

Global Studio Johannesburg 2007

CHANGING MINDSETS

Chapter 3 : Jovi (Marshalltown) part 1, Redrawing 'Jovi'

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In collaboration with Global Studio 2007

Redrawing 'Jovi'





Redrawing 'JoVi'

Structuring a response to inner-city redevelopment

Vision

To reconceptualize a model of urban transformation that meets the basic needs of the existing population through encouraging investment and development that builds on existing social and physical infrastructures.

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Executive Summary

On our first visit to the site, standing atop the Carlton Center peering down into the area, revealed a seemingly desolate landscape of abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and streets largely devoid of people. In contrast, exploring the neighborhood by foot revealed layers that did not appear on city maps or the architects initial plans for redevelopment. We began to understand the role that this 'dead' zone of the CBD plays in the wider Johannesburg area: as car repair district, transitional space for recent migrants and immigrants, home to long-term residents, and a labor force for the greater CBD.

Our initial investigations on the ground revealed that far from being an abandoned warehouse district, the area was in fact home to a bustling auto repair industry with a state of the art training facility, and thousands of mostly hidden residents who had transformed warehouse and open space alike into high density housing of various levels of formality. Often the only indication of tenancy is a surreptitiously hung line of washing peaking over a parapet or through a window.

Motsepe Architect's plan is a response to the Johannesburg City's intentions of development

in the inner city region. Such development strategies are underscored in the Jozi city map.

We re-wrote the Jozi - Jo'burg city map, which currently highlights the '5 pillar inner city regeneration strategy,' and generated our own '5 building blocks for inner city transformation.' While the city plan aimed to redevelop the inner city through investment in increasing real-estate values and its accompanying ripple effects, our approach aims to enhance the existing strengths of the area by revealing its rich social and spatial conditions, and by connecting the area's hidden populations to the larger city.

One of the primary elements that needs re-examination are notions of the formal and informal, in both residential and economic conditions. While the city attaches mostly negative interpretations to the category of 'informal' our concept allows for celebrating the informal as a responsive, flexible, accommodating, productive, and high-density urban response.

The mandate of Global Studio compelled us to question the notion of the urban slum as a seed of, and not detriment to, positive urban transformation.

The Site

JoVi is bounded by Commissioner Street to its north, Joe Slovo Boulevard to the east, the M2 highway to the south, and Eloff Street at the eastern boundary. It is an area that falls within the southern shadow of the landmark Carlton Center, and one that stands in stark contrast with the more energized activity nodes of the Carlton, Park Station, and Smal Street. While these areas are bustling centers of commercial and pedestrian activity, JoVi was more-or-less perceived as devoid of activity, and comprised of a majority (80%) of vacant buildings, most of which were former warehouses.

Has JoVi become a forgotten component to Johannesburg's CBD? Many argue that JoVi, just east of the city center in Marshalltown, is the future site for re-development. They site the Carlton Center, Jewel City, and ABSA's headquarters as important commercial landmarks to the area. Despite such claims, the present conditions in Marshalltown prove to be an intriguing place of inquiry. Located adjacent to the M2 highway, much of the informal economy in Marshalltown hinges upon the auto repair industry. Also, the taxi rank adjacent to Faraday Market serves hundreds, if not thousands, of passengers a day.





Other developers have speculated upon the prospects for the conversion of industrial warehouses into residential flats. Yet, the question of housing in Marshalltown is complex and often contentious. A large number of south Africans and immigrants have settled into the area – many of them live within formal housing structures, such as apartments, whereas others occupy industrial buildings illegally.

Motsepe Architects coined the name “JoVi” to describe this region of the Johannesburg CBD for a presentation to the Rotterdam Biennale. The presentation was not so much an urban design proposal as the re-branding of a neglected light industrial zone, a seemingly abandoned warehouse district adjacent to the busy Carlton Center and the ABSA District, both of which are undergoing extensive redevelopment. The guiding vision of the proposal was to create a catalyst for the generation of a neighborhood similar to Greenwich Village in New York.

Background

Written by Percival Greaves.

What is JoVi? What are the historical forces that conspired to create the idea of JoVi? How is this area viewed within the context of development? And, what are the prospects for the future of JoVi? These are just a few of the questions that have guided the investigation and the production of this report, and on which this report aims to shed some light. On the final day of the People Building Better Cities (PBBC) conference a presentation was made by Motsepe Architects about their aspirations to create a village in the Marshalltown section of downtown Johannesburg. This village was envisioned as a community built to reflect the diverse realities of the target area, somewhat akin to that found in New York's Greenwich Village and Chelsea neighborhoods. Thus, the name JoVi – Johannesburg Village. Mr. Fanuel Motsepe, articulated that his company intended to propose a redevelopment strategy for the area that questioned conventional planning and design methods, which in his estimation neglected to consider the characteristics of neighborhoods slated for development. His idea for JoVi was that it would transfer the energy that abounded on the outskirts of the area into the target area.

Motsepe Architects' vision for JoVi is built on the premise that the energy that now exists to the area north of JoVi, specifically, the Smal Street area and its pedestrian mall, could somehow be transferred into this proposed village. Motsepe's proposal would extend the pedestrian activity of Smal Street Mall from its terminus in Carlton Center, by breaking through an existing Parkade (parking lot) and connecting it to the Smal Street extension, and establishing nodes of activity within JoVi that would help to redirect activity – primarily in the form of pedestrian flows – through the proposed village. Motsepe also expressed interest in developing entertainment, green space, and various attractions in the area. The JoVi group was formed to explore the area and suggest possible approaches for informing the proposed development of the area.

The group set out to explore JoVi by first going on a walking tour of the busy areas around Main Street, Park Station, and Carlton Center, during which we learned about some of the city's history and the events that shaped the downtown Central Business District (CBD). We were shown some of the prime real estate that currently stood abandoned in the heart of the city.



Why had such a once vibrant city been reduced to mostly empty buildings, marginalized communities, crime, and social and spatial decay? Johannesburg was established following the discovery of what Motsepe called a “river of gold” running under the high plains, and grew to become the major center of economic activity in South Africa. But, as the city grew, the quest for riches helped to plant the seeds of apartheid. The mostly Black African population, and Indians living in the areas were relegated to living in townships and other housing schemes on the outskirts of the city, to be seen only in the CBD during working hours. Apartheid formalized this arrangement by enacting pass laws, but also brought to light the severity of the social contradictions that existed in the city and South Africa as a whole. The JoVi area became a manufacturing and warehousing annex to the bustling mining industry that characterized the city.

As the end of apartheid loomed and blacks began to disregard the country’s unjust laws, the economic elite who lived and worked in the CBD fled to the safer suburban areas of Sandton and Midrand, abandoning the housing and commercial infrastructure in their wake. This prompted massive invasion of the city by blacks hoping to eke out an existence by grab-

bing hold of the dregs of economic activity they hoped to find there. JoVi proved attractive because it provided easy access to the city center, and the possibility of low-cost or free housing in the abandoned buildings. But the unavailability of services meant that the new residents were to be without essential services, and that they could become prey to unscrupulous slumlords and building hijackers.

As our walking tour of the CBD drew to a close, we rode to the top of Carlton Center and looked out at the area slated for redesign by Motsepe Architects. This view corroborated the common perception of the area as a sea of vacant buildings, some accidentally burned out by fires in squatter encampments, most seemingly void of any semblance of human life. The following day the group set out to uncover what exactly existed in the area, a day filled with surprise, shock, and disbelief at the many unknown realities that abounded in JoVi. Our entry into the neighborhood began with a walk along the other side of Smal Street, what we initially saw and referred to as the extension, and we were immediately made aware of the large number of vacant buildings.

However, as we proceeded through the neighborhood we began to realize that what seemed



as vacant buildings, indeed were containers of hidden communities and the complex reality of housing in various degrees formalization, legal and illegal landlordship, formal and informal economic activity, and varying degrees of organization in housing, commerce, and social service, mostly as survival mechanisms against the harshness of the city. The JoVi group made several more visits to the area, and at each stage the realities of the target area became more apparent, prompting the group to first entertain a series of acupuncturist interventions aimed at relieving the poverty, lack of services, and economic and political marginalization in the area. The group also engaged government officials including the Ward Councilor, talked to landlords and residents in innovative forums, and conducted hours of research to add to their understanding of JoVi, and to inform our and Motsepe's proposals for the village.

As time progressed, the group develop a deeper understanding of JoVi, and came together to embark on a project that questions common perceptions of the area, identify the hidden realities of the neighborhood and its population, and establish a new framework for development in JoVi. In effect, the JoVi group has developed a view that critiques the birds-eye view

afforded from the top of Carlton Center and other distant locales, one that begs the examination of people and their realities alongside that of spaces and buildings as a framework for development.



Process

This is a process of a work that progressed throughout our investigations. We took a conventional architectural plan and kept annotating it as our understanding of the site and its inhabitants grew. Our question became how to account for these unprecedented contrasts and the transformation of a part of a modern city into a slum.

Information was gathered primarily through site visits and extensive mapping; along with interviews with various stakeholders: council officials, a local preacher, various building managers/owners, community representatives and community members. Official statistics of the area were largely unavailable.

The interview with Ward Councilor Pahad provided information regarding services available to both the informal and formal housing sector, and led us to believe that the neighbor is not as hidden, at least from the consciousness of developers, as we might have thought. An interview with Pastor Mafika of the Central AME Church revealed that private service providers have an active and rather robust presence in the neighborhood.



An interview with both the caretaker and owner of a semi-formalised building gave an insight into the difficulties faced by private investors in re-zoning land as residential, in meeting building codes, in access to financial assistance, and above all, the lack of coherent and consistent advice from various housing and development agencies.

With guidance of Fanuel Motsepe and Eric Lindenberg of Motsepe Architects, we were introduced

to the greater Johannesburg CBD, then the area of study in the following days. As we walked around the area and spoke with the inhabitants, we began to understand the role that this zone of the CBD plays in the wider Johannesburg area: car repair district, transitional space for recent migrants and immigrants, home to long-term residents, cheap labor pool for the greater CBD.

We collated our work and proposals into a re-drawing of an existing map to include the invisible populations we had interacted with and also the cacophony of informal and formal spaces that built this area.