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## ACROSS THE CHASM

STEIDL

THE WALTHER COLLECTION



Even though I live in the Johannesburg CBD, I had never visited Ponte City. Yet I was always keenly aware of its presence. How could I fail to notice the vertiginous monument that thrusts upwards, piercing Johannesburg's skyline? It is distinctive and visible to all, like that Biblical city on the hill that cannot be hidden.

'Ponte is more like a township than other buildings.' This comment by one of the residents made me curious about the place before I ever went there. Did the building foster a sense of community? Was there a feeling of neighbourliness in the corridors and on the stairs? On my first visit, I had the idea that community was precast in the tons and tons of concrete that went into Ponte. No one can live here, I thought, and not feel as one with the thousands of others around them.

Whether the people in the tower think of themselves as part of a community is another question. The vast Ponte City itself sits on a hill, cut off from most other buildings in its vicinity by the major thoroughfares of Joe Slovo Drive and Saratoga Avenue, and by the park close to its entrance. Although Ponte City, in the words of a resident, is separate from Hillbrow, it is not detached in such a way that 'you are ignorant of your surroundings.' While it is visible from everywhere in the city and, one imagines, from many other points *outside* of the city, it's an architectural paradox that the building can now be accessed from just one direction.

The concrete, steel and glass tower stands boisterously on the hill; it is hollow at the centre, empty, like a giant beast without a heart. If the building is the archetypal symbol of Johannesburg, are its hollow innards emblematic of the heartless city, built on violence and dispossession?

Since its completion in 1976, Ponte's identity has evolved, as the shades of the multitudes contained within its walls have changed. A community of identities inhabits the structure conceived as the most glamorous residential building in the inner city. Meant to house whites at the height of apartheid in the 1970s, its hue has changed to reflect the desegregation of the 1980s and the influx of foreign nationals to South Africa in the 1990s. By the turn of the century, Ponte City was seen as a seedy narcopolis and a lair for the lumpen; and as a new homeland for immigrants, both official and unofficial, in some postmodern iteration of the tower of Babel. It was the symbol





and fullest expression of inner-city decay, containing all that is forbidden in a taboo, but also all that is distinctive in a totem.

Ponte was built to house around 1 500 people, but in its 'down' years was home to more than 3 500. Now the maximum number of adults allowed in a flat is four, making for a total of about 1 800 people (excluding children). With such numbers, it's no surprise that the building has ancillary services. Its ground floor has a grocery shop, an internet café, a swimming pool, a bar and restaurant with a Nigerian flavour, and a play house, *Dlala Nje* (Zulu for 'Just Play'), that has pool tables and walls hung with artworks. The latter initiative, co-founded by journalist Nikolaus Bauer, who lives in the building, means that some of the kids from Ponte and the surrounding area can attend lessons in karate or music over the weekends. Bauer calls the play centre 'a vehicle for the people to develop themselves,' and 'a place to call their own.'

Godfrey Tshivase mans the premises on weekends. Above the din of young patrons seemingly all trying to speak at once and a catchy house beat blaring from a sound system, he told me that the play centre is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, and from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. during the week. In between requests for loose change from young teenagers who wanted to play pool, Tshivase said the centre hosts weekly storytelling sessions, occasional film screenings and art exhibitions.

The centre is part of the battle to change Ponte City's reputation as a place not suitable for kids. Bauer estimates that there might be as many as 800 children in the building. Despite efforts to improve things, the neighbourhood remains unsafe for children, says Tshivase. 'But they feel free here.' One of the reasons for this could be the strict security measures implemented at the building, including biometric identification for entry. I don't know of many other buildings in the city where security is as tight.

This security system would surprise some people, who still see Ponte as one of the most dangerous places in the city. Where Ponte is concerned, perception and reality have seldom matched perfectly. In a 1996 interview, Jack Sher, then the manager of Ponte City, said, 'Most of the residents are students, and mostly South Africans. Less than 10% [of the flats] are let to Zaireans. But the perception is that the building's lingua franca is French.'





On my visit, I came across Nigerians, South Africans, Zimbabweans and people who spoke English with a French inflection. As often happens in situations like this, micro-communities have coalesced in a nostalgic recreation of home away from home. So it is that small Lagos bounces off small Bulawayos, which in turn engage small Nairobis and small Kinshasas in an endless, energetic shuffle.

‘There is a community within a community,’ says Malcolm Rees, speaking of the dinners he and about nine other tenants have. Like Bauer, Rees is a recent arrival, another one of the young white professionals who have been attracted to the building in the current phase of its existence. But this internal community is by no means a closed one. ‘You are always meeting someone new in the flats.’ It was a point borne out by several other people I interviewed. ‘I have just moved in,’ went the refrain. Could it be because ‘management is very draconian,’ as Rees puts it? A teenage resident told me that anyone caught doing something wrong is summarily evicted.

Judging by the restaurant on the ground floor where I had a meal, the building is quiet and orderly. Except for a few waiters, the place was deserted, like a stadium in the aftermath of a football match. But it was still early on a Saturday afternoon and who knows how the night ended.

After the meal, I took a lift to the top floor. In previous years, the massive Coca-Cola sign on the roof of the building earned it the nickname Coke City, but these days the sign belongs to the cellphone giant Vodacom. So it’s ironic that cellphone reception at Ponte is patchy, as I discovered on the 51<sup>st</sup> floor. Even though Ponte is the fourth tallest building in the city, it towers over everything else because it’s built on a hill, and this makes it somewhat inaccessible to communication signals.

As I followed the curve of the corridor around the core, it struck me that Ponte City relies on an architectural idiom widely regarded as African, that of the circular hut. Should that make it more appealing to African residents? I recalled that when the building was first opened, the marketers referred to it as the African Queen. In eschewing a harsh, orthogonal structure in favour of a curvaceous, circular one, to what future or past or present did the project gesture? Nearly forty years after it was built in the heyday of apartheid,



Ponte City remains for many a symbol of division, a spectacular marker of a metropolis that has lost its way.

Nervously I approached a window on the 51<sup>st</sup> floor and peered down into the chasm below. Already slightly out of breath from the thin air at those heights, I could feel the onset of vertigo. 'Do you sometimes shout hellos to your neighbours across the chasm?' I asked Bauer. 'No, I don't,' he said with a laugh. 'It's not the done thing.'

Later, when I reflected on my visit to Ponte, I thought of the parable of the wealthy man and the beggar Lazarus in Luke 16. 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. And at his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.' Then Lazarus died and went to heaven; soon afterwards, the rich man also died and went to the other hot and parched place. Looking up one day, the rich man saw Lazarus in heaven, and so he cried out to Abraham to send Lazarus to 'dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony here in this fire.' In a stroke of interfaith reasoning, Abraham explained to the rich man that he and Lazarus were the subjects of a karmic reversal of fortunes. And besides, said Abraham, 'between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

There is an interesting experiment at work in Ponte. While nearly all the residents continue to be working class and black, a small number of middle-class people and professionals, some of them white, have been drawn to the building. It's a worthwhile exercise. The city's founding fathers championed an ethic of exclusion. That didn't work. A more inclusionary ethos is at play now, however tenuously. Perhaps Ponte City is pointing the way towards a new kind of community after all.

























First edition published in 2014

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ISBN 978-3-86930-750-3

Printed in Germany by Steidl

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Back cover: Photograph found in abandoned Ponte City apartment, 2008







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