

Post-Apartheid Johannesburg:



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Tracy Metz

No one knows how many people live in Johannesburg or its greater metropolitan area. No one knows how many people are streaming into South Africa's cities—rural blacks in search of work, illegal immigrants fleeing their own regimes, and Chinese laborers brought in to recover the last flakes of gold from the mine dumps that cut huge swaths through the city.

No one knows how many South Africans are HIV-positive and how many will die of AIDS this year, or any other year, or how many households will then be headed by children. No one knows how many people are waiting for water, for electricity, for a house—and have meanwhile been living for years in a cardboard shack inside a warehouse.

No one knows whether the African National Congress (ANC), in the throes of its own internal leadership struggle, will be able to rise to the

challenge and provide the new South Africa with justice and equity.

But there is one thing that everyone in South Africa does know. "Post-apartheid South Africa is an experiment the like of which the world has never seen before," says Myesha Jenkins, performance poet from Los Angeles who emigrated in 1993, the year before Nelson Mandela became president. "We *want* this experiment to work." Taxi-driver Vincent from the northern province of Limpopo, speaking of the elections that will take place later in 2007, says, "We must do it right. The eyes of the world are on us."

Myesha guides us, the Loeb Fellows of 2007, deftly and with good humor on our class study trip in and around Johannesburg. Our meetings and encounters range from the World Bank in Pretoria to the worker hostels of Soweto, from the Johannesburg Development Authority to the dark slums of Alexandra, from the hip bars of Melville to the halls of the new Constitutional Court, from the

A Work in Progress

Apartheid Museum to the day-to-day apartheid we still see all around us in the city.

We can't help noticing that people of various colors go to the same bars and restaurants, in Melville for example, but don't sit at the same table. And at most of the institutions we visit, the person speaking is white and the second-in-command is black. And we can't help wondering how many of these whites will choose to stay in South Africa, knowing that in the foreseeable future their positions will be filled by their black colleagues.

Things look different, easier, in the supercool Rocca's in the redeveloped quarter at 44 Stanley. Tonight there is live jazz and the place is packed with twenty-somethings from the media and design world. At every table every color is represented. This could be the future. Myesha loves this tough town, and it's contagious. There are a lot of can-do people like her in Joburg. The city needs them.

Apartheid and Land Use

The Loeb Fellowship Program at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design supports ten mid-career professionals each year whose work contributes to "the improvement of the built and natural environment." The annual study trip and one of the fellowships are cosponsored by the Lincoln Institute.

We went to Johannesburg in May with many questions related to the Fellowship's mission: How did and does apartheid impact land use? How is the new government addressing the country's housing needs? What does the city expect to gain from hosting the World Cup in 2010, and what are the risks? To what extent do the environment and sustainability play a role in the rapid new development?

In 1994 the racist National Party stepped down and Nelson Mandela's ANC stepped up. Thirteen years is not enough time to change the spatial pattern of the city, which for so long had been shaped by segregation. Nevertheless, it is a shock to see the extent to which urban development still plays out along the lines set by apartheid.

"Government leaves the construction of RDP housing to developers," says Dave de Groot of the World Bank in Pretoria, speaking of the country's Reconstruction and Development Program. "Developers want to minimize the cost of land so they

build out at the edges where land is cheap. This not only promotes sprawl, but reinforces spatial apartheid."

"Apartheid has shaped the city and still does," agrees Lael Bethlehem, the young white female director of the Johannesburg Development Authority (JDA). The JDA, with a staff of 45, is city-owned and funded, but has an independent board. "Already at the end of the nineteenth century the English and the Boers were divvying the country up between them and excluding the blacks," Bethlehem adds. In 1913 the Land Act forced 90 percent of the people of this country to live on 13 percent of the land." That pattern only changed after massive resistance in the 1950s from both blacks and whites. The Apartheid Museum in Joburg by the black-and-white architecture firm of Mashabane Rose testifies powerfully to that period. But even when blacks were officially allowed to live in the cities, the Group Areas Act of 1963 still divided the cities by color.

Our meeting with the JDA is in its downtown office in the Bus Factory, which also accommodates cultural space for performances, exhibitions, and the Crafts Council shop. The JDA works with the architecture department of the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), Bethlehem explains, because

LEFT: Informal commercial enterprises and housing remain prevalent in many townships.

BELOW: New RDP housing was built in the Brickville neighborhood on the outskirts of Johannesburg.



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“there are simply not enough black architects yet for us to be able to meet the Black Economic Empowerment requirement that 60 percent of our funding be spent on black-owned businesses.”

Interestingly enough, according to Alan Mabin, dean of architecture at Wits, 90 percent of the planning students are black, but only 30 percent of the architecture students. “Architecture is still seen as an elitist profession, and there are hardly any role models,” he notes

Housing Shortage

In South Africa now everyone can live wherever they like—on paper. But, that doesn’t mean there are houses available. Little affordable housing is being built in the cities. The RDP houses are stark, standardized, cookie-cutter products of 300 square feet each, grouped in settlements at the urban periphery and bearing an uncanny resemblance to the townships created as residential areas for blacks and coloreds under apartheid. South Africa’s cities are sprawling, worsening the already heavy burden on the infrastructure, and forcing people to still travel long distances to work.

The Joburg municipality, says Paul Jackson of the Trust for Urban Housing Finance, is “technically nonfunctional” as far as plan approval is concerned. The Trust manages commercial property and provides mortgages; its agenda is to arrest urban decline through investment and build low-to middle-income housing. “The banks are supposed to have done 42 billion Rand (US\$6 billion) worth of investment in housing by mid-2008, and they are not even halfway there,” Jackson states.

The banks became skittish after the well-organized civil disobedience campaign in the final stages of apartheid, Jackson explains. “As part of their resistance to the system, many people simply stopped paying their mortgage, or they lost their jobs and were unable to pay. Either way, the banks got burned.” Now a growing group of South Africans see property ownership as a way to wealth, and the demand for the Trust’s services is high. Quite a few of the new landlord/developers are recent immigrants from Zimbabwe, Congo, Cameroon, and Nigeria.

Downtown

“The inner city is a very different place from even three years ago,” Jackson continues. “The same group is coming to downtown as everywhere else: the newlyweds and the nearly dead. But there is

also a new move to the center, by families in their thirties and forties who are tired of the commute to Soweto.” In a survey the Trust conducted among people now living in the inner city, 42 percent of the respondents say they want to remain there. The price of property has more than doubled, and the rents have gone up 60 to 80 percent.

Neil Fraser worked for 13 years as director of the Central Johannesburg Partnership on the revitalization of downtown and now has his own consultancy, Urban Inc. He remembers vividly the empty buildings and the crime of 10 and 15 years ago. “Like Detroit,” he says. Fraser was instrumental in engineering the turnaround, but now he is concerned about the consequences. “There is 500 million Rand worth of middle- to high-income housing planned downtown, but we desperately need affordable housing and open space,” he states, noting that there are an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 homeless in Joburg’s city center alone. But with evident pleasure he points to the pavement, which is once again whole, and to people sitting at a sidewalk café. “That would have been unthinkable a few years ago; no one would have dared to sit outside,” he exclaims.

The JDA was set up to address the collapse of the inner city through the use of good design and public art. Bethlehem comments, “These help the quality of life *and* reinvestment. We must create a platform for private investment.” One old office building that was converted into 400 condos ranging from 650,000 Rand (ca. US\$100,000) to 1.25 million Rand sold in three weeks, many of the units to investors. But many empty buildings have been “hijacked” by squatters; wash flutters from broken factory windows. One of these is Mandela’s former office. Neil Fraser adds, “The owner knows he has something special and is just waiting for the price to go up; in the meantime the building is a fire and sanitation hazard.”

Privatization

Privatization is one of the most hotly contested issues in South Africa. As the ANC struggles to transform itself from a liberation movement into a government, it looks to business to provide the services it cannot. Paul Jackson puts it succinctly: “The private sector is doing much more than government and NGOs together.” According to the Anti-Privatization Forum, however, service delivery is even worse now than under apartheid. “Yes, the ANC did inherit a backlog from apartheid,”

OPPOSITE

TOP:

Residents use a communal water tap in Soweto.

MIDDLE:

Laundry day in the township of Alex.

BOTTOM:

Informal housing takes many forms in marginal areas.

says Patra, an activist and musician, “but people are poorer than in 1994. The government listens to big business now, and parliament is full of aspiring capitalists.”

At the Mvula Trust, an NGO working on water and sanitation in both urban and rural areas all over the country, we learned that foreign companies brought in to provide “instant” service delivery are experiencing difficulties in getting paid and are now threatening to walk out on their contracts.

During our visit there was a striking example of the disconnect that still exists between local and provincial government. The morning paper announced that the province of Gauteng had signed a contract with a Malaysian company for the construction of a monorail between Joburg and the airport, and the mayor of Joburg purportedly knew nothing about it. “The ANC works on a committee system,” one of our spokesmen says. “It doesn’t want dynamic mayors.”

Another example is the rioting being reported in the papers during our visit in the township of Khutsong. The inhabitants are vehemently protesting the government’s decision to change the borders of Gauteng, in the process “moving” Khutsong into the province of North West, which is notorious for its poor service delivery.

Leila of the Mvula Trust spoke of the obstacles to progress. “We say, manage water at the lowest possible level, rather than introducing high tech programs. Use local skills and resources, train people to do it themselves. But local governments are reticent to work with local people; they’re in a hurry,” she says. The problem comes back yet again to education. How can South Africa educate its people after decades of disenfranchisement, and in time to provide their countrymen with the services that are so badly needed?

Meanwhile, in South Africa as in the rest of the world, households are getting smaller, but there are more of them, so many more water connections are needed. “And there is even the issue of what constitutes a household,” Leila explains. “Is that the account holder, or also the people living in the 15 shacks on his land who are dependent on him for their water supply?”

Privatization of utilities has siphoned skilled workers from the public sector into private business. After decades of under-education of blacks, there was already a dearth of black engineers. “Many municipalities do not even have *one!*” exclaims Leila. “And the World Cup of 2010 is



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New government housing offers only modest accommodations.

a huge drain on skilled personnel and building materials.” At the same time everyone admits that the World Cup can be a boost of confidence.

Black Diamonds

Of the entire sub-Saharan economy, 40 percent is generated in South Africa. The new prosperity, and the new opportunities, have created Black Diamonds, the new class of prosperous blacks. A three-page special report in the *Sunday Times* of May 20, 2007, quotes a survey by the University of Cape Town Unilever Institute and TNS Research Surveys putting the number of Black Diamonds at 2.6 million, of the total 23 million adult African population. They account for 12 percent of black consumers, but wield 54 percent of the buying power. They are piling up debt on property, cars, electrical appliances, electronics, furniture, and clothes (a familiar pattern for Americans). The South African economy is grateful; white spending has been stagnant, according to the Unilever report, and 35 percent of black adults are unemployed. This lifestyle is in stark contrast to that in many townships, which residents are leaving in droves.

Denis Creighton, a retired businessman who now leads tours through Soweto, shows us surprisingly wealthy suburbs. The most noticeable difference with Joburg proper is the lack of razor wire and armed response. “Housing is at a premium here,” Creighton explains, “and there is no stigma attached to living here.”

Soweto is an acronym for South Western Township, but since its founding in 1904 it has grown into a full-fledged city of between 1 and over 3

million people. In South Africa’s most famous township a mall and a megaplex are under construction. It can even lay claim to being the only place in the world with two Nobel Prize winners on one street: Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu. Here, too, is the memorial for a small figure who looms large in the history of Soweto: the school-boy Hector Pieterse, whose death at the hands of the police sparked the violent student uprisings of the mid-1970s. The photograph of him, fatally wounded, in the arms of a schoolmate with Hector’s sister at his side, went round the world as an iconic image of South Africa’s struggle.

Yes, there is also poverty in Soweto, for example in the crowded workers’ hostels and in Kliptown, where uncounted thousands live in shacks of corrugated metal and whatever other impromptu building materials can be found.

We witness poverty of an even more bitter order in the warehouse district of Alex, a township right next to the wealthy suburb of Sandton. No one knows how many people, South Africans and immigrants from other parts of the continent, have constructed dwellings in abandoned warehouses. Electrical wires run crisscross between the improvised walls across the pitch-dark alleys, many of which deadend. One shivers to think what happens when one of the paraffin cookers people use here falls over and starts a fire.

One of our most haunting encounters takes place here, with a woman who lives in a tiny room with her husband and three children. Her space is unbelievably proper and well-organized, and we compliment her on how beautiful she has made her home. “No,” she retorts with angry dignity, “it is not beautiful. No human being should live like this.”

Cycles of Violence

At the Market Theater in downtown Joburg we see the play *Molara* (ash), an adaptation of the ancient Greek drama of Orestes, who slays his mother in revenge for her slaying his father. Creator and director Yael Farber has changed the ending: at the last moment Orestes takes mercy on his mother Klytemnestra. The throaty singing and rhythmic stamping of the chorus, one man and six women from Transkei in traditional blankets and turbans, is powerful and moving.

In the program Farber writes, “Coming from South Africa, the question of revenge begs enormous consideration in the light of an almost

unfathomably peaceful transition to democracy. *Molara* is an attempt to grapple with the drive for revenge, and a celebration of breaking the cycles of violence by the courage of the ‘ordinary’ man.”

Farber is proud of her countrymen. Indeed, nowhere in the world do you hear people of all colors and walks of life say so passionately and unconditionally: “I love my country. I am proud of our Constitution.” Lael Bethlehem of the JDA concurs, “The Constitution is a radical and extraordinary document that sets the basis for a new society. It accords South Africans constitutional rights that no other nation has, such as gay marriage.”

On Constitution Hill past and present come together in a deeply moving manner. It was here on a hill overlooking the city that Boer leader Paul Kruger decided in 1893 to build four prisons: the Fort, the Women’s Jail, the Awaiting Trial Block, and Number Four, the “Native” jail. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Mandela were incarcerated here. At the transition in 1994, precisely this spot was chosen for the newly created Constitutional Court, in a building designed by the Joburg firm Urban Solutions that opened on Human Rights Day, March 21, 2004.

The worst and the best of the country come together here. Justice Albie Sachs receives us in his chambers and tells us about the genesis of the building and the art collection in it—largely his doing. He does not talk about his years in prison as a dissident against apartheid, or about the bomb that took his right arm and one of his eyes when he was living in exile in Mozambique. That was the past; Albie Sachs, at 72, is looking to the future. After all, his son Oliver is just a little over a year old.

Reflections

Our visit to Johannesburg was an intense and exhilarating professional experience, as well as an emotional, personal one. Rarely is the connection between the built and natural environment and the social and political contexts that shape it so intimate and immediate. It made us sure, if we had ever doubted it, that what we do as planning and design professionals matters.

South Africa is reinventing itself as we speak—socially, politically, economically, racially. Hope and apprehension are running head to head. Will the “unfathomably peaceful” transition be strong enough to sustain South Africa’s uncertain future? Everyone hopes so, but no one knows. **L**



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Loeb Fellows, 2006–2007

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Chicago, Illinois

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Ulises Diaz

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