

Urban archives and Walter Benjamin's The Arcades Project

Noëleen Murray (University of Pretoria)

[noeleen.murray-cooke@up.ac.za](mailto:noeleen.murray-cooke@up.ac.za)

ORCID ID [0000-0003-2016-3651](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2016-3651)

Jill Weintroub (University of the Witwatersrand)

[jill.weintroub@gmail.com](mailto:jill.weintroub@gmail.com)

ORCID ID [0000-0002-3385-2926](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3385-2926)

## Abstract:

This special issue of *Critical African Studies* has emerged through our involvement in the scholarly meeting *Secret Affinities, a workshop in critical reading and an interrogation of the city in Africa via Walter Benjamin's Das Passagen-Werk*. The collection of essays presented in this volume is one of the outcomes of the workshop, which took place in Johannesburg in 2017. As Walter Benjamin turned his attention to the Paris of the nineteenth century, and to the space of Naples in the 1920s, to begin gathering lingering traces that would contribute to his 'other' history, so we in Johannesburg look to architectures and heritage spaces in the city, and invoke creative modes of research and innovative and experimental forms of writing to construct alternative forms of archiving the urban and the social.

## KEYWORDS

Secret Affinities, The Kraal, Walter Benjamin, urban archives, Johannesburg

*What distinguishes Naples from other large cities is something it has in common with the African kraal; each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life* (Benjamin and Lacis 1979 [1925], 174).

In their co-written essay *Naples*, published in 1925, Asja Lacis and Walter Benjamin invoke the architecture of the African kraal as a metaphor to encapsulate their ideas of communalism, interpenetration and porosity, which they formulated spatially. Existence, they argued, was a ‘most private of affairs’ for the Northern European citizen; for natives of Naples, it was, on the contrary, ‘as in the kraal, a collective matter’ (Benjamin and Lacis 1979 [1925], 174). ‘Courtyards, arcades, and stairways’, where ‘building and action interpenetrate’, they wrote, were ‘porous’ spaces that would ‘preserve the scope to become a theatre of new unforeseen constellations’ (169). This was indicative of the way in which space had a certain power to shape human interaction, and thus might offer a way to read grander social and political processes. In this formulation, then, urban space could operate as a kind of archive of human experience, as long as scholarly practice was sensitive to these alternative modes of reading. These concerns with spaces and architectures as a kind of archive or embodiment of society and politics would reach fuller expression in *The Arcades Project*. Critics argue that the unfinished collation of reflections, notes and citations presented in *The Arcades Project* is built on a way of thinking and a writing methodology that was established across townscapes such as *Naples* and the vignettes or ‘thought figures’ (Eiland 2006, viii) and essays collected in *One Way Street* (published in 1928), together with his reflections on childhood that appeared in the posthumously published *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (Benjamin, 1979 (1925), 2006 [1950], 1999, see also NLB 1979, Sontag 1979, Szondi 2006 [1961]; Brodersen 1996).

For some commentators, ‘the great innovation of *The Arcades Project* would be its form’ (Coetzee 2001). To be more precise, however, it is the way its form was to be bound up with and produce analytical insights. ‘It would work on the principle of montage, juxtaposing textual fragments from past and present in the expectation that they would strike sparks from and illuminate each other’ (Ibid.). Benjamin’s intention for *Arcades* has also been described as a move to construct ‘a world of secret affinities’ or ‘a magic encyclopaedia’ (Benjamin 1999: 540, 874; Eiland and McLaughlin 1999: x; see also Weintraub 2019) in which the notes, reflections, and citations on a host of topics he had gathered could begin to inform and expand on each other in unpredictable, undisciplined ways, bringing together past and present, producing constellations, and encapsulating different conceptions of time. In this way, by offering alternatives to linear narrations of the past centred on great men and events, Benjamin’s project was to interrupt accepted understandings of history as progress, and to intervene in conventional processes of knowledge-making about social life and the urban.

It was the creative and expressive form of *The Arcades Project* that provided inspiration for some of our thinking as we convened the scholarly meeting *Secret Affinities, a workshop in critical reading and an interrogation of the city in Africa via Walter Benjamin’s Das Passagen-Werk*.<sup>1</sup> The methodological innovations of both writing and research displayed in

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<sup>1</sup> The *Secret Affinities* workshop was supported by the African Critical Inquiry Programme (ACIP) as its project for 2017. It was hosted by the Wits City Institute and the Wits School of Arts (see *Secret Affinities* 2017).

*The Arcades Project* and in Benjamin's other writings, together with the correlations drawn between experience and space, time and history, were key concerns as we brought scholars and graduate students together to reflect on the African city – from the remade heritage and memorial site chosen as the location for our deliberations. In the course of a day and a half, we spent time in the communal dining room of Satyagraha House, embellished with African-inspired décor and minimalist accents. Our strictly vegetarian meals and alcohol-free refreshments were in keeping with the Gandhian injunction to practice self-refinement through dietary restrictions (Dhupelia-Mesthrie and Weintroub this volume). Located in the leafy neighbourhood of Orchards, Johannesburg, Satyagraha House markets itself as an island of calm just a short walk from frenetic Louis Botha Avenue, as Dhupelia-Mesthrie and Weintroub point out.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as these co-authors reflect in their essay in this collection on their work as historians and their individual projects pivoting on Satyagraha House, this is a space rooted in a series of pasts and layered in memories that are intimate and private as well as public and global. As Dhupelia and Weintroub show, these connections originate in the House's first iteration in 1907 as The Kraal. But they also range across time and geographical space, where familial relationships spanning generations and continents are archived through personal correspondence and photography. Satyagraha House's thatched roof, circular walls, inner spaces and memorial displays hold clues to transactions and relationships of the past, and at the same time are prompts for scholarly work in the present.

Benjamin's reference to the African *kraal* in the essay 'Naples' came to our attention in the aftermath of the *Secret Affinities* workshop.<sup>3</sup> It has enriched an already vibrant and suggestive set of associations, memories and connections that can be read from the space of Satyagraha House, adding to the layers that we wished to trouble and probe in the design of our workshop as a way of complicating engagements with how knowledge is produced in relation to Johannesburg itself and in regard to cities and urbanisms in general. As Benjamin had focused on the glass and steel arcades of Paris of the nineteenth century as evidence of new forms of economy, consumption and the social, so we in Johannesburg wished to think about the architectures, heritage projects, creative writings and artworks inspired by the city, and to see how creative modes of thinking and writing might begin to construct an archive of the present. Locating this inquiry in the space of the remade Satyagraha House was central to our inquiry; it was one way to alert us to the modes in which urban space in Johannesburg might be reproduced or reimagined over decades, and what the ramifications of this might be.

The essays in this special issue employ innovative writing and creative practice across a range of topics, drawing either directly on the events of the workshop itself and its afterlives, or moving beyond these to draw inspiration from the methods, approaches and theoretical insights suggested by Benjamin. Whereas the essays collected in the companion special issue

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Botha Avenue was originally the main road linking central Johannesburg with the capital city Pretoria, starting in the inner-city neighbourhoods of Hillbrow and Berea and tracing a north-easterly direction through the apartheid era 'township' of Alexandra. Today, Louis Botha Avenue is identified as a transport-oriented corridor of redevelopment or TOD, (previously Corridors of Freedom) in city-wide albeit contested, project aimed at reversing the spatial legacies of apartheid and 'restitching' the previously divided city through encouraging the establishment of integrated neighbourhoods through the provision of affordable housing and employment opportunities along major transport routes with access to the Johannesburg CBD (Amato 2019; Rubin 2019; Moeti 2015).

<sup>3</sup> 'Naples' was one of the earliest of Benjamin's published articles. It was co-written with the Marxist educationist and theatre director Asja Lacin, and it presents an early elaboration of the notion of porosity and public space that would become seminal to Benjamin's thinking and writing in the ensuing decades and an increasingly important theoretical focus for the Frankfurt School (Jeffries 2016, 99-121; McGill 2008).

*Urban secrets? Affinities and anthropologies of South African cities* (Kratz, Weintroub and Murray 2019), sought to complicate the notion of the secret or hidden in the urban anthropologies of cities in Africa and beyond, our concerns here are different. In this volume, we consider what it might mean to extend our inquiry beyond the grand narratives and ordinary ways of archiving or writing 'History' (Dhupelia-Mesthrie and Weintroub this volume), as well as to trouble the boundaries of academic and disciplinary convention (Sacks, Witz). Our contributors to this volume in addition variously deploy experimental modes of scholarship (Mahashe, Josephy) in which they challenge notions of authorial voice, offering experiential forms of research and writing, to suggest alternative ways to reflect on and archive the city.

For Mahashe, a practicing artist and anthropologist, the histories and techniques of image-making provide a metaphor through which to stage a critique of authorial voice and positionality. In his essay, Mahashe addresses the contested locations of tradition, culture, knowledge production and artistic practice within broader processes of globalisation and decoloniality. Taking inspiration from Benjamin's flâneur, he proposes 'walking about' as a method by which to begin to interrogate these complicated legacies. Through 'walking about' and reviewing earlier artistic outputs along with reliving personal journeys and geographical travel, Mahashe toys with authorial positionality while explaining the ramifications and outcomes of his move to installation work in his creative practice.

In Josephy's visual essay, photography is deployed as a critical tool in an exploration of the architectures, heritage and narratives of nostalgia at locations within and on the edges of Johannesburg, which are creatively mapped through site visits and photographic recordings. Through a sample of richly detailed images of sites collated in *JoziQuest* (Weintroub 2019, see also Dhupelia-Mesthrie and Weintroub this volume), Josephy takes us – with her camera – on a visual journey showing how decades of urban change can be read in contemporary spaces, in much the same way that Benjamin addressed the Paris arcades. For example, Josephy's camera shows in granular detail how Arop House, built in the 1930s at a moment of elite desire in Johannesburg for 'seductive images of material progress and an illusion of New York situated in far-flung Africa' (Chipkin 75, 146), has been repurposed to serve alternative needs in the present.

Witz, on the other hand, seeks to question the idea of the planned outing or excursion through engaging directly with the 'tour' organised as an introductory activity ahead of the formal proceedings of the *Secret Affinities* workshop (Places n.d.). For Witz, such an intervention involving an 'itinerary' of 'predetermined sites and routes' is an 'anomaly' – undermining the workshop's intention to facilitate (after Benjamin) the construction of a world of secret affinities characterised by unpredictability and the undisciplined. With 'Mr Benjamin' inserted as a 'creative, discursive character' into the writing, Witz reads public spaces and heritage sites in Johannesburg as they are produced through contemporary and early nineteenth-century guidebooks to the city, as a way to 'both orient and disorient' his readers to their 'own historical and political associations of place'.

Extending this reading of the space of heritage, Sacks turns her attention to icons of liberation in Johannesburg and Kinshasa. Addressing Constitution Hill and Tour de l'échangeur de Limete, Sacks' essay offers a careful reading of each icon within their respective cityscapes. From a position destabilised through her location in contemporary Johannesburg fraught by 'deep political mistrust', Sacks revisits the 'jubilant moments' of independence through their material remains in both cities, providing a granular reading of both text and image of the

unfinished. Her engagement is one that mediates notions of the unfinished and incomplete, not via the arcades of nineteenth century Paris, but from ‘the perspective of the constantly shifting urban sprawl of the African metropolises of Johannesburg and Kinshasa’.

As the five contributions gathered in this special issue show, Benjamin’s writings model and inspire alternatives by which to enrich standard methods of research and writing, analysis and archiving. In *The Arcades Project* in particular, the fragmentary, loosely organised collections of materials or ‘convolutes’ (Benjamin 1999), suggest a working with fieldnotes and initial jottings in a way that mirrors the informal archive of diverse, often randomly gathered materials that lie at the heart of so much scholarly work. The richness and density of Benjamin’s unorthodox and flexible methods continue to provide springboards for contemporary thinking about cities refracted through diverse ways of writing and creative practice. It is in this spirit of porosity and fluidity that this collection of essays is offered as the beginnings of an alternative archive of the urban.

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