify issues from a macro perspective and deduce facts about the institutional context of Cape Town (Sections 3 and 4), and the inductive to identify contextual (social and cultural) data, collates and then analyses to arrive at proximate inductive generalisations (Section 5). To elaborate and motivate, the paper discusses urban regeneration referenced to 'place sensitive' specificity [54] (p. 133) of the urban development discourse, but situated in a wider 'relational urbanity' [55] (p. 166) of political economy. Data was collected from numerous sources. Firstly, to ground research

in sensory experience—as opposed to detached literature and reading—observation of daily routines and activities was complemented with walks, photographs and extensive notetaking in and around city regeneration projects (amongst several others)). Secondly, semi-structured interviews, ranging in length from 1 to 2 hours, were conducted with key individuals to gather views, perspectives and opinions of past and present circumstances of urban regeneration. The interviews—all containing a common set of questions—were in-depth and largely conversational, maximising discussion and interaction. Prepared unstructured interviews are believed to be most in-depth—‘conversation with a purpose’ with conversational intimacy helping participants feel comfortable telling their story’ [56]) with key informants in the private and public sector [3,57,58]. Thirdly, documentary and archival resources (i.e., newspapers, reports, policy documents, frameworks, and plans) and secondary literature used to enhance both deductive and inductive reasoning.

The interviews, observation, archival resources and secondary literature together unearth a city shaped by a potent and powerful mix of local politics and the global discourse of the externally imposed top-down process of neoliberalisation. The mixture, a fused conflicting discourse, underwrites contradictory realisms suitably understood by integrating micro-oriented postcolonial urbanisms with macro-orientated structures of political economy. The integration is crucial to describe and elaborate the metamorphosis and mutation of the local bottom-up process of self-organisation of ‘Saving the City’ into state-facilitated and Treasury-enabled private sector ‘Seizure of the City’ driven in the main by exclusionary property-led cultural and urban regeneration [59]. The integration is central to expand the registers through which urban regeneration is studied, the actors, and relationships.

### 3. Overview of the Urban Regeneration Literature

Since the decline of developmentalist schools of thought—slated as an ethnocentric and unilateral way for Third World modernization but with a decisive lack of cohesion within the models and even the academic community itself [60])—the failures of state socialism and the deepening of global economic integration, a range of conflicting urban transformations have occurred [61]. The ‘causes, contours, contexts, interconnections and implications of such transformations are widely debated’ and ‘remain extremely confusing’, remark Brenner and Schmid [62] (p. 152).

Two key meta-trends are discernible, questioning long-held assumptions on the nature of the ‘urban’. First, a geography of uneven development has emerged from the interaction of rapid processes of urbanisation and other forms of stagnation, shrinkage and marginalisation, often in close proximity to each other [63,64]. ‘[R]ather than witnessing the worldwide proliferation of a singular urban form . . . we are instead confronted with new processes of urbanisation that are bringing forth diverse socio-economic conditions, territorial formations and socio-metabolic transformations across the planet’ [62] (p. 152). Second, the regulatory landscapes of urbanisation have transformed considerably [65], substantially reconfiguring and recalibrating urban governance [66].

Gaining increasing prominence in twenty-first-century policy circuits [67], urban regeneration finds itself in a uniquely political position; viz. the literal remaking of the city in an unfathomable minefield of socio-cultural complexities [68]. This remaking derives from and contends with diminished levels of public and private sector control over a rapidly changing economic environment evidenced in the decentralisation of employment, declining infrastructure investment, unsustainable service delivery, and financially stretched and strapped city governments [69].

Urban regeneration claims to move beyond the aims, aspirations and achievements of 1960s urban revitalization (prescribed action but failed to specify a precise method of approach); urban renewal of the 1970s (essentially a process of ‘physical change’); and urban redevelopment of the 1980s (lacked a well-defined mission and even less defined purpose) [69]. An ‘intervention designed to ameliorate against the negative consequences of urban decline’ [70] (p. 57), urban regeneration was historically utilised to promote

land values and rectify urban decay [71]. In the *Age of Sustainable Development* [72], urban regeneration is increasingly projected as an integrated approach for improving the social, economic and environmental fabric of the city [73].

Notable cases of urban regeneration in Vienna (Austria), Piauí (Brazil), Seville (Spain) and Luanda-Sil (Angola) [73] indicate mobilization of collective efforts and resources across public, private and community sectors (the CTP as meeting point for constructing consensus); emphasises short-term solutions as the pathway to sustainable solutions (property and business owners paid a levy on turnover to finance security and cleansing services in the central business district (CBD) on account of redirection of municipal funds to unserved black racial areas); spotlights outcomes with specific plans and projects (street cleaning and visible security constituted the early mandate of the CTP); and, engages with the functioning of the urban system in its entirety or the operation of the economic, social, physical and environmental processes and systems (stemming capital flight and boosting investment in the CBD) [73,74].

Regrettably, urban regeneration studies are linear in theory [73]. Historically, ‘top-down’ urban regeneration interventions were founded in the belief that disadvantaged areas will benefit from the introduction and integration of wealthy residents [71]. The replacement of social housing, the introduction of leisurely facilities and general improvements in amenities are designed to render the space attractive to the middle- and upper-classes [75]. With socio-spatial integration, wealth and prosperity would ‘trickle down’ [74]. These strategies have drawn substantial criticism for marginalising and displacing (existing) lower-class residents [76] (see [64] for a case study of Woodstock in Cape Town). Yet the ascendancy of culture-led regeneration is overpowering [77].

Aside from the criticism levelled by urban geographers [78–82], urban regeneration research is routinely conceptualised through social policy or urban planning [83–92], and not strictly political economy. The latter spotlights the inherently political nature of urban development—host to resistance and cooperation, co-option and autonomy, conflicts of interest and consensus [82,93].

The in/voluntary embrace of urban regeneration in South Africa behoves explanation. The co-existence of obscene excess and grinding poverty is a ‘reproach’ [94] to the post-apartheid government who abolished discriminatory legislation and reorganised institutions but ‘did not address the distorted form of SA cities with much determination’ [6] (p. 75): ‘[T]here wasn’t an equivalent commitment to push through a new vision for integrated cities’; resources to invest in major public infrastructure and catalytic projects for urban restructuring were not (made) readily available; and numerous ‘progressive policies were approved, but not matched by concrete action’ [6] (p. 75–76).

Without experience to articulate a coherent response to apartheid segregated cities together with reluctance to ‘challenge vested interests’, the ‘new generation of local political leaders’ resigned themselves to a toxic ‘political settlement’: The ‘lifestyles’ of the ‘white middle- and upper-class households’ would not be disrupted on condition them accepting ‘democratic rule’ and continuing payment of ‘their taxes’ [6] (p. 76). The political settlement; the absence of ‘creative thinking around urban compaction and integration’; and democracy’s birth coinciding with the global movement away from state intervention and planning gave private investors and developers ‘a relatively free hand to do as they pleased’. i.e., ‘[t]hey could deliver tangible products and jobs, so decision-makers supported almost any kind of property development’ [6] (p. 76).

This contextualises South Africa’s awkward and in/voluntary embrace of urban regeneration, explaining its dominance as a key policy and planning tool in post-apartheid city construction [4,95,96] in spite of its frequent and routine spatial and socially exclusionary outcomes. However, these outcomes were not inevitable in Cape Town where a potent, powerful and temporally relevant discourse of ‘Saving the City’—formulated by impassioned local actors—merged with global discourses, mutating, in the end, into a ‘cultural’ project that dramatically altered the face and space of the city.



#### 4. Seizing the City

‘Contextual specificity’ is always and everywhere ‘enmeshed within, and mediated through, broader configurations of capitalist uneven development’ [62] (p. 160). It is ill-advised in this intensely globalised world [97] to decouple urbanisation from the ‘causal significance of capitalism’ [98] (p. 1527). The ‘context of contexts’ [99] is the unavoidable political, institutional and juridical terrain onto which all urbanisms must unfold. The ‘context of contexts’ pertinent to this paper is the pervasive and ubiquitous ‘neoliberalism’ and its usurpation of Cape Town.

Substantial urban analysis of Cape Town pivots on a ‘taken-for-granted understanding of the post-apartheid state (and the post-apartheid city) as a neoliberal one’ [100] (p. 262). Historical characterisations of the city tell of a neoliberal coup spanning the late 1990s and early 2000s [101–107]. Despite calls at home [108], and abroad [78,109], for restrained assessments, a wave of ‘polemical’ readings [110] grew tethered to weighty concerns about economic inequality [111], planning [112], and social justice [105]. These matters coalesced with and found ‘legitimacy in a wide range of anti-neoliberal social movements’ [113] (p. 293). Scholarship raced to define and identity ‘neoliberalism’ [113]—globally scapegoating it for all manner of crises. As a result, two ostensibly diffuse, yet intertwined, narratives emerged elucidating the city’s ‘neoliberalisation’. The narratives are presented as an exogenous pressure, as coordinated, and, ultimately, inevitable.

The *first* narrative hinges on the (well-documented) shift in the national government’s macro-development framework [101,102,114–119] from the equity-oriented Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (1994) to the economic-oriented Growth Employment and Reconstruction program (GEAR) (1996). Enacted at the national level, the conservative macroeconomic policy GEAR, widely regarded a foreign import at the time [101,102,120–122], was ironically designed and implemented by the first popularly elected democratic government led by the African National Congress (ANC). Unlike other developing countries where structural adjustment programmes are externally imposed—overseen by and mediated by international financial agencies—South Africa’s ‘sudden and extensive neoliberal turn’ [119] (p. 159) was ‘largely internally generated’ [123], see also [124,125]. This paper finds synergy with this narrative, internalising the impetus of the ‘neoliberal turn’, focusing on Cape Town and honing-in on the explicit role of the local versus global actors.

Opinions varied on the extent and depth of neoliberalism’s inroads into national government and its policies. But there was broad consensus of GEAR constituting a national policy shift and, in turn, dictating and constraining local policy formation [108,111,116,126–129]. This ‘new [neoliberal] way of thinking’ [103] (p. 125) ‘trickled down to urban policy-making’ [106] (p. 1461) where the state’s leading/primary role in urban governance was unceremoniously diminished and demoted under the executive orders of national policy [106]. The landmark *Municipal Systems Act* [130] is in step, detailing a framework for service delivery that—unlike the RDP (1994)—does not accord the state the leading/primary role and responsibility for extending socioeconomic rights. In this same year, the *White Paper on Municipal Service Partnerships* [131] downgraded state involvement to ‘no more important than private-sector initiatives’ [106] (p. 1465). The order of implementation was clear—the private sector was to be involved [132] and that post-apartheid transformation would stem and grow from expansion of the market in economy and locality. Private investors and developers were given ‘a relatively free hand to do as they pleased’ [6] (p. 76).

The form and manner of the market extension and private sector involvement varied, coalescing mainly in the design and implementation of the traditional business improvement district model. Established in July 1999, the CTP focused on ‘encouraging the renewal of the CBD and to attract investment’ [59] (p. 35). The Partnership comprised ‘two distinctive but overlapping operations’—the ‘CTP itself’ (a ‘strategic partnership for the long-term development of the Central City’) [133] (p. 32), and the ‘Central City Improvement District (CCID) formed by the CTP in November 2002 [134] (p. 114). Andrew Boraime, ‘who had set up and run’ the CTP [135] (p. 186–187)—referred to the ‘CTP itself’ as the ‘executive

arm of the partnership' [58] and the CCID as the 'operational arm' [36], i.e., the 'non-profit organisation' tasked with providing 'security, local management and cleansing, social development and job creation, and social marketing and communications' [133] (p. 32).

The establishment of the CTP is pegged as *the* watershed moment in the urban development trajectory of the city during this transitional period [136]. The most cited papers [104,107,136,137] characterise the CTP as a 'trojan horse' [104] (p. 89); part and parcel of 'privatisation strategies of the neoliberal agenda that remove the poor's access to basic services and amenities from the responsibilities of government' [104] (p. 90). The CTP signified the capture of the local state by 'formal business, foreign investors, global tourism and the national elite' [107] (p. 620). Elsewhere, the CTP is cast as 'merely a political instrument to implement neoliberal policies' [138] (p. 709); an 'emulation of the West's privatisation of urban space' [12] (p. 58); an entity 'intended to attract and retain service-oriented transnational capital and to induce the kinds of socio-spatial restructuring required to (re)establish new regimes of capital accumulation' [136] (p. 2575).

In a comprehensive review of public-private partnerships in South African cities, Didier et al. [8] (p. 918) attribute the adoption and transfer of the model as 'part of the much wider neoliberalisation of urban practices and policies in South Africa.' Although Didier et al. [8] anchor their work in Peck's model of neoliberal hybridisation (2002), the CTP represents the 'adoption of international best practice' [8] (p. 926), with its conception unflatteringly portrayed through its manipulation of stakeholders, specifically via the local press, to assume legitimacy [8] (p. 921). The CTP is presented as a premediated discursive attack on the City to undermine public confidence and trust in the state thereby sanctioning and legitimating the neoliberal takeover. Built largely on the work of Nahnsen [103,139], the press stands accused of manufacturing a sophisticated discourse 'pointing out the inefficiency of the public authorities and consequently the fact that urban affairs should be handled in cooperation with the private sector' [8] (p. 919). An ideological assault—strengthened by the 'powerful media divisions set up by the partnerships' [8] (p. 921)—publicly judged and damned the local state. A 'trope of crises' is purported to have been cynically exploited [16] (p. 68), stoking a 'general atmosphere of apocalypse' [103] (p. 158). It was a synchronised *coup de grace*, with Nahnsen [103] (p. 158) signposting the quick succession of strategically timed articles [140–144] following 'soon after the first local government elections' [103] (p. 158). In this account, the 'recognition of the city centre crisis did not occur immediately after the first democratic local government elections . . . but was relayed to local press' [8] (p. 921). More precisely, it was the 'screaming' by the local press [145] (p. 127) of apocalypse, the 'fear of crime', the 'fear of inner-city decline and the need to save the area', which began in the mid-1990s, [that] led to the formation of the Cape Town Partnership' [146] (p. 643).

The *first* narrative analyses and critiques the top-down, exogenous imposition by a neoliberalising national government directing the restructuring of local municipalities [111,116,126–129,147–152]. The *second* narrative centres on a coordinated neoliberal manipulation to wrest control of the city's urban development trajectory [4,103,104,107,136,137,145,146,153,154]. Ostensibly diverse in their movement and motivation, both narratives are conjoined by a corporeal supposition of neoliberalism in Cape Town as a top-down process, with the city impelled and compelled to the privatisation of urban space at the behest and in the service of local and transnational capital and neoliberal market-led growth. This paper does not dispute the existence of neoliberalised incarnations of urban governance. Instead, it ventures an alternative explanation of its origins, movements and motivations with the aim to reinstall and possibly re-institute an agency lost in the literature.

## 5. Saving the City

The maxim of 'saving'—as in salvation from urban apocalypse and the climate crisis—is laden with moral overtones. Consequently, it is critical to clarify the context or the spatiotemporal setting of this tone (and zeal).

Research documenting Cape Town's inner-city decline during the 1990s is extensive and authoritative [155–157]. Reviewing the decade, Visser [154] features a CBD marked by massive capital flight, unprecedented levels of the 'fear of crime' linked to escalating crime rates, and severe environmental decay [158] (p. 398). This was no myth invented by vested interests to manipulate public opinion. Tamra Valey [57], a CTP founder, explained:

'It was shocking, really. The CBD was a mess. And it was dangerous. This wasn't some made up thing. You can ask anyone that was there, anyone that saw it. It was falling apart. Businesses were fleeing. Residents didn't feel safe. No one felt safe.'

Evident are valid concerns over the social, environmental, and economic collapse of the inner-city, estimated by the end of the 1990s to house 29 per cent of all formal businesses in the Cape Town metropolitan area; 27 per cent of total employment (232,000 jobs); and 21 per cent of City turnover [132] (p. 96). It was the main transport hub serving 240,000 commuters daily [132] (p. 97). Moreover, the inner-city contained buildings and precincts of rich and diverse cultural heritage (i.e., the Castle of Good Hope and the Iziko Slave Lodges). Could 'saving' the city offer a reasonably plausible motivation for action and intervention? Michael Farr [2], another founding member and former CTP CEO, remarked:

'What were we meant to do? I don't understand. The CBD was on the verge of collapse, and someone had to do something. I'm not blaming the City. This is not about blame. But were we, as citizens, simply meant to just stand by and do nothing? Were we just meant to wait until someone did something? Were we just meant to sit there and watch?'

Calls for intervention date back to the first democratic election of 1994, when residents and CBD business owners approached the City, pleading for action to halt and reverse urban decay. Boraine [58], former Cape Town city manager and ex-CTP CEO, spoke to consequences.

'What would happen if we let the city decline further? What would have happened if no one decided to do anything? It was a very serious problem. The entire social and economic fabric was on edge. The question that needs to be asked is why wouldn't local business or people do something? Why wouldn't anyone do something in such a situation?' [58].

By early 1995, businesses in the CBD, organised as the *Cape Town CBD Business Caucus*, despatched to the City an array of matters—ranging from security to safe parking to sanitation and informal trading—requiring urgent remedial action.

'These organisations [i.e., the Business Caucus] were fairly fluid and grew organically, with meeting minutes reflecting the changing names of the various entities that finally evolved into the Partnership and other structures' [159] (p. 9).

By January 1996, the Business Caucus agreed that remedial action would be optimally served by a joint initiative leveraging the authority of the City and the resources of the private sector. In the early stages of its institutional formation, the CTP came to be viewed as the middle ground or meeting point for constructing consensus on the long-term sustainable development of the city adversely impacted by the diversion of city revenue to, amongst others, the 'patchwork of intensely crowded informal settlements barely tolerated in various parts of the city', the 'unauthorised shanty towns', and the 'austere and inhospitable dormitory settlements on the treeless sandplains of the Cape Flats' [6] (p. 73). The first democratically elected ANC-led City Council inherited a municipal area, a third of which had not received any capital infrastructure expenditure in half a century [36]. Again, the literature [159] supports this claim, with limited budgets reoriented away from the already struggling CBD towards historically deprived areas in dire need of basic services [160]; areas such as Gugulethu—an African township established in the 1958 and located 15 kilometres from the city. Boraine [58] described a 'catch-22 situation'. The CBD—the economic engine of the economy—was failing, demanding investment to combat accelerated capital flight.



Simultaneously, the townships and informal settlements on the urban periphery desperately and urgently required basic services and infrastructure to address decades of criminal underinvestment linked to apartheid spatial engineering and racial discrimination.

By September 1996, the *CBD Emergency Task Team* was convened, presided over by Councillor Hanief Tiseker. Several prominent representatives of Cape Town's private and public sectors were in attendance including the City Council, Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the CBD Business Caucus (above), the South African Police Service, and the Office of the Attorney-General. The meeting, reported Boraine [58], resolved that a Section 21 company (i.e., a not-for-profit entity leveraged through joint funding) would be an appropriate and effective solution for improving services in the CBD, compensating for the redirection of municipal funds.

In the interim, the Emergency Task Team, sponsored by personal donations, hired 30 unemployed homeless people to pilot a CBD street-cleaning project. Visible security was boosted with the appointment of 25 civil society reservists on six-month contracts. In 1996, the Task Team assembled *Cape Town Cares*—a joint initiative between the City and anyone affected by life in the CBD. This movement spawned further off-shoots such as the *Broom Brigade*—a programme to clean the city, again, employing the unemployed. The cleaning and security services would eventually constitute the bedrock of the CTP's early mandate, i.e., to 'prevent the degeneration of cities and towns and the consequential urban decay' [161] (p. 3). In a 1998 forum meeting, property developer Theodore Yach declared:

'The social element cannot be over-emphasised. The only long-term sustainable route to success is to deal with the social issues on a holistic basis and not just to move the problem to another precinct. Our cooperation with the NGOs, welfare departments and other interested parties will be essential and beneficial to all affected parties at a grass-roots level'

[159] (p. 11).

Farr [2] asserts that CTP meetings, discussions and initiatives were no secret; they were not clandestine operations; and the local community, he claims, was the 'principal and main constituency'. From 1997, flyers, inviting open attendance, were distributed on the street advertising workshops on turning the CBD around. This was unprecedented, as property developer Colin Bird observes:

'It was the only time I knew of where business actually got together to do something about a situation they saw was deteriorating to a point where it would never be redeemable if nothing else was done. It was totally apolitical. There was a lot of disbelief about the potential, but no one was trying to earn money or get votes. It was being done for the right reasons and that's why it worked' [159] (p. 11).

These formative years of the CTP (1998/1999) could arguably be deemed collective action at the local level; a bottom-up process of self-organisation. Indeed, when the CTP finally materialised as a formal entity in July 1999, it operated on a 'shoe-string budget' without an office [2]. Long and often thankless hours, comprising mostly rejection and refusal, greeted a three-person team attempting to persuade local businesses and residents to attend meetings. Valey [57] recalls going door-to-door, 5 days a week for several months. The transparency and volunteerism belie reductive and cynical interpretations of the CTP as a top-down process, exogenous to Cape Town; as an import or mere 'adoption of global neoliberal ideology' [137] (p. 874). There is a decisive nuance here, particularly *vis-à-vis* aspersions of calculated, Machiavellian manoeuvrings under the long and dark shadow of global capitalism.

Furthermore, the media 'campaign' commenced four years after the emergence of the (local and collective) movement, and two years after the decision to establish the CTP. The campaign was *not* spontaneous. Prior to articles recording catastrophic urban decline [140–144], the *Cape Argus* [162] led with a front-page story titled 'Now It's Cape Town Ltd.' of the City and a consortium of local business owners forming a private enterprise for

service delivery in the CBD. Substantial improvements in sanitation, safety and security were promised. Boraine—cited by the *Cape Argus* [162]—described the formation of a legal structure to be completed within two months, laying the foundation for the formalisation of the Partnership. Thus, the press campaign supposedly following cannot so blithely be boiled down to coordinated fearmongering seeking the public sanction and legitimisation of neoliberal urban governance.

These distinctions are critical, affording an alternative perspective, an alternative lens to the events and engagements catalysing and driving the formation of the CTP. On the one hand, there were local business owners faced with an existential threat; locals responding at their own behest, with their own resources, configuring a rational pathway to plug and fill the investment gap resulting from the redirection of municipal funds to under-invested townships and informal settlements, and the broader fiscal constraints of the post-apartheid local government dispensation. On the other hand, these were citizens of Cape Town registering valid concerns over the deteriorating living and working conditions in the CBD, gathering in their spare time, conducting door-to-door canvassing, and installing community programs to mitigate the negative impacts and consequences of urban decline. Clearly, these are, themselves, narratives that underscore and acknowledge development outcomes as the product of multiple inter-woven circuits of associational economies, knowledges and practices. Reducing these narratives to orchestrations and machinations together with condemning stakeholders as mere puppets attached to the marionette of global capitalism deprives the city of its own agency and history and is, ultimately, a disservice to southern urban theory and theorisation.

## 6. Discussion

Aside from (re)establishing historical clarity and imbuing a measure of conceptual nuance related to the evolution and dynamics of neoliberalism in Cape Town, the implications are deceptively profound. Before proceeding to a discussion of the implications, a few words on methodology and limitations of the research.

Leaning on the philosophical orientation of interpretivism, the paper engaged diverse subject realities with conflicting narratives of Cape Town's urban regeneration. Wrestling with postcolonial and political economy interpretations of urban regeneration shows that many more than one explanation can emerge, laying the foundation for their reconciliation (discussed further below). Studying phenomena in their natural environment facilitates better understandings of the how and why; and is alive to the fluid and organic manifestations of social phenomena [44,51]. Narratives of Cape Town's urban regeneration cannot by this logic and cannot without pause be pejoratively labelled neoliberal and chronicle of neoliberalism foretold.

To answer questions of the how and why—the motivation, determinants and evolution of urban regeneration—a qualitative research methodology was adopted. Because themes and ideas are built inductively, guided by integrating and pooling perspectives, qualitative research routinely yields greater contextual understandings, deeper explanations, and conceptually richer theory [44,51]. Direct contact with the field of study through prepared unstructured interviews, observations and documentary analysis aided in heightening sensitivity to observation and interpretation (often compromised in quantitative research methodology and multiple case study research).

Deductive and inductive reasoning generated meaningful data. Sections 3 and 4 identified issues from a macro perspective and deduced facts about the institutional context of Cape Town. The inductive—Section 5—focused on more contextual (i.e., social and cultural) data lending voice to competing interpretations of urban regeneration. Deductive reasoning is scientifically confident, keeping inferences to a minimum. Inductive reasoning interrogates and questions sedimented thought, possibly pointing to paradigm-shifting generalisations from particular instances; albeit, however, with the chance of things going wrong [163]. These contradictory realisms of urban outcomes offer valuable scope for

expanding the registers through which urban regeneration is understood; the array of constitutive actors, objects and practices; and their relational character.

But analysis of interpretive data is challenging and complex [50] related to researcher bias and restrictions in scope [51]. Scholars of both postcolonialism and planetary urbanisation must acknowledge that clear patterns may not emerge, weakening the weight and impact of the research outcomes [50].

A single case study was the research design. Evidence created from a multiple case study design is usually considered strong, reliable and capable of generating substantial and convincing theory when the presuppositions are grounded in empirical evidence [44]. Conversely, the single case study is praised for its potential and ability to produce rich and composite theory [48], especially where the nature of issues being discussed is not always immediately obvious—as in Cape Town’s urban regeneration intervention—and empirically anchored as in the natural sciences. Extensive investigation and delineation of both context and situation [44]—exploring, explaining and describing—can result in contestation of old theoretical relationships and the exploration of new ones [48]. We will return to this reconciliation and re-integration shortly.

In a single case study, key informants become their own embedded units of analysis. Analysing units *within* the case—that is, between the units of analysis can fashion a cross-case analysis [44]. Phrased differently, the depth of a single-case study design need not be at the expense of comparison—hence the ‘place sensitive’ specificity of the postcolonial situated in a ‘relational urbanity’ of political economy.

Temporally and contextually, the single case study comprehends Cape Town’s past and present circumstances within their exceptionality as part and parcel of a specific context and the interactions there within [163]. Understanding exceptionality in a specific context is an end in and of itself, avoiding inclinations to calculate certain futures—city path dependencies and urban trajectories—in favour of deciphering the present nature of a setting.

Returning to the deceptively profound implications. The case study of Cape Town’s urban regeneration intervention could potentially be a starting point to commence reconciling provincialised, postcolonial urbanisms with broader processes of planetary urbanisation—a timely and urgent reconciliation in lieu of the long, protracted and on-going debates within critical urban studies. Indeed, across the field of critical urban studies, ‘there seems to be a growing sense of disarticulation, dissipation and fragmentation’ [164] (p. 162). As poststructuralists continue to deconstruct and dismantle hierarchies, the urban field risks ‘losing traction in a protracted moment of deconstructive splintering’ [164] (p. 162). Blokland and Harding [165] warn of continued disintegration in dialogue, with the field growing ‘susceptible to endemic and ever-widening discontinuity and disjuncture’ [165] (p. 220). The subsequent ‘misread[ings]’ [60] (p. 821) and ‘narrow-mindedness’ [166] (p. 1603) have resulted in generalised critique [167] and ‘dismissive caricatures’ [43] (p. 591). Consequently, there are calls for an ‘engaged pluralism’ [168] (p. 258); for a dampening to the obsession of ‘new’ theory [169]; the embracing of ‘shared vocabulary’ [170] (p. 3); and one with common, mutual ‘points of convergence’ [167] (p. 3).

‘What remains needed is thus a conceptual framework capable of riding the fine line between the two extremes . . . one that recognizes the contingency and specificity of particular projects at all geographical scales while also appreciating the commonality and interconnections among them’ [38] (p. 544).

Cape Town, arguably, showcases this conceptual framework. The interpretation of key historical junctures in the 1990s are measurably more nuanced than is currently uncritically portrayed. Business owners facing an existentialist threat, locals responding at their own behest using their own resources to address critical investment and service deficiencies is at odds with planetary urbanisation narratives of the top-down external neoliberal juggernaut. Failures to redress this is problematic on historical and empirical grounds as it undermines an agency and subjectivity, including the discussion of modes, modalities and matrices that may have, at one time, been relevant and productive. Moreover, the opportunity is denied

to appreciate and unravel the anthropologies and microcosms of provincialised agency at play.

There is much research required to (re)integrate micro-orientated postcolonial urbanisms with macro-orientated structures of political economy. Such work could (better) inform and map how, for instance, contemporary urban policy in Cape Town has since become dominated—and possibly captured—by private interests [135]. The question then arises as to why and how the ostensibly sincere ‘Saving the City’ discourse morphed and transformed into private sector ‘Seizure of the City’ executed by exclusionary property-led cultural and urban regeneration [59]? How did the involvement of the private sector change from service provision and delivery to effecting sweeping socio-cultural and exclusionary spatial change? When, why, and how did it change?

Domination and capture were neither inevitable nor externally driven. Ironically, it was facilitated by a democratically elected local state and incentivised by the ANC-led national treasury. Firstly, in response to growing concerns of the CTP governing Cape Town and *not* the City—a case of the ‘tail wagging the dog’—the new democratically elected ANC council reassessed service provision partnerships causing redirection of CTP activities towards cultural events, consumer centric street entertainment and marketing initiatives to attract and entertain international tourists and the leisurely monied classes. Secondly, following the dismissal of Michael Farr, after the City relooked the Partnership, the CBD on request from the City to National Treasury, was declared an ‘urban development zone’ (UDZ) permitting accelerated depreciation allowances on the cost of businesses erected to arrest urban decay and to encourage private sector investment. UDZ tax rebates degenerated into an instrument sanctioning rampant gentrification [43].

Greater urgency is required on *how* and *why* Cape Town’s current approach to urban regeneration is so thoroughly entrenched in public policy, with grudging acknowledgement of the contradictory realisms of its outcomes [4]. These are questions for another paper but by rooting the origins of the city development discourse in its provincialised and spatiotemporal context—versus knock offs and reproductions of northern urban theory—a richer, nuanced and, ultimately, more helpful urban theory and southern theorisation can root and thrive.

## 7. Conclusions

Cape Town represents a potent and powerful mix of local politics and planetary urbanisation. The city is shaped by fused conflicting discourses that are simultaneously objective and subjective; simultaneously consensual and coercive; simultaneously autonomous and structural. These contradictory realisms afford significant scope to expand the registers through which urban regeneration is understood; the array of constitutive actors, objects and practices; and their relational character. Valorising the myriad efforts that residents put forth to live and thrive in the city entails negotiating and navigating an unfathomable array of socio-cultural complexities in the literal (re) making of the city. Comprehending the exceptionality of this specific context is an end in and of itself, avoiding inclinations to calculate certain futures—city path dependencies and urban trajectories—elevating instead understanding the present nature of a setting (versus comparative study).

Theorising embedded in autonomy and agency elevates the plurality of voices, agendas and interests moulding urban development. Such work helps decipher political decisions and decode policy choices—both internally generated—that facilitated and financed the metamorphosis and mutation of local collective action (‘Saving the City’) into private sector ‘Seizure of the City’. Reductive and cynical interpretations of the CTP as top-down process, exogenous to Cape Town; an import or mere adoption of global neoliberal ideology in service of transnational capital could do well to revisit the terms and conditions of the toxic democratic political settlement; the post-apartheid governments in/voluntary embrace of urban regeneration; and the unique and common inherent in the institutionalisation of regeneration interventions in South African cities and elsewhere. Again, the subject of another paper.

An engaged pluralism and a shared vocabulary with common, mutual points of convergence will likely unearth scenarios of social exclusion and domination, but also resistance. Planners and policy makers could do well to listen to the narratives and discourses of the of resistance to present property-led and cultural urban regeneration to gather clues and intimations of the passage to a socially, spatially and culturally inclusive political economy—a postcolonial political economy, perhaps.

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