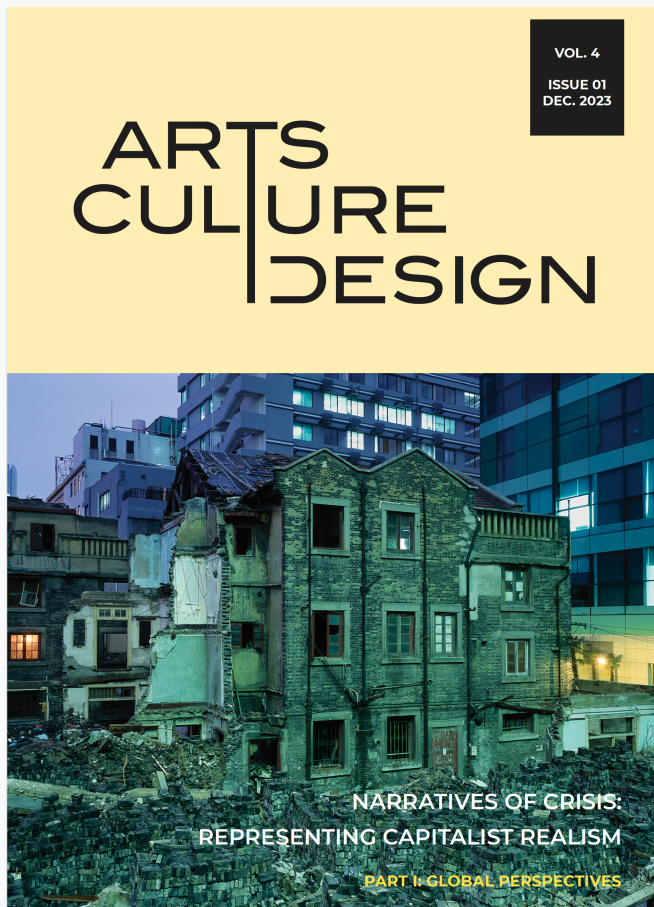


Design/Arts/Culture

Vol 4, No 1 (2023)

Narratives of Crisis: Representing Capitalist Realism



Unequal Scenes

John Miller

doi: [10.12681/dac.35312](https://doi.org/10.12681/dac.35312)

Copyright © 2024, Design/Arts/Culture



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Miller, J. (2023). Unequal Scenes. *Design/Arts/Culture*, 4(1), 28–49. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dac.35312>

UNEQUAL SCENES

Johnny Miller

1. Code For Africa,
2. Global Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity, London School of Economics.

Keywords:

Capitalist Realism
Poverty
Inequality
Photography

ABSTRACT

This photographic project documents some of the world's most extreme dividing lines of inequality using aerial photography. Seen from above, cities as diverse as Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai and more are portrayed as systematically exclusionary, with the urban footprints of their buildings inviting the viewer to understand each city in a unique way. The aerial nature of the photographs is reminiscent of satellite images, but presented with the color and style of a travel portfolio. By presenting such a topic as inequality through aerial photography the hope is to spark discussions on urban planning and equity. Capitalist realism is globally dominant.



JOHNNY MILLER is a photographer and multimedia storyteller based in South Africa and the USA. He is currently a Senior Fellow at Code For Africa, and a Global Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity at the London School of Economics. Johnny is also the co-founder of africanDRONE, a pan-African organization committed to using drones for good.

UNEQUAL SCENES

Severe economic inequality is largely a consequence of human-enacted policies. Tin shacks in Cape Town are separated from mansions with barbed wire and concrete walls. Millionaires in high-rise aeries in Mumbai gaze down on informal settlements, their roofs covered in blue tarps to keep out the monsoon rains. Pollution-spewing highways belch toxins onto playgrounds in underserved areas of New York City.

Walls, highways and other infrastructure usually keep us from seeing the extent of the problem, usually by design. That always bothered me. By using drones and helicopters for this project, I wanted to peek over those walls, and enter into forbidden liminal territory. For the first time in our history, drones and social media are a cost-effective solution for depicting and then disseminating these separations. It's hard not to look straight down on the divisions and not have an unsettling realization that we, the people gazing at these scenes, are also complicit.

The scale and regularity of urban structures constructed to separate people, in many different cities and cultures all across the world, points to the systemic nature of inequality. Evidence shows that high levels of inequality are correlated with worse health outcomes, like lower life expectancy, higher rates of heart failure, and higher levels of infant mortality. More equal societies are happier and more cohesive, and to a large degree more prosperous.

Countries that are more equal tend to have far more generous, encompassing and egalitarian social systems.

I see these photos as reflecting an intentional disenfranchisement of poor people, but also a catalog of building practices on the cusp of what may well be the last years of the "informal settlement". Many cities are taking steps to remove informal settlements (or slums, whatever you want to call them, etc), which on the surface seems to be a positive development. The truth is more complicated, as often more "regular" looking homes, at least from above, are a poor indicator of the shape and conditions of the internal units. Moreover, I find a perplexing sense of humanity, and perhaps even resilience, in the "less formal" parts of cities. The struggle to exist near the center of a city, with access to work and transportation and services, and to consider that city "your own", instead of marginalized on the periphery, is also reflected here.

I enjoy the freedom that aerial photography allows, an expansive sense of travel and distance. There is a beauty in the composition and color of the earth as seen through a rectangular frame, much as the pages of atlases and maps captivated me when I was younger. I hope that the discussions around equity, design, and justice are somewhat furthered by this project, as well capturing some essence of strange beauty in our built environment.



Figure 1: The famous Santa Marta favela, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Brazil is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating countries on the planet. For starters, it's huge: Over 211 million people and the fifth biggest country by area. It's diverse: the racial makeup of the average Brazilian ranges from European to African to Indigenous to Asian (São Paulo actually has the world's largest Japanese population outside of Japan). It's got incredible cultural, religious, and culinary heritage that are both traditional and new. It's instantly recognizable: the Amazon rainforest, the beaches, the Carnival are all here, and they are truly larger than life. Better than those, though, is the warmth and welcoming of Brazilian people. In most countries, this might be said as a platitude without really meaning it, but in Brazil it is absolutely true. The people are really incredible.

Lastly, and most distressingly, Brazil is completely unequal. It's the democratic country with the highest concentration of income in the top 1 per cent. Millions of people live in slums in plain sight of affluent mansions and beaches, or are forgotten altogether. Crime and corruption exist side by side with law and order, and journalists, politicians, and activists are killed defending human and environmental rights. And the problem of inequality in Brazil is getting worse.

Figure 2 (right): Villa 31 and downtown Buenos Aires.





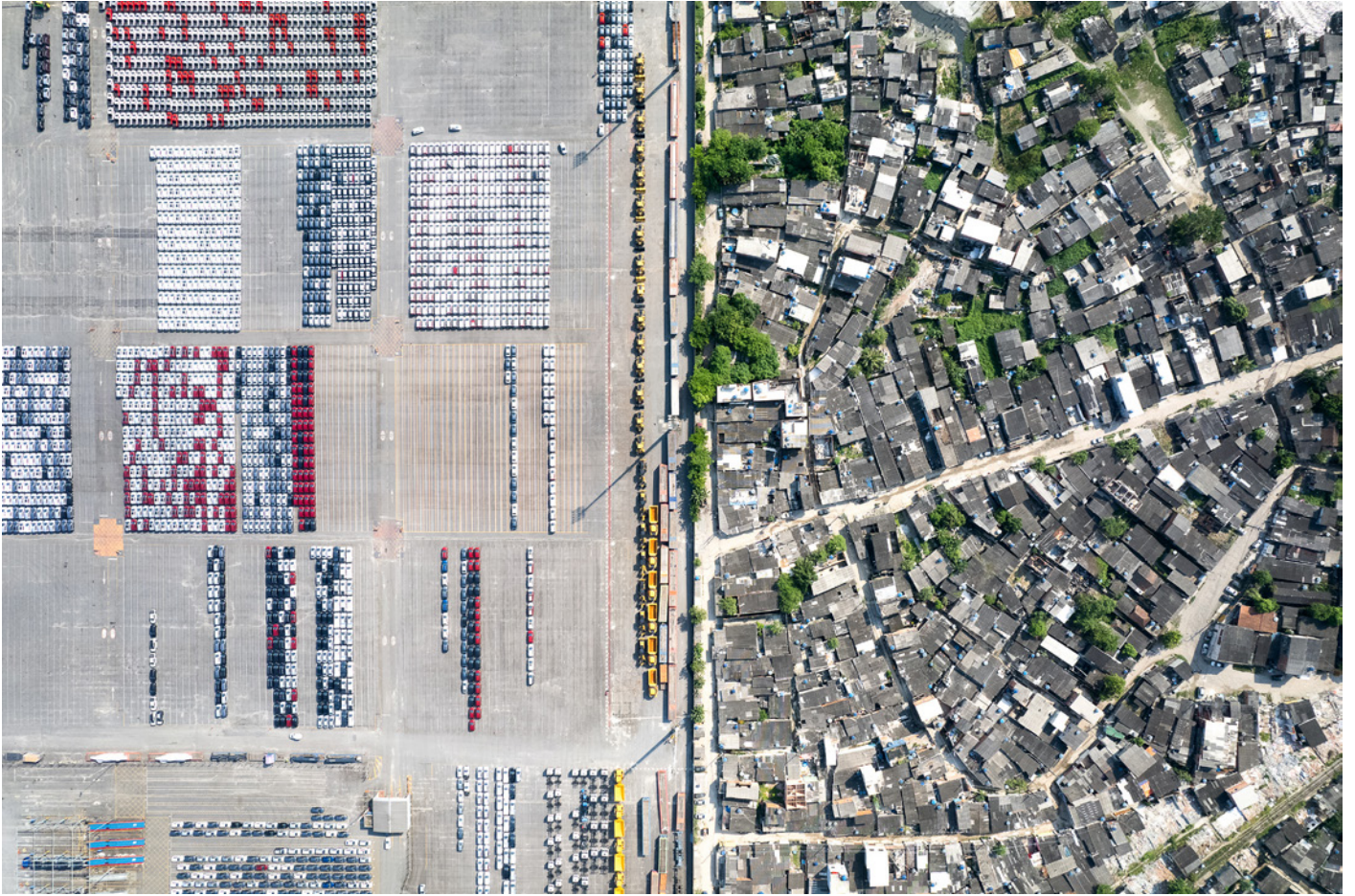


Figure 4: Brazil.

The Port of Santos, Brazil is the largest in Latin America. It's the last stop for products leaving South America and the first stop for everything incoming, and it's surrounded by a large and dangerous slum network which sprawls through the waterways and surrounds many of the container yards completely.

Figure 3 (left): Bali.

Development and speculation abound in hidden coves of trees, ravines and farmland far from the dense bustle of the road network and prying eyes.

Figure 5: Bosque Real Country Club and Lomas del Cadete, Mexico.





Figure 6: Makoko, Lagos.

Makoko is called “The Venice of Slums” as most of the 300,000 residents or so live on stilted homes atop a fetid lagoon, carrying goods via canoe including fresh water. Nigeria is a wealthy country, blessed with abundant resources, but corruption and misallocation of resources mean that 112 million people live in poverty, and investment in health and education are shockingly low. This, as the country is projected to become the world's third most populous by 2050, with over 420 million people.



Figure 7: New York City.

The Cross-Bronx Expressway, another controversial Robert Moses project, was routed north of Crotona Park and through the Tremont neighbourhood, severely disrupting the character of the largely Jewish society at the time. Respiratory illnesses along the Cross Bronx run much higher than the average and have added an extra challenge during COVID-19.

Figure 8: "100 Quarters" slum, Islamabad.

The "100 Quarters" slum in the center of Islamabad is predominantly made up of Christians, who live alongside wealthy Muslim households and often perform menial duties such as cleaning and recycling for them. Christians make up less than 5% of the population of Pakistan, however in the capital their obvious slum "colonies" are a thorn in the side of the local government, and many have been dismantled, removed and targeted, although "100 Quarters" remains resilient.



Figure 9: Jakarta, Indonesia.

Danau Sunter Barat, or Sunter West Lake, is one of the prominent lakes in North Jakarta. It plays a crucial role in the local water system, acting as a water reservoir for flood control and irrigation purposes. The lakes are part of Jakarta's strategy to manage its recurring floods, a significant issue faced by the city due to its geography and urban planning challenges.





Figure 10: Extreme wealth inequality in South Jakarta's Pondok Indah neighbourhood.



Figure 11: Mumbai, India

The area surrounding the Bandra Kurla complex is a mixture of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, including the consulate generals of several countries, corporate headquarters, and the National Stock Exchange.

It's estimated that over 7.5 million people – more than 60% of the residents in Mumbai – live in slums like these. The exceedingly sharp contrast from the developed areas is stark. The narrow streets and hustle and bustle is such that it's almost easy to forget these scenes exist, until you fly above them.

Figure 12 (right): Manila, Philippines. The port. Floating homes next to the container terminal.

Home to over 13 million people, this city is the epitome of contrast, where towering skyscrapers shadow humble shanties, the wealthy minority lives alongside the majority living in poverty, and modern architecture coexists with dilapidated buildings. This dynamic mosaic paints a stark picture of the socioeconomic and environmental inequality that pervades Manila.



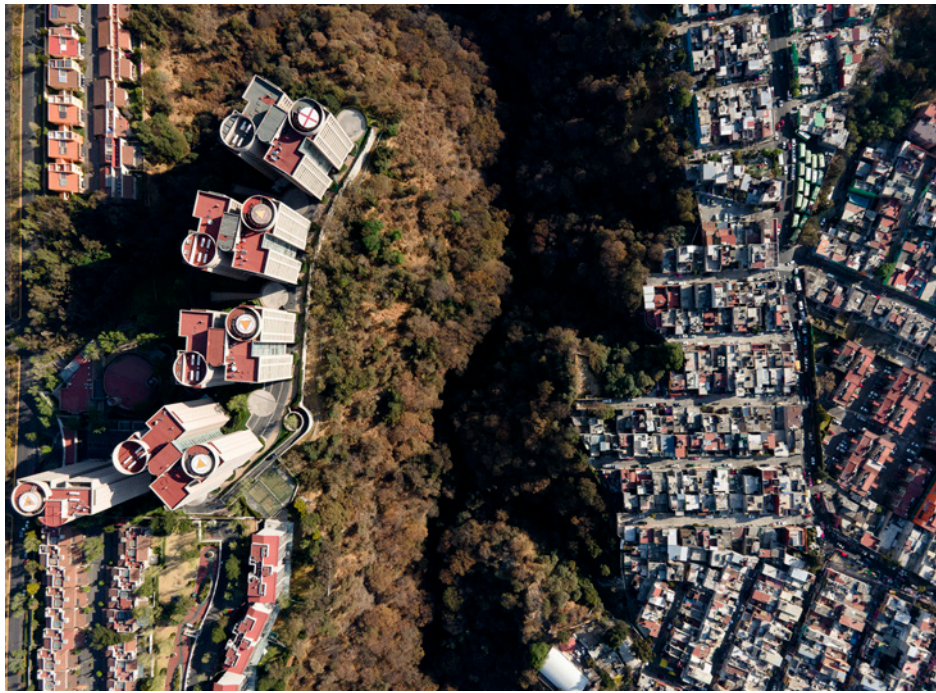


Figure 13: Santa Fe, Mexico.

The wealthier homes in Santa Fe sit atop ridge lines which tower above the surrounding neighborhoods on the outskirts of Mexico City. Until recently this peripheral part of the city, high above the smog-choked center, was filled with garbage dumps and low-income residents, but the construction of glittering new tower blocks and office buildings now make this a powerful location for gentrification and a dividing line between health outcomes, especially during Covid.



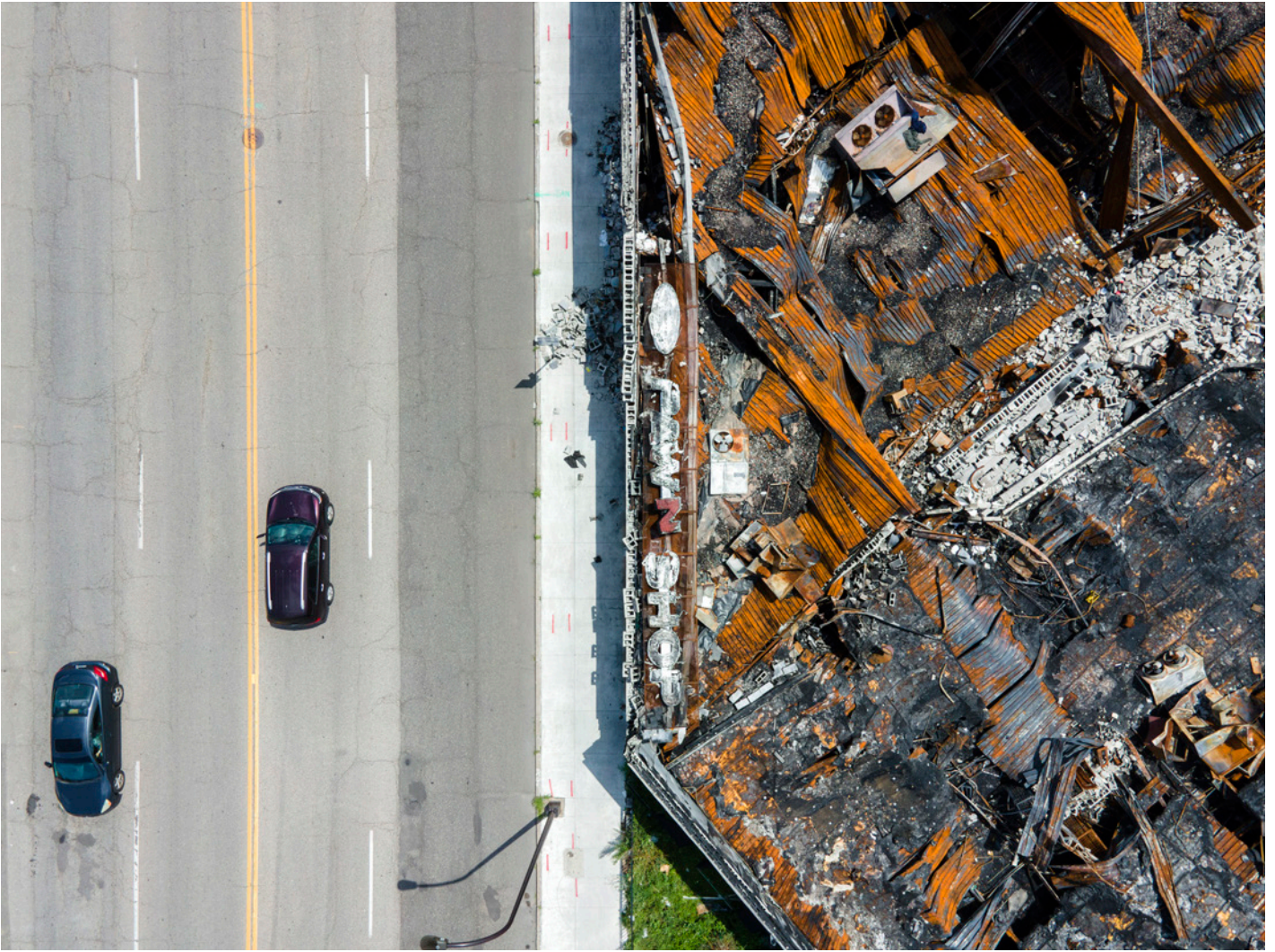


Figure 15: Vehicles drive by a pawn shop gutted in the unrest following the murder of George Floyd. Minneapolis.

The "Twin Cities" of Minneapolis and St. Paul have a reputation as extremely progressive cities - Democratic politics; redistributive tax policies; bike lanes and re-zoning initiatives. It's also an uncommonly beautiful metro area, with many lakes and parks, a pedestrian-friendly downtown and an undeveloped river corridor which courses between the two cities. If you visit in the summer, you might even be forgiven for thinking the weather is perfect, too.

The eruption of unrest following George Floyd's murder in June 2020, however, laid bare the reality that the progressivism celebrated by so many has failed to materially uplift minority households at the same rate as their white counterparts. In fact, the Twin Cities has the highest discrepancy between whites and POC of any of the top 25 metro areas in the USA by population in poverty rates, home ownership, employment, and level of education. According to the Washington Post, black households earn less than half the income of white households, and redistributive tax policies and spending have not changed the reality of physical segregation and racial architecture which continues to hem minorities into clearly defined areas within the city. A series of high-profile police shootings and videotaped killings of unarmed black men only served to reinforce the notion that the city works only for the wealthy white population.

Figure 14 (left): Mukuru slums, Nairobi, Nigeria.

The Mukuru Kwa Njema slums are made up of several informal areas southeast of the city centre, including this one called "Riara". Added together, the slums have a population totaling over 120,000, a vast slum city with poor services, stolen electricity, and mounds of rubbish in the streets. The unerring regularity of long tin roofs, perfectly parallel, belie the squalor underneath, and from the air create incredible striated patterns.

Figure 16: Papwa Sewgolom Golf Course, Durban. South Africa.





Figure 17: Primrose and Makause, unequal neighborhoods in Johannesburg, South Africa.

South Africa has been famously called "The World's Most Unequal Country", and it certainly looks that way from the air. Ask anyone where the nearest "township" is and they will give you an answer; talk of slums, race, and poverty and no one will blink. Inequality is a part of the society here, as second nature to South Africans as any other topic. Inequality in South Africa is economic, cultural, but maybe more here than anywhere else, also overtly racial. Black and other non-white South Africans continue to suffer from much higher rates of every societal ill, have less social mobility, and have dramatically less income and wealth as their white counterparts.



Figure 18: Lima, Peru.

The Wall of Shame has existed for decades in Lima, a kilometers-long barrier of concrete and barbed wire. It exists as a proxy for the failure of an effective state response to informality, inequality, and crime, built along class lines, rather than ethnic or religious lines. The simple fact is that the wall works - San Juan de Miraflores, in the district of Pamplona Alta, is the second least safe neighbourhood in Lima, according to the NGO Ciudad Nuestra. On the other hand, Surco, in the district of Las Casuarinas, is the fourth safest neighbourhood in Lima.

Figure 19: Nungwi, Zanzibar.

The beachfront in Nungwi, on the northern tip of Zanzibar island, is populated with expensive multinational hotel chains which cater to the super-rich and can cost upwards of \$7,000 per night. The strain that this puts on the service delivery system in this region (for electricity and water) is massive. Researchers found that, on average, tourists were using 16 times more fresh water a day per head than locals: 93.2 litres of water per day, whereas in the five-star hotels the average daily consumption per room was 3,195 litres.



Figure 20 (next page): Mumbai, India



