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IVAN VLADISLAVIĆ

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Joe Slovo jinks into the city. Just where it passes Ponte and drops down off Berea Ridge, the road also rises on concrete pillars to sweep over Saratoga Avenue. This elevated section rests at its northern point on a massive spur of rock. The traffic island below the flyover, like other places in Johannesburg where nature breaks through a smooth, man-made surface, is raw and forbidding.

Yet this inhospitable island appeals to people sleeping rough. If they shelter on the eastern side, between the rock and the slip road, they are unlikely to be disturbed. On winter nights, men and boys huddle there under blankets or squat around smoky fires.

When Robert Maitland, the architect in J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island*, crashes off the motorway in central London, he finds himself marooned. He cannot attract the attention of a passerby.¹ The homeless people on the Saratoga traffic island, living their lives between a rock and a hard place, have the opposite problem: they cannot escape attention. Every passing driver gazes at them. Through the window of a car they look like shabby cavemen in a diorama.

Twenty years ago, when Joe Slovo Drive was still called Harrow Road, I used to pass by there every morning on my way to work just as the islanders were beginning to stir. Some of them would be lumped under blankets, while others scratched around in plastic bags or went to fetch water in tins. The water point was in the retaining wall on the other side of the slip road, where a hatch had been jemmied to expose the mains. This access to water was clearly another reason why people were drawn to sleep under the flyover. Occasionally I saw a man washing there in the open, stripped to the waist and lathering himself with a rag.

One morning it struck me that the knot of people at the water point had grown: there were twenty men and women milling around on the pavement. I saw women carrying plastic bottles, and then a couple of kids pushing a large container, perhaps an empty paint tin or a Steri Nappi bucket, in a cement-encrusted wheelbarrow. It looked like a refugee camp, which in a sense it was. Over the past few years, many African immigrants had moved into the surrounding suburbs. People from these overcrowded and neglected houses and flats, some of them cut off from municipal services, were swelling the queue at the water point.

Just when the crowds threatened to get out of hand, order was

restored. One fine day, two men had taken charge. One of them was managing the valve while the other kept the women and kids with containers in line. Queue marshals, presumably self-appointed, perhaps charging a small fee.

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Johannesburg is famously short of water: it is said to be the largest city without a major river or lake. Finding water and regulating its supply have always been part of the city's life, and its history may be read as the quest for a water source adequate to meet the needs of a growing population and a thirsty mining industry.

There was water to begin with, as the name Witwatersrand suggests. The very first digger's camp was established by Col. Ignatius Ferreira alongside a spring in Turffontein.² The three points of Randjeslaagte, the triangular uitvalgrond or wasteland on which the city was laid out, are all named for springs: Turffontein, Braamfontein and Doornfontein. But these 'small white waters' were long ago buried under concrete and tar.³

Within two years of the city's founding, the supply of water was becoming formalised and commercialised. In 1888, the first reservoir was built on the corner of Harrow and Abel roads – a stone's throw from where Ponte would rise 80 years later – and pipes were laid to supply households and businesses.⁴ At the opening of the reservoir, Sir James Sivewright of the Johannesburg Waterworks and Exploration Company made a speech in which he imagined the 'goodly plantations and gardens' this water would nourish.⁵

As Johannesburg grew, increasing the water supply became crucial. Almost from the beginning, the city's survival depended on water transported or piped from elsewhere, initially from the Klip River, then from the Vaal, and later from the Tugela and dams in the highlands of Lesotho.⁶

This story has echoes in other cities. Reyner Banham writes about the history of Southern California: 'Given water to pour on its light and otherwise almost desert soil, it can be made to produce a reasonable facsimile of Eden.'⁷ As he points out, maintaining this 'instant Paradise' requires that you keep adding water. After exhausting the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles had to look further





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afield and today draws much of its water from the Colorado River 970 km away. Beijing goes even further to the Yangtze River Basin 1 200 km away.⁸

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The original developers of Ponte saw it as a town or village – but called it a City. In a single building they hoped to concentrate the advantages and conveniences of urban life, providing accommodation ‘for every human circumstance, or need’ and ‘all the facilities required by a household.’⁹ Supplying this ‘city’ with electricity and water presented huge challenges, some of them analogous to servicing an actual city, others unique to such a tall, complex building.

The plumbing in the first skyscrapers was fairly simple: a tank was installed on the roof and water was pumped there and then fed by gravity to the apartments or offices below. This is good enough for relatively low buildings, but in taller ones water pressure becomes a problem and systems involving secondary tanks and valves are needed.

The scale of Ponte prompted some vertical – rather than lateral – thinking. As the architect Rodney Grosskopff put it, ‘it’s actually two buildings, one on top of the other.’¹⁰ Following this division, the upper and lower apartments are served by two separate sets of lifts and two water supply systems. Cold water is pumped from tanks in the parking level to low-rise storage tanks on the 38th floor and from there to high-rise storage tanks on the 54th floor. Cold water is then gravity fed to separate low-rise and high-rise hot water cylinders for heating. Soil and waste water are also disposed of by two separate systems made up of 48 double-pipe stacks per floor rising in 18 ducts.¹¹

The circulation of hot and cold water in this immense building, rendered in blue and red on the architectural drawings, suggests a cardiovascular system. The system for disposing of waste from kitchens, bathrooms and toilets is a sort of alimentary canal. The electrical wiring, telephone lines, TV cables and satellite dishes might even be a nervous system.

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Cities are open to metaphorical reading. The imagery changes with time: according to Graham Livesey, the central metaphor for premodern cities is the body, for modern cities the machine, and for postmodern cities the network or web.¹² Clearly this is a matter of emphasis and all three registers remain active today. Cities are organic creatures, mechanical constructs and virtual networks at the same time.

Large buildings, especially those with distinctive shapes, from New York's Flatiron Building to London's Gherkin, also attract metaphor. Ponte's unembellished cylinder, which is unlike anything else in the city, is no exception.¹³ Think of the era in which Ponte was built and it looks like a rocket on a launch pad. Think of the tower under construction, or reconstruction, and it resembles a mine shaft. Put a Coca-Cola sign on the roof and it turns into a soft-drink can. Fill it with drugs and it's a syringe, with rubbish and it's a dustbin.

Norman Ohler's *Ponte City* is a wellspring of acidic urban metaphor. The skyscrapers of Johannesburg are described as cartridges, cigarette butts in the giant ashtray of the city and the snaggled teeth of a punchy boxer. Ponte itself is a beacon in the rough sea of Africa, an erect penis – an obvious association, as the character who makes it admits – a steamer foundering on the sea of the city and a mutant rondavel. But it is the hollow centre of the building, 'an abyss of monstrous proportions,' that causes the imagery to flow: it is the barrel of a gun, a chimney sucking oxygen out of the city's lungs, a gigantic urethra, and finally 'the sight of a telescopic gun – to kill God'.¹⁴

Playing metaphoric games with the city and its parts is a serious pastime. Metaphor is a crucially transformative function of language. It creates equivalence and reveals connection. It is how we bind ourselves to places in the world and reconstruct them in our imaginations.

Ponte's location calibrates my sense of metaphor to a scale of highs and lows. The fact that Ponte and the Abel Road reservoir stand side by side on Berea Ridge is more than happy coincidence. This is nearly the highest point in the city: the builders of the reservoir meant to exploit gravity, the builders of the tower to defy it. The two structures, one recessed almost invisibly below the earth,





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the other rising boldly from it, are wedded in the world and in my eye. Ponte becomes a gauge in which this city's hopes and anxieties rise and fall. It is either half full or half empty.

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In the beginning, Ponte's detachment from the surrounding area was seen as a security feature: 'Ponte which is situated adjacent to the populated flat-land of Berea is virtually on an island site.'¹⁵ But no building is an island.

Initially, Ponte's water supply did not come from the reservoir but from Saratoga Avenue at the bottom of the hill. Water was pumped through a 4-inch pipe to the main storage tanks on parking level 6, and then four huge pumps drove it further upwards to separate low-rise and high-rise storage tanks on the 34th and 54th floors. These 100 000 litre tanks were fitted with float switches so that the pumps came on automatically when the water fell below a certain level. In the early 2000s, when the building was fully occupied or nearly so, this system proved inadequate. The pumps could not replenish the tanks fast enough and every single day the water would run out. The residents were furious.

Building manager Danie Celliers had a plan: he would connect the building to the fire hydrant. After badgering the Fire Department and Municipality for months, even persuading the Fire Chief to visit Ponte to assure himself that the water would be for domestic use only, permission was granted. Next Celliers persuaded the Municipality to make a second feeder available, a 6-inch pipe from the Lily Avenue side. The Municipality installed a meter near the entrance, but pipes had to be run from there to the tanks. You might think such work would require the services of a contractor, but the skills were close at hand. Celliers turned to one of his tenants, a man called Brian who happened to be a plumber, and he made the connections. Celliers says, 'All the staff helped, but he was the captain.'¹⁶

Joburgers get on with things. This jaunty making-do is an admirable trait, for the most part, but it can have consequences. Not long ago, the journalist Sean Christie roamed around Doornfontein searching for the source of the Jukskei, one of the small white waters that still forces its way to the surface in the eastern suburbs.¹⁷

In the course of this quest, he came across a 24-storey block on Nugget Hill that had been plumbed directly into its own parking garage. The basement was flooded with sewage.

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The 2010 Soccer World Cup gave people ideas. When David Selvan and Nour Ayyoub came up with a plan to redevelop Ponte in 2007, they had the World Cup in the corner of their eye. They thought the building would appeal to visitors looking for a place to stay close to the Ellis Park stadium.

As the big event drew closer, the City Council set about sprucing up the area around the stadium. Dilapidated buildings that sullied the gateway to the city were razed and strange, featureless little parks created in their place. Fibreglass footballs were trundled into position.

One of the biggest eyesores was the prehistoric dosshouse below the Saratoga flyover. People had been living there for thirty years and more, but now it had to stop. First the water point on the pavement was sealed. Then the pillars were covered with breezy mosaics and the lighting was improved. The place looked more cheerful. To discourage anyone from spoiling the effect by sleeping there, the entire surface of the traffic island was covered with a layer of rocks. They were rough-edged, sharply pointed rocks and it must have seemed like a good idea.

But Joburg's homeless are not so easily deterred. As I drove by one night soon after the rocks had been installed, I saw half a dozen wheelie bins with their lids ajar laid down side by side on the jagged surface. In each bin, wrapped in blankets and newspapers, lay a sleeping figure. The wheelie bins, another municipal innovation, had already proved useful to the collectors of scrap metal, but I had never before seen them employed as sleeping pods. The occupants looked as cosy as Japanese businessmen in a capsule hotel. Most were lying with their heads sticking out, but one had gone in head-first and left his feet out in the cold.

City Parks would have been well advised to cement the rocks in place. Packed together loosely, they turned out to be a handy building material. Within a month, the islanders had cleared a patch of sandy soil at the northern tip of their home, up against the smoke-blackened





spur, and used the rocks to make improvements. They built a fireplace, some stools to sit on, and a drystone windbreak to shelter behind when they slept.

1. J. G. Ballard, *Concrete Island* (Vintage, London, 1994).
2. I. Manoim, 'The city without water,' 6 January 2003. <http://www.joburg.org.za>. Accessed 25 July 2013.
3. L. Abrahams, 'Thoughts on Johannesburg's Centenary (while by the Jukskei River at Broederstroom),' in *The Writer in Sand* (Ad. Donker, Johannesburg, 1988), p. 61.
4. *Johannesburg - One Hundred Years* (Chris van Rensburg Publications, Johannesburg, 1986), p. 277; J. W. N. Tempelhoff, *The Substance of Ubiquity: Rand Water Board, 1903-2003* (Kleio Publishers, Vanderbijlpark, 2003), pp. 30-4.
5. J. König, *Seven Builders of Johannesburg* (J. L. van Schaik, Pretoria, 1950), p. 42.
6. Tempelhoff, *The Substance of Ubiquity*.
7. R. Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Pelican, Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 31.
8. L. R. Brown, 'Plan B 3.0: Mobilising to Save Civilisation' (Norton, New York, 2008), quoted in K. Stoll & S. Lloyd (eds), *Infrastructure as Architecture: Designing Composite Networks* (Jovis, Berlin, 2010), pp. 51-2.
9. *Planning & Building Developments*, 17, November/December 1975, p. 17.
10. R. Grosskopf quoted in L. Davie, 'Ponte: Rent the best view in town,' 24 December 2003. <http://www.joburg.org.za>. Accessed 11 August 2013.
11. *Planning & Building Developments*, pp. 29-30.
12. G. Livesey, *Passages: Explorations of the Contemporary City* (University of Calgary Press, Alberta, 2004), p. 61.
13. Abe Jacobson's Imbali, a round, 14-storey block of flats on the northern edge of Berea, bears a passing resemblance to Ponte, but is much too small and mild to compete.
14. N. Ohler, *Ponte City* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2003). These images are on pages 37, 45, 76; 65, 79, 81, 126; 44, 44, 69, 80, 208.
15. *Planning & Building Developments*, p. 35.
16. Interview with Danie and Elma Celliers by Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse, 2009.
17. S. Christie, personal communication, 4 April 2013.

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