

7.0 Johannesburg: African World City

One of the key examples where urban renewal through the use of arts and culture is being attempted is Johannesburg. It is argued that the city⁴ has followed a policy line that closely mirrors world city discourse and the national policy of cultural urban renewal. The City appears to have accepted the recommendations of the National Department of Arts and Culture in that the arts are seen as a way to drive urban economic renewal, and to alter the negative image perceptions of the city. However, it will be demonstrated that many of the inherent tensions between this language and policy and the contexts of post-colonial Africa cities are being played out in the process.

According to this strategy, Johannesburg can lay claim to a new identity as a uniquely “African world city”, and thereby gain a certain competitive advantage within the continent and within the world system. City planners looking to promote both tourism and investment have taken the descriptor “African” and given it a distinct slant, one that is palatable to the powerbrokers in the rest of the world. As with the “commoditization” process described in the previous chapter on Cultural Tourism, the “African” in the city of Johannesburg’s vision of becoming an “African world class city” appears to be “a quaint, exotic icon of a distant land.”(Bremner, 2005, p. 92) In fact, it is virtually impossible to find any specifics within any official City policy or publication that actually address what it means to be a distinctly “African world class city.” Lindsay Bremner observes though, when describing the launch of the City’s Joburg 2030 vision document, “the drum rolls and African masks were designed to connote “African”, and are what she calls, “ethno-nostalgic accessories [that] were local interpretations of [Mayor] Masondo’s global thinking.” (Bremner, 2005: p. 77). These typically iconic items such as masks and drums denote Africa as it is perceived in its most romanticised tourist form.

But, as she also goes on to point out, “two months later, ‘Supermayor’ Masondo dropped the “African” from his mantra entirely. The newly honed Joburg 2030 vision has Johannesburg

⁴ By city, it is meant the various offices and organizations of the city of Johannesburg, including the Greater Johannesburg Metro Council, The Johannesburg Development Agency, Blue IQ and others. It is acknowledged that there is not always consensus amongst these departments, however the dominant policy direction will be examined.

aspiring directly to “world class city” status. “(Bremner, 2005: p. 77) This shift in language calls into question the relative importance of the term “African” within the city’s plans.

Johannesburg’s city planners have also been very eager to position the city in such a way so as to attract both business investment and tourism which are seen as crucial for the development of the city. This development, it needs to be pointed out, is based specifically on neo-liberal models of increased growth, accumulation of capital, and production and expansion of markets. While there has been much resistance to these plans from various activist groups outside of city structures, it still appears that the city planners are boldly following this plan on a number of levels.

It is therefore important to highlight the ways Johannesburg’s local government is attempting to portray the city to the rest of the world. One of the ways that Johannesburg markets itself globally is to claim that it can compete within the accepted criteria for what makes a city work and succeed. These qualities are based on the model of developed Western cities and on the world city criteria. Johannesburg is attempting to distance itself from the typical perceptions of Africa, by describing itself as the Western styled economic centre for the African continent. As Rassool & Witz explain,

South Africa is located spatially and conceptually as ‘African’ and hence ‘tribal’ by nature with all the associated potential for anarchy and upheaval. Unable to escape these parameters, South Africa has to propound its ‘Africanness’ as the embodiment of the continent’s possibilities for modernity, the ‘engine room’ of Africa’s economic development. (Rassool & Witz, 1993: p. 337)

Johannesburg is marketed as the “the New York of Africa, dominating the continent in terms of the scale of sophistication of its stock market, financial services and related activities.”(Bernstein & McCarthy, 2002: p. 9) These images appear even more clearly on the Joburg.org.za web-site where one can find the following description of Johannesburg as the “Gateway to Africa”:

Johannesburg is where the money is. It is the most powerful commercial centre on the African continent. It is an African city that works, the phones dial, the electricity grid is reliable, you can drink the water, there are multilane freeways, skyscrapers, conference centres, golf courses. If you should get lost, ordinary people on the street speak English. Cellphones are everywhere. You can send e-mail from your hotel room, you can bank any foreign currency, you can watch CNN, and should you fall ill, the hospitals have world-class equipment and doctors who can be trusted with a scalpel.

(City of Joburg. www.joburg.org.za/travel/travel_overview.stm)

Clearly this description is an attempt to alleviate the typical negative Western perceptions of what makes a city African. However, when it is considered lucrative, Johannesburg is also prepared to market itself as uniquely African. This description as uniquely African, is however, qualified in terms of the target market and the economic motivation behind it. When it gives Johannesburg a comparative advantage, as in the lucrative tourism market, to promote the African identity and culture of the City, then the City can be described as African.

Following on from this, Johannesburg is currently attempting to position itself in terms of tourism as an “authentic” African destination. In keeping with the trends in Cultural Tourism described in Chapter Six, the City is “re-inventing itself as a must see for visitors seeking to experience the ‘real’ South Africa.” (Harrison, 2005) In fact, the same article, states that “some industry experts reckon Johannesburg is also poised to cash in on a growing trend for cultural tourism in which visitors...seek an ‘authentic’ experience of a country’s people and history, rather than merely ticking off a list of beauty spots.” (Harrison, 2005) The article goes on to state, “guide books have started touting Johannesburg as the best place to experience the ‘New South Africa’. ‘If you want to see the real South Africa – and try to understand it – Joburg has to be on your itinerary’ says the *Lonely Planet* guide to South Africa.” (Harrison, 2005)

However, the City is also aware that it is primarily a business, not a leisure destination. The City of Joburg has produced an intensive Tourism Strategy report that seeks to increase the competitive advantage of the city, particularly for business and retail tourists from abroad.

(City of Joburg. www.joburg.org.za/unicity/tourism_ch4_1.stm) These initiatives seek to position the city as a key destination for MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibition) and Retail Tourism, particularly from foreign markets.

(City of Joburg. www.joburg.org.za/unicity/tourism_ch4_1.stm)

In order to achieve the various goals of the City within the parameters of the world city system, there have been a number of plans, policies, and vision statements issued by the local government. These documents make it very clear that the context within which this urban renewal is taking place, is very clearly the world city system and has been so for a number of years.

During the late nineties, the city of Johannesburg was in such a state of decline, that the City itself could no longer pay its own bills. During this time, the first post-Apartheid plan to rejuvenate the city, iGoli 2002 was announced. This project was a three year plan designed around “the structural transformation of Metro functions with a view to ensuring enhanced and more cost-effective service delivery.” (City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 2001: p. 53) This plan as followed by iGoli 2010, a more long term plan for the transformation of the City with an “overarching vision to transform Johannesburg into a globally competitive ‘African world-class city’.” (City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 2001: p.147). Critical to this understanding was the acceptance of the world city system and the belief that “the competitive and comparative advantage of Johannesburg relative to other cities must be promoted and developed.” (City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 2001: p. 147).

The Johannesburg Inner City Business Plan from March 2004 goes into more explicit detail, specifically stating:

The strategic importance of the Inner City to the development of Johannesburg as a world-class African city in the context of increasing global connectivity cannot be understated. (City of Joburg, 2004: p. 200)

The document goes on to describe the “vision of the Inner City ”as “The Golden Heartbeat of Africa” described as:

- A dynamic city that works
- Liveable, safe, well managed, and welcoming
- People-centered, accessible and celebrating cultural diversity
- A vibrant 24 hour city
- A city for residents, workers, tourist, entrepreneurs, and learners
- Focused on the 21st century
- Respecting its heritage and capitalizing on its position in South Africa, Africa, and the world
- A truly global city
- The trading hub of Africa, thriving through participation, partnerships, and the spirit of Ubuntu (City of Joburg, 2004: p. 200)

Obviously within these brief bullet points lie many assumptions and unspoken agendas. What is unstated and needs to be pointed out are the inherent contradictions that exist between some of the stated goals. For example, what it would take to create a people-centered city might in fact be in direct contradiction to what it would take to create a “global city” that is a “trading hub.” Language like this, in its broad and ambitious phrasing, masks many of the economic and social realities that are in constant tension within a modern African city.

It is telling that in terms of actually defining what is meant by “African world-class city”, one finds little if anything in the policy documents. What does emerge though is that the city planners are clearly trying to position Johannesburg as a world city. This goal is even more explicitly laid out in the latest plan for the City, is Joburg 2030, which is another so-called

visionary plan that will gradually reshape the city’s economy and geography and ultimately transform it into a world-class business centre with services and standards of living on a par with the capitals of the developed world. (Hossack, Feb 19th, 2002, www.joburg.org.za/feb_2002/30year_plan2.stm)

Furthermore, according to another article published by the City to sell the plan,

In 2030, the quality of life of a citizen in Johannesburg will have more in common with the quality of life of a citizen in San Francisco, London or Tokyo than that of a developing country's capital city. (Hossack, Feb 21st: 2002, www.joburg.org.za/feb_2002/30year_plan2.stm)

Clearly through these articles the City is attempting to sell the vision of Johannesburg as a world city to affluent and capitalist markets both here and abroad. Joburg 2030 was written by Sandy Lowitt who at the time was the Chief Strategic Officer at Blue IQ⁵, and clearly the document is operating within the realm of world city discourse. The introduction to the Joburg 2030 plan acknowledges the climate of globalization that makes "cities important global entities in their own right." (Lowitt: 2002: p. 6) The document is based on research into normative international trends and globally accepted principles, but does acknowledge that the strategy is also "home grown and geared to the needs of Johannesburg's own citizenry." (Lowitt, 2002: p. 6) The author of the document obviously believes that the world city system is an accepted *fait accompli* in that she states that "the world is agreed on a common 'vision' for a world-class city: all citizens should have an increased standard of living and improved quality of life." (Lowitt, 2002: p. 7) The document goes on to state, "economic growth is the only sustainable road to increased quality of life." (Lowitt, 2002: p. 7)

It is within this framework that The City of Joburg's Department of Arts, Culture and Heritage has been specifically tasked with using the arts to achieve some of the above goals. The Department aims

to promote accessible, dynamic facilities and programmes in the creation of a cultural environment that enhances the image of the city and assists in its regeneration. (City of Joburg. www.joburg.org.za/arts/index.stm)

⁵ Blue IQ is, according to the Blue IQ web-site "a multi-billion Rand initiative of the Gauteng Provincial Government to develop economic infrastructure for specific major projects in smart industries, high value-added manufacturing and tourism." (www.blueiq.co.za/what.asp)

The Department sponsors a number of commercial activities to this end, most notably the annual Arts Alive festival. The projects and the culture industries that the city supports are clearly be those that live up to the two goals of urban regeneration and the enhancement of the city's image.

The city of Johannesburg's leaders have determined that the world city system can and will benefit the residents of the City, once Johannesburg stakes out its competitive advantage within the system. The role of arts and culture to create economic growth and to reposition the City in symbolic terms can also be understood within the world city system. It has been shown that the city is attempting to position itself as a Western styled business centre that is pivotal to opening the gates to the vast development riches in the rest of the African continent. Alongside this perception of a gleaming business centre, the City is also trying to appeal to the Western tourist market and its desire for so-called 'authentic' experiences. Throughout this process, the city planners find themselves having to construct a new African identity for the City that is predominantly determined by the hegemonic discourse and worldview of the West. The way in which this process affects how African space is perceived and developed can be demonstrated by the Newtown project.