8.0 The Newtown Project

As has been demonstrated in previous chapters, Johannesburg’s policy makers and city planners have adopted much of the rhetoric and language of world city discourse. It is also clear that the City has become a testing ground for National Arts and Culture policy, specifically in terms of the support of the so-called cultural industries. The rationale behind these policies is clearly two-fold; firstly as an attempt to rejuvenate the inner city’s economy through the use of these industries; and secondly on a more symbolic level to create a new African identity. As demonstrated, within world city discourse and in much of the national Department of Arts and Culture’s policy, there is an emphasis on the power of the arts to re-establish and upgrade the country (or the city’s) international image and reputation.

One of the most symbolic projects undertaken by the city of Johannesburg to this end has been the latest Newtown development project. This initiative, the most recent in a long history of such projects, is clearly in line with world city discourse in regards to the creation of a cultural quarter and the support of the culture industries therein. Newtown has also become a flashpoint for opposing policy views; specifically when it comes to issues of urban renewal, exclusion, and spatial development.

As previous chapters have highlighted, world city discourse also has certain specific ramifications for post-colonial African cities. Some of these realities have also impacted on the perceived success or failure of the Newtown project and this chapter will also highlight those issues.

The Newton Development project is modeled on the various cultural quarter projects that have taken place in Western cities such as Manchester (see p. 21). At the heart of the project is the understanding that through supporting certain, strategic culture industries within a specific geographic area, the seeds for economic and urban renewal can be planted. This understanding has been specifically stated within national Arts and Culture policy, and in the various white papers commissioned by the Department (see Chapter Five). This economic argument has been put forward at a national and local level as a powerful justification for the large sums of money spent on the precinct. However, as mentioned above, also central to
this type of project is the intention to improve perceptions of the city for residents, tourists, and potential investors.

The Newtown project has been a joint venture between the City of Johannesburg, through the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), who appointed Blue IQ, the public private partnership, to work on specific infrastructure projects within the Newtown area. The JDA was established in 2001 “to stimulate and support area-based economic development initiatives …in support of Joburg 2030” (Greater Johannesburg Metro Council, 2005) Within the JDA’s performance indicators it is made explicit once again how the two goals; that of economic development and that of improving perceptions, underpin the City’s policy and practice. The JDA has six performance indicators the first four reflect the goals linked to economic development while the last two relate to the importance in the change in perceptions by people who use the inner city.

Indicator 1: Is Johannesburg becoming a 24 hour city?
Indicator 2: Is the inner city property market improving?
Indicator 3: Are rentals stabilising in the inner city?
Indicator 4: To what extent has business turnover increased in the inner city?
Indicator 5: Is confidence in the inner city improving?
Indicator 6: How aware are people of the JDA and are they satisfied with its work?
(Greater Johannesburg Metro Council, 2005)

The Newtown project itself is described as follows:

This urban renewal project is regenerating Newton, adjacent to the Johannesburg CBD, in order to increase commercial activity in the area, especially in cultural Industries, and thus boost economic growth, employment and exports. South Africa’s reintegration into the world economy presents opportunities for Gauteng’s cultural artists to develop and commercially exploit their music, dance, crafts, clothing, and fine arts activities, all of which have a potentially high demand in the international market.

The intention of the Newton project is to create a locational cluster for these
activities and to provide both infrastructure and facilities as well as marketing support and positioning. Newtown’s location and the vastly improved access created by Blue IQ, make it possible to develop Newtown as a true mixed-use cultural precinct in the manner of Soho or Greenwich Village. (Blue IQ, www.blueiq.co.za/project_newtown.asp)

The Blue IQ mandate for the project was clearly both economic and symbolic. According to Sandy Lowitt, who was the Chief Strategic Officer of Blue IQ from 1999 to 2003, the project was definitely more symbolic in nature than economic. She claims that Blue IQ was never convinced of the economic viability of the Newtown project as a major catalyst for growth in the city. Instead, she believes that the project was mainly undertaken for its symbolic value in terms of upgrading the city’s image (Lowitt, interview, 2005). Ms. Lowitt states that she, and others at Blue IQ, were more in favour of other projects that would have created more economic activity and jobs within the city, but that the Mayor and others within the city council were looking for a symbolic jewel in the crown in terms of their plans to transform Johannesburg into an “African world-class city.” (Lowitt, interview, 2005)

According to Ms. Lowitt, Blue IQ approached the project from a very straightforward infrastructural point of view, and in those terms they succeeded in their mandate. (Lowitt: interview, 2005) The various Blue IQ projects cost the city about R295 million, with the understanding that once the infrastructure projects were complete private investment would flow into the area. The goals included the increasing of the rental and property values in the area, and the ability to attract a cluster of culture industries. (Lowitt: interview, 2005) The follow up in terms of private investment and support of the culture industries was not under Blue IQ’s mandate, but rather a function to be undertaken by the city through the JDA and other bodies.

The infrastructure projects that have been completed to date by Blue IQ include the following:

- The Nelson Mandela Bridge: Access to Newtown was determined to be a major issue and therefore an access bridge and improved on and off ramps from the M1 were created.
• Mary Fitzgerald Square: The square is seen as a central gathering place for the Newtown area and can hold over 50,000 people for concerts and events. The square cost R15 million to upgrade with carved head sculptures and a lighting feature designed by French lighting engineer Patrick Rimoux (www.joburg.org.za, 2003)
• Close Circuit Cameras: The entire area is covered by CCTV as a safety and security measure.
• Lighting: Improved nighttime lighting in the area was also undertaken to help promote night time activity in the area.

Blue IQ has officially completed its role within the Newtown project, and as stated above, based on their specific mandate to improve infrastructure, their part of the project can be viewed as a success. However, in terms of whether or not the improved infrastructure has had the intended knock on effects is a more complicated matter. These desired outcomes are also described within the key indicators for the JDA as listed earlier and are difficult to determine at this stage. In terms of the long term economic viability of businesses within Newtown, this is dependent on the next phase of the Newtown project; a long term development function of the City to support and develop the cultural industries.

In relation to this on going support of the cultural industries within Newtown, it is first necessary to look at how the City actually defines the culture industries, and to investigate what the Newtown project partners consider to be viable culture industries. Within the framework of the iGoli 2010, and the Joburg 2030 documents, it is clear that the culture industries specifically focused around lifestyle and concepts of “quality of life”, often with entertainment at their core function are those that would be considered for support. The definition of who the target market for these arts and entertainment projects is not clearly stated, although it is clear that foreign tourists and business people are a core component of this market. Much of the Joburg 2030 rhetoric is aimed at comparing Johannesburg to other major global cities and ensuring that the city gains as much comparative advantage as possible within the system.
According to the City, the Newtown project aims to support “the creative industries; specifically film, television, music, as well as for recording and production, crafts and design, multi-media and information technology.”
(www.joburg.org.za/2003/newtownbrochure/newtownbrochure.stm) It is clear that most of these industries are highly commercial in nature and the more formal arts sectors form a small portion of the industries included within the definition. The culture industries highlighted by the City would clearly be seen as drivers for economic growth within the inner city and as ways to achieve the desired outcomes of the Newtown infrastructural development.

Within this context, in order to achieve so-called success, the culture industries that would be considered for official support would need to be ones that contribute to the two goals of culturally driven urban renewal; that of stimulating economic growth, and leading to improved perceptions in regards to the quality of life of the city. These industries are therefore those that are able to be commercially exploited within the international market and those that will help to redefine Johannesburg as a globally acceptable African city.

While statistics in regards to the growth of these industries within Newtown are difficult to ascertain, there have been some notable successes. The new development within the Mills is now home to a number of multi-media and advertising agencies. Anecdotal evidence as per interviews conducted lead one to conclude that a number of other new businesses from book stores to art galleries are doing well in the area. (See Appendix A) The area is home to a number of music venues, including The Horror Café, The Fuel Café, and The Bassline. Theatre is thriving at the Market Theatre and galleries such as AfroNova are selling African art at high prices to locals and tourists alike. According to businesses owners such as Henri Vergon, owner of the AfroNova Gallery, the area is now perceived as clean, safe and orderly (interview Henri Vergon, 2005). According to Mr. Vergon and others such as Malcolm Purkey, Director of the Market Theatre (interview Malcolm Purkey, 2005), Newtown is attracting more visitors as the full restaurants and theatres can attest. The current state of the arts and entertainment businesses in Newtown is positive according to these stakeholders who claim that people from the outer suburbs of Johannesburg and from all over the world are coming to the area.
The success of venues such as those mentioned above is taking place on the basis of a platform that, according to the city planners such as Sandy Lowitt and Steven Sack (Lowitt interview, 2005, and Sack lecture, 2005), the Blue IQ infrastructural interventions have put in place. According to Steven Sack, this infrastructure has created “a platform, a stage, and blank walls” (Sack, lecture, 2005) within which the culture industries are now expected to insert content that will stimulate economic growth by creating jobs and encouraging investment and increasing property prices. This content is also expected to create a new symbolic identity for the city, one that supports the goal to become a world city with the strategic advantage of a new African identity.

However, it is argued here that the assertion, that the Newtown space is somehow a neutral platform or receptacle for content, is not quite accurate. In fact, it can be argued that the underlying goals and assumptions of the project have led to specific infrastructural interventions that will in fact heavily influence the artistic and cultural content that takes place within Newtown.

The success criteria for the Newtown project, both economically and symbolically are based on Western understandings of order, urban life, and progress, as has been shown in previous chapters. The concept of a nine-to-five business district with a distinct social and entertainment quarter proceeds from a Western urban understanding. Other, more Africanist understandings of city life are not necessarily based on the same assumptions. It can be argued that the spatiality of the Newtown project, the so-called “stage” is therefore not a neutral space after all but rather is underpinned by a historical legacy of Western architectural, urban planning, economic, and social values. The people attracted to live and work within that space will come from that Western mind-set. It can be argued that the city, through the JDA and other departments, have already, through their rhetoric, policy and infrastructural interventions influenced, and to some extent, predetermined the content and identity of Newtown. Since the outcomes of the content are already predetermined, just how much flexibility is there for unique voices within the Newtown project?

There have been a number of areas of conflict and tension around the Newtown project, and specifically there has been huge tension over the social cost at which this economic development has taken place. This chapter is not an investigation into the social issues such
as evictions and exclusion that have taken place in the area, however it is important to point out that there have been major conflicts around these issues and many voices have tried to make themselves heard in terms of the way in which the process was undertaken. Small artist groups as well as the homeless have been displaced from the area as investment has moved in. While this chapter will not delve into these areas of contestation, it is important to recognise and to acknowledge that the project has not gone ahead without other voices making themselves heard. This report however, is more interested in the way in which the Newtown project has been framed by the city planners, and the ensuing implications for arts and culture.

It becomes easier to understand processes taking place in Newtown by highlighting some of the issues around identity and culture that are specific to the Johannesburg and Newtown environment, some of which are legacies of the colonial and Apartheid eras. As it has been previously discussed in Chapter Four, African cities have retained the physical and planning characteristics of their colonial past, and these physical legacies of colonialism have imprinted on the psyches of urban residents. In other words, the physicality of the post-colonial city has made it difficult for African voices to thrive and find their own space. White and black areas were clearly delineated and the power structure between the coloniser and the colonised was played out in this spatial arrangement as discussed previously. Furthermore, the black areas were generally slum areas where distinctions between work and living space were not clearly demarcated. The “native” spaces of the colonial city were “unordered” in the sense that living, working, socialising etc. all took place in close proximity. For this reason these areas were perceived as disorderly and unclean. In contrast, the white areas were distinctly residential and tended to be demarcated from the industrial areas of the towns.

This type of urban planning and understanding continued into Modernist urban planning and thinking. As quoted by Sally Gaule, Herwitz explains that

> Even before the rule of Apartheid, [public life] was regulated by a severe Eurocentrism in design and mission……it was designed to divide and rule; to incorporate the privileged into ‘European’ culture and exclude all others. (Herwitz 1999, 411 quoted in Gaule, 2005: p. 4)
Distinct models of urban life were proposed with the separation between work, residential, and recreational areas. More often than not, post-colonial African cities followed this pattern of living for its wealthier (often white) residents, while for the poor urban masses (mostly black) such models of order and planning were irrelevant. For cities such as Johannesburg, the Apartheid era simply perpetuated the urban spatial order and segregation of the colonial past, but the Apartheid area imposed even further spatial segregation and ordering on the urban space through the Group Areas Act. For white South Africans this meant that their residential areas were clean, ordered and clearly separated from industrial areas.

Historically, even prior to Apartheid, certain areas of Johannesburg such as Newtown were considered “Africanised” spaces in contrast to the white suburbs. They were perceived as dangerous, dirty and unhealthy and were cleared during the slum clearances of the early twentieth century. However, when one looks beyond the negative stereotypes of these areas, one finds that interestingly enough, these African spaces could be described with many of the indicators now used to describe the goals of current urban planning. These spaces were mixed use; meaning the space consisted of retail activity, recreation and entertainment, work, as well as mixed income (and race) living space. Newtown\textsuperscript{6} was a twenty-four hour space with a vibrant street and public life. Newtown, towards the end of the nineteenth century was a mixed use and mixed race area, with “a cluster of three locations on the western side of the town occupied by Whites, Coloureds, Indians, and Africans” (Gaule, 2005: p. 5 These locations were residential but also were industrial, for example, the Brickfields which was “the site where Johannesburg’s first bricks were kilned.” (Gaule, 2005: p. 6) It is ironic then, that the current language around Newtown today proposes exactly that “mixed use” with various types of development and activities taking place within one district.

The current plans for Newtown and the inner city of Johannesburg have in some ways taken on the characteristics of Apartheid-era “African” spaces, but modified and sanitised them through Western constructs. The multi-use activities whereby people live, work, shop and socialise in one space are characteristic of “disordered” African cities, however through world city discourse, mixed use has become a buzz word for the best use of urban space. The

\textsuperscript{6} While this part of Johannesburg was not always known as “Newtown”, reference here is made to the physical space that is the currently accepted area of the Newtown precinct.
urban slums of the colonial and Apartheid city were perceived as places where music and after hours socialising and illicit activities took place. When one looks at the current goals for Newtown, the aim is to create this sense of a twenty-four-hour space, however, once again this activity is now to be strictly ordered and within the commercial constraints of the capitalist economy. The culture industries are now designed to attract middle class audiences to specific events within a clean, safe, and ordered environment.

Newtown is also being positioned as a key tourist attraction within the revitalised Johannesburg. As pointed out in previous chapters, the culture that is being presented to these tourists is an attempt to create a new South African identity. This commodified culture that is presented in Newtown represents then, a sanitised version of previous “African” areas, a version that is now clean, safe, ordered, and palatable to the West. It is argued that this process has real implications for arts, culture, and identity when this version of what is “African” is packaged in such a way so as attract visitors and investment. While the attempts to provide clean and safe spaces within Newtown are not necessarily ignoble goals, it is necessary to acknowledge that within this process there are issues around identity and exclusion. Is the way in which Newtown being packaged and the way that the infrastructural interventions have taken place allowing for an autonomous African subject or a new African narrative, or is the space simply perpetuating the dominant narrative of Africa on the people, art, culture, and space of the Newtown area?

The language of Blue IQ and the JDA, in as far as they mirror the language of the National Department of Arts and Culture, make reference to the creation of a new African identity. It is hoped that that this new African identity will replace the stereotypical view of African spaces (such as Newtown used to be) as disordered, unclean, and unsafe. This new African identity is sanitised and commercially viable and is based on Western social and economic constructs. The Newtown project has global ambitions and aims to create a Western sense of ordered space. Therefore, despite protestations to the contrary, or claims that Newtown is simply a neutral stage for content, it can be argued that the content that will be created within the space can hardly fail to be a by-product of the dominant Western paradigm.

One could argue that it would have been possible to have imagined a completely different Newtown, one that allowed for a welcoming environment for an autonomous African voice.
However, the historical spatiality and colonial and Apartheid era architecture of the space, now combined with the development agenda based on Western social constructs, has created a specific development path for Newtown.