Bad Buildings, Good Intentions & Muggy Politics

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The South African feature film, Jerusalema, projected the idea of hijacked buildings into popular consciousness a few years ago. Inner city Johannesburg represents one of the most complex and intractable spaces of informal politics because of the sheer density, implicit economic interests at stake, and the diversity of actors and interests at play. It serves as an ideal site to explore the theme of Panel 89 on "the politics of urban informality" because it involves highly informalised housing and rental markets, heavily exploited residents from diverse national and linguistic backgrounds, a relatively powerful local state with explicit intentions and plans to "intervene" to "improve" the situation, and a host of civil society actors who use various tactics, including litigation, to frustrate and resist the intervention plans of the local state. In our case study, we will provide some contextual background to this situation and focus in on a specific building, San Jose, which became the symbolic focus of intense political contestation between the various actors in this area. This will all be set against the important recent literature on emergent politics in spaces sutured by multiple rationalities—formal, informal, criminal, spiritual, familial, and so on. The so-called bad buildings in the Inner City of Johannesburg reflect the complex processes of city formation in Africa. Bad buildings are symptomatic of both structural failings in the system of settlement development and management, and a subjectivity of associated with informal urbanisation. These building are spaces in which there is a perverse consonance of interest between the poor and various predators. Criminal gangs, building hijackers, slumlords, self-interested tenants' committees, fraudsters of all types, all extract enormous value from poor people with nowhere else to go. But any state effort to shut down criminal activities in buildings has the ironic structural effect of depriving many residents of the only home they can afford. At the core of this conundrum it becomes possible to map out a more situated account of the intractable and to some extent, insoluble, tensions that mark most African urban areas. We hope that through the case study we can also illuminate some of the questions that continue to haunt this field of enquiry in order to substantiate a more grounded theorisation of urban politics.