CLOSER THAN THIS
(extracts from an open-source book for urban planners)

Karen Press
AND ON THE EIGHTH DAY

someone said –
we’ll have a city here
(town, township, settlement, whatever)
pointing at a blank spot in his eye,
his finger dripping decrees onto whatever lay beneath it,

and you were standing just to one side of where the decrees fell,
maybe you were reading a novel or counting birds,
or thinking of how to fit utopia through the eye of a storm,
but the decrees ran towards you following the incline of the land,
they pooled at your feet, your face was reflected in them –

what did you do?

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

test: would Vladimir and Estragon be willing to wait here?
test: would a ball kicked along the road roll backwards?
test: would a bunch of flowers stay alive all the way home?
test: would Charles Baudelaire walk these pavements?
test: how long would a goldfish survive?
test: would Frida Kahlo find enough colours?
test: would the carrots grow straight?
test: would Nawal el Saadawi be able to relax?
test: would a cellist be heard?
test: would Elvis be happy here? would Fela?
**Songs Of The Data Bird**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dawn Song</th>
<th>Dusk Song</th>
<th>Midnight Song</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30% under thirty</td>
<td>543 residential burglaries</td>
<td>344 murders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2% over 60</td>
<td>4,000 weddings</td>
<td>954 car crashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the wheels of the bus go round and round</td>
<td>342 smash-and-grabs</td>
<td>the queue moves at a rate of 3 metres every 15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>999 male pensioners</td>
<td>8 cases of public violence</td>
<td>304 attempted murders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,740 female pensioners</td>
<td>35,078 baptisms</td>
<td>2,647 assaults with intent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>round and round, round and round</td>
<td>the queue moves at a rate of 3 metres every 15 minutes</td>
<td>20,439 birthday parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 male foster parents</td>
<td>416 drug-related crimes</td>
<td>54,875 unreported child rapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,188 female foster parents</td>
<td>(excuse me?)</td>
<td>and a partridge in a pear tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the wheels of the bus go round and round</td>
<td>167 graduation ceremonies</td>
<td>the queue moves at a rate of 3 metres every 15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400 dads in need of child support</td>
<td>1,600 common robberies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37,000 moms in need of child support</td>
<td>25 fashion shows</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all day long</td>
<td>77 indecent assaults</td>
<td>556 rapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3,010 kitchen teas</td>
<td>(excuse me?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>518 stokvel frauds</td>
<td>109 ill-treatments of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,165 thefts not mentioned elsewhere</td>
<td>(excuse me?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the queue moves at a rate of 3 metres every 15 minutes</td>
<td>54,875 unreported child rapes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Connected**

in my room I hear the boy upstairs whose mother died
lifting weights and dropping them onto the floor above my head,
the mongrel puppy snuffling at the skirting board next door,
back and forth, back and forth, hungry for them to come home
the lime green white-eyes strung along the plane tree branches
dangling over my balcony, chattering to the pearl-pink sky

* no closer than this

* your shoulder falls against me in the taxi
* and I can’t think of it as innocent
* but in your eyes I see that this is all you have to offer
* though your hands are hardened like a farmer’s shoes

poor man, I think, poor man
what would you do with a small animal if it nudged your calf?
what would you do if I leaned against you
and said, tell me a story?

* no closer than this

the little girls know not to touch anyone
their mothers fold their arms as I walk past, turning aside
young men shove their hands through the taxi window
to offer me keyrings and sunglasses
‘for home for away’ they call, laughing,
they shout at me as we drive on

* no closer than this
THE THINGS THAT SURVIVE ARE THE THINGS THAT SURVIVE

put a frame around it and it stops jiggling,
takes on proportions and resonances

take the frame away and it weathers into dirt
the frame is just a rectangle of wood or metal, mass-produced
the jiggling was going to stop anyway, for a while
when it starts up again it’s heavier-footed
until the air gets hold of it, then it’s grave dirt
dug up and drying out, the portion displaced by the beloved body

with nowhere to settle
roaming in the air, surviving
or not
the city turns the land
from an animal into a machine

ROUTES

(route for a car chase
route for a wedding procession
route for a carnival parade
route for a history walk
route for learning to drive
route for training a dog to obey orders
route for keeping ice cream frozen
route for selling fresh fish from a barrow
route for hanging orange scarves from lamp posts
route for filming a dream)
Stats SA says there are 10,771 disabled people in Khayelitsha.

Were. In 2001, or possibly 1996.

Of which a quarter can’t see well, a quarter can’t move well, three hundredths can’t hear well, a tenth can’t think well, thirteen hundredths can’t feel well, one twentieth can’t speak well, and nearly one tenth struggle with many of the things humans are supposed to be able to do.

And according to Stats SA there are, were, 328,997 people living in Khayelitsha.

More or less.

Which would mean that for every disabled person there are:

- 30.54 people to take care of them
- 7.98 households in which they might live
- 9.03 children who might look at them with wide eyes
- 0.68 pensioners who might spend time talking to them
- wait a minute: 7,371 pensioners in the whole of Khayelitsha?
  I don’t think so.

Anyway.

Here on a folding chair in the sun outside a house looking onto the street a woman sits who may be one of the quarter, the thirteen hundredths, the twentieth, the nearly one tenth, or the 30.54 who watch over someone not fully able to live here on the busy streets of a town no one can count properly.

She leans her head back against the wall so that the brick heat can massage her crown and smiles.

For what it’s worth she lives here, you can count her in.

A child walking past looks up from her cell phone, her bright eyes register that the woman is not her mother or aunt, her dark eyes busy far behind the bright eyes register without speaking that she will be this woman one day, they programme in the folding chair in the sun against the wall overlooking the street.

What to expect, what to save up for.

No point counting. The sums perpetuate themselves hand-to-hand.

The one who can’t move now has her 30.54 people remembering her hour after hour as they step around her, over her, walk the other way, drop blankets at the door.

The one who can’t speak has 9.03 children’s laughter to scar him with sound.

The troubled thoughts of the one for whom 7.98 households stand ready will flow like a river through them, and all their troubled thoughts will flow with him out into the streets where children on their cell phones avoid the eyes of the pigeons, kicking them with their little feet, storing up data for long-term recall.

**Words That Must be Included**

- periwinkle
- Cathar
- pirogue
- honeycomb
- amphora
- linotype
- parrot
- lantern
- foundry
- ellipse
- mulch
- footlights
- water lily
- robin’s egg blue
- crystal
- metronome
- windmill
- seesaw
- bubble
- grave
- parachute
**The Urban Planner Ruminates**

*after the first whiskey*

all the arguments have already been used up
everyone knows why it won’t work
to give everyone a small kind house
or to ban shopping centres
or to let the roads be marked out by children playing adventure games

it’s naïve and also boring to ban cars and swimming pools
from cities and their suburbs, to ban suburbs,
to insist that everyone has to plant ten trees per year as a tax payment
to encourage dogs to settle where once were tanning parlours

sometimes just
any place that shuts
any room, dry enough
walking distance from food and water

sometimes just
any place where you don’t have to bargain, vote, explain
make friends in order to stop moving on,
greet ten people in order to sit looking at a bush

(no one celebrates bushes in memories of a place, isn’t it odd,
always a tree or a hill or some climbing twisting thing,
ever a simple bush sitting steadily on its own feet
not even flowering for attention)

if everyone got a room and a good bathroom
no questions asked
would that take the pressure off the capitalist system
to trade in homes?

if every square metre came with fibre optic connections
and a good bathroom, would we all just sit quietly for a bit
thinking, chattering in that wonderfully silent electronic language
that makes us invisible to the neighbours?

and then outside, cobbles for sentimental reasons, flowerbeds,
paths leading to little shops, children hopscotching to keep the psychologists happy,
cars sunning themselves and dogs padding along being alert,
men sitting at tables in the sun, women learning to do the same,
would that satisfy the urban theorists?

same old same old

everyone wants to live in pretty Minerve
the way it was before the market went global,
before all that blood flowed that makes the summer geraniums glow
so firmly on their blond steps up to the little doors,
the good old thick doors with their cast iron hinges and the lintels worn by hands,
real human hands now long dead, little children and women and sturdy men
who ran through the streets screaming and then bled into the earth,
bright Minerve with its vineyards and chateaux
is a place that shows how a place should be,
a public private place,
a human place between hills and a gorge good for defence, though too little in the end
to last when people came, real people on horseback with vats of oil and swords
made in another town somewhere along the same road
with its church at a slightly different angle to its market square

*after the third whiskey*

what came first, the ‘trinkets and baubles’
or the appetite for them?
if no one wanted them there’d be no shopping
and therefore no capitalism
cats like trinkets and baubles
at least for thirty seconds
so do elephants, probably (for whom an SUV counts as a small trinket),
and moths, who like them big and blazing hot
must be an evolutionary thing
trinket as food source perhaps or
bauble as shelter from the storm
or sweets for my honey, sugar for my gene pool’s mum –
not a sign of anthropo-spiritual genius but a DNA moment
prodding the creature into action – maybe that’s what all the junk DNA is for,
to spur the hunt for junk –
if stomachs get hungry, so do brains and fingertips
yearning for shiny fluffy silky glittering doses of sensory input
even Mr and Mrs Feudal Serf in their mud-spattered clogs and coarse hessian coats
must have lifted their heads in longing when a crown rode by
(else why was it worn, the headache-inducing spine-crushing crown
with its load of trinkets and baubles?)
capitalism wouldn’t have got started if the first peasant had walked past
the first silver buckle displayed in the first shop window thinking,
what would anyone want with a thing like that?
and here we are, building gherkins and sailing ships out of stone and glass
to amuse ourselves because there’s nothing to watch on television,
the wonderful city is too easy to explain, its CAD-infused skin has no perfume,
what can we do next with our hands and eyes to keep us out of trouble?

UNPLACE

What to do with four million people wandering around all day with nothing to do?
This is not a statistic it’s a mass of plankton with no algae to eat,
a herd of lion cubs growing bigger by the hour,
a sea of hunger and boredom washing up against the walls of every building.

City of aimless adults
pacing the same grooves into the same pavements hour after hour.
Would a free museum on every corner help?
A library, a cinema, a sports café?
A gym with swimming pool?
A hobby centre with free tools and materials?

City of girls and boys full of bounding energy and curiosity
pacing up and down the sandy roads where no one invites them in to play.
Would a military training programme help?
A 24-hour dance venue on every block?
Free sandwiches and apples for anyone willing to stay off drugs?

It seems the city is not designed for people to just be present in, Zen-like, still.
A useless location for foraging, for exercising the body,
for meditating on nature and god. No bible came from a city, no moral teachings.
Send them back into the deserts and forests, the ones with no jobs,
let them start their own cities, there’s always room for a new civilisation to start up
against a bare mountain, bare-handed and free of refuse collectors, traffic police, housing authorities.
**Essay Topics for Urban Planning Students**

- What kinds of dwelling do you build for people who have a tendency to rape or be raped?
- What public leisure facilities should you design for people who are likely to be murdered?
- What are the civic participation processes most suitable for hijackers and drunks?
- What governance structures will best serve the interests of people addicted to consumer goods?
- What should be the layout of commercial zones in a city where most people are unemployed?
- How many paintings should each child be able to see on the way home from school?

**Typology**

City 1 won’t let you sit down

City 2 says wear heavy shoes

City 3 sends you across your own direction

City 4 says whatever, just hurry up

City 5 stands you against a wall

City 6 follows your lead

City 7 says never mind, have an orange

City 8 asks you for a ticket

City 9 touches you too quickly

City 10 sits on the pavement watching you

City 11 is ready for action

City 12 wants you, but doesn’t know how to ask