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# Activists in the State: City officials working behind the scenes for change in post-apartheid Johannesburg

Claire B nit-Gbaffou

## Introduction

One day, I used the term ‘activist in the state’ in a conversation with a former student: a young Black man born in a poor family, having defended his master’s thesis in urban studies on issues of spatial justice, and who had just found a job in the Western Cape provincial administration, ruled by the Democratic Alliance (DA).<sup>1</sup> When I suggested he had become an ‘activist in the state’, his eyes brightened and a large smile illuminated his face: surprise, relief, a whole world opening. He said, ‘This actually exists? So ... it means I can tell my friends that I am not a sell-out!’

The academic field of social movement studies, but also popular discourse, tend to see working for the state as compromising: being coopted, yielding to power, betraying or losing sight of one’s cause. Not without reason, as accusations abound that liberation movement activists have turned into self-enriching elites, and as state-provided job opportunities (direct or indirect) have become one main avenue for economic upliftment (von Holdt 2013), especially in a time of neoliberalisation where contracting out if not outright privatisation has become one dominant mode of service delivery (Miraftab 2004), and even of resource redistribution (Chipkin et al. 2014).

Social movement scientists have theorised why entry of activists into state institutions has been seen with such suspicion. Michels (1911) warns against the ‘cruel game’ in which institutionalisation leads to the formation of a professional elite that divides the movement and leads to its de-radicalisation. Barker (2001) further links this suspicion to

an essential, possibly misled, criticism against individual agency and leadership, in a world of social movement studies celebrating the collective in mass mobilisation. This dominant literature, combined with large and increasing distrust against institutions and the realm of ‘politics’, have arguably contained and limited research on activism in the realm of state institutions – in spite of some ventures, reemerging today, around the notion of ‘institutional activism’. It is this arena that I wish to enter in this chapter, where I propose the exploratory concept of ‘activism in the state’, as a way to shift our disciplinary gaze away from some of the normative framings of the social movement literature. This concept and this shift are inspired by the grounded realities of ‘activism in the state’ observed in the post-apartheid City of Johannesburg, that I illustrate by three portraits in practice.

## **Institutional activism, inside activism, activism in city hall – framing ‘activism in the state’ in the study of urban governance**

Some authors interested in what social movements actually achieve in terms of social and political change (Giugni 1998) started questioning the social movement-state divide (Goldstone 2003), and how ‘entering the state’ might be part of a long-term strategy for social movement to increase their ability to open up public imagination towards more systemic interventions in terms of policies and public resources redistribution aligned to their cause (Domhoff 2011). Some developed the notion of ‘institutional activism’ (Santoro and McGuire 1997; Pettinicchio 2012; Abers and Tatagiba 2015), ‘inside’ or ‘insider activism’ (Banaszak 2010; Hysing and Olsson 2017), to account for social movement activists who continue to act from a government position:

An inside activist is an individual who is engaged in civil society networks and organisations, who holds a formal position within public administration, and who acts strategically from inside public administration to change government policy and action in line with personal value commitment (Hysing and Olsson 2017, 6).

One key defining element of institutional or inside activism was the link existing between the activist and social movements or looser civil society networks. This literature documents the complex reframing of the relationship between the activist official and the social movement they belonged to (Abers and Tatagiba 2015), the cultural adjustment activists

undergo when they work for the state (Blatrix 2001; Goldstone 2003; Neveu 2011), and the gaps opening between the two types of activists. Abers and Tatagiba (2015), for instance, narrate how one feminist activist working under the Lula administration develops a set of strategies based on her understanding of the internal challenges of passing a progressive legislation and how these strategies are misunderstood and ultimately defeated by social movements' external actions. The interrogation is framed around issues of loyalty to the cause, accountability to the social movement, as well as how the activist-turned-official is able to 'push' the cause, but also needs to reframe it, entering in a world of compromises, possibly compromising the cause in the process.

The activists I am looking at in this paper do not formally belong to such networks: they can be said to be active citizens with strong personal values, but have not necessarily been socialised as activists outside or prior to the opportunity provided by their government job, even if they do have social networks built in particular in universities. This configuration has been analysed some time ago by two specific threads in social movement research, feminist studies (Staggenborg 1988; Katzenstein 1998, 2012; Banaszak 2010; Revillard 2011; Bereni and Revillard 2012) and environmental studies (Boucher and Villalba 1990; van der Heijden 1997; Seippel 2001). This body of work demonstrates how feminist and environmental ideas, policies and institutions were developed thanks to officials who had no particular link to social movements, and who even started developing awareness to the cause when in an official position to act upon it. Institutional activists with limited links to civil society networks are the focus of recent analyses, leading authors to coin other terms differentiating this phenomenon from 'institutional activism': some propose 'bureaucratic activism' (Niez and Krishnamurthy 2013; Abers 2019), others talk of 'governmental activism' (Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2017).

Broadening the definition of 'inside activists' to individuals who do not have strong links to existing civil society networks, severing the conceptualisation of activists from social movements, however, raises a question: how do you define activism, if commitment to a cause is no longer materialised and objectified by collective commitment and networks with a social group? Any public official with a vision for change and some degree of initiative may then be characterised as, or might claim to be, an 'activist'. Rebecca Abers (2019, 23) proposes a useful definition of bureaucratic activism in this perspective, as the 'proactive pursuit of opportunities to defend contentious causes' by workers inside bureaucracies, further defining a cause as:

a particular kind of idea, one that, from the perspective of believers, needs to be defended against powerful forces of either stability or change. ... Being a cause is not an inherent quality of the idea itself (Abers 2019, 24).

This definition illuminates another implicit normative dimension in social movement literature – that social movements and contentious politics are generally assumed to be ‘progressive’, aligned to broad goals of social justice. Taking away this assumed normative dimension does open other questions: in particular, does it include as ‘activists in the state’ those who actively drive change from within the state, in the name of exclusionary or identity politics that they see as causes to fight for? Does it mean an activist in the state might include officials actively constructing the neoliberalisation of the state, that they see as triggering progress in service delivery efficiency, and that many do construe as ‘progressive’ and perhaps even ‘contentious’, given the level of in-fighting against bureaucratic inertia driving this reform entails? Of course, one might consider that various identity politics or new public management have now become the dominant norm in contemporary societies – so they are not contentious issues anymore; and this is what renders such sweeping reforms of institutions possible. But, could this not be said of what leftists consider progressive reform as well? This doubt cautions against entirely relying on actors’ descriptions of their own actions. It requires researchers to still define what constitutes a contentious cause, and identify against which dominant power structures they are fought. In this respect, Clarence Stone (1995), possibly bringing back a degree of normativity, considers that urban leadership (equated to a form of activism in the state in specific positions) consists for a mayor in developing interventions *going against the flow of market forces* – constructing policy instruments that broadly counter, amend or regulate dominant dynamics, those of the market. Contemporary social challenges might, however, call for a finer characterisation of what constitutes dominant forces and contentious causes, in an age of complex neoliberal, populist and identity politics.

Intersecting these interrogations on institutional and bureaucratic activism, urban politics and planning studies have also engaged with this object. It has other, perhaps more explicit, normative assumptions, at least in the field of the planning discipline which explicitly questions ‘what should be done’, in particular for planners appointed in government positions, who want to, and often are trained to, drive change for social justice. Clavel’s ‘activists in City Hall’ (2010) and his research network on

‘progressive cities’, Krumholz and Clavel’s ‘equity planners’ (1994), Stone’s reflection on urban ‘leadership’ (1995), Forester’s collection of stories of ‘deliberative practitioners’ (1999) contribute to this reflexion – even if they struggle to be incorporated in broader planning theories that remain poorly informed by the actual challenges of practice (Harrison 2013). These activists are not only part of a ‘guerilla in the bureaucracy’ (Needleman and Needleman 1974), confronting their hierarchy overtly or covertly to reform state practices, or to more collectively subvert public interventions by appealing to civil society support, pressure and resources. They are actively part of the state apparatus, can work with a degree of support of the institution and are sometimes purposefully appointed for their activist skills, values and ideas to champion reform in newly elected local governments. The articulation between different types of activism (with or against the grain), how one may shift from one to the other, what they have in common and how they differ, remains to be thought. Here, we are considering mostly institutional activists working openly for progressive reform, in (generally short) moments of grace: what could be called ‘progressive moments’, to nuance Clavel’s quest for ‘progressive cities’, that are indeed difficult to find as they do not subsist for long (Shrock 2015).

Clavel (1986) defines ‘progressive cities’ (and Shrock defines ‘progressive urban policies’) as those committed to pursuing both redistribution and participation in their policies, the balance between the two varying according to contexts – opportunities, sector and nature of intervention, identity and skills of the leading activist. This definition complexifies the link between activist officials and civil society networks, beyond deployment or entryism. Often, the civil society networks that institutional activists might call for support are constructed by and through their interventions, rather than pre-existing such action. To some degree, these links with civil society networks are instrumental in supporting policy change (putting pressure on councillors and politicians, through street or electoral politics), rather than essentially providing guiding ideas and values on what ought to be done. Without this mobilisation, Clavel argues, progressive reforms are short-lived (2010), and politicians tend to abandon what are often difficult political moves (a ‘difficult dive’, as per Stone’s metaphor (1995)). This is also what scholars argue about the health sector reform in Brazil (Dowbor and Houtzager 2014) they explain politicians’ retreat from health reform programmes when seeking their second mandate by the disconnect between the broader, mass and grassroots *sanitarista* movement, and the small groups of professionals and officials actively leading the health system reform

within the state. This conceptualisation of civil society mobilisation seen as an instrument to support reform for insider activists assists in further understanding how social movement and state actions are co-constructed. It goes further than what Verhoeven and Duyvendak (2017, 570) construe as a ‘division of oppositional labour in which each player [government activist and social movement] focuses on what it knows and does best, and on what is seen by a broader public as a legitimate form of action by that player’. Each player and its resources are not that clearly defined, and co-construct in situated and relational ways their own mandate and the resources they mobilise.

Then, why did I use a new term, ‘activism in the state’? This formulation refers to Katzenstein’s attention to the *location* of where activism is deployed and what it implies for its *form* (Katzenstein 1998) without assuming that its development ‘within the state’ necessarily affects its *content* (by de-radicalising it). Secondly, it assists in shifting our gaze from the activists’ links to civil society, towards the state apparatus, as central to understand *what it is that activists in the state do*. In this respect, Verhoeven and Duyvendak (2017) call for ‘breaking down the state’ for better understanding of ‘governmental activism’. Yet, it is not enough to only see the state as a set of multiple, heterogenous and centrifugal entities – it would not exist without repeated and iterative attempts at regulating these dynamics and building internal unity and control. The heterogeneous nature of the state is therefore constantly challenged and tempered by a hierarchised bureaucracy animated by political leadership.

Building on this reflection, the emerging field that is being constructed currently globally – quite productively today in Brazilian academia (Abers and Tatagiba 2015; Abers 2019; Clavel 2010; Dagnino and Tatagiba 2010; Dowbor and Houtzager 2014; Rubin 2021), offers three promising directions. Firstly, an interrogation on activists in the state’s specific values, actual practices, and strategies, following social movements’ concepts of resources, repertoires, and framings (McAdam et al. 1996). Secondly, an exploration of the effects of these practices on policy change (discourses and norms, projects, plans, policies, institutions), a less developed and more arduous analysis (Giugni 1998). Thirdly, a line of research around what activists’ practices reveal of (and also how they potentially reshape) state structures, normative constraints and opportunities for change. In this respect, it is useful to ask directly, using Verhoeven and Duyvendak’s expression (2017): what is it that activists in the state ‘know and do best’? Rather than assuming it is a given, I would like to keep this as a driving question – including the

consideration that officials also learn to navigate state institutions and to build a strategic balance with civil society networks, mostly through trial and errors, as in any political game.

I find it productive to borrow from the literature on policy instrumentation, and the work developed by Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) on ‘governing through instruments’, inspired by Foucault. They posit policy instrument as political constructions whose genealogy is important to study, both to understand the conflicted rationalities that they brought together (in the state and outside the state), and to analyse what it is they do in society – encapsulating not only their ‘impact’ (planned and unforeseen material effects), but also what vision of society and social relations they naturalise. I argue, in this chapter, that a major difference between activists in the state and activists outside the state is the former’s focus on building policy instruments aligning to the cause they have chosen to defend or to drive from their institutional position. They actually do so more often in reaction to the opportunity opened by such a position, than from a long-standing expertise or sector-specific ideological drive (or perhaps, in the encounter between the two). Social movements’ activists will gauge their success in their ability to mobilise large sections of society (direct constituencies and the public at large); to influence public debate and transform a social issue into a ‘public problem’ or reframe an existing ‘public problem’; to get public visibility to the point governments are compelled to engage, to backtrack, if not to change their policy. Activists in the state will focus their effort primarily in altering or crafting policy instruments, as this is how government works – both as an opportunity and a constraint. They will attempt to change dominant policy and bureaucratic norms, institutions, categorisation and discourses; construct projects, plans, frameworks, policies and find ways of having them adopted, budgeted and implemented, in line with the cause they are driving – be it affordable housing and desegregation, inclusive public space, extension of public services to the most marginal urban areas. Paying particular attention to the politics of the framing of instruments, in their technical and narrow details, assists in illuminating what activists in the state actually do.

Furthermore, as argued in previous work (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018a), it is not one single policy instrument that one needs to look at, but a set of instruments working together towards changing a whole sector of intervention in the city. The work of an activist in the state does not stop at passing a policy and its by-law – it also involves finding a budget, partners and resources; inscribing the new policy direction in the diverse departments that are involved in its implementation; and developing the



practical tools for each of these departments to actualise this new direction. Actually developing these other instruments might be a requirement for passing new City policies. That echoes with Katzenstein's definition of 'institutionalisation' (1998): creating new norms within the complex, heterogeneous, fragmented state institution. This leads to another point I wish to make in this chapter, about which 'activists in the state' I am interested in – a dimension we lose by shifting from 'city hall' to 'the state' in naming these activists: that is the city, and the value of the 'local' as the locus of immediate confrontation between policy and its implementation, and where the interventions of several levels of the state (national, regional, local) are intertwined and made visible.

## What made this research possible

This chapter relies on individual portraits and narratives of officials working in the City in post-apartheid Johannesburg. These officials were all in intermediary positions – neither street-level bureaucrats nor senior officials, a position that is arguably key for imagining and practically conducting change in organisations (Chiha 2006). I engaged a conversation with these officials about one key initiative, project or goal they had been working towards while working in the City administration.

The narratives took the form of recorded and transcribed interviews but also informal conversations, in the context of long-standing engagement mixing focused research (in particular, on issues of public space, and parks' management) and personal relationships (some of these officials being former students in the Wits School of Architecture and Planning). The interviews and conversations were further contextualised and complemented through the use of three other methods.

Firstly, complementary research was conducted, partly through coordinating students' research around the projects mentioned by activists (Bosaka 2015; Daniel and Foto 2016; Memela and Nyanda 2016; Molema 2016; Laures 2017; Mogkere 2018). Complementary sources were gathered to give background to the projects narrated by the interviewees.

Secondly, before proceeding to the interview, I involved myself in parts of the project mentioned by the activist interviewed: workshoping research results, strategically framing these results for different platforms around specific stakes, debating and jointly framing content, together with the activist in the state (in various degrees, depending on opportunity

and need: high with Ayanda, medium with Matt, low with Nikki). This research-action process – jointly strategising with the activist I was portraying – has been illuminating: learning by doing some of the ‘tricks of the trade’, the ways things can be done or actually work but also better understanding the context, the challenges and fault-lines in institutions, and learning how to handle them through trial and error.

Thirdly, I engaged in a process of peer-review of the stories, by the three actors I am portraying but also by colleagues familiar with Johannesburg’s politics and environment.

Finally, there is the issue of confidentiality, not dissimilar to the ‘black box’ on internal strategies in social movements: publicising a political strategy while it is current might jeopardise it. Two elements limit the risk. The first is this chapter has been read and debated with each of the activists portrayed, and the second is that time has elapsed between the collection of these stories (2016) and their publication time (2023).

## **Story 1: Building support for a homeless shelter in the suburb, outside and inside the state**

The main character

Matt Jackson is a former student of Wits Planning Programme. As long as I have known him, he has been in awe of entrepreneurship, with a desire for action, efficacy and pragmatism, mixed with a longing for social justice. This was the streak of activism, that he first developed when working with the Central Johannesburg Partnership, a coalition of property developers and private companies interested in the inner-city revitalisation, and instrumental in crafting the provincial legislation on City Improvement Districts (CID). He expanded this passion when he was appointed to the City of Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) in 2015, in charge of facilitating the development of the mayoral flagship project: Corridors of Freedom,<sup>2</sup> in the northern suburbs, around the Louis Botha Corridor.

While engaging with White middle-class residents, mostly adverse to the project of densification and social mix that the Corridors of Freedom entailed (Applebaum 2017), Matt focused on making the project understood and accepted through a process of education and bargaining. That is where he developed his awareness on issues of homelessness in the suburbs, and worked towards convincing local suburban associations

to support a homeless shelter as part of a neighborhood plan of revitalisation of public space. This is the project this story is focusing on. Having left the City in 2017, Matt involved himself in social entrepreneurship to construct a national network, with churches, NGOs, officials, and researchers, around the issue of homelessness.

The context: trading the inclusion of homeless people for public investment in public space

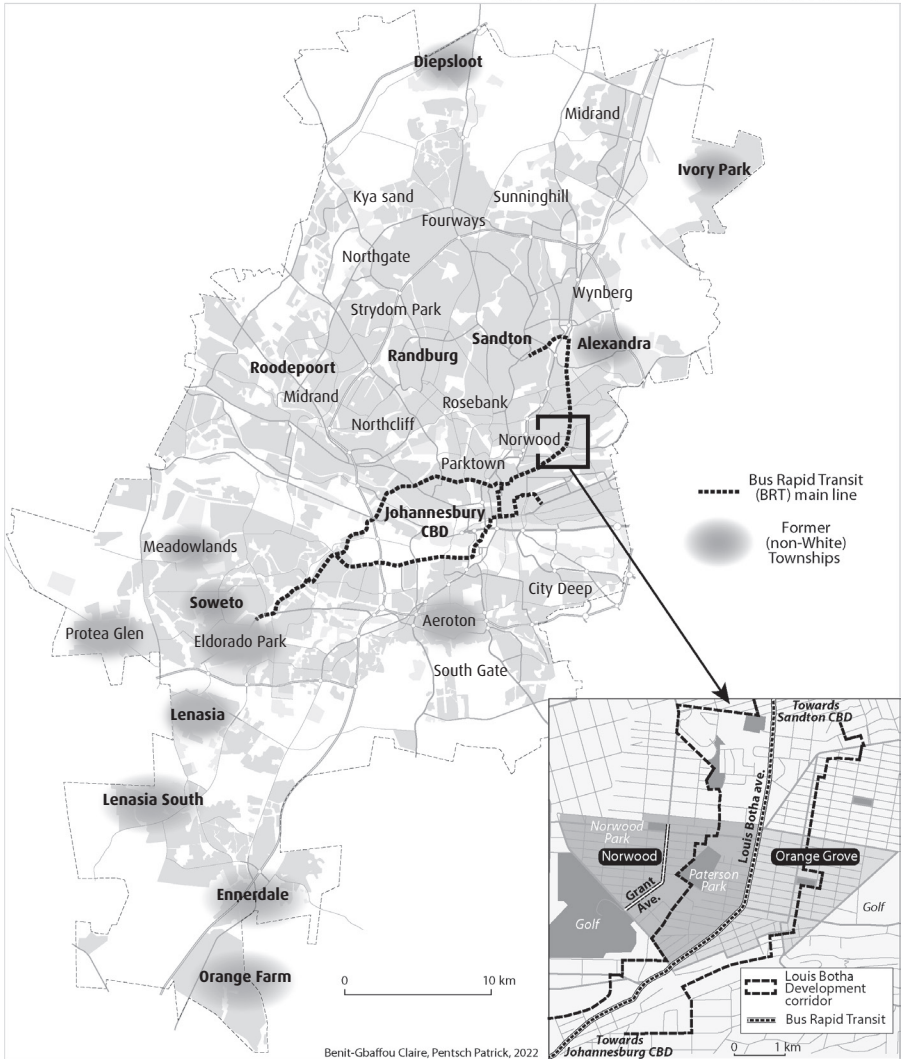
The JDA Facilitation Unit, where Matt used to be positioned, is a relatively free environment, a small mobile unit within a resourced and partly autonomous, powerful municipal-owned entity.<sup>3</sup> This unit within the JDA was set up by a visionary JDA senior official, frustrated by how often their interventions to regenerate the city were blocked by social protests, which she linked to the absence of engagement with citizens. Her proposed unit happened to respond to the practical need for the City to have a large project like the Corridors of Freedom run smoothly.

The Corridors of Freedom (constructing urban density along public rapid transport lines, linking townships, inner city and suburban centers) was a flagship project under Parks Tau's African National Congress (ANC) mayorship (2011–17). It had backing from the mayor and the overall City administration: financial resources, political visibility and legitimacy, directed towards the neighborhoods that the bus line affected. This focused and fast-tracked public investment opened possibilities for bargaining and for innovative state practices beyond the usual departmental silos. Even though literature focusing on large projects ([Flyvbjerg 2014](#)) emphasise their democratic limitations and their limited governability, in the case of Matt, in charge of development around one specific corridor (Louis Botha Avenue), the project was small scale, focused, powerful, and manageable at a neighbourhood level. A pragmatic take (avoiding large projects being derailed by social protests), had opened a space for democratic possibilities, processes taking community participation seriously, at least in terms of resources committed to the process.

The area of intervention, the middle-class suburb of Norwood, is marked by strong and visible public interventions: the construction of the Bus rapid transit line and station on Louis Botha Avenue, and the project of building social housing units in a section of Paterson Park in Norwood.

Norwood resident associations were up in arms against the social housing project (not led by JDA, but by another municipal owned entity: Johannesburg Property Company – JPC), multiplying objections and threatening litigation ([Applebaum 2017](#)). As a way to calm the situation,

Norwood and the Louis Botha Corridor of Freedom



Benit-Gbaffou Claire, Pentsch Patrick, 2022

Source: After Applebaum A (2017). *Contestation, Transformation and Competing Visions: A Study of Orange Grove and Norwood*. SA&CP, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

**Figure 3.1** Matt’s area of intervention: Norwood and the Corridor of Freedom project in Johannesburg. Matt broadened the City’s area of intervention beyond the official area earmarked for the Corridors of Freedom. This allowed him to intervene on broader issues of public space in Norwood, and construct multiple sites of engagement with the local community, beyond the conflict around Patterson’s social housing project.

Map: © Claire Bénit-Gbaffou and Patrick Pentsch, with thanks to Aix Marseille University 2022

the JDA developed a plan to revamp Norwood's high street – in spite of the fact it fell outside the strict perimeter of the Corridor (Figure 3.1), hence requiring a specific action by Matt to expand the scope of public intervention. Problems that were identified by business people and residents included the large number of beggars and informal car guards (some with substance abuse issues), that the residents felt were contributing to crime and grime. The car guards and beggars were living in Norwood's park, together with a number of informal recyclers using the park as their depot and living space (Laures 2017). The Paterson park housing project had the unplanned effect of displacing the homeless people living there, towards Norwood's park, where their visibility increased due to their aggregation, and the fact that the (smaller) park in Norwood is also more central to the neighbourhood than Paterson's park.

Matt's project was to gain the buy-in of Norwood residents to the whole Corridor of Freedom project, and through engagement around public space along Norwood's high street (that borders Norwood's park), to convince residents and businesses to contribute to the integration of the homeless locally, in exchange for City support and investment. The project went far, but was stalled ultimately.

Matt's intervention – becoming an advocate for the homeless

Matt put most of his efforts into building support in the Norwood community, in a context of vocal discontent and opposition to the JPC project and the idea of densification in the first place. Playing on the fragmentation of the state, he embodied the 'good cop' from the JDA in contrast to JPC's contentious social housing project, successfully separating platforms of engagement: 'the City is diverse, I am here to engage about your high street regeneration, do you wish to talk about that?' Not necessarily as a cynical intention, but as a definite effect, Matt was able to build a constructive relationship between Norwood's residents and businesses, and the City, from which he was able, incrementally, to bring into the debate a better understanding of the benefit of densification and integration. He likes to tell the story, heard in a public meeting, of the diverse profiles of people needing affordable accommodation in the area: a single Jewish mother, a trendy young gay couple, a cashier working in a local shop and a waiter in a local restaurant, reminding us of Krumholz and Clavel's stories of planners' strategies to demystify social housing in conservative American neighbourhoods (1994).

These public meetings did not succeed immediately though. Matt had to first engage with each stakeholder group and key local figures,

hear their concerns and get to know them (their interests and characters). An example of this was the Business Forum's leader who supported a homeless person sitting on his business' doorstep by putting him through rehabilitation, providing him with accommodation and a job in security in the area. This businessman was not translating his practice into any general discourse on homelessness. Matt's initiative allowed this translation to occur to a certain extent. Another element in Matt's approach was to reason concretely and pragmatically, rather than starting with normative discourses on integration and social mix: 'the street is not managed, the City does not have the resources, the homeless are not going to go away. Why not set up a management mechanism?' Another tactic was to use as a bargaining tool public funding (investment in the park revamp and high street regeneration) and resources (the possibility of establishing paid parking on the street, and delegate the fee collection to a local community body). But he maintained a strong line – public resources could be invested only if some public good would result, contributing to uplifting the poor in the area: the homeless people.

This pragmatic discourse (realistic management and bargaining) was held with multiple stakeholders and in a number of fragmented community forums. Then the issue was to try and overcome local fragmentation, between the residents' association on the one hand (focusing on the park, already raising funds to pay for a gardener, since municipal management was insufficient), and the business forum on the other (interested in the high street where businesses are concentrated). Matt attempted to construct a sustainable instrument for community-led public space management, inspired by his experience with City Improvement Districts in the Central Johannesburg Partnership. His key idea was to negotiate the delegation to a community body of parking fee collection in the high street (a form of privatisation), which would provide the revenue for the community body to hire cleaners and security and contribute to the management of a homeless shelter.<sup>4</sup>

Simultaneously, Matt multiplied initiatives to try and make the plan real. He started connecting with churches, NGOs and advocacy groups engaging with the homeless; commissioned research on existing local support structures (a dense but uncoordinated network of local churches: [Laures 2017](#)) that could potentially run the homeless shelter. He identified a potential building, together with an official from the Department of Social Development. He gained the institutional support of the City's Planning Department that informally committed funding to the initiative, not initially ear-marked since Norwood was outside the Corridor's official boundary. This was sufficient to both revamp the park and purchase and

regenerate the shelter. This was the 'carrot' proposed to Norwood's residents, presented as two intertwined, and not to be separated, budgets. Matt also worked on convincing his own hierarchy in JDA (beyond his unit), of the potentialities of the project, by inviting his hierarchy in public meetings where he presented the park revamp-cum-homeless shelter project to the residents.

Interestingly enough, Matt was not initially the champion of the homeless. Although sensitive to inequality and a supporter of micro-entrepreneurship as a way out of poverty, his awareness grew incrementally, one crystallising moment being a Wits report on the Corridor of Freedom. The report had been contracted by the City explicitly to support the Planning Department in running the Corridor Project (Harrison et al. 2019). The report expressed robust criticism of the exclusionary effects of the Corridor's interventions ('you are actually chasing the poor out of the suburbs'), especially around the Louis Botha Corridor (Applebaum 2017). This was not only a critical moment for Matt; it was also a moment of shock for the Planning Department, partly explaining its later backing of Matt's project around the shelter in Norwood.

However, at the last minute, the project collapsed. It did so in the conjunction with three elements. When the project was about to take off, the Department of Social Development (under-resourced and understaffed: hence Matt's imagined NGO structure, paid by parking fees, to manage the shelter) refused to sign support for the City's investment in the shelter and purchase of the building. The official who Matt had worked with had not done his internal work, and Matt had not followed protocol in engaging the Department of Social Development's hierarchy early and formally enough. This blocked the project. Secondly, with the change of leadership in the City and DA Mayor Herman Mashaba elected, the Corridor of Freedom project was marginalised and underwent drastic budget cuts. The funds earmarked by the Planning Department for the Norwood shelter were redeployed by the JDA to cover its committed projects. No one in the JDA's executive defended the project nor considered the funding to be 'committed' in Norwood, in spite of two years of intense community engagement driven by Matt. The JDA's withdrawal echoed and amplified some of the comments his intervention had attracted earlier from the JDA executive: 'spending public funding for a bunch of White privileged residents is not [politically] sustainable'. Matt took it as a strong personal setback, a betrayal by his institution, and a lack of recognition of his action – in the (White) suburbs indeed, but towards the crucial inclusion of the (Black) poor in these suburbs.

## What Matt's story tells us about institutional activism

The process required a set of specific skills: strategic facilitation, advocacy, leadership and mobilisation, together with the local (fragmented) community and with the City's internal apparatus (legislations, departmental protocols and egos, political rhetoric). Matt spent most of his time on the former (engaging in external politics), and possibly not enough on the latter (building internal support).

The joint management instrument Matt attempted at building (community-led management of public space; raising parking fees as income; contributing to an NGO running the homeless shelter; possible employment of homeless people for the cleaning and monitoring of the street) is a sophisticated and complex one. It reveals the absence, or under-capacity, of the City departments in urban management (in charge with the streets), city parks, and social development (in charge of homeless shelters). It does mobilise additional resources (a local tax on parking, residents and business's time to collect, manage and coordinate the revenue), using a model similar to the City Improvement District, but tailored locally and with strong and explicit social objectives. This is a way of responding to scarce public resources, to create a social service contributing to the public realm: the usual discard of City Improvement Districts as neoliberal tools might not be relevant here (Joshi and Moore 2004). Its complexity and the difficulty in formalising it might make it a fragile instrument (Ferguson 2010), difficult to sustain over time, far more than it would be for functional state departments. It is also more complex than straightforward privatisation, with limited strings attached and a simple exchange, service against public payment (Stone 2006). But it is certainly an innovative way to produce a managed and not (too) exclusive public realm that should be recognised as such.

The ultimate failure, and the lack of institutional and political backing of Matt's intervention, casts a light on dominant representations of citizenship, participation, poverty and race – not only in Johannesburg as an emblematic post-apartheid city, but also in the global contemporary city. The reluctance to engage with White urban citizens and their suburbs as a legitimate part of the urban fabric ('why are you spending all your time convincing these rich White guys?') is partly a legitimate concern given the scarcity of public resources. But how to address the structure of inequalities without also changing 'the rich?'<sup>5</sup> This reluctance reveals the invisibility of suburban poverty (Charlton, Chapter 10 in this book) – as illustrated by Matt's failed attempt to



convince the ANC and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF),<sup>6</sup> consolidating a pro-poor discourse especially under DA rule, that it was a cause worth supporting.<sup>7</sup> By not constructing politically the social acceptability of the poor in middle-class suburbs, and their material access to these spaces, however, the battle against urban inequality and segregation remains limited. This simplistic reading of space in static racial terms, in fighting around transportation across urban areas identified as ‘White’, is not unique to Johannesburg: complex mobility patterns do not translate well into (clear-cut) political discourses. Matt’s action has prepared the ground for legitimising a place for the (Black) homeless and the poor, for shelter and affordable housing, in a suburb that was up in arms against it. While some might say it is a huge amount of energy spent for a small result, it might be crucial to shift public discourses and dominant representations around the ‘inclusive city’ and the place of the poor in middle-class suburbs.

## **Story 2: moving institutions to render community engagement relevant in City Parks**

The main character

Ayanda Roji has been the General Manager of the Corporate Research, Policy and Knowledge Management unit in Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ, hereafter City Parks) since 2013. The JCPZ is a municipal-owned entity in charge of green open spaces in Johannesburg. Ayanda was raised in a family involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and in the ANC and she defines herself as a pan-Africanist and a feminist. She is committed to having parks recognised as public spaces which also need to cater for the poorer and more marginalised residents – recognition for which she uses research partnerships (the core of her official mandate) to both deconstruct dominant representations of what a park is (focused on issues of biodiversity, City Parks being conceived as a ‘grass-cutting’ department), and seek alternative ways in which parks could be developed and managed. Her specific goal narrated below was to transform City Parks’ internal structure, to enable it to more meaningfully engage with user communities, make parks more responsive to a diversity of needs, particularly in the decayed Johannesburg inner city where homelessness and informal activities in parks are constantly criminalised.

## The context: recognising parks as social objects

Since 2013, City Parks has claimed its intention to better engage with what it calls ‘stakeholders’, with a dedicated stakeholders engagement department, but also a number of programmes for environmental education (directed towards disadvantaged schools), job creation in parks through contracts to emerging small Black companies, and strategic efforts to better frame joint management of parks with local user groups. The framing of such engagement can be seen as neoliberal, responding to City Parks’ chronic under-funding and obvious inability to manage Johannesburg’s own 2,000 green open spaces. Yet City Parks is also marked by a sense of its transformative mandate in post-apartheid Johannesburg, where access to green space has been a privilege of the White and the rich, and the spatial distribution of parks is biased towards the northern suburbs (previously the White only spaces), ‘leafy suburbs’ contrasting with the ‘dusty townships’ (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018b). In a post-apartheid and racialised context, City Parks is more than elsewhere aware of the dangers of privatisation, and attempting to assert its mandate even when it delegates most of the daily management of the park: opening a space for possible, actual co-production.

What is missing, however, for such co-production, is a set of dedicated and resourced City Parks officials to regularly meet with existing user groups (in the suburbs), and to consolidate user groups in the more disadvantaged urban spaces – in townships where open spaces were not developed parks for a long time,<sup>8</sup> or in the inner city where urban decay, impoverishment combined with lack of park management have made them risk-prone areas. In theory, (and as stated in the organogram), it is the Stakeholders Liaison Officers (SLOs) who are in charge with engaging with communities in parks (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018b). However, there are only four of them for the entire metropolitan area and they are unable to regularly engage with the park user groups (whose list they do not even have), let alone encourage the creation of new ones. Some of these officials have political and community facilitation skills, but cannot exert it properly. Most have given up and invest little in their practice, seeing communities as a nuisance. It is park managers, who are actually ‘on the ground’ on a regular basis, who end up playing the role of interface between users and the state. Trained as horticulturists, their mandate is to make sure grass is cut and trees are pruned and park equipment is maintained. But some have developed *ad hoc* community engagement skills, as social issues are central in their ability to fulfill their restricted mandate.<sup>9</sup> However, they too are too few to engage regularly with user

groups. For the inner city, there is one single park manager, with 58 inner city parks under his responsibility. Some of these parks are tiny playgrounds; other are regional parks. All are characterised by heavy and complex social issues, reflecting their difficult urban environment marked by poverty, informality, lack of public space, homelessness, and substance abuse, violent crime and insecurity. Beyond their number which is too low (but still higher than the number of SLOs, and capacitates them to have a degree of knowledge of each park and some of their users), park managers are not mandated to engage with users nor facilitate continued engagements or partnerships. But they have been identified, both by research and some officials in City Parks, as the best placed to do so.

### Ayanda's intervention: institutionalising community participation in park management

Ayanda's objective is to have parks recognised as public spaces, and to encourage community and user participation in park management. The concrete instrument to do so is an institutional restructuring of City Parks, that redefine park managers' mandate (and training, status, salaries) to include community engagement, that some of them already do in practice. The definition and advancement of this vision involved several steps.

First, Ayanda initiated a research partnership with Wits School of Planning and Architecture to conduct research on park management and community participation. Wits' case studies, initially grounded in middle-class White suburbs, were not necessarily audible in the Johannesburg political context, as illustrated in Matt's story. But these case studies allowed for the identification of the structural powerlessness of park managers facing the (legitimate) discontent of (structurally) powerful user groups. The research highlighted the importance for City Parks transformation objectives to not simply delegate park management to private and privileged groups but to be in a position to facilitate the joint management of parks. It showed the key difference a strategic and skilled park manager can make, and the institutional and structural limitation of partnerships in the absence of a mandated and resourced park representative (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018a).

Ayanda started a pilot project in an inner-city park (End Street North), in partnership with the JDA and City Safety – through a network based on three powerful and committed female officials driving the project together, resourced by external institutions (UN Habitat, GIZ, and a local NGO facilitating community meetings). The pilot showed the

benefits of community engagement for local problem solving. The residents, for instance, succeeded in lobbying the Johannesburg Roads Agency (JRA) to build a speed hump in the street bordering the park that had been identified as a major security issue for the park, but on which City Park had no mandate and no capacity to act (Mogkere 2018). Once aware of how the City worked and that the JRA was the agency in charge of roads and streets, residents organised a sit-in at the JRA, and lobbied the JRA through street politics, in ways that City Parks had been unable to do through internal bargaining. But the pilot also illustrated the unsustainability of community mobilisation without a dedicated facilitator. When the pilot ended, the engagement collapsed, and it was unreasonable to expect a community champion to emerge and sustain action, especially in impoverished and fragmented inner-city communities. Reporting on the pilot thus became strategic in Ayanda's attempt to change institutions and practices, not only to demonstrate the value of community engagement, but also to call for dedicated and grounded officials facilitating it.

Backed by this pilot and the research, Ayanda and her City partners developed an inner city open space safety strategy (JCPZ 2017). This tapped into the mayor's interest for regenerating the inner city, and a political context possibly opening a space for institutional change, where the mayor had been critical of his predecessors' externalisation of municipal entities (for example, City Parks, the JDA, etc), calling for their reintegration into the City administration. The strategy emphasises the need for resourcing City Park in the inner city; for clustered park management; for empowered and resourced park managers for these clusters. It constructs parks as social objects, whose value is not only measured in terms of biodiversity but also in terms of 'social cohesion'.

To have this strategy adopted and become a City official document, the path was not obvious. As a strategy that cuts across departments and entities, it was to be reported to several departments and their political heads. The JDA was responding to the Department of Development Planning, JCPZ was reporting to City Community Development and City Safety Department was a third department. As a document concerning the inner city, it also needed to go through the Inner-City Office, another City unit. This proliferation of authorities diluted the protocol and perhaps opened up a space for advocacy, instead of trying to first have the strategy approved by City Parks itself. As a matter of fact, convincing City Parks' executive came very late in the process, as its leadership was uncertain, changing, and not likely to be sympathetic to the document unless it had strong political backing.

A chance encounter of the political head of the Department of Development Planning, who was also chairing the Inner-City office, meant that Ayanda was invited to present the strategy to the Mayor directly. In the meeting, he showed interest for the strategy, thanks to Ayanda's charisma, drive and strategic thinking, even committing to allocate significant resources. Instead of R900,000 per annum for managing the 58 inner-city parks, Ayanda advocated for R900,000 per month, and this was heard.

Through Ayanda's position as organiser of public events around parks, she was in a position to meet and gain the trust of the political head of the Department of Community Development (to which City Parks is accountable administratively). However, this strategy still needed to be formally adopted by the Community Development Section 79 Committee, the group of elected councillors (from different political parties) appointed to that portfolio in an oversight capacity. Not only was Ayanda not well prepared by her own institution (which did not disclose to her what the presentation she had to make to the committee was about), but the whole committee rejected her report with derogatory comments. Ayanda learnt later on that the committee had decided to reject all reports submitted to its oversight, as a way to challenge the political head who was not taking the committee seriously. Her choice not to follow protocol and start from gaining mayoral support might have backlashed, but she did not have a real choice: following protocol by obtaining endorsement first from City Parks, then the Community Development Committee, then mayoral level, given these institutions' petty politics, rivalries and lack of strategic visioning, would have killed the project from the start.

Building support from within the institution, but from below City Parks executive (seen as a likely stumbling block), was equally crucial, especially with park and regional managers with whom Ayanda has a good working relation. At the time of writing, she was starting to debate ideas about institutional restructuring through research dissemination workshops and weekly regional managers' meetings. From the research workshop debates I was part of, many stakes were at play. It was about redefining overlapping functions, as the new function of park managers would compete with the role of SLOs. It was about redistributing resources (new park managers would need a status and salary upgrade, besides higher numbers). Would resources come from a higher subsidy from the City, or the internal reshuffling of an institution whose top is too heavy? And it was also about defining City Parks' mandate, where some officials sympathised with informal and poor users of the parks, while others saw their role in protecting biodiversity and classic uses of the park, even if it meant allying with conservative users in chasing away

people defined as ‘undesirable’. From these internal debates at the middle range managerial level, Ayanda then hoped to have the strategy adopted by the City Parks’ board (an array of business people and civil society representatives whose mandate is to guide the municipal entity) – and from then only lobby the city Section 79 Committee and City Parks’ management to have the strategy adopted, budgeted and implemented.

What Ayanda’s story teaches us about institutional activism

What does this story show us about the interplay between agency and structure? Ayanda’s drive and goal were crucial, her frustration with existing practices, institutions and policies, and her desire for change. But she also did not set her action in opposition to existing directions, rather opening, actually shaping a space of opportunity using the gaps she could identify. This relates to Dahl’s vision of leadership as resource creators (1961), and Krumholz and Clavel’s illustration of how the bringing together of various limited networks and resources can end up causing significant shifts (1994). Ayanda used her seemingly innocuous research and knowledge management position to try and reform institutions and practices. The pilot in End Street North, catalysing partnerships (with funders, internal city allies and a web of researchers and NGOs), provided the project with funding, legitimacy, and knowledge, each dimension reinforcing the other. It was ultimately translated into a political instrument (the strategy document, as well as the narrative around the pilot as a marketing tool). This pilot crystallised cooperation across City departments, escaping City Parks’ narrow identity, leadership and mandate (marked by the perennial battle between environmentalist and socially-oriented officials). It demonstrated in practice that parks are not only about grass cutting; strategically choosing the inner city (of high strategic stakes for the mayor) to make the point to him, and reaching out to get his support. Not that all of this was planned in advance. Some of it is luck, some of it is personal charisma and networking skills, and some of it is just the effect of bringing resources together at the right time.

Ayanda’s actions show in retrospect what the City’s spaces of opportunity are, and how to bring them together to create potential change – agency informs about structures, testing their boundaries and learning, by trial and error, how to navigate them. Three structural elements assisted in opening such a space. First, City Parks’ acute need for partnerships and community engagement, as it has no actual capacity to manage parks on its own in post-apartheid Johannesburg. This instrumental quest for community engagement arguably opens a space

for negotiation between state and society. Secondly, street-level officials (park and regional managers) have a practical understanding of parks as social objects, requiring multi-departmental and stakeholders' intervention. City Parks did offer space for them to voice their challenges, as their daily task is to manage scorecards and scarce personnel, rather than think strategically. But, as City parks is under the threat of institutional restructuring, possible re-integration in the City, and undergoes changes in its executive leadership, a space opens where conversations are potentially impactful. For an activist in the state, it is a moment to build on the gap, use a space to consolidate these voices, and create support from the bottom for an institutional change that reflects her vision. Thirdly, the mayor has clearly indicated his commitment to regenerate the inner city, to invest and attract investors, to fight crime and grime. His vision is not particularly a socially-inclusive one; but bringing forth a new strategy for the inner city, framed in the language of increased safety and efficient urban management, could have been a winning gamble.

Identifying and building a network of fellow activists in various parts of the local state and outside the state was equally crucial to find the confidence and resources to drive the pilot and transform it into a legitimate and credible policy document proposal (the safety strategy). This network, however, was not a given: the collective was constructed through the project, and one of the officials involved, initially reluctant to move beyond a legalistic approach, shifted to a more socially-oriented one.

Ayanda multiplied arenas of mobilisation. She did not, as Matt did, rely on social mobilisation and external constituency. There are indeed no social movements focusing on parks and public spaces in Johannesburg. The voices of civil society around parks are muted in the inner city, disconnected in the townships (parks are not a key area of mobilisation), and delegitimised in the suburbs (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018b). Ayanda and some other officials contemplated mobilising the latter – and thought of using the Centre for Urbanism and the Built Environment Studies (CUBES) research and facilitation to launch a forum of park user groups (that would have been dominated by suburban White middle classes) in which to start engagement. Although possibly talking to DA constituencies, such engagement was not politically correct, and could have easily backlashed, as it was also a difficult engagement: City Parks could have been under attack by this group rather than being supported in its reform agenda.

Therefore, Ayanda focused on navigating the inner complexities of local government apparatus. Seizing an opportunity, she sidelined protocol to make things move by achieving support from the top. In a context of lukewarm support from City Parks' leadership, the backing of the mayor

was in retrospect the only way to effect change. But her navigation of protocol is not only through sidelining obstacles by running to the top. It is also about informally discussing issues with leadership, coining the right terms that can be heard by each; doing the round of involved stakeholders; using different strategies to respond to challenges tackled one after the other in an unconventional order (political head of of the Department of Development Planning and Inner-City Office, then the mayor, then the political head of the Department of Community Development, then the City Parks' Board to move back to the City Parks' executive, her direct hierarchy). Her other concomitant tactic is equally crucial. This involved building bottom-up support within the institution, opening a space for awareness and mobilisation of park and regional managers, low- to middle-rank officials, including SLOs, whose position might be threatened by such a shift, so that the idea of the reform penetrates the thickness of the apparatus rather than being a policy veneer, easy to wash away if it is not known, understood and supported by the core City Parks' bureaucracy.

### **Story 3: going beyond community meetings: the hard work of circulating claims and building policy instruments through the internal intricacies of the state**

#### Main character

Nicolette (Nikki) Pingo, like Matt Jackson, is an official in the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA)'s Development Facilitation Unit (DFU). Prior to joining the City in 2015, she worked with an NGO committed to community participation, after having been trained in educational applied drama – street theatre and development planning at the University of the Witwatersrand. One of her first tasks in her position at the DFU was to create a five-year strategic plan – Urban Development Framework (UDF) – for the eastern section of the inner city (the Eastern Gateway), comprising low-income residential, derelict and squatted industrial areas, migrant hostels, and pockets of rapid gentrification. In this endeavour, Nicolette was part of several community meetings in the area to discuss the plan. She was struck by the urgent claim for affordable and decent housing which is something that the UDF generally does not deal with, and is neither the mandate of the JDA, nor directly the competency of the Department of Planning for whom the JDA was developing the plan. Nicolette endeavoured to construct a set of policy instruments to address that need.



## Nikki's action – taking the public production of inner-city affordable housing seriously

She first developed the housing component of the UDF, in more detail than usually done for this type of planning instrument. Rather than stating broad intentions ('there is a need for affordable housing in the sector'), she included maps identifying sites where affordable housing could be developed locally, indicating densities and number of units that could be developed for each. She admits having made a mistake there: she prioritised state-owned sites (including City-owned ones), assuming that these would be easier to access for affordable housing development. However, she soon realised that the reverse was true: privately-owned land was in fact far easier to access (and not expensive given the area's urban decay), while discussion with other branches of the state, and even with the agency holding the City's land asset, the Johannesburg Property Company (JPC), reached a dead end.

Nikki then initiated networks with social housing and state institutions, to devise funding mechanisms to construct affordable housing; identifying private buildings that could be purchased and redeveloped as social housing in the Eastern Gateway. In particular, a partnership with the Social Housing Regulatory Agency (SHRA) at national level, seemed to be yielding results: budget was set aside, a number of private buildings were identified, social housing institutions were approached that could be given the grant and develop and manage affordable housing on this basis.

As a JDA official working on the inner city, Nikki was, together with other activists in the state and former fellow students from Wits Planning School, part of a policy process on housing, the Inner City Housing Implementation Plan (ICHIP) – developed in response to a number of Constitutional Court judgements.<sup>10</sup> There, she developed several types of affordable housing provision programmes she had started imagining with potential partners in the making of the Eastern Gateway UDF that would be piloted in the Eastern Gateway, based on the UDF she had constructed. An office was to be created by the JDA to drive the implementation of the plan which would of course assist in piloting the projects in the area as well as consolidate the policy itself.

However, no affordable housing intervention had taken place three years after the UDF was completed, and a number of initiatives did not materialise. The CEO of the JDA, initially supportive of the JDA taking charge of the implementation of ICHIP (in collaboration with the Johannesburg Housing Department), changed his views on the matter

after an ANC caucus. Nicolette explains that this change occurred because he thought the plan was too complex to be implemented and would lead the JDA to failure; or because he was told to leave ICHIP to the (notoriously inefficient and possibly corrupt) Housing Department. Its management, with attributions of tenders and inner-city buildings to be redeveloped, was seen as being too strategic an instrument to be left to the JDA. The JDA then lost its ability to drive the plan's implementation. The ICHIP was ultimately passed in Council with great difficulty, having been deprived of many of its core elements, and seems today to be put aside, and considered 'too complex to implement' by the Housing Department.

Many local initiatives that Nikki had identified, with funding and institutions to develop and manage affordable housing, are stuck because of one stumbling block – the purchase of urban land. The institution officially in charge of purchasing urban land for the City, the JPC, is structurally driven by the need to raise revenue, and not easily convinced to purchase or sell land for (unprofitable) affordable housing. The high financial stakes (and possibly some kickbacks attached to transactions) on urban land, and the multiplicity of fragmented state agencies involved in the process (the JDA developing projects and land for City departments, working mostly with the City's Planning Department, Housing Department; and the JPC, another municipal agency) render interventions complicated.

Finally, the newly elected mayor, the DA Herman Mashaba, has limited sympathy or enthusiasm for the development of affordable housing in the inner city, rather focusing on attracting private developers with no strings attached. Out of 13 existing buildings that the JDA had identified to be transferred to social housing institutions in the Eastern Gateway, most have now been sold to the private sector for 'redevelopment' by the Department of Housing, under direct instruction from the mayor and in contradiction with prior discussions with the JDA.

Reflecting on the disappointing results of her three years of efforts, Nicolette wonders if she was not wrong to 'put all her eggs in the same basket', namely the development of affordable housing in the eastern section of the inner city. She felt very close to a breakthrough, but the space for pushing affordable housing in the inner city closed down under the new mayor. She is now considering working less with other City agencies or departments, using the JDA's degree of autonomy to work on smaller-scale projects, and possibly in more peripheral parts of the city, attracting less attention from private developers and the other City departments.

## What Nicolette's story tells us about institutional activism

There is something risky, but simultaneously necessary, in 'putting one's eggs in the same baskets' as an activist – it is about focus, grounded knowledge and cumulative engagements that multiplies areas of opportunities. In the process of engaging around the UDF, Nicolette did not only hear the local needs (for affordable housing in particular), she also identified local resources, partners and opportunities, as well as the gap in policy instruments. She was able to scale up, from understanding the nature of local needs, towards pushing the boundaries of the usual local planning tools (the UDF), to making inputs into a municipal policy process (ICHIP), that it seemed the JDA could pilot in the very same area. This straddling of multiple scales of intervention, construction of networks within the City and outside (with housing associations and central housing institutions), open spaces to imagine and to craft new instruments for intervention.

To some extent this seemed to work under the previous mayor. But with a change of leadership and party in power, this direction no longer works with the grain, and the magnitude of the policy instrument innovation cannot hold without political backing, let alone if it is in opposition to political leadership. The urban land question is possibly the most relevant and powerful tool for redistribution in the city – yet it has not, even under ANC leadership, been attributed to an institution with a clear redistribution mandate. Instead, it is fragmented, between the JPC (the only agency entitled to purchase and keep land in the name of the City but works on a revenue-raising model that is not questioned); the notoriously inefficient Housing Department, whose leadership is perpetually contested and possibly corrupted; the Department of Economic Development which is in charge of specific programmes using inner-city buildings as an asset to kick-start Black economic empowerment,<sup>11</sup> and marginally, the more progressive department which may be able to play on zoning regulations but has limited say on these matters. This fragmentation contributes to opacifying political stakes, and to blocking attempts at reforming or challenging the inner-city growth machine. Here the agency of individual officials cannot do much, especially in the absence of either a vocal constituency (such as an inner-city wide social movement), or strong political backing. In this context, the strategy of the activist in the state is shifting towards keeping a low profile and becoming rather a 'resistant' in the state – another, different, form of activism.

## Concluding remarks

The commonality between these cases is first that each of these state activists has had to straddle three fields of mobilisation: the City administration itself (and its hierarchical but also fragmented institutions), City political leadership (where political support is key), and civil society. Three interconnected fields, where political backing could help overcome administrative resistance, civil society pressure could convince politicians of policy gains, administrative support could multiply the chances of legitimisation and feasibility. Each of the three activists has worked out a different balance between these three fields (administrative, political and social), through a process of trial and error. Matt has overinvested the mobilisation of civil society, at the expense of consolidating administrative and political support. Ayanda and Nicolette were focused on internal mobilisation with higher-level political investment for Ayanda, using her ANC networks and managerial position; and a deeper local grounding of Nicolette engaged in participatory planning processes. Such choices depend on personalities, skills and preexisting dispositions. It also depends on position within the bureaucracy (a higher position opening up the field of political leadership). One might hypothesise that it also depends on the costs of building and sustaining social mobilisation that does not exist (absence of an inner-city tenant's constituency), or that is ambiguous in its political effects – White suburban middle class engaged around parks turned out to be a politically complicated ally in a post-apartheid era.

A second commonality was a strong focus on building policy instruments as key to achieving change. In all three cases, this was about building a set of instruments (not just one), to ensure budgeting, implementation, follow up and deep institutionalisation: that is, the meaning of 'all eggs in the same basket':

- For Nicolette, this meant stretching the UDF planning tool to incorporate housing; identifying land and buildings, budget and financial strategy and the construction of the ICHIP policy and its implementation.
- For Matt, this meant the Norwood Park and High Street revitalisation plan, budgeting, identification of buildings and the construction of a management vehicle.
- For Ayanda, this meant building strategic research partnerships as a tool to foster debate within City Parks' administration; starting a pilot project in an inner city park; developing a strategic document and lobbying for budget and institutional restructuring to make it work.

The activists' efforts could not be targeted at crafting policy documents only and their main battles were actually around the City's fragmented institutions and their rivalry on roles and functions.

A third commonality is the relative failure of these initiatives, the fragility of these strategies, and time running short in unstable social and political environments. In this respect, one may contrast Matt's short-term mandate as a City official (within the frame of a quite specific and bounded project), with Ayanda and Nicolette's longer standing in administration, allowing a better reach and understanding of the internal administrative and political logics of the state. Nevertheless, it is important to say that they all undertook their jobs with incredible intensity and an often-felt feeling of being burnt-out, especially in the face of the many battles that were lost in a continued drive towards achieving their progressive objective. We may remind ourselves that policy reform has always been a long-term battle (Domhoff 2011; Giugni 1998), and in this respect, building external constituencies may be key in providing a buffer to these unstable politics, reminding politicians of pressing urban agendas. But building civil society mobilisation is too big a task for officials, and a serious limit to their action might be linked to the thinness of their collective networks outside the state.

Finally, what do the stories of these activists reveal about the role of the state in governing cities? Their practices reveal 'the state's' high level of fragmentation, even at the City's internal level. This is sometimes an opportunity (if one has an overview and can play one to sideline another, as was partly the case for Ayanda), but more often a challenge in the capacity to act (Matt's and Nicolette's final disappointment in these institutional battles). The permanence of strong land-based elite interests in the city blocking progressive change, together with mayoral and strategic departments that have remained market-oriented (Department of Economic Development and the JPC), severely restricts progressive action and reveals the limits of the post-apartheid transformative discourse. For activists in City Hall, this might mean resorting to more covert, modest and discrete interventions from within the state – finding solace in the fact that change takes time and holding an official's position might expose them to future opportunities. Or it might mean driving change from outside the state as the brief, post-apartheid window of opportunity for change seems to be closing.

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## Notes

- 1 The main opposition party to the ANC.
- 2 Corridors of Freedom is a transit-oriented development project, aiming at interconnecting different areas of the sprawling city through bus rapid transit, and densifying the urban fabric (Harrison et al. 2019).
- 3 The JDA is the development arm of the city, works closely with the Department of Development Planning, peopled by activists with a strong sense of the urgency of post-apartheid transformation of the city (Rubin, Chapter 4, this book).
- 4 The formalisation of the agreement in legal terms, the negotiation around the creation of parking fees on the street and the delegation of their collection to a community body were, however, left pending – they were in process when Matt’s project collapsed.
- 5 Using broad-brushed categories, Norwood can be defined as middle class, not high bourgeoisie.
- 6 The ANC is the liberation party in power at national level since 1994, but starting to lose the main metropolitan municipalities (such as Johannesburg in 2017), to the DA, main opposition party (liberal). The EFF, a splinter group from the ANC, led by a charismatic leader, professes radical positions in terms of Black economic empowerment and land redistribution.
- 7 One could have expected the DA to protect the middle-class residents of Norwood as their core constituency, but the discard of the Corridors of Freedom by the new (DA) mayor was not conducive to it.
- 8 They are often wetlands with a mix of informal uses (cattle grazing, car washing, religious worshipping, criminal activities, dumping zones, informal settlements) occasionally leisure activities in a green open environment.
- 9 How to have grass cut, if the park has developed into a dumping zone, or has become home to the homeless? Beyond blaming and evicting, some park managers have adopted a pragmatic and social approach to what they understand as a structural issue one cannot find a quick fix for (Bénil-Gbaffou 2018b).
- 10 See Rubin’s Chapter 4 and Klug’s Chapter 8, this book.
- 11 Seeing the buildings’ asset value for Black private developers, rather than their use value for low-income (Black) residents.

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