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Rob Nixon

## How to Read a Bridge

### I

I grew up in South Africa, our planet's most inequitable society, and immigrated to the USA, the rich world's most unequal one, a country in which 400 individuals have half the nation's assets. For 15 years I lived in the most economically divided of America's major cities, New York, where 70 billionaires reside and 30 percent of children languish in poverty. If New York City were a nation it would rank 119th in terms of the Gini coefficient, the standard measure of economic disparity.

### II

I'm reading an article on South Africa's fitful progress since the turn to democracy. From the available economic data, the journalist has created a fictional average South African: she is twenty-five, currently employed, and an urban renter. Her shared home has basic amenities: erratic electricity, a flushing toilet, and indoor plumbing but no internet. The journalist has named this average South African "Thuli."

In the comment section, someone writes: "Yes, her name is Thuli. She has a life partner. Her life partner's name is Gini."

### III

In most societies, inequality of resources is increasing. Economic gaps are becoming economic chasms. Social mobility is slowing: in the US, a child born into poverty now has a 42 percent chance of remaining there. As the path from poverty to the middle classes is lengthening, so the path from poverty to destitution is shortening.

### IV

When a society fractures—when the rickety bridge linking the über-rich and ultra-poor collapses—social cohesion collapses too. Civic trust erodes. Dissociative thinking and dissociative planning become pervasive: just disconnect the dots.

But our age of disparity is boom time for what urban planners call defensible architecture. Tunde Agbola names this "the architecture of fear." In Mumbai, Los Angeles,

Mexico City, Lagos, Johannesburg, Jakarta, Sao Paolo, Madrid, Shanghai, and beyond, clients clamour for up-to-the-minute fortress design, fresh ways to wall off, as elegantly as possible, the possessors from the dispossessed. When the tasteful architecture of exclusion fails to deliver the message, the private security detail is there to back it up. In our megacities, defensible architecture rises alongside indefensible inequities.

## V

Inequality is, among other things, an infrastructural story. Dreams of society-wide public services—services as government obligation, as source of civic pride—fade as utilities are outsourced to private firms that institute for profit, pay-as-you-go user access only. The idea of the customer trumps the idea of the citizen. Infrastructure, outside select areas, is left to moulder and disintegrate, if it ever arrived in the first place.

## VI

Such thoughts are on my mind as I venture from the American heartland to South Africa's Eastern Cape, one of that country's poorest provinces. I fly into Port Elizabeth, the provincial town where I grew up, now a sprawling city of several million. In scale and name, the city is unrecognisable. Back then, our family lived beside the airport that my plane now approaches; back then, in apartheid's heyday, it was called the H. F. Verwoerd Airport—akin to touching down, in other lands, at the Adolf Hitler or Josef Stalin Airport. Now a sign welcomes visitors to the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Airport.

## VII

Despite this symbolic turnaround, anything approaching equality remains elusive here. When I try to swing by my childhood home, an aggressive police presence and billowing black smoke obscure the road. My nostrils burn, my stomach heaves against the acrid flavours of scorched rubber. From the radio I learn that Walmer Township is on the march, burning piled tyres in a service delivery protest, one of thousands of such protests that convulse South Africa each year.

“Service delivery”: South African English would be unthinkable—the syntax could barely hold together—without that pervasive, adhesive phrase which speaks to post-apartheid disparities, feelings of abandonment and betrayal by people the state treats as disposable or, in the old apartheid argot, surplus to requirements.

### VIII

Here in Port Elizabeth, the tyre-burning destitute are making their needs known. The state must deliver: electricity, drinkable piped water, useable roads, a sewage system that's better than pit toilets, schools with desks and without broken windows, functioning hospitals, all the services that say "you too belong."

What do we want? Service delivery. When do we want it? Now.

Voices through the smoke, in Xhosa and English, voices of the new surplus people, urban invisibles, writing their names in fire.

### IX

"Service delivery failures": the phrasing may be peculiarly South African, but the phenomenon—and the popular response—reverberates across the planet, particularly the Global South: Brazil, India, Nigeria, Kenya, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, Chile, Mexico, Argentina. The politics of structural exclusion travels across the south of the North as well: Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Spain.

In 2012, 55,000 environmental protests shook China alone—protests in which the environmental component was inseparable from public health concerns and service delivery failures. Amidst surging Chinese growth, too many are left to feed on globalization's fumes.

### X

Traveling northeast up the coast from Port Elizabeth, I cross one estuary bridge after another. I stop for lunch at the Great Fish River Bridge: from above, the view is spectacular, as the river prises apart the dunes and enters the Indian Ocean.

On impulse, I take a gravel road that ducks beneath the bridge deck. Down here, there's no panoramic option; instead I find myself staring up at the undergirding, 20 metres above my head. To my surprise, the bridge is alive with foliage: in the gaps between the concrete slabs strangler figs have inserted themselves, one after another, creating an interrupted forest. Their roots follow the grooves from one side of the bridge to the other, while the leaves and branches, in various stages of maturity, billow forth beyond the edges.

Each of these horizontal canopies ends in a cluster of finely woven, kidney-shaped nests that I recognise as the handiwork of village weavers, sociable birds with black masks, red eyes, and bodies the kind of yellow that every yellow secretly yearns to be.

## XI

It's winter now and the birds are gone, but the scene feels animated nonetheless: a crossroads between human and nonhuman civil engineering.

The strangler figs and the weaverbirds are opportunistic colonists; they have collective designs upon the bridge. They're wedged in where design meets chance. Design: that double-edged word that suggests both structure and intent.

But the bridge is active too. It's built to give: gaps between the slabs allow the metal and concrete to shift with the shifting temperatures, expanding and contracting, from day to night, from summer to winter, moving all the time. To survive, every bridge must breathe.

A laden lorry drives overhead: the concrete creaks; the fig trees shudder; the weaver nests start bobbing. Vibrant matter indeed.

## XII

“But the strangler fig/arrives in shit”: Jeffrey Thomson, “Landscape with Fig Trees and Strangulation.”

## XIII

A bird drops a fig seed, sheathed in shit that lodges in one of the bridge's infrastructural apertures. In that sheltering gap, a tree starts to swell, attracting to its greenery seed-eating, seed-expelling birds in search of seasonal housing.

The weaver birds' primary predator—the boomslang (tree snake)—cannot scale the smooth columns of the bridge. To drop down on to the nests, the boomslang would have to hazard the traffic overhead. This is fortress architecture, avian style.

#### XIV

Construction is more glamorous than maintenance. Politicians gain kudos from erecting structures that gleam with novelty, but gain little from the quotidian business of unspectacular upkeep. Maintenance is well-nigh invisible until the moment of collapse.

But neglect is political—it's unevenly distributed. The strangler figs and weaver bird, as they slowly pick apart this bridge, receive a boost to their life chances from the infrastructural neglect that is intertwined with rural misery.

#### XV

The socioenvironmental scene that undergirds the bridge—this extra chapter from the botany of desire—begins to resonate theoretically. The parallel paths assumed by animal studies and environmental justice studies have long troubled me. Animal studies scholars are often too quick to bracket the Human as a unitary force, are too indifferent to the history and politics of human disparities. By contrast, environmental justice scholars specialise in exposing inequalities, but often neglect the weave between human and more-than-human powers—animal, botanical, geological, and physical in the broadest sense. Injustices shape and shake our world, but so do those non-human forces that Kennedy Warne has dubbed nature's "ecosystem engineers."

#### XVI

Few scholars have worked as assiduously as Jane Carruthers to think across these divides. Her work arises from a strong tradition of African historiography attentive to power and justice. Yet she has taken that tradition further, bringing to the fore questions of environmental equity. In so doing, she has avoided both the pitfall of presenting the Human as a unitary environmental force and the opposite danger of overlooking non-human actors with impulses, behaviours, and ecological effects of their own. Whether addressing invasion biology, botanical politics, colonial game park creation, wildlife and warfare, or the long history of elephant hunting, conservation, and behavioural research, Carruthers is alive to the steep power gradients that separate diverse human environmental actors. But she is equally alive to the sentience and dynamism of non-human forces.

## XVII

In the spirit of Carruthers's historical commitments, I don't want the Great Fish River Bridge to float off into the conceptual stratosphere. This built environment, engineered by multiple forces, is a concrete scene with a material history. The bridge leads from somewhere to somewhere. The character and history of those somewheres remain particular.

Historically, this bridge has served to separate.

## XVIII

I cross over the Great Fish River and enter a land worn thin from overuse. I am now in the erstwhile Ciskei, one of South Africa's 10 former Bantustans. From the 1960s through the 1980s, some 3.5 million black South Africans suffered forced relocation, mostly to places like this shambolic "ethnic homeland." When Ciskei was declared independent in 1981, with the stroke of a pen two million people were stripped of South African citizenship. Without elusive, temporary labour permits, they were barred from entering the country of their birth.

"If our policy is taken to its logical conclusion as far as the black people are concerned, there will be not one black man with South African citizenship": Connie Mulder, Minister of Plural Relations and Development, 7 February 1978.

## XXIX

Even Xhosas who had lived for three or four generations in cities were decreed to be natives of this Ciskei they'd never seen. Black peasant farmers in fertile areas rezoned for whites were visited at 2am, 3am and carted off in GG (Government Garage) trucks. Then dumped here: discarded people.

## XX

Things are and aren't different now. Ciskei is officially no more: that derided figment of apartheid social engineering has evaporated. The people here, liberated from involuntary citizenship, are South Africans again, free to move, free to vote.

But the economic divisions and ecological scars run deep. Traveling through the Ciskei still feels like a journey through the development of underdevelopment. This place

remains shadowed by its past: this vast, overcrowded rural slum, where the margins of survival remain small.

South African wealth—old white wealth and the new wealth of black Johannesburg plutocrats—belongs to some other, far off country. Unemployment, ecological exhaustion, corruption, and infrastructural abandonment compound the cycles of rural poverty. These free South Africans are citizens both of a neo-liberal present and a very heavy history, which together cement inequity.

## XXI

Maano Ramutsindela has written of the ex-Bantustans as “resilient geographies.” Resilient is a complex word: here it suggests a tenacious survival, a refusal to go away. Far from vanishing through democratic assimilation, the Ciskei has been reinforced as a marginalised ethnic space by rural indigence and by popular disillusionment with resources skewed toward an urban, cosmopolitan elite.

## XXII

For two weeks I meander through the former Ciskei and the Transkei that lies beyond. A jagged landscape of unforgiving hills, thin goats, and high-density human destitution. Here a tree is an event: most have been felled for fuel.

Somewhere between Kentani and Nxaxo River Mouth, I pass a woman shuffling bare-foot up a formidably steep gravel road. She’s elderly and edges forward in small, methodical steps, leaning into the three-sided cage of her aluminium Zimmer frame. But her neck remains erect: on her head she balances a white plastic 10 litre paint bucket filled with water that sways ever so slightly as she moves.

I reverse and we ride the next six kilometres together. Between her halting English and my residual Xhosa we piece together a conversation. Most of the men, she explains have gone searching for jobs in the city. She has great-grandchildren she is looking after. No, there is plenty of water here, but it’s way down there in the valleys. She and her paint bucket undertake this trek for water every second day.

We need a stronger phrase than service delivery failure.



### XXIII

On the return trip back down the coast, I cross the Great Fish River Bridge close to midnight. In the darkness, I hear trucks changing gears up the pass, like those GG lorries that once ferried human cargo across the Bantustan border in the dead of night. Ghost trucks taking people to a home they had never known and did not want, people first made homeless at gunpoint and then, at gunpoint, told, this place, hundreds of kilometres away, this is your homeland.

Apartheid may be gone, but here, the bridge above, the river between, still mark a separate development.

### XXIV

Flying back across the Atlantic, I revisit *The Death of Distance*, the bestseller by Frances Cairncross. When it appeared in 1997 Cairncross was hailed as a visionary who foresaw an ever more integrated humanity: together, digital technology and globalization would keep shrinking our world, rendering distance obsolete. But deep into the twenty-first century things seem a lot more contradictory: technological connectedness may be rising, but so too is economic rupture. The title of Timothy Noah's 2012 bestseller puts the matter bluntly: most human societies are being torn apart by *The Great Divergence*. In the austere year of 2011, the world's mega-rich had stashed \$13 trillion in offshore accounts—equal, in scale, to the American and Japanese economies combined.

### XXV

As I write, another plutocrat takes to the air in his golden parachute, soaring above the planet of the slums.

### XXVI

In a 2013 report on the global distributional crisis, Oxfam concludes that extreme wealth is “economically inefficient, politically corrosive, socially divisive.” But the distance between parachute and favela is imaginatively vexing as well. Distance intensifies the need for inventive testimony, for finding new ways to bear witness across the divide separating people whose lives feature in bright stories of growth and innovation and the disposable people who inhabit neoliberal globalization's vast shadowlands.

Arundhati Roy sees globalization like this: as “a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can’t be seen. Once you get used to not seeing something, then, slowly, it’s no longer possible to see it.”

### XXVIII

From America, I email a government minister in Bhisho, once the Ciskei capital, now the provincial capital of the Eastern Cape. I explain that the Great Fish River Bridge is being subjected to a colonial takeover: someone should remove those strangler figs. I don’t hear back, nor do I expect to.

In truth, I have no idea whether intervening in that tangle of infrastructural neglect and environmental reengineering would fortify this complex bridge or hasten its collapse.