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Planned *stitching*, practical *suturing*: assembling community voices and mobilisation across difference in Johannesburg's corridors of freedom

Mike Makwela, Romain Dittgen  and Margot Rubin 

The City of Johannesburg's Corridors of Freedom (CoF), launched in 2013, were intended to cut across the economically and racially divided city using infrastructure and interventions in the built environment around new transport nodes. Undertaken in haste for political reasons and projected to be delivered as swiftly as possible, those driving this mega project oversaw substantial consultation exercises, but provided relatively few spaces for direct engagement to shape the project. This paper presents the experiences of a team of engaged-researchers, a long-standing NGO in partnership with University-based scholars jointly investigating the CoF development process. Interested in the ways in which the CoF initiative sought to 'stitch' the city together, our contribution to the project was to engage with different communities, clarify their different experiences with participation in the Corridors

Keywords **stitching, suturing, public engagement, community mobilisation, engaged research, Johannesburg**

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development and explore the possibility of collaboration across these different communities. Using the conceptual framework of stitching and suturing, the paper, in two parts, interrogates the roles that engaged partners can have in complex and diverse communities and our ability to support engagement. We reveal the limitations of engaged research when faced with political and institutional cycles that do not synchronise with the research projects, and point to the cleavages and disruptions that result when the local state does not systematically incorporate the needs and lived realities of its residents.

Introduction

A marketing video begins with the following scene: somewhere in central Johannesburg, Nomusa, a 12-year old girl, notifies her classmates by text message that before heading to school she needs to take her granddad to the nearby clinic. In a thread of text messages, she talks about riding the bus (all by herself), meeting her granddad in the park, and walking through the inner city, pointing out the current convenience in sharp contrast to the difficulties of the past. As she is waiting outside the clinic, she is thinking of getting a slice of cake at the bakery next-door, mentions the existence of a fully equipped library and her wish to enrol into college, both located in the same neighbourhood. The year is 2040 and, according to Nomusa, 'in Jozi, you can do anything you can dream of'.

This excerpt in cartoon format is part of a promotional video¹ highlighting the benefits of a large-scale and long-term urban project, known as the Corridors of Freedom (CoF). The initiative was launched in 2013 as a transit-oriented development project by the City of Johannesburg (CoJ or the City) and, according to the municipality's phrasing, expected to 're-stitch' the city. With its aim of breaking the legacy of apartheid spatial planning, this flagship project meant to address some of the city's most enduring and stubborn spatial inequalities (Crankshaw 2022). This was to be achieved through the provision of increased densities and inclusionary, affordable (formal) housing in the more central parts of the city (Harrison et al. 2019), and multi-functional sites and corridors made accessible for all via a bus-rapid-transit system, the project's operational spine (Pieterse 2019; Harrison and Todes 2020; Wood 2022; van der Walt and Pretorius 2023). In effect, the initiative was designed and driven by the then mayor, Parks Tau, and a small group of experienced and relatively powerful, yet under-staffed planners (Harrison and Rubin 2020). Despite the CoJ's ambition to transform the urban landscape at an unprecedented scale through a 'social and spatial justice' rationale, the bureaucratic-led nature of the project, the slow and uneven implementation and the limited participation process revealed stark misalignments and differentiated interests between those planning and implementing the initiative and those affected. As a result, the aim of this paper is twofold: in the first instance, it offers a localised account from members of several 'recipient' neighbourhoods towards this large-scale

and long-term development project. In parallel, it also explores our positionality and how we as a collective, comprised of practitioners at Planact,² a local NGO, and scholars at the University of the Witwatersrand,³ tried to navigate the complexity of this ambitious Corridors initiative (whose underlying idea we supported) and the urban context in which it unfolded, marked by overlapping and variegated layers of diversity and sets of priorities.

At state-citizen level some of these ‘conflicting rationalities’ (Watson 2003) notably manifested in the way urban transformation was framed and imagined. If CoJ’s *stitching* of the divided city drew on particular state tools and instruments, reflected in a technical language and use of concepts, ultimately it is the practices of those who inhabit and navigate these urban spaces that make them workable and liveable for people, and imbue them with meaning. Furthermore, the project partially reinforced or even produced new gaps or ruptures, often in the form of physical divisions, which required renewed efforts from residents to find bottom-up and pragmatic solutions for sustaining livelihoods and mobility. As such, the ‘planned stitching’ of the state was met by a form of ‘practical suturing’, taking on a more embodied dimension of lived experience(s). In scholarly literature, *suturing* ‘suggests [the] closing [of] a wound, making an incision or stitching together parts, locations and points of view; as such point[ing] to new kinds of creativity with sources, evidence and interactivity’ (Hunt 2007). Viewed through an urban lens, De Boeck and Baloji in their ethnographic study of Kinshasa refer to ‘suture as closure, as junction and as a seam, [...] read[ing] meaning into the black hole of the city’ (2017, 11). This grounded, resident-led mode of making space, especially working across the ‘holes’ or gaps in the physical, social and economic urban fabric (De Boeck and Baloji 2016) echoes Simone’s notion of *people as infrastructure* and the ‘tentative and often precarious process of remaking the [...] city’ (2004, 411). Based on this interpretation, *suturing* in the context of Johannesburg relates to the ways in which the majority of the city’s inhabitants navigate the ongoing housing crisis (Wilhelm-Solomon 2020), carve out (informal) livelihoods within a constrained formalised economy (Matjomane and Bénit-Gbaffou 2019), or simply manoeuvre the precarious everyday in light of an uncertain future (Wafer 2017). It is against this broader framing and reality that we explore the misalignments between what was planned and envisioned, and the actual needs and desires on the ground. Relatedly, this specific reading of *suturing* also offers a relevant lens through which to explore the manner in which we, as self-appointed ‘mediators’,⁴ tried to close or at least reduce the gap regarding ideas, priorities and visions between different interested parties.

Our direct encounter with the Corridors of Freedom began in January 2016 as part of a two year-long international research project which focused on governance innovations and community-related matters in large-scale urban developments in three cities (see special issue introduction).⁵ Within our own research approach in Johannesburg, we integrated the scholarly and the social facilitation component from the start. However, one of the crucial questions we were faced with from the outset was the extent to which we, as latecomers in the official Corridors process, could shape or adjust a project that was being implemented, and especially where public engagement had largely been completed. With most of the decisions already taken, could we still carve out

a space to productively engage with this state-led initiative? In parallel, how would we critically position ourselves in relation to a project which, while politically driven, carried the ambition of changing the city for the better? Considering this complexity, what were we hoping to achieve and what kind of tools should (and could) we use as ‘uninvited outsiders’ (Miessen 2010) to meaningfully contribute to this process of urban transformation?

This paper, which reflects on the findings of this two-year research project and collaboration, joins a long list of community-focused and—engaged research in South Africa. The aim here is not to offer a systematic review of this rich scholarly literature, but mainly to draw out a few select points which guided our thinking. Bénit-Gbaffou, for instance, stresses the need to remain ‘attentive to the messy politics of communities [and] complex dynamics of urban change’ (Forthcoming, 19) which feeds into Katsaura’s argument about the existence of different types of knowledge and their ‘significant role in shaping the anatomy of power in the community politics field’ (2019, 360). Within such complex ‘playing’ fields, it is important to ‘set modest goals, not pretend to transform the world or the city in two years, [which, nonetheless,] does not mean abandoning a radical take’ (Bénit-Gbaffou 2019, 34). In parallel, Winkler also reminds us of the need ‘that service program facilitators [or, in our case a collective of NGO practitioners and scholars] reflect on and share their diverse project experiences, even if, or especially when, experiences are deemed less successful’ (2013, 225). For Oldfield and Nkula-Wenz, ‘the complexities of cities challenge and inspire urbanists to contend with diverse [and, at times, contradictory] ways of knowing the city’, with the aim of ‘engaging such complex dynamics as productive tensions’ (2022, 21, 22). Due to the scope and scale of the Corridors initiative, cutting across a wide range of neighbourhoods characterised by varied socio-economic realities, cultural backgrounds, and ways of living together (Ballard et al. 2017), there was a need ‘to attend to (and learn from) the political and ethical tensions that arise from research in real-world settings’ (Cupers et al. 2022, 9).

Below, we offer an account of our project-specific methods and approach, including the underlying rationale for doing so. The article is structured in two parts: the first one reflects on our role as ‘mediators’, engaged researchers and the process that we followed, whilst the second part surfaces the consequences of the CoF and the lack of participatory processes. As such, a sizeable part of the paper is dedicated to the voices from research participants sharing their views on the public participation process and on the various gaps, misalignments and disruptions which manifested between and within neighbourhoods. Finally, we share some critical reflections on the perspectives of ‘engaged’ collaborative research in relation to this specific large-scale urban development project.

Navigating the realities of participation along the corridors of freedom

The Corridors’ aim of transforming the city at scale required major shifts in the built environment. The rolling-out of the bus transit route and provision of affordable housing in more centrally located and better serviced areas was aimed at reducing the unnecessary hours disadvantaged urbanites relegated to

the outskirts of the city lose in daily commutes. Once resolved, this would enable them to spend more quality time with their families and access a wider range of opportunities across the city. Mayor Tau during whose tenure (2011-2016) the Corridors were launched, pushed for rapid and visible changes to portray the administration's commitment towards such structural urban transformation. In response, the City's Planning department, understaffed and pressured with delivery, was initially struggling to keep up with the budget spending cycles earmarked for this flagship project (Interview with City Officials, 29 July 2016). They relied on external consultants and an internal project delivery arm of the city (Johannesburg Development Agency) to bring forward plans and lead consultations.

Due to a combination of political pressure, strict financial deadlines and fears about potential disruptions to the process, there was a tendency to treat the resident population, whose lives and needs were clearly at the centre of the planned development, as passive recipients. While constitutionally required to submit the CoF to a public participation process, the City largely handled it as an *ad-hoc* intervention. Engagements with various neighbourhoods only began once a full plan for the area had been prepared and implementation was underway. Meetings were not widely advertised, and most of them took the form of presentations of plans for the area, with questions and answers. As a result, many of the impacted residents we spoke to were either not aware of the consultations having taken place or considered that participation in this form as pointless and compliance-led given that most decisions had already been made.

But some of these 'consultations' nonetheless saw substantial expressions of resistance. These mostly emanated from middle-class residents but also from specific stakeholder groupings within poorer neighbourhoods, indirectly aimed at protecting their interests, or safeguarding their existing neighbourhoods. This resulted in a series of difficult encounters between a belated effort by the City to retroactively win over sceptics through different modalities of engagement, while the various impacted groups tried to advance their sensitivities and priorities through a range of methods of their own (see Dittgen et al. [Forthcoming](#)). If middle-class residents were primarily worried about the eventual drop of their property value and neighbourhood status, in poorer areas the focus was mainly directed towards more immediate concerns, such as benefiting from job opportunities and better amenities, and the taxi industry contesting the roll-out of the BRT system itself.

It is within this specific context that we undertook our research. Due to the sheer scale of the Corridors initiative we needed to make choices (for reasons of feasibility) and select specific areas that, in combination, would offer a range of perspectives on the dynamics and challenges linked to the CoF initiative. After an initial scoping exercise and pre-planning phase, we primarily focused on three specific segments (see [Figure 1](#)) within the Corridors: Orlando East/Noordgesig in Soweto, a broad conurbation of townships located to the south-west of Johannesburg's inner city; Alexandra, a predominantly black township situated in proximity to Sandton (Johannesburg's main financial district in the northern suburbs); and the Greater Sophiatown area made up of low-income neighbourhoods with a large proportion of *coloured* population (more specifically Westbury, Claremont, Sophiatown, Newclare and Coronationville,

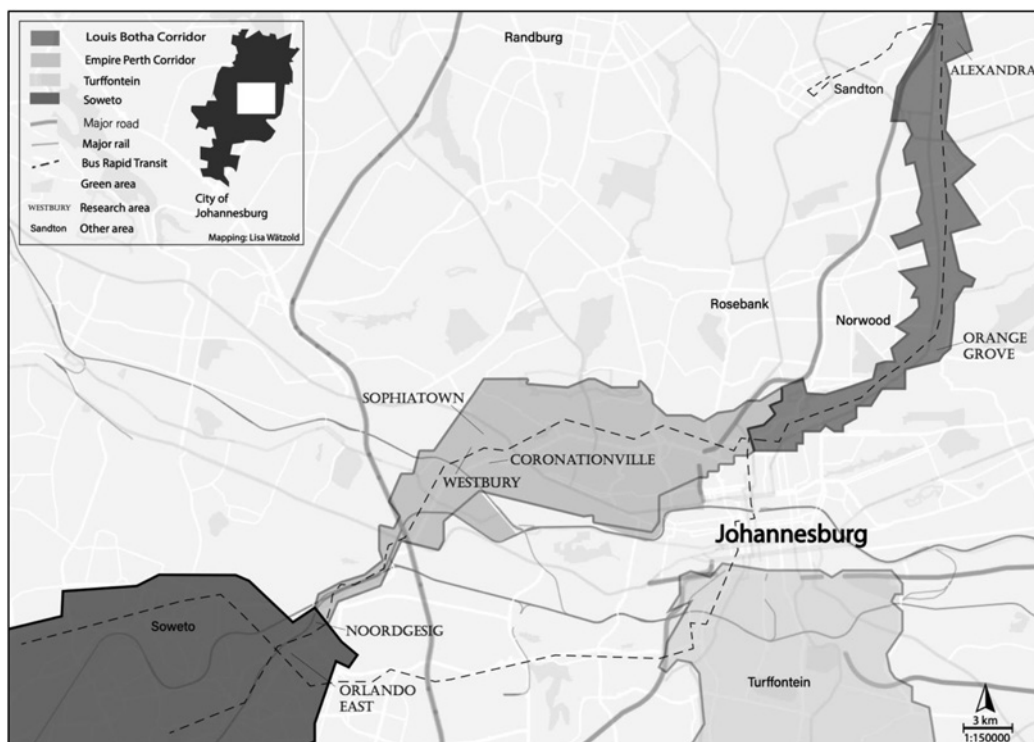


Figure 1: Research sites along the Corridors of Freedom, Johannesburg.

all located in the Western inner suburbs of the city). Furthermore, during focus group discussions we also included representatives from Orange Grove, a centrally located neighbourhood which combines a (lower) middle-class white population with a large proportion of migrants from the continent. The choice of these different segments offered temporal, racial, social, income and generational variation, which provided insights into the differentiated impacts of the Corridors. The aim was to draw on Planact's longstanding expertise and foothold in poorer neighbourhoods, while exploring the potential of expanding its organising base to lower middle-income areas and develop contacts in new kinds of neighbourhoods.

In terms of methodology and approach, our objective was to gain a deeper understanding of neighbourhood dynamics while trying to re-activate the need for continued community engagement along the Corridors initiative. Through the creation of 'invented' spaces (Miraftab 2004), this research project presented the opportunity for Planact and the academic team to work outside the routine or formal public participation process, with the CoF cutting across different wards and regions. Led by Planact, the team collaboratively conducted over 40 in-depth interviews, organised transect walks and, most prominently, held a series of regular focus groups over a period of two years. The first step was to reconstruct, mainly through engaging with local activists and community leaders, the way people in impacted neighbourhoods had experienced the public engagement process, alongside capturing their overall impressions, hopes, and specific concerns with developments in their areas. Combining research and facilitating

community mobilisation, these encounters were also used to inform community representatives about the Corridors development. In parallel, and cutting across different neighbourhoods, we actively worked towards establishing a platform of dialogue between CoJ planners (with whom we were in regular contact) and communities to reduce misinterpretations on both sides and to potentially render, in Oldfield and Nkula-Wenz' wording (2022), some of these tensions productive. With us as 'mediators', the objective was to bring the City back to the table (despite the official public engagement process being largely concluded) and entertain a regular channel of dialogue between the municipal administration and affected citizens across the CoF.

Building alliances amidst stalled prospects

In practice, setting up new relationships in communities in which Planact had previously not worked was at times challenging, and took longer than anticipated. It was also difficult to get people interested in the topic of the CoF, as they either did not understand how it affected them, or they thought that there was no point as plans had just gone ahead anyway. In poorer areas, the perception was that the CoF did not deal with basic issues, making it less relevant. However, by sensitising community members, our hope was that they would subsequently be able to engage on the issues around this City-led initiative and help communities build capacities to engage in large-scale state-led processes and secure resources for their own development.

Our methodological approach also aspired to respond to the initiative's goal of *stitching* the city together by jointly engaging people across the Corridors on Johannesburg's future and assisting them in building collective capacity. Paying attention to both neighbourhood-specific challenges and realities, and those cutting across place-based specificities, we decided to structure engagements with participants in sequential stages. In practice, this meant that we began with a neighbourhood-based focus before shifting to a broader theme-based approach. As such, the aim was to support participants in acknowledging their commonalities rather than solely focusing on entrenched differences or site-specific interests. Drawing on the preliminary interviews conducted with leaders and members of community-based organisations (e.g. churches, sports clubs, rate payers' associations, civil society) in our three selected segments, we grouped issues, concerns and ideas into specific thematic categories. Seven themes emerged which formed the basis for several focus group discussions: (1) accessibility, mobility and inclusion; (2) safety and security; (3) housing and densities; (4) economic development; (5) environment and heritage; (6) community views on mega development projects; and (7) means of public participation across the Corridors. While certain themes were more pressing in some areas than in others, these thematically focused discussions were sufficiently relevant to representatives from all the chosen areas.

Throughout the facilitation process, we engaged with the diversity and wide variety of community organisations that we encountered in the various communities (see [Figure 2](#)). In the formal and middle-class areas, communities were more aware of the issues surrounding the CoF, and thanks to access to



Figure 2: Snapshot of one of the breakaway focus group sessions during a cross-neighbourhood stakeholder meeting. PC: Planact, October 2017.

resources they were less dependent on organisations like Planact. For example, in Norwood/Orange Grove, the residents' associations had the capacity and legal power to lobby the City to change height restrictions of buildings. Similarly, in situations where communities are organised, the City was willing to partner and avail resources, for instance by trying to convince the leaders of the Alexandra Taxi Association to become shareholders in the BRT along the Louis Both corridor. The active Greater Sophiatown Development Forum managed to convene a public meeting and invite the JDA (Johannesburg Development Agency, the infrastructure arm of the City of Johannesburg) to come and account for the projects that were implemented in their area. Aside from these organisations that had engaged with the City and CoF, we also tried to pull in those communities and groups along the corridors that had initially been left out of the decision-making process.

With the aim of exploring commonalities and connections amongst the various communities impacted by the CoF, we organised a larger inter-community engagement towards the end of our research project on 'Inter-community dialogue about public participation along the Corridors of Freedom'. It was aimed at consolidating the findings on public participation across all communities with which the research team had engaged since the inception of the research project: sharing experiences, providing mutual learning across the Corridors, and, arguably most important, promoting collective engagement on similar thematic issues across the communities. As such, it constituted an indirect response to the City administration's goal of 'stitching the city together' and thinking along the Corridors at a more human – and community – centred level.

This inter-community dialogue brought together over 50 participants from across Johannesburg. Participants included residents from the key research sites, NGOs and other stakeholders. Discussions were held along the aforementioned

thematic issues. While attendees and organisers initially felt that there were strong differences between the various groups, there were also many shared concerns. A mutual experience across all community groups was that the City's consultation on the Corridors project had not been effective and was perceived as a mere tick-box exercise. It was also noted that there was scope to learn from the distinct approaches of different groups seeking to engage the City on developments.

Overall, one of the key challenges for us was to intersect our project time frame (2016–2018) with the temporal agenda of the mayoral initiative and opportunities for community engagement. However, by 2016, most of the official public participation process had already been concluded (during 2013 and 2014), except for engagements regarding two pilot special development zones (held in 2017) and a range of smaller area-specific projects. Furthermore, the African National Congress (ANC) losing control of Johannesburg after the August 2016 local elections triggered uncertainties (Harrison and Rubin 2020), both in relation to the continuation of the Corridors initiative itself (closely tied to ANC mayor Tau) and the pertinence of our own work.⁶ Towards the end of the project, the gradual side-lining of the CoF also led to a fizzling out of the remaining community interest. While some infrastructure components (such as community centres or neighbourhood clinics) partially continued to be implemented, a lack of political commitment in addition to insufficient funding and capacity (even after the ANC briefly returned to power in late 2019) meant that the overall initiative lacked cohesion and drive. At that time, the uncertain future of the CoF also raised doubts regarding our role as intermediaries. Nevertheless, while this high-profile badging of a major mayoral development project might have ended prematurely, the relevance and urgency of altering the built environment and social fabric remained.

Retrospectively, participants offered some crucial insights on the impact in their neighbourhoods of this ambitious planning initiative to 'stitch' the city together. They observed that this in fact caused significant disruption, introducing gaps which residents have sought to 'suture'. These findings, although not surprising, reinforce the importance of community engagement in any large-scale initiative seeking to transform cities.

Gaps between visions and (urban) realities

Despite the administration's intention and claim of stitching the city together, in practice many of the CoF's interventions (whether planned or realised) failed to adequately respond to community desires and needs. Furthermore, a resident from Noordgesig (1 June 2017) commented during a focus group that '[t]hey [the City planners] are the ones who actually destroyed what we had built for a number of years through blood and sweat'. This indicated the negative ramifications of some of the plans and a lack of acknowledgement of community-led initiatives. Corridor developments often failed to take account of earlier planning initiatives, some of which Planact had supported. For example, in Orlando East-Noordgesig, Planact had been invited by the ward councillor to support the establishment of a joint Community Development



Figure 3: View of the dedicated Rea Vaya bus lane between Coronationville and Westbury along the Empire Perth Development Corridor. In different neighbourhoods where the BRT infrastructure has been rolled out, the concrete island in the middle of the road, stretching for long interrupted distances, has significantly altered mobility patterns and affected local businesses. PC: Mark Lewis, July 2016.

Committee bringing together these divided communities to develop a precinct framework through a participatory process. In this case, not only was the precinct plan not taken into account within the Corridors' planning, but the Corridor introduced a physical divide between these communities (through the development of rapid transport lanes), including making crossing the road to the local school potentially lethal (Focus group discussion, 1 June 2017). Instead of *stitching* together parts of the city, the project contributed to the increase of spatial and human ruptures in different segments of the Corridors (see [Figure 3](#)).

Participation, exclusion, and marginalisation

A further rupture was tied to the nature of participation and engagement. Many of the interviewed residents and stakeholders saw the participatory process as nothing more than compliance-led governance, with officials merely engaged in a tick-box exercise. For some, the problematic character of the process even exceeded this basic concern, as illustrated by the following comment:

After doing research on public participation, we actually felt violated. What we experienced and what we know as public participation is nowhere near to what is supposed to unfold. Public participation is not a meeting; it's a process [...] [Instead] they come to tell you what they are going to do in your community. (Community leader from Greater Sophiatown, stakeholder forum, 27 October 2017)

This middle-aged businessman expressed his frustration at having clearly communicated what the consequences of poor engagement would be, arguing ‘You [state agencies] can do whatever you want in this area. If there’s no community buy-in you will never be able to sustain this project. [...]’ (Community leader from Greater Sophiatown, stakeholder forum, 27 October 2017).

At the same time, it was not just in the participatory processes that residents felt excluded. Residents and community structures from less privileged areas had attempted to initiate engagement with the state, through signing petitions (largely tied to missed employment opportunities and people not being hired locally) but received little response. At times, vandalism was used as a form of contestation by some community members to push back and contest what they saw as something that was forced on them, reflecting a lack of buy-in from local communities:

We’ve got a brand-new clinic worth ZAR 20 million [around USD 1.37 million]. At the moment [...] there is no toilet that is working. All the taps have been stolen. I’m not saying it is right, but since the people don’t have a sense of ownership to the clinic... that is why they are vandalising the clinic [...] because the people don’t have a sense of ownership; they just feel it was dumped on our backs. (Sophiatown resident, focus group, 23 September 2017)

The engagements that took place, did little to bring the parties together but contributed to reinforcing the gaps and widening pre-existing wedges of mistrust between residents and City officials. In a sense, rather than healing as *suturing* is intended to, state-led public participation was perceived and experienced as a form of violence and trauma.

Disconnections

Plans for altering the mobility pattern via the rollout of the Rea Vaya itself, the new bus rapid transit infrastructure underpinning the CoF, became a symbol for disengagement and confusion.⁷ Residents felt that they were not able to navigate the BRT system and were confused by how it articulated with other transit systems:

The routes are not known to the public, to the users, and also there was a question—is the Rea Vaya replacing the metrobus? (Focus group, 18 November 2016)

It further underlined a sense of exclusion that many residents felt both about the process and the final outcome, labelling the Rea Vaya and the whole initiative as ‘not really designed for the poor ... [but] more of a middle-class issue’ (Focus group, 18 November 2016). The sense of disconnection was reinforced by what residents felt was a lack of appreciation for their daily realities. For instance, the need for transport at most times of the day and night was not adequately addressed: ‘At the moment there is no assurance that the new bus service is going to offer 24 h, and if it is going to replace the taxis’ (Focus group, 18 November 2016). Residents also argued that the Rea Vaya was expensive and difficult to navigate: ‘They [the tickets for the Rea Vaya] were quite cheap for the

first three months and from there, they started escalating. You must have a card, you must go and buy a card, you feel reluctant, you must have ZAR 25 [about USD 1.7] to go and purchase a card. It is confusion, worse confounded' (Focus group, 1 June 2017).

A central feature underlying the CoF vision related to the question of mobility and accessibility. The City of Johannesburg anticipated the BRT service would act as the 'spine' of the project to be utilised by households and commuters living and working along the different corridors, with new developments concentrated at key transit nodes (largely around the bus stations, or in extended neighbourhoods along major routes). This was a key strategy of *stitching* the city, using the BRT to be able to pull people and places together. The intention was to also integrate the BRT system with other existing modes of transit, which, as described by one respondent, did not happen as planned: 'You might have the BRT route, but ... people hav[e] to walk long distances to get access to it, [there are] no taxi connections' (Focus group, 18 November 2016). The lack of integration also had further consequences: 'You also have Putco [a provincially owned bus company] travelling the same route and taxis and the metrobus [municipally owned bus company]'. The conglomeration of all of these modes of transit led to massive congestion, with a resident noting his disappointment about the lack of integration:

I don't know much about planning ... but whoever thought of that route, the way they built it, you must see it in the mornings and the afternoons, it's chaos [...] I think very little planning went into that because [...] it bottlenecks just close to where the [Rea Vaya] station is. (Westbury participant, focus group, 25 August 2016)

In addition to the congestion and long distances that people must walk, numerous households do not use the Rea Vaya as they have few places to go. For instance, many of the residents in the neighbourhood of Westbury and the adjacent informal settlement of Joe Slovo are unemployed, relying on state grants and piecework to survive. They depend on a range of facilities situated within walking distance and seldom travel further afield; the Rea Vaya is often seen as irrelevant to residents in these areas.

As a result, there was some confusion on state spending and priorities. For many of the participants from the Sophiatown area, it raised questions as to why the state would invest so heavily in building this particular transport infrastructure when the more urgent challenges relate to drugs, gangsterism and unemployment (see [Figure 4](#)).

They mentioned issues of drugs and all those things, but they don't mention issues that will alleviate this permanently which is recreational facilities, sports facilities, proper schooling facilities to recreate and develop kids properly, none of that is done and the Council has failed to integrate those schools. (Westbury participant, focus group, 25 August 2016)

In addition, the developments planned around nodes in the Corridors of Freedom project made some residents feel that their needs were simply not being addressed. One resident expressed his frustration by saying:



Figure 4: View of pre-existing apartment blocks in a more densely built-up part of Westbury. Within the scope of the Corridors Initiative, plans for the broader area largely focused on upgrading or building new community infrastructure such as clinics, community centres or playgrounds. During visits to the neighbourhood, residents stressed that safety was their main concern and required a more dedicated effort from the state, with gang-related violence undermining the prospect of sustainable economic activities and opportunities. PC: Mark Lewis, July 2016.

The next thing is [...] very little has been touched on in terms of cross-cutting issues; nobody spoke about the integration of schools. We are in an area where there are twelve schools within a three kilometre range. There are over 10,000 [children] in those schools, there is not one proper sports facility. (Westbury resident, focus group, 18 November 2016)

Overall, the residents felt that their views and needs, including those expressed in previous rounds of participation in spatial planning, had not influenced the investments planned and implemented by the state.

Ruptures, obstacles, and displacements

In parallel to the participation process foregrounding the misalignments between communities and state agencies, the CoF also (inadvertently) triggered new ruptures and obstacles: materially, but also in terms of social agency and community coherence. Residents from specific communities noted that the Rea Vaya created situations of mental and physical danger, with a resident from Noordgesig describing how new divisions occurred when getting off a Rea Vaya bus:

[...] you still need to cross the Soweto freeway, if you are from the side of Orlando, you still need to cross this freeway to go into Orlando... which means there is no freedom, you are not free, because you are being put in this psychological bondage of death when you cross there. (Noordgesig resident, 25 August 2016)

Fences and barricades erected as part of the Rea Vaya development also produced borders between communities that had previously close ties:

The CoF, the BRT issue has impacted negatively on the relationship between the two [areas]. Our kids can no longer cross easily into Noordgesig, from Orlando to Noordgesig; it is a very serious barrier, it is a carnage road where a number of casualties are being reported on a weekly basis. This CoF, I may call them Corridors of impediment. (Orlando Resident, focus group, 1 June 2017)

Along one segment of the Louis Botha Corridor, a busy main artery,⁸ many of its adjoining roads were closed or turned into one-ways disturbing the flow of vehicle and pedestrian traffic that had existed for many decades. Consequently,

a number of businesses [...] were destroyed in the process. That is an unintended consequence, practically half of Louis Botha from say Victory Theatre [towards the south] going down halfway to Alexandra township in the north], all those businesses [were affected]. (Orange Grove resident, focus group, 18 November 2016)

Another pertinent example was recounted to us by someone who, since 1992, worked in a longstanding local bakery/restaurant on Louis Botha Avenue:

Customers used to come through here, we used to have an entrance they'd come through, from that side... but now it's closed. You must risk making a U-turn there which is very risky. We have old people coming here, they always tell us, as a 14-year-old, they used to come and eat here. See but now it's difficult, now I won't come here, I'll come now and then, I can't be making a U-turn, I'm too old to be making a U-turn there. Taxis are going to hit me or something.⁹ (Interview with resident along Louis Botha, 9 April 2016)

Furthermore, in order to assist with pedestrian safety a fence was put up on top of the concrete islands in the middle of the road, but its erection was met with vitriol and was eventually taken down by the City:

The lack of social cohesion which is being created by the island in the middle of Louis Botha Avenue is a great problem. I would like to see it being removed. I do not see that it serves a valid purpose despite what the BRT says [...]. (Orange Grove resident, focus group, 18 November 2016)

One of the issues was the fence they put up along Louis Botha Avenue which was the dumbest thing they have ever done. That has cost us as taxpayers a vast amount of money by separating our communities. The same thing [hinders] fire trucks, the police cannot get [access during] emergencies. (Developer at Patterson Park and Orange Grove Residents Association, focus group, 18 November 2016)

The road disruptions and ensuing access restrictions due to material changes (i.e. the concrete island) also impacted business operations along the corridors. Many of the interviewed businesses mentioned that they were not consulted about alternative access points during and after the construction phase. For

instance, with the BRT infrastructure gradually rolled out along the Louis Botha Corridor, businesses can now only be accessed from one side, meaning that residents must drive further to get to work while many customers (at least those using private cars) have chosen to shop elsewhere. Businesses at certain segments, like panel beaters and spare parts shops near the Bramley Police station and heavily reliant on motor vehicle access, were cut off completely from their customers and their activities were badly affected by the construction of the Rea Vaya. If large formal businesses at strategic pick-up and drop-off zones, such as the functioning BRT stations, have benefited from the CoF, commercial activities for traders situated between these stops have dropped significantly.

Other interviewees complained that the new infrastructure became 'a breeding ground for crime' (Westbury participant, focus group, 25 August 2016). Attempts at recreating the urban landscape through upgrading often led to unintended consequences:

It [the local upgrade] was never thought about, it was never really clearly spoken [about] to the people, you said listen, like now, they [the City] took away the park, there was a park there, just close to the station, [...] then they built a bridge and at that bridge that's where the crime takes place; these kids, these youngsters [are] robbing the people. (Westbury resident, focus group, 25 August 2016)

Contrary to the projected Corridors vision, the manner in which the new infrastructure was implemented often did not lead to stitching but rupture, ripping apart, impeding and breaking open spaces, creating situations of danger for those who use them.

Reinforcing cleavages

From the wider interviews and engagements it became clear that differences and gaps emerged both within and across communities. This was an important issue for the team to reflect on, in terms of Planact's interest in inquiring whether different communities along the corridors might find shared grounds for joint engagements and seeking to shape the development. The question of the densities of proposed new developments became a symbol for a range of cleavages. The idea that the City intended to densify certain areas along the corridors was understood by many as introducing people of different socio-economic profiles to the pre-existing communities. Some of the resistance to this was encoded with the way that people identified higher density housing as 'ugly' or being 'too much' (Orange Grove resident, focus group, 25 August 2016) whilst others noted the perceived 'dangers' that higher density housing may offer, such as providing 'really poor quality housing that close, and to have people living there who may actually be unemployed and could therefore be a source of crime ... people are not going to be happy' (Orange Grove resident, focus group, 25 August 2016). In parallel, others saw the housing that was going to be provided as out of reach for most of the current lower income residents:

When you look at ... housing [and] ... densities, it seems to be social housing and it's happening all over but it's still not affordable. The cheapest unit you can obtain is

ZAR 1500 [about USD 100 per month], a bachelor unit, and that's not affordable compared to what people are paying now [...]. So, the upgrading, especially, say in Orange Grove, the Paterson Park area, is not going to be affordable; so they still keep excluding the poor from opportunity. (Focus group, 18 November 2016)

Densification and housing triggered reactions which were at once deeply contextualised and yet also referring to broader thematic concerns. In places such as Alexandra, densification was seen as a non-issue given that, according to some participants, it was rather a question of who was entitled to a right to housing in a very densely populated area. In one of the focus group discussions the topic of housing quickly triggered anti-immigrant comments and sentiments, revealing deep-seated tensions and underlying power rivalries within specific neighbourhoods (Focus group discussion, 27 October 2017). With regards to suburban areas, some residents sought to protect the identity of *their* neighbourhoods against those perceived as 'other' (see for instance, Rubin 2021; Dittgen, Chungu, and Lewis 2023), while other groups engaged in negotiations and initiatives to find liveable solutions, such as moderating the density of developments, or upgrading local shopping streets and parks (Mhkize and Mosselson 2017). There were also those who saw the change in businesses as desirable, arguing that 'with [the] Rea Vaya, the rentals are going to go up, if they were renting or the market is going to be improved and you are going to get a much higher standard of businesses opening there' (Focus group discussion, 27 October 2017). However, others worried that this was a form of gentrification and, instead of stitching the city, it would paradoxically exclude poorer residents, displace informal businesses (see Figure 5), and, as such, contradict the original intentions of the Corridors initiative.

Reflections and thoughts

To successfully alter the built environment, especially if geared towards the creation of a more inclusive city, entails the development of a fine-grained understanding of human experiences, behaviour, desires and aspirations. This is a process that takes time, especially where there are diverse neighbourhoods and communities with their specific demands and forms of engagement. More broadly, it speaks to the importance of 'radical incrementalism', which Pieterse defines as 'a disposition and sensibility that believes in deliberate actions of social transformation but *through a multiplicity of processes and imaginations* [emphasis added], none of which assumes or asserts a primary significance over other struggles' (2008, 6). It is therefore important for any instigator to incorporate a certain level of flexibility to adapt the conceptualisation of planned alterations to the existing reality of lived spatial and social practices. For the CoF this means that the municipality's *stitching* of the city via targeted investments would have needed to intersect with the manner in which Johannesburg's inhabitants are themselves *suturing* the city through various means. Apart from the materiality of urban change, one of these *gaps* to be filled relates to imagining (and implementing) an inclusive future city that remains open to several different yet intersecting interpretations.

In terms of the role of the team and the collaboration between the collective, this project, like so many others, points to the wider challenges of building



Figure 5: Small tailor business set up along Louis Botha Avenue in Orange Grove. If the Corridors Initiative was geared towards the promotion of mixed-use facilities, there was little indication about a planned integration of informal activities, raising concerns amongst affected groups. PC: Mark Lewis, June 2016.

community-based comparative urban research (Peake et al. 2021) and reflects the difficulties and trials of actors with different priorities, aims and audiences working together (Benson and Nagar 2006). The team constituted of a well-respected and established NGO that had been working with a number of communities for many years, was well-versed in community engagement but faced some challenges when undertaking research. The academic staff, comprised of social science researchers, had to a large extent theoretical understandings of community engagement and long histories of policy-work but often found working in the complex terrain of inter—and intra—community politics challenging. Given that the City was also intended to be a partner but had their own processes and timelines to work towards, facing critique from the communities and team was periodically difficult. While each partner brought significant strengths and abilities to the project, allowing for substantial (if sometimes painful) mutual learning (such as how to engage with the complexity of community politics and new research methods), it also required regular discussions to align priorities. Most significantly, we all were faced with a situation where, despite our best efforts, the City politics overtook everything else, creating a vacuum into which many of the efforts fell. As such, while there was some interest in establishing an inter-community steering committee and task team, led and carried by representatives from various neighbourhoods, this plan was short-lived and soon evaporated after the research project had

ended. In our own work since, whether undertaken by Planact or the scholars, we largely returned to more localised scales of analysis in Johannesburg with opportunities for cross—or inter-neighbourhood engagements remaining limited.

Concluding remarks

The Corridors initiative, cutting across a diverse and layered societal spectrum, was still in its early stages when progress stalled. This makes it difficult to speculate about its expected long-term impact, and the opportunity to build cross-neighbourhood community capacity. Had our own research on the Corridors initiative started earlier, ideally before the first phase of public engagement, would we have been able to shape the trajectory of the project (or at least certain components)? And, more importantly, would we have been able to ensure that the voices of affected people had been heard? Impossible to say, especially given the political turn the City of Johannesburg took since August 2016 and the various coalition governments which followed. That being said, and as acutely stated by Bénit-Gbaffou, if we were to assess engaged research solely on the basis of ‘the actual social change it trigger[s]’ then ‘perhaps we should stop engaged research entirely’ (2019, 34). As such, without necessarily producing any tangible ‘outcome’, our research aimed to assess the underlying meaning and essence of urban transformation at this unprecedented scale as well as its impact on different neighbourhoods and communities across Johannesburg. By capturing people’s perceptions and lived experiences of the Corridors of Freedom initiative (including the official publication engagement process), our aim was to interpret how the terminology and plans initiated by the City government translated into people’s lives and to explore how this produced misalignments between state and citizens, but also among various groups of citizens.

One of our key entry points was to juxtapose the administration’s planned and long-term *stitching* of the city with the practical and everyday *suturing* of urban realities. While initiated and carried by a broader social justice rationale, the City’s ambitious vision of radically restructuring Johannesburg’s urban environment through the Corridors of Freedom was delivered at speed (in part due to strict budget cycles) and fell short on several levels. Public engagement with residents was considered secondary (unless when faced with resistance), and the implementation of the initiative was not necessarily aligned with the realities and needs of many of Johannesburg’s affected inhabitants. If ambitious spatial projects, such as the Corridors of Freedom, are fundamental to reshaping unequal and unjust cities, care has to be taken to consider the fine-grained experiences and quotidian acts that hold cities and communities together and which are so easily disrupted, even by the best of intentions. One of the City’s lead planners at the time reflected that the municipality ‘should have considered involving psychologists, anthropologists and the likes to help gain a better understanding of the mindset and behaviours of people in the affected neighbourhoods’ (Conversation with City Official, 3 August 2017). In practice, a gradual shift or expansion from ‘stitching’ to ‘suturing’ from

a planning perspective would entail adopting a more pragmatic approach towards transforming Johannesburg: one that is grounded in the (complex and conflicting) realities of the city, is ambitious yet realistic, structured while leaving sufficient room for manoeuvring. This flexibility is also a lesson for us to take on board, especially since the structural inequalities the CoF aimed to undo remain prominent, if not worsened due to the current unstable political local landscape (with seven mayors since 2016) and the heightened service—and infrastructure-related crises in recent years.

Notes

- 1 The full video can be viewed by using the following link: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiaAdgGRHo&t=284s>, from 5' 6", accessed on 8 July 2021].
- 2 A Johannesburg-based non-governmental development organisation committed to holistic development for the poor, focusing on the areas of integrated human settlements and participatory governance.
- 3 Only two scholars are listed as authors here, but the research project involved several colleagues within the South African Research Chair in Spatial Analysis and City Planning (led by Prof. Philip Harrison) and within the School of Architecture and Planning.
- 4 We aimed to intentionally act as a bridge or connection between several disparate actors and perspectives, thereby working towards linking and establishing a possibility of sustained dialogue between civil society, academia and the state in its different forms.
- 5 This research was part of a larger ESRC-funded research project called 'Governing the future city: A comparative analysis of governance innovations in large scale urban developments in Shanghai, London, Johannesburg' (ES/N006070/1).
- 6 Considering our overall focus on governance innovations linked to the implementation of this large-scale and long-term project, the gradual political and financial shift away from the Corridors Initiative also meant adapting to these new realities. As a result, our work was no longer as relevant since we no longer had the political and intellectual capital that was needed.
- 7 The vision behind the Rea Vaya bus system has been highly ambitious and, once the different phases are completed, the network is expected to 'include 330 km of bus routes across Johannesburg with 85 percent of [the city's] population within 500 m of a Rea Vaya Trunk of Feeder service (Wood 2022, 39). However, according to the 2017/18 Quality of Life Survey, the ridership remains extremely limited at 0.6 percent compared to 4.7 percent for other buses, 3 percent for the Metro Rail, and the majority either using minibus taxis (at 45.7 percent) or resorting to private car use (at 36 percent) (GCRO 2018). In 2019, the BRT still only carried 0.95 percent of Johannesburg's population, raising pressing concerns with regards to its financial viability (Wood 2022, 145).
- 8 It runs in a north-south direction and connects the working-class inner city with the wealthier areas of northern Johannesburg, but also the township of Alexandra.
- 9 This statement was not necessarily shared by everyone. Some Orange Grove residents argued that, in more recent times, the Dollhouse had hardly attracted any customers. Those objecting to its closure were themselves not patronising the establishment anymore and were mainly nostalgic about a long-gone past (Focus group discussion, 27 October 2017).

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