



Reinventing the Johannesburg inner city

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After the discovery of the Witwatersrand gold reef in 1886, the city of Johannesburg became, within a very short period of time, the financial and commercial hub of sub-Saharan Africa. It maintained this position throughout the earlier half of the twentieth century in the face of increasing opposition to the apartheid political system. By the late 1980s, however, this had changed. The restructuring of the global economy and increasing political pressure had resulted in a city whose economic base was declining and in which the social and economic exclusion upon which it had been built was no longer sustainable. This resulted in successive attempts by the urban authorities to reinvent a city which could claim a position in the mainstream global economy and become a city all its citizens could feel part of. This paper sketches these attempts, locates them in certain traditions of urban regeneration and exposes their theoretical and practical inadequacies. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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Introduction

Since 1990, Johannesburg's local authority has spearheaded two local economic development initiatives to reinvent, re-image and reformulate its inner city landscape. These have been driven by the twin objectives of positioning the city advantageously in the global economy and averting the urban economic decline experienced from the 1970s onwards. To do this, images have been constructed of the city's future, around which investment, public opinion and social accord have been mobilized.

This paper begins by outlining the changing character of the Johannesburg inner city, in particular from the 1970s onwards, as a background for examining these local economic development initiatives and the images invented to shape them. It then presents the successive approaches to urban revitalization in Johannesburg and traces the threads of commonality and difference between them, in particular their quest for "world city" status and their changing, but continually ambivalent, relation to Africa. Having explored the conceptual inadequacies of this official policy making, I conclude by locating Johannesburg's future within a theoretical understanding of the complexity, interdependence and unevenness of current

global restructuring and of Africa's likely place within it.

The changing character of the Johannesburg inner city

After the discovery of the Witwatersrand gold reef in 1886, the city of Johannesburg became, within a very short period of time, the financial and commercial hub of sub-Saharan Africa. Within the first 10 years of its existence, banks, finance houses and mining company headquarters lined its streets (Chipkin, 1993). Successive waves of economic activity, corresponding largely to the booms and slumps of the gold mining industry, produced, by 1990, a city housing the headquarters of 65 out of the 100 largest public companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, 13 of South Africa's 30 largest companies, 6 of the 8 mining conglomerates and 9 of the 18 leading life assurance companies. In addition, it functioned as the national banking center, housing 11 of the leading 16 banking institutions, the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and the National Reserve Bank (Tomlinson *et al*, 1995). Its adjoining high density residential suburbs, developed speculatively in the 1960s (Chipkin, 1993), served as a point of arrival for new European

immigrants to the city. The black working class, set apart by apartheid legislation, lived and commuted from Soweto, the sprawling township to the south west of the city.¹

From its inception, the city was constructed to conform to images of Western modernity. Its building boom prior to the turn of the century drew on the *Fin de Siecle* European style, while the boom following the Boer War (1889–1902) produced monumental imperial buildings, consolidating the gold mining industry and the financial district in the appearance of British Edwardianism (Chipkin, 1993). The depression of the 1930s, which saw the abandoning of the gold standard in 1932, resulted in foreign capital flooding into the country and transformed Johannesburg into a little New York, or if not New York, then at least Chicago or Saint Louis (De Kiewiet, 1966, in Chipkin, 1993). By 1936, at the time of the British Empire Exhibition, Johannesburg was described as the “largest and most densely populated European city in Africa” with “fascinating shops and smartly dressed shoppers” (Times Weekly Edition, 1936, in Chipkin, 1993: 105) and claimed for itself the status of “the Empire’s great gold center” (Rogerson, 1996: 141).

This image began to be tarnished by the 1970s, as growing opposition to apartheid revealed the city’s racial segregations and political divisions (Rogerson, 1996). The city’s image was an exclusive one that “celebrated white dominance and brushed aside the alternative black experience of the city” (Rogerson, 1996: 141). By 1986, at the time of the city’s centenary celebrations, black opposition to the image of the “city-with-a-golden-heart” reached its peak and rendered the celebrations meaningless. The authorities realized that the city needed reinventing.

Over this period, a gradual movement of black people from the township areas into inner city suburbs picked up momentum. The lifting of influx control and escalating repression and violence in the townships under the apartheid government’s State of Emergency contributed to this. By 1986, at the time of the city’s centenary celebrations, approximately 20 000 black people, of a population of 120 000, lived in the inner city suburb of Hillbrow (Morris, 1996). Migration into inner city suburbs accelerated rapidly. By 1993, 85% of the inner city residential population were black (Morris, 1996) and by 1996, only 5% were white (Crankshaw, 1997). Unlike in United States inner city neighborhoods, the bulk of this population

did not constitute an underclass or ghetto poor (Wilson, 1987, 1991). The majority (ICHUT, 1996; Crankshaw, 1997; Morris, 1996) were more affluent than their counterparts, who remained in the segregated “ghetto” of the black township.

This rapid “greying” of the inner city was accompanied by physical decline and racial stereotyping of new residents (Morris, 1996). In many cases, the exodus of white residents had been aided and abetted by landlords, who saw the “illegal” status of black tenants as an opportunity for raising rents and reducing building maintenance (Zack *et al.*, 1989, in Morris, 1996). In many buildings, rents were increased, apartments overcrowded and services not maintained. These conditions fueled the racial prejudice of white inner city residents who had left and who romanticized life before the arrival of black residents (Morris, 1996).

Further demographic shifts have occurred during the second half of the 1990s as Africans from countries further north, mainly Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, have arrived in the inner city. In 1995, 23 000 Congolese were estimated to be living in Johannesburg (Kadima and Kalombo, 1995), while Morris (1996) estimated 3000 Nigerians to be living in the inner city. These population groups have been subjected to high levels of persecution from South Africans (Dhlomo, 1997). They are blamed for the overcrowded informal trading sector, the growth of the narcotics trade and deterioration of the physical environment (Simone, 1998). Increasing xenophobia, assaults and conflicts over space and access have led to the construction of a defensive, ethnically defined spatiality. Immigrant communities can, in many ways, be compared to immigrant minorities in the United States (Morris, 1996; Ogbu, 1993).

Turning to the economy of the inner city – in ways typical of similar cities across the world, Johannesburg’s economy has declined since 1980. Its traditional manufacturing base (clothing, printing, textiles, food, fabricated metals) lost activity across all sectors, declining from R3.4 billion in 1980 to R2.5 billion in 1994 (Pienaar, 1994).² At the same time, its financial and government sectors increased (finance from R3.2 to 4.8 billion, government from R0.8 to 1.2), while commercial activity on the other hand, remained stagnant at R3 billion (Pienaar, 1994).

Between 1982 and 1994, 17 of the 65 top 100 national public companies located in Johannesburg

¹Urban residents were spatially segregated on the basis of race in terms of the Group Areas Act, No. 40 of 1950. Each racial group was allocated to areas reserved exclusively for them. The movement and residence of Africans in particular was further controlled by an array of legislation, including the Blacks (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945. This legislation meant that the vast majority of Johannesburg’s estimated 3 million black residents were confined to townships on the periphery of the city, while its approximately 1 million white residents were located close to the city center.

²Rogerson and Rogerson’s (1996) research on Johannesburg’s inner city manufacturing activity indicates that its overall downturn arose from the high death of inner city enterprises in relation to the birth rate of new enterprises (237 as opposed to 182) and short-distance relocations to adjacent areas. The inner city has lost its competitive advantage to new industrial sites favoring smaller, cleaner locations along main road and rail routes (Tomlinson *et al.*, 1995: 90).

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