

RISE, THE URBAN VILLAGE:

Maboneng Precinct - A City Of Light

By Bongani Mhlanga

In the last eight years, Eastside inner city Johannesburg (Joburg), has become the subject of an urban renaissance that has turned the city's crime-ridden centre into a brighter place than it has been in years; a transformation that has reignited the human spirit in South Africa's urban spaces.

At 24, entrepreneur and visionary Jonathan Liebmann returned home to a lifeless Joburg after travelling the world. Suburban life, though secure, had no sense of community and engagement and there were not many alternatives for city life. There was, in his words, "emptiness". Since he was 18, Jonathan had a knack for acquiring property. The passion behind it, however, only surfaced when his wife introduced him to West Joburg's Milpark, where young creatives were converting inexpensive old factories and Industrial spaces into alternative 'live and work' areas. What came to light was the integral role that creative community could play in area transformation and the vast potential of inner city Joburg's aged industrial canvas. Characterised by high ceilings, a loaded history and a 100-year quality, these "left for dead" city structures were perfect for creating new alternative spaces.

The revelation inspired a transformative partnership with his architect in 2008, to fund their own buildings, beginning in the East side city area formally known as City and Suburban. This morphed into the inspired development organisation Propertuity; purposed to bring 'city' back to old and dilapidated urban areas in Africa. Their vision: to evolve and revolutionise most of Joburg's inner city and incorporate business, housing and creative spaces to be used by people from all walks of life. Jonathan moved into the focal area during construction to connect with his new community, overseeing every single aspect of the dream to secure its success.

Arts on Main was the opening development. Five different buildings merged into one. A mix of studios, galleries, and creative office spaces focused on accommodating the multidisciplinary arts of Joburg. Famed South African Artist William Kentridge purchased the largest studio space for his work, consequently attracting big arts tenants. The launched community enticed leading galleries and businesses to follow suit. After this great reception from the art community, it caught the attention of people who hadn't been into the city for over 20 years. Struck by this and a collaborative roof-top artwork by two German artists and a Sowetan, featuring the Sotho word for "Place of Light" (Maboneng), Jonathan recalibrated the vision. The idea thus transformed into 'Maboneng', a haven for a new and enlightened community. The place of light was born.

Maboneng offers a safe connection to Joburg and a new personalised lifestyle that encompasses the urban and the African, reuniting its citizens with their city and the forgotten urban experience. At its centre is Main Street Life, a first class residential complex and no ordinary one in that it links work opportunities with the living environment. Its genius is that it thrives on the attitude of "Live, Create,

and Collaborate”, which incorporates visual arts, fashion, cinema, theatre, gym, restaurants, workshops and exhibitions in the same vicinity as residential space. On its completion in 2010, it rapidly grew to over 300 artists, designers, bankers, lawyers and even doctors; a truly diverse lot who wanted to join this new inner city revolution.

Creative and collaborative spirit quickly fostered and bore fruit through resident fashioned projects like the 12 Decades Hotel on the crowning floor of Main Street Life. The 12 room boutique artwork celebrates Joburg’s brief but memorable history. Clothing designers like Enisa have converted their living space into multi-use space. She manufactures her clothing there for sale in the local market. This kind of inventiveness is what made Main Street Life the catalyst that cemented Maboneng as a new residential area aimed at balancing life, work and play.

Main Street Life is also home to assorted ground floor retail that faces Joburg's Main Street. The BIOSCOPE, which boasts being South Africa’s only Independent cinema, is a small atmospheric zone featuring obscure locally produced and art house films on a weekly basis; a fantastic niche with a dedicated following. Right next door, the Pop Art theatre showcases local performances, and across the streets, a diverse assortment of cultural restaurants and cafés add flavor to Maboneng; with eats ranging from East African and Israeli to Argentinean marinating the air. Maboneng also hosts the inner city's debut sushi restaurant. Security allows for shops to be open till late, thereby revitalising the night culture.

Cutting edge businesses are a Maboneng staple. Urban think tank Studio X and Legrand Concept Store facilitate spaces where minds can engage and discuss. Busboys & Poets is a DC inspired dinner club, theatre and poetry reading space conducive to the sharing of ideas. Everything is always being changed up by business owners constantly on edge, trying new things to expand their footprint. Locals are encouraged through the “Made in Maboneng” Philosophy to buy locally in support of each other, in order to create a sustainable micro-economy that will kick start businesses and promote private sector change.

Maboneng fast-tracked into a recognisable collection of buildings that hover between visual art and architecture. Artists like Marcus Neustetter, the man behind the Rocket Factory, use modern repurposing to create experimental spaces, furniture and artworks to form an ambience that is both real and imaginary. The name of each building (e.g. ‘Situation East’ & ‘The Urban Fox’) is not haphazard but intended for representation. ‘Revolution House’, for instance, the second residential building, is a banner of Maboneng’s socioeconomic revolution; a fundamentally improved, highly coveted, lifestyle. Perched

These buildings hold strong environmental, economic and cultural depth. The rooftop gardens of Revolution House, Living Room jungle of the Main Change, and green courtyards of Main Street Life and Maverick’s Corner add greenery to soften the urban landscape and maintain an air of the natural. Ramed’s View lends its apartments to affordable housing for local students. Living MOAD, home to the Museum of African Design, and Fox Street that doubles as both retail and Penthouse space, characterise the flexibility and interchangeability of space and design. The Rocket factory and Arts On Main have a

noteworthy place in Joburg's past and by maintaining some old elements of their respective buildings they tell its little-known stories. The Artisanal lofts borrow the artisan design ethos of rough materials to retain the industrial heritage of the building. This embraced contrast of old and new is sustainable and 'recyclic'.

Craftsman's Ship was the very first new build, which is to be followed by the next-gen apartments of Drivelines. Promising to be a monument of the future, the construction of 80 to 100 apartments, is the first partnership with the amazing pioneers of shipping container architecture 'Low-tech' from New York. This unique and ground-breaking step is the first of many. Hallmark House, scheduled to be completed by 2020, will be "Starchitect" David Adjaye's first big Southern African Project and Property's biggest endeavor yet. It is destined to make Maboneng feel like a whole other city.

The overall boost in attraction is driven at its foundation by Maboneng's Events culture, an approach first used by Jonathan and his team to market for new tenants and bring energy back into the city through networking parties and hosting music videos, art installations and film sets. This effort to show the security, class and comfort of the place blew up into a regular line-up of major events. Maboneng has since hosted TEDxJohannesburg, the South African Fashion Week (SAFW), and World Cup Exhibitions in 2010. It continues to showcase prime arts and entertainment spectacles annually.

Conjured from a deficit of regular events, the Market on Main has become Joburg's Sunday tradition. The acclaimed food and design market is a community spectacle that captures the soul and essence of Joburg. It offers locally manufactured wares in the way of handmade fashion, accessories, artworks, antiquities, foods, sweets and wines. The increasing number of entrepreneurs is a testament of the employment engine Maboneng has become. A constant influx of what Jonathan calls "Extreme local tourists", determined to explore this fresh side of their city, pours in every weekend. To wind down visitors convene at The Chalkboard, Pata-Pata or the popular Canteen courtyard restaurant and rooftop bar (with its signature rooftop installation vintage Chevy). During the working week resident vending spaces on the street maintain the colour, life and intrigue. The activity has pegged Maboneng as a novel and exciting location for internationals.

The expansion of Maboneng has had positive effects on the surrounding area. Renovations and upgrades are occurring to keeping up with the neighbourhood, existing business owners have expanded their scope to accommodate the residents and community engagement has grown through initiatives like 'One crèche at a time' which raises funds for local kindergartens. Trim Park is the community physical training facility and Common Ground the open public park. Community Saturdays bring out a formerly unheard of and especially heartwarming picture of children playing in the streets of Joburg. Community impact spreads through new partnerships. For example, BIOSCOPE partners with institutes to screen films that promote self-actualization for kids. The outcome is total engagement between people, space and environment.

This vital creative Mecca has complemented the lives of young artists, designers and filmmakers by centralising studios, galleries, bookshops and social hubs; a befitting environment to try out international lifestyles and develop local ones. New market gaps have provided opportunities for the

young to move from suburbs and hazardous shanty towns to a healthy alternative that thrives on an integrated community. New found relationships have grown enterprise and previously economically depressed areas are now ripe entrepreneurial nuclei. An entire business directory of Maboneng is available on Maboneng's website, www.maboneng.co.za, where one can see what is new, browse available vacancies and follow the hype on social networks. This way residents, outsiders, and business owners can keep informed of new events and business prospects.

Maboneng is a life driven philosophy centered on creating a culture of thinkers and makers. Hunger and enthusiasm for this kind of environment have birthed a nation-wide revolution. Rivertown, Maboneng's sister precinct, in KwaZulu-Natal, is an inner-city community that is motivating city life in Durban. Properties in Pretoria and Cape Town are still being procured to expand this urban empire which will soon reach the entire continent. The implications are immense for a changing Africa, and it will take many more buildings for real impact. Propertuity seeks to undertake this expansion through global collaborations with artists, architects, designers, development, strategic and operative partners who share their dedication and optimism for innovative and authentic urban regeneration.

Jonathan Liebmann has since featured in TedxTalks, Forbes and the World Economic Forum, challenging property developers to go beyond the status quo and develop thriving community-based economies using empty buildings in what he calls "Turning buildings into ideas". He mentions, "After having lived and worked all around Maboneng, I have learned the need to create a community. My call to property developers across Africa is to identify the needs of yourself and those around you, and see the potential in the dilapidated and vacant buildings, and transform them into spaces that inspire ideas."

The triumphant story of Maboneng is that of a light in a dark abandoned city, which made its way into the BBC News and The Wall Street Journal earlier this year. This landmark achievement is a testament to the power of young and original thought and a beckon of progress for Africa. In a world where Ideas have become commodities, areas like this are engines for the generation of viable and responsive solutions that will build a close-knit culture of "art, people and passion" as we journey towards creating the cities of the future.

TAGS: #Maboneng #Urban #City #Culture #Art #Design #Africa