



# A ‘Chinese’ Street (Un)scripted and (Re)imagined: Material Shifts, City-making and Altered Ways of Living in Suburban Johannesburg

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## Abstract

Derrick Avenue in Cyrildene, is a striking example of clichéd Chinese (street life) atmosphere in Johannesburg. Owing to its visible markers and demographics, this activity node sparks visions of a spatialised elsewhere. Standing in sharp contrast to a surrounding quiet and mostly residential neighbourhood, Derrick Avenue has been viewed as exceptional, different and closed, resulting in a spatial and cognitive divorce from the rest of the area. These representations, largely associated with Chinese spaces, not only shape the ways in which such spaces are commonly examined, understood and conceptualised, but also contribute to side-lining the existence of transversal urban processes and realities. This article moves away from entering Derrick Avenue through the lens of ethnicity and othering, in an effort to read this street as a holistic object of research. Through (un)writing this space, we unpack its complexities as well as explore the coexistent tension between specific characteristics of a lived and constructed differentiation and geographies of the ‘familiar’ Once decoupled from predetermined analytical categories and conceptual frameworks, the articulation between ‘migrant space’ and ‘host city’ is not merely confined to a study of relational ties (whether parallel, contentious or complementary), but becomes one of entanglement in terms of city-making processes and broader societal dynamics.

**Keywords:** neighbourhood shifts, city-making, streetscape, built form, Chinatown, Johannesburg

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## Résumé

Derrick Avenue à Cyrildene, constitue un exemple saisissant d'une atmosphère stéréotypique (de vie de rue) chinoise à Johannesburg. Du fait de ses marqueurs visuels et de sa démographie, cet axe suscite un imaginaire d'un ailleurs spatialisé. Contrastant fortement avec le quartier avoisinant calme et principalement résidentiel, cette rue a été considérée comme exceptionnelle, différente et refermée sur elle-même, produisant une séparation spatiale et cognitive du reste du voisinage. Ces représentations, essentiellement associées aux espaces chinois, façonnent non seulement la manière dont ces espaces sont étudiés, compris et conceptualisés, mais contribuent aussi à la mise à l'écart de l'existence de réalités et de processus urbains transversaux. Soucieux de lire cette rue comme un objet de recherche holistique, nous évitons dans cet article d'aborder Derrick Avenue par le prisme de l'ethnicité et de l'altérité. En (dés)écrivant cet espace, nous déballons ses complexités et explorons la tension coexistante entre les caractéristiques spécifiques d'une différenciation vécue et construite et les géographies de l'« ordinaire ». Une fois découplée des catégories d'analyse et des cadres conceptuels prédéterminés, l'articulation entre « espace migrant » et « ville d'accueil » ne se cantonne plus à une étude de liens relationnels (qu'ils soient parallèles, conflictuels ou complémentaires), mais devient celle d'un enchevêtrement en termes de processus de fabrication de la ville et de dynamiques sociétales plus vastes.

**Mots-clés :** changements de quartier, faire la ville, paysage de rue, forme bâtie, Chinatown, Johannesburg

## Introduction

'There needs to be more [Chinese] development here; any development is a positive sign.' This is what Dave, a local landlord, remarks, partly to us, partly to himself, as we walk along Derrick Avenue in Cyrildene, a suburb in the eastern parts of Johannesburg.<sup>1</sup> Since the late 1990s, this strip, about half a kilometre long and running perpendicular to two busy transit routes, has gradually evolved into the city's main Chinatown. Dave is a middle-aged white man with a long beard, tattoo-covered arms and a slightly rough demeanour. He owns two building blocks at the southern end of the street, comprised of 45 flats and seven shops, which he rents out to Chinese tenants. In a street where the bulk of the existing built environment is nowadays in the hands of variations of Chinese and Taiwanese capital, this long-term Jewish resident appears to be an anomaly. Nonetheless, his vision is geared towards turning Derrick Avenue into a successful Chinatown, a tourist attraction with street food vendors and a stronger emphasis on the commercial aspect as seen in other major cities across the globe. Halfway along the street, he

pauses next to a four-storey temple-like building, adorned with a 'pagoda-style' roof and traditional dragon figures, red pillars and painted and wooden ornaments. He expresses the hope that going forward, this type of 'Chinese' architecture will become more visible throughout the street. While, in this context, Dave may be unusual as a property owner, Derrick has progressively attracted growing numbers of non-Chinese residents in Johannesburg looking for food, leisure and grocery shops.

The existence of two gates (one only completed recently after long delays) towering over each end of the activity node, the clustering of Chinese and other Asian restaurants and supermarkets, and above all the specific demographics spark imaginations of a spatialised elsewhere. With its visible 'oriental' features, Derrick Avenue appears out of place in this leafy hillside suburb which is characterised by spacious detached properties and a number of compact apartment blocks dating from the 1950s and 60s. Ambitions about increasing development and densities along and even beyond this main street, as expressed by Dave and other Chinese landlords, sit uneasily with the more established residents living in the vicinity of Derrick.

Up until the early 1990s, the street and its surroundings were largely characterised by Jewish, and to a lesser degree, Greek residents and associated spatial markers. With the advent of democratic South Africa in 1994, concerns about political uncertainty and rising crime rates triggered a significant demographic overhaul in the neighbourhood, with many of the initial inhabitants leaving and the temporary void along Derrick Avenue being filled by new residents from Taiwan and mainland China (Dittgen et al. 2019:39). While middle-class suburbs such as Cyrildene experienced significant demographic shifts and have, over the last ten years, become racially more diverse, tolerance of newly arrived suburbanites is conditioned upon newcomers conforming to the suburban ideal and norms of a conventional, residential and calm neighbourhood (Ballard 2010:1070; Chipkin 2013). The lifestyles and cultural reference points of Chinese migrants in the area seem to defy this unwritten (moral) code, and changes have largely been viewed as incompatible with the surroundings.

Whether viewed as a (new) space for socialising or as a nuisance,<sup>2</sup> Derrick Avenue exists within a context of imagined urban othering. To borrow Njabulo Ndebele's words, Chinatown in Cyrildene emerges as a 'representation of spectacle, [...a] spectacle of excess [...] that captures the imaginations of the spectators' (1991:31). Viewing the street in a particular light contributes to 'transform[ing the] objective reality into conventional tropes which become the predominant means by which that objective reality is artistically ritualised' (*ibid.*:39). In fact, this tendency of

resorting to a spectacle as the primary lens of analysis commonly features within scholarly research on ‘Chinese’ urban spaces outside of China and contributes to an analytical divorce from broader urban phenomena. In the case of Cyrildene, we argue that this specific analytical framework not only obscures the narrative but also assigns a particular singularity to urban dynamics and realities which often transcend the confines of this geographical area of focus. In line with this argument, we shift away from pre-emptively classifying Derrick Avenue and seek rather to engage this street and its surroundings as a holistic object of research. Stripping it, at least at the outset, of its Chinese features, our aim is to understand how characteristics of a lived and constructed differentiation materialise and co-exist alongside a geography of what, in the context of Johannesburg, is perceived as ‘familiar’ or ‘conventional’. As such, it helps us to ‘stop seeing streets [merely] as geographical locations and rather interpret them as lively expressive archives of [broader] urban realities’ (Quayson 2014:129).

The notion of Chinese space (or street) then becomes a fluid signifier, as we insert categories of ‘migrant space’ and ‘host city’ into the same analytical framework. We hereby draw inspiration from Çağlar and Glick Schiller, who argue ‘that migrants [and their associated spaces] can no longer be considered a separate category of actors but must be seen, along with everyone else, within their multiple identities/disparate positionalities’ (2018:19). By assessing the ways in which Chinese ‘drivers’ have transformed the built environment and urban practices along Derrick Avenue (whether in obvious or discreet ways), while also looking at how these spatial alterations are themselves shaped by the host city, our aim is to ‘[counter] disciplinary divisions between migration [area] and urban studies that continue to obscure global processes of city-making’ (*ibid.*:16).

This research draws on a long-standing interest by one of the authors in ‘Chinese’ spaces in Johannesburg (from 2009 onwards), and a more focused analysis on the street since 2017, as part of a broader collaborative and multi-disciplinary research project. During this more recent phase, we conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with close to fifty people in addition to organising a few transect walks with several key figures in the area. We spoke to business and property owners, entrepreneurs and workers operating along Derrick Avenue and surroundings to explore the different processes unfolding within and beyond the street. Furthermore, we interviewed current and former residents about the reality of everyday life at various periods, alongside meeting with city planners, the ward councillor, consultants, developers and resident associations to get a better sense of the different visions for the street and the neighbourhood. These qualitative

research methods were combined with a semester-long design studio on the Chinatown precinct with graduate students at the School of Architecture and Planning (University of the Witwatersrand), led by Gerald Chungu, and a layered and longitudinal photographic mapping exercise undertaken by Mark Lewis.

The article begins by critically engaging some of the existent literature on Chinese spaces, bringing publications focused on Johannesburg into conversation with similar research conducted elsewhere, alongside mapping out an alternative way towards studying such spaces. We then focus specifically on Derrick Avenue and the most recent Cyrildene Precinct Plan, looking at the extent to which material changes in the built environment and existing dynamics along the street reflect broader urban tendencies, and speak to the City's planning visions and challenges. Approaching this street as a constituent part of a larger reality, the last segment of the paper moves beyond the appearance of an established neighbourhood identity and deals with questions about renewed ways of living together in altered (sub)urban environments in Johannesburg.

### **Flipping the Script**

The study of 'Chinese' urban spaces in various international contexts – predominantly in North America, but also in South-East Asia, Europe and increasingly across Africa – has received significant academic attention from the 1980s onwards. The aim here is not to provide a comprehensive list, but merely to highlight a broad spectrum of tendencies. Areas of interest have been diverse, covering themes as wide as:

- entrepreneurship, labour markets, and forms of community organisation (e.g. Zhou & Logan 1989; Zhou 1992, 2009);
- semiotic landscapes and cultural markers (e.g. Preston & Lo 2000; Lai 2003; Lou 2007, 2010; Leeman & Modan 2009);
- longitudinal analyses of the construction of racial categories and evolving perceptions (e.g. Anderson 1991; Shah 2001);
- residential mobility and spatial transitions (e.g. Zhou & Logan 1991; Zhou 1998a, 1998b; Li 2005; Li & Li 2011); and
- place-making, preservation of identity or blending in within suburban environments (e.g. Ip 2005; Li 1998, 2009; Luk & Pha, 2005; Lung-Amam 2017).

The initial scholarly focus on Chinatowns, as entry and reference point of 'Chinese urbanity', has gradually widened to incorporate other spatial configurations (Harrison et al. 2012:901–902), mirroring the reality of growing complexity and diversification of 'Chinese' urban spaces abroad.

In Johannesburg, the presence and gradual expansion of Chinese footprints have similarly, if to a lesser extent, translated into growing numbers of scholarly publications. While unfolding in a specific context, research has largely resonated with themes and broader areas of study on Chinese urban spaces elsewhere. A lot of attention has been directed towards historical aspects, given that the living conditions and the emplacement logics of Chinese migrants – from as early as the late nineteenth century and throughout the apartheid era – were determined or at least shaped by discriminatory laws and regulations (Harris 1998; Accone & Harris 2008). First or ‘old’ Chinatown, small in size and situated on the western edge of downtown, has often been the focal point used to illustrate questions of belonging and identity tied to the local Chinese (commonly referred to as South African born Chinese) (e.g. Yap & Man 1996; Accone 2006; Park 2008), but also as a space of memory, nostalgia and abandonment (e.g. Park 2010; Harrison et al. 2012). A more recent phenomenon, from the late 1990s up to about 2010, has been the emergence and mushrooming of Chinese-run malls, generating research on entrepreneurialism, commercial logics and broader economic functions (e.g. Lin 2014; Dittgen 2015; Huang 2015, 2021; Zack & Lewis 2017). In 2013, the announcement of an ambitious new city project to be built in Modderfontein by a property developer from Shanghai, which then subsequently collapsed, sparked research outputs looking at aspects of modernity and differentiation of the initial project vision (Dittgen 2017), as well as at the limits and challenges of replicating and transferring a project to a specific context (Brill & Reboredo 2019; Ballard & Harrison 2020).

Research on the second (or ‘new’) Chinatown in Cyrildene has most often formed part of broader enquiries into various aspects of the Chinese presence in the city, with ethnicity or othering used as the main entry points into studying the street. Some have focused on the lives of Chinese migrants within the immediate neighbourhood or the ways in which they navigate the city (e.g. Accone 2006; Harrison et al. 2012; Huang 2015; Liu 2017), others on aspects of cultural identity (e.g. Huynh 2015; Dittgen 2017; Dittgen & Anthony 2018). As argued by Harrison et al., ‘space has not been ignored in the growing literature on the Chinese presence in South Africa, but it has generally not been foregrounded or theorised’ (2012:905). In terms of the spatial framing of Derrick Avenue, the street has been portrayed as an ethnic enclave (Park 2010), a somewhat atypical Chinatown in a suburban setting (Harrison et al. 2012), an ethnoburb, or even an ethnic edge city (Xu 2017). Park’s depiction of this section of Cyrildene as ‘the loud, colourful, take-over-the-streets, in-your-face version of Chinatown’ (2010:118), at the receiving end of bad media coverage during the 1990s and early 2000s,

and rejected by the local and more established Chinese, contributes to ascribing this street to a realm of difference. Symbolically, Derrick Avenue has also been associated with particular perceptions or urban imaginaries, whether as 'dirty, dodgy, and dangerous' (Dittgen & Anthony 2018:122), as 'a carrier of authentic Chineseness and modernity' (Huynh 2015:109), or as a mixture between both a real and constructed form of 'orientalism' (Dittgen 2017:992–995).

Xu's paper on Cyrildene Chinatown, framed as a critique of the ethnic enclave, discusses how the current form of Derrick Avenue must be read against broader phenomena. This includes the arrival of new waves of Chinese migrants across Africa, 'dramatic suburbanisation' in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as tendencies towards private management and self-governance (Xu 2017:82, 98). His portrayal of this stretch as characterised by 'a whole range of "hybridised" strategies in opening itself to new and different worlds', as well as 'shaped by complex imbrications of global, national, and local forces' (*ibid.*:99) is helpful in opening up the analysis of the street. Yet at the same time, his use of the spatial category of 'ethnic edge city', described as deeply connected with broader urban dynamics, stands in direct contradiction to the above, as it distinguishes Chinatown through a clear (ethnic) boundary. Even so, Xu makes a timely observation about the difficulties of defining places like Cyrildene Chinatown (see also Huynh 2018:34), amid notions of spatially segregated enclaves, processes of low-end globalisation, and the unprecedented nature of transnational social spaces spurred by Chinese globalisation (2017:100).

Overall, studies on Derrick Avenue have mostly ended up being confined within fixed analytical categories and terminologies. This is partly due to attempts to ascribe a specific definition to this space and to the people evolving within (whether by scholars, planners, or the general public), alongside the use of ethnicity or difference as privileged conceptual entry points. Not only has this resulted in obscuring the commonalities between migrant and non-migrant populations, for instance by viewing practices across categories as coeval (Çağlar & Glick Schiller 2018:5, 22), but it has also contributed towards neglecting spatial adaptations and gradual social changes. This echoes Anthony's argument that 'an obsessive focus on China [or Chinese features] brackets out other actors' and that 'analyses dwelling almost exclusively on the role of China fail to identify the broader context and its challenges' (2019:114). As a departure from this rigid compartmentalisation, we suggest a conceptual unfreezing, which is aimed at 'understand[ing] how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term' (Sellars 1962,

quoted in Van Norden 2017:XVII). To do this, we turn to Doreen Massey's vocabulary, approaching 'Chinese urban spaces' as relational, continually moulded, and open to the future (2005:11–12).

How can one then achieve a 'problematis[ation of] the very concepts that undergird its own frameworks once they have become canonical[, in particular as] certain constructs come to dominate an intellectual landscape and train our gaze' (Mattingly 2019:1)? Cheryl Mattingly uses the notion of the *perplexing particular* – described as 'an *encounter* [, in our case a street,] that not only surprises, in the sense of striking unexpectedly, but also eludes [simple] explanation' (*ibid.*:13) – with the 'ambition to critique concepts [and categories] not merely via other concepts but experientially' (*ibid.*:18). If she aims to 'reveal their limits' (*ibid.*:13) and 'provoke the sort of thinking that awakens critical concepts and guards against their ossification' (*ibid.*:18), in our own research we seek to avoid pushing the discussion and argumentation into any preconceived direction. Rather than working towards giving concepts new meaning or introducing new ones (due to the risk of potentially falling back into the trappings of a spatial 'container'), our goal is to multiply the gaze and angles of vision. It requires pursuing a combined effort of first un-writing, aimed at untying the analysis of 'Chinese spaces' and specific conceptual categories, followed by an exercise of writing anew, exploring how assumed antipodes such as ordinary/exceptional or internal/external become entangled and form co-constitutive parts of a much larger and complex landscape of urban change (Dittgen & Chungu 2019).

This attempt of flipping the script can, in part, be illustrated by the following two examples. Anderson, in her work on 'Chinese urban spaces', has argued in favour of a paradigm shift, away from 'a reductive framework of "difference" [and] alterity' (2018:136), 'introduc[ing] an order of complexity and contradiction to the dualisms of West and East around which conventional accounts of Chinatowns have been framed' (*ibid.*:135). By critically revisiting some of her own work (Anderson 1990, 1991), she makes a case for 'multiplying the epistemic standpoints on a place [*i.e.* Chinatown] whose relentlessly communal scripting, even through the critiques of orientalism, requires recasting for the present day' (*ibid.*:134). She draws on the example of Sydney's Chinatown and considers that, given its increasing diversity and openness, 'it might even be possible to envisage a future in which difference is no longer "other" to a mainstream but inherent to the very fabric of an evolving metropolitan culture' (*ibid.*:144). In another paper focused on the 'difficult flowering' of Chinatown in Zeedijk in Amsterdam, Rath et al. shift away from traditional understandings of ethnic commercial landscapes,

referring to 'a themed economic space', where market share and the right to an identity-bound claim of the area become a competition between Chinese and other, more upmarket, entrepreneurs (2017:95). One aspect of their broader analysis stresses that the 'legalising and protecting [of the area's (light)] Chinese character could fossilise [an] otherwise dynamic process', not only considering declining numbers of immigrants from China and other Asian countries but also in connection with the area's shifting identity when viewed from a long-term perspective (*ibid.*:92).

Whether in Sydney, Amsterdam or Johannesburg, the '*multiplication of the referential points of Chinatown's narration beyond the singular one*'<sup>3</sup> (Anderson 2018:144) helps to disrupt the "only one narrative" [that] obliterates the multiplicities, [and] contemporaneous heterogeneities of space' (Massey 2005:5). Therefore, 'if space [and in our case Derrick Avenue] is genuinely the sphere of multiplicity, if it is a realm of multiple trajectories, then there will be multiplicities too of imaginations, theorisations, understandings, meanings' (*ibid.*:89). Far from claiming that this section of Cyrildene does not bear any elements of specificity (not least its demographics), what matters here is to investigate and read across urban phenomena (processes and practices) that resonate with dynamics perceived as conventional for Johannesburg, and those that appear as more singular. This is first outlined through the shifts in the built environment and visions for the area.

### **Built Form, Aesthetics and Functionality**

As a locational reference point, the suburb of Cyrildene has come to be primarily associated and correlated with the image and existence of Chinatown, in particular due to the discernible transformations along Derrick Avenue. The arrival of Chinese migrants, first predominantly Taiwanese during the 1990s, followed (and largely replaced) by higher numbers of mainlanders since the turn of the century, led to a densification of the urban mass. As argued elsewhere, factors such as concerns about safety, the lack of 'accessible' public spaces and linguistic ease have increased the central function of Derrick Avenue and adjacent streets as 'a space of temporary connection and pragmatic human interaction' (Dittgen 2017:986). The rising demand for accommodation by Chinese migrants as well as the need for social and economic functions resulted in gradual alterations of the built form along the street. The initial layout, at least dating back to the 1950s, had been structured around detached bungalow houses lining up the space between both extremities, occupied by multi-storey (three to four floors) and mixed-use buildings. If the latter structures have been preserved, the demographics have changed and previous shops on the ground floor have largely evolved into Chinese-run restaurants, grocery stores or hair

salons. Many of the bungalows have been demolished and replaced with newly built three- to four-storey structures often using up a large proportion of the plot size. The few remaining bungalows along the central axis have been partially remodelled and most often turned into shop fronts (see Picture 1).



**Picture 1:** Gradual transformation and stratification of space along Derrick Avenue  
Photo Credit: Mark Lewis, March 2019

Other alterations, less visible, illustrate the complexity of urban dynamics present in the area. If difficult to notice at street level, closer examination of aerial photographs produced by the City of Johannesburg (from 2000 to 2015) reveal a horizontal densification in the form of backyard dwellings which provide additional accommodation options for migrants, either from China or from neighbouring countries on the continent. In a context where the demand for living space has exceeded the supply,<sup>4</sup> most of the initially rather spacious flats along Derrick and many of the bungalows, especially those in vicinity to the main activity node, have been internally sub-divided to lodge more people. If some of the buildings have been structured around shared facilities, in Dave's two adjacent buildings all units are self-contained, since, based on his own experience, collective amenities remain largely under-used.<sup>5</sup> The maximisation and multiple usages of space can also be observed on certain balconies (mostly at the back of buildings), sometimes serving as extended kitchens for restaurants. The presence of Chinese characters on signboards, a limited number of buildings with distinctive architectural features

and predominance of Chinese people along Derrick can be conceptually distracting and generate a feeling of spatial alienation. Views by residents in the surrounding neighbourhood as well as media reports (as early as the late 1990s) have correlated the arrival of Chinese migrants along Derrick to a sudden neighbourhood disruption in the form of a so-called 'Asian invasion' (*Financial Mail* 1997; *Mail & Guardian* 1998).

However, when considering the 'genetic factors underlying urban patterns' (Storper & Scott 2016:1115), changes along this street parallel those occurring in other (sub)urban areas. Comparable conversions of residential buildings into commercial spaces (whether shops, restaurants or cafés) are visible elsewhere, for example along core sections in upmarket suburbs such as Greenside (Gleneagles Road), Parkhurst (4<sup>th</sup> Avenue) or Parktown North (7<sup>th</sup> Avenue), as well as in Kensington South (Queen Street), a suburb adjacent to Cyrildene. Similarly, backyard accommodation as a strategy to increase land coverage and intensity of use is a widespread phenomenon across numerous areas in Johannesburg (e.g. Crankshaw et al. 2000; Shapurjee et al. 2014; *Gauteng City-Region Observatory* 2013), as much as the multi-purpose use of space is often combined with the practice of converting and dividing rooms inside older existing apartment blocks (e.g. Poulson 2010; Harrison et al. 2018). While these illustrations of the production and alteration of space form part of broader urban dynamics and often respond to similar motivations, some are read and examined from within an ethnicised framework while others are not. Similar arguments can, for example, be made regarding the Somali presence in Mayfair (along Church Street) or Indian one in Fordsburg (in and around Mint Road).

While forming an integral part of the city, there is also an intentional effort towards differentiation in Derrick Avenue. Cultural identity is not only expressed through the variety of cuisines on offer (although varying in degrees of authenticity and adaptation to local palates) but also through a partial symbolic commodification of urban space (Lou 2010). A limited number of buildings, mainly in the middle segment of the street, stand out in terms of the built form and through the adoption of specific aesthetics. The building pointed out by Dave is the most noticeable, but there are also a few examples of smaller features being added to the existing built environment (such as decorative pillars or roof tiles). The elaborately decorated front side of the temple-like structure, showcasing elements associated with traditional Chinese architecture, contributes to the branding of the streetscape and serves as a visual magnet for visitors. This deliberate alienation through aesthetics is however partial and clearly directed towards the activity street, with the back side bare and plain, revealing a standard design used in most buildings (see

Picture 2). The gateways, through their sheer size and architecture, are, next to the shop signs, the most quintessential example of cultural place-making and spatial coding (see Picture 3). Yet, when considered beyond their ‘ethnic’ branding and in the context of Johannesburg, gates or gateways are the norm rather than the exception. In many of the city’s upmarket gated communities (such as Steyn City or Waterfall Estate), gates are not only a security feature but also serve as place branding. The main difference is that in the latter case, the controlled gate marks a hard boundary between those who belong and those who do not (Murray 2015), whereas Chinatown archways are open and aim to draw people into a public street.



**Picture 2:** View of the middle section of Derrick Avenue from a side street, displaying a purely functional and bare back side

Photo Credit: Mark Lewis, March 2019

From a spatial planning perspective, changes along Derrick Avenue resonate with recent debates in Johannesburg about the direction the city should take going forward. The Cyrildene Precinct Plan exemplifies some of these aspects. Commissioned by the City in 2016, the precinct plan was approved by the Council towards the end of 2018. The latest version is far more detailed and comprehensive than two previous iterations. An initial Chinatown Precinct Plan, developed in 2009 and mainly focused on the older Chinatown, only looked towards Derrick Avenue as a comparison. A 2013 plan, centred on Cyrildene, merely provided a superficial reading of the area. It never went

through Council and warranted the production of the current version. The study area, about 22 ha large, is demarcated by Marcia Street to the south, Friedland Avenue to the east, Aida and Christeen Avenues to the west, with Derrick Avenue as its central feature. The plan aims to engage with an area ‘in need of improvement, [...] encourage a more appropriate built form along Derrick Avenue [...] through regulatory support and development incentives, and through the maintenance and appropriate development of the public realm’, while ‘limit[ing] its impact on the surrounding residential area’ (City of Johannesburg 2016a:9, 11).



**Picture 3:** Street view centred on the second archway at the intersection of Derrick Avenue and Marcia Street

Photo Credit: Mark Lewis, August 2019

Whether by describing Derrick Avenue as ‘an activity street [with] a high level of on-street interaction’ (*ibid.*:18), with its mixed-use functions and increased building density or by suggesting ways to manage future densities in the study area, the plan is strongly aligned with the City’s Spatial Development Framework 2040 (City of Johannesburg 2016a). In light of Johannesburg’s severe spatial and social challenges, including (among others) urban sprawl and fragmentation, spatial inequalities, jobs-housing mismatch, inefficient residential densification and land use diversity (City of Johannesburg 2016a:28), the City’s ambition has pursued the ambition of producing a polycentric compact city form, promoting compaction, higher densities and integrated neighbourhoods. This has been most visible in the

context of the Corridors of Freedom (CoF) initiative, a citywide project aiming to undo the spatial legacy of apartheid planning by altering existing well-located areas and integrating poorer people so that they can live closer to job opportunities. Structured around transit-oriented development (in this instance the rolling out of a bus route), the City put in place favourable incentives to attract interest from private developers willing to buy into the idea of providing higher density, affordable and mixed-use dwellings in these areas. Announced in 2013, during Mayor Tau's term in office (2011–2016), this large-scale and long-term project was met by considerable resistance from impacted middle-class neighbourhoods, making it difficult for the City to build consensus (Harrison & Rubin 2020).<sup>6</sup> When comparing the design vision for the Cyrildene precinct plan with the one for precincts included within the CoF initiative, there is a similar focus on combining density, mobility and multi-functionality along the main axis, while retaining the character of the suburb as one moves further away from the main section. The Cyrildene plan, despite falling beyond the confines of the CoF, deliberately adopts the language and direction of the City's spatial transformation agenda,<sup>7</sup> but one notable difference is that the transformation of the built environment along Derrick Avenue has been self-initiated instead of being carried and driven by the municipality.



**Picture 4:** Everyday work rhythms along Derrick Avenue

Photo Credit: Mark Lewis, March 2017

The street reveals a complex set of relations, overlapping within a specific location. Derrick Avenue as such provides accommodation options for Chinese migrants and others (with the former operating to a large extent in the Chinese-run malls south of the CBD), work possibilities as kitchen staff, shop assistants or security guards (often carried out by migrants from neighbouring countries but also by South Africans), as well as access to supplies (e.g. rice, condiments, vegetables) for resale elsewhere (see Picture 4). More structurally, one of the interviewed Chinese developers and property owners was adamant that the level of activity needs to be increased and the perimeter of the precinct expanded. In his view, the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) does not see the benefit of higher levels of densification, holding on to past modes of development even when realities on the ground are changing:

What is needed is a more compact city approach where land-use can be intensified and changed to mixed use just like in Sandton [the financial heart in the north of the city]. There is a need to move away from bungalows which use valuable land with low intensity; that can be unsustainable because government (and people) will be forced to open up new virgin land outside the city, when that land can be preserved. [...] CoJ needs to allow the area to develop instead of holding back progress. White people in the area don't want change. They don't realise that such developments will ultimately increase property values in the area since it will become a more attractive place. Currently there is a need for stronger government action, but unfortunately CoJ does not have capacity and is unwilling to work with the Chinese people who live in the area.<sup>8</sup>

As a proponent of urban compaction, he mentioned plans to tear down his own four-storey office building along Derrick Avenue, assemble some of the adjacent plots of land, and develop a much larger and higher building complex with several floors dedicated to commercial activities alongside an integrated food court. His reference points are both drawn from China, in terms of density and entrepreneurship levels, and locally, with regards to the challenge of stretched-out urban geographies.

Another mixed-use development project, comprised of retail, office space and residential, mirrors these ambitions to increase the scale of activities. It led to the demolition of four separate bungalow houses translating into a massive vacant plot of land. The project was approved by Council in 2012, but – aside from a temporary billboard announcing the development in Chinese (which disappeared after a while) – nothing hints at the launch of the construction phase amid rumours about the business-owner returning to Hong Kong, no longer interested in developing the property (City of Johannesburg 2016a:73). A group of women from Mozambique seized the opportunity to occupy this 'gap' in the existing built environment to sell vegetables and fruit as well as

seafood (fish, squid and crabs) arriving by truck from Maputo (see Picture 5).<sup>9</sup> Eventually, the overgrown bushes on the empty stand were temporarily cleared to accommodate additional parking possibilities, with the hawkers operating alongside the boundary wall increasingly pushed to a smaller section at the edge. This co-existence of long-term visions, some of them uncertain and unlikely to materialise, and everyday activities, whether adaptive or transient, reacting to or anticipating business opportunities, is reflective of an area that fuses multiple scales and temporalities (Dittgen et al. 2019).



**Picture 5:** In-between spaces and future visions

Photo Credit: Mark Lewis, March 2019

Apart from the materiality of physical change and debates about the ideal usage of space, the articulation between this street and the wider neighbourhood also speaks to questions of collective life, class and identity in a changing suburban environment.

***‘One must well live together...’***

The current makeup of Derrick Avenue has given rise to various interpretations in terms of priorities, realities and possibilities. During a walkabout in the area with the local ward councillor (representing his constituency and a voting base of mostly established residents), he almost exclusively focused on the non-compliance with by-laws (some essential such as hygiene and building safety)

but without considering the discrepancy with current lived experiences and usage of space.<sup>10</sup> For the City Council, due to more pressing urban issues at the scale of the whole city of Johannesburg, and given Cyrildene's categorisation as a consolidation zone, the neighbourhood has not been considered a priority in terms of public capital allocation and attention. This might explain the slow reaction from planning authorities and the fact that the 'proposed land use plan is [largely] an indicative framework of possible and preferred zonings that may be supported by the City' (City of Johannesburg 2016a:85). If existing land uses along Derrick Avenue, often deviating from current zoning conditions and building regulations, should be accommodated if they do not compromise health and safety standards (*ibid.*:20), the City's main objective was to clearly define the boundaries of Chinatown. As such, the plan suggests implementing additional smaller secondary gates or thresholds along the side streets as well as 'varying pavement types to distinguish between the higher density of Derrick Avenue and the residential character of the wider Cyrildene' (*ibid.*:66, 76). However, for one of the long-term Chinese residents of Cyrildene, the City's predominant logic of spatial and economic containment seems counterproductive and more could be done to support the core drivers of change in the area:

In order to develop the area, attention needs to be paid to the economic base. So far, it has developed organically without any plans in place. [...] The main thing to note is that this area has slowly been changing and even if it looks the way it does, this should be seen as positive and can be used as a foundation to develop it to be better, in a holistic and sustainable way. Whatever plans the City has, they are not communicated effectively with the Chinese community and not much effort seems to be made to understand our needs. There is also a disconnection about the way development should proceed between CoJ and the Chinese community. For them, there must be a plan before the area can be developed, and since it is not a priority area, nothing happens and we have this organic form of development which looks chaotic. If this area is not a priority for CoJ, why don't they then support community efforts? Cyrildene has faced ups and downs; no one can control that.<sup>11</sup>

In condensed form, these different standpoints were also at the heart of the associated public engagement process, comprised of various interest groups. On the one hand, established (non-Chinese) residents were 'concerned about unregulated building and conversions, land uses, and urban management problems', and these dynamics 'spread[ing] into the adjoining areas not intended for business or rental accommodation purposes' (City of Johannesburg 2016b:5). As for the Chinese, owners were 'keen to use their properties to best advantage, mostly informally', and shopkeepers along

Derrick Avenue were mainly concerned about the trading conditions and the impact of rules and enforcement on the success of the street market. On the other hand, the Chinatown Johannesburg Community Committee was frustrated by the inability to finalise the gateways (at the time blocked due to a dispute with City Power), the lack of day-to-day service provision in the area and the shortfall of appropriate and consistent rules to regulate traders (*ibid.*:5). If there was a clear split of opinion regarding the nature and level of urban development between both sides, amid varying levels of support for the enforcement of by-laws among Chinese stakeholders, a general agreement emerged around the inadequacy of parking and the City's disinterest in the area. According to the lead designer of the precinct plan, the participation process, which consisted of three meetings (between May and July 2016), turned out to be very one-sided, dominated by established residents and a general anti-Chinese attitude, which can partially explain the reticence by Chinese to attend.<sup>12</sup>

This middle-class discomfort with urban change, 'expressed not only [through] a loss of place but also, more profoundly, a loss of self' (Dixon & Durrheim 2000:36, cited in Ballard 2010:1082), is comparable to the predominant mood characterising the public engagements in middle-class neighbourhoods impacted by the CoF. In each case, the culprit was framed as the *other*, the 'black urban poor' or the 'Chinese', responsible for causing undesired shifts, and anxieties about dropping property values in *their* neighbourhoods. However, despite certain parallels, there was also a striking difference which can be captured by the following two quotations. The first one highlights a particular reaction to the CoF initiative raised by established residents in Westdene:

...if this is not in place before the developments are forced onto this area, it will turn into another Hillbrow. [...] Entirely up to residents if we want it to be this way or not. Anger and disgust without eyes wide open have helped us nothing up until now. Time for residents to decide if we shall continue to become the new Yeoville or the new Parkhurst.<sup>13</sup>

The second one concerns Cyrildene:

Once shoppers have done their shopping in Derrick Avenue, on many occasions these same people (guess what nationality) simply litter the road and pavement by nonchalantly throwing all their unwanted packaging, empty beverage cans/bottles and fast-food wrappers, wet tissues, cigarette butts and packages, wood meat skewers, etc onto the pavement and roadway before leaving. [...] What kind of people are these and who do they expect should clean up after them? All this for the benefit of the Derrick Avenue businesses and nobody cleans up the mess.

To top all this, we have a continual cacophony of spitting on the roads and pavements by shoppers and 'illegal guest houses' and other residents (this very often includes young women?). Lionel Street must be one of the most spat on streets in South Africa.

Except for certain portions, like in front of my house and my neighbour (both of us, strangely not Chinese) the pavements are generally full of weeds, rubbish/litter, holes, builders' rubble and on many occasions discarded old torn/dirty and stained mattresses. There does not appear to be any pride by certain people in the area we live in.<sup>14</sup>

The first statement, referring to the implementation of the Corridors project, points to specific places; Hillbrow and Yeoville as signifiers for over-crowding, poor urban management, crime, general mayhem and a high percentage of predominantly black African migrants; Parkhurst is mentioned as a trendy and upmarket neighbourhood. In relation to Cyrildene, the second comment focuses directly on the Chinese themselves while mirroring a barely concealed racial prejudice and aggressive attitude experienced throughout most parts of the public participation process.<sup>15</sup> It could be argued that there is little difference between these variations of othering, whether disguised by place metaphors or openly ethnicised.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, it offers an indication about where these *other* groups fit within middle-class urban imaginaries: both tolerated if kept at a distance, but the former seen as part of a local phenomenon (associated with the city's history of inequality and exploitable cheap labour force); the latter relating to a more global and disconnected one. It is not only that the lifestyle is deemed unsuitable for established suburban values (Ballard 2010),<sup>17</sup> or that the *other* emerges within the boundaries of the constitutive core (Lu 2000), but also that these Chinese newcomers fall outside the middle-class and are associated with a type of low-end globalisation. More broadly, the comments by surrounding residents regarding the lack of salubrity and inability of grasping a normative suburban standard of living were also echoed by others. On a Facebook group called 'Cyrildene remembered', and predominantly made up of Jewish members who used to reside in the neighbourhood between the 1950s and 1990s, references to Derrick's current configuration were largely negative and framed in contradiction to what was once a 'harmonious' community and neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, more established middle-class Chinese, mostly living in Johannesburg's upmarket neighbourhoods, increasingly avoid Derrick and its inhabitants due to their low *suzhi* (素质), which refers to qualities measured in terms of behaviour, education, ethics and ambition.<sup>19</sup>



**Picture 6:** A street-scene during the Chinese New Year celebrations, attracting visitors from all over the city

Photo Credit: Mark Lewis, February 2019

‘Cast within [this] racialised frame of belonging’, Derrick Avenue is not only refused ‘recognition of the many sources of identity formation’ (Amin 2002:977) but also becomes excluded from broader discussions about renewed ways of living together in suburban areas. Indirectly, it speaks to Doreen Massey’s critique of reducing the conception of place ‘to drawing lines around’ or setting ‘a frame in the sense of a concave line around some area, the inside of which is defined in one way and the outside in another’ (1993:65–66). She further states that ‘[d]efinition in this sense does not have to be through simple counterposition to the outside; it can come, in part, precisely through the particularity of linkage *to* that “outside” which is, therefore, itself part of what constitutes the place’ (*ibid.*:68). During the second public meeting, residents engaged in a slightly more positive manner once they realised that the likelihood of approval for the plan was high, and the spreading of Derrick Avenue was to be contained through specific street coding. At the same time, the design team wanted to deliberately bring out the *ethnic* component as something positive, and as a contribution to the city:

The story we wanted to tell is that for immigrants,<sup>20</sup> there is a freedom in how they develop their properties, and which promote public life: The removal of the front wall, for example, giving the front yard over to the public realm, and with a shop in that interface. Part of the story was to say, there are clues

here. Sure, most of this has been done illegally, without following the by-laws, but there are clues about how we can make our city a more public place, more active, and more vibrant. [...] While there is a general fear of exercising agency in the public realm, these guys just do it. With its by-laws or not. We didn't project anything; it was just there.<sup>21</sup>

While opting for a themed *ethnic* approach, their underlying argument was to situate these changes and transformations of space as part of a broader narrative of city-making. As such, rather than pointing towards a question of 'integration' and 'assimilation', this reasoning relates to what Çağlar and Glick Schiller refer to as 'emplacement', 'which invokes both a sense of place-making and allows us to focus on a set of experiences shared by people who are generally differentiated by scholars and policy makers' into separate categories (2018:21). The closely knit neighbourhood identity of old times, as invoked by former residents, is long gone, as much as the people themselves, who have either moved overseas or live in other more up-market suburban areas. Nowadays, apart from the direct correlation with Chinatown, Cyrildene's identity is unclear. Next to the fading away of earlier Jewish and Greek footprints, few of the 'established' residents have lived in the area for more than fifteen to twenty years, amid a growing racial mix of suburbanites. In this context, Derrick Avenue, having gradually emerged as a central focal point (see Picture 6), becomes a starting point rather than an end-result of ongoing shifts in the process of 'suburb-building' (Mabin et al. 2013:183). While the Precinct plan has been approved, the challenge is that there is little chance of public funds being allocated towards any infrastructural upgrades in the area. It will, therefore, be up to the residents and private initiatives 'to make the plan work'.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, living together [in Cyrildene], as interpreted by Derrida, becomes 'always a matter of necessity' as 'one cannot not "live together" even if one does not know how or with whom', or if it implies 'hav[ing] to live *badly* together, which [is] also [a] manner of living' (2013:23–24).

## Conclusion

In light of Derrick Avenue's current configuration, research and analyses have predominantly been cast within an ethnicised framework. Throughout this paper we have adopted an alternative approach, opting for a method of (un)writing, and with the aim of embedding the street and its surroundings back into the city at large. Thinking about relational comparison, Gillian Hart stresses the importance of 'starting with [...] *processes* and practices rather than with any sort of bounded unit – be it nation, city, village, [street] or whatever – and engaging in an initial round of abstraction or

theorising. What are typically seen as bounded “units of analysis” are often more usefully understood as vantage points from which to try to begin to grasp the coming together and interconnections of what (at least initially) appear as key processes’ (2018:389, emphasis in original). As such, if the street with its predominant demographics, architectural features and cuisine easily stands out and speaks to geographies of difference, once stripped of these ethnic markers more underlying patterns come to the fore. In relation to changes in the built environment, these self-initiated efforts (while often done illegally) relate in their own way to dynamics of compaction, mixed-use developments and interactive street environments envisioned by official urban planning documents (such as in the case of the mayoral Corridors of Freedom Initiative). They also showcase the reality of a city that functions across formal and informal divides (related to planning and production of space). Furthermore, a comparative view of the public participation process linked to both the CoF and the Cyrildene Precinct Plan revealed similar forms of *othering* by more established middle-class residents and targeted at undesired newcomers, whether existing or potential. If narratives in relation to the Chinese were openly ethnicised, raising questions about where they fit in within South Africa’s society (e.g. Harris 2018; Dittgen & Anthony 2018), this also invites a broader discussion about renewed forms of collective life in these in-between (sub)urban environments, characterised by a growing diversity (both racially and socio-economically) amid reduced public funding for infrastructure upgrades. Alterations such as those along Derrick Avenue (as well as in other ‘migrant spaces’) are driven by spatial efficiency and ideal usage of space in a city where this is challenging. As such, it is important to flip the script and consider these spaces not only as drivers, but also as firmly rooted within debates about (sub)urban change.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Notes

1. Pseudonym (series of interviews, April to May 2018, July 2019).
2. Given the limited amount of safe outdoor spaces for socialising in Johannesburg, there is a growing appetite for high-street environments and food market spaces as an alternative to shopping malls. If Derrick Avenue is not as popular as, for example, 7th Street in Melville, or 4th Avenue in Parkhurst, both upper-middle-income suburbs, there is a novelty appeal which becomes visible over weekends and reaches its apex during the Chinese New Year celebrations. While negative attitudes to the area are expressed at a neighbourhood level (both by current and previous residents of Cyrildene), those eager to explore the street come from various areas of Johannesburg or are visitors from elsewhere.
3. While displacing the communal script, Anderson nonetheless focuses on the diversification of ethnicities as one of her reference points.
4. Interviews conducted between 2009 and 2011 showed this to be the predominant impression at the time. However, just a few years later, there have been on-going rumours about Chinese migrants leaving, in part, due to harsher economic prospects amid continued concerns about safety. While it remains difficult to say how this has affected the demand for space in Cyrildene, quite a few restaurants have closed or changed ownership over the years.
5. Interviews in Cyrildene with Dave (1 May 2018) and with the caretaker of the building (23 August 2019).
6. If, following political changes in the summer of 2016, this major initiative gradually lost traction within the local administration, the key principles and aims behind the CoF remain highly relevant.
7. This point was emphasised during an interview with the lead consultant of the Cyrildene Precinct Plan (12 September 2018) and with a senior planner of the City of Johannesburg's Planning Department (23 April 2019).
8. Interview conducted in Chinese (own translation) and in English, Cyrildene (19 October 2018 and 1 September 2019).
9. First, they sold seafood quite openly, but subsequently in covert form, after a nearby Chinese fishmonger had complained to the police of them selling informally.
10. Interview in Cyrildene (24 October 2018).
11. Translated excerpts from interviews held in Chinese (Cyrildene, 28 June 2018 and 21 August 2019).
12. Interview (12 September 2018). In addition to these public gatherings, the design and planning team organised a walkabout of the study area, conducted 26 surveys with residents and 30 with businesses, and held a number of focus group meetings with different stakeholders (City of Johannesburg, 2016b:4).
13. Excerpts from a WhatsApp Street group conversation in Westdene, a lower-middle-class neighbourhood earmarked as part of the Corridors of Freedom Initiative (various dates in June and September 2017).
14. Excerpt from an email thread written by a Cyrildene resident, sent to CoJ on 9 June 2016.

15. This was pointed out in interviews conducted with one City planner (1 June 2018), the lead designer (12 September 2018) and the main project consultant (27 September 2018).
16. The Cyrildene Precinct Plan was conducted in parallel to another Precinct Plan in Forsdburg/Mayfair. According to the lead designer, similar comments were made about the living standards of Somalis in Mayfair (interview, 12 September 2018).
17. Ballard's research on cattle slaughters by black residents in suburban neighbourhoods offers an interesting parallel, as it partially speaks to registers of a *swart gevaar* (black peril), which can be compared to those of a *gele gevaar* (yellow peril) in the context of Cyrildene.
18. This was also expressed during interviews with five former residents (various dates in May and June 2018, and in August 2019).
19. Conversations and interviews with several Chinese upper-middle-class residents throughout the years. With the emergence of a concentration of Chinese restaurants and supermarkets in Rivonia, located in the wealthier northern suburbs, there has been a growing split along class lines in terms of Chinese patrons.
20. This was the case for both precinct plans: Chinese in Cyrildene and Somalis in Mayfair.
21. Interview with the lead designer (12 September 2018).
22. Interview with City Planner (1 June 2018); minutes of the public participation meeting on 19 July 2016.

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