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## HOUSE OF AFRICA

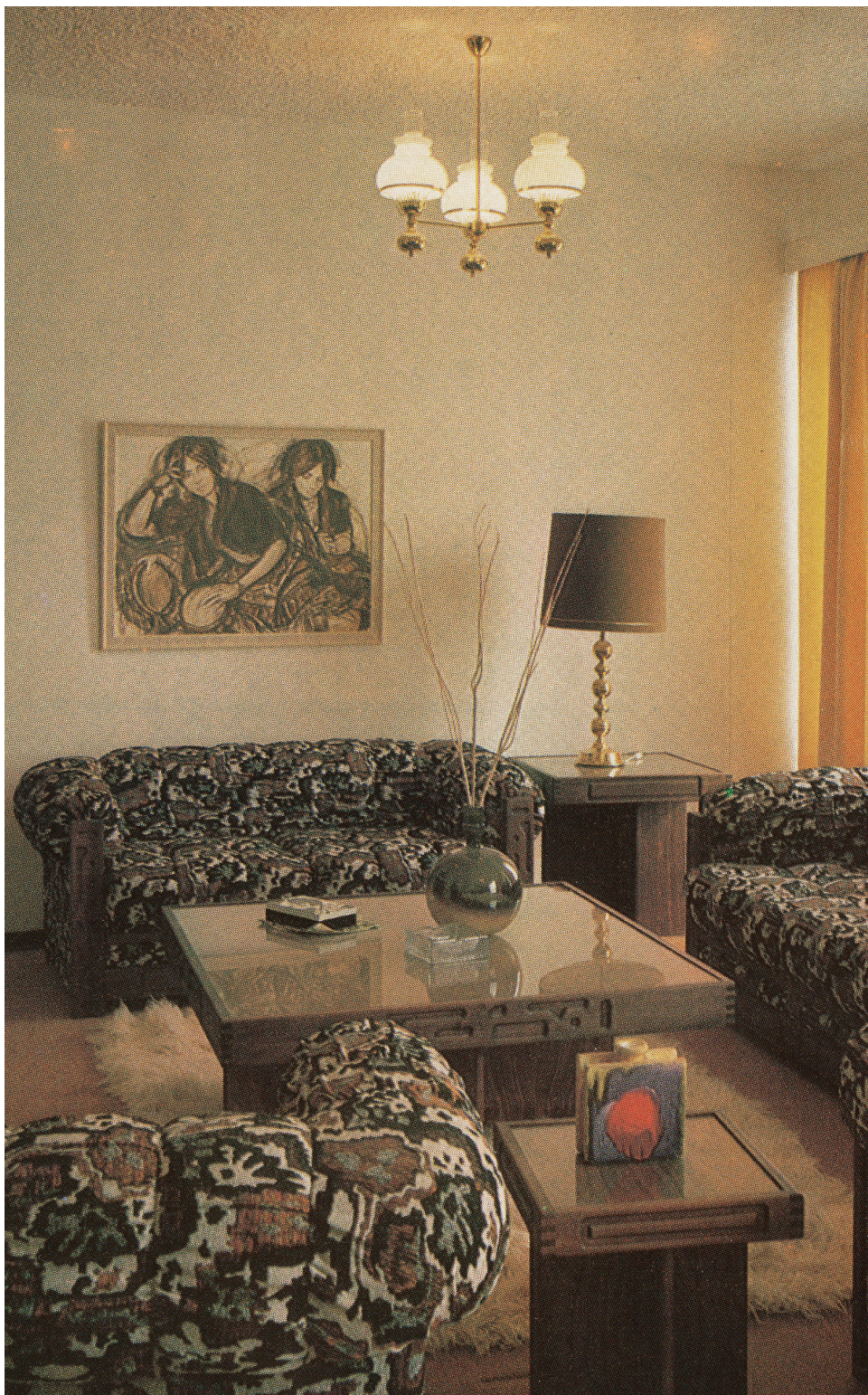
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THE WALTHER COLLECTION



# AFRICAN QUEEN





## STRAIGHT TO THE TOP

*From an Interview with Bruna Levitan*

We were living in Waverley before we moved to Ponte. It would have been around 1978. One of the boys was in the army and one of them was at varsity, and my daughter was still at school. My mother was living with us – my father had passed away. So we needed a five-bedroom place and it wasn't easy. Then we came across this penthouse. It was a little bit out of our area, but it was *lovely*. If you got up there, you were away from everything, away from the noise, away from the people. It was noisy, even then, in the foyer. I remember they had pool tables and there was a little café shop where you could get milk and bread and that sort of thing. But we drove our car into the garage and went straight to the top. Our lift went straight up. Once we were there, it was great.

We had a four-bedroom apartment. Either the lounge or the dining area was raised, you went up a couple of steps. It was quite cosy. We also had the staff quarters above our flat and there were steps going up there. There were two staffrooms. My maid Beverley must have had one of them and one of the boys had the other. He had his own bathroom.

There were only four penthouses at the top. If you came out of the lift, you turned left and we were the second one on that side. So we were 5002. Next to us was this English guy, a very sophisticated sort of gentleman. He drove one of those old English cabs and he worked for a cigarette company – it could have been Rembrandt. I can't remember his name. We weren't really friendly with him. He was a young guy and he had his own single gentlemen friends. Then somebody else moved in, I think, and started a brothel. It was very discreet: they never made any noise and there were no signs of indecency, just various women going in and out. We moved away soon after that.

The flat was fully furnished, very nicely furnished. We had brown shaggy carpets and we had a brown leather sofa. I'll never



forget, the bed was raised on a platform and you could make the mattress go up and down. The kitchen was nice and big. We had a laundry room on the third floor and we hung our washing there. And it had quite a big – I wouldn't call it a patio – it was a deck, I suppose. I remember we had brought all our cycads in pots from our house in Waverley and we had a cycad garden at the top. You couldn't sit up there because the wind always blew straight into you. But we had all our cycads and our exotic plants up there.

We didn't like the Berea area particularly. But I was a great rugby fan and so I used to go down to Ellis Park with my brother. We saw this building going up – and up – and up. Then we must have seen an advert in the paper for a four-bedroom apartment, which is exactly what we were looking for. We used to go into Hillbrow sometimes. We got our roast chickens at Fontana and my husband had his offices there. Ron started Page Boy, which was the first paging service, with two-way radios. They were in Loveday Street in the beginning but then they got bigger and they rented the whole of the first floor in Highpoint.

The best thing about living in Ponte was the facilities and the view. Our flat was north-facing – north-east, something like that – but we had a complete round view of Joburg. As you came in there was a passage with glass and you could even see a bit of the south, I think.

The unpleasant part of it was the ground floor area, which had a lot of riff-raff. My daughter Kim and I went back there about ten years later, I can't remember why, and then it was full of blacks. A lot of Nigerians and drug-dealing and that sort of thing. But when we stayed there, the rough crowd, the *roughish* crowd, was white. The boys didn't mind, they would go and play pinball and do whatever they wanted to down there, but my daughter hated it. She was quite nervous about going down there. There were a lot of rowdy teen-agers and working guys. I think they worked in Hillbrow or in town.

Our friends Sam and Rene Ephron moved into the penthouse on the other side. We had a cottage down at the River – two of my kids were Springbok waterskiers – and the Ephrons had a cottage behind us. Sam and Rene were always trading houses. They would buy a place, renovate, move in and sell again. We bumped into them

at the River and they were looking for a place. If I remember correctly, they had a townhouse opposite the Huddle Park Golf Course which they'd sold and they needed somewhere to live while they were fixing the next house. They had three grown-up children and so the penthouse was ideal.

They were tough cookies. Rene was a bit rough and raw and ready, but she was really a very generous, kind person. Sam was in the motor car business: I think he had a motor spares place in Jules Street. He was always cooking – he was a *great* cook! We were sort of friendly with them, they often used to invite us for supper or they'd pop in and have a drink. Rene was Joe Slovo's sister. It's quite strange to think that Harrow Road, which runs right past Ponte, is now named after him. You couldn't have imagined it then! I liked Rene. She was a real character. She used to spend quite a lot of time with Ronnie First, who was Ruth First's brother.

We stayed for about 18 months. My daughter was at Waverley Girls' High, so it wasn't all that convenient for her, and as I said she didn't like it at Ponte. We paid something like R1 500 a month – it was a lot of money in those days – but the other flats were more affordable and Ponte was close to Hillbrow and to town. There wasn't fighting or anything like that, but there was definitely a rougher crowd coming in. It was time to go.



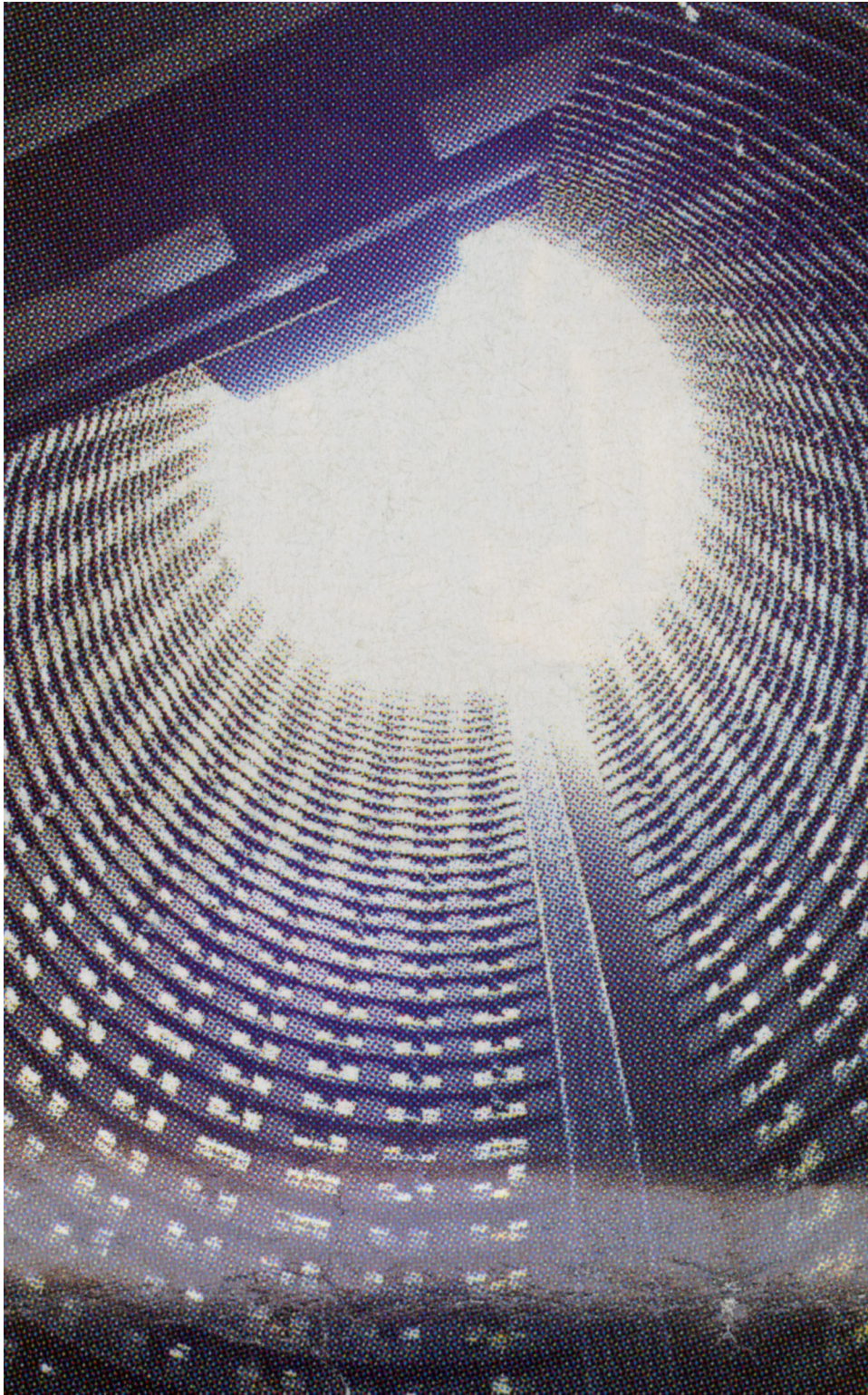


Sjebiengangers lê plat op die grond terwyl die polisie vir dwelms en wapens soek.

Foto: JOHANN HATTINGH

# 'Klop aan elke deur!'





## THE TALLEST PRISON IN THE WORLD

*Note by Ivan Vladislavić*

In February 1998, the South African Minister of Correctional Services, Dr Siphosizwe Mzimela, announced that his Department was about to acquire a new prison: Ponte City.

South African prisons were overflowing. There were 110 000 inmates in prisons built to hold 95 000, and nearly 40 000 of these inmates were still awaiting trial. The number of escapees was also high, partly because so many prisoners were transported daily from outlying prisons to courts in the city. The Department urgently needed to expand its facilities.

The idea of recycling Ponte as a prison came from American architect Paul Silver, an expert on prison construction. In 1996, he visited Johannesburg at the invitation of the authorities and set about exploring how 2 000 awaiting-trial prisoners could be housed close to the courts. After looking at various construction sites and existing buildings, Silver chanced upon Ponte. 'It's a lousy apartment building,' he said later, 'but a perfect prison.'

The conversion plan Silver presented to Correctional Services proposed turning Ponte into 11 vertically stacked prison blocks. Decks were to be constructed over the shaft every five floors, thus creating areas for recreation and observation. Not much would be needed to convert the old apartments into cells – 'each with its own barred picture window' as one journalist put it. All you needed to do was put locks on the doors. The entire complex was conceived as a privately run 'justice centre,' with the ground floor holding a police station, six magistrate's courts and a clinic, even a café. There were also plans for a 'landscaped piazza and a copper domed rotunda.' The costs were put at \$50 million – 40% less than building a new prison.

The owners of the building, Vincemus Investments, threw their weight behind the plan. Their representative Don Stuart presented it as an inner-city rejuvenation project, comparing it to such initiatives

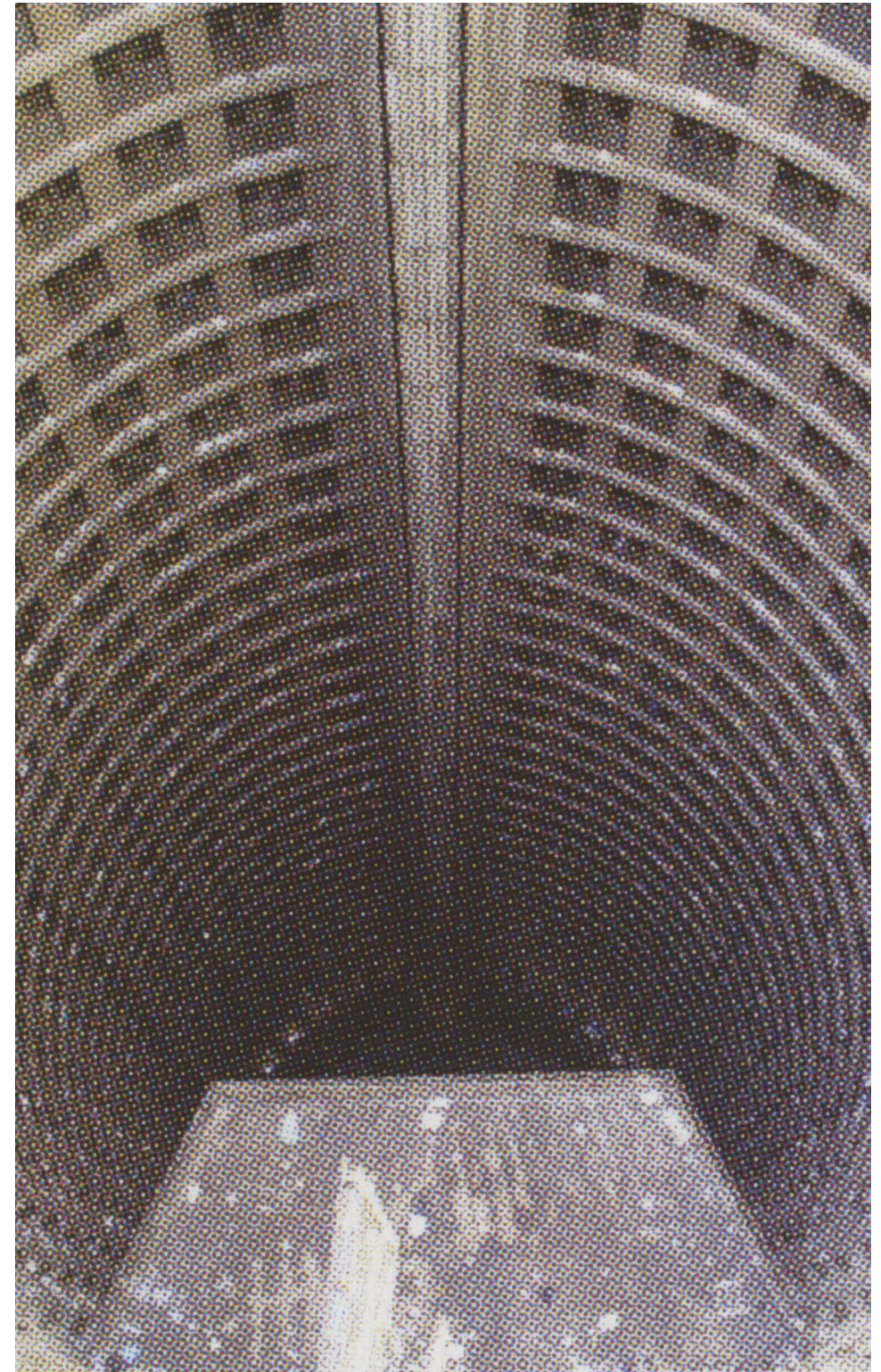


in American cities. The owners' report to the Metro authorities said it would help to create a 'safe, secure, clean and attractive public environment.'

The public was unconvinced and the plan was widely criticised. While some objectors were opposed to locating a prison in a residential area, others deplored the very idea of turning a city landmark into a prison. Architect Henning Rasmuss said, 'At a symbolic level it sucks.'

In April, Stuart said that the government and the city council had approved the project 'in principle' and the building had already been rezoned for its new use. Silver argued that prisons make the areas around them safer. 'It is actually a nice way of saying we are doing something about crime... You don't hide penicillin just because it reveals that there is disease.'

In June, the government considered various proposals for new prison space, including the Ponte project and a scheme to purchase ships from the Ukraine and refit them as floating prisons. Both proposals sank without trace.











## NOBODY'S PERFECT

*Ntsiki and Patricia*

NTSIKI: I arrived here at Ponte from KwaZulu-Natal in 2001. We loved this place – it used to be so vibey. It was very busy and people here were very lively. But then it got so crowded. And then they said they were renovating, making a new Ponte, and they asked everybody to move. People thought they were making a jail, but how can they make a jail in this place? That's when I moved out. I didn't want to – nobody wanted to. When I visit, I go down there just to look at my flat. It's still empty, but it's still nice. Now they're asking people to move back. But what's the point?

PATRICIA: I thought by this time it would have been so nice. But then I wouldn't be staying here. Obviously the price would have gone up.

NTSIKI: Some people thought it was going to become a hotel for 2010.

PATRICIA: I think there's only one hotel room and that's on 32 or 31. They were redoing from 34 down. It's beautiful. When they were advertising the new Ponte, I saw it on TV – I was staying here, but I didn't know. So I went there to see for myself. It was nice. Very expensive, starting from R400 000, luxury places. The flat screen that's downstairs – it was there. It was very, very nice. One thing I knew: nobody staying around here would have bought a flat for R400 000. And another thing: a white person will never leave Midrand and come and stay in Hillbrow. Definitely not. The only people who could do that are Nigerians, because they have money – quick money, easy money. I knew nobody was going to buy. Except if there were investors, then they would buy and put people in. But how much are you going to be getting? I wouldn't want to pay more than R1 300 or R1 500 for a bedroom. When are you going to cover the investment? Ponte used to be nice like that twenty years ago; there were shops downstairs and everything. They say it was like a hotel and most of the people who



were staying here were white. You wouldn't find somebody throwing something from the window. I don't know what happened. I only know this place now.

NTSIKI: The Nigerians took over. That's what happened.

PATRICIA: I'm not happy when you talk about the Nigerians. It's not all of them who are bad. You find some of them suffering so much. Our colour is the same, our blood is the same. I had a Nigerian boyfriend. I loved him! You know that in each and every country there are tribes. So he was the other tribe, the nice tribe. He was not the other tribe that everybody's scared of. The other tribe, when they come here, they want to get a girlfriend and get married. The only thing they want from her is the paper. When you get mugged, you have to report your ID very quickly. Nigerians use it for marriage, Zimbabweans use it for jobs. They put in their own picture in your ID. At least I got one of the nicest Nigerians. He was not the kind of person who wanted me to marry him and everything. He got a work permit. He did everything by law.

Some foreigners are good, but not all of them. Just like South Africans. Some South African men beat you. I'm not taking one side, I'm taking both sides. Even Nigerians will tell you that there are good South African girls and bad South African girls. The bad ones eat your money and leave you. A Nigerian man will ask you, 'Which tribe are you?' And if you say, 'I'm a Xhosa,' they say, 'Oh! Thank you very much!' and they move on. I think Xhosas taught them a very good lesson. A Xhosa girl will eat your money and get you arrested if she knows where you put your stuff. It's a very good thing.

NTSIKI: A Xhosa girl will actually call home and tell them, 'Mommy, I got a job!' That's what she does when she finds a man who has money. 'I got a job, Mommy! I'm buying you a new stove.'

PATRICIA: You find people, especially Nigerians, will have eight people in their flat. A flat that has two bedrooms, you find about sixteen people staying inside there. It's very bad. Especially a Zimbabwean, when he gets a bedroom, he starts calling Zimbabwe: 'Hey, I got a place. Come!' That one will call somebody else: 'I got a place. Come!' Then they will be packed in there.

The Congolese are not clean, that's the only thing about them. So far I haven't heard of anything bad about the Congolese.

NTSIKI: The quietest people. They are just untidy, they can't clean their places.

PATRICIA: If I have neighbours here who are Congolese, when they start cooking, you can imagine the smell that's going to come from there. They eat too much fish and it smells bad. So the Congolese, there's nothing bad about them. I've never dated any of them.

NTSIKI: You remember Daniel from Kensington?

PATRICIA: Was he a Congolese?

NTSIKI: No, he was from East Africa.

PATRICIA: Uganda?

NTSIKI: No, he was from Ghana.

PATRICIA: I can't say a bad word about Ghana.

NTSIKI: No, they don't have anything bad about them.

PATRICIA: And I can't say South Africa is bad. It's *Hillbrow*. I go home and none of these things happen.

NTSIKI: Maybe South African people are lazy?

PATRICIA: They are. They want someone to come and give them things.

NTSIKI: Like child support grants. Who wants to work if the government gives you money? Then I'm going to have five kids. That's R1200 a month. And for a black person, that's something.

PATRICIA: Okay, the father ran away, as they always do.

NTSIKI: South African men!

PATRICIA: Can you see that nobody's perfect? We're just the same. Even whites are not perfect.

NTSIKI: Nobody's perfect.

PATRICIA: There was a time when the whole of Africa was here inside Ponte. We have eleven tribes in South Africa. In Ponte back then, you would find all of them. Every tribe in Africa was here – Nigerians, Congolese, Zimbabweans... everybody talking their own language... Kenyans, Rwandans... I was surprised when I saw Ethiopians once. These very tall people with the funny hair. They said they were from Ethiopia.

NTSIKI: When everyone moved out, you saw a whole lot of different people.

PATRICIA: You were surprised to see this person was staying in Ponte. Where do you come from? No, I come from Angola. And you? From Zambia. Ponte was the house of everybody. It was the



House of Africa. Unfortunately now they're all gone. When they got outside, the police were waiting to get those who were illegal immigrants.

NTSIKI: The bad thing is it was the hiding place of everybody. Most of the people who had nowhere to go knew they could come to Ponte. The good and the bad, they were all hiding here.

PATRICIA: When there was this xenophobic thing, it really did piss me off. We're the same colour, why do we have to kill each other? I didn't like that at all. It was not nice.

Note: 'Straight to the Top' and 'Nobody's Perfect' are based on interviews that Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse conducted with residents and former residents of Ponte in 2009.

'The Tallest Prison in the World' draws on the following news reports from 1998:

Celean Jacobson, 'Prison Plan for Ponte,' *Sunday Times*, 8 February; Matthew Burbidge, "'Yes" and "no" to Ponte as a prison,' *Star*, 13 February; Nick Bezuidenhout, 'Ponte City in Jo'burg word beslis 'n tronk,' *Beeld*, 13 February; Ido Lekota, 'Ponte City to become a prison,' *Citizen*, 13 February; Donald G. McNeil, 'Johannesburg Journal: For Rising Crime Rate, High-Rise Jail to Match,' *New York Times*, 28 February; 'Skyscraper jail for sky-high crime,' *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 April; Mary Braid, 'Locked in the tower?', *The Independent*, 17 May.





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