

**Contribution to TAGESZEITUNG, Berlin: URBAN 21 International Conference /
Henning Rasmuss**

Johannesburg : a different Urban Renewal

Johannesburg is one of the fastest growing cities on the African continent. It is and remains a magnet of attraction for urban migrants from across the country and the continent. This is in spite of its negative image as a Crime Capital. In spite of its basically unattractive physical landscape. In spite of its history of division and inequality.

While this city is undergoing a dynamic phase of informal hyper-growth, it is dying a slow media death. Before our eyes, Johannesburg is dramatically transforming itself in ways no-one foresaw a decade ago. We are now released into the chaos of reinvention - our city lives on the knife-edge. In the official middle-class media opinion, the inner city core is 'dying'. The sense of ownership has changed from the middle class to the lower classes, and the surface appearance of the city has changed along with this. According to the media opinions, we have an imploding center. In the middle of enormous growth. Can this be true, and why should it be so? And how important is the core of the city to its overall condition?

Perhaps we need to look first at the kind of city that the present has inherited from our violent and distorted past. How has Johannesburg come to be shaped through history? The urban landscape clearly reflects the agendas of colonial opportunism and racial segregation aimed at the extraction of its hidden wealth. Superscribed over the colonial landscape, apartheid planning fixed the physical separation of communities through the entrenchment of cultural and racial difference. Johannesburg has been planned to be dysfunctional. It is an abnormal city shaped by a malformed societal system. 'City' and 'township' have always developed separately: Johannesburg has always been made up of a number of cities co-existing in each other's shadow. In contrast to Berlin, where development energy is now focused on the center, in Johannesburg the energies have always been divided. Between the City of Death and the City of Superfluity, the contemporary landscape is shaped between extremes of ambitions and realities. Today, the fear of violent crime, the inherited prejudice of apartheid and misplaced architectures perpetuate the polarisation into different zones. The engineering of separation is exposed through a series of abrupt changes in landscape, which delineate zones of homogenous culture, economy, race and density.

Many cities worldwide have undergone cycles of growth and decline, and perhaps Johannesburg is in its first decline in its 115-year history. But can we truly talk of decline in the face of the huge development pressure of our city? It would seem that urban renewal, in an unordered and unplanned manner, has made a place for itself and is occurring right here and now. Urban renewal without planners, urban renewal without infrastructure, urban renewal without financial resources.

At present, Johannesburg is developing in spite of, or ahead of, a plan for the city. The recent planning history has been undermined by a lack of political will, prevalent in the final years of the apartheid government. With the realization of the unavailability of political change since the early 1980's, local bureaucrats created a void of decisive planning action out of fear and indecision. Fear of being accused of making partisan decisions about resources. Inability to foresee the new political structure and to plan for it.

The void of political will led to the breakdown of structured planning and the surrender to the development energies of private capital. From this time, we have inherited the monuments of the last wave of inner-city development: five-star hotels now mothballed twelve years after their completion. Glass skyscrapers now stranded in a sea of street-level activity. Post-modern office blocks set in villa gardens at the immediate edge of the city. At the same time, inner-city decline set in: in a more permissive political climate, ruthless landlords exploited the remaining apartheid laws against increasing numbers of black urban dwellers. Immense density of living resulted in small areas of the city, beginning the slow collapse of service infrastructure. The face of the city began to change as development started moving north and inner-city buildings stood empty. From the beginning of the 1990's onwards, there was an almost complete lack of building activity in the city centre. Only monolithic banking headquarters carved up the public space through inscrutable facades and introverted, self-sustaining environments. The monuments to this time include the Reserve Bank building in Newtown.

The suburbs began to change as fear and uncertainty led to higher walls and a less safe public domain. Tougher economic conditions led to densification in townhouse-style developments on smaller pieces of

land. Development energy was focused only on the moneyed, individually mobile elite: shopping malls, convenience centers along main roads, office parks on cheaper land on the periphery.

With the new political dispensation in place, optimism and capital speculation finally made the city explode its boundaries, with all development energy driving away from the centre. The recent void of political will left the city open to be ravaged by the opportunistic operation of private development capital without imposed structure. Planners at best reacted to development energy, rather than guide it.

In a threatening climate of instability and fear, the suburbs were and still are mutating into a landscape of solitaires behind high walls and fences. Shopping malls by the dozen, inserted into low-density sprawling suburbs but still serving only middle-class markets. Culturally suspect architecture styled to complete the escapist façade for a life of excess in a context of desperate need: from American Colonial to Greek Island Fantasia to Renaissance Medieval to French Provencale to Tuscan Country House. A wave of dislocated architectural fragments satisfies the psychological need to dissociate from the insecurity of everyday life.

The attraction of the suburbs continues to draw energy and activity away from the city centre. Following from the earlier lack of planning vision, the inner city now suffers from an unwillingness of management. The new local government structures are more interested in the exercise of power in itself. They do not understand that power devolves into the hard work of city management: if you want to rule a city, you have to empty the refuse bins too. Businesses locate according to convenience and status, and the development of small office nodes across the suburbs in all directions continues unhindered.

Without a coherent planning framework to guide the city's development, and without tax incentives to guide development within the guidelines of government policy, individuals adapt the city for short-term gain. Against the background threat of crime and violence, the public space deteriorates: houses are secured individually, streets become canyons of blank walls. 'Armed response' signs offer a visible everpresent counter-threat to the unseen crime menace.

In reality, the structure of the city being built now is no different from the city of apartheid years: distribution of access to resources remains discriminatory. The car-based society is served by development capital. Johannesburg has not learnt the lesson of density: extensions to Soweto and other 'townships' are being built at this moment, based on the model of the free-standing single house on its own plot of land. Infrastructure is being pushed into the ground in an ever-growing network that continues to locate the urban poor further away from the city and its opportunities. The new township house is smaller and less well built than the township house of twenty years ago.

The old patterns of habitation in the landscape are not broken: city and suburb co-exist in an uneasy relationship, each according to its own rules. Armies of commuters travel inordinately long distances every day, in order to exchange value in the economy and take part in city life.

What then can be said of the future? What is happening to the city centre, and what can our vision be for it? How can we be visionary in the face of a media campaign that declares the city centre 'dead'?

The flight of the middle class in body towards the periphery and in mind to its escapist projections of exotic places is complete. The sense of ownership of the city as a territory has shifted completely in the past few years.

Demand for housing in the inner city remains high and grows with the growing population. Existing housing stock is overcrowded and technical service installations are under strain. But the city has primarily been designed for business, with a majority of office and warehouse buildings. There are innovative projects underway to convert existing inner-city warehouse blocks into housing units, but financing costs are high and there are few creative subsidy strategies available. Private development capital prefers the easier, less risky option of developing on the periphery.

At ground level, the city is filled to capacity. Johannesburg remains the shopping district for the sprawling townships, which have not yet attracted the shopping malls of the middle-class suburbs. Line shop rentals on Eloff Street are higher than those of the best boutique shops in the upmarket malls. Formal retail demand is huge. The African conduct of street trading by independent or loosely organized 'hawkers' has changed the surface and texture of the public space completely. Informal markets exist along most streets, and shops in competition display more of their goods on the pavements. The city is filled with activity and

opportunity, and serves a huge population of commuter consumers. Johannesburg now offers opportunity for economic and social exchange to a much larger number of people than ten years ago. Emerging small businesses are beginning to locate back to the city centre with flexible rental deals, and the city is beginning to support a service network for its users once again. The large banks and financial institutions are entrenched in the city and continue to draw their staff to the city as consumers.

What is fascinating to see and edited out of the media reports about the city is this: we have managed to maximize the use of the city on the back of the existing service infrastructure, without investing additional capital into the city centre. We have arrived at the new type of African Johannesburg by chance and by the actions of desperate and opportunistic people who have exploited the void of planning and governance.

The city is renewing itself in a frenzy of informal activity: by inhabitation of inbetween spaces, by creative re-use of buildings designed for other functions, by the takeover of public space, by the defiance of local government regulations. The users of the city have scavenged the cadaver of the old city and created a new city with a new texture, a new order, a new logic and new patterns of use. What is here will not be reversed: it will be up to the politicians, their planners and architects to follow this city and intervene creatively in the reality that has been created. There is a new sense of ownership that gives us hope for the future: a real ownership where the city has been adapted to suit the satisfaction of basic human desire and need. What is needed now is a concentration of new resources into this dense centre, in order to make it safer and even more attractive. There are encouraging projects of higher-density new housing in areas close to the city centre which have been left empty by the forced removal of Black and Indian communities under the apartheid government.

In Johannesburg, the role of the Keepers of the City (including architects) can embrace the responsibility of mediating, combining and exploiting the forces acting on the city by building on the positive features of our new city order, and by designing the city in such a way that basic human desires can be enacted in a dignified manner. In a city with a history of discrimination, access to urban amenity becomes the site of struggle. This is where our urban renewal is taking place in spite of the planners and in spite of a lack of resources. The inner city is by no means dead: it has simply moved towards its new African future, leaving behind the problematic suburbs with their continuing wastefulness of resources and their architectural manifestations of paranoia and cultural isolation.

—

Henning Rasmuss
Architekt
Johannesburg

Juni 2000

Tel. +27 11 482 3781
Fax +27 11 482 3784
Mobile +27 83 449 2670
mwillovo@iafrica.com
paragonarc@icon.co.za