



JOHANNESBURG: A WORLD CLASS AFRICAN CITY

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On the southern edge of the Johannesburg city centre is the Standard Bank super-block. This juggernaut of a building, an early icon of Johannesburg's rising power as a finance centre, contains one of the city's premier art galleries. This recently hosted an exhibition tracing Africa's influence on Picasso's art – how a chance encounter with African masks led Picasso to the revelation that painting should not merely capture surface appearances. Just as ceremonial masks are used to symbolize evil, sexual power, human character in moments of crisis, transition or celebration, the canvas ought rather to be a 'form of magic that intersperses itself between us and a hostile universe, a means of seizing power by imposing a form on our terrors as well as on our desires'. A short distance from the gallery is the Faraday Taxi Rank. Fêted as a prime example of new South African architecture, the rank stood empty for years after its construction. The taxi industry it was meant to serve refused to use it, balking at the implication of its location for their informally determined routes, and at its layout, which did not facilitate embarkation in line with sedimented practices. While it has been hard to catch taxis at the Faraday rank, it has been possible to buy 'muti'. Faraday is reputed to be the largest local source of the herbs, roots, animal parts and other arcana of traditional medicine. The everyday equivalent of the mask, 'muti' is the means by which a majority of Johannesburg residents still seek to cure inexplicable illnesses or summon the intercession of ancestral spirits to find meaning in strange turns of events. In multiple ways, this small quarter highlights challenges and opportunities in the project of governing Johannesburg. In official strategy documents Johannesburg has defined itself as a future 'world class African city'. In 2000 the new City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality stated that it has 'A vision of becoming an African world class city defined by increased prosperity and quality of life through sustained economic growth for all of its citizens'. In its 2002 long-term economic development strategy, *Joburg 2030*, the City said that in future it would like to be 'a world class city with service deliverables and efficiencies that meet world best practice'. And in its newly published 2006 Growth and Development Strategy, the City reemphasised the desire

to become a 'world class African city for all'. It is easy to dismiss these words as banal, easy to miss the fact that, like masks and muti, city visions are powerful symbolic devices to organise understanding of development challenges, and give form to solutions and aspirations. Read closely, the notion of a 'world class African city for all' helps us come to terms with the nature of this city, and what it might become. Johannesburg, it must be understood, is not a genteel place. Since the late 1880s, successive waves of fortune seekers from across the globe have scrambled to stake their claim on the richest deposits of gold ore ever found. Over time, who could access this enormous wealth and how, became the *raison d'être* of one of the world's most perverse systems of ordering physical and social space. Johannesburg was the quintessential apartheid city. For half a century, a national policy of 'influx control' relocated millions of South Africans to various rural Bantustans on the basis of their skin colour. Cast in Afrikaner-nationalist policy-speak as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', their chance to live full urban lives was systematically negated. Those who did make it into the city were defined as 'temporary sojourners', dispatched to underdeveloped ghettos on the edges of the built-up area, where their costs of social reproduction could be deflected and suppressed. Under this system 'white local authorities' subsidised the cost of utility and property services to business and a wealthy minority, creating a virtuous cycle of development. Meanwhile, poor black residents likely to cost the tax base more than they contributed to it were kept out of their boundaries and off their budgets in separate 'black local authorities'. With this history, it is not surprising that Johannesburg is today portrayed as a place of migrancy, stark division and informality. The vision of a 'world class African city' reflects this legacy, but paints the challenge in a positive light. Some have said that this city, a 'gold-rush tent town' from the start, seems defined by processes of frenetic extraction, of people who would rather be somewhere else – urbane Europe or the idyllic Zululand countryside perhaps. From the bond trader on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange to the informal trader sharing a one room Hillbrow flat with two other families, all seem hell-bent on getting out as soon as possible with as much cash as possible, at the least cost to soul and pocket. But whereas

some recoil at the resulting instability and transience, others feel, and revel in, this city's restless energy. Growing at 4% per annum, and bumping up against equally fast growing neighbours in a now virtually continuous urban region of some 10 million people, this is not a city on the edge of crisis and collapse. It is a 'city of potential' constitutively always on the verge of 'hitting paydirt'. The vision is to harness this energy by absorbing opportunity seekers, and structuring commitment to the city. This is not easy when so much energy is still dissipated by spatial, social and economic divisions. In their green suburbs some residents enjoy the highest level of services and public amenity. Others dwell in dusty, overcrowded, under-serviced townships, where they struggle to reach jobs, education, shops and leisure on the other side of incongruous 'buffer zones'. While the apartheid city remains, the structures of exclusion *are* gradually dissolving. Previous white suburbs, even walled ones, are becoming melting pots of all colours and creeds. And in places like Soweto the streets are now tarred, new shopping malls are springing up, thousands of trees are being planted and residents are investing in homes they now legally own. This process must accelerate. Our vision of a world class city is not one of more hulking bank buildings in the financial district, however many art galleries they contain. It is one of more well-designed taxi ranks serving ordinary people on their way home to decent neighbourhoods. It is hard not to notice this city's deep and pervasive sense of incivility. This temperament is both feared and celebrated. Feared because wealth and poverty rub up against each other in a harsh friction that invariably ignites crime and violence. Celebrated because many see an unbroken line between the anti-apartheid boycotts and protests that made townships 'ungovernable' in the 1980s and today's refusal by a 'find its own way' taxi industry to use an official rank. For many too, Johannesburg's apparent disorderliness is one of the characteristics of the 'African city', whose ordinary citizens are invariably obliged to make social 'infrastructures' out of daily improvisations and inscrutable social practices, confounding those in charge of the official order. A vision of a 'world class African city' tries to address both facets. It is certainly a vision of a safer city. But this does not imply painting the informal as irrational. In this vision, city governance enables, and works with, the day to day ingenuity and generative interactions through which residents continuously remake their futures.

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