

ELITE RESISTANCE AND THE DISABLING OF SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION IN JOHANNESBURG

B BRADLOW

Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University

ABSTRACT

Transitions to democracy promise equal political power. But political ruptures carry no guarantee that democracy can overcome the accumulated inequalities of history. In South Africa, the transition to democracy shifted power from a racial minority in ways that suggested an unusually high probability of material change. This article analyzes the limits of public power after democratic transitions. Why has the post-Apartheid local state in Johannesburg been unable to achieve a spatially inclusive distribution of public goods despite a political imperative for both spatial and fiscal redistribution? I rely on interviews and archival research, conducted in Johannesburg between 2015 and 2018. Because the color line created a sharp distinction between political and economic power, traditional white urban elites required non-majoritarian and hidden strategies that translated their structural power into effective power. The cumulative effect of these “weapons of the strong” has been to disable the capacity of the local state to countervail the power of wealthy residents’ associations and property developers. Through these strategies, elites repurposed institutional reforms for redistribution to instead reproduce the city’s inequalities.