**A walk to freedom: can Joburg's bridges heal the urban scars of apartheid? (Edited)**

Planned to segregate people by race, the city of Johannesburg now wants to physically connect rich and poor communities with a series of bridges and other projects – but can it solve the urban legacy of apartheid?

**Alice McCool,** Friday 16 December 2016 02.30 EST

“You just have to run,” says Nombulelo Motsei, grabbing my hand as we dash across a dual carriageway in Soweto, which even on a Sunday afternoon is terrifying. Klipspruit Valley Road, which connects Soweto highway and the N17 motorway, is better known to locals as “Killer Road”, and you can see why: there is no pedestrian crossing near us. “People often need to cross here, because on this side there’s a school and many properties, and on the other there’s the train station, police station and clinic,” says Motsei, a 28-year-old insurance company employee. Two weeks earlier, her neighbour Lesley Shopane, a 40-year-old carpenter, died while trying to cross to buy bread.

“I have to cross coming to work and going home,” says Muzi, who works in the petrol station. “It’s very dangerous, especially when it’s rush hour, or if we finish late and it’s dark.” His workmate, George, agrees: “We’ve seen very bad accidents. People die here, very painfully.”

Johannesburg was built to segregate people by race. The division was first laid out by the city’s gold mining belt, with black townships in the south and white neighbourhoods in the north. Black areas were then separated from other non-white areas, such as those inhabited by people of Indian descent. The final level of segregation kept apart different linguistic groups within black neighbourhoods, with the aim of reducing the risk of communities uniting against the regime. According to Thabang Sithole, an area planner at the council, this was specifically done with infrastructure, using “barriers like parks or huge vast lands that were vacant, so that the division was clear”.

For pedestrians in Johannesburg, that has meant harrowing, dangerous and expensive journeys to work – particularly in Soweto and other poorer neighbourhoods. Joburgers unable to afford a car or who live in areas where economic opportunities are scarce can spend up to [40% of their income on transport](http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/05/world/africa/commuting-africa/). But it has also meant a deeper “spatial legacy” of apartheid, with black and white neighbourhoods kept worlds apart, socially and economically.

Now, a new project called [Corridors of Freedom](http://www.corridorsoffreedom.co.za/) (CoF) hopes to change this. A transit-led initiative of Johannesburg city council, the idea is to combat this “spatial legacy” of apartheid [through urban planning](http://joburggis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapTour/index.html?appid=4951d51e5a5a432ba82b1aa33a80608f). The flagship project is to build pedestrian bridges across busy roads and railway lines, to connect once-segregated areas. One such “corridor” has already been completed in Soweto, an area that has been the focus of many development projects following the [Soweto uprising](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/16/my-activism-started-then-the-soweto-uprising-remembered), which marked its 40th anniversary this year. The bridge connects the historic neighbourhood of Naledi with Protea, a newer area that has become a popular place for young people to buy their first homes.

Are bridges like this solving the urban legacy of apartheid? Indeed, the bridges are opening up access to townships that were once cut off from the rest of the city. Residents are largely thankful for the jobs that follow – particularly people who remember what it was like before.

But the problems are entrenched. As poor Joburgers travel to provide labour to richer areas like Sandton, neighbourhoods such as Alex and Evaton retain their “dormitory town” status, starved of opportunities and services. Nor are the richer areas fully disposed to welcome their poorer cousins.

Deborah Mpanza, 28, grew up in the sought-after neighbourhood of Sandton. “We get called snobs, the black kids who want to be white,” she says. Her job in the entertainment industry, however, has led her to start visiting central Johannesburg regularly. It confuses and worries her Sandton friends and family. “When I started going I was uncomfortable, too,” she says. “I was judgemental. Poverty is a serious thing there. But after going a few times I started opening myself up.”

For Mpanza, the difference between communities is too profound for integration, not only in terms of wealth but “opposing social upbringings”. Michael Setumo, an electrician from poorer Alex, agrees. While he would like to live in Sandton, it would “never be possible” – not only due to the cost, but because “it’s not easy for people from Alex and Sandton to be together”. Lesiba, another Alex resident hanging out by the bridge, adds: “They don’t want us in Sandton. They prefer if we stay away. We just come here to work, because there is nothing in Alex.”

Certainly, crime in [South Africa](https://www.theguardian.com/world/southafrica), particularly in wealthy and white communities, is a huge concern, where heavy-duty gates and security systems are the norm. But would crime actually rise if communities were more mixed? “It’s hard to know because we don’t have a precedent in South [Africa](https://www.theguardian.com/world/africa) of this kind of living,” says Edgar Pieterse, a professor of urban policy and director of the African Centre for Cities. “What we do know is that if you design higher densities and a mixture of uses, linked to a commitment to enable pedestrianisation, then passive surveillance tend to reduce crime and create safer atmospheres.”

CoF is using spacial planning to undo the city’s apartheid legacy is by building social housing and mixed community spaces. In Soweto, the Jabulani social housing flats are located in a “cultural precinct” that the council has established in the hope of attracting tourists and people from other parts of the city. In addition to a police station, hospital and railway station, the area also has a theatre and a mall (an essential component of putting an area “on the map” in a South African city).

“I would like to say the area is developed. It has everything,” says Momo Dichaba, a tenant. Again, however, Johannesburg’s divisions are difficult to overcome: for many locals, even the subsidised rent is too high. “Rent here will take up most of your salary, and you must understand there is food, transport – and while your salary doesn’t go up, the rent keeps going up,” Dichaba says. The flats may look smart, but dissatisfaction regarding the price of utilities has led to some residents refusing to pay – and some evictions.

While the Corridors of Freedom project is not perfect, its spatial and transit-led approach is an encouraging experiment in solving the urban legacy of apartheid. But it is a psychological change among South Africans – rich and poor, black and white – that will be necessary for longer-term change. “For centuries black people have been oppressed, and white people have been oppressing, so we can’t possibly expect to reverse this in the 22 years since the end of apartheid,” Sithole says. “It’s going to take time. But we’re up for it.”