

# Landmarks of Indignation: Archiving Urban (Dis)Connectivity at Johannesburg's Margins

Hanno Mögenburg

The fire broke out in the afternoon, when she was not at home but visiting a cousin that had just returned from hospital. This was luck, Lindiwe says – because she had not opened her pub yet, so nobody was there who could have been hurt when the flames took everything on that day in August just two weeks before we met. “My neighbours called to tell me about the fire and I came back right away. I could see the smoke from afar and I hurried. But when I arrived I found everything already burnt down to the ground.” As it turned out, the reason for the fire was a defective electricity distribution box outside the pub. Some cables burnt through, eventually sparking the thatch on the roof which quickly escalated the conflagration.

Ironically, the distribution box was the only thing that emerged from the fire completely undamaged. A grey box in front of a crumbling, soot-smearred concrete wall: this is why we came here, what my companion wanted to show me to give an example of what she and other residents of Soweto – South Africa's biggest conglomeration of townships at the margins of Johannesburg – are so outraged about. “You see this now? This is what they do to us! They kill us with their shitty boxes. They don't even care that their old cables put our lives in danger.”

Tragically, this box had been an issue in the neighbourhood for quite some time already. Months before, they requested for the electricity company to send out technicians, logging complaints about a loud humming emanating from the box. But nobody came. In fact, as far as my interlocutors could remember, nobody had ever been back here since the late 1980s, during apartheid, when they first put up the distribution boxes in this area, trenched the cable ducts and did the wiring to finally electrify (in very rudimentary fashion) parts of the townships.

*Before and after the fire: the owner of the pub is holding up an old picture to show how her establishment used to look inside.*

Photo: Hanno Mögenburg, 2019.



Infrastructures are often described as the material substrate of the city, connecting or networking it together and, as the literal translation of the Latin word suggests, underlying and traversing our urban worlds as we pass through them. While for the more privileged, infrastructures only become visible and a public matter at moments of breakdown and disruption (see Bowker and Star 2002), in the world's urban margins they are instead often experienced as systemic abandonment and an accumulation of failure. Here, they are envisaged through a sense of disconnectedness, absence,

partiality or inchoateness, inevitably stimulating a local public's attention – as in the case of Johannesburg's outskirts.

Residents of South Africa's townships have always been well aware of the political materiality of their surroundings. Apartheid's spatial engineering and the historical experience of domination, based to a great degree on "infrastructural modalities of power" (von Schnitzler 2016: 65), are inscribed in people's social memory and the spatial knowledge they inherit.

*The electricity distribution box was the only thing undamaged after the fire.*

Photo: Hanno Mögenburg, 2019.



Given their material longevity and their material-semiotic quality of connecting citizens of and to the state, infrastructures are key objects in the production of this spatial knowledge as they simultaneously accommodate diachronic and synchronic dimensions of imagining, memorizing and thematising politics in their different temporalities (Carse and Kneas 2019). Hence, infrastructural dis/connectivity – an important factor in the mobilization of the African National Congress's electorate since the first democratic elections in 1994 – continues to inform public negotiation

of post-apartheid state-building today. This is especially so because after years of neoliberal corporatization, mismanagement and corruption, infrastructural governance of the South African postcolony has become exceedingly incoherent and fragmentary in all fields. Just one pertinent example is the case of electricity provision, particularly in urban peripheries, where diverse, coexisting technologies at different stages of implementation, with different rules and de/regulations, and interventions are coupled roughly together.

It has been established in infrastructure studies that perpetual “unfinishedness” (Carse and Kneas 2019), or – borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari – a state of constantly being in the process of becoming, is an inherent feature of infrastructures, as indeed it is to societies, and thus they require permanent maintenance and repair (Graham and Thrift 2007; Jackson 2014; Gupta 2018). It is in this relation between materiality and care, the mediation between construction and decay, where archival qualities of infrastructures also take effect. They are archival in that they conserve the state of political, economic and technological orders in which they are embedded. And their material condition discloses trajectories of political priorities, recording the extent of past support that a given project enjoyed. Their material beginnings and endings, technical adaptations, abandoned construction sites and remnants – all of their material elements and interventions as a whole – eventually manifest the contingency of a state’s performance, expressing the quality of its care and the strenuousness of its efforts to deliver equal resources to all citizens. Therefore, infrastructural ruins not only document the non-linear, fragmented and multi-temporal character of large technological systems; they also carry sediments of past and present socio-political ordering.

Consequently, it is not infrastructure’s unfinishedness per se that incites urban resistance in South Africa’s townships, but its fragmentary condition, which is synonymous both with historical marginalization during apartheid and present, post-liberation neglect. To many residents, residues of infrastructural development represent derelict political projects of post-apartheid state-building: abandoned, switched off, burned out, damaged and dismantled, or broken down once and for all, but nonetheless enshrined in the material-semiotic environment of people’s everyday lives.

While ‘unfinishedness’ suggests being in some sort of state of development with a tendency towards repair, adaptation and betterment – eventually connectivity – the fragments and abandonment of infrastructural objects at the city’s periphery in fact convey a definite sense that nothing is to be expected out of them anymore. This represents a terminus of governmental care in several respects. They are like loose threads, where the infrastructural delivery apparatus frays into nothing: dysfunctional, suspended, moribund or defunct.

Another expressive example of this can be found in Thembelihle, an informal settlement outside of Lenasia, a neighbourhood southwest of Johannesburg. In 2017, its residents were finally granted a solar-powered energy supply after years of struggling for their homes to be connected to the grid. In avoidance of formally recognizing their claims to the land that the residents had initially occupied illegally, the city administration

decided to agree on a solar facility as a temporary, removable and cheap solution to Thembelihle's protest for energy justice. But the night after they were finally installed, alongside media-effective appearances by local politicians, the panels were stolen – before they could even be connected to the shacks.



So, while residents continue to rely on illegal connections of all kinds today, with live wires hanging over their heads, the empty frames and scaffoldings of the solar panel programme for Thembelihle openly decay on a prominent site in the settlement as just one of various dead ends of post-apartheid infrastructuring. They have become well-known landmarks and, along with other ruins in this part of the metropole, are inciting the community's anger and frustration on a daily basis. Hence, for people like my companion, it has been a natural consequence to organize one of the various crisis committees, resident associations and activist grassroots formations, all of which explicitly address infrastructural shortcomings in the living environment. These are infamously known as 'service delivery protests'.

*Empty frames of  
Thembelihle's solar power  
programme.*

Photo: Hanno Mögenburg,  
2019.

Such protests should not be mistaken for unanimity and cohesion among all residents. There are political reservations and social tensions between various groups and actors regarding infrastructure development, as there are ongoing conflicts over the allocation of local power and economic gains from illicit activities in the shadow of constant undersupply. Nonetheless, it is both the quality and the extent to which these ruins incite the continuing, relentless engagement of people with their surroundings that I want to emphasize. Within these engagements, the ruins of infrastructural development are material signifiers, carrying residents' social critique and being something to point at when illustrating failures in connecting communities to the democratic project. Singling out ruined infrastructural objects and telling their story of failure aims to disentangle them from their quotidian backdrop, and to re-scandalize and de-normalize the political omissions of which they are material evidence.

This is why, along with new materialist reasoning, according to which certain objects bear agential capacity to become central to the formation of political issues (Marres 2012; Barry 2013), I think these remnants of abandoned infrastructure contribute to the emergence of a critical local public registering what is to them post-apartheid debris. Both subliminally and/or in more elaborated form, residents thereby develop some sort of infrastructural history from below. This gains gravity and accrues detail through recurring reference to specific places of infrastructural abandonment, in conjunction with passing on background stories and formulating political accounts – for each other, or a wider public when they take around journalists or anthropologists. This eventually connects these places in a mental map of splintered urbanity (Graham and Marvin 2001), readily retrievable to all those archivists accustomed to residing outside the realm of well-serviced islands of suburban enclaves. Furthermore, the accumulation of such places at Johannesburg's margins, the city set out to be the post-apartheid example for an Afropolitan metropolis, is becoming a serious threat to support of the liberation project.

#### References:

Barry, Andrew. 2013. *Material Politics: Disputes along the Pipeline*. Malden: Wiley Blackwell.

Bowker, Geoffrey and Susan Leigh Star. 2002. "How to Infrastructure." In *Handbook of New Media. Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs*, edited by Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone, 151–61. London: Sage.

Carse, Ashley and David Kneas. 2019. "Unbuilt and Unfinished: The Temporalities of Infrastructure." *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 10: 9–28.

Graham, Stephen and Simon Marvin. 2001. *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities, and the Urban Condition*. London: Routledge.

Graham, Stephen and Nigel Thrift. 2007. "Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance." *Theory, Culture and Society* 24: 1–25.

Gupta, Akhil. 2018. "The Future in Ruins: Thoughts on the Temporality of Infrastructure." In *The Promise of Infrastructure*, edited by Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, 62–79. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Jackson, Steven. 2014. "Rethinking Repair." In *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, edited by Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot, 221–39. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Marres, Noortje. 2012. *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Von Schnitzler, Antina. 2016. *Democracy's Infrastructure: Techno-Politics and Protest after Apartheid*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

### Acknowledgements:

I want to thank the *Roadsides* team for their support and all the work of editing this issue. Much appreciation goes to AbdouMaliq Simone, Alessandro Rippa, Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi and Hannah Schmidt for their thoughts and comments. All flaws are my own, I am afraid. And finally I owe much gratitude to Zodwa, for taking me around.

---

**Cite as:** Mögenburg, Hanno. 2021. "Landmarks of Indignation: Archiving Urban (Dis)Connectivity at Johannesburg's Margins." *Roadsides* 5: 31-37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202100505>

---

### Author:



**Hanno Mögenburg** is PhD student at the Anthropology Department of the University of Konstanz and research associate at the DFG-funded project "Activist becomings in South Africa and Myanmar: studying infrastructure and politics through activists' life-worlds." Interested (among other things) in the intersections of technologies, urbanity and knowledge production in the postcolonial state, his research investigates rogue technicians and mundane practices of infrastructuring in the struggle for energy justice in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

**Roadsides** is a platinum Open Access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.



⊕ [roadsides.net](http://roadsides.net)  
✉ [editor@roadsides.net](mailto:editor@roadsides.net)  
🐦 [@road\\_sides](https://twitter.com/road_sides)  
📷 [@roadsides\\_journal](https://www.instagram.com/roadsides_journal)

**Editorial Team:**

Julie Chu (University of Chicago)  
Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam)  
Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Fribourg)  
Madlen Kobi (Academy of Architecture, Mendrisio)  
Nadine Plachta (University of Toronto)  
Galen Murton (LMU Munich and James Madison University, Harrisonburg)  
Matthäus Rest (Max-Planck-Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena)  
Alessandro Rippa (LMU Munich and Tallinn University)  
Martin Saxer (LMU Munich)  
Christina Schwenkel (University of California, Riverside)  
Max D. Woodworth (The Ohio State University)

Collection no. 005 was edited by: **Alessandro Rippa**  
Managing editor: **Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi**  
Copyediting: **David Hawkins**  
Layout: **Chantal Hinni** and **Antoni Kwiatkowski**

**ISSN 2624-9081**

**Creative Commons License**

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

