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Naomi is an urbanist and visual historian who works on heritage, memory, spatial politics and urban transformations. She is a senior lecturer in the University of Cape Town's School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics, where she convenes the MPhil in Conservation of the Built Environment. She is also affiliated with Cape Town-based museum and heritage consultancy DijonDesign as a senior researcher. Naomi has previously held research fellowships and teaching positions at the University of Cape Town, the London School of Economics and Political Science, Birkbeck University of London, and the University of the Witwatersrand. Her work has been published in Social & Cultural Geography, Anthropology Southern Africa, Thesis Eleven and Safundi and she has contributed chapters to several edited books. Her recent monograph Remaking The Urban: Heritage and Transformation in Nelson Mandela Bay (Manchester University Press, 2021) examines the relationship between heritage, public memory and post-apartheid urban space.

Urban heritage conservation for radical futures: what would it mean to think about architectural conservation as a tool for spatial justice?

Historically, built environment conservation in South Africa has been rooted in politically conservative and colonial architectural and aesthetic values and practices. The framing of the post-apartheid South African National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 reflected a global shift towards inclusivity, participatory practices and acknowledgement of the intangible. However, in practice, 'official' approaches to built environment heritage remain often perceived as elitist and exclusionary, or simply a tool of NIMBYism. Drawing on experiences and examples in the city of Cape Town, this paper considers the possibilities for a built environment conservation practice with a more radical underpinning, linked to the urgent demands of inclusive urban transformation and spatial justice in post-apartheid cities.

In Cape Town, in particular, important public debates have begun to take place around housing, land politics, densification and inclusive development. Urban densification is both an economic imperative and a political one, and a key strategy for undoing some of the spatial legacies of apartheid. As such, there are strong imperatives for radical spatial change and transformation of the built environment in South African cities, but there is a complex relationship between this much-needed spatial change, social memory, gentrification, and architectural conservation. This paper draws on experiences in Salt River, a historically working-class neighbourhood closely linked to the textile industry in the 20th century, where longstanding residents are increasingly feeling the pressures of gentrification and densification. At the same time, the neighbourhood's architecture, urban design and spatial qualities support important social practices and community identity, in ways that current heritage legislation and management tools are not fully equipped to recognise. The example of Salt River is used as a lens to consider whether conservation is indeed inherently conservative, or whether it could be a tool for imagining and making more equitable, just, and liveable cities.



Courtesy of Anwar Omar, 2021.