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Edges of influence: overcoming urban isolation in Hillbrow

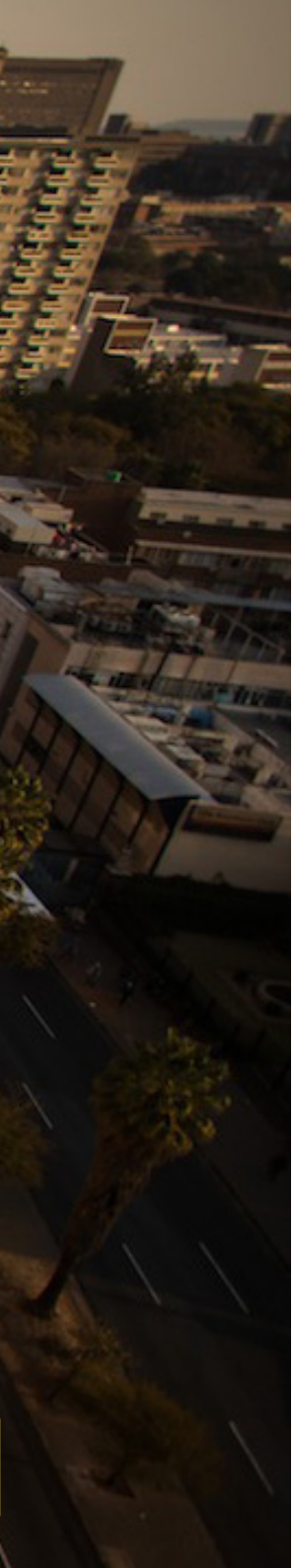
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Hillbrow was first developed as a residential neighbourhood consisting of detached houses. It then saw a surge in development during the 1950's with the removal of height restrictions and the advancement of new building technology – this enabled the development of high rise buildings. The neighbourhood was predominantly occupied by European white middle class tenants, with a few black people who worked as servants and security guards living on the rooftops of the apartments.

In the mid 1970's the neighbourhood started seeing racial transformation due to the combination of economic decline, political uncertainty and the withdrawal of the initial white occupants to the northern regions of Johannesburg. The city experienced rapid social change, many of its buildings were left abandoned and the city council at the time was averse to dealing with the changing social circumstance. This resulted in large scale overcrowding, lack of service delivery and lack of law enforcement - prompting urban decline in the neighbourhood. In contrast, the social change that occurred simultaneously resulted in a vibrant, energetic melting pot of diverse cultures.

Today Hillbrow is a well-known neighbourhood grappling with a number of social ills such as crime, drug abuse and prostitution; and is considered by most as a home to dubious members of society. This has led to the neighbourhood being perceived as "bad," which has caused many to shun the neighbourhood. This research aims to firstly unpack the historical context of the development of Hillbrow in order to understand its current complexities and their origin. Secondly, the research aims to explore the causes of urban isolation in Hillbrow by investigating the barriers of connectivity along its edges. The key concepts that will inform this research will be linkages and connectivity, densification, recoding land uses, redistributing traffic flows and place making.

My hypothesis is that spatial integration can be achieved by creating better linkages. My research assumes that improving linkages between the edges of Hillbrow and its surrounding areas would encourage increased mobility of people moving in and out of the neighbourhood, thereby fostering a vibrant, active edge with a greater sense of safety. It will also look at creating good quality public spaces by taking advantage of underutilised spaces such as the alleyways, as well as reconfiguring internal uses. The research will apply a qualitative research method, with the primary research strategy being a case study. Data will be collected through observation of public behaviour and photography.

ABSTRACT