

JOBURG ICONS

(NUMBER ONE IN A SERIES OF TEN)

Vroom with a View: the Top Star Drive-In

It is said of Jo'burg that it has none of 'the things that make a city' - a river, a mountain, the sea. It's simply not beautiful, you see, and we all know that people live here only for the money. We'd all rather be in Cape Town, right? And Jo'burg is simply so... uninspiring, right?

Wrong. If the image of Paris is condensed in the Eiffel Tower and Beijing is known by the Forbidden City and Hong Kong by the HSBC Bank building, then what are the icons of Johannesburg? I have been asked to write on the icons of Johannesburg. Today begins a tour of the most striking landmarks of our city, together with a collection of entirely subjective reasons why they should be loved and celebrated.

But why begin with buildings? If Cape Town has a mountain that is central to its soul, so has Johannesburg. And it's closer to the real soul of the city than that lump of sandstone across from Robben Island. It's simply more sublime, more dramatic, more stylish, more in-your-face and exciting, more Jozi style. Sharp sharp.

Where do **you** go for inspiration in Johannesburg? I have a theory about people's relationships to cities, and it is this: every once in a while, you need to sit and contemplate the place where you live. You need to face this city, frame it, give it a sharp and incisive glance, and a forgiving and knowing one. Together. And for this, you need distance. In Hong Kong, try the harbour promenade in Tsim Sha Tsui. In Cape Town, try Robben Island. In Berlin, try the Kreuzberg. In Johannesburg, go to the Drive-In. And here I mean the vehicular bioscope, not the McDonald's hole-in-the-wall.

When last did you go to the Top Star? What? Haven't been to the Top Star lately? Not on a weekend winter's morning, with yellow grass and spiky fleshy plants crowding the crash-landed pastel-coloured concrete gatehouse exiled from Brasilia? Not on a hot summer afternoon with the smell of wet dust and golden red rivulets of molten sand streaming down the cleft sides of our mountain? Not on a warm night with cold burgers and chips on your car seat? Well, no wonder you may find Johannesburg uninspiring.

Never mind the fantastical gatehouse, wait for the drive to the top! The mine dump that is crowned by the Top Star has some grand 30's factories around its base, all orange Transvaal brick and voluptuous curves. Then the snaking drive

around the hill to the top and back down the opposite way, with sweeping panoramas of the Deep South and the Wild West.

The Top Star is and ought to be one of our true monuments to the magic of urban life. It is one of the great places of repose in Jozi. Here, you can take a deep breath of polluted highway air and stare across at a shimmering, glowing, ziggurat city of hopes and violence and rebirth and consumption. Here, you can see and feel and understand the geography and the history. The short-lived spark of exploitation and the aeons of human habitation. Here, you can have the distance to contemplate. Go on, choose a bad movie, get a mushy burger, bring a bottle of good stuff and sit in front of the big screen, facing the city. The grass and the dark broken earth fall away at your feet, the ground is awash in synthetic red and white light from the pale billboard towering above, and the city faces you head-on.

We went the other night, with silent clusters of other strangers, to escape from Jozi to Gotham City and believe in Batman for two hours. Families, children, dogs, couples making out, loners, dressed up chicks, larney gents, washed-out suburbanites in tracksuits. I don't think one can have a better evening with a wider cross-section of fellow Jo'burgers anywhere in this town. And we all shared an evening on our own Table Mountain, doing our thing, being in the presence of our city. It felt strangely good and reassuring to know that this was our mountain in our city, shaped out of our piece of bland Transvaal earth. Or Gauteng Earth. Our earth.

With more and more of the mine dumps being dissolved back to gold-bearing sludge and being exported to the East Rand as we speak, perhaps you should go out and catch the late show. It may be your 'last chance to see'. Go on, get over to the Top Star and tell me it's not an iconic place in this city. And name me another city on earth where you can catch a movie and an inspiration fix.

I personally and unreservedly declare the Top Star Drive-In to be Jozi's first and most sublime Icon.

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