Local Public Space, Global Spectacle:  
A Case Study on South Africa’s First Shipping Container Shopping Center  

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Abstract
This thesis is the explication of a journey to reconcile Johannesburg’s aspiration to become a ‘spatially just world class African city’ through the lens of the underperforming 27 Boxes, a globally inspired yet locally contested retail center in the popular Johannesburg suburb of Melville. By examining the project’s public space, market, retail, and design features – features that play a critical role in its imagined local economic development promise – I argue that the project’s ‘failure’ can be seen through a prism of factors that are simultaneously local and global. Furthermore, the perceived failure and reinvention of the center exemplify the tensions inherent in municipal, developer, and community aspirations for who such projects should serve and subsequently, who is welcome to access and utilize Melville public spaces. What began as a project intended to offer an anti-mall experience to a broad-ranging group of patrons is now being reconstituted as a space for Melville residents who yearn for the village-like community environment that flourished years before. These tensions between nostalgia for the past, the politics of spatial justice, and world class African urbanism provoke us to think deeply about if, when, and how divergent market and state priorities can be aligned and exploited for local social and economic impact. The research raises critical questions about how to develop and promote urban amenities, like alternative urban retail formats, that might simultaneously create value for the city’s global brand and local residents; and, ideas for mitigating the friction among seemingly competing stakeholder aspirations.

Thesis Advisor: Jason Jackson 
Title: Assistant Professor of Political Economy and Urban Planning
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This was a journey. I threw myself into it, hit many many walls, tried to do way too much in too little time, overly critiqued myself, and then attempted on multiple occasions to throw progress to the wind and start over – thankfully to no avail because of the good folks below.

To my DUSP classmates: too many to name here, but especially the ones who indulged me during late nights in CRON, those ‘what is my research question’ sessions in the halls of building 9, and those who helped me talk through what this research was adding up to – you’ve made DUSP all-the-things for me and I am so grateful for your support, hugs, words of encouragement, and friendship while on this journey.

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Thank you to my thesis reader, Albert Saiz for offering your expertise related to urban economics. Retail became central to this research much later in the process, which I had not anticipated, but welcomed the challenge to consider how other analytical dimensions (like quantitative methods or real estate economics) might have informed or shifted my overall findings.

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8.2. Appendix B. TripAdvisor analysis 58
8.3. Appendix C. Media analysis grid 60
8.4. Appendix D: Timeline of methods 62
8.5. Bibliography 63
Living in Johannesburg today then, as a vast experiment in how to inhabit apartheid’s ruins, exhibits a number of contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, its nascent public life is taking shape around new official narratives, modes of associational life, meanings of money and everyday travail. On the other hand, its public space is viewed and experienced by many as out of control and dangerous. It is bounded on by fences, palisades, walls, gates, private security guards, cameras and other defensive security technologies. Public life withdraws into the interiority of the private realm (hotels, homes, malls, gated enclaves etc.) and urban space is abandoned to featurelessness and neglect. Building more robust intersections between the two becomes a priority. (Burdett 2006, chap. Making Public Life)

1. Introduction

If you travel to South Africa, you will transit through the Johannesburg O.R. Tambo airport hub and pass through is exactly what many people do. The city’s reputation has done far more to discourage people from spending much time navigating the sprawling and fragmented urban form. Many visitors travel on to other urban centers like Cape Town and Durban or stay over just long enough to jaunt to Nelson Mandela’s house in Soweto or the National Apartheid Museum. You might even find yourself in one of Joburg’s most popular suburbs, Melville, widely touted for its bohemian vibe, café culture, and socially mixed nightlife along 7th Street. Proximate to two prominent universities, easily accessible by public transit, located just west of the city’s urban core and proximate to major highways, Melville is also of particular interest to city development agents because of this unique combination of characteristics. For all its popularity among those who live beyond its borders, these same attributes render it a hotly contested space where the local resident association has expressed concerns about the externalities of this 7th Street activity, namely noise, crime, and parking (Kok 2016). In one of only a handful of suburbs with a mixed-use typology that facilitates the lively walkable and socially integrated street life the city portends to want more of, this research aims to unpack the politics of global aspiration and local preferences as they play out in the Melville 27 Boxes shipping container shopping center just steps away from 7th Street. By examining the project’s public space, market, retail, and design features – features that play a critical role in its imagined local economic development promise – I argue that the perceived failure and reinvention of the center exemplify the tensions inherent in municipal, developer, and community aspirations for who such projects should be made to serve and an implicit desire to control who uses and accesses Melville public spaces. The research surfaces tensions not unlike those expressed in the opening quote: how can we create safe, welcoming, and accessible public space when public space is so contested and scarred by the wounds of past racial segregation and anxiety? 27 Boxes as a case study offers some ideas on how to develop and promote amenities that simultaneously create value for the city’s global brand and local residents; and more importantly, ideas for mitigating the friction among seemingly competing stakeholder interests.
Before 27 Boxes was an operational retail center, the site was home to an underutilized public park that fell into disuse as concerns about maintenance and security bore on without consequence. As a neighborhood park, the space would have been geared toward a more localized and limited catchment area of community members. As a retail center, it would be a fair assumption to expect the opposite. In retail, this notion of catchment is referred to as the trade area which is the ‘geographic area containing people who are likely to purchase a given class of goods or services from a particular shopping center or retail district’ and usually varies based on ‘center type and size, tenant categories, and level of distinctiveness and innovation’ for example (Urban Land Institute 2008, 8). One of the most fundamental tenets of retail development is to optimize trade area penetration to generate a ratio of foot traffic to sales that enable businesses to be profitable and afford premium rents. In the best-case scenario, retail tenants will yield high enough profits so that property managers can charge higher rents. Throughout this paper, I will refer to this suite of concepts (trade area, foot traffic, sales, and rent profits) as the retail imperative. What makes 27 Boxes an interesting case is the juxtaposition of the retail imperative with its legacy character as publicly owned park space.

1.1. Melville Context

Melville was established in 1896, in the decade following the discovery of gold in the Witswatersrand. The area was originally part of the Braamfontein farm (Musiker and Musiker 2000), one of a handful of farms that covered the agricultural area that later became the Johannesburg urban core after the discovery of gold. With the passing of key apartheid legislation in the early to mid 1900s, Johannesburg’s centrally located urban spaces became increasingly white while non-whites were forcibly removed and relocated mostly to areas on the periphery of the city. Some decades later however, a key differentiator for Melville relative to other neighborhoods, was the siting of the South African Broadcasting Corporation’s (SABC) headquarters to the immediately adjacent Auckland Park neighborhood. The SABC brought a critical mass of creative professionals who for decades helped enshrine Melville’s identity as different, progressive, and bohemian (MRA Interviewee 1 2018). Surrounded by the University of Johannesburg and SABC both in Auckland Park, and the University of the Witswatersrand in Braamfontein, Melville has come to be known as a preferred residence for university faculty and an important nightlife node with trendy cafés, restaurants, and bars along 7th Street.

7th Street is a popular destination for a cross-section of patrons including but not limited to students, artists, tourists, expats, and neighborhood residents. The neighborhood is one of Johannesburg’s most well-known suburbs featured in a number of outlets describing attractions and things to do in the city. One interviewee remarked that international tourists love the place because it reminded them of home with the sidewalk cafes and street life (Researcher 1 2018). This on-street commercial and recreational activity embedded within the residential fabric is only found in a handful of suburbs, most of which are considered middle and upper class. Many
of the region’s malls are also located in or adjacent to upper class residential areas to the North, but because of the required parking and higher requisite land area needed, the older generations of consumption sites are not contiguous with residential. These unique older mixed-use places are also known as high streets and the character emanating from the mix of commercial, recreational, and social life give these places a village-like feel; this is in contrast with other commercial centers that are predominately enclosed or set back off the street or highway. The significance and uniqueness of the high street is captured in the quote below:

“Several of Joburg’s more established suburbs boast a ‘high street’ of sorts – a central, often formerly residential, thoroughfare boasting shops, restaurants and filling stations. While some of these (such as those in Melville, Greenside and Parkhurst) have become well-known focal points of Joburg’s scattered, suburban social scene, others have settled into lowest common-denominator retail nodes whereas yet others serve niche interests or retain a village-like, small town community feel” (qtd. in Kok 2016).

These villages, Melville, Parkhurst, Greenside, Norwood, and others each have their own perceived distinctive identities due in part to demographics and geography, the reputation of their respective residents’ association (and the issues they have organized themselves around for example), and the character and nature of the high street tenants and patrons. Melville’s 7th Street, while popular, is a point of contention among some residents who lament that the overrepresentation of bars and club-oriented establishments leaves fewer options for the amenities, services, and businesses most fit to their preferences. These discontents are evident in grievances expressed by the Melville Residents Association (MRA) related to both 7th Street and 27 Boxes, which I will explore further in a subsequent discussion on resistance to the

![Image](https://goo.gl/maps/FGvjXuS6PHs)


1 During my summer internship at Wits, I helped scope a case study exploring the Parkhurst suburb’s much publicized plan to go off-grid for energy needs. This work gave me a window into the politics of Joburg’s ‘suburbs’ as a particular category of analysis which contributed greatly to my understanding of Melville and this research.
project. Unlike many of Johannesburg’s suburbs, whether they have high streets or not, Melville has two important attributes that make it of particular importance to the CoJ: it has a high street and it is on the edge of the urban core making it a prime candidate for more strategic land use management. Figures 1 and 2 provide snapshots of Melville’s relative location in the broader Johannesburg landscape and situates it within one of the CoF target areas for transit-oriented-development. Figure 2 (Esri South Africa, Esri, HERE, Garmin n.d. Screenshot by author.) further illustrates how much Melville abuts the boundary of the target area which may or may not exacerbate residential resistance to CoF related strategies for densification and/or intensification of land uses.

Figure 2. A satellite view of the Empire Perth Development Corridor as part of the Corridors of Freedom (CoF). Here, it is clear that Melville abuts the boundary of the target area which may or may not exacerbate residential resistance to CoF related strategies for densification and/or intensification of land uses. Image: Corridors of Freedom Interactive Map tool

1.2. Main research question and sub questions

At the heart of this research exercise is an attempt to unpack what it meant when people said 27 Boxes wasn’t doing well, that it was failing, that something needed to be done about it. And then, once I had a sense of what was happening in the case itself, understand how widely those factors overlapped with or derived from the social and political realities in Johannesburg.

Primary question:
- Why is the project perceived\(^2\) to be commercially infeasible in its current state and how are those factors related (or not) to Johannesburg’s social and political context?

Secondary questions:

\(^2\) It is important here to acknowledge that this research is not aimed at investigating whether the center was feasible from a market and financial standpoint; rather, investigating the perception of such factors believed to be at work and negotiated by the various actors involved.
• Is the perceived failure of the center endogenous to any of the features of the site?
• What is the conversation happening between the perceived failures and the strategies to turn it all around?
• Who can learn from this case? Are there lessons to be gleaned for the parties or others more broadly?

1.3. Overview of thesis

An important part of the 27 Boxes story is that it attempts to offer a leisure and shopping experience that you cannot get at a mall, a proxy for bad service, the impersonal and generic (27B Tenant 3 2018). While there is speculation that malls will continue to proliferate in the global South, it is difficult to escape the discourse about failing and empty malls in the US. For this research, I operate from the assumption that while Johannesburg may not be at the point where malls are the relics they’ve become in some parts of the US, 27 Boxes is one experiment in small scale neighborhood-based shopping centers, something much more novel in the Joburg landscape. Given the increasing urbanization occurring all over the world (Urban Land Institute 2008) and the bifurcation of wealth that render sites of consumption increasingly bifurcated by class, 27 Boxes’ unique orientation as a sort of public amenity makes it a rich site of contestation and imagination. By the crudest interpretations, malls are seen as sterile, controlled, and regulated destinations for the upper and middle classes while sites of consumption for lower income groups tend to be connoted as informal, chaotic, and transient appropriations of public spaces. In Johannesburg, malls enable a social mixing of different racial groups despite their location in mostly white Northern suburbs, but there remains a sorting among these groups by class (Tomlinson and Larsen 2003). This thesis explores what occurs when the traditional retail imperative (attract broad catchment of patrons) is transposed onto a site that was historically intended to serve only the local residents. The findings illustrate the complexity of urban retail concepts that depart from more traditional and conservative approaches as exemplified in suburban malls or decentralized urban strip concepts.

Chapter one introduces key features of the 27 Boxes case geography, namely the nature of the Melville neighborhood as both a tourist destination and important entertainment node in the city. The primary and subsidiary research questions are articulated as well as an overview of the thesis.

In chapter two, the methodology by which the case was selected and data analyzed is outlined in great detail using a combination of personal narrative format and descriptive writing to animate the details of both the case and my positioning as a researcher.

Chapter three is a discussion of three key conceptual lenses through which the case is explored. The first being broader debates on public space and shopping malls to establish that concerns around safety and public funding toward maintaining public space render sites of consumption important features of the urban fabric, especially in developing contexts. The
second, the internationalization of placemaking as a tool for sustainable urbanization, looks at the adoption of public space and placemaking practice within the UN framework and Johannesburg’s exemplar status among global cities on the path toward sustainable urbanization. The final section surfaces the politicization of the prevailing social-spatial order of Johannesburg, in order to contextualize Johannesburg’s rhetorical aspiration to become a spatially just world class African city as part of a long history of attempts to reinvent its identity in the face of an enduring legacy of apartheid spatial planning.

Chapter four is an overview of South Africa today and various histories of its urban form. A brief description of the colonial, industrial, apartheid, and post-apartheid urban periods help stage a discussion of contemporary Johannesburg’s social-spatial order.

In chapter five, the case study is fully explicated describing the politics of the 2017 Melville precinct planning process; and the Melville Residents Association (MRA) is presented as a key stakeholder in the planning process and the 27 Boxes case. Other sections detail the origins of the 27 Boxes concept; its construction, execution, and resistance from the MRA; and, the turnaround effort underway from 2017 to the time of writing in May 2018. Additionally, a summary and analysis of discourse across 27 Boxes related media offers a public accounting of perceptions of the site.

Chapter six is a discussion of findings and considerations for implicated groups. The first finding articulates why the shift away from a larger trade area to a more local one is a teaching lesson for new market entrants. Finding two make assertions about understanding local context and aspiration as a key politic that can and will shape people’s willingness to collaborate. The final two findings explore how the novelty of the shipping containers helps abate perception of failure and the insights we can all take away from the community that has been built between the tenants themselves.

In the concluding chapter seven, a return to the discussion of 27 Boxes’ relevance to the retail development sector offering a vision and set of lessons for urban retail projects especially where the local government is a stakeholder. The section also includes a discussion of the limitations of the research scope and further research ideas.

2. Methodology and Case Selection

The city as a site of everyday practice provides valuable insights into the linkages of macroprocesses with the texture and fabric of human experience. (Low 1996)

I have always been fascinated by the question of how people in cities spend their time when they are not working, going to and from work, or sleeping. How and where do people in places wind down, hang out, and recharge? Is the space private or public? Formal or informal? Are people welcomed in the spaces they’d like to leisurely access or not? This research was inspired
by that nagging curiosity and began as an attempt to understand how public space is theorized, conceptualized, and designed in the context of an African city. Given the focus on placemaking and public life in Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Resolution 2015), the one goal galvanizing the attention and critique of global urbanists, I sought to locate a set of cases that might offer insight into the localized challenges of achieving an ambitious goal like improving quality of life through public space improvements. Following a three-month stint in Johannesburg and around Southern Africa, I was intrigued by the varying degrees with which urban public space was associated with lawlessness, crime, and unpredictability. Johannesburg when mentioned, many people from outside the city would often lament the dangers of the big city so to speak or swear off any possibility that the place had anything to offer in the way of quality of life or the kind of attractions fit for gallivanting tourists. Johannesburg’s concrete jungle reputation precedes it.

On the other hand, as a participant observer I experienced spaces in the city that were vibrant, full of activity, free of incident, and navigable to both visitors and residents alike. It became clear that there was more to unpack regarding Joburg’s reputation and the fervor with which the city holds up land use as a mechanism to rectify the afterlives of apartheid spatial planning. Taking an exploratory and inductive approach, I started with the intention to understand how public and leisure land use types (parks, malls, entertainment, and recreation) are developed and deployed in a city whose reputation is shrouded in concerns around crime and security. In the section that follows, I discuss the pathway from that starting point to the selection of 27 Boxes as a single case study.

2.1. Why Johannesburg

When it comes to understanding a society, its agency, its modes of thought and ideas, images and imaginations are as much part of the social reality as the built environment, the economic situation, or the social relations. Imaginations of a place may influence the experience of, and the agency within, a city and reveal insights into a society that go beyond the visible. Because of its long history of segregation, Johannesburg perhaps is one of the richest places to examine exactly these diverse ways of how a place, or a social group inhabiting it, is known, experience, or just imagined. (Siegenthaler 2013, 253)

From the moment I confirmed my 10-week summer internship at the University of the Witswatersrand in Johannesburg, I quickly became all too familiar with the cautions of how I was to not conduct myself while in country. Each day thereafter presented a new opportunity to confront, question, and substantiate the city’s enduring reputation as a dangerous place. Refrain from walking anywhere. Do no use public transportation. Do not visit any townships, unless part of an official group. Do not go to the neighborhood of Hillbrow. Do not loiter on the sidewalks when waiting for a taxi or rideshare. Do not take help from anyone while at an ATM. Do not walk anywhere, especially at night, even if it seems perfectly safe to do so. With so much of my
educational institution’s pre-departure advice, I wondered why Johannesburg had been approved for student travel in the first place. The picture painted for me was alarming and was further substantiated in ongoing research about things to do in the City and in conversations I had with people I deemed reasonable and trustworthy, including advisors and South Africans themselves. The city of Johannesburg seemed to be shrouded in a legacy of crime, insecurity, and fear, one that I found both pervasive and curious, legitimate in many ways yet thin in others; propagated by Black and White Americans and South Africans alike. It was this narrative through which I sought to understand the ways in which public life and public space is mitigated in the city.

I was prepared to fulfill my summer research commitment with the South African Research Chair in Spatial Analysis and City Planning where they were wrapping up a major effort to study the impact of planning outreach and engagements for selected sites in the Corridors of Freedom (CoF) project (Rubin and Appelbaum 2016), the city’s major transit-oriented development strategy. In my initial exposure to CoF, I was struck by the project’s focus on the public realm, especially the goal of spurring mixed-used development and thriving public life around transit hubs. In the Figure 4 (City of Johannesburg n.d.) visuals for the project, a vibrant commercial district is depicted with people of all ages and racial groups under the purview of ‘re-stitching the city back together’. Language in the strategy calling for the need to develop leisure, recreation, and open space was particularly compelling and something I wanted to learn more about during my time in the city. This idea that a spatial reordering of the city could facilitate a social reordering of how people would or could relate to one another in public space was an idea I wanted to investigate further. Having never visited South Africa or Johannesburg, I spent those initial months exploring the city with these questions top of mind: what does public space here mean? Where are the sites of leisure and recreation? How do people access these spaces on a daily basis? Who develops and manages these sites?

Figure 3. Pages from the CoJ Corridors of Freedom project deck. Of particular interest is the vibrant public life, the language of ‘re-stitching’ the city back together, and the focus on recreation and leisure as a strategy to achieve such aims. Images: Corridors of Freedom website http://www.corridorsoffreedom.co.za/
I finally landed at O.R. Tambo Airport after a long journey from Washington, DC. I collected myself, passed through customs at a surprisingly fast pace, gathered my things from baggage check, and proceeded to the arrivals area where I planned to hail an Uber on my phone. I saw signs for the Gautrain but remembered that I was advised not to take it. That I was weary to take this newly constructed high-speed rail train did not make sense to me, but I was not going to take any chances in my first few moments of arriving. South Africa was included in my international data plan, so I fully expected that after switching from airplane mode I would be online and on my way. To the contrary, I could not connect to the local cell carrier. Not a big deal. I’d just walk around a bit and find a signal, turn the phone on and off, switch back and forth between airplane mode; sometimes you have to do these things after being in airplane mode for hours on end. Without much luck, I began to ponder. How would I get to my Airbnb? Would I go with one of the airport cabs? Was that safe? Which were the cabs that the school told me were safe? Why didn’t I arrange someone to pick me up beforehand? Am I really about to spend three months here? Eventually, my worry gave way to a lucky brief internet connection and I connected to the airport Wi-Fi just long enough to request a ride. The driver arrived, I put all my things in the trunk and headed for the front seat where I tucked my small purse out of sight under my feet and nearly held my breath the entire ride. I had never sat in the front seat of an Uber before; not when it was just me in the ride alone, but I remember reading somewhere that doing so made it less obvious that it was a rideshare which was good because tensions between Uber drivers and the taxi industry here were high. So high that violence against Uber drivers was common. I hoped this a sufficient decoy to defer any would-be criminal incident. All I could think about was the recent fatal carjacking of an American tourist after leaving this very airport just a few weeks prior. I was advised to keep valuables out of view while riding in the car and to be on the lookout for tailing vehicles.

These were my first moments in Johannesburg. Fighting off seemingly irrational thoughts, cautions and advice, and navigating space with a vigilance that felt bigger than any single truth I could put my finger on. And so I went on for three months following this conflicted arrival moment. The initial three months were primarily exploratory. I visited several sites as a curious foreign visitor while always iterating on the research questions I might ask and acting very cautiously as a student, representative of MIT, and with a keen awareness of my being black American (often mistaken for being Coloured) and being a woman (as this affected how safe and hyper aware I felt in different circumstances).

2.2. Analysis of TripAdvisor data

During the exploratory period, I visited public parks, lifestyle markets, food hubs, heritage sites and districts, and malls. Though all the sites were publicly accessible, they varied greatly in the activities offered, frequency of patronage, location, design, and objective. To make sense of how
public space was being used, accessed, consumed, and evaluated in Johannesburg, I experimented with virtual data collection and analysis methods that might reveal the disparate views on specific public spaces and places in the city. Given the constraint of being based internationally, I designed a research project upon my return to the US that would enable me to analyze user generated content, extracted from the TripAdvisor web platform, as a complement (or potentially a substitute) to traditional participant observation.

Gehl (Gehl Institute 2016) and Whyte (Whyte 2010) propose ways to empirically observe, assess, and evaluate public spaces according to function, use, and design criteria. The methods they respectively articulate however rely heavily upon first person observation; that is, one must visit the space in person, explore it with their senses, observe it repeatedly by way of participant observation or — in Whyte’s case of the Seagram building plaza in Manhattan — by observing time lapsed recorded video footage of the space. While Whyte’s infamous study was groundbreaking for its empiricism and cutting-edge use of video footage, methods for observing, assessing, and evaluating public space seem to have evolved very little since the 1950s-landmark study. This can be viewed as a testament to the methods, that they are enduring and effective; it can also mean that there are other complementary methodologies yet to be explored. As researchers of the public realm, participatory observation is the coveted holy grail of approaches. This lack of evolution and innovation in methods was not lost on the Gehl institute who in the last several years have taken on the task of assessing public space by an elusive criterion – social mixing – or the use of space and quality of interactions between people from different economic strata. As part of this work, they prototyped a census of city streets method using geotags on photos shared on Instagram. With Instagram user data, they estimate where the user is based and then conduct cross-referencing on median income in that locality to ascertain the amount of social mixing in a particular public place. This is but one approach to gathering and deploying user-generate content (UGC) toward assessment and research of the public realm, but the method extended far beyond the scope of my interest in establishing a baseline understanding of not only who was accessing certain public spaces in Joburg, but how they characterized their experience to others. Given Joburg’s reputation, the goal here was to test whether UGC could serve as a supplement to more conventional in-person intercept surveys and surface positive or negative sentiments associated with individuals’ experiences.

At the start, I naively set out to compare data from various social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TripAdvisor (TA). As I learned more about the mechanics of accessing, compiling, cleaning, and analyzing the data from each website, it became clear that the task was too extensive. In narrowing down to a single platform, I chose TA for its longstanding reputation as a review website (founded in 2000), and unequivocally offers the richest UGC content when compared to other platforms that allow reviews for attractions in South Africa. TA claims to be the world’s largest online community for travel content and is recognized in the tourism industry as one of the key resources for destination planning by users...
who view peer user content as highly reputable and reliable (Yoo, Sigala, and Gretzel 2016). While compiling and analyzing TA and other travel site UGC data was new to me, it is a vibrant area of ongoing experimentation. UGC research is being used to understand the use and impact of travel UGC on travel planning (Gretzel and Yoo 2008), test models for extrapolating demographic data to generate segmented marketing recommendations based on user characteristics (Korfiatis and Poulos 2013), test text and sentiment analysis techniques for correlations with individual ratings (He et al. 2017), and understanding how user demographic and travel companion data affects customer satisfaction (Ahn, Park, and Yoo 2017).

Many of these methods rely upon text mining, sentiment analysis, and natural language processing techniques which allow for the analysis of individual words, bigrams, phrases, and sentences in review data. I familiarized myself with these statistical analysis methods using the data tool R and the various packages available for text mining (Robinson 2017). R allowed me to take the following steps to compile a dataset of TA reviews:

- Write a web scraping script to prescriptively fetch items from each review from the TA website (Wickham 2016). These items were rating, review date, review title, abbreviated summary of the review\(^3\), reviewer name, reviewer home location, total number of TA reviews posted by that user, and the number of fellow TA users who voted the review ‘helpful’.
- Convert this scraped data into an excel file for cleaning. Due to the inconsistency in the format TA collects user location data in, I had to manually clean and delimit many of these entries in order to accurately use this locational data. Cleaning involved removing city names from the country column and removing words that were not cities from the data altogether.
- Combine data from each of the 13 attractions that I scraped data for into a single sheet in order to compile basic descriptive statistics for the reviews.
- Convert the newly combined data into several new datasets that would allow for text mining and sentiment analysis including tidytext (Silge et al. 2018) and wordcloud (Fellows 2013).

These datasets allowed me to compare and contrast reviews across sites and from multiple vantage points. From quantity of reviews, to review scores, reviewer location, and positive/negative sentiment scores across the locations, I was able to glean that reviews for the public space typologies I was concerned with were overwhelmingly positive and negative scores were associated with words that were not contextually negative, as can be seen in the Figure 5 wordcloud.

Looking at the sites in the aggregate was very helpful in seeing just how difficult and

\(^3\) A key limitation of not using an API was the inability to scrape the text for the full review. For this experiment, I used the text available in each review before the ‘Read more’ command.
surprising working with this kind of data can be. While I hoped using UGC would reveal something about the perception of fear and crime in public and semi-private spaces, I found that concerns about safety and security were not particularly salient at all. There was an overrepresentation of users based in South Africa, and qualitatively, it was not always clear how different a rating of two, three, and four were. As a supplemental input in a more robust public space evaluation and assessment protocol, TA offers an interesting foil to test assumptions and discover unexpected insights. What is perhaps most powerful is that TA can be drawn upon to corroborate, challenge, and further animate prevailing or counter narratives about places, which in my case was useful because it helped debunk the validity of my assumptions that people in Joburg were fearful enough that they might communicate as such on a platform like TripAdvisor.

![Wordcloud](image)

**Figure 4.** Wordcloud of most frequent positive and negative sentiments for all sites. See Appendix X for a full list of sites and descriptive statistics for each.

### 2.3. Selecting a single case study

Of the sites I visited and analyzed as part of the TripAdvisor exploration, I wanted to focus more closely on a subset of at least three cases. However, due to schedule and funding constraints, my fieldwork schedule was long enough to focus only on a single case rather than a subset. After consulting research colleagues based in Johannesburg and conducting a scan of published literature and student research on topics related to public space, local economic development, lifestyle markets, and urban regeneration, I selected 27 Boxes. There was little research on local economic development projects in Johannesburg suburbs and the project seemed to be at an important inflection point redefining its success, identity, commercial feasibility, and relationship to the surrounding Melville community. It was neither a mall, market, nor a public park, yet it was attempting to be all simultaneously. As a practical matter, the
permanence of the structure made it a more feasible site for participant observation over a short period of time unlike the transient weekly markets across the city. Lastly, the nontraditional location – in the middle of one of the city’s most popular suburbs – made its so-called lack of success even more compelling to research further and understand the extent to which a retail property could thrive in a neighborhood setting.

2.4. Case study method
While initially discouraged and concerned about the potential validity of this research given the focus on a single case, I found great solace in the literature where case studies are endorsed for their depth and attention to nuance, especially in the African context. Flyvbjerg traces the origins of conventional wisdom on the so-called limitations of case study research to debunk these misconceptions and argue that case study research contributes important depth and contextual richness upon which social science disciplines should be based (2006). When the African Association of Planning Schools (AAPS) embarked on a curriculum revitalization and reform process, they doubled down on first thinking critically about the value of case study research in planning pedagogy and then promoting the approach in research and teaching (Duminy 2014). AAPS’ interest in transforming pedagogy emerges from a desire to see more African planners who are planning with and not against the realities of urban life as a counter to a more technocratic Northern centric planning pedagogy that does not take into account the different histories of Southern cities (2014). Watson contends that the ability to understand planning systems in the global South is predicated on alternative theoretical approaches to understanding the multiple ‘competing rationalities’ shaping and being produced by urban life (2009). These such rationalities are complex and constituted by forces that are not necessarily foregrounded in analyses of the global North, and therefore not only require us to engage a politic of seeing from the south as she terms it, but that we employ and encourage methods that make these forces legible through interpretation and thick description (Geertz and Darnton 2017). Conversely, scholars (Ong 2011; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Pieterse, Simone, and University of Cape Town 2013) offer perspectives that studying African cities can also serve as an exercise in understanding cities around the world; they embrace the possibility that Africa is neither intrinsically like or unlike other places, but that it is through discourse, ethnographic exploration, and creative reinterpretations of the mundane and the specific that we can draw cities together and/or articulate their particularities relative to one another.

This discussion of the validity of case study research, the expressed theoretical imperatives for case study research in African cities, the assertion that there are important nuanced local dynamics to unpack, and that there is still the possibility that such findings might be generalizable for understanding elsewhere (both Southern and Northern) is a discussion that permeates throughout this entire thesis.
2.5. Media analysis

To understand how the center came to be, it was necessary to piece together a bigger story from a wide range of media sources. Similar to drawing upon TripAdvisor data for salient insights, taking an inventory of media and press related to 27 Boxes was an important step in understanding the timeline, history, individuals, and agencies involved in the project. In the aggregate, the media provided a window into the ways in which the site’s identity was imagined, constructed, and projected to reify the spectacular promise of alternative shopping. The process of inventoring and analyzing reporting and press about the site was straightforward and involved conducting internet searches for 27 Boxes related news and press items. I conducted searches from the US as well as during my time in Johannesburg to account for the disparate results. I bookmarked every article, press release, and web page I could find before reviewing each one more closely for relevance, substance, and differentiation (to ensure each piece was unique and not simply a reproduction of another on a different website). In total I analyzed 15 pieces by looking at the photos included, date published, type of document, and a summary of the key themes which enabled me to compare these basic features across the whole set. Using this information, I was able to mentally map out a timeline of the project from conception to present day and corroborate information I heard from several informants. A preliminary read of many of these references were crucial to creating a preliminary list of interviewees.

2.6. Semi-structured interviews

In preparation for 2.5 weeks of fieldwork in January 2018, I created an initial list of potential interviewees and stakeholder groups to be represented among the pool. Initial names were compiled from previous desktop analyses of media and user generated content. A snowball method (Noy 2008) was embraced to further fill out the list. I solicited recommendations from Wits colleagues and interviewees who upon reaching out and/or meeting, provided additional names and organizations to include. For 27 Boxes shop interviewees, I approached people in person and also sent individual interview requests by email to shop owners whose email addresses were available on the 27 Boxes marketing website. In total, I reached out to about 42 people and formally interviewed 31 people. An abbreviated summary of individuals I spoke with are below. See Appendix 8.1 for a list of all interviewees.

- 2 primary developers engaged in the project
- 13 tenants (a mix of owners and some workers)
- 5 CoJ staff from across the JDA, City Parks, and Development Planning Office
- 4 researchers whose areas of expertise and personal reflections were helpful in understanding the broader forces at play in the city. Across them, I learned about street trading and informality in the City, public space, streets, and representations of the city, social cohesion policy and programming, and urban regeneration in the inner city.

See appendix 8. 3 for a basic table of this summary data.
• 2 NGO leaders at organizations focusing on participatory planning

2.7. Literature Review

Because 27 Boxes seemed to facilitate a market-like pop up environment on a permanent and daily basis, I considered a wide range of literature in this research. In addition to the theoretical topics underpinning my conceptual framework further discussed in chapter three, material about security, urban planning practices in the global South, local economic development, urban tourism, and retail industry perspectives were consulted.

In making the choice to winnow down from this broad list of topics, which each offered compelling points of view for the case, it was important to bound my analysis with concepts that were suitable to a more qualitative approach to help make sense of the insights surfaced from my experiences as a participant observer. In addition, Joburg’s municipal slogan and the city’s expressed intent to use planning policy to counter apartheid spatial planning were important inspirations for this project that I wanted to use as filters for understanding the dynamics of the case. The conceptual framework in this view represents three discrete analytics through which I interpreted the data collected.

The first helped frame the interface between urban public space theory and the role and function of the shopping mall. If you consider what malls actually provide: they are clean, safe, secure, orderly, and offer a predictable experience which in many contexts, are welcome additions to the urban fabric that are not always found in more traditional urban public spaces. When it comes to places of consumption like malls, there is a self-selection that occurs among those who see the space as suitable for their own preferences and/or exclusionary practices that regulate who is permitted to access and use the space. Class then becomes an important mitigating factor for who patronizes which places and it is not uncommon to see a bifurcation of patrons by class on the spectrum of informal to formal, and edge suburb to dense inner city spaces. This is an important tension at work in the case when one considers the challenges and opportunities of deferring to retail as a strategy for facilitating social integration.

The next concept takes a step back to consider that it is not only South Africa targeting public space as a conduit for social transformation, but that it is occurring at the international level. The UN, World Bank, and major NGOs are on board with this instrumentality of public space where it is seen as a means toward achieving development ends. The SDG public open space target instantiates the durability of this concept for years to come. The reason this lens is important is because it opens up the conversation about what happens when you take these global ideals about planning and development practice and situate them in the local context. What happens, how do locals respond, and how can we understand this conversation between the local and global to increase the efficacy of public space interventions?
The third and final analytic examines Johannesburg’s aspiration to become a spatially just world class African city. While the phrase is immensely complex, the research benefitted from meandering through the nuances of ‘spatially just’, ‘world class’, and ‘African city’.

3. Conceptual Framing

3.1. Urban public space and the shopping mall

*Public spaces are all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive. Each public space has its own spatial, historic, environmental, social, and economic features.* (‘Charter of Public Space’ 2013)

Urban theorists have articulated that public space is a human right (Harvey 2003) and crucial to democracy (Mitchell 1995). In an effort correlate DIY urbanism with notions of ‘right to the city’ and political claims to freedom and protest, Iveson asserts that merely appropriating space for tactical and functional objectives does not equate to a new counter-state urban politic (2013), but at least offers citizens the space and possibility to engender new politics and new forms of resistance and challenging power (Iveson 2013). This is just one instance where urban scholars try to capture and articulate the reality, promise, and ambiguity about what exactly to do with and in public space; and, to what end? In spite of its physical and theoretical ubiquity, public space is not always easily delineated from private space or general social space in practice; and in the case of cities, issues of legal ownership, security, and management transform how open and accessible spaces seem. It is this gray area of urban public space that Harvey, Mitchell, and Iveson are attempting to theorize toward some broader notion of inclusion and equity. These questions of spatial equity, access, and openness are critical to the case of 27 Boxes which while it is on publicly owned land, its primary shopping orientation renders it somewhat not as open, accessible, and equitable.

The most widely accepted definition of public space is a place that is open and accessible to the public. Within that definition, there is room for explication, interpretation, and debate over concepts like ‘place’, ‘open’, ‘accessible’, and ‘public’. UNESCO goes further to assert that accessibility extends to people regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic status (UNESCO n.d.) which suggests that accessibility and contestation over who is permitted and excluded, either by design or enforcement, is a global concern. An even more specific definition is the opening quote for this section. Notably, it is also the official definition of reference for UN-Habitat (Habitat), but elsewhere in the document it is acknowledged that typologies of public spaces in the city can include public programming functions like hosting markets and accessible commercial activities (“Charter of Public Space” 2013). From a practitioner standpoint, this spectrum of definitions provides for an expansive approach to creating and managing public space that might include more hybrid ownership structures like
that of the case; or, for more staunch advocates, could support a targeted campaign for publicly owned and non-commercial open spaces.

Different public space typologies, like streets, plazas, parks, squares, and gardens are seen as key features of the city facilitating the movement of people and goods, social interaction and chance encounters, and the production of a distinctive milieu that lends itself to the character and identity of a place (Garau 2015). What then are we to make of spaces that are maintained by private entities for public use? Or places whose function is primarily consumption, but open to the public and contain welcomed features such as parks and gardens? Or in the case of 27 Boxes, a privately managed shopping center on publicly owned land that was formerly a park? The shopping mall paradigm as Graham and Aurigi refer to it, concerns the zeitgeist of urban modernity where citizens seem to welcome the “theming” of urban space by way of the application of the logics of shopping malls which confine public social life to a single location, within certain daily hours, and prescribe acceptable activities (Graham and Aurigi 1997). The authors argue that the seemingly “trouble-free, clean, ideal places have the appearance of being ‘public’” precisely in order to maximize consumption of goods (1997).

In instances where local governments lack the capacity to secure, clean, and maintain publicly owned spaces, public spaces pose significant challenges to local authorities and residents alike. In South Africa, public space and the historical restriction of nonwhite people’s access to and through it makes contemporary visions of public spaces hugely political and contested. In various policy documents at the national, provincial, and municipal levels of government, public space is articulated as a tool to achieve a multiplicity of objectives. The national level Department of Arts and Culture manages the nation’s social cohesion strategy, which is both a nation-building exercise and invariably attentive to activities that facilitate cross-racial and class mixing in space. Former President Jacob Zuma remarked that the 2010 Fifa World Cup was a social cohesion investment (Zuma 2012) which afforded significant local investments in parks and recreation infrastructure (Barolsky et al. 2011). In Joburg 2040, the CoJ’s long range growth and development strategy, public space is mentioned among strategies to eradicate poverty, improving community safety, and enhancing livability (Central Strategy Unit 2011). South Africa’s prioritization of using public space to achieve more social integration and improved quality of life presents a puzzle and opportunity for projects like 27 Boxes, that straddle the public and private realm. While the resources for infrastructure maintenance and security are there, the consumption activities provide for both a self-selection of who accesses the space and the opportunity to exclude who should access the space. As I will argue though, it is the public ownership of the land that further exacerbates the contestation of the space and opens up new opportunities for imagining ways in which state, market, and resident interests might be aligned.

3.2. Public space as a tool in international development practice
The inner city is important because of overcrowding. It’s a health thing. What’s the link between nice public space and economic opportunities? As a city we don’t really understand that public space is the backbone of a city. If I had the luxury of safe public space I would walk more. We have health issues here in South Africa and we aren’t doing enough. How can we use public space to educate citizens? This issue of budgets, we have the money. Social development has a big budget, but they don’t use parks. Mobile health clinic being done; how can we see social work and legal services [being addressed in the mobile clinic]? What if we could see public space as a place for those services? (CoJ City Parks & Zoo 2018)

When the international development community turned its attention toward the 21st century challenge of urbanization, they made a huge transition from the more place-agnostic Millennium Development Goals to the expansive Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) very much grounded in place. The introduction of public space as the backbone of cities and as a key lever for addressing a host of crime, safety, health, social, and environmental challenges brought on and/or exacerbated by urbanization has grown into a fairly concerted bilateral effort. In 2011, the UN passed a resolution mandating that Habitat focus more intently on public space and its potential contribution to sustainable urban development (UN-Habitat 2018). That same year, Habitat and Projects for Public Spaces, an active nonprofit advocate for placemaking and public space development, entered into a five-year cooperation agreement to raise international awareness of the importance of public space (Garau 2015).

**SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable**

SDG 11, Target 7 (11.7): By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities (“Goal 11 SDG Knowledge Platform” n.d.)

By the time the SDGs were approved in 2015, the celebrated ‘cities’ goal, SDG 11, target seven was officially enshrined as the commitment to urban public space for years to come. Even still, in the February 2015 proposal for a monitoring indicator for target 11.7, there is an important delineation made that public open space does not include open spaces under private ownership (UN-Habitat 2015), such that open recreation and leisure spaces created on privately owned sites that house mixed use or retail land uses would not count in the UN’s reporting scheme. Subsequently, places like 27 Boxes would be lost in this calculation despite its richness from a case study standpoint. To this I would argue that there is some utility in capturing this information somewhere, even if it doesn’t count towards a city’s real open green space.

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5 The shared definition of placemaking used by Projects for Public Spaces and UN-Habitat reads: ‘a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value. More than just promoting better urban design, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution.’
The internationalization of placemaking as a principle of sustainable urban development renders public space an instrument through which developmental means are to be achieved for all cities, not just for places like South Africa whose history necessitates that public space be used to redress the wounds of the past. The delineation and visioning for what exactly those means and ends should be are left to the deliberation of local planning and development practitioners. One of the central questions for this research is to understand what work is done to subsume global planning priorities into the local social-spatial order of the day. Who is consulted in the design and execution of such projects? Where is there alignment and divergence between these normative international approaches and local development priorities and aspirations? Habitat had the foresight to anticipate these very questions and addresses many in the 2015 *Global Public Space Toolkit: From Global Principles to Local Policies and Practice* (Garau 2015). The toolkit provides a more granular set of directives around how to audit and assess the availability and quality of public space, mobilize the public, and leverage planning policy interventions to secure commitments to such projects (2015). In contrast with the case however, much of the language around public space tells a binary story about the dearth of quality spaces in poorer places and more amenity rich middle and upper class areas. 27 Boxes’ location in the Melville suburb is a particularity not addressed in the literature’s positioning of public space interventions in more densely populated areas and/or places where the urban poor live.

Johannesburg occupies a special place in the UN global cities order. The City’s land use and urban growth management plan, the revised Spatial Development Framework (SDF) approved in 2016, was a product of collaboration between the City and multiple international development partners, including UN-Habitat. In the plan’s introductory remarks, Joan Clos the Executive Director of Habitat enthusiastically endorsed the SDF’s participatory design process and its overarching vision citing it as an international benchmark and a new model of sustainable urbanization (City of Johannesburg: Department of Development Planning 2016). Mpho Parks Tau, Executive Mayor of Johannesburg at the time, articulated that the primary objective of the plan was “to transform Johannesburg into a spatially just world class African city” (2016). That the CoJ sees local planning and land use as a tool for transforming the social-spatial order of the city, and that this strategy and objective is endorsed as an exemplar for sustainable international urban development, the CoJ’s planning priorities are simultaneously local and global; the intent is both context-specific and geopolitical existing at the intersection of local space, urban management and global spectacle. Conversely, while 27 Boxes may be a unique case, Johannesburg’s local-global orientation suggests there is something for this global public space practitioner community to gain from the case study. As will become clear in the chapter five discussion of the case, the competing vision for what the center should be (as expressed by the developer(s) and the residents) is very much in conversation with this global aspiration on the one hand, and the politics of local planning on the other.
3.3. World class city and southern urbanisms

In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don’t get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. (Wainaina 2006)

One, if not the most prominent milestones in the historiography of South Africa is 1994, the year marking the collapse of the apartheid state and the country’s first democratic elections. This was just 24 years ago, so recent that the promise of this transformative moment is ever present in the rhetoric of local and national politics and collective memory. People sometimes refer to this time in the shorthand as ‘94; or in a tongue and cheek way, ‘the new South Africa’ denoting the moment as precipice. As a first-time visitor and late millennial, I had only a vague sense of this history which I picked up from readings, film, and other creative formulations of what happened in and to this place. Even still, when a history is not your own, it can feel quite distant and unfamiliar. Or simply, like history.

To that end, I was struck at just how palpable these histories of struggle, injustice and follow-on deliberation were for many of the people whom I crossed paths with. This palpability was not merely because these individuals recalled the past or passively recollect the past during milestone moments of remembrance. It was because this history is etched onto the urban fabric and is mostly inescapable in public life. More importantly though, this past is continuously and politically enacted and re-enacted (SiHlongonyane 2016) in the reconstituting of its identity as a place. As I will discuss in chapter four, Johannesburg was the city for which the brute strength of apartheid was applied like a blunt force object, direct and forceful. A city of opportunity and a symbol of industrial strength and capitalist legitimacy; the new South Africa would embark on a journey to recast the image of its most important urban center beginning in 1995 to the present day. It is with that history of recasting in mind, that this section opens with a quote from the infamous Wainaina satire How to Write About Africa, since the politics of city identity making in this case are rooted in a reclamation of ‘Africa’ the imagined other, and the ‘world class city’ a projecting of proximity to a more familiar and legitimate global imaginary.

By one interpretation, Johannesburg’s aspiration to become a world class African city was brought on by international, national, and local pressures on the new government to project competence, be globally competitive, and exude a cosmopolitan urban character (SiHlongonyane 2016). In the new South Africa, the associations of the myopic ‘Africa’, that of failed or corrupt states and populations infinitely embroiled in anti-modern lives of deprivation – much akin to Wainaina’s construction – needed to be disabused. The 2016 proclamation in the Col’s SDF to become a spatially just world class African city is the latest in a series of other aspirational

Harkening back to the relevance of Johannesburg in the global cities order, scholars have pointed out that appeals toward a world class city-ness can represent many things simultaneously. That the world city is a useful framework for interrogating the relationship between the changing spatial organization of cities, the onset of shifts in the international division of labor in the 1980s, and the more local political dynamics in places (Friedmann 1986). The relentless drive to stand out against other cities, deemed a ‘competitive angst’ as one key feature of world city politics in addition to a dominant culture of cosmopolitanism which privileges English and particular patterns of consumption (Friedmann 1995). And, that the term global city denotes something quite distinct from historical connotations of world cities, but that some cities can be one or both exhibiting attributes of cosmopolitan old world places and/or being important nodes for the flow of transnational business capital (Sassen 2004). With such a focus on theorizing the city through the lens of globalization and changes in the international ordering of economic exchange, it is no wonder that post-colonial urban theory and southern urbanists have resisted the urge to deduce that local politics are wholly constituted by these more contemporary macroeconomic shifts as opposed to more historical factors like colonialism and imperialism for example. This latter turn toward reclaiming narratives about Africa’s present, its past, and its future is an important mechanism by which the city of Johannesburg attempts to recast its image in the global order of cities post 1994. This framing is central in the following chapter’s discussion on the politics of aspiration in the post-apartheid city.

So far, I have explored what public space is and its social and cultural functions as debated in theory and practice to illustrate the treatment of commercial and consumption functions in public spaces. Then, an exploration of the ways in which public space has been assigned a very instrumental function toward achieving the Global Goals\(^6\) to highlight how globally inspired projects are implemented in local contexts. Thereafter, a discussion of what it means for cities to appeal and aspire to these internationalisms, either in branding or practice, by engaging with various literatures on world cities and southern urban theory. Taking these three conceptual angles together, public space and consumption, placemaking and sustainable development, and world class African urbanism, I want to articulate the 27 Boxes case as a scenario in which a retail site is instrumentalized to improve urban quality of life and social relations.

4. **Background & Urban Context**

\(^6\) The SDGs are sometimes referred to as the Global Goals.
For more than a century, such choreographies of opposing forces have shaped and reshaped the cityscape, leaving behind layers upon layers of detritus that once hardened and ossified, become difficult to dislodge without some as-yet-undiscovered Herculean effort. Johannesburg is an invented city, struggling valiantly to keep apace with global trends; from its inception it has always led a double life. (Murray 2011, 5)

Johannesburg today remains an important economic engine for South Africa and Africa writ large since its industrialization turn. As the once thriving mining and manufacturing sectors decline however, the growth in financial services and the knowledge economy while celebrated are recognized as insufficient to create opportunity and prosperity for those who need it most, a population that is only growing (Rogerson and Rogerson 2015). It is argued that the bleak financial outlook on economic growth spawned an era of ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ that coincided with much more proactive economic development strategies intending to spur growth, investment attraction, tourism, and job creation through small, medium and micro-enterprise (SMME) policies (2015).

![Figure 5. Gauteng, the darkest blue area just under Limpopo, is significantly smaller in land size area relative to the other provinces yet is home to a quarter of the country’s residents. Image: Stat SA](image)

According to 2011 census data, the city’s total population is 4.4M. If you consider the broader Gauteng metropolitan area, the population is 12.3M and about 24% of the population nationally (Statistics South Africa 2012). As you can see in Figure 6, the land area of Gauteng
relative to the other provinces is quite limited. Nationally, black Africans make up about 80% of
the total population and Gauteng is no exception with about 77% black Africans. These quick
statistics offer a small window into how powerful and broad reaching apartheid politics must
have been for such a small white minority to physically reorder the urban fabric to accommodate
nationalist visions for separation of racial groups. No discussion of space in South Africa is
complete without some explication of these histories that link race, space, class, and contest.

Further, to understand the contemporary perception and function of public space in
Johannesburg, a brief historical accounting of the contrasting urban forms that have evolved up
to the present day is in order. That is, the colonial, industrial, apartheid, and post-apartheid city.
In each urban period, the politics among different groups are expressed and reinforced through
the economic system of the time. A discussion of the social, political, and economic ordering of
these distinct urbanisms will help situate the present-day politicization of the prevailing social-
spatial order of Johannesburg as it manifests at the municipal and neighborhood levels in the
case.

4.1. Colonial SA city
The region of southern Africa was first colonized by Europeans in 1652 when Dutch merchants
settled on the Cape to run a filling station of sorts for transiting ships making their way around
the Cape of Good Hope. The Dutch with their agricultural know how set up farm businesses to
supply food and other wears to seamen making the long journey to and from East Africa, South
Asia, and across the Indian Ocean. People were imported to the Cape from various Dutch
colonies as slave labor which coincided with a steady inflow of European settlers and the
emergence of the mixed-race community known as the Cape Coloureds. The British, slow to
settle in the Cape until some 200 years following in 1806 and in Natal by 1843, brought with
them an oppositional politics that incited decades of conflict with the Dutch farmers, or Boers as
they were called. Over time, the Dutch began settling further inland from the Cape eventually
establishing the independent republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State by the 1850s
through conquest and occupation, but also instigated by growing tensions between the Dutch
Boers and British. These social, spatial, and political dimensions of colonial and pre-industrial life
– the European chain settlement, differentiated labor specialization among groups, tensions
between white settlers, subjugation of laborers and slaves, and dispossession of native lands
(Davies 1981) – remain inscribed on the contemporary urban landscape of Cape Town, the
earliest South African city.

4.2. Industrial SA city
This history stands in contrast to the urban form of Johannesburg. The 1869 discovery of
diamonds in Kimberley and 1886 discovery of gold in the Witswatersrand ushered in a drastically
different political economy grounded in some of the same factors underpinning the social order
of the colonial city, but also transformed by the sheer scale of mineral extraction and agglomeration of international capital (Davies 1981). By the mid 1800s, the southern Africa region was subdivided into colonies governed by a smattering of groups. The Boers having been settled in the region for some two centuries had begun self-identifying as Afrikaners. The British Empire, newer to the region and still operating under the Crown’s mandate of respectability, ‘engaged in its final bout of expansionism’ (Burdett 2006, chap. The View From Outside) had long felt a sense of superiority over the Boers and other groups. These competing and antagonistic identity politics underpinned both the social and spatial order of the day.

The City of Johannesburg was founded in 1886 and the landscape was radically transformed as the population grew and the less dense urban form gave way to more dense settlement patterns. As the region became an increasingly attractive and strategic asset, the British Empire under pressure to remain an economically dominant imperial power, sought to consolidate the various Boer republics and independent African groups under a single confederation. The pursuit of collapsing colonies under British rule led to a string of conflicts between the British and the Boers and Africans. The Boers wanted to maintain their hard-earned sovereignty over local lands while the British wanted to entrench their economic dominance as a colonial world power. This disparate local-global politics as expressed through the conflict between the two white settler groups is an interesting parallel to the various local-global frictions in contemporary Johannesburg. If for no other reason, this historical analog is useful because it helps reinforce that Johannesburg, the site of global capital flows and industrial muscle has been ensconced in this global city politic since the 1800s, perhaps because of its making under industrial capitalism.

The 1910 South Africa Act was passed after decades of tension and conflict between groups over lands in the central and eastern part of the region. Under this act, the colonies (Cape, Transvaal, Orange Free State, and Natal) were united to form the Union of South Africa. Johannesburg rapidly urbanized over this period and eventually became a global leader in gold extraction. The scale of wealth flowing in and out of the city, the massive influx of black labor particularly, and the pace at which the city’s physical form was being remade to support this explosive capitalist enterprise cannot be understated.

Johannesburg emerged under quite different conditions than Cape Town. The colonial city was pre-industrial and therefore not as viciously contested as Joburg quickly became. The industrial city in contrast, was settled by way of coercive contestation and conquest, and subsequently shaped by the aggressive agglomeration of capital, induced labor, intense migration and population growth. The imperatives of optimizing productivity and carefully facilitating mutually reinforcing concessions among the powerful class of white elites (Davies 1981), Johannesburg, the city of gold, came to represent a place for which the British industrial elites and self-governing Boers would consolidate and align their historically oppositional politics to fully reap the benefits of the extraction economy (The Economist 1999). This recalibrating of
the upper rungs of social hierarchy was co-constituted by the politics of exclusion, disenfranchisement, and the stifling of opportunities for non-white groups, especially black Africans, who were the majority. The newly consolidated white political regime quickly began implementing laws that reinforced white superiority, like restricting non-whites from skilled mining jobs (Mines and Works Act of 1911) and prohibiting Africans from owning land (Native Lands Act of 1913).

From the union of South Africa in 1910 on, the city continued to expand and urbanize rapidly and settlement patterns followed a more or less organic ordering by race, class, and ethnicity. While the city was segregated during this time, it was moreso brought on by public policies that favored white access to – and ownership of – land in urban areas. The over articulation of urban space as white residential space meant that accommodations for Africans were less robust, poorly defined, and in some cases undefined altogether (Davies 1981). The lack of concerted policy attention to address housing and living conditions for a growing African population culminated in the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act, legislation relegating Africans to live in special areas and restricting their access to urban space altogether. This was the first of a series of segregationist policies that would come to be known as the pillars of apartheid.

4.3. Apartheid city

Johannesburg’s mining proposition and the labor intensity of that work, African populations were drawn to the city both for the promise of work, but also because of the gradual constrictions imposed on their access to land and subsistence lifestyles in the rural areas they called home. In the period between 1910 and the election of the Afrikaner National Party (NP) in 1948, the NP’s nationalist ideology and separation doctrine evolved over time and manifested in a string of laws passed up to the election and then immediately following. The apartheid city was the site for which full measures of social control, exclusion, and disenfranchisement were exercised against all non-white groups, but along a continuum on which black labor, culture, autonomy, and claims to land were completely suppressed.

The impacts and consequences of the apartheid political order are exhaustively documented (Smith 2003) and requires no significant additional explication for this thesis except to draw correlation to Melville’s bohemian character, which in anecdotes with interviewees and others, is unanimously described as a quirky and alternative place in light of what I can intuit as something different; or, the rigid racial segregation that defined other parts of the city. That black mobility to and through urban space was regulated and suppressed is only one feature of the extent to which apartheid undermined the prospective of black land ownership, wealth accumulation, labor mobility, and educational attainment. Forced removals relegated non-whites to areas where there was little business and commercial activity, public space, and transport except to and from highly restrictive spaces for which they were only deferred to as labor. Under apartheid, public space was the site through which social separation, contestation,
and disenfranchisement were enacted and this is why the CoJ’s effort to reclaim it to rectify these legacies is so central to this research.

4.4. Post-apartheid city and the politics of aspiration

_In order to meet our goals of creating a city that benefits all of its residents, we must be determined and steadfast in applying our SDF. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past, of residential dormitories located far from economic opportunities, sprawling gated communities, and extending infrastructure to service inefficient, sprawled development. With continued work, dedication, and vigilant application, our SDF will transform Johannesburg into a spatially just world class African city._ (SDF 2040 2016)

The City of Johannesburg (CoJ) has been deploying future-focused and aspirational language in various urban strategy policies dating back to the mid 1990s as described in chapter three. The quote above was yet another attempt to solidify the city’s commitment to shedding its reputation as fragmented, segregated, and inefficient. It is the concluding excerpt from Mayor Mpho Parks Tau’s celebratory remarks in the revised Spatial Development Framework, 2040 (SDF), a 174-page document laying out a vision and set of policy strategies for future land use planning and development. In June 2016, the CoJ celebrated the adoption of the revised SDF and no more than two months later, for the first time since the inaugural democratic elections in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) was defeated by the Democratic Alliance (DA) candidate Herman Masheba. What is most important about this political sea change is the tension between the ANC’s doctrine of aspiration and the DA’s doctrine of service provision and local operational excellence. In 2000, the ANC adopted the municipal slogan, a world class African city which was the slogan up until very recently before the DA changed it to ‘A Joburg that works is a South Africa that works’.

The newly elected party has employed discourse that is far less globally oriented and focuses more on service provision and redress. The ANC’s electoral casualties at the municipal level have been attributed to the deteriorating trust in ANC national leadership, namely South Africa’s most recently ousted Jacob Zuma who has been widely accused of corruption and patronage for years on end. These tenuous relationships between the national government and the provincial and municipal administrations are an important dimension to understanding why the municipality would bet the future social, economic, and environmental sustainability of the city on its steadfast application and adherence to a visionary and future-looking land use plan. Whether this is due to the era of ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ or a belief that land use is the best tool at the municipality’s disposal, land use planning, once the great tool of segregationist intervention, is invoked as the primary tool through which this past can be rectified. Another possible function for such rhetoric asserts that the ANC’s early embrace of participatory planning practices was a way to consolidate their power of the city, acting more as a long term campaign
strategy rather than an earnest approach to transforming the city (Lipietz 2008). That through ‘continued work, dedication, and vigilant application’, Johannesburg can be transformed ‘into a spatially just world class African city’ is not simply a rhetorical device for the municipality, but it permeates the discourse and politics at play in the envisioning of what 27 Boxes should remake itself into, and for whom. I will refer to this municipal level appeal to world class-ness as the politics of aspiration.

In light of the transition from the ANC to the DA and the noticeably divergent rhetoric being deployed, the city is learning what it means when power toggles between oppositional parties. Shifting from a world class city narrative to ‘waging a war on potholes’ as was one such characterization of Masheba’s agenda, paring down the optimism and hope with which the city imagines itself to something much more practical and pragmatic is the work of a new urban governance regime. Notwithstanding the impossibility of knowing whether these tactics will be evaluated as effective or successful in the long run, this political sea change in and of itself is a significant enough disruption in the political order of the city that this research would be incomplete without considering. Just as the city was once characterized and ordered around the capitalist industrial economy, and the social-spatial political economy of apartheid, such a disruption in any dimension of the city’s social-spatial order could very well set the stage for a post-world class African city Johannesburg; or, whatever the next period of the city’s urban form may be organized around. While this ANC-DA dynamic is not central to the thesis of the 27 Boxes case, the gravity of the first non-ANC governance regime unfolding concurrently alongside a major existential inflection point for the project is important. That the reimagining of what retail can be and do for the Melville community suddenly coincides with a shift in governance rhetoric that affirms (and not subverts) community members’ very localized aspirations for the site makes for a richer case study.

27 Boxes provides a window into an alternative collaborative planning model through which local economic development projects might be executed. While the SDF is enshrined as city policy, its vision, aspiration, and the discourse it employs are co-constituted by these broader macro political realities. In the sections to come, I will consider the agency, autonomy, and constraints that nongovernmental actors are operating under in lieu of the tension between these politics of global aspiration (world class African city) and the localized politics of neighborhood planning and development (spatial justice). Subsequent analyses draw connections between a prism of factors attributed to the perceived failure of the project and the subsequent turnaround effort of this experimental suburban retail project, which follows a similar political arc as the municipal political transition.

5. **27 Boxes Case Study**
The neighborhood is cherished for very different reasons: because it has places of encounter where people reaffirm each other as who they are, or comment on the day’s events; because life has a certain rhythm with which all are familiar and to which all expectantly look forward; because there are places that are “sacred” to the people; and because there are places of gathering where events important to the community transpire. (Friedmann 2010, 162)

Crucial to the dynamics at play in the 27 Boxes case is the Melville neighborhood. Its brand as a tourism and leisure node, its location right on the edge of the CBD, and its bohemian and progressive reputation are part of why it is cherished and contested. If I borrow from Freidmann, the “sacred” places in Melville are a network of private gated homes and the liminal unenclosed public spaces connecting together these residential uses into a singular urban fabric. What occurs in these spaces, and who makes use of them are a great source of trepidation for some residents which I will argue is at the heart of the turnaround effort to make the center into an asset that serves residents first and foremost.


7 Here I am referring to the broad definition of public spaces like sidewalks, roads, plazas, and gardens to name a few.
27 Boxes is abutted on all four sides by residences and is just a half block from the terminus of the 7th Street strip. Faan Smit Park, having fallen into disrepair (MRA Interviewee 1 2018) and becoming a haven for undesirables, remains a symbol that continues to animate the landscape of contest and possibility for how 27 Boxes should remake itself as a retail center and public space for the community’s enjoyment. The center opened its doors in July 2015 and by the time I was conducting fieldwork at the site in January 2018, much had transpired. During the first six months after opening, there was a tremendous excited energy following the launch and the center thrived. 2016 was described as a troubled year for managing tenant turnover, marketing, structural and design flaws, and security. And by the end of 2016, occupancy dropped as low as 30% (27B Tenant 2 2018) and it was at that point where remaining tenants and Melville residents began rallying to chart a new path forward for the center. What follows is an account of the center’s fraught trajectory constructed from media and data gathered from interviewees. The section begins with a discussion of the 2017 precinct plan development process facilitated by the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), a primer on the resident association, and an accounting of the origin story, construction and launch, and finally the turnaround effort. A summary and analysis of discourse in 27 Boxes related media as one particular public perceptions of the site.

5.1. Precinct Planning and the Melville Residents Association (MRA)

*I believe that the residential amenity in Melville is under siege. If one looks at the map of Melville, it appears as though what this precinct plan might produce is further compromises for the residential amenities. That is of great concern to me. I serve on the MRA because I am concerned about the residents’ interests, about our properties and about our life. I haven’t heard one thing which directly benefits the present residents of Melville except public walking spaces and public transport. And I simply don’t believe the character of Melville will remain the same if what I*
suspect is going to happen, happens. We have a beautiful village-like character in Melville which I am afraid might be compromised and eventually disappear with too much interference.

(Resident “JDA Melville PP Public Meeting Part 2” 2017, pt. 7:25)

Notice the terms deployed in the above quote. The ‘residential amenity’ is ‘under siege’; the resident is concerned about his and his neighbors’ properties and lives; and that the ‘character’ of the neighborhood is subject to compromise, and even worse, disappearance if any of the proposed development strategies are enacted. At one meeting in a series of public neighborhood meetings open to ‘anyone with an interest in Melville’ (2017), this resident expressed an impassioned objection to the process by which the JDA was soliciting input from the community. The JDA was being accused of merely ticking the box without taking resident input into account.

Once we have a plan, it is a plan that needs to be agreed to by as many stakeholders as possible, not just a plan that we put out and ask for your comments and submit to Council’s approval and that’s the last time you see it. The reason for a precinct plan is that it informs Council where cap ex should be spent. Cap ex on bulk infrastructure, on pavements, on upgrade of parking areas, on everything. For that reason, we need to have an approved precinct plan. If we don’t have that Melville basically falls off the radar and not much cap is coming to this community...Sir, I understand appreciate your cynicism in this process but rest assured that we want to delve as deep as possible on what is the future of Melville, what it is supposed to be, and how are we going to get there. (Botes, “JDA Melville PP Public Meeting Part 2” 2017, pt. 19:38)

Over the course of 2017, the JDA embarked on this precinct planning process to develop a neighborhood level plan to guide the next five years of growth and development. The precinct plan is the most localized iteration of land use and development plans that exist at every level of government in South Africa. By the JDA’s own admission, their objective was co-creation; that through a highly consultative process over the course of several months of focus groups, public presentations, timely Facebook communication, and open comment periods, they were embarking on an experimental exercise to test new ways of engaging with communities. Prior to Melville, the JDA initiated this renewed approach to local planning and participation in only one neighborhood prior, a nine-month process in the suburb of Norwood (2017, pt. 20:00). That said, in selecting Melville, Auckland Park, and Mayfair as priority areas for only the second and third precinct level plans in all of Johannesburg, the JDA was making it clear that these neighborhoods were implicitly being considered as sites for the proactive urban growth management tactics articulated in the SDF, namely curbing sprawl by consolidating development proximate to the urban core and transit nodes. During the Sept 2017 meeting, JDA CEO Christos Botes articulated that without a precinct plan, Melville might miss out on crucial capital expenditure allocations to
support development and physical upgrades, as shown in the above quote. The challenge is clear however that some residents want these investments and upgrades, but not alongside the encouragement of increasing the population.

An additional issue raised during the process was the need to increase student accommodations in the area to account for increased demand from neighboring universities. Residents vehemently opposed any plans to increase residential densities citing concerns about the inadequacy of current service delivery and the impact of increasing demand on these aging infrastructures; and, they rejected the idea that increasing their share of student population and residents overall would positively impact their property values. While there were many priorities and concerns raised on the city side and many points of agreement, support, and resistance raised by different residents, the MRA as the primary voice that speaks on behalf of residents (even if it is not fully representative) was not pleased with the process and expressed at many turns that they did not trust the assurances, motivations, and information being shared with them by the JDA.

On the surface, it appears that the SDF objectives are incompatible with the MRA’s vision for public life and adequate service provision. That the SDF calls for strategic growth management through up zoning and intensification of uses where land is not optimized, is seemingly incompatible with the JDA’s promise that no plan that does not reflect what the community desires will be submitted (“Residents Refuse to Sign off on Proposed Melville Precinct Plan” 2017). The City it appears, wants to allocate development around the city with laser precision and the residents seem to want reliable basic services and a development vision that requires very little spatial transformation of their neighborhood.

The distrust and incompatibility of intent playing out is not unlike what occurred in the planning, development, and execution of 27 Boxes where there was also distrust and incongruity between the developer’s aspirations for the project and residents’. As I will argue however, the urgency of remaking that project into a commercially viable asset (or at least as it might be perceived) has created the conditions for alignment between the otherwise disparate developer objective and the residents’ preferences. That there is a pathway for aligning seemingly divergent resident and developer interests surfaces an opportunity for the municipality to consider how it might work through these kinds of partnerships to secure commitments to development projects that produce sustainable and spatially just outcomes within low density higher income suburbs.

5.2. 27 Boxes Concept Origins

We selected Melville and subsequently Faan Smit Park because it was centrally situated in a busy part of the town close to Melville’s bohemian shopping district and the site had a minimum of existing structures. It proved to be an ideal space to build a retail centre. Faan Smit Park was
The center was the brainchild of two individuals, Paul Lapham, former CEO of Citiq Property Developers and Arthur Blake, Managing Director of Citiq at the time. 27 Boxes was conceptualized on the heels of three serial residential projects that incorporated shipping containers in the design. Due to the positive response Citiq received from these projects, namely, tenant takeup, Citiq felt confident taking the container concept into a new asset class. While the company’s core business was in residential and student accommodations, they pursued the opportunity to experiment with another application of containers and expand their footprint into retail property. The land on which 27 Boxes is located was originally called Faan Smit Park and is owned by the City of Joburg Property Company (JPC), a company mandated to manage and develop the CoJ property assets for the purpose of maximizing both social and commercial opportunities for the Council (“Joburg Property Company - Company Profile” n.d.).

The fate of Faan Smit Park was somewhat uncertain for over a decade as many site development proposals were submitted over time to no avail. Despite the park being permanently closed in 2008 and some describing it as overrun with vagrants, residents were keen on maintaining the park features in any future development plan (MRA Interviewee 1 2018). Concurrently, it seemed that the JPC was soliciting proposals for more commercially oriented projects in hopes of spurring development that could bring both social and economic benefits to the area. 8

Ultimately, Citiq was able to secure approval to develop the site with a suite of concessions including maintaining some element of park space, open space and parking (Green 2018).

5.3. Construction, execution, and resistance

Container building is new in this country and no skills existed on the scale at which we are building. Blake says that new working methods and engineering solutions constantly have to be developed. Building with a fixed volume in each module requires a different approach and the inevitable crane work in limited space can also be a problem. (“BUILDING BLOCKS” 2015)

Arthur Blake was at the helm of Citiq’s container architecture trend. He even wrote the dissertation for his MBA about shipping container housing in South Africa long before it was a trendy material in construction (Khan 2016). Containers were conceived as a lower cost modular construction option that could lend the project the cache of originality and reduce the

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8 After reaching out to individuals at the JPC multiple times, I was unable to secure an interview or receive the lease agreement for review to corroborate any details provided by interviewees or media directly related to the relationship with Citiq or the circumstances under which Citiq’s proposal was selected after a long line of proposals over many decades.
construction costs. The arrangement of the actual containers on the site took about two weeks, but the finishes took another three months to complete bringing the total construction time to over six months altogether. It costs R30 million (~$2.4M) in total to construct. After a few years of planning, negotiating with the city of Johannesburg, fending off resistance from local residents, and unexpected cost overruns, the shipping container shopping center opened in 2015 for business. The completed project used about 80 containers each about 27 meters in length (where the project gets its name), configured in various ways allowing for shops to design the interiors to suit their needs. Some container shops are configured in a linear fashion or the container entrance is horizontal allowing for the shop to be arranged horizontally instead of linearly. Other shops are half containers or more than one container put together.

The pedestrian entrance to the site from 4th Avenue requires one to ascend stairs from the sidewalk level as the bottom level of the center is above street grade. There is an underground parking garage accessible from 4th Avenue, and an above ground parking bay accessible from the 3rd Avenue entrance where the pedestrian entrance is level with the street. The entrances are important to note since the site is just off the 7th Street corridor and it was originally hoped that pedestrian traffic would flow seamlessly between the two and the increase in parking would add much needed dedicated and secure parking options to an area where parking fills quickly. In observing patrons coming and going from the center, it appeared that people at 27 Boxes were people coming to see the center and not people who wandered over from the 7th Street strip by happenstance.

During the early part of the Wednesday night market, the most anticipated day of the week when foot traffic and energy permeating through the center was to be at its peak, I walked about, popping in and out of shops and watching other patrons doing the same. I stopped briefly
for a pretty compelling demo. The young man was selling small ceramic plate with grating ridges in the middle, ‘perfect for ginger, garlic, cheese, and chocolate’, he carried on. It costs R150 (~$12), not an insignificant amount, but certainly novel and seemingly useful. I watched a few families making use of the playground area, children ranging from 15 months to seven years old running around and playing with the water features on the amphitheater steps. There were certainly more people in the center this night than the previous weekdays (day and late afternoon), but the number of patrons still seemed light for what was supposed to be the day of the week. Perhaps the forecast kept people home as it started raining around 6PM and the sound of the rain hitting the metal roof is best described as a roar. The rain was loud and at any moment, a gust of wind would have pelted anyone standing on the edges of the center’s roof cover. A little after 6PM, I counted around 20 people upstairs where people congregate in the food area and about 10 people milling about in the pop-up market area. At the Wednesday night market the following week, with much better weather, I counted about 40 people between 6-7PM. During both instances, people walked around tentatively, taking in the center’s ambiance and perhaps considering what else they would do once they completed their initial circuit around the center.

5.4. Media Analysis

When I see people taking pictures of 27Boxes, I ask myself: Would people have been taking pictures of a normal brick and mortar building? I wanted to create something that would fit in better with the Melville vibe as well as be something people could enjoy as unique to our village.” (“BUILDING BLOCKS” 2015)

From the tourism authority to the broader commercial property industry, much of the media adheres closely to a fairly straightforward script describing the shipping container structure, the center’s orientation as a platform for local artisans and small businesses, and as an alternative to Joburg’s mega mall scene. The continuity in this language as well as the broad cross-section of outlets espousing this particular narrative suggests the launch was a concerted marketing and publicity exercise. With most of the media outlets dated on or around the July 1, 2015 grand opening, and much fewer being posted outside of that time frame, this reveals that there was a one-time upfront investment in marketing, or that there was hardly anything newsworthy occurring. Media reporting focused on the key themes listed below which range from the specificity of the lease structure, to container design, to characterizations of the neighborhood’s character and resident push back on the project, to the site’s significance in the broader context of Johannesburg and the portability of the model to other parts of Africa.

- Features of the center itself: novel design, affordable and flexible lease structures, hub for local and startup businesses
• Center developer: Citiq reputation for previous container constructions, tenuous engagement with residents
• Neighborhood: good for Melville, fits quirky character, community resistance
• The ‘city’: alternative to malls, great for families
• Africa: transferrable to other settings, recycled materials, reference of shacks

The ease with which the center’s relevance and novelty are correlated with the design, its suitability for the Melville neighborhood, and the alternative-to-mall experience illustrates how much the vision and execution of this project were more about the center’s local and supralocal symbolism and less about the mechanics of how the property would be managed, the center’s identity, patron catchment, and tenant mix. The latter attributes are among the strategies identified for prioritization in the turnaround phase of the project and are all more local and site-based concerns in contrast to the design symbolism in the greater Johannesburg and South Africa context.

5.5. The Turnaround Effort

“Last summer, 27 Boxes was on trial. Citiq Property Services’ new CEO Gustav Holtzhausen opened his door to anyone who knocked and met with representatives of the Melville Residents Association who shared their concerns that the centre was in crisis. Unlike his predecessors, he listened.” (Melville Residents Association n.d.)

By 2017, Citiq installed a new CEO to help discipline the portfolio by refocusing on core business assets and purging those that are underperforming and/or not in alignment (Interviewee XX, 2018). 27 Boxes’ underperformance was costly, yet if there would be any hope in making the project financially viable, additional investment would be required and as the quote above suggests, a rethinking of the center was in order.

The MRA was of multiple minds about the project. There were residents who opposed the project from the very beginning who wanted to see the space redeveloped into a park and broader community space. There were others who upon hearing the site would be constructed from shipping containers, were opposed to the aesthetic proposition afraid that the project would look cheap and unfit for the character of the neighborhood. Another contingent of objectors were those who felt alienated from the initial planning and development conversations between Citiq and the Council, and subsequently, between residents and Citiq. While Citiq reportedly engaged in stakeholder outreach, it was not communicated to me what the nature of this engagement was and from the resident perspective, they were ignored altogether. Of those who were not fully against the project or were in support, simply wanted their concerns to be heard. Since the project was complete and operational, it seemed in everyone’s best interest that it succeeds, become usable by residents themselves, and not become the white elephant that it was shaping up to be. In response to the split amongst residents, the MRA created a 27
Boxes turnaround subcommittee and appointed a member to lead the effort and communicate back to the rest of the association on relevant updates and developments.

The turnaround process was set into motion as the new CEO of Citiq took up the task of assessing the state of affairs at the site. At the same time, the few tenants who remained at the site had gone through a range of emotions from excitement and joy at the 2015 launch to disillusionment with what appeared to be a lack of marketing, hands on management, the lack of foot traffic, design deficiencies, and insecurity on site. Many tenants having been part of the initial set of shop owners at the launch wanted to see the center succeed in part because many of them valued having an affordable physical home for their business, but also due in part to their persistent belief in the promise of the site. After all, it was a quirky development in one of the only Johannesburg neighborhoods unique enough to house such a project. They felt like a community and could not afford, nor did they desire, to be at a more traditional retail or mall site. One tenant in particular, Leon Pretorius, owner of The Countess a successful restaurant that many asserted was the closet to an anchor tenant generating foot traffic and repeat visitors. Pretorius seeing an opportunity to raise tenant concerns with the new management at Citiq offered up fresh ideas on how to remake the center so that it might live up to its original promise to be a thriving alternative shopping experience and hub for local entrepreneurs. Citiq gave Pretorius the opportunity to create a plan for what needed to change and address the lowest hanging opportunities to improve the site. Citiq solicited the help of a smaller local development group known for well-curated and niche commercial and retail projects in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Group 44’s leads, Brian Green and Mark Batchelor, had successfully executed a handful of projects that 27 Boxes was hoping to mimic in some way. Green agreed to come onboard and spearhead the turnaround and expanded the scope of Pretorius’ previous recommendations to include a major investment in physical transformation upgrades and a new tenant strategy.

Phase I: basic analysis of status quo
Phase II: physical transformation and upgrades
Phase III: tenant curation and center identity reconstruction

As of February 2018, the center physical upgrades were ongoing and occupancy rates were not as low as they were at the end of 2016, but there were still a number of empty shops and limited foot traffic. According to a Facebook post in April 2018, 27 Boxes is no longer running its Wednesday night market, its staple pop-up market programming that served as the busiest time of the week for the center. This suggests that the turnaround has entered into the phase of redefining and revamping its marketing and attraction strategy.

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9 I was reminded that January in South Africa is a particularly sluggish month for consumer spending following the holiday season. This is an important limitation of conducting participant observation in January.
6. Findings Discussion

On my second night in Johannesburg in June 2017, my Airbnb host took me for a ride around the neighborhood. He pointed out several sites offering colorful commentary about each one including, “Look, that’s Wooly’s. You can go there for groceries if you want. It’s some white people shit. Expensive, gentrification you know.” Lume described everything like that, with a splash of color, passion, profanity and hyperbole; the mark of a storyteller, a local docent, and the more time I spent with him over those months, reminded me most of a griot, the village elder who kept the stories of his people. You never really knew how much of what he described was true and how much was metaphor, but you always knew it was profoundly and deeply informed by real life experience.

I was grateful for this unsolicited tour. I learned about the neighborhoods surrounding his own, and I learned about him. He was an ANC freedom fighter, exiled in the 1980s, living for a stint in New York City meeting with politicians and elites in an attempt to drum up support for the anti-apartheid movement. One of his most sullied memories: his admission to MIT, but coinciding with the exile, he watched that possibility of a lifetime fade beyond his grasp. Lume I

10 Wooly’s is shorthand for Woolworth’s, an upscale regional grocer and retailer.
11 Lume (pronounced Lew-mee) is short for Malume, which means ‘Uncle’ in Zulu. This is the term used by many of the neighborhood youth to endearingly refer to my host. Here, I employ the term as a pseudonym, but also because he became an important endearing feature of my experience in Johannesburg.
would come to learn, is one of thousands of South African residents for whom this history of struggle is not a thing of the past, but that it is alive and well in the everyday politics of the city. There was one site in particular that we drove past for which I remember his editorial highlights very vividly: “Look at this. It’s a bunch of shops with lots of local entrepreneurs and artists. They have a pop-up market there at night sometimes. It’s still kind of new and made of old shipping containers. It’s a cool concept but it’s not doing well; they didn’t do it right. We’ll see though, I hope they do something with it”.

I had no idea I would be focusing on that very site for this thesis, but in meandering through this research journey, I found that recollecting that night’s event is important staging for the articulation of my research findings. Deep in Lume’s eccentric storytelling lies a few critical lessons that foreshadowed the major takeaways for this work.

6.1. Finding One: Reconstituting the Retail Imperative in their Own Community Self-Image

_Collaborative problem-solving can only be truly collaborative when the power of parties is balance enough to make them interdependent, to make their problem-solving a joint enterprise, not the decision of one party visited upon the others.“_ (qtd. in Sandercock 2000)

That night, Lume told me something about the relationship between place, race and class, and the symbolism of retail in the urban milieu. His description of Woolworth’s as a signal of something I couldn’t quite put my finger on, was the first (but not the last) time I would hear off the cuff remarks about certain stores or malls off in the suburbs, unreachable by car, and reserved for the wealthy. This particular Woolworths was not in the distant suburbs however, it was in the neighborhood just steps from his own in Brixton which abuts Melville to the south. Lume’s assertion that it was a signifier of class (‘expensive’), race (‘white people’), and social-spatial politics (‘gentrification’) helped me ground my interpretation of what deeper logics might be at play in the strategy to address the perceived failures of 27 Boxes.

At the outset of the project’s conception, Citiq was convinced that Melville’s quirky bohemian reputation made a prospective novel shipping container development fitting. The neighborhood’s popularity as both a tourist destination and an important entertainment node in the city seemed a sure enough bet to pull in patrons from a broad enough trade area across the city just as it were for the restaurants and shops along 7th Street. However, as one resident lamented, the retail shops along 7th Street were not necessarily doing well and there were vacancies over the years (MRA Interviewee 1 2018) much to the residents’ chagrin. According to this logic, any retail outfit in the neighborhood was bound to be a challenge, much less something as niche as a collection of small and start up entrepreneurs who may or may not have had a dedicated clientele base before acquiring space in the center. Without knowing definitively what financial and market calculations Citiq considered before greenlighting the project, nor what considerations the JPC negotiated before determining Citiq’s proposal was the most viable
for the site, it is not clear to me the financial grounds on which the center was projected to succeed. It is important here to revisit an introductory acknowledgement that this research was not an interrogation of the commercial and financial viability of the center, but the *perception* of such; and thusly, the discourse surrounding its conception, execution, and transformation as conduits through which its viability was interpreted and negotiated. By this acknowledgement, I did not retrieve any financial or real estate property documents or data that might have substantiated these perceptions. However, some of these underlying assumptions surface in the strategies for turning the center around.

From a patron attraction perspective, the turnaround strategy has been about transitioning away from an indiscriminate attraction strategy (more like a mall or standard tourist attraction) to a more niche, considered, and local consumer. The latter requires a higher tough approach, as evidenced in the management style of Brian Green who described this approach as key to the success of previous projects. Key tenets of the approach in these projects are that they are highly considered and meticulously curated in the tenants who are invited and allowed to rent space and the overall experience the place is intended to offer. While initially of multiple minds about whether to support the project, several MRA members have played a key role in helping to shape a vision for what the center could be. It is in the image of the village that no longer exists on 7th Street that Green’s approach and the residents’ self-image converge. It is not just that they want a nicer shopping center, they want one that reflects their values, who they once were, and who they see themselves as today: this is what I call reconstituting the retail imperative in their own community self-image.

By banking on the residents’ use of the center as the primary population of users, the vision for its future identity is somewhat oppositional to the identity of 7th Street. 27 Boxes is being remade as a space for the residents and their preferences. I don’t mean to suggest this is an earth shattering insight, but it is one that is worthwhile for new and established entrants into the urban retail market. The world is only becoming more and more urban and deeply informed strategies that are sensitive to neighborhood character, identity, and history can only add to the efficacy of project design. Reducing the trade area and focusing on residents as target consumers renders the project their very own retail hub and begs the question of what about the public nature of the site? Will enough of the Melville and neighboring suburban residents actually patronize the center, buy goods, and return frequently enough to ensure the shops are profitable? And if something like this can work in Melville, can it work elsewhere, like a township where more services are desperately needed? These are important points of departure for more community-based retail projects that are intended to catalyze local social and economic outcomes for the communities they are embedded in.

6.2. Finding Two: Nostalgia for the 1994 Promise and Competing Visions for the Future City
There is also the growing tendency of ordinary (ANC-voting) black citizens to compare the (dangerous and crime ridden) present with the (safer and more controlled) past – fully acknowledging the horrors of Apartheid but mourning the loss of allegedly effecting policing and strongly criticizing present powers for failure in this area.” (Harrison and Mabin 2006, 17)

That night, Lume hinted that 1994 was not a distant history of the past, but that is the filter through which the present day is enacted. His MIT-exile story is not just a historical incident that happened, it is recollected in light of the current state of affairs. If you can imagine a line of thinking that might go ‘I passed up MIT to fight for freedom and this is what we have to show for that fight 24 years later.’ This sort of critical nostalgia is also at play in the case where everything that is not good about the neighborhood today compels people to recollect a time when Melville was in its heyday. When this ‘time’ in Melville’s history was mentioned, it was never quite clear exactly when this time was, but it certainly was not the present. In this research, I was unable to pinpoint exactly when Melville started becoming less a village, but I have constructed this finding to suggest that the decline of the high street and the neighborhood in general12 is perceived through the filter of recollections of the 1994 precipice.

The grounds on which the present day 7th Street is aggrieved has much to do with the nature of the commercial offerings and their perceived negative externalities: pressure on parking, noise, and illicit activity. The vigor with which the village is constantly recollected, and the fact that 27 Boxes is being remade in that exact image, I believe stems from a similar critical nostalgia expressed by Lume. That there was a time in the past when things were hopeful, albeit uncertain, is a key reference for comparison for the present. As time has passed, the material gains of this promised progress are not felt in daily life and this is evident in the political rhetoric of the DA whose priority is operational excellence and service delivery, or as the current mayor has been characterized, the ‘pot-hole’ mayor.

7th Street is endeared because it is a historical and contemporary signifier of Melville’s past and ever-becoming alternative and bohemian village identity. Melville is known as a place where one can see an alternative Joburg that is a departure from what is/was available in the Northern suburbs and inner city. This is why it is both a destination and an entertainment node; but with the shift in the commercial offerings from being more resident-centric (‘the village’) to something else, the village represents a yearning for a time when the neighborhood felt like it was theirs, when the people moving to and through it were like them, and the commercial activity was something they could be proud of that complemented (and not undermined) residential property values. In finding one, this nostalgia materializes in the conceptualization of the transformed 27 Boxes, but in this finding, this nostalgia is part of a broader politics of the city that takes into account the unrealized gains of 24 years of freedom. And one could argue that...

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12 Upticks in local crime and the incursion of illegal residential dormitory conversions for guesthouses and/or student accommodations are among the salient concerns surfaced at JDA precinct planning meetings.
this desire to keep the neighborhood as it was or have more control over who moves in and through it is a mutation of historical influx controls, though in the contemporary era further complicated by Melville’s somewhat mixed demographic along race and class interests.

This nostalgia in part, fuels the oppositional politics between the MRA and the city. Plainly, the city needs to transform and residents want things as they were. One is fixated on the future state and the other preoccupied with the neighborhood that is no longer as an indictment on the unrealized fruits of progress. This finding raises questions about how to mitigate this friction between these parties whose objectives are divergent and mired in legacy encounters. One key insight here is the way in which Citiq and the MRA have been able to put aside their beef and collectively set out a vision for the center; a vision that everyone feels committed to and hopeful about. Citiq, through a leadership change, the hiring of a developer with expertise and legitimacy, and shift in their approach toward the MRA, was able to reset the relationship and embark on a collective visioning and planning process akin to what is aspirational for the JDA in their precinct planning process. What Citiq has that the city lacks is the ability to reset a relationship that has a much shorter legacy and fewer touchpoints; residents’ nostalgia is shaped by a history of touchpoints with various state agencies and functions that are seen as woefully inadequate and unreliable ranging from basic service provision, to inconsistent refuse collection, and unpredictable power outages. The state in this case has a more limited sphere of influence and should consider opportunities to work through partners with more agency like private actors or potentially, use their positioning as an opportunity to more clearly articulate a framework for assessing success (as opposed to simply being hands off) of these local economic development exercises which it was not clear that the JPC had.

6.3. Finding Three: Shipping Containers and the Politics of Aspiration

As a designer, he’s been credited for elevating the humble shipping container to new heights. It’s a phenomenon that’s long taken hold in urban planning across the globe, but despite being a particularly utilitarian and affordable model in a country where shipping containers are frequently transformed into convenience stores, beauty salons, and makeshift restaurants in the townships, South Africa hadn’t quite embraced the concept on a larger scale. Enter Blake.

‘There’s really amazing stuff happening in America and Europe with containers,’ he says. (Khan 2016)

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13 Over the course of this research, I subscribed to the ‘Melville Council issues’ whatsapp group predominately for important news updates about the neighborhood, but later discovered that the group was a conduit for communication with the local Ward Councillor for service and crime reporting and complaints.
Lume described 27 Boxes as creative, different, and cool; seemingly innocuous adjectives that are attributable in part to the novel design and use of shipping containers. With so much of the media discourse centering the shipping container design and the project’s invoking of Boxpark in London’s Shoreditch, the containers are at the heart of how people view the project and the possibility it seems to represent. The containers were a key signal for legitimacy because for it to ‘work’ in Melville, the project had to have ‘character’ and it had to be different or alternative just like the neighborhood.

Figure 10. An exterior and interior photo of 27 Boxes taken sometime after March 2018, after the shop’s physical transformation was complete. Image: 27 Boxes in Melville Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/27boxes/

“Boxpark Shoreditch opened in 2011 as the world’s first pop-up mall. The concept utilised the modern street food market and placed local and global brands side by side, to create a unique shopping and dining destination. Entirely constructed out of refitted shipping containers, Boxpark showcases a unique position in being able
to offer affordable and flexible leases for lifestyle brands, cafes, restaurants and galleries to trade and succeed.” (Boxpark 2018)

For all the ingenuity the containers represented, there were also some limitations from a design and function perspective as evidenced in the physical upgrades made to the center during the turnaround phase. These were never cited as critical flaws or death blows; just opportunities for new thinking and workarounds. The center is a local spectacle, representing a new and alternative addition to the Melville bohemian milieu. At the same time, the center’s container centric design put it on the map with other global city assets of the same aesthetic orientation. 27 Boxes became a site for which a global affinity was activated and the novelty and quirkiness of the center’s design made it easy to look upon favorably, with hope, or affinity which I believe is at work in the developer’s willingness to invest more money into the project even while it continues to underperform in the interim. The center’s global inspiration and unique design proposition saves it from being declared a total failure and abandoned in the minds of residents and shop owners. It is also perhaps the reason for the unanimous assertion that ‘it isn’t doing well’ instead of ‘it has failed’ or something much more plain and definitive. This is the power of what I argue is the local politics of aspiration. It runs parallel to the city’s socially just world class African city narrative which very much uses its looking beyond South Africa and all of Africa to render its current state tentative, yet not failed, optimistic, yet not determined. People I spoke to wanted the center to work, they did not want it to become a white elephant, and they certainly saw in the site a potential to replicate this approach in other places (like townships
which was mentioned on a few occasions) where there was a need for local economic
development projects. These politics are important as they seemed to drum up support and
optimism precisely because of how aspirational and seemingly different the project was. By
taking steps that are seen as experimental, different, and worldly, the developer was able to
curry favor from the right stakeholders in order to chart a new path forward for the center.
Perhaps this is a lesson for global practitioners as they bump up against local planning politics in
the effort to localize global planning ideals that could easily be rejected as foreign and in this
case, be embraced because of its relative otherness.

6.4. Finding Four: Tenants Find Community

*It’s really nice to be in an environment where you have other people facing the same challenges as you. When you go into a mall, if this isn’t your 5th branch, I don’t know you’ll survive. I find it really nice that I have people who are sort of starting out and we can do collaborations, which in a mall I couldn’t do.* (27B Tenant 4 2018)

And then finally, Lume let on something about the tenants being ‘local entrepreneurs and start-ups.’ As I got to know them, they were the community helping to keep the dream and promise of the center alive more than anyone else. The community they’ve formed amongst themselves is important for the municipal planners and economic development agents who have a broader mandate to cultivate the city’s small business ecosystem. In developing countries where national economic growth is slow or stagnate, increasing discourse and policy strategies emerge that target small, medium-sized, and micro enterprises, or SMMEs as a play to stimulate economic growth and job creation. The framing of the project as an anti-mall of sorts focused predominately on small, local, and start up entrepreneurs meant that it was designed to support a class of entrepreneurs who might not otherwise have a place to grow roots or a chance to start up at all. Many of the shops I spoke with did not have a physical space before 27 Boxes, were doing business in pop-up markets, and/or only started because the center offered a quirky place to run a business. The neighborhood and the affordable rents attracted them to the site because they wanted to be part of something that seemed to prioritize people like themselves. They commented that they would were either a long way off from affording rent in a more traditional retail setting, or that they were not attracted to that kind of setting at all. Their business, products and services were unique and fit for Melville.

*The things that are bad could have really been an example for other shopping centers. The idea in the beginning was to bring smaller people in so that you have a creative hub. Either people that are more established like myself or new upstarts and working in conjunction with each other you can actually bounce ideas off each other. I can get feedback from every generation on what their*
contemporaries need and they can learn from me. That way we come a community that services the broader public. (27B Tenant 3 2018)

For many, their lives and livelihoods are at stake in the future of 27 Boxes. On a broader level, this case study provides a window into alternative and permanent retail formats (as opposed to transient pop-up settings) that provide stability and pathways for growth for the very businesses on whom the country is relying on to pull itself out of economic stagnation. The community they feel from their time persevering through a harrowing journey of excitement, decline, and re-imagination of the center is the bright spot of this research and makes me so hopeful that there might be lessons for future local economic development projects. They along with Lume brought the center to life and convinced me that this project was a worthwhile exercise for the city and for the developers to be embarking on.

7. Considerations & Conclusion

7.1. Research Scope, Limitations, and Opportunities for Further Exploration

With the emergence of new types of shopping centers and retail tenants, the market study is not as simple as it once was. What was once primarily a quantitative study of retail space needs has now become heavily qualitative, relying on specialized lifestyle demographics, and, in some cases, consumer surveys. In all situations, however, the developer must be sure the market can absorb the increase in retail space that is being proposed. Success may require providing a new shopping center type, a more up-to-date merchandising mix, a more current design concept, or stronger tenants. (Urban Land Institute 2008)

By looking closely at a single case study, I made it my principle objective to unpack what it meant when people remarked that ‘27 Boxes wasn’t doing well’, that it was failing, that something needed to be done about it. And then, once I had a sense of what was happening in the case itself, I sought to understand how widely those factors overlapped with or derived from the social and political realities of Johannesburg. It should be clear from the findings and the qualitative nature of the data drawn upon, this research exercise was not about discerning the commercial viability of the project or what it would take to become a viable investment asset. Instead, I have attempted to interpret perceptions about 27 Boxes’ failure and turnaround through the lens of the CoJ’s urban growth management priorities, the City’s aspiration to be a spatially just world class African city, and through the proposition that urban public space is conceptualized as a key piece of infrastructure in facilitating sustainable urbanization for cities all over the world. This focus on qualitative analysis is intentional because of the ways in which contextual and political factors often inform the viability of development projects yet are not easily quantifiable or discernible using the tools at the disposal of real estate developers and
economic development agents. As the opening quote for this section suggests, even where the retail industry takes a formulaic approach to projects, approaches to new retail development are becoming more dynamic and creative out of necessity and that will only continue.

This interpretive approach would be served well in a future iteration of this research by collecting and further interpreting the business case on which the project was originally conceived and the financial viability logics that underpin the turnaround strategy. There are a few other limitations of note related to scope and approach that are important to note.

- This being a single case study allowed for a depth of analysis but limited the extent to which the findings could be explored comparatively with other alike or dissimilar sites in the city.
- The completion of fieldwork in January is likely to have shaped my observation of activity onsite as well as interviewees perceptions of the project’s failure as January was described as a time of slow retail activity in light of the holiday season immediately before.
- With respect to understanding resident concerns about the project, I relied primarily on the published and expressed perspectives of the MRA which while it offers a more definitive consolidation of community voice, the MRA is not fully representative of the views of the broader Melville community. More research on this topic would be better served to include a broader set of resident and stakeholder impressions of the project and the development trajectory of the neighborhood.
- A crucial stakeholder for whom I was unable to discuss the project with was the JPC who owns the land, selected Citiq’s development proposal, and ultimately issued the terms of agreement for operating a retail project on the site. The public ownership of the land and its prospective local economic development promise is central to this case and without being able to account for the JPC’s role and agency in this project, the research is not as robust as it could have been.
- Finally, while I did interview individuals from Citiq, it could have been fruitful to interview either or both the Citiq leads who conceived of the project and carried it through as it bottomed out.

Other opportunities to enrich this research would be to utilize photography as a methodology. Where people live and the ways they use and navigate public, shared, and private space are incredibly visceral and experiential. Photography, as I have attempted to incorporate in this thesis to a limited extent, has the ability to animate the details of the case in a way that analysis and narrative cannot. I did not begin this research journey with that in mind but believe it could provide another window into the various competing visions and aspirations shared by the people I came across.

For more insight into the performance of the retail sector relative to 27 Boxes, a closer look across the geography of retail typologies would be interesting as well as an analysis of the
retail components across JPC’s asset portfolio. Finally, there are bodies of literature on the ‘African consumer’, township based economic development, and informal markets and street trading that which this research does not engage with, but in a further iteration would certainly do so. Given the scope was limited to planning policy and public space, it would be invaluable to explore assumptions about consumption patterns in Africa as well as spaces in the city where there is urgency to consider alternative pathways to stimulate local economic development and formalize trading, of which townships and informal vending are recurring focal points in the literature.

7.2. Considerations for Stakeholders
When I first embarked on this research, I wanted to gain some understanding about the way in which retail, leisure, and entertainment offerings in Johannesburg were contributing to the public realm (or not). I was curious about the function of these amenities in the urban fabric, how people were using these spaces, how they were perceived, and whether there might be salient insights that could inform public provision and management of such spaces. As I reflect on the process and findings, I feel confident that this case offers something valuable to the provocations that put me on this journey and the stakeholders implicated in these types of projects.

For the retail industry, this case offers a supplementary way of evaluating the underperformance of a retail project and suggests that other such indicators should be considered when prospecting for new sites in new markets. While Citiq lacked experience managing retail projects, their naïveté and conviction that the project would/could create value for the neighborhood, their portfolio, and for tenants is exemplary of a developer willing to consider a broader set of return on investment indicators. The nature of this being an economic development investment (per the JPC’s involvement, however perfunctory) forces us to consider the role retailers can play in engaging with communities in order to create products tailored to local preferences. As 27 Boxes reconstitutes its identity in the image of residential preferences, it offers a roadmap for new entrants in the market and the criteria they might observe for projects considered risky, alternative, or non-traditional. By incorporating community and other stakeholder voices in the prospecting process, industry professionals might be better informed about what people want, their perceived shopping habits, and complementary functions the site might accommodate thereby reducing the risk already apparent in this kind of property development.

For the state writ large, particularly municipal policymakers and economic development practitioners, the case provokes us to consider exactly what state capacity is necessary to not only execute agreements, but fully articulate a vision for what these strategic sites can be. Across my interviews, the JPC was almost never mentioned as a present and active partner nor were they mentioned as having any engagement with the shop owners. In fact, no municipal actors
were cited as having any interaction with shop owners, nor did the developers speak to any interactions with the JDA or the JPC outside of the upfront negotiation of the land lease agreement. Again, having not interviewed anyone from the JPC in this research, I am left to speculate that they were more hands off than less and their primary objective was to choose a development proposal that was best fit according to the criteria they use to assess proposals. Recognizing the limited sphere of influence the JDA had in the precinct planning process, it is plausible to intuit that the JPC also has limited agency in the prescriptions it makes to developers and concessions they require. Nevertheless, the journey that 27 Boxes has been on is an important and compelling one that speaks to the possibilities that could come of a more intentional SMME implementation strategy (to support the entrepreneurs with much needed business development support and mentorship) or a proactive partnership with let’s say, City Parks or partner NGOs who could have helped conceptualize public programming options for the site. To optimize on the social returns yielded from development on the site, the JPC and other agents in charge of managing city owned assets should consider broadening the pool of state partners who can lend their expertise toward activating the more unique features of the project, like the public space component and the focus on local and start up entrepreneurs.

In conclusion, 27 Boxes as a real estate investment on the one hand and a local economic development project on the other poses many challenges for all stakeholders involved. What the case demonstrates most incisively is that each stakeholder group has to figure out how to create the enabling conditions for the various moving parts to thrive so that social and economic returns can be yielded for the investor, property developer, municipality, community, and the tenants. While there are traditional metrics to project and evaluate optimal economic returns for such developments, the same sophistication does not exist for the social dimensions of such projects. What we gain from 27 Boxes’ bumpy journey is the notion that determining these social criteria requires a collective visioning, planning, and more holistic approach that with refinement over time, may lead to a more transformative conceptualization of public-private partnership and inclusive economic development.
8. **References**

8.1. Appendix A. Interviewee bibliography (total 31 interviews conducted)

27B Tenant 1. 2018. 27B Owner 1.
27B Tenant 3. 2018. 27B Owner 3.
27B Tenant 5. 2018a. 27B Owner 5.
Green, Brian. 2018. Developer: Group 44.
### 8.2. Appendix B. TripAdvisor analysis

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<tr>
<td>11 newtown</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 rosebankCrft</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 rosebkmall</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 8.3. Appendix C. Media analysis grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dated</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Pic?</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7/3/2015</td>
<td>27Boxes I Joburg’s Clever and Colorful Retail Centre made from Shipping Containers</td>
<td>10and5.com</td>
<td>Digital platform for South African creative industry related content</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Focus on design elements and the opportunity the center provides for ‘local designer-makers to have their own permanent retail spaces’. Containers referred to as ‘lego blocks’ and assertion that using ‘recycled materials’ enabled affordable rents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/20/2017</td>
<td>Shopping out of the box</td>
<td>Gauteng Tourism Authority Blog</td>
<td>Provincial authority that provides information of events, activities, and attractions in Gauteng</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Described as inspired by similar concepts in Europe and ‘a welcome change from the frenetic activity in the province’s large malls.’ A number of shops are named as well as the Wednesday night market and focus on ‘promoting homegrown brands and creativity.’ Brief quotes about the center’s impending physical transformation and revamp are provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/1/2015</td>
<td>27boxes a shipping container development for a quirky shopping center</td>
<td>eProperty News</td>
<td>Online commercial property marketplace</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A more in-depth profile of the site’s origins including how the site was selected and the process by which Citiq engaged key stakeholders like the JPC, Council, and Melville residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/28/2016</td>
<td>27 Boxes</td>
<td>27 Boxes Blog</td>
<td>News page on the website for 27 Boxes which includes original posts and a compilation of press from external sources</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Describes 27 Boxes as ‘inspired by similar developments like Box Park in London’s Shoreditch’ and ‘a quirky alternative to Joburg’s mega mall scene.’ The piece then describes options for fashion, gift shopping, places to eat, and the Wednesday night market as an attraction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/9/2015</td>
<td>27 Boxes not without opposition</td>
<td>Wits Vuvuzela</td>
<td>News publication produced by Wits University journalism students</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Briefly discusses residential support and resistance to the development. Quoting Arthur Blake, Citiq MD, ‘he decided to use the vacant land to draw people into Melville, a suburb he described as “arty”’ and resident concerns around crime, litter and noise are noted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/21/2015</td>
<td>Building Blocks</td>
<td>Leading Architecture &amp; Design</td>
<td>Bi-monthly magazine targeting South Africa’s design professionals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Focuses predominately on the utility and challenges of container architecture including the advantages of modular building and drawbacks that with such a new technology, the industry lacks the skills to execute with the same efficiency as with brick and mortar. Citiq representative shares his perspective that container architecture should ‘help speed up giving homes and spaces for people to live, in a country where we need housing fast.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>27 Boxes</td>
<td>Gauteng Tourism Authority</td>
<td>Provincial authority that provides information of events, activities, and attractions in Gauteng</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>A general description of the site, its retail offerings, and the aim of the center being to promote small local brand and entrepreneurs. The center ‘was inspired by similar developments in cities such as London and Berlin’, this being the only reference to Berlin across all media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/7/2015</td>
<td>27 Boxes opens in Melville (gallery)</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>The Citizen is a Gauteng-based daily, national newspaper, distributed Monday to Friday, with its core circulation in Gauteng</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A short discussion on Citiq’s acquisition of Joburg Artists Market who had a 30-year lease on the park and the developer’s persistence in the face of residential opposition to the project. The article cites the cost of the project at R30m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dated</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Pic?</td>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
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<td>------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/1/2015</td>
<td>Shipping container shopping centre opens in Melville</td>
<td>Engineering News</td>
<td>Video</td>
<td></td>
<td>The center described as a ‘mall-meets-market shopping center’, and that this was Citiq’s first retail project. The approach to short and long-term lease options was noted as a strategy to promote the market environment while also providing key low-cost rents for businesses not yet convinced that the center was a worthwhile investment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/1/2015</td>
<td>27 Boxes: New Hot Spot in Joburg</td>
<td>South African Garden and Home</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>A thick description a one particular restaurant’s food offerings, this review-like post focused mostly on the food options and family-friendly nature of the space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/6/2015</td>
<td>27 Boxes l Johannesburg l Shopping Malls</td>
<td>In Your Pocket</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Noted as a ‘quirky alternative to Joburg’s mega mall scene’ and inspired by London’s Shoreditch Box Park. Fashion, gift shopping, and places to eat are highlighted along with the weekly Saturday morning pop-up market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/21/2015</td>
<td>Melville’s 27 Boxes Opens Its Doors</td>
<td>JHB Live</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Described as falling between a shopping center and a market, Citiq’s Group Marketing Manager is quoted sharing about resistance to development by a minority of disgruntled residents who seemed most upset by the construction phase. The center wouldn’t be the ‘cheap and nasty’ flea market that a lot of residents picture when they saw the shipping containers. The project is also anticipated to ‘be a plus for Melville’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/9/2015</td>
<td>Joburg’s Trendy Melville Neighborhood Gets ‘27 Boxes Mall’</td>
<td>Voice of America</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>The center is cited as ‘modeled on similar projects in London, Paris and Christchurch’. “People just said containers are shacks on steroids” recalls Arthur Blake in the article which looks at the project through the lens of recycling (as in the value of using shipping containers as opposed to more traditional materials) and as a cheaper alternative to renters noting the intentional low rental rates geared toward artists. “Black said several internationally renowned architects have congratulated him on what he describes as his “dream project.”’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.4. Appendix D: Timeline of methods

Jun–Aug 2017
ethnographic
hanging out, meeting people, going places, journaling, taking notes

Fall 2017
TripAdvisor assessment
to ascertain perceptions of several key recreation, entertainment, leisure sites: looking for evidence of fear, security, and crime

Jan 2018
in depth fieldwork
interviews, participant observation, snowball method

Mar 2018
media analysis
reviewed associated media on the 27 Boxes and compared across platforms, themes, photos

Apr 2017
MISTI award and
confirmation of research internship in Joburg at Wits to work on Corridors of Freedom

Late Aug 2017
traveled around Southern Africa region to establish baseline for Joburg urban fabric. Travel support from SA+P Julian Rainart Award

Dec 2017
due to time constraints, comparative study scratched for single deep dive. After consult, selected 27 Boxes. Travel support from DUSP Rodwin Grant and MISTI.
8.5. Bibliography

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Green, Brian. 2018. Developer: Group 44.


