

Author Accepted Manuscript

This is the author's accepted version of the article. The final published version may differ in copy-editing, typesetting, pagination, and layout. Please cite the published version where available.

Agonistic Public Things: A Garden for 100 Flowers at 12 Park Lane

Dr Robyn Cook, Associate Professor of Design Ecologies

Faculty of Creative Arts & Communication, Falmouth University, UK

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4265-6716>

robyn.cook@falmouth.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article, I develop the concept of the *agonistic public thing* through an analysis of 12 Park Lane, a community-led garden established by *the ungovernable* on a derelict colonial-era property in Johannesburg. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's account of the distribution of the sensible, Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, Bruno Latour's account of 'things' as gatherings around matters of concern, and Carl DiSalvo's account of adversarial design, I argue that recurrent collective use redistributes the contested site's spaces, activities, and forms of participation while rendering it artefactual. Specifically, cultivation, re-entry, maintenance, repair, and gathering leave accumulated traces that constitute an indexical formation across the site, through which competing claims over access, heritage, value, and legitimate use become available to public interpretation.

Methodologically, the article takes the form of an interpretive case study, combining an historically situated reading of Johannesburg's urban geographies, selected South African histories of community gardening, and in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted with community organisers Simangaliso Sibiya and Molemo Moiloa (2025). The analysis proceeds across three interconnected scales: *micro* practices of working with waste, water, soil, and salvaged materials; *macro* practices of contested access, coordination, mutual aid, and convivial care; and a *meta* register concerned with the wider meanings generated by the accumulated traces of these practices.

Taken together, the analysis conceptualises 12 Park Lane as a *site-as-artefact-as-medium*: the situated ground of practice, understood within the social, historical, and institutional relations that shape its use and meaning (site); the material and relational form that ground takes through recurrent practice (artefact); and that artefactual formation insofar as its accumulated traces make claims and relations available for encounter and interpretation (medium). Through this formation, 12 Park Lane operates as an agonistic public thing: recurrent practice reconfigures space through new forms of activity and participation, incompatible claims over the site remain in contention, and accumulated traces give that continuing contest durable public form.

Keywords

Johannesburg; urban gardening; agonism; public things; political design; heritage

Introduction

At 12 Park Lane, Johannesburg-based collective *the ungovernable*¹ has established a community-led garden on the grounds of a derelict colonial-era property (Figure 1). The site lies at the threshold between Parktown and Hillbrow—a seam residents refer to as ‘Parkbrow’ (Moilola 2025)—where histories of privilege, dispossession, density, and stigma are brought into direct relation. Exposed to the street and overlooked by surrounding tower blocks, 12 Park Lane occupies a field of visibility shaped by Johannesburg’s spatial divisions and scopic politics. Here, participants grow vegetables and medicinal plants, share meals, and hold workshops amid persistent precarity and legal ambiguity. Specifically, access to the property remains insecure, with frequent lockouts; there is no running water or electricity; and equipment and other materials cannot be securely left on site (Moilola 2025; Sibiya 2025).

This takes place within Johannesburg’s ‘unfinished city’, where historical structures of racial inequity are simultaneously sedimented and unbundled (Mbembe & Nuttall 2004:366), and where strained service provision, uneven urban maintenance, and food insecurity remain acute (Kanosvamhira & Tevera 2024:408; Nembambula 2014:148–149). In this context, the site makes questions of access, use, and stewardship visible and contestable.

This article develops the concept of the *agonistic public thing* to account for this capacity. At 12 Park Lane, recurrent collective use leaves material and relational traces whose accumulation renders the site artefactual. Their indexical properties allow the resulting formation to signify the practices, claims, and relations through which it has been produced. I describe this as a *site-as-artefact-as-medium*: the situated ground of practice, understood within the social, historical, and institutional relations that shape its use and meaning (site); the material and relational form that ground takes through recurrent practice (artefact); and that artefactual formation insofar as its accumulated traces make claims and relations available for encounter and interpretation (medium). Rancière’s account of the distribution of the sensible (2006) helps explain the political significance of how the garden reconfigures space through new forms of activity and participation; Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism (1999) frames disagreement as irreducible to final consensus; Latour’s account of ‘things’ (2005a) explains how heterogeneous

¹ The collective’s name draws on South African traditions of ungovernability associated with Black resistance in the 1980s. Formally taken up by the African National Congress in 1984 in the call to ‘render this country ungovernable’, the term joined refusal of state authority with self-organised forms of coordination from below, including street and block committees, civics, people’s courts, clean-up campaigns, people’s parks, and relief committees (Moilola 2020:85–86). It has continued to resonate in later struggles over housing, eviction, and precarity (Chance 2022).

claims and attachments gather around material matters of concern; and DiSalvo's adversarial design (2012) establishes the articulatory capacity of material form. The contribution developed here is to show how recurrent practice can make incompatible claims over a site materially and publicly legible. At 12 Park Lane, cultivation, re-entry, maintenance, repair, and shared use also enact different ways of organising social and ecological life. For design, the concept makes the site itself an object of analysis, as a medium whose communicative properties develop through recurrent use.



Figure 1: 12 Park Lane, Johannesburg, 2025. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the ungovernable

At the Seam: 12 Park Lane and the Politics of 'Parkbrow'

12 Park Lane sits between Parktown and Hillbrow, bringing the area's histories of colonial privilege into close proximity with urban density and infrastructural strain.

Looking to the first of these, Parktown Ridge was developed by Hermann Eckstein and Company in the early 1890s as a 'villa neighbourhood' for Johannesburg's colonial elite (Murray 2011:43). Large stone mansions, extensive gardens, and avenues of non-indigenous planting reshaped the ridge to emulate an English suburban landscape, dramatically reconfiguring its

ecologies in the process. As Murray (2011:45) argues, Parktown projected an 'imaginary English country life' onto Johannesburg.

12 Park Lane belonged to this wider spatial order. It gave domestic form to the extractivist wealth generated by deep-level gold mining, an industry predicated on mass land dispossession and the violent and coercive control of labour (Mbembe & Nuttall 2004:363). The property later took on a succession of institutional uses — including military quarters during the Anglo-Boer War, a Department of Health facility, and a crèche for nurses' children at the neighbouring hospital² — adding further layers to the building's material history. Today, the house stands in ruin, complicating accounts of Parktown's so-called 'golden era' (Murray 2011:43). Its shattered windows, collapsed balcony, and missing heritage plaque sit uneasily with the valorisation of colonial architecture as cultural heritage. While commentators lament the 'disgraceful state' of this once 'premier Parktown address' (Munro 2018), Rassool (2000:1) reminds us that heritage in South Africa is complex and contested. Nostalgia for Parktown's architectural past can obscure the histories of extraction and coercion that made these houses possible. Seen in these terms, 12 Park Lane reflects what Mbembe describes as an entanglement of temporalities: the colonial past persists in the present through traces and fragments that are continually recycled and invested with new meanings in the material and symbolic organisation of everyday life (Mbembe in Hoeller 2001).

Hillbrow, by contrast, was shaped through a different socio-spatial history. Originally envisaged as a 'healthy' residential area distinct from the industrial activity of early Johannesburg, it was established in 1895 as an upscale suburb of detached houses (Stadler & Dugmore 2017:1). Later transformed by rapid high-rise development, Hillbrow became one of Johannesburg's most densely populated neighbourhoods. By the 1960s and 1970s, it was a cosmopolitan district: a centre of cafés, cinemas and one of the first neighbourhoods to push against apartheid's racialised residential zoning. In the 1980s, it became a 'liberated zone' — both a site of gay activism and an early space of racial integration in defiance of the Group Areas Act (Stadler & Dugmore 2017:S444).³

² Accounts of the building's successive uses are drawn from heritage journalism and material supplied by the ungovernable; they indicate a layered institutional history, even where archival reconstruction remains incomplete (News24 2017; the ungovernable [Sa]).

³ The Group Areas Act (1950) was a central instrument of apartheid urban planning, designating specific residential and business districts for different racial groups. Hillbrow was zoned as a White Group Area until the early 1980s, making it illegal for Coloured, Indian, and African residents to rent or own property there. Although reclassified as a 'Grey Area' in 1982, the Act itself was only repealed in 1990 (Winkler 2013: 312–313).

During the 1990s, however, Hillbrow became increasingly associated with 'grime and crime' (Winkler 2013:311) and was routinely portrayed as 'dirty, diseased and dangerous' (Stadler & Dugmore 2017:S445). By the 2010s, Hillbrow's population density exceeded 68,000 people per km² across 200 buildings and nearly 25,000 households (Stadler & Dugmore 2017:S444). These demographic pressures intensified infrastructural strain and underscored Hillbrow's role as a site of arrival and survival: a port of entry for migrants and immigrants, where hope, precarity, and instability remain entangled (Stadler & Dugmore 2017:S444–S445). Poet Phaswane Mpe's description of Hillbrow as a place of 'milk, honey and bile' captures this tension between promise and opportunity, suffering and stigma (Mpe 2001, cited in Stadler & Dugmore 2017:S444). Hillbrow's heterogeneity thus complicates one-dimensional narratives of decline. Its social and spatial complexity registers infrastructural strain, but also adaptation and forms of urban life that exceed conventional planning logics of order, legibility, and control.

While Parktown and Hillbrow are historically distinct urban formations — one shaped by privilege and extraction, the other by density, cultural and linguistic diversity, and precarity — Parkbrow forms a seam between them, bringing their histories, infrastructures, populations, and claims on urban space into close proximity. Doreen Massey's concept of 'throwntogetherness' offers a way of understanding this proximity as the co-presence of heterogeneous trajectories whose terms of engagement must be negotiated in the here-and-now (2005:140–142). 12 Park Lane is also unusually exposed within this spatial seam: visible from the street through its gates and overlooked by surrounding high-rise residential blocks and the Hillbrow Tower (Figure 1).⁴ This exposure places the activities at the site within a broader metropolitan field of visibility shaped by dense apartment living, contested infrastructure, and different histories of authority, neglect, and urban transformation. In this way, the practices unfolding there are drawn into Johannesburg's scopic politics, taking place in public view within the city's layered histories of extraction, exclusion, and reclamation.

Cultivating Resistance: South African Precedents for 12 Park Lane

The genealogies of South African community gardening are inseparable from conditions in which land, settlement, and cultivation were organised through colonial and apartheid

⁴ Completed in 1971, the structure was originally named the J.G. Strijdom Tower and only later became widely known as the Hillbrow Tower. The original name registers the ideological charge of apartheid-era infrastructure: the tower formed part of a communications landscape that was also symbolic, and has been read, together with the Brixton tower, as a figuration of South African national identity (Groenewald & Legge 2008:1–2, 7–9).

dispossession. Through segregated planning and labour systems, both regimes engineered hunger and dependency by eroding access to the means of cultivation (Shackleton & Gwedla 2021:3–4; Vibert 2016:255–256). In response, small-scale and often informal gardens became vital infrastructures of survival, ranging from homestead plots maintained largely by women (Vibert 2016:255–256) to collectively cultivated sites on unused municipal land, churchyards, and school grounds (Shackleton & Gwedla 2021:3; Kanosvamhira & Tevera 2024:408). This section turns to South African histories of community gardening to clarify two distinct but overlapping political lineages through which cultivation at 12 Park Lane can be understood: cultivation as collective care and mutual aid under imposed scarcity, and cultivation as urban land reclamation under insecure conditions of access.⁵

Established in 1992, the Hleketani Community Garden in Limpopo clarifies the first of these. Situated in Jomela village, the cooperative was founded by several dozen women amid a food crisis marked by drought, declining household incomes, and widespread hunger (Vibert 2016:253). These conditions were actively produced by apartheid-era ‘betterment planning’,⁶ whereby rural households were relocated from dispersed homesteads into tightly gridded villages with reduced access to land and resources. The ‘villagisation’ of Jomela, as in other designated ‘homeland’⁷ areas, stripped families of subsistence security: landholdings shrank, livestock and land use were regulated, and residential, grazing, and arable areas were placed under state authority (Vibert 2016:255–256; Falayi 2022:873). Within this context, the Hleketani women’s mobilisation of collective labour sought to address immediate needs for food while also reasserting autonomy over cultivation in the wake of imposed scarcity. Pooling resources, exchanging seed, and redistributing produce during illness, funerals, and other moments of crisis worked to build forms of social solidarity beneath the radar of the apartheid state. In this sense, Hleketani exemplifies a broader trajectory of quiet activism in South Africa, in which everyday cultivation, though ‘unspectacular’, becomes socio-politically significant by meeting collective needs and modelling civic alternatives (Kanosvamhira & Tevera 2024:402, 404–405; Pottinger 2017:215–222).

⁵ Although the focus of this article remains on South African histories of cultivation, these practices also resonate with the wider global repertoire of guerrilla gardening and informal urban growing; see Hardman *et al.* (2018:7, 9–10).

⁶ ‘Betterment planning’ was a central policy of apartheid’s ‘homeland’ system from the 1930s through the 1970s. Ostensibly framed as soil conservation, it involved compulsory relocation of African households into planned villages, reduced landholdings, enforced culling of livestock, and state control over natural resources. The result was widespread dispossession, overcrowding and entrenched food insecurity (Falayi 2022:873; Vibert 2016:255–256).

⁷ ‘Homelands’ refer to the ethnically designated territories assigned to Black South Africans under segregation and apartheid. In practice, they were under-resourced spaces of spatial control and labour reproduction, shaped by overcrowding and constrained access to land and water (Vibert 2016:255–256).

Abalimi Bezekhaya, founded in 1983, clarifies a second lineage of South African community gardening: urban land reclamation through cultivation. The organisation's name, meaning 'Farmers of the Home' in isiXhosa, reflects its grounding in household and community cultivation (Abalimi Bezekhaya [Sa]). Working in the Cape Flats,⁸ an apartheid 'resettlement' zone, the NGO responded to conditions produced by forced displacement, which left Black and Coloured communities confined to areas marked by scarcity, unemployment, poverty, and infrastructural neglect (McDonald 2002:164; Karaan & Mohamed 1998:67–69). By the mid-1990s, Abalimi Bezekhaya had built a substantial gardening network across township areas including Khayelitsha, Nyanga, and Philippi, supporting home gardens, community gardens, and outreach-based forms of cultivation (Karaan & Mohamed 1998:67, 70–71). Importantly, it also organised neighbourhood gardening groups and street-based forms of cultivation, extending gardening beyond individual household plots and towards collective use of urban land. This work took place under harsh environmental conditions, including wind-scoured coastal dunes exposed to the south-east gales, and recurrent constraints on land, tools, and water (Karaan & Mohamed 1998:68–69, 70, 75–76). Despite these conditions, the gardens contributed to household food security, reduced food expenditure and, in some cases, generated a modest income through the sale of surplus produce to neighbours and nearby buyers (Karaan & Mohamed 1998:73–74, 76–77). Alongside the practices, Abalimi Bezekhaya created infrastructures of sociality through gatherings and training that fostered collective solidarity (Karaan & Mohamed 1998:69–73). Read in this light, Abalimi Bezekhaya's support for neighbourhood gardening groups and community gardens can be understood as *infrapolitical*: low-visibility acts through which residents reclaimed urban space for food growing, collective use, and neighbourhood survival (Baudry 2012:32–36). The stakes were therefore spatial as well as social and political: the gardens contributed to food security, while also reworking who could occupy, use, and improve land in township areas shaped by apartheid resettlement.

Together, Hleketani Community Garden and Abalimi Bezekhaya show how cultivation has supported both mutual aid under conditions of precarity and urban land reclamation under insecure conditions of access. While the modalities of exclusion from affordable and nutritious food under apartheid differ from those of the present, the structural logics established under apartheid continue to shape conditions in the democratic era (Kanosvamhira & Shade

⁸ The Cape Flats refers to the township belt on the outskirts of Cape Town produced through apartheid planning and resettlement. Karaan and Mohamed describe it as a sandy area of old and new housing estates with inadequate social and recreational facilities, few industrial and commercial centres, and harsh environmental conditions (1998:68).

2025:134–135). These inherited logics have been further exacerbated by neoliberal restructuring since the mid-1990s, which has weakened food systems by dismantling interventionist policies, liberalising markets, and leaving small-scale producers without adequate support (Fukuda-Parr 2018:225–227). Paradoxically, South Africa is a net exporter of food, yet one in five households continues to experience inadequate access to nutritional resources, with urban poor populations particularly vulnerable (Kanosvamhira & Tevera 2024:408). This food insecurity is part of a broader landscape of marginalisation: the same communities facing the highest barriers to affordable and nutritious food are often also struggling with unreliable access to water, electricity, and housing. The consequences of this structural precarity are visible in recurrent waves of service-delivery protests — still ‘the most visible form of protest in South Africa’s democratic era’ (Chiwarawara 2024:149) — which reflect demands for basic services together with a pervasive sense of voicelessness in municipal and governmental decision-making (Nembambula 2014:148–149).

The continuing work of Hleketani and Abalimi Bezekhaya shows how practices of mutual aid and spatial reclamation developed under apartheid continue to operate within South Africa’s present landscape of inequality, food insecurity, and infrastructural precarity. Read alongside them, cultivation at 12 Park Lane belongs to an ongoing political repertoire in which gardening becomes a means of collective support, spatial claim-making, and refusal under insecure conditions of access.

Agonistic Practices: Fragility, Autonomy and Prefiguration

The preceding sections establish two conditions for the analysis that follows: 12 Park Lane is already organised through particular histories of ownership, authority, use, and value, while community gardening in South Africa carries established histories of mutual aid, collective care, and spatial reclamation. The analysis now examines what recurrent cultivation does within these conditions across three interconnected scales: at the micro scale, through work with waste, water, soil, and salvaged materials; at the macro scale, through access, reciprocity, coordination, and convivial care; and at the meta scale, through the traces these practices leave and the ways those traces enter public interpretation.

Micro: Material Practices at 12 Park Lane

At 12 Park Lane, cultivation takes shape through the site's constraints and contingencies, as gardeners work with what is found, salvaged, or otherwise available. Site and practice are therefore mutually shaping: material conditions influence decisions, redirect activity, and afford possibilities for cultivation. This can be understood as a *correspondence* with materials, in which form emerges through engagement with how they flow, bend, and resist (Ingold 2013:21).

This is perhaps most evident in the conditions produced by the site's infrastructural absences. Copper pipes and wiring, long since stripped for resale, leave 12 Park Lane without plumbing or electricity (Moilola 2025). Their removal forms part of Johannesburg's wider informal economy, in which the salvage of metals and architectural remnants sustains livelihoods while also producing the logistical precarities that shape sites such as 12 Park Lane (Schoeman & Ramutanda 2022). Gardeners therefore work without running water, relying on a single JoJo tank and the contingencies of summer rain (Moilola 2025). Tools also cannot be left on site but must be carried away after each session and brought back the following week, since anything with resale value is vulnerable to removal. Cultivation thus proceeds through materials that can be found, reused, or worked into the site without relying on municipal services, permanent infrastructure, or equipment that would need to be secured between sessions. Brick and stone from the former colonial-era rockery become planting beds; offcuts from adjacent jacaranda trees become stakes; and piano keys from a grand piano once housed in the mansion, later stripped for firewood, become plant markers (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Piano keys repurposed as plant markers at 12 Park Lane, Johannesburg. Digital photograph, 2025. Courtesy of the ungovernable; photography by Riaaz Ameen.

This adaptive material work extends beyond site remnants into Johannesburg's cycles of municipal waste. As Moilola explains, nearby lawns and verges are routinely trimmed by garden-service workers, with the grass clippings treated as disposable and taken to landfill (2025). At 12 Park Lane, participants redirect this material through informal arrangements with these workers who bring the debris to the site. The clippings are then sifted by hand to remove embedded plastics and litter and layered onto beds as mulch or added to a compost heap improvised from an old sandpit, likely left over from the house's period as a crèche. Through this work, discarded organic matter re-enters cycles of growth, and cultivation proceeds with reduced reliance on commercial fertilisers (Figures 3 & 4).



Figure 3: Clearing the site and sorting waste for recycling at 12 Park Lane, Johannesburg. Digital photograph, 2025. Courtesy of the ungovernable.



Figure 4: Garden waste layered as mulch on vegetable beds at 12 Park Lane, Johannesburg. Digital photograph, 2025. Courtesy of the ungovernable; photography by Riaaz Ameen.

This reworking of discarded organic matter also carries Johannesburg's hydrocolonial history into the garden's present. As the discussion of Parktown has already suggested, the lawns and verges from which these cuttings derive belong to an imported landscape vocabulary, one poorly aligned with the city's dry inland ecology. Their maintenance depends on water-intensive horticulture, imported planting regimes, and racially coded ideals of 'refined' European gardens (Bethlehem 2022:345–346). In metaleptic terms, the resulting visible greenness of lawns stands in for the hidden hydraulic systems, transformed landscapes, and extractive relations that made such cultivation possible (Bethlehem 2022:345–346). Redirected to 12 Park Lane, these

cuttings protect and sustain crops such as sorghum and millet, and medicinal plants such as *lengana* and wild garlic (Sibiya 2025). A reversal takes shape here: material generated by colonial planting regimes is turned towards crops and medicinal plants that those same regimes helped to marginalise or displace. In this sense, the garden's practices are prefigurative. They enact, in situated and provisional form, an urban ecology organised around reuse, improvisation, and autonomy, contesting inherited logics of display, extraction, and imposed ornamental order.

Composting and vermicomposting at the site extend these material practices into the making of soil itself. Organic matter from the garden and from participants' homes is folded back into the beds, where the residues of households are gathered into a shared soil ecology. Here, decomposition, microbial activity, plant growth and collective tending become part of the same fragile infrastructure (Moilola 2025). Soil thus becomes a living 'bioinfrastructure', continuously made through waste, labour and care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2019:393).

How these relations extend into questions of access, reciprocity, and collective organisation comes into clearer view at the macro scale.

Macro: Relational Practices at 12 Park Lane

At the macro scale, the focus shifts to the social, spatial, and organisational relations through which cultivation is sustained, beginning with contested access. Participants have repeatedly cut chains to regain entry to the property and resume work after lockouts (Moilola 2025). Cultivation is therefore inseparable from trespass, taking place where entry is intermittently tolerated and periodically withdrawn. As Sibiya explains, 'you never know if the next day we will have access or will get there and the garden will be [out of bounds]' (2025). The ungovernable has approached the property's successive custodians — the Gauteng Department of Infrastructure Development and the Department of Health — to secure access, but accountability is displaced between offices and officials, leaving the garden in administrative ambiguity (Sibiya 2025). Legality remains unsettled, and cultivation persists in the interval between permission and exclusion.

Within this condition of uncertainty, the garden is sustained through fluid forms of coordination. Responsibilities move between participants, and decisions are made without settling into fixed

roles, hierarchies, or committee-like management. As Moilola reflects, 'maybe what has kept [the garden] alive is that nothing is fixed' (2025). Provisionality thus becomes an organising condition: it allows cultivation to continue through flexible and adaptive collaboration rather than through formalised structures the project cannot sustain. In this sense, the garden recalls what AbdouMaliq Simone describes as 'people as infrastructure', where collective life is reproduced through the 'incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections' of people, spaces, and practices (2004:407–410). These improvised and incomplete arrangements nevertheless produce a regularity through which the garden is sustained.

This regularity is most visible in the weekly meetups. Since November 2021, participants and community members have gathered at 12 Park Lane on Saturdays, interrupted only by sporadic lockouts and, on one occasion, cold weather (Moilola 2025). Gardening remains the central practice, while also providing a frame for other activities: meals are shared, seeds exchanged, conversations held, and workshops convened (Figure 5; Sibiya 2025). Cultivation is therefore a point of entry into a wider social practice, drawing gardeners, neighbours, visitors, and facilitators into recurring relations of participation and support. Conviviality is useful here because it names this social modality: the transformation of the garden from a plot of production into a shared setting where weekly activity and collective events nurture social ties, broaden participation, and generate support for the project itself (Hou 2017:119-120).



Figure 5: Fresh produce gathered for a shared meal at 12 Park Lane, Johannesburg. Digital photograph, 2025. Courtesy of the ungovernable; photography by Riaaz Ameen.

The political character of this convivial practice, present across the garden's shared labour, exchanges, and workshops, is particularly explicit in the intermittent HoliGrain Sessions. These gatherings use shared meals and collective discussion to embed questions of food justice into everyday practice. One session on *mabele* (sorghum), led by farmer and indigenous food activist Siphile Sithole, emphasised the grain's indigenous significance while drawing attention to its contemporary marginalisation: sorghum remains excluded from the zero-rated VAT treatment granted to many maize- and wheat-based staples (the ungovernable [Sa]; Dean 2025). Another session on *maíz* (maize), led by Héctor Peña, introduced the Mesoamerican farming system *milpa*, in which crops are understood through relations between soil, sky, and companion planting rather than as isolated commodities (the ungovernable [Sa]). In these sessions, sharing food becomes a form of quiet activism through which marginalised crops, food systems, and ecological relations are explored through eating, conversation, and exchange.

12 Park Lane persists through the repeated organisation of collective use under fragile conditions. Re-entry contests closure; flexible coordination distributes labour without fixing authority; Saturday gatherings make cultivation regular; and workshops such as the HoliGrain Sessions make explicit the links between cultivation, social justice, and ecological relation. Participants themselves produce the conditions through which the garden continues, enacting forms of autonomy within its persistent uncertainty (Escobar 2018:174–175). Across these practices, land is approached through cultivation, food through reciprocity, and heritage through lived use. This is where the garden's prefigurative character becomes apparent: different ways of inhabiting, valuing, and caring for the city are enacted together within the same contested site.

Meta: Traces and Public Meaning at 12 Park Lane

If the micro and macro scales describe how the garden is materially made and socially sustained, the meta scale considers how the traces of these practices enter public interpretation. That is, recurrent collective use leaves traces across the site: salvaged remnants, worked soil, cultivated beds, evidence of re-entry, repeated gathering, and maintenance. Taken together, these traces constitute an *indexical formation* through which

practices of cultivation, repair, care, common use, and claim-making become available to interpretation.

At 12 Park Lane, the contrast between competing regimes of value sharpens what these traces bring into view. The building condenses colonial prestige and heritage discourse. Its present neglect sits uneasily with the continued valorisation of that inheritance. At the same time, the building's deterioration registers broader pressures on public maintenance and service provision. The cultivated beds and salvaged materials, by contrast, make visible alternative socio-economic logics organised around cultivation, repair, reciprocity, and common use. As Moilola observes, 'the collapse of the house speaks to the collapse of the value of that history... and us gardening there speaks to an attempt to make something else' (2025). These material conditions bring different claims about the site's value, use, and future into relation. Their meaning remains open and contested. The resulting indexical formation is therefore polysemic. Because indexical meaning is context-dependent, the same materials, traces, and practices at 12 Park Lane may be read differently according to institutional position, spatial proximity, or everyday involvement with the site (Ciecierski 2021:73–89). To state agencies, they may register as unauthorised use, a challenge to custodial control, or an exposure of public maintenance failure. To neighbours, passers-by, and residents in the surrounding towers, they may register as social activity or a communal intervention amid wider infrastructural strain. To heritage preservationists, they may register as entropy or loss, where the material integrity of the colonial-era 'trophy' is further compromised by the gardeners' unauthorised interventions. To participants, the same signs may signify collective self-provisioning or a capacity to alter material conditions through cultivation, care, and common use.

The political significance of this reworking can be understood through Jacques Rancière's account of the distribution of the sensible: the organisation of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines what can appear as part of a common world, and who can have a part in it (Rancière 2006:12–13). At 12 Park Lane, the property has been constituted through categories such as colonial mansion, heritage object, and state asset, each carrying particular assumptions about its use, custody, and value. Recurrent use as a garden introduces other forms of activity into this order: cultivation, maintenance, gathering, exchange, and collective occupation. Through these practices, gardeners claim time and space within the property and participate in determining its use and value. In Rancière's terms, this constitutes a redistribution of the sensible because it alters the distribution of activity, space, and

participation at the site: cultivation becomes a way of occupying and defining the property, and those without official authority over the property acquire a part in shaping what the site can be.

This reconfigured field is also conflictual. Mouffe's account of agonistic pluralism is useful here because it treats conflict as constitutive of democratic politics (Mouffe 1999:752). For Mouffe, 'the political' names the dimension of antagonism inherent in social relations, while 'politics' names the practices, discourses, and institutions through which coexistence is organised under conditions that remain potentially conflictual (Mouffe 1999:754). The democratic task is therefore to transform antagonism between enemies into agonism: a relation in which opponents struggle over incompatible interpretations of shared principles while recognising one another's right to make those claims (1999:755). At 12 Park Lane, disagreement over heritage, access, and co-operative use can be understood through this agonistic lens insofar as incompatible claims to the same site remain in contention and consensus remains partial. The colonial mansion, the heritage object, the neglected state asset, and the cultivated commons remain present at once as competing accounts of value.

Latour helps specify how this agonistic condition becomes materially gathered. In his account of *Dingpolitik*, he shifts attention from politics understood primarily as representation to politics as the gathering of publics around things, issues, and matters of concern (Latour 2005a:15–16). For Latour, a 'thing' is a matter that draws together affected parties, attachments, disagreements, obligations, and possible resolutions (Latour 2005a:22–23). Read in these terms, the recurrent activation of 12 Park Lane as a garden gives the site's agonism a *thing-like* form. These disagreements are localised in the property itself; the site becomes the durable material locus around which dissensus persists, consensus remains partial, and the terms through which the site might be valued, used, or governed remain open to dispute (Mouffe 1999:756–757).

If Mouffe helps account for the site's agonistic condition, and Latour for its thing-like assembly, DiSalvo helps specify its articulatory function and brings the design (communicative) register into the argument. Adversarial design is concerned with revealing the contestable dimensions of situations often treated as non-political and with giving political conditions material form through which they can be encountered and disputed (DiSalvo 2012:84, 117). At 12 Park Lane, questions of heritage, neglect, common use, and authority become publicly legible through the accumulated signs, materials, and practices of the site. Cultivation, re-entry, maintenance, repair, and gathering leave traces whose accumulation renders the site artefactual. As those

traces make the claims and relations through which the site is produced available to encounter and interpretation, the site also functions as a medium. I describe this as a site-as-artefact-as-medium: the situated ground of practice, understood within the social, historical, and institutional relations that shape its use and meaning (site); the material and relational form that ground takes through recurrent practice (artefact); and that artefactual formation insofar as its accumulated traces make claims and relations available for public encounter and interpretation (medium).

A Garden for 100 Flowers

At 12 Park Lane, part of the garden's political significance emerges from its intervention in a place already shaped by particular histories of ownership, value, authority, and use. The discussion of Parkbrow established this existing order: a colonial-era property shaped by histories of extraction and privilege, subsequently constituted as a heritage object and state asset, and located within a part of Johannesburg marked by density, infrastructural strain, and contested access to urban space. The histories of Hleketani Community Garden and Abalimi Bezekhaya located cultivation within South African lineages of collective care, mutual aid, and spatial reclamation. Together, these sections establish why gardening at 12 Park Lane matters politically: recurrent cultivation intervenes in existing arrangements of use, value, custody, and meaning.

The micro and macro analyses showed how this intervention takes place in practice. Working with soil, water, waste, and salvaged materials physically reworks the property, while re-entry, provisional coordination, reciprocity, gathering, and common use reorganise its social and spatial relations. These alter what happens at the site, who participates in its use, and who takes part in determining its value. In Rancière's terms, they redistribute the sensible: cultivation, maintenance, exchange, and collective occupation introduce new forms of activity and participation into a property previously ordered through categories of heritage, state custody, and authorised use.

That redistribution remains unresolved. In Mouffe's terms, 'the political' persists as incompatible claims over heritage, access, authority, value, and common use remain in contention (Mouffe 1999:754). As recurrent practice leaves traces across the property, this conflict acquires material presence: cultivated beds, worked soil, salvaged remnants, and evidence of repair, re-entry, and repeated gathering constitute an indexical formation through

which the site's competing uses and meanings become available to public encounter and interpretation. Through these traces, the contested redistribution acquires a durable public form as an *agonistic public thing*.

Sibiya's description of 12 Park Lane as 'a garden for 100 flowers' captures the unresolved plurality of this condition particularly well (2025). Some of those 'flowers' are already being cultivated in practice: land is put into common use, food circulates through reciprocity, maintenance becomes a practice of care, and heritage is activated through lived use. These are provisional ways of organising social and ecological relations within the garden. The '100 flowers' also open outward. Because these relations leave traces in the site, they become perceptible to others and available to interpretation, disagreement, and imagination. What is practised at 12 Park Lane can therefore make further ways of organising collective life visible and thinkable. The phrase holds these two senses together: a plurality enacted within the site and a wider field of possibility opened through its public readability. The site itself remains unresolved, as its use, meaning, value, and future continue to be contested.

For design, the agonistic public thing offers an analytic for examining how a site can acquire communicative force through use. It directs attention to the existing order through which a place is organised; the practices that redistribute its spaces, activities, and forms of participation; the incompatible claims that remain active within it; and the traces through which those claims become publicly legible. 12 Park Lane provides a situated case through which this analytic has been developed. Applied elsewhere, the analytic offers a way of asking how recurrent practice can redistribute the sensible at a politically situated site, how that redistribution remains contested, and how its material traces make both conflict and enacted alternatives publicly perceptible, towards widening the field of what can be imagined, contested, and brought into being.

References

- Abalimi Bezekhaya. [Sa]. About. [O]. Available: <https://abalimibezekhaya.org.za/> Accessed 17 September 2025.
- Amin, A. & Thrift, N. 2013. *Arts of the political: New openings for the left*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Baudry, S. 2012. Reclaiming urban space as resistance: the infrapolitics of gardening. *Revue française d'études américaines* 131(1):32–48.

Bethlehem, L. 2022. Hydrocolonial Johannesburg. *Interventions* 24(3):340–354.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2021.2015710>

Chance, K.R. 2022. Sustaining 'ungovernability': Housing and evictions during Covid-19 in Durban, South Africa. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 31 March. [O]. Available: <https://polarjournal.org/2022/03/31/sustaining-ungovernability-housing-and-evictions-during-covid-19-in-durban-south-africa> Accessed 20 August 2025.

Chiwarawara, K. 2024. The struggle for housing and basic services in South Africa: a case for service delivery protests. *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 50(2):148–165.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2024.2352193>

Ciecierski, T. 2021. Indexicality, meaning, use. *Semiotica* 238:73–89.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2018-0056>

Dean, S. 2025. Reviving indigenous crops to support farmers and improve nutrition. *Farmer's Weekly*. [O]. Available: <https://www.farmersweekly.co.za/agribusiness/agribusinesses/reviving-indigenous-crops-to-support-farmers-and-improve-nutrition/> Accessed 15 September 2025.

DiSalvo, C. 2012. *Adversarial design*. Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press.

Escobar, A. 2018. *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Falayi, K. 2022. The ghost of environmental history: Analysing the evolving governance of communal land in South Africa. *People and Nature* 4(4):867–878.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10342>

Fukuda-Parr, S. 2018. Developmental states, neoliberalism, and the right to food: Brazil and South Africa in *Economic and Social Rights in a Neoliberal World* edited by G. MacNaughton & D.F. Frey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press:217–235.

Groenewald, L. & Legge, F. 2008. Foundations of the nation: The Hillbrow and Brixton Towers as figurations of national identity in South Africa. Paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Case Histories in Geotechnical Engineering, 15 August, Arlington, Virginia. [O]. Available:

<https://scholarsmine.mst.edu/icchge/6icchge/session11b/4>

Accessed 15 May 2026.

- Hardman, M, Chipungu, L, Magidimisha, H, Larkham, PJ, Scott, AJ & Armitage, RP. 2018. Guerrilla gardening and green activism: Rethinking the informal urban growing movement. *Landscape and Urban Planning* 170:6-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2017.08.015>
- Hoeller, C. 2001. Interview with Achille Mbembe. [O]. Available: <https://www.laits.utexas.edu/africa/ads/1528.html> Accessed 25 August 2025.
- Hou, J. 2017. Urban community gardens as multimodal social spaces in *Greening cities: Forms and functions* edited by P.Y. Tan & C.Y. Jim. Singapore: Springer:113–130.
- Ingold, T. 2013. *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. London: Routledge.
- Kanosvamhira, T.P. & Shade, M.D. 2025. Urban agriculture for environmentally just cities: the case of urban community gardens in Cape Town, South Africa. *Local Environment* 30(1):133–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2024.2434757>
- Kanosvamhira, T. & Tevera, D. 2024. Unveiling quiet activism: Urban community gardens as agents of food sovereignty in South Africa. *Geographical Research* 62(4):408–421. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12663>
- Karaan, A.S.M. & Mohamed, N. 1998. The performance and support of food gardens in some townships of the Cape Metropolitan Area: An evaluation of Abalimi Bezekhaya in *Development Southern Africa* 15(1):67–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03768359808439996>
- Latour, B. 2005a. From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: Or how to make things public. In: *Making things public: Atmospheres of democracy* edited by B. Latour & P. Weibel Cambridge, MA: MIT Press:14–43.
- MacNaughton, G. & Frey, D.F. (eds). 2018. *Economic and social rights in a neoliberal world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Massey, D. 2005. *For space*. London: Sage.
- McDonald, D.A. 2002. *Environmental justice in South Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- Mbembe, A. & Nuttall, S. 2004. Writing the world from an African metropolis. *Public Culture* 16(3): 347–372. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-3-347>.
- Moilola, M. 2020. Ungovernable: reclaiming autonomy, letting go of authority. *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 104: 81–92. <https://doi.org/10.1353/trn.2020.0034>
- Mouffe, C. 1999. Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism? *Social Research* 66(3):745–758.
- Munro, K. 2018. Parktown's oldest house continues to decay. *The Heritage Portal*, 10 July. [O]. Available: <https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/parktowns-oldest-house-continues-decay> Accessed 23 August 2025.

Murray, M.J. 2011. *City of extremes: The spatial politics of Johannesburg*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Nembambula, P. 2014. Violent service delivery protests in the governance of public participation in a democratic South Africa. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5(9):148–151. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n9p148>.

News24. 2017. Parktown's oldest home faces ruin. *City Press / News24*, 21 December. [O]. Available: <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/parktowns-oldest-home-faces-ruin-20171221> Accessed 18 September 2025.

Pottinger, L. 2017. Planting the seeds of a quiet activism. *Area* 49(2):215–222.

Puig de la Bellacasa, M. 2019. Re-animating soils: Transforming human–soil affections through science, culture and community. *The Sociological Review Monographs* 67(2):391–407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119830601>

Rancière, J. 2006. *The politics of aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible*. London & New York: Continuum.

Rassool, C. 2000. The rise of heritage and the reconstitution of history in South Africa. *Kronos* 26:1–21.

Schoeman, C. & Ramutanda, T. 2022. Waste pickers and e-waste: A case study in the Greater Johannesburg area. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 40(1):1–15, 5–6.

Shackleton, C.M. & Gwedla, N. 2021. The legacy effects of colonial and apartheid imprints on urban greening in South Africa: Spaces, species and suitability. *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 8: 579813. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2020.579813>.

Simone, A. 2004. People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg. *Public Culture* 16(3):407–429.

Stadler, J. & Dugmore, C. 2017. “Honey, milk and bile”: A social history of Hillbrow, 1894–2016. *BMC Public Health* 17(Suppl 3): 444. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4345-1>.

the ungovernable. [Sa]. *HoliGrain Sessions*. [O]. Available: <https://www.theungovernable.org/projects/holigrain#h.4s5g15p07a6n> Accessed 19 September 2025.

Vibert, E. 2016. Gender, resilience and resistance: South Africa's Hleketani Community Garden. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 34(2):252–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2016.1202508>.

Winkler, T. 2013. Why won't downtown Johannesburg regenerate? Reassessing Hillbrow as a case example. *Urban Forum* 24(3): 309–324. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12132-012-9168-1>.

Author Accepted Manuscript

This is the author's accepted version of the article. The final published version may differ in copy-editing, typesetting, pagination, and layout. Please cite the published version where available.

Interviews:

Moilola, M. 2025. Interview with author. Johannesburg, July. [Transcript].

Sibiya, S. 2025. Interview with author. Johannesburg, July. [Transcript].