

## 5 “The darker side of modernity” in an Illuminated Precinct in downtown Johannesburg

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The promotion of the creative economy and creative city model has been seen in Europe and in the United States as a means of economic recovery in response to the global financial crisis. Governments across the world are increasingly recognising its importance as a generator of jobs, wealth and international trade and UK has been a leader in the development of this agenda (Bakhshi, 2014). In the South, the promotion of this model not only represents the opportunity for a possible economic revival but also an instrument of modernisation and internationalisation of cities and actors involved in this process of “urban renewal.” In Johannesburg, this model has been adopted since the beginning of 2000 as a strategy of inner city recovery from the dilapidated state in which the Centre Business District (CBD) had fallen after the end of apartheid. The promotion of a “center recovery strategy” is a leitmotif of the City of Johannesburg: to name a few—the Inner City Charter in 2007 updated in 2008; the Development Strategy (GDS) 2040 launched in 2011; the Inner City Transformation Roadmap in 2013. However, Johannesburg’s biggest transformation is at the hands of private initiatives, such as Play Braamfontein and South Point in Braamfontein, and the more recent Property in Jeppetown and Doornfontein.

The article focuses on the Maboneng Precinct and the community that Property promotes in downtown Johannesburg.<sup>1</sup> Through Lefebvre’s idea of lived space as “the personal experience of space in everyday life” (1991), it observes the daily experience of this community in relation to housing, sociability, security and economy/business. It interrogates whether a temporary renter community qualifies a “community of place making” or rather as a community of market making.

The article ends by highlighting similarities between the elite circles of professionals, locally gathered and internationally connected, and

the previous colonial elite. Using as a starting point the work of the *Proyecto Modernidad/Colonialidad*, the paper intends to deal with the subject of gentrification as a result of the maintenance of a colonial logic, interconnected with a modern ideal. In this sense, modernity does not intend to overcome coloniality, but rather barbarism or supposed uncivilised behaviours responsible for delaying the advancement of global market opportunities and lifestyles.

### **The place of light**

Launched in 2008, Propertuity began to develop the Maboneng Precinct in the Jeppestown area that despite its central location suffers from low indexes of human development, precarious infrastructure, illegally occupied buildings, and high levels of crime. Following the revanchist slogan “take back the city” (Smith, 1996), Maboneng, which in Sotho means “place of light”, is the new name given to part of the industrial area of Jeppestown and Doornfontein and it has become an enclave disconnected from the reality of the surrounding territory. As described by Mbali Phala (2016):

The Maboneng precinct markets itself as an urban neighbourhood where residents, businesses and tourists are part of a growing tribe connecting the heart of the city of Johannesburg. An integrated social space with a string of artisan restaurants, high-end retail stores and overpriced lofts where the hipsters come out to play on weekends, the precinct is also home to all things creative, including an art gallery and an independent cinema. Half a kilometre away, self-employed Ntombekhaya Njiyela lives in a 3°—6-metre room with her husband and five children in what used to be a factory building on Janie street. Most of the room is filled with a wardrobe and a three quarter bed balanced on four repurposed buckets. The three-storey building on Janie Street has been separated by flimsy cardboards into 170 flats, offering very little privacy to residents, with less than seven toilets and one tap.

This newly developed enclave is built around two main axes: commercial/entertainment and residential.

Arts on Main, where the project started in 2009, is a collection of art galleries, artist studios, offices and trendy shops. Every Sunday, the Market on Main, a gourmet food and local brand clothing market takes place. Recently, it has been joined by a street market selling African crafts, vintage clothing, old style postcards and sunglasses

“made in China”. The street market contributes to creating the image of a space “for all” which is more democratic and egalitarian in social and economic terms. Main Street Life, the first building in the area converted for residential use, offers 194 dwellings, ranging from studios to two-room apartments to penthouses, and an event space on the rooftop, an independent cinema, The Bioscope and the Pop-Art Theatre. The Museum of African Design MOAD was officially opened at the end of October 2013 as the first museum on the African continent dedicated to design.<sup>2</sup> The complete portfolio also includes Access City a commercial building; Spark, a private primary school; and residential buildings with evocative names: Revolution House, Artisan Loft, The Craft Loft, The Main Change, The Craftman’s Ship, and more recently Hallmark House, and Aerial Empire and Dual City, which are still in construction. All the residential solutions follow the same model as “independent, spacious apartments with exclusive and hand-craft finishes, complete with balconies and terraces with spectacular views”. This contributes to create a homogeneous urban environment whose monotony is evident on Propertuity’s website: the sensation I have, as an international observer, is that I am looking at an IKEA store catalogue. The loft design of the apartment is clearly targeted at single or young tenants: in many apartments, for example, the bathtub is part of the bedroom’s furnishing, and sometimes a big glass shower serves as division between the living room and the bedroom. On the one hand, according to the Propertuity<sup>3</sup> Census Study, the majority of the owners are single and white, between 25 and 34 who spent a maximum of half a million Rand (US\$35.2065) buying their properties. This information is questionable when the adverts I came across during the participatory observation period of my research<sup>4</sup> announced studio apartments (between 31 and 48 square meters) for up to 700,000 Rand (US\$49.2423). On the other hand, the tenants who rent apartments are mainly single, black, aged between 25 and 34, who spend up to 2,000 Rand (US\$140.69) per month on rent. However, this is again a questionable information since the smallest (32 square meters) and cheapest studio apartment available for renting in the Maboneng Airbnb page costs 9,000 Rand (US\$633.66) per month (the monthly levy costs are 600 Rand [US\$42.24]). Even recognising that Airbnb prices are higher than the long-term contract, it seems unlikely that the normal rental value can be 70 percent less than the Airbnb price. Overall, the data available from Propertuity tell us that, in terms of residential use while 47 percent of the owners are young and white (27 percent are black and 14 percent Indian); 66 percent of the renters are young and black (22 percent white and 8 percent Indian).<sup>5</sup>

This observation confirms that ownership continues mainly in the hands of white private investors who understand their properties as a real estate investment, rather than a new housing choice offering them the “urban experience” that is always associated with Maboneng. The shift from use value to exchange value (Lefebvre, 1991; Brenner, Pek and Theodore, 2005), and the predomination of a profit vision is evident in the limited “use” of the precinct for consumption or profit extraction. Vision that is reflected in the understanding of the meaning of the “Maboneng’s community” by the marketing strategy of Propertyu. What is on sale is not just a working or residential space, but a lifestyle that aims to reinforce a specific type of community: creative, visionary, exigent, passionate, exciting, inspiring, modern, lovely, unique, successful, safe, a few of the most used adjectives in the company’s website. From the perspective of the landlords this use of their properties, mainly based on Airbnb short-medium renting, seems more compatible with the Marxist understanding of Rentier Capitalism, as one of the “economic practices of monopolization of access to any (physical, financial, intellectual, etc.) kind of property, and gaining significant amount of profit without contributing to society.”<sup>6</sup> Many articles link gentrification to Airbnb, because of its impact on housing patterns and its effect of emptying the historic centres of many European cities.<sup>7</sup>

Not only is the idea of community in Maboneng quite contrived, there is a great deal of hypocrisy in their claim that they are creating a new urban life away from the massively high security walls which characterise the middle-class suburbs of Johannesburg. Their website reads:

Maboneng is an area for everyone and I think a lot of people are surprised when they come here to see how diverse it is. It really is the future model for South Africa. It’s changed how people choose to live, their intentions in their movement and space. (Aaron Kohn, director of MOAD)<sup>8</sup>

However, the presence of private security guards on every street corner, as well as numerous cameras, fingerprint access control for residents and the required submission of ID books for visitors entering into the buildings, reproduces the familiar patterns of surveillance and securitisation we see in middle/upper class suburban Johannesburg. These new “urban tenants” just swap the walls of their houses for hyper-surveilled apartments, moving from suburban to centrally located differently gated communities (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1 New designed gated communities in downtown Johannesburg

Even the celebrated urban experience of “walking” is limited to the well-guarded Fox street where the majority of the bars and restaurants are located. Following the opening of Hallmark House, a new upper-class residential option and the moving of the head offices of the company to the area of Doornfontein (in front Hallmark House) a shuttle service has begun to connect Fox street, to this new developing area. The shuttle operates from 8am to 6:40pm; this is the time when it is safest to walk around the precinct, showing the lack of meaningful intention in promoting walkability. Also, despite the fact that Maboneng claims to be “for all”, the shuttle is exclusively used by people who work for Propertuity or live, or are hosted, in Hallmark House. One of the drivers told me, “It is for all but *mamas* do not use it because they do not know it, and they think they must pay for it.”

In terms of small/medium investments, while Propertuity is expanding its business to the area of Doornfontein, that the company calls Maboneng north, businesses/investors do not seem to follow this movement. Most of the shops built in this new part of Maboneng are empty; the rent of a little *spaza shop* of 4 x 4 meters is 1,200 Rand (US\$84.52) per month plus all the service bills. This is considered high rental costs for the discounted businesses that characterise these shops; for example, a complete meal served in one of the restaurant costs 25 Rand (US\$1.87). The rent cost also needs to be evaluated

in relation to the monthly expected profit, which is affected by the fact that during the weekend the area is deserted. Maverick Corner, announced as an attractive investment spot for small businesses, has become a big pub. Investors who, interviewed in 2016, showed at that time great enthusiasm, they moved out of the area because of poor management and the security and infrastructural issues (pickpocketing, bathroom conditions, bad management of the communal areas, etc.). Some of the retail outlets in Arts on Main, one of the most prestigious commercial spots of the precinct, have left. One of the interviewees declared:

Maboneng is a good place for showing your work but it is not a place for business. Most of the visitors come to the area to have lunch or a drink and not for shopping. It can happen that they bump into some products, but it is not planned. The flux of people keens to spend is also limited to the weekend, making the place economically unsustainable for business. During the week the precinct is quiet, on Monday everything is closed. Most of the people around are young creatives, new entrepreneurs who use Maboneng in a similar way, are basically there for making contact and showing their face. Maboneng is a showcase. (anonymous person interviewed)

Following the previous observations on housing, sociability, security and the business impacts of the Maboneng Precinct, we can conclude that the real novelty of the area is the mix use. This is somewhat unusual in South Africa where urban planning maintains the division in accordance with commercial or residential use, and apartheid planning used to assure racial division.

The introduction of shared working space suits a world economic movement. In opposition to Fordist mass production, and the transformation of the economies (from manufactory to service), flexible specialisation and global mobility required by the new production result in the exit of the factory and the transference to the cluster. The cluster model is useful to the new production, based on collaboration and sharing. It reinforces a sense of “community” underlying this collaborative economy proposal and, in the case of Maboneng, it defines Propertytuity’s marketing strategy. However, the application of this model in cities in the South raises two issues: the first in regard to the composition of the elite circles of professionals locally gathered and internationally connected; the second in regard to the role of the state

in supporting and promoting these enclaves of wealth. What characterises these communities is the fact that their members see themselves as transformers of societies in which they live; they act in an urban environment; the majority of them come from wealthy families; and they are highly educated. Recognising that the main means of production in creative industries is higher education, in countries like South Africa, restricted access to education ensures that only a few can benefit from these economies (Harney and Sealy, 2015; Burocco, 2017). Belonging to these spaces appears to be conditional on the sharing of a specific aesthetic model and certain economic parameters that contribute to the creation of a gentrified environment characterised by exclusivity, the existence of a patronage networking, and hierarchical relations of power.

### **The darker side of modernity**

The gentrification process in the Maboneng Precinct might be seen as a new form of urban colonialism driven not only by external (Western or multinational) investors but also by native ones, and by local and national governments, who share the same interest as international elites (Cardoso and Faletto, 2008). It intends to highlight the maintenance of what the Comaroffs define as complex relations:

Colonial societies were complex formations, they entered into complex, unpredictable relations with Europe. Metropolis and colony, after all, were co-constitutive elements in a rising world capitalist order. (2012: 6)

I am taking as my starting point the work of the *Proyecto Modernidad/Colonialidad*, a multidisciplinary group of Latin American scholars who, in the first decade of the 21st century, worked on the *Decolonial* approach that originates from the conquest of the Americas (1492). The group focused its attention on the “coloniality of power” or “the darker side of modernity”, as a type of colonial inheritance that persists and multiplies even when colonialism is supposedly overcome by modernity (Figure 5.2). Its members make a specific distinction between the term colonialism, which refers to the militarily forced submission of a territory by an imperial foreign force, and coloniality/*colonialidad* as the logic that this submission evoked. At the centre of the *Proyecto M/C* is the idea that the cultural logic of



*Figure 5.2* Maboneng's visual coloniality

colonialism (coloniality) is not opposed to or a precedent of modernity but is implicit in it:

As European capitalism is fundamental to understanding the main modern institutions of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (capitalism, science, art, the state), all processes of modernization in the south are mediated by coloniality as a colonial heritage. (Mignolo, 2011:45)

The coloniality of power, a concept originally elaborated by Quijano in 1989, affects the sphere of power, knowledge and being. The manner in which the creative economy works in the South seems to encompass

these three spheres because knowledge produces power that requires a transformation of being.

The crises of Fordism and the advent of globalisation determine the transformation of the system of production, which originates a new form of capitalism, cognitive capitalism (Vercellone 2005; Fumagalli 2007). It is fed by a new class of “global professionals who form a fraction of the transnational capitalist class, an elite of service providers and consumers who have reproduced on a global scale” (Rose, 2003). As Mignolo (2002) links the “geopolitical of knowledge” to the geopolitics of economy itself, places like Maboneng link the local geopolitical of creative economy production to the geopolitical of a global new capitalism denouncing the continuity of colonial forms of domination. The concentration of information flows, financial transactions, population migration (of a specific type of highly educated professional) help to connect people, institutions and states that become a locus of concentration of power relations and contacts.

Gentrification becomes the perpetuation of a colonial obsession for land (or real estate) acquisition on a local scale, which is empowered on a global scale through the collaboration between local wealthy investors, local and national governments, and international and multinational financial groups of investors and institutions. It is in these terms that the link between creative economy and new colonialism; between geopolitical of knowledge and economy, becomes clear. As art and culture become an “undeveloped resource ... that can generate income, through tourism, handicrafts, and other cultural endeavours” (Yudice, 2013, 31), the increase of international cultural and entrepreneurial private and public partnerships is central to the maintenance of these economies, reproducing the system from a local to a global scale. It appears evident that private developers and governments share the same goal: to place their economy in the global market so that the public interest becomes irrelevant to all. Therefore, the role of the State in the South is an even more important causal factor of gentrification than in the north, either through public policies that favour or that do not recognise and limit the spreading of the phenomena of gentrification. This last case of government inertia is the one we can observe in Johannesburg: government, instead of acting as a deterrent to inequality, becomes an engine of processes that increase socio-spatial inequality, which deepens the social polarisation between rich professionals and the poor majority.

Finally, a distorted vision of progress and development seems to lead to a normative assimilation of aesthetic concepts and subjectivities. The moralistic discourse of “salvation of the city” adopted by the new developers is reminiscent of the similarly civilising and

developmental mission of the rhetoric of modernity. It provides a frame for the return to hygienisation tendencies of the urban landscape, which characterised the first half of the 20th century. In order to satisfy an imaginary of modernity, we enter a contemporary wave of domestication and submission to homogenising patterns of consumption and lifestyle

According to Dussel:

Modernity works as a myth that covers coloniality, “modern civilization describes itself as more developed and superior, and obliges to develop the most primitive, barbaric, rude, as a moral requirement. ... For the modern, the barbarian has a ‘guilt’ by opposing the civilizing process, that allows ‘Modernity’ to present itself not only as innocent but as ‘emancipating’ this guilt.” (2000: 49)

Similarly, the development provided by the local elite circles of professionals ignores with the reality of the people who originally lived and used the surrounding area. This *colonidad* even claims to correct their incivility and underdevelopment. We are faced with the reproduction of colonial thinking based on the distinction between “ourselves and the others”, where the others are described by their excesses or deficits, and the explication of why the new creative professionals in the South have stronger ties with peers from the professional sector in São Paulo, Paris, London and so on, than with the rest of their own societies (Sassen cited in Kuper: 2013; see also Rofe: 2003).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the Maboneng project in the city of Johannesburg as a contribution to the insertion of the city in the global creative economy city circuit, cannot be considered as unsuccessful. The benefit of its achievement, however, remains in the hands of a few, which is problematic in a country already marked by deep socio-economic inequality. This “progressive, distinctive urban space” exists via urban perimeters whose walls, until now only symbolic, define clearly the terms of accessibility based on social, economic and aesthetic parameters (Burocco, 2015). They reproduce a similar situation as colonialism used to do: the creation of borders and the establishment of differences based on excesses or lacks. As Lopez-Morales (2015) draws attention to, while most of the gentrification studies deal with the “aesthetical transformation” of the territory, it is necessary and urgent to

deepen our understanding of the public investments and changes that at the macro scale increase elite access into certain neighbourhoods around the world's cities.

## Notes

1. As part of the methodology, the author spent one month in 2016 and another month in 2017 living in an apartment studio in Main Street Life. <http://property.co.za/>, <http://www.mabonengprecinct.com/>
2. At the time of writing the Museum is closed.
3. The company's marketing strategy is remarkably proliferates and produce many publications such as: *The Maboneng Census: Analytics behind community building*; *MABONENG: Developing a Neighbourhood Economy*; *Maboneng 2020 Vision: The Unfinished City*. Looking at the content of these publications, however, it becomes apparent that it is, always the same, presented through a different design. Census available at <http://property.co.za/downloads/Maboneng-Developing-a-Neighbourhood-Economy.pdf>.
4. As part of methodology, the author spent one month in 2016 and another month in 2017 living in an apartment studio in Main Street Life.
5. Ownership within the Property developments is largely held within South African hands (95%), with only 5% being owned by foreigners. Similarly, the demographic profile of tenants shows as the 77% is represented by South African rentals and 22% only by foreigners.
6. Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rentier\\_capitalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rentier_capitalism). See also Semi, 2016; Doust, 2010; Pollin, 2007; Hudson, 1998.
7. To mention a few: Verdù, 2015; Coppo, 2016; Fernández, 2016; Lopes Gay, 2016; Haden, 2017.
8. *MABONENG: Developing a neighbourhood economy, faces of Maboneng, meet the people that live and work in Maboneng*, p. 70, <http://property.co.za/downloads/Maboneng-Developing-a-Neighbourhood-Economy.pdf>

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