



## THE VIEW FROM OUTSIDE

*Deyan Sudjic*, Director, Design Museum, London

Like Melbourne or San Francisco born a generation or two before, Johannesburg is a city that erupted into existence out of a spasm of explosive growth. In all three cities, rapid urbanisation was triggered by the rush to exploit the discovery of large deposits of gold. Like Melbourne, Johannesburg became an instant metropolis toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, crystallising from a mining camp into a city of stone and stucco. It imported electric trams and trolley buses, dance halls and department stores in a matter of decades. Of course, Johannesburg had more gold, and therefore more need of rather more mining labour than the other two cities. It attracted the ambitious and the dispossessed from around the world: Russian Jews fleeing persecution; indentured Chinese labourers (65,000 of them were shipped in and then out again when they were considered surplus to requirements); Indians moved in from Natal; and also Africans, pass laws permitting.

Unlike Melbourne and San Francisco, Johannesburg grew up on the edge of the gold fields. And, in contrast to its coastal counterparts, it is a mile above sea level. Johannesburg has lost the trams that still grace Melbourne and San Francisco. They have been replaced by swarms of micro-buses that put the city closer to Mexico City or Moscow in ethos. The surviving public transport system is regarded with such anxiety by Johannesburg's citizens that nobody who can afford a car would even consider using public transport. But its shared roots with its American and Australian counterparts are still recognisable. That is perhaps, what makes it a subject of such fascination to those who observe the evolution of cities from the relative comfort of western Europe. Johannesburg is the product of a set of circumstances that are highly specific to Africa. It was born out of the conflict between Afrikanerdom and a British empire engaged in its final bout of expansionism. It was shaped by the cruel restrictions of the apartheid regime, as well as by the dreams of modernity of the post-war years, that together brought about some distinctive inversions of urban norms. But it is also a kind of laboratory for projecting urban phenomena to their extremes. The apartheid regime deliberately planned for low density in black areas, as an instrument of social control. Soweto for example was built on the

model of an English Garden City, its density increased only through multiple occupancy. Higher densities were reserved for the more affluent whites in the inner ring, living in Brazilian inspired highrises. Now the city has become a honey pot for a new kind of Africa, drawing in migrants, legal and otherwise, from all over the continent. The whites have consolidated in the northern suburbs.

In fact the pre- and post-apartheid city does not represent an entirely sharp break as it might seem. There was a gradual relaxation of the racial controls on black urban settlement before majority rule, and the patterns of change have their echoes of other cities. It is a city that forms part of a complex urban hierarchy which reflects South Africa's origins as the union of a range of once individual states, a country with its parliament in Cape Town, the executive based in Pretoria, which is now close to the edge of the Johannesburg conurbation, and a supreme court in Bloemfontein.

Johannesburg grew rapidly as a commercial, banking city, an upstart challenger which quickly overtook the older, more genteel Cape Town. To some, the city is in itself a mark of colonialism, in an Africa of nomadic movement. Certainly it attempted to exclude black people from citizenship for half a century. One reflection of South Africa's postapartheid constitutional settlement is the way in which Johannesburg has constantly drawn and redrawn its political boundaries during the last decade. This has allowed it to incorporate suburbs with an ease that Los Angeles would certainly envy. It has also seen local boundaries within the city reshaped, initially along radial lines so as to ensure an income and racial balance within each unit. These boundaries have now been superseded with an entirely different structure. Soweto itself was included into the city boundaries only four years ago. Johannesburg is a city of around three million, with the infrastructure and the skyscrapers of the first world, and with a degree of hollowing out, and suburban flight which can be found to match that in any American city. But the process has been given an accelerated twist by an epidemic of violent crime and by the rapid changes

brought about by the creation of a black managerial class since the ANC came to power. The starkest symbolic move in this process of hollowing out was the departure of the stock exchange for the white northern suburbs. The last four star hotel in the city centre closed four years ago. Johannesburg is a city in which the malls and gated communities which we associate with Southern California have been given their most baroque – perhaps one should say Tuscan expression, in deference to the style of choice of the developers. They have turned the northern edge city of Sandton into an alternative to the city centre that has been abandoned by all but the most determined of banks and mining conglomerates. Sandton is growing as fast and is as affluent as any American sunbelt city. In some ways, Johannesburg's gated settlements, literal recreations of medieval walled cities, could be seen not as a reflection of American suburbs, but as predictions for what they may one day be like.

The prospect of the skyscrapers of the central business district being taken over by Nigerian traders, and hemmed in by street markets selling traditional remedies and bush meat, and of formerly affluent white suburbs being turned into no go areas, can at times look like a real life version of JG Ballard's dystopias. Indeed there is something about the mood of the skyline of downtown Johannesburg that suggests Shanghai's art deco bund, marooned in Mao's China. The reality is that Johannesburg is facing many of the same issues as its American and European peers. But in addition it has to deal with the prospect of a tragic drop in population – caused by the appalling mortality of AIDS and TB. The death rate among young adults is a phenomenon that is already facing the city with the need to find ways to protect the property rights of child heads of households. Johannesburg has the economic potential to address the challenges that it faces, and to share its wealth with a wider section of the community. Its attempts at urban regeneration have started to have an effect on the city. By directing government jobs to the city centre, blight is being reversed. Retailing is beginning to come back into the centre. And the new constitutional court, weighted with resonance, has been built on the site of an apartheid era jail in the stigmatised Hillbrow area. One continual refrain which sounds eerily familiar in Europe is official: Johannesburg's determination to present itself as Africa's 'world class' metropolis. The very words are a betrayal of a certain level of anxiety. Despite its dominant position as Africa's industrial and financial power house, with 45 million or so citizens, South Africa looks modest in comparison to Africa's real giant – Nigeria with 100 million people. And the city

Johannesburg may one day be measuring itself against is likely to be Lagos. To that end, South Africa is putting great store on symbolic markers, in particular the 2010 World Cup, when Johannesburg will be one of its centrepieces. The city is working on a series of large-scale investments in the build up, of which Gautrain, linking the city's down town to the airport and Pretoria, is the most ambitious. On a world scale Johannesburg's population is still relatively modest. But it has been through a whirlwind of change in its shape and structure whose outcome is still far from clear. It is a city in which the threats facing all cities are present in their starkest, bleakest form, but also a place full of a vitality demonstrating all that cities have to offer.

---

## URBAN AGE

*a worldwide series of conferences  
investigating the future of cities*

*organised by the Cities Programme  
at the London School of Economics and  
Political Science and the Alfred Herrhausen Society,  
the International Forum of Deutsche Bank*

*more information on [www.urban-age.net](http://www.urban-age.net)*