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## **Engaging Jeppe's urban potential through fashion and comics.**

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### **Abstract**

Jeppe in Johannesburg's downtown area is a dense area of retail trade run by pan-African immigrants, dominated by the Ethiopian diaspora. The area has an unprecedented dynamism and attracts hawkers and private customers from all over Southern Africa. The trade extends up to six floors into the city blocks and has transformed the city more comprehensively than formal initiatives and businesses. Our intention in documenting this trade and its spaces is to contest the lack of official recognition by the City of Johannesburg of the Jeppe area. Through mapping, image making and performative practice, we wanted to document the transformative capacity of its ambivalent spaces to allow for the choice of recognition to be considered.

Our mapping, which took place between July 2009 and the end of 2011 has revealed great spatial intelligence at work in Jeppe, minimizing spatial waste, combining resources supporting the processes around retail with small spaces and the micro-technés of the traders. Our two case studies here look first at the interrelationships between place and fashion in the area, through the competitive and creative practices by which traders and customers alike partake in acts of mutual transformation. In the second study, the genre of comics is used to create

new relationships between the researcher and the area's users and to access deep knowledge of the patterns of use across the area.

**Keywords:** Urban change, Johannesburg, action research.

Jeppe, otherwise Little Addis, is in Johannesburg's downtown area, six city blocks that have come to form the epicentre of retail trade in the region in the last five years. Cheap household goods and counterfeit designerwear from Asia is sold alongside curtains and pinafores sewn in the area, in deals involving Chinese businesspeople, Ethiopian and Eritrean forced migrants, Pakistani shop owners, Malawian tailors and South African hawkers. The area has a dynamism that is unprecedented in the city and maybe even on the African subcontinent. The ever-growing levels of trade extend laterally in the city and upwards and even right through the city blocks. The traders have arranged their own security company, and trolley pushers transport goods on demand. The economy of the area is large and cash-based, working with low margins and very high turnovers. While elsewhere in the city buildings stand empty or derelict, in Jeppe they are fully used and lively. In Chabal's words, Africa Works here (Chabal and Daloz, 1999).

Our interest as researchers in Jeppe has come about through an initial admiration with the traders who have managed to build a trading empire in barely a decade, and in the process rejuvenating the inner city, where formally planned renewals have had much less impact. For many traders, Jeppe is a short term, transit place, where they make money prior to emigration on to the West. Because their situation is so fluid, they suffer anxiety, but have also built a tight-knit, efficient and vigilant community, bent on short term economic success. On closer examination, their practices often combine extraordinary potential to transform lives and space, with extreme disregard for existing norms of order. Yet within these micro-practices there are highly effective ways of negotiating the contemporary world, that question current preconceptions of city building.

We wanted to disturb the 'politics of un-recognition' that has been practiced towards Jeppe by urban authorities. We intend to explore several actions to bring the area's "greyed" identity and practices to the light through the art and politics of recognition. Recognition would alter the tenuous stability of the existing situation. But within the range of choices in the area from eviction/leaving, to tolerance, to formalising/investment, there is also a possibility to acknowledge and stimulate the gestures that have created the current situation. The role of our research, through mapping, image making and performative practice, is to inform such a choice, by evoking the transformative capacity of its ambivalent spaces.

Our mapping, which took place between July 2009 and the end of 2011 has revealed great spatial intelligence at work in Jeppe. The reuse of vacant buildings is done in a way that

minimizes spatial waste and combines the resources of many players. Its static spaces balance with fluid systems of distribution of goods, cash and people. Personal services are accessible at very close range. Voids are claimed and related back to the circulation pattern in the area, or used as supportive quiet spaces such as the many coffee shops. The open platforms of the buildings allow for surveillance and signage in the area, creating in turn ways of claiming and including public space in the web of trade. And everywhere, micro-technés including digital, mobile and wheeled systems proliferate to support the processes around retail.

This paper presents two of these studies of the micro-architecture of Jeppe that took place in the second half of 2011. The first looks at the interrelationships between place and fashion in the area, through the competitive and creative practices by which traders and customers alike partake in acts of mutual transformation. Styles are developed historically and today by black consumers and designers as something unique to Johannesburg and its retail spaces. To demonstrate this points, Nonthokozo followed their ways of walking and shopping in order to put together three outfits at good prices, and argues that is this form of mobile self-styling was promoted, middle class customers would patronize the area.

In the second study, Stephen used the genre of comics to create new relationships between the researcher and the area's users. In an area where direct interviews, and formal place names are hard to come by, he found that telling stories and reenacting situations by drawing them allowed him to access deep knowledge of the patterns of use across the area. The comics can be reinserted into the area to create a communication flow between groups.

## **Case study one: new city image**

### **Urban branding and city identity**

'Fashion, like architecture, is a key physical manifestation of culture. Both translate a dream into material form and offer that dream to people to clothe and represent their identity, by wearing the clothes fashion has produced, by occupying the buildings architecture has produced, we live that dream' (Franck and Lepori, 2000, p.95).

Over recent years Johannesburg has deployed numerous agencies and projects to initiate the wide-city development strategy, in attempt to socially and economically rejuvenate its inner city. The Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) has assumed a leading role in the implementation of these strategies. Projects such as the establishment of the Newtown precinct, the development of Constitutional Hill, the introduction of the Braamfontein corridor known as the cultural arc, the rejuvenation of Jeppestown station, Faraday precinct, Jewel city and finally the Fashion district in the eastern sector of the inner city, have all been part of the JDA's portfolio (JDA, 2012).



**Figure 1.** Aerial Map, Jeppes Street. Source: Authors.

The fashion district in particular was intended to be one of the more successful JDA projects to re-capture a vibrant portion of the inner city (JDA, 2004, p.5), with the goal of providing a wealth of opportunities for city rejuvenation. Incorporating 20 city blocks, the fashion district is confined within Kerk, End, Market and Von Welligh streets, with its central core around Polly, Troye, Pritchard and President Street” (Dawson and Davie, 2004; JDA, 2011). A small portion of former formal sector manufacturers and retail outlets are still present in the area, and with the attempted rejuvenation by the JDA, few newcomers have made their way back.

Just north of the district, boundary of Kerk Street, along Jeppe and Bree street exists is an area that this research refers to as "Jeppe".

Unlike its newly formalized and revamped neighbour (the fashion district), the Jeppe street region has undergone a rejuvenation process of its own kind. Dynamic and informal, this area seems to have successfully created an economically functional and sustainable network of fashion retail spaces that encompass the urban vibrancy that the formalised fashion district sought, but failed to execute.

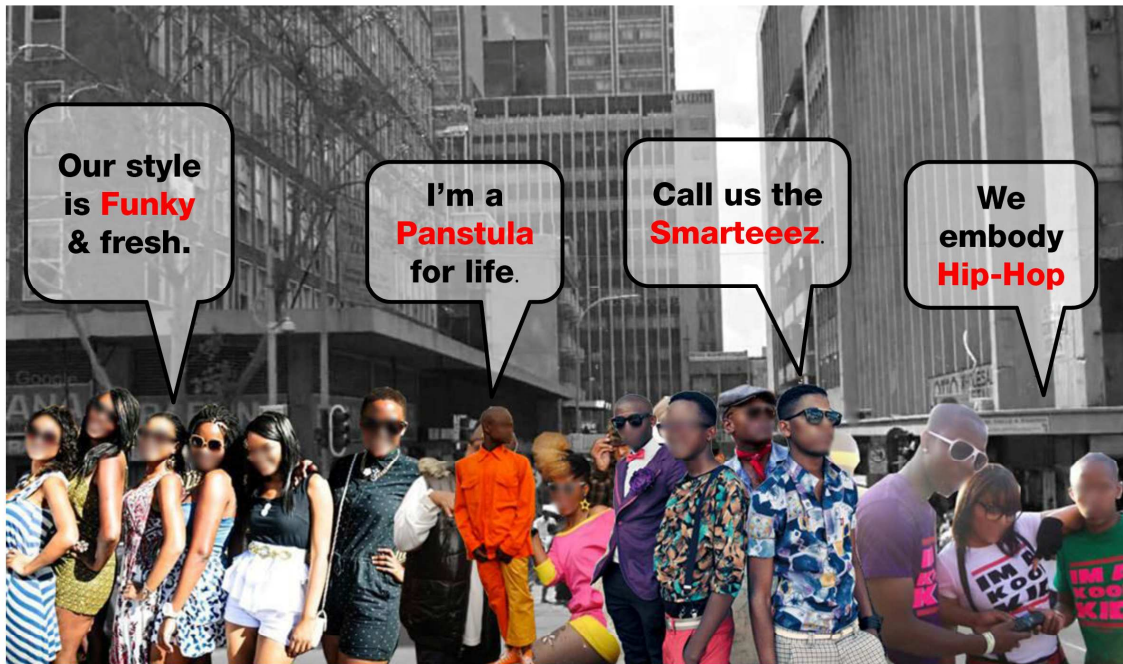
Although its poor inner city image still resonates, this area manages to creatively translate its dilapidated and neglected surroundings into a rich urban market tapestry. A constellation of previously vacant rundown buildings and neglected pavements have been re-activated into bustling, congested hub of linear retail streets and vertical malls, which extend up to five floors of shopping in renovated buildings like Delver Square and Africa and Joburg Mall. The pavements are no different as the more informal traders are aligned their steel cage retail stalls tightly up against the street edges, on pavement all around the blocks. Although lacking the secure attractive environment intended by the fashion district, Jeppe plays a critical economic role in the city.

### **Urban styles**

'Living in Johannesburg in the 80's, the urbanized African understood that fashion was not just about clothes. It was now a statement about identity, about society and about new found allegiances, they had made in the big city' (Drum, 2011).

As a youngster growing up, urban life styles and fashion styles such those of the 'Swenkas', 'maDzansansa's' and 'Pantsula's' were always a fascinating, yet foreign cultural phenomenon, that would be introduced by a relative or sibling who had moved or recently visited Johannesburg. Referred to as "oSwenka base Kliptown" which translates to "the trendy ones from Kliptown" these guys were regarded as fashion icons in the more rurally inclined townships of Northern Zululand. The reputation of Sophia town and Kliptown gangsta's fashion trends far preceded them, and for any new "Jozi-bela" (Jo'burg inhabitant), adopting a hip urban style earned you a lot of 'Street cred'.





There are many fashion trends that have captivated the Johannesburg urban youth. The inner city retail market seem to cater for the funky fresh dressers, the Pantsula's, the Smarteeez and probably largely for the Hip-hop fashion markets.

**Figure 2.** The styles in the city. Source: Authors.

As examples of these urban African identities, Figure 2 shows three contemporary clothing styles sourced in the city: Pantsula's, Hip Hop and Smarteeez. Proudly South African, Pantsula style is a style of dress or rather "an urban lifestyle" taken from the 60's and 70's associated with gangsters (Fourie, 2005, p.1). "This dress sense went on to inspire an urban South African form of dancing and dressing in the 80's and 90's that incorporates colorful shirts, Dickies trousers, a cloth hat and Converse All Star sneakers" (ibid). Street threads and floppy Kangol hats worn with a new attitude, whilst displaying savvy fancy footwork when dancing or even just walking down the street are what separate Pantsula's from the rest. For young urban blacks, American fashion brands such as Dickies, All-star and recently several local designers like Soweto born Wandie of "Loxion kulcha" have seen the huge opening in the local market for a brand that caters for this uniquely South African trend.

With the many international influences that have infiltrated South African fashion in the past two decades, hip-hop street wear has become a very dominant trend for today's youth. And like the Pantsula style, the look is made up of branded items that are often expensive, 'Hollywood' influenced America brands. Researching Jeppe's retail market, it was evident that Jeppe has a huge selection of stores that cater to this trendy look but very reasonable prices. It is more so the Nigerian owned stores that you will find hip-hop brands such as Jordan, Sean John and Roca-wear, particularly because Nigerian urban culture perhaps has a larger following for American hip-hop than the whole of South Africa. This now opens up an

opportunity for Jeppe to become a potential major player in delivering this look to trend-following hip-hop enthusiasts who cannot afford the expensive gear from malls and customized hip hop stores.<sup>1</sup>

After finding the street-savvy young Soweto designers called “the Smarteeez” or New Millennium Swankas, it became clear they were not just a seasonal sensation. Through reading their enlightened interviews with numerous major publications, one of them being fashion giant ‘Elle’ magazine, it seemed apparent that these young guys were fast becoming a force not to be reckoned with, not only in the fashion industry, but also to South African urban culture as a whole. Celebrated as the ‘new cool’, the Smarteeez have achieved the task of “changing mind-sets, reviving the old to make it appeal to the new age”. The Smarteeez have begun to change the face of urban culture, and slowly but surely they have altered negative perception about downtown Johannesburg. Describing their style as playful, spontaneous, edgy, colourful, vintage-meets-new, Mngomezulu elaborates that being a Smarteeez is about more than just the clothes you wear. “It’s about free will, doing what we want in a smart way. People who like our work share our principle of individualism” (Elle Decoration, 2010, p.10). The concept was to revive eclectic style of vintage meets new items of clothing. And what seems to have been the most important part of establishing this look was the cheap price at which this look can be put together.

Proclaiming that downtown Johannesburg, was ‘thee’ place to shop, Mngomezulu confesses to finding the best items for their fashion show collection at the most amazing second hand shops on Bree street and President street: “people don’t realize that downtown CBD is a gem when it comes to purchasing unique cheaply priced vintage and latest fashion items” (ibid, p.10). To the Smarteeez the process of shopping in the inner city has become part of what their style is about. “Lately when we go shopping it becomes like a whole fashion event, we reckon the process has become bigger than our shows on the runway” (ibid, p.10) referring to how when the crew comes into town, followed by photographers and camera crews the street of Jozi come alive as this colourful and vibrant entourage of savvy young designers weave their way in and out of second hand fashion stores, local boutiques and the underground and street level informal markets. “At the end of the day, we go home with a variety of cheap items that are worthy to grace the runways of Cape Town & SA Fashion Weeks and magazines” says Mngomezulu (ibid., p.11). This again begins to confirm the major potential that downtown has to establish itself as Johannesburg’s fashion capital.

### **Informal city experience and existing smart interventions**

Fashion plays a primary yet intense and informal role in stimulating commercial vitality of Jeppe. Whilst trying to strategically thrust your way (without being pick-pocketed) through the

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<sup>1</sup> The price differences between Jeppe and the malls may relate to the channels through which the branded clothes enter the country. Over the last year Customs officials, advised by lawyers for the international brands, have made numerous raids on Jeppe traders and confiscated stock.

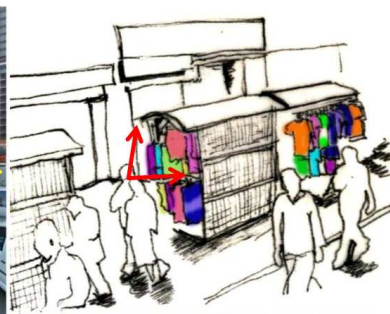
trolley pushers, multiple denim stalls and consumer congested pavements, one frequently gets obstructed by the human-like figures of the fashion store mannequins that also encroach on the pedestrians' already limited path. These mannequins, unavoidably, yet strategically placed in the way to grab the customer's attention, become the first and last threshold of the store.

The traders have developed their own tools and techniques with which they have set innovative ways of transforming previously rigid office spaces into efficient and fluid urban retail spaces. The diagrams show the way in which the traders have developed their own tools and techniques with which they have set innovative ways of transforming previously rigid office spaces into efficient and fluid urban retail spaces (Figure 3). The concept of larger wholesale stores accommodating the smaller denim or sneaker stall is a demonstration of how this flexible spatial design caters for the rapid pace at which developments happen without any formal regulation. Consumers are bombarded with 'in your face displays' of the latest hand bags, trendy garments and shoes that forces them to engage with the products being sold. The way in which the manikin displays are places right outside the store entrance is clever in its capability to attract customers inside the store from the pavement and corridors of internal streets, by giving them a close up three-dimensional experience of the advertised apparel.

**1. Mannequins displayed on roof ledge:** Allows for clear visibility of the shop from afar



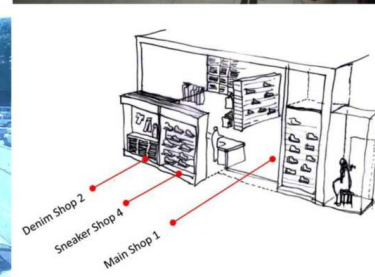
**2. Street market & Mannequins on walkways:** This type of shop layout and is a great advertising tool as it give customers direct and involuntary interact with the clothes /product.



**3. Flashy in your face Signage:** large bright and noticeable signs, with catchy slogans and large graphics attract customers into shop spaces that may not be visible on the street frontage.



**4. Pinned Window displays:** As one drives or walks past, they have full vision of the items that are for sale inside the shop.



**5. Shared shop front displays:** A small shop space can be shared by a number of different retailers occupying just a small portion of the shop, even if its only the display window.

**Figure 3.** Fashion diagram. Source: Mhlungu, 2011.

The last and probably most unique and effective urban retail innovation is the rooftop display of store manikins. Strategically placed along the edge of the concrete overhang ledge, location



of the mannekins allows them the consumer to view the clothing from both sides of the block. The height at which the manikins sit also allows for audience viewing from as far as a block away.

The delicate manner in which, much of the urban fabric has been redefined, illustrates the sensitivity and understanding by the informal traders, of how a simple and not too obtrusive alteration of space can create an environment that is both versatile and efficient. All of these transformations made by the informal economy traders Johannesburg's downtown urban landscape , "demonstrates to us, in the form of fragile spatial gestures, a fresh vision of the city's potential to reinvent itself" (le Roux, 2009, p.1).

### **Nthokozo's strategy: research-by-shopping**

Trying to conduct any type research in the area of Jeppe proved to be a challenge, and because of their volatile socio-economic status, the traders from the Ethiopian community seemed to show more hostility and anxiety towards outsiders, such as myself, who come around asking questions about their businesses. The Nigerian shop owners and street traders seemed to be more open about their economic objectives and the operation of their business, but I had to use a different and less direct approach when engaging with the Ethiopian traders. My strategy was to be an 'undercover shopper' and to use the interaction between customer and the trader as a kind of indirect interview about the latest trends, their target market as well as sourcing, distribution and sales of the different garments. Having given myself a budget of R400 (US\$50) I was going to spend a whole day shopping in Jeppe, trying to find bargains on identical items of the latest fashion that I would normally buy from up market retailers like Mr. Price, in various low end retailers in Jeppe Street.

On a sunny Tuesday morning I embarked on my weekly visit to the vibrant bustling street of the inner city, only today I wasn't the invasive foreign researcher with a camera, pen and a sketchbook, going around arousing suspicion. On this day my intention was to fit in and be a sassy young fashionista looking for the latest trends at the best price. Hopping off the Noord taxi at the corner of Bree and Von Welligh Street, I made my way into the first enticing 'downtown boutiques' that caught my interest. Alex's Fashions, stood out with its bright green guerrilla advertising signage and their pavement obtrusive, yet stylishly dressed mannequins that stand right on the street edge. Instinctively deciding that a particular pair of jeans on the window display would match perfectly with a pair of sandals I owned, I knew Alex's fashion was definitely a store I had to visit.

As nonchalantly as can be, I made my way past the unpleasant female security at the door, down a staircase and inside into a little paradise of sexy bright summer dresses, leggings and sandals with an array of accessories and handbags to match, all at an unbelievable steal. I

excitedly ravaged my way through the fashion racks, hoping to find something in my size. I noticed I was being physically surveillance by one of the shop assistant that kept following me around every aisle. Normally I would find this annoying, take offense, and probably leave the store, but knowing the current nature of downtown Johannesburg, I recognized it as precaution and instead decided to use it to my advantage. Calling the young lady for assistance I began asking obscure questions, which would normally not interest an average consumer, about the different sizes, design and styles that the dresses came in. Also fronting as someone who was shopping for a friend back home, I asked if I could take photographs of various items in order to BBM them to this "friend" who would then reply and tell me which outfit she preferred. This rather crafty strategy allowed me the privilege to take photographs in the store, which is highly forbidden in these areas, whilst enthusiastically engaging in a casual conversation about which country these clothes are stocked from, as well as the shipping and the trend identifying process that the store owners utilizes to keep up with the latest fashions.

Needless to say I used this very, simple and social strategy in the rest of the shops I went to. And on that day I acquired more research information than in my entire previous site visits put together. Not to mention that I went home with three bags full of new clothes for a third of the price I would normally pay at a shopping mall (fig 4). This made me realized that within this very close knit, seemingly unsystematic and vulnerable community was a highly sophisticated organization of entrepreneurs and business people that have established a very rewarding and affordable market for fashion retail, that strips away all the prejudiced assumption that good high fashion is determined by the name and address of the shop.

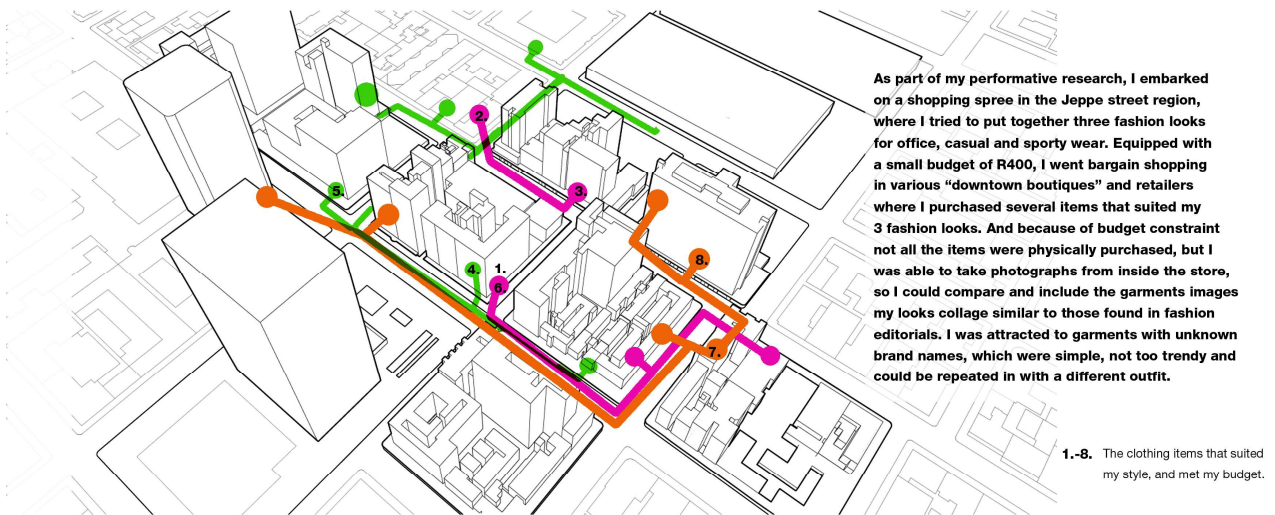


Figure 4. Fashion Looks. Source: Mhlungu, 2011.

Contrasting the official vision of the Fashion District and the reality of Jeppe, we see different dynamics of shopping and display, with the latter rich in innovation. This informally animated retail economy is dense with colorful and intricately compact fashion signage and consumer attraction strategies by boldly boasting the best fashion trends and retail and wholesale deals. Having identified the multifaceted relationship that fashion and the retail architectural nature of Jeppe have with their consumer group, it seems it is preconceived negative images about the inner city that has resulted in its commercial sector only attracting a majority 'lower income bracket' consumer group. "Smart" ways of redefining the space aims to start changing the precinct's negative image. At the risk of totally stripping away the exciting, dynamic and non-conformist characteristic that make African cities so distinct, urban renewal strategies should "mirror design practices such as participatory planning, adaptive reuse and minimal form making" (le Roux, 2009, p.1). This kind of urban planning approach serve to accommodate both the formal and informal, creating an exciting range of new urban experience and retail dynamics for the traders and their 'new' economically diversified consumers market.

## **Stephen's strategy: comics as narrative**

I decided on exploring a single restaurant in terms of its ability to cultivate networks. Therefore, over the course of the research project I visited and explored the potential of a restaurant which intrigued me from the first time I visited: Meski's. Using this restaurant I became my own test subject and set out to use the restaurant to become familiar with the area. I was, in a sense, an immigrant to the area because although I was born and raised in Johannesburg I had spent comparatively little time in the inner city. This made me more aware of myself as an outsider within the area and, even if subconsciously, became the origin of my hypothesis of restaurants as havens within the area. The frantic and essentially alien nature of the streets juxtaposed with the relative calmness of restaurants is something I experienced in the dense urban areas of Ghana. To be off the streets in a restaurant, or "spot bar" as they're referred to there, was always a welcomed change. I spent a great deal of time in those spot bars; in Accra, Korforidua, Kumasi and elsewhere, and it was there where I cultivated many friendships and learnt a great deal about the people and the area. I was certain that I could do the same on Jeppe Street. Only this time I would be doing it as an architectural student and would therefore be interested in more than friendly banter, I would be looking at the implications of a space on the cultivation of these friendships and networks.

How does one document the cultivation of community networking? The traditional methods of data collection would surely prove ineffectual at recording an experiential process of place discovery. Edward Tufte refers to this challenge in his book *Envisioning Information*. He talks of information being depicted on "flatland", referring to video screens and paper. He asks in the introduction "how are we to represent the rich visual world of experience and measurement on mere flatland?" (Tufte, 1990, p.9). The book then charts various methods which have attempted to address this issue yet fails to highlight a tool which I had been using for years, a combination of paper and video screen: the comic book.

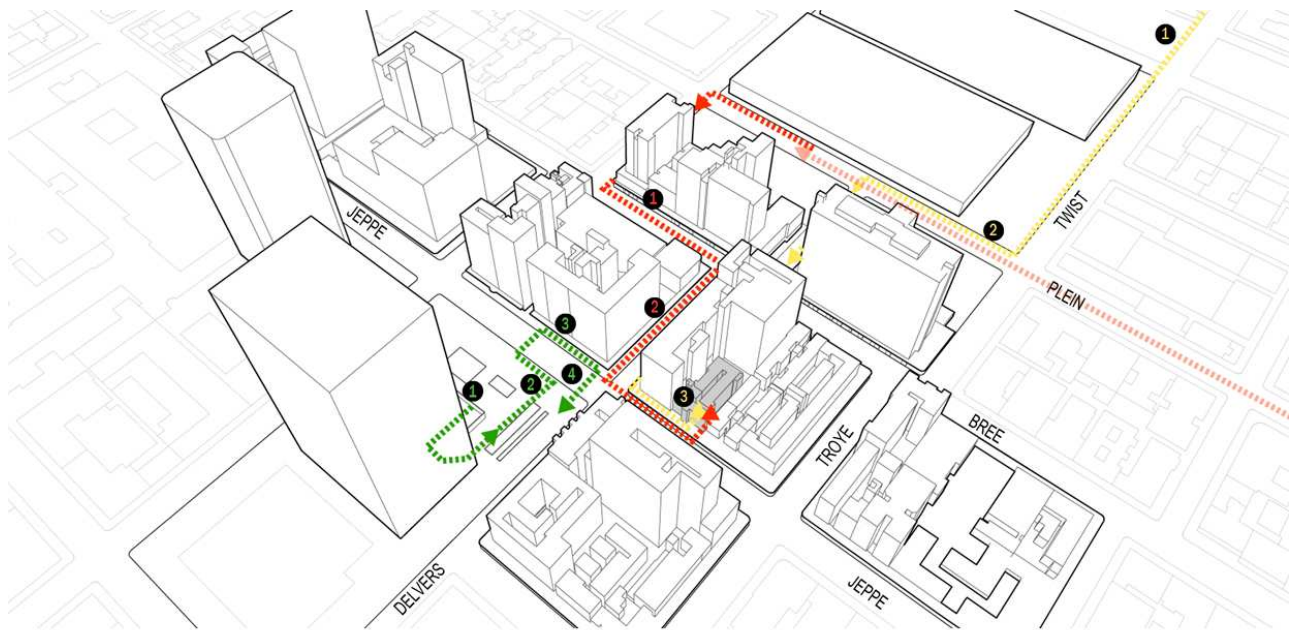
Comics tell stories. They provide insight into situations through narration, spoken word and visual context. They are able to convey the stories in one's head in a medium that others can read and visualise. When a comic is based on reality instead of imagination it becomes a research tool as the story being portrayed is one based on interviews and the scenes based on real locations. If enough attention is given to the detail of these aspects, a comic has the ability to record and portray cultural, social and architectural contexts in a single cohesive document capable of transcending language barriers due to its visual nature. Comics and cartoons as tools for recording events is explored by Emmison and Smith (2000, p.82) who is argued that "the historical record that is available in relation to cartoons can sometimes be more complete than for photographs". The creation of a comic therefore became my research methodology.



Comics have been used as architectural research tools before. Switzerland's ETH Studio Basel (2009) conducted an urban study of Basel and used the comic book as their medium for publication. Within this narrative the visitor's architectural input is coupled with visual documentation to create an engaging academic report on a part of life in Basel. This gives the reader a much greater understanding of the area than a traditional written report as it incorporates the human experience in a visual way. My intention was to do the same with Jeppe Street. I wanted to show people who had never visited the area what it might be like if they were to go there, to show life and, more importantly, the area itself as a character.

Suzanne Hall's research on everyday practices and ordinary spaces that individuals and groups use to engage with in the multi-cultural urban environment of Walworth Road in London (Hall, 2009) inspired the use of a single place from which to cover a variety of social interactions between both groups and individuals, none of which she had any affiliation with. She therefore began her research with a single place where she could objectively establish herself. In a similar way, I used Meski's Restaurant as a base for story collection. Kasu, a co-owner, introduced him to patrons who he thought would be interesting contacts for him. I would begin by telling people how I was creating a comic book for the area and was looking for stories. Most people were highly intrigued by this and what ensued was a conversation instead of an interview.

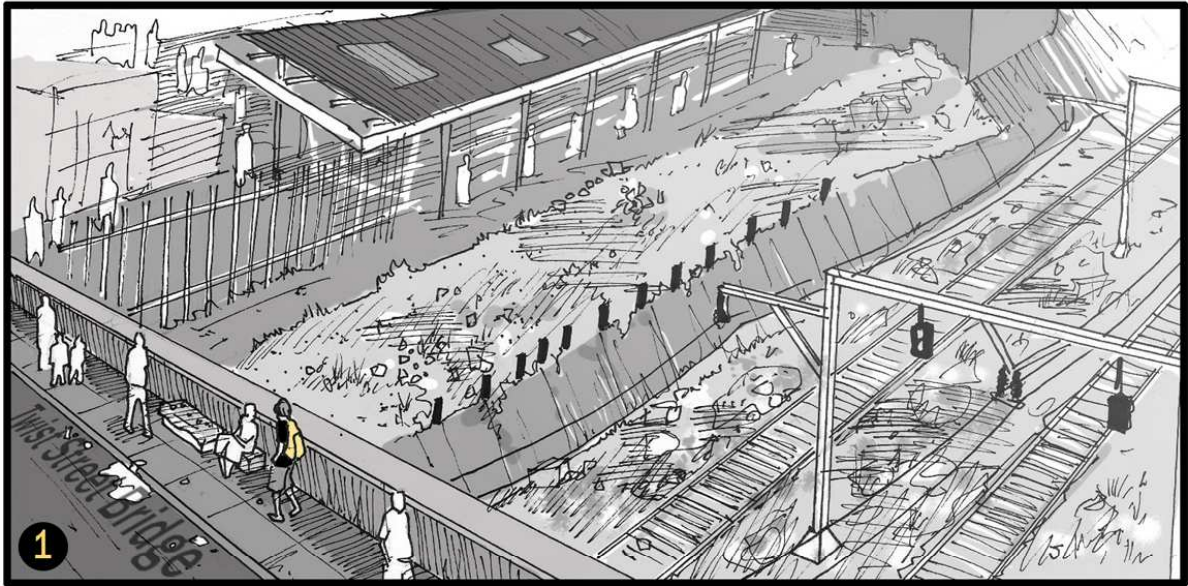
The conversations were centered on topics such as immigration, business, safety, the restaurant etc. I began recording these stories through single words, small sketches and the occasional photograph, all the while becoming more familiar with the area and feeling less alien. The information gathering therefore becomes qualitative documentation within a sketchbook, providing "clues" to various plots happening within specific locations of the area. These stories were then sketched out at home in comic book form around a map. Through this method of story collection I began to develop a sense of place through stories. This sense of place is then turned into comics which become a record of conversations had within a space, conversations which that space allowed and encouraged. Spaces facilitate narratives. These can be recorded just like any other aspect of a space with comics. The architectural context becomes a character in the scene and the interaction between human and built environment becomes a story.



Jeppe Comic Map **Desta Wolde** **New Arrival** **Comic Author** Meski's Restaurant

**Figure 5.** Comic map. Souce: Authors.

In the comic map, fig 5, I locate the variety of comic worthy stories I collected during the course of my research. For this document I chose three which provided the most interesting insight into the area. These stories are mapped out as foot paths within the city and certain frames in the comics relate to story points on the map with the corresponding colour and number. Meski's is on the top floor of the highlighted building: Madibas.



Comic Author

Figure 6: Comic Author. Source: Authors.

My own story, fig 6, is the journey from the Twist Street bridge to Meski's restaurant. To me, crossing the bridge and walking along the Plein Street market signals the start of Jeppe. It doesn't take long to hear the words "Umlungu"...which means "white person" in Zulu. This is always spoken in a friendly manner though so he welcomes the greeting. From here it's a short but busy walk to Meski's where I always choose the stairs over the dodgy elevator and make my way up. My progress is usually slowed, however, by delivery guys bringing goods to the various shops off the stairwell. Upon reaching the top I am greeted by Kasu, a co-owner, who introduces me to new faces over a cup of Ethiopian coffee.





Desta Wolde

Figure 7. Desta Wolde. Source: Authors.

Desta Wolde, fig 7, a hair salon owner in Marble Towers, is a regular patron of Meski's and often has his lunch breaks there. To get to Meski's he must cross the intersection of Jeppe and Delvers - a very busy interchange where minibus taxis reign supreme. Desta says that the taxis don't slow down for ANYTHING, a lesson he learned one day when out on an errand for work...



New Arrival

Figure 8: New arrival. Source: Authors.



I heard the story in *New arrival - first impressions of Jeppe*, fig 8, from a man named Solomon at Meski's. An Ethiopian had arrived in Johannesburg and was staying in Yeoville, north east of the Jeppe area. He wanted to go out for food but had no idea where to go. He found a small taxi not far from where he was staying and climbed in. His English was poor, but the taxi driver recognised he was Ethiopian and said to him: "let me take you to your brothers, you'll find everything you need there".

He was taken to the Jeppe area and dropped off close to the taxi rank on Plein Street where he became quite disorientated. It didn't take long, however, before he heard someone speaking Amharic and was able to get some help. The person he heard was Solomon, who brought him to Meski's for coffee and injera, a traditional Ethiopian food.

Restaurant spaces in an area such as Jeppe Street provide a crucial role to the foreign national community. They act as embassy like spaces where traditional food is served, "local" news is heard and conversations with fellow immigrants occur. Meski's restaurant is a perfect example for showcasing these attributes and was pivotal in my research into the area as it provided me with a platform to establish my own connections with the community, and in so doing replicate the arrival of an immigrant to the area. This journey was documented through the creation of a comic book which required conversations to determine narratives and architectural understanding of spaces to provide detailed contexts. When all these elements were combined I was able to synthesise my experience of researching Meski's into a single visual document which has the ability to give outsiders insight into what it might be like for them to do the same. Essentially, this comic book is a microcosm of the restaurant space because it has collected and distributed stories in the same way that people might over coffee and Injera.

## **Conclusion**

The difficulty of urban research in an environment like Jeppe, with its multiplicity of codes and strategies, can frighten off a researcher tied into any single convention, especially those tied to official languages. It is not surprising that the area is a *terra incognita* in the mapping of the city, and a destination of choice amongst the thousands of shoppers whose navigation of the city relies on hearsay. In the course of a few weeks, Nthokoza and Stephen strategically made a transition from outsider-researchers to participant-narrators, playfully exposing their recordings to their informants while gathering the information they required for their studies. Their allegiances to the people they were recording grew, along with their respect for their practices and their intention to feedback benefits from the research project. Carried through to a level of performative work, such strategies, although modest, signal ways to support the potentials of Jeppe and break through the city's official ignorance of this precinct.

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