

Courageous jesters, (dis)owning the city, through festive protest

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, he was the jester – the foolish pseudo-king, mocked by some, scorned by others, and praised still, by those who thought he was the real deal. Of course, their hopes was in him to be their liberator from Roman rule. They could not fathom the liberation he promised, which cut much deeper, and asked much more. It was a liberation that required a radical break with the status quo; an abandonment of old lifestyles and established patterns of life; it turned religious and economic tables upside down, and invited strangers to share at the feast. His was the promise of a new kingdom, so radically new that Letty Russell does not even call it a kingdom, for such patriarchal and hierarchical languages and norms did not fit what Jesus came to do.

Where Jesus was, a new household unfolded, a circle of friends, a festive and abundant table of just and hospitable sharing, a different way of being human, a reclamation of the city by those who only belonged outside the city's gates. And most people, even if upon his entry into the city they feigned support, could never actually become what he invited them into. The enormity of change required, was just too much.

Once a year the Feast of the Clowns transforms the Burgers Park in the inner city of Pretoria into a space of boisterous celebration. Then – black and white, big and small, South Africans and transnationals, homeless and students – all gather to enjoy the first signs of spring, the vitality of local musicians, the freedom of participation, the dignity of belonging, solidarity in togetherness, as they march, chant and protest, naming and resisting death-dealing forces gripping our society. On this day, the March of the Clowns, or jesters, or fools, are led by those who normally take the back seat in society. They usher in a new way of being; they provide a safe and secure space for festivity; they claim the city as theirs, in spaces that were long disowned by many, including those with the capital to effect deep change. Their simple festivity announces a different way: where capital is not God, but God comes in the shape of a frail child or homeless adult.

In a recent research project, we interviewed 60 migrants who arrived in the city within the past 12 months. 90% of them, upon asking if they considered the city to be home, replied in the negative. Either lack of secure tenure, a longing for the ancestral places they come from, or the hostilities of the city, made them feel like perpetual strangers. Of course, if the majority of people see the city only as place of transition, or place of consumption, the levels of ownership, investment and care, will be resultantly low, not boding well for the city's future and well-being.

Who owns the city that we are in? Who cares for the city? Who creates seats at the table? Who are the courageous ones – jesters indeed – that will tell the emperor, the mayor, the princes of industry, and the intellectuals at our institutions of higher education, when we are naked? Who will make fun of our loftiness when the city is burning, and its poor killed on its streets, whilst our buildings stand as empty monuments to incompetence, corruption or bad governance?

The Feast of the Clowns happens only once a year. But every day, we need to see / hear the courageous jesters, at every traffic light and under every bush, mirroring a failed society, because our tables still exclude them. We have disowned our city's toughest places, and ignored those crying loudest. Will we dare look, and listen, and join the festal protest, by those, themselves disowned, who claim the city from below? Will we disown a city that excludes, and join forces with those who struggle to belong, owning together, a new city, of shared tables, crafted together, resembling something of God's new, exciting, and disarming household?

The Feast of the Clowns as a spatial strategy

Much has been said and even written about the Feast of the Clowns, an annual inner city festival in Pretoria, South Africa, since 2000.

1. **Firstly, it is a celebration of the city, its diversity, and God's presence in the city.** It was started in response to the exodus of white people and capital from the city; the media's sustained presentation of the inner city as a place of decay and hopelessness; and a general sense amongst certain Christians that God has left the city, when the city started to look different to that which they were comfortable with.
2. **Secondly, it is a community-based festival, run by the community and for the community.** Local and emerging artists are part of the line-up on the day, homeless and former homeless people provide the security infrastructure, local community organisations exhibit their work, and the March of the Clowns is a celebration of community and a resistance of death in the city. Over the years it also became a day on which inner city families enjoy the Park, children play, and a sense of community is nurtured, slowly but surely.
3. In the past 10 years or so, **a more deliberate focus on awareness-raising for various social justice issues**, has become a trademark of the festival. The March of the Clowns, the posters and exhibition, and a series of workshops before and during the festival, all highlight issues pertaining to human trafficking, homelessness and refugees, gender violence, children's rights, HIV/AIDS and health rights, and environmental justice.
4. And, fourthly, **the Feast is not an event only, but embedded in a much larger community transformation process**, happening year in and year out, **creating psycho-social, housing, economic, spiritual and institutional infrastructure**, with some of the most vulnerable populations of the inner city.

What has not been recognized, and even nurtured deliberately enough, is **the Feast of the Clowns as a spatial strategy.**

1. When white people and business left the inner city in the 1990s, churches also had the option to leave. Some churches did. Others stayed, and had to navigate the difficult terrain of demographic and social changes, losing core members, and having to learn how to become inner city churches.

The Tshwane Leadership Foundation (TLF) hosting the festival since its inception, was born as a result of the ecumenical church in the inner city, committing itself to stay put. TLF decided to pitch its tent, so to speak, in the opposite spirit of dislocation and disinvestment from the inner city. **It placed a huge value on the inner city as a place**, and the Feast of the Clowns became a bold, lively and playful expression of this value.

2. The Feast is intentional about being a welcoming, inclusive and safe space, where the most vulnerable people of the city are the guests of honour. In that sense, it is a proclamation of the possibility of free, accessible and decommodified spaces, shouting it loudly against commodified, militarized and restricted spaces. It demonstrates that humane and just cities and urban communities are indeed a possibility, if the moral and political will existed.
3. In that sense, the Feast also shows – and explores – **the possibility of inner city regeneration without gentrification**: it is to transform and improve challenging urban communities in ways that are radically inclusive of everyone, without having to displace

anyone. Being embedded in a process and not an event, the Feast's main venue is surrounded by diverse housing options, including upmarket commercial hotels, condominium style apartments, student housing, social housing, transitional housing for women at-risk, communal housing, and retirement centres, all co-existing in viable and peaceful ways. The myth that this is impossible needs to be destroyed.

4. The March of the Clowns usually opens the festival. It is a colourful display of diverse people, clowns, drummers, brass bands, posters, provocations, combining play with shouts for justice. It moves through the City, past many national government department buildings, accompanied by municipal police, safeguarded by homeless individuals, and is, in a real way, **a reclamation of the city, from below**. It is a sign of what is possible; a sign of what is to come; a sign of the subversion of power. In that sense, its participants, beneficiaries, organisers and activists, should draw courage from this. If this is possible one day a year, every year for the past 20 years, then it is possible every day of the year, for the next 20 years, and beyond. It is only our lack of indignation at the way things are, our lack of imagination at the way things could be, and our lack of will to share and make space for others, that restrict us!

In 2019 the Festival in its current form is 20 years old (if one does not count one prior attempt in 1995). Building on the above, **the Feast can delve even deeper and become even more imaginative and deliberate, about understanding it as a spatial strategy**. *To do so, it needs to design and implement the actual spaces during the festival with much more care and precision.*

- How are different elements of the festival, prior to and during the day, speaking to each other?
- How are Burgers Park connecting much more deliberately to the family of housing projects and psycho-social services offered by faith-based groups in and around the Park? How are these spaces opened on the day of the festival for people to become aware of the beauty of this neighbourhood?
- How is the Feast used as a catalyst for Friends of the Park to take an interest in preserving and nurturing the Park for current and future generations?
- How can Burgers Park Lane, closed for the day, be integrated fully, and be a hive of activity, as it used to be in early years?
- How are vibrant, lively and noisy spaces, creatively interwoven, with quieter, reflective spaces, or creative play spaces, or educational spaces, or spaces of refreshment and fellowship, all in and around the Park? How can red spaces (stimulation), orange spaces (happiness), black spaces (contemplation, mystery and reflection), purple spaces (spirituality and adventure), green spaces (healing and freshness), brown spaces (security and stability), or white spaces (precision and clarity), be fused into a colourful tapestry of meaning, participation and spatial celebration?¹
- How is the festival and the spatial aspects of the festival more carefully and deliberately choreographed, as a living and participative liturgy or ritual, in which everybody

¹ Roughly adapted from Feng Shui spatial meanings

participated, through play, enacting compassion, sharing the call for justice, and demonstrating solidarity?

God as the big Choreographer, unleashed the festival, hiding in every nook and crannie of the space, to put a smile on the faces of tired humans: how can the festival be aligned to the dream of the Choreographer for this day, and for all his people who choose to participate on this day?

In this way, the festival is a spatial strategy, drawing from a deep spirituality of space, acknowledging God as the Choreographer who desires to re-make this day, these spaces, and all the fractured spaces and wounded people and places of the city in which we are placed. Neels Jackson, after all, spoke of the festival, as the weaving and reweaving of frail human threads, until it forms a tapestry of life, against all odds.