Gentrifying Jo'burg

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Urban renewal in South Africa intersects with the legacy of apartheid

Gentrification is a deeply contested term. Its interpretations are incongruent and its applications liberal. In a recent paper for the journal *City*, geographer Alex Schafran marked the 50th anniversary of the concept. Developed by Ruth Glass in response to shifting class dynamics in a part of London in 1964, Schafran exalts gentrification as, 'arguably the most vibrant and contested source of debate in writing about cities over the past three decades'.

David Harvey writes famously about capitalism's 'spatial fix', where crises of capital surpluses are remedied through investment in fixed urban assets. Though developers often favour building on green-field sites and urban expansion, investors often also turn to existing urban areas as prime sites of reinvestment. Herein lies capitalism's 'creative destruction' where urban assets are destroyed to create space for new – often more consumption-oriented – investment. The city loses its true authenticity and its immeasurable 'use value' is exchanged for a refined urban consumable, accessible only to those who can afford to buy it.

Johannesburg is a complex terrain in which to read processes of gentrification. As a city that has reportedly rebuilt itself three times since being founded in 1886, 'creative destruction' is at the heart of its DNA. Fragmented and divided Johannesburg is the result of the need for urban infrastructure to support the industrial extraction of gold. Its Wild West roots remain entangled in the contradictory, contemporary city of speculative gambles and entrepreneurial fixes. Wealth is a golden ticket to a 'world class' and highly privatised existence, while poverty condemns the majority to a creaking public sphere.

> 'The inner city has become mythologised as a distant and dangerous realm'

The flat grassland of the city's environs combined with the cluster effects of colonial and apartheid planning, and with economic decentralisation, have led to a polynucleated, sprawling urban form. The result is a city of urban outcasts where residents have little experience of the city's vertical core. The inner city has become mythologised as a distant and dangerous realm, unsafe to pass through and unfit for human occupation – sentiments that comfortably ignore the thousands of people who lead very normal lives there.

The past decade has seen increased investment in the city by private developers and public agencies. The fickle suburban middle classes, tired of shopping malls and curious for an urban experience, have begun flooding the artisanal markets, coffee shops and galleries that have emerged recently in the small urban nodes of Braamfontein and Maboneng.

Graffiti in Maboneng: as in Berlin, NYC, and everywhere else, it's a sign of gentrification

'Maboneng' is the brand applied to a assemblage of old industrial buildings to the east of the inner city that have been systematically bought up by a single developer and converted into mixed-use commercial and residential spaces. These are actively marketed to those wanting to 'Join the City Lifestyle'. The precinct's developer, Jonathan Liebmann started Maboneng in 2008, which includes over 34 neighbouring buildings, and boasts an annual property price growth of 15 per cent.

A private security company that enforces a permeable boundary subtly guards the precinct. The contrasts between life within this boundary and outside it are stark. At the corner of Main and Maritzburg Streets, for example, boutiques open up to tree-lined streets catering to the urban cool on one side of Main Street, while small security-meshed shops in crumbling buildings provide daily provisions to the area's original residents who occupy small industrial buildings and old residential buildings dating back to Johannesburg's earliest days.

While some buildings are receiving an overdue makeover in Maboneng, those just outside the precinct are in rapid decline. For example, the Jooste and Bryant Building, built in 1906, has just seen its Victorian front balcony dramatically collapse due to the theft of its cast-iron columns. Numerous industrial and commercial buildings still intersect the precinct offering potential for future expansion.

The Museum of African Design, a misnomer for what is essentially an industrial art space, has been remodelled into a cavernous interior for creative work. Facades have also provided a canvas for the graffiti and mural art that has come to define the precinct (and which has gone from being a symptom of social decline to a globally recognised marker of gentrification).

While Maboneng has faced much criticism from journalists and academics for fuelling inner-city gentrification, which Liebmann and company deny, the implications of the development are more complex. There is no doubt that investment in old industrial buildings that includes repurposing them into consumables for the property market will increase inner-city property prices. This will have an adverse effect on the residents of Jeppe, the greater area around Maboneng. These residents scrape together small incomes, and despite Maboneng providing what they term as low-cost rental options, they will almost certainly be priced out of the area.

Johannesburg grapples with its apartheid legacy every day. While the city continues to attempt to link communities through infrastructure, embedded psychosocial divides impede progress. As the wealthy isolate themselves in compounds, the inner city must not be gentrified into a socially and economically homogeneous zone, the likes of which we've seen from Williamsburg to Prenzlauer Berg. Instead, development should cater to a wider range of residents. First, however, South Africans need to begin to realise that living together across race and economic lines might not be so scary after all.

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