

## ZAHIRA ASMAL

I am at my desk in Cape Town overlooking the cold Atlantic, sipping a warm Rooibos, playing text ping-pong with Parks Tau, mayor of Johannesburg. We're arranging time to catch up about our project for Jo'burg's Park Station. But I am distracted today and feeling the pressure of numerous deadlines. It is the financial year-end. People need to be paid, balance sheets completed and tax returns filed. From my desk I have a clear view of Robben Island. It was 25 years ago today that Nelson Mandela walked the streets of Cape Town a free man after 18 years on that island. I remember that day so clearly. My uncle Kader also returned to South Africa after 37 years in exile – apartheid isolation. I still carry the hope of that day but I am also sad; tomorrow the president will deliver his state of the nation address and Cape Town's magistrate court is hearing 16 cases of racial violence in six months. Young 20-something white South Africans beating up and humiliating black and mixed-race people – the born-frees. I am sad we are still not integrated.

May 2011. It is the eve of South Africa's municipal elections and I first meet Parks Tau. I've been invited by the dynamic councillor for transport Rehana Moosajee who thinks it would be good for the soon-to-be mayor to know about my fledgling organisation – my non-profit is not even two years old. We meet at a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop in Melville. As my work in South African cities is largely collaborative, I invite local architects and academics who are designing, developing and critiquing urban projects from the high street to the townships. Together we talk about our work and shared vision for the city. I talk about Park Station. This grand arrival point to the city – the gateway to southern Africa.

I want more for Jo'burg, beyond mining overalls and nouveau riche bling, and am convinced that built environment professionals can deliver it. I have been a migrant in numerous cities across the globe, I know what it feels like to arrive in a big city and be bewildered. What if we were to mark the arrival to Jo'burg with a great statement of design, architecture, art – not big, but significant. Tau is intrigued and on becoming mayor announces he will work with us. He quickly sets the ball in motion but the team of managers he inherits is either not ready or not willing and even with my immense effort, the momentum stalls. Dejected, I focus on our other projects, taking us across the Atlantic and to other nations in the Global South.

Years later the city is in the middle of yet another xenophobic furore when the mayor and I meet again. He now has a new team in place and asks if I am ready to push the Park Station project

forward. Tau says he is saddened by the tensions in the city. He hopes to make a statement that Jo'burg should be welcoming to everyone, especially other African nationals. He has a tough job to do and reaches out for help, asking if my proposed Park Station project could form a part of his 'Corridors of Freedom' development and welcome Africa to Jo'burg. I say that good design coupled with global collaboration would be a good start. I talk about a place to pause from the constant movement, to stop, reflect, rest, to meet a friend and to just be urban. With one million people moving through this transport precinct each day, a quarter of Jo'burg's population, it is the perfect place to make bold statements. I suggest an architect I believe would be suitable for the project – someone I've known for a decade and have worked with before, David Adjaye. Tau asks for more so I go back to my desk to prepare further and to make the call. David says yes. Suddenly it is back to the daunting but exhilarating task of placemaking at Africa's biggest transport node.

New York City, June 2013 and I'm presenting our work. Ten days later and we get the green light and David Adjaye will officially be designing Jo'burg's first permanent public pavilion. We begin setting up a local team and I hunt for private and cultural funds to match government contributions. We want this project to be open, generous and inclusive. We set up monthly meetings with community members, architects, academics, government institutions and NGOs seeking advice and insight. Ones with great ideas and a positive spirit are immediately included in the project. People with interesting proposals become our collaborators. Jo'burg is still a gold rush city with a 53 per cent migrant population. People move quickly – social, spatial, political, economical, formal and informal – all jostling to be a part of the action. The city is only 129 years old so depending on where you cut off time, we are all migrants – all foreigners.

March 2015 and I pause to read this in my inbox: 'I am 100 per cent disappointed that this is not a South African architect. I object to public money being spent on a foreigner. If we give commissions to foreigners, how will we ever develop ourselves?' My heart sinks. If we wish to be part of the international community of cities then should we not welcome the flow of people and ideas both to and from our home? Being insular limits our work and ideas. My own thinking and boundaries are most usefully challenged by seeing my city through someone else's eyes. I welcome this striking piece of architecture at Park Station initiated and created by both local and global teams. But then, as Beck said at the Grammys, 'You can't please everybody'