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Maboneng: Place of Light—A Case Study in Urban Regeneration in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Abstract

After returning to South Africa from years abroad, Jonathan Liebmann felt a sense of emptiness in Johannesburg and missed the urban lifestyle he experienced in other cities. In 2008, he established Propertuity, the business vehicle with which he launched an urban regeneration project known as the Maboneng Precinct. While Liebmann has seen impressive success in developing Maboneng, he still faces significant challenges in expanding the precinct and reaching his vision of rejuvenating the CBD through community integration. On the local level Liebmann has attempted to provide basic services for the community but Maboneng is in desperate need of government support to preserve its vision. Meanwhile, Liebmann's rapid success has led him to consider replicating the project in other cities, and has even started an initiative to link regeneration projects worldwide. With so many competing priorities, Liebmann is faced with a set of choices and tradeoffs about how best to build on Maboneng's popularity in the coming years.

Case



“The concept of gentrification: I ate it, and ate it, and ate it every single day of my studies. When I actually experienced the real world, I realized this concept was so empty of any sense. I’m sorry if this sounds political or something but gentrification is not a concept well defined. It was theorized and conceptualized in the Global North in London and New York, for example, and I think it is very dangerous to apply such, 1) undefined concepts and, 2) concepts that were theorized in other urban contexts to a context of just Johannesburg. Many academics are putting into question the notion of gentrification and concluding that gentrification benefits all members of society in terms of income.

“I question the notion of gentrification versus rather what we can call ‘urban change’ or ‘urban transformation’ which has been at the core of cities since the very beginning. [...] Some complain that Maboneng] is just wealth in the middle of a poor area. What’s the problem with that in a post-apartheid city where the poor stay with the poor and the rich stay with the rich? This is just replicating the segrega-

tion that has lasted for decades in Johannesburg. [...] Race segregation is still very present and has been succeeded by class: low income versus high income. Urban change provides an opportunity for a more diversified society, which for me is the biggest thing in Johannesburg.”¹

– Alice Cabaret, Urban Strategist for Propertuity

¹Alice Cabaret (2014, March 10). Skype interview with Kevin Brege.

Maboneng: Place of Light

Staring out over the neighborhood he built from scratch in just six years, Jonathan Liebmann surveyed the scene on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. He caught a glimpse of the MABO’go van as it dropped off a fresh batch of young professionals from the suburbs to enjoy the artistry of this new neighborhood in downtown Johannesburg: The Maboneng Precinct. SMACK! Republic Brewing Company was busy with people waiting to try a beer from Johannesburg’s first inner city microbrewery. Young kids with skateboards weaved through a throng of shoppers on their way to the Adidas AREA3 skate park on Kruger Street. Arts on Main was in full swing with dozens of visitors streaming in and out of the gate on Fox Street, enjoying the diverse aromas and tastes of the various food stands scattered throughout the market. Everyone was entranced by a creative ambiance captured by local artists and put on display for the public.

In the past few months, groups of investors had approached Liebmann to ask him and his property development company to build similar neighborhoods in other South African cities, such as Durban and Cape Town. More recently, investors from Ghana came asking for the same thing in Accra. With his property development company being pulled in so many directions, Liebmann’s vision wandered beyond Fox Street and towards the surrounding community. He looked past the private security personnel patrolling the outskirts of the precinct and the CCTV cameras his team had carefully installed. Just two blocks away, the surrounding area consisted of boarded-up shops, vacant buildings, and rampant poverty: the reality of downtown Johannesburg.

Johannesburg: From City of Gold to ‘No-Go’ Zone

Though Johannesburg is the economic hub of South Africa, the city itself is under 130 years old. Founded during South Africa’s gold rush of the 1880s, Johannesburg quickly grew to half a million people fifty years later. Until this point the population was multiracial but in 1933 the South African government declared Johannesburg to be an all-white city. The government decided that the black population must live in vast, sprawling townships such as Soweto and Alexandra. These townships were specifically built with “extraordinarily inefficient layouts designed for security reasons to make internal circulation difficult” and were designed to prevent any commercial or industrial base from forming¹. Within five years nearly the entire black population – over 90% of the city – had been forced out to the townships.

The government formalized this racial separation nationwide in the 1950 Group Areas Act. This policy of *apartheid* – which literally translates to ‘separate’ in Afrikaans – formally segregated the country by race, giving the white minority control over the vast majority of the country, including Johannesburg’s Central Business District (CBD). Over the next 50 years almost all of the population growth took place in Johannesburg’s townships and suburbs. The poor working class lived in townships further afield and a small affluent class lived in ‘near-suburbs’ such as Hillbrow, Berea, and Yeoville close to the CBD.

Beginning in the 1970s, this all began to change. In 1976, a popular protest against the apartheid regime in Soweto turned violent and hundreds of people were killed by the South African Police Force. The Soweto Uprising signaled a turning point in the anti-apartheid struggle and led to a gradual relaxation of the Group Areas Act in Johannesburg. As the CBD and near-suburbs slowly transitioned from being all white to having a mixed population, change began to occur in the city. In the 1980s, a combination of the gold standard’s demise – Johannesburg was the center of the gold mining industry – and South Africa’s economic isolation led to a recession. Combined with skyrocketing crime levels, many businesses left the CBD. In a matter of years, business owners, residents, and even the Johannesburg Stock Exchange abandoned the CBD and the near-suburbs “in favor of suburban certainties removed from the threat of urban crime and infrastructural decay².”

These processes led to a massive urban decline and a simultaneous exponential growth in the suburbs. The CBD quickly lost its significance as the center of Johannesburg and the surrounding near-suburbs quickly became ‘no-go’ zones. By the fall of the apartheid regime in 1994, Johannesburg had completely shifted to

a decentralized and car-dominated sprawl. In the early 1980s, over 70% of Johannesburg's office space was found in the CBD but by 2000 this percentage had fallen to 30%, and by 2005, it had reached just 22%. From 1996–2001, unemployment in the CBD increased by 65%, with almost 20% of households in the former center of South Africa's economy lacking any source of income³.

Urban Decay in Downtown Johannesburg

"All around Johannesburg there are iron rails and shutters on the windows of chain-stores, boutiques, shops and outfitters – and this gives the city an eerie feeling. The 'heart of Africa' is lacking in warmth and does not embrace anyone with a feeling of welcome ... The openness and acceptance that most people used to enjoy ... have been replaced by the ugliness of burglar bars and alarm wires ... Do you remember the days when toddlers would run up and down the pavements while their parents walked slowly gazing at some article they were planning to buy? [... Johannesburg] has been turned into a military fort. This is horrible because it means the community has allowed its heritage to be destroyed."

– Sandila Memela in *City Press*, April 1997.¹

In this anarchic environment, crime quickly took hold in Johannesburg (See *Figure 1.5 in Appendix*). In 1997, increasingly violent feuds between the taxi drivers led to a brutal series of 'taxi wars'. In just one of these wars, more than 80 passengers and drivers were fatally shot by pistols and high-velocity assault rifles.² By 1999, the homicide rate in downtown Johannesburg had reached an astounding 603 murders per 100,000 people.³ For comparison in the Honduran city of San Pedro de Sula, the world's most dangerous today, the murder rate is 169 per 100,000.⁴ Even police, "fearing for their own lives, tended to steer well clear" of downtown Johannesburg.⁵ At the turn of the millennium, Johannesburg had descended into complete and utter violent urban decay.

¹Keith Beavon, *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004.

²*Ibid.*, 244.

³Martin Schönteich and Antoinette Louw. “Crime in South Africa: A country and cities profile.” *Institute for Security Studies*, Occasional Paper No. 49, 2001. <http://www.issafrica.org/uploads/paper49.pdf>.

⁴Pamela Engel, Christina Sterbenz, and Gus Lubin. “The 50 Most Violent Cities in the World.” *Business Insider*. 27 November 2013. <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-most-violent-cities-in-the-world-2013-11?op=1>.

⁵Beavon, 247.

Post-Apartheid Johannesburg

Sandton and Alexandra: Separate and Unequal Still

As central Johannesburg was left to ruin, the northern suburb of Sandton boomed (See visual maps of Johannesburg in Appendix Figures 1.1–1.4). Between 1997 and 2004, office space in Sandton increased by 150%⁴. With jobs located in the northern suburbs, workers also chose to live close to their offices. Though crime had always existed there, the 1990s brought about a surge in crime in the suburbs: the murder rate in Sandton reached 23 per 100,000 in 1999⁵— a rate similar to present-day Oakland⁶. Fearful of crime, many settled in gated communities and homes cutoff from the ills of Johannesburg that have been described as “literal recreations of medieval walled cities⁷.” Life in the northern suburbs became increasingly car-dependent, as wealthy residents refused to walk for fear of safety: a survey found that 82% of people referred to ‘security concerns’ when discussing their walking habits⁸. With security the primary concern, social life began to revolve around enclosed and largely impersonal shopping centers.

A sprawling suburb, Sandton has a population density of 0–1,500 people per km², a population that is 61% “white or Asian”, and an unemployment rate of just 4%. In contrast, just 3 kilometers away in the township of Alexandra, there is a population density range of 45,000–81,000 people per square kilometer, a population

that is 98.5% “black African”, and a staggering unofficial unemployment rate of 60%⁹. Even as South Africa celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the fall of apartheid in 2014, the separateness still remained.

The CBD and the Near-Suburbs

The near-suburbs were built in the 1950s as “points of entry” for European immigrants recruited by the apartheid government. During Johannesburg’s ‘economic miracle’ of the 1960s and early 1970s, these areas boomed. Due largely to the Group Areas Act, these suburbs were over 80% white and had wealthy and employed residents. Today, it is a different story. Left abandoned during the flight to the suburbs, the near-suburbs are “characterized not only by ruination [... but also by] illicit livelihoods”¹⁰; not unlike the CBD. In the downtown neighborhood of Hillbrow in 1997, it was not uncommon for twenty murders and rapes to occur each month¹¹. Unemployment in this former center of business is now over five times higher than in the new center of business, Sandton¹².

Johannesburg: Beginning to Regenerate

Recognizing the sizeable need for security, the municipal government of Johannesburg started to address the issue of crime in the CBD. In the mid-1990s, the Business Against Crime of South Africa and the South African Police Department implemented CCTV cameras in the CBD. In the first year of its operation, there was a 90% reduction in muggings and a 48% overall decrease in crime¹³. Despite this progress, the CBD remained extremely dangerous as near-suburbs such as C&S remained relatively untouched by all levels of government, including the police force.

Braamfontein

Between the late 1980s and early 2000s however, the urban decay from Johannesburg’s inner city spread to the near-suburb of Braamfontein, resulting in a mass exodus of business and institutions to the north. The city became rundown, untidy, and unsafe. In 2002 however, the local government realized the invaluable lo-

cation of Braamfontein, and enacted a multi-million South African rand regeneration program for the area that was supplemented by private sector investment. Today, Braamfontein includes Newtown, the University of Witwatersrand, Constitution Hill, and the Civic Center. The Nelson Mandela Bridge serves as a landmark that connects Braamfontein to the city center, as well as one of the regeneration catalysts of the effort headed by the Johannesburg Development Agency.



The Braamfontein Management District is a non-profit company financed by local taxpayers that works on the fundamentals of crime prevention, street cleanliness, and provides security services to the district. Numerous property developers, including Adam Levy and Neil Fraser, realized the potential of upgrading old buildings in the area into a precinct of mixed uses. Braamfontein has been an economic success and has positively impacted the community: giving a six-fold return on investment to some property developments. This formerly

rundown business district has been transformed into “a widely used model of urban regeneration, producing a kind of ‘post-architectural’ city-in-the-making [14](#).” Hosting integrated office, residential, and lifestyle spaces to serve both lavish lifestyles and modern student life, Braamfontein has the “feel of a chic lifestyle with a stylish buzz [15](#).”

44 Stanley

Separated from the CBD by the M1 Motorway and surrounded by industrial blight, the suburb of Milpark was the westernmost embodiment of urban decay. An abandoned area dominated by empty warehouses, Milpark seemed destined for further isolation with the construction of a major highway overpass underway [16](#). Responding to a growing demand for ‘café culture’ rather than a ‘shopping centre culture’ two property developers purchased a block of Milpark in 2002. They built a small artisanal outdoor shopping space called 44 Stanley.

In an economic sense, 44 Stanley has been a tremendous success. Ten years after its creation, the property value of 44 Stanley has risen six-fold [17](#). Unlike Braamfontein, however, 44 Stanley has had little impact on the surrounding community. Though designed to include outdoor walking spaces, 44 Stanley is relatively self-contained with large gates restricting access and security guards standing post, making it a “fortified enclave” similar to the malls it tried to replace [18](#).



One of 44 Stanley's tenants was a young entrepreneur named Jonathan Liebmann. Liebmann purchased a small building in 44 Stanley, hoping it would give him an urban alternative to the suburban-dominated lifestyle of Johannesburg. Quickly, however, Liebmann grew frustrated with the limits of this enclosed property development. Resolving to meet this problem head on, Liebmann decided to undertake a much larger and more ambitious urban development project.

“Urban regeneration can be such a major tool for social inclusion and economic development: it can actually create more opportunities for sustainable and equitable cities.”¹

—Alice Cabaret, Urban Strategist for Propertuity

¹Alice Cabaret (2014, March 10). Skype interview with Kevin Brege.

Jonathan Liebmann

Jonathan Liebmann, the young entrepreneur leading the urban regeneration of downtown Johannesburg, grew up in both Durban and Johannesburg. He comes from an entrepreneurial family: his mother has a clothing business, his father is a lawyer and banker with a successful art foundation, and his siblings also have businesses in Johannesburg. At the age of 17, Liebmann moved to London and worked menial jobs in order to travel and be exposed to various cultures and urban lifestyles. After working his way to the top as a telecommunications salesperson, he worked construction on Canary Wharf. Working overtime as a construction worker, he earned enough money to explore countries from Europe to the Middle East to America. Seeing urban vitality throughout the world made him understand that there was something different that could be introduced to the South African market. Liebmann realized that if the urban lifestyle was properly integrated, it could make sense for the young and upcoming generation in Johannesburg.

“I returned to Johannesburg, and felt a sense of emptiness [19](#).” Liebmann started this process at Monash University to gain a foundation for business. After establishing a laundry business in Johannesburg that ex-

panded from one to seventeen laundromats in just a three-year period, Liebmann realized that his innate entrepreneurial skills could help him do something bigger. He missed the urban lifestyle he enjoyed abroad in cosmopolitan cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Berlin, and set on a mission to find a live-and-work space that would allow him to engage with the city. A friend introduced Liebmann to 44 Stanley where he renovated and converted a small factory into his own utopian live-and-work space. In doing so, Liebmann learned three critical lessons. First, the creative community can play a very important role in transforming an area. Second, empty factory space was an untapped resource and had incredible potential to become new live-and-work spaces. Third, urban regeneration was his passion. Together, these three critical factors motivated Liebmann to realize his vision and find the perfect location for his urban regeneration vision: the Maboneng Precinct.



Propertuity

Turning Liebmann's conceptual idea into a reality hinged on the establishment of a property development

company: Propertuity. The name is a combination of the words “property”, defined as a building or buildings, and “perpetuity”, defined as the state or quality of lasting forever, resulting in “Propertuity: building with a state or quality that lasts forever [20](#).”

Propertuity seeks to create “dynamic spaces that offer alternative lifestyles for individuals that seek to live, work and play in an uplifted and connected environment. We take a community focused approach to development, with an understanding that the contributions of a neighborhood’s inhabitants to its identity are as pivotal to its success and sustainability as the redevelopment of buildings. We strongly believe that by taking a curated and inclusionary approach to the repurposing of buildings at the surrounding urban environment, regeneration provides the infrastructure for collective encounters and new engagements resulting in unique and energetic neighborhoods where business and residents prosper.”¹

¹Propertuity, “About Us”. 2014. <http://propertuity.co.za>.

One of Liebmann’s first priorities was to find the perfect catalyst to trigger the art community to set up shop in Maboneng. “Artists and creatives are often the best catalysts for change. They are the perfect first adopters. It’s not in any way unique to [Maboneng]. It’s been proven in many cities throughout the world. It was important to get them in as they would become the foundation of the community [21](#).” He started this movement by convincing world-renowned artist William Kentridge to move his studio into a large space at the center of Maboneng shortly after opening his first building, Arts on Main.

Growing beyond this first building was not an easy process. In the early days, it was a case of changing people’s perceptions. Many who had fled to the northern suburbs of Johannesburg had not been to the city center in 20 years. There was still a long way to go but changing people’s mindsets and allowing them to accept change was underway. This was no longer a one-man operation: the brains behind Maboneng were an operation that consisted not only of the team at Propertuity but also of critical private partnerships.

Liebmann worked with Italian architect Enrico Daffonchio from the beginning to convert industrial spaces into a cultural hub. Liebmann also had a silent partner and financier, whose initial investment financed Arts on Main and the creation of Propertuity as an entity. Propertuity's strategic private partnerships have since expanded to ensure that operations run smoothly. These companies include Mafadi Management Letting Sales, the property management company responsible for the management of completed buildings in Maboneng and Pam Golding Properties, which markets residential accommodation and provides strategic guidance. In addition to these urban management companies, other private sector partnerships include the security companies keeping Maboneng safe, as well as private banks looking to invest in Maboneng.

Maboneng

Searching for a canvas for his artistic vision of urban regeneration, Liebmann and Propertuity chose the near-suburb of City and Suburban for the site of their development.

City and Suburban: From Industrial Wasteland to Maboneng

Located on the lower eastern fringe of Johannesburg City, the formerly industrial near-suburb of City and Suburban (C&S) in many ways embodies the shifting demographics and functions of central Johannesburg. In addition to the shifted demography of the city – over 99% of C&S is viewed by the Census as “black African” – C&S also demonstrates another key feature of present-day Johannesburg: emptiness. Just as only 8% of Johannesburg's 4.5 million residents live in the city center, C&S has shrunk to the point where only 2,719 residents live there²². Previously an industrial hub, between 1990 and 1994, 337 manufacturing firms closed down, taking 20,000 jobs with them²³. C&S is now one of the most abandoned and derelict sections of the former city center. It is a suburb with block after block of abandoned buildings: physical reminders of an urban era.

The run-down abandoned buildings were seen as a complete mess and overlooked by many. Liebmann however, saw this as an opportunity: reimagined, reinvented, and reused urban spaces that could drive the regeneration process of Johannesburg²⁴. Starting in 2008, Liebmann and his team at Propertuity began the

process of transforming this no-go area into a vibrant urban community.

Welcome to Maboneng

Meaning “place of light” in Sotho, Maboneng (M[A’]-bo-neng) “is an urban neighborhood. It is a community of like-minded people, artists, entrepreneurs, bankers, lawyers, people from all walks of life, that have come together with a common interest of engaging with urban Johannesburg [25](#).” Bordered by Berea, Market, Albrecht and Main Streets, the Maboneng Precinct started out as just one building on Fox Street: Arts on Main. A collection of artist studios, office spaces, galleries, and retail outlets, this abandoned factory served as the catalyst for the development of the rest of the community. On Sundays, Arts on Main hosts the popular Market on Main, where the theme “For Joburg By Joburg” and “Made in Maboneng” runs rampant, catering to the community of innovators with a little bit of everything from fashion to food to business. The success of this development triggered the decision to further regenerate the neighborhood and transform it into a broader Maboneng Precinct. The district has since expanded from Arts on Main and into surrounding buildings, creating a small yet vibrant neighborhood.

A Walk Through Maboneng



1. **Arts on Main:** The original building in Maboneng, Arts on Main is a “mixed-use creative hub” that hosts artists such as William Kentridge, the Sunday Market on Main, SMACK! Republic Brewing Company and other galleries, shops and apartments.
2. **Main Street Life:** In addition to a number of apartments, Main Street Life hosts the 12 Decades Hotel, the Bioscope Independent Cinema, the POPart theatre, the Adidas AREA3 Skate Park and a number of restaurants.
3. **Fox Street Studios:** Multiple live-and-work studios, fashion retail stores, ethnic restaurants, and Maboneng’s community center, A Curious Cave. A Curious Cave offers educational materials, classes, and art supplies for students, residents, and visitors.
4. **The Main Change:** A shared workspace that offers alternative office space for small to medium entrepreneurial enterprises. It also features retail stores, OPEN (a co-working space with full office services), and Cocoon (a health-food rooftop café).
5. **Revolution House:** The first floor offers artist studios, film studios, music recording studios, band rehearsal rooms, as well as a barbershop and fashion retail stores. The top floors offer residential apartments including both double studios and penthouses.

6. **Artisan Lofts:** Completed in 2013, this building is an entirely residential development.
7. **Museum of African Design:** An events and museum space intended to showcase problem-solving design and large-scale art exhibitions. It includes ground floor retail, on-site workshops for artists and artisan collaboration, and an underground nightclub.
8. **Maverick Corner:** A future retail and residential development in the planning phase.
9. **Curiosity Backpackers:** A 60-bed backpacker hostel built in support of an artist exchange program with a food stand, performance space, and other communal areas.
10. **Remed's View:** Designed by renowned Spanish street artist Remed, this will be Maboneng's first building dedicated to student housing, with 100 student beds.
11. **Urban Fox:** The Urban Fox will host a small number of high-end apartments, three retail units, and an athletic club. When completed, the Urban Fox will connect Fox and Main Streets via the landscaped boardwalk, Maboneng Canal.
12. **Off the Grid:** Built in support of the Mabo'go program, Off the Grid will be a transportation hub for visitors and Maboneng residents.
13. **Craftsmen's Ship Workshop Space:** A mixed-use facility, the Craftmen's Ship will have industrial-styled residential and retail spaces when it opens in 2014 as well as indoor parking, a garden and a swimming pool [26](#).

Spotlights on Maboneng: Who's Who?

The heart and soul of Maboneng are the business owners, residents, and visitors. The rise of creativity as a fundamental economic force has come to be known as the “creative class [27](#)”, including artists, filmmakers, fashion designers, actors and entrepreneurs.



George Khosi – Maboneng Boxing Coach : Khosi is a boxing legend from Hillbrow that many artists have engaged with over the last 10 years. He still runs his Hillbrow Boxing Club but teaches boxing and boxing workouts on the roof of the 12 Decades Hotel multiple times a week [28](#).



Bheki Dube – Curiosity Backpackers : At just 21 years old, Bheki Dube is the Neighborhood Host for Maboneng. He and his business partner, lawyer Greg Solik, started Main Street Walks and Curiosity Backpackers, a tourism company that offers a guided experience through Johannesburg's inner city, and the opportunity to experience Johannesburg like a local [29](#).



Shruti Nair – One Creche at a Time : Shruti Nair not only works for Propertuity but also founded One Creche at a Time, a community development project that aims to uplift and refurbish the physical environment that pre-school learners are taught within, and to develop a curriculum to teach first time learners how to think outside the box [30](#).



Zein Ferreira – The Nollie Faith Project: Main Street Life resident Zein Ferreira noticed everyday that when he came home from work, kids were playing on the street with anything they could get their hands on. “We are just regular people who are trying to make a difference in a tough community. Skateboarding is giving these kids opportunities that they would not normally get to experience [31](#).” He started a skateboarding school that has since expanded into the Adidas AREA3 Skate Park in Main Street Life.



Andrew Martin – SMACK! Republic Brewing Company : Martin is one of the three founders of the only microbrewery in Johannesburg's inner city. "We're an artisan brewery born from the desire of three beer enthusiasts to create curious flavours and smash boundaries." SMACK! launched in Arts on Main in 2013 and will soon be expanding their Craft Beer selection into bars across Johannesburg [32](#).



Alice Cabaret – Propertuity, GRIND : Serving as the Urban Strategist for Propertuity, Cabaret is also the director of GRIND Studio, a knowledge platform and international network of regenerated neighborhoods and buildings restored by owners, organizations, and developers. GRIND, a nonprofit organization, is based in Maboneng and facilitates access to funding and technical knowledge that help drive urban innovation and investment in partnering neighborhoods³³.

Interaction With Broader Community

Maboneng faces a surrounding population that is characterized by its poverty and regarded by the middle and upper class as ‘unsafe’. While Maboneng has thrived in C&S, its proximity to dense low-income areas such as Hillbrow and Berea place Maboneng at odds with its immediate environment³⁴. In order to fulfill the vision of a sustainable community that interacts positively with the surrounding environment to incorporate various socioeconomic classes, Liebmann has been cautious about Maboneng’s reputation. Liebmann and his team are careful to emphasize that Propertuity did not buy “any buildings that have a residential component; we have

not evicted anyone from any buildings” and have explained instead that Maboneng has instead increased the demographics of C&S. Instead, Liebmann’s intentions seem to be the exact opposite: he wants to provide economic opportunities for the population around Maboneng while creating a space that interacts with the surrounding community. To do this, Propertuity has hired half of its employees directly from the surrounding population³⁵. In addition, it has provided its staff with affordable housing and the opportunity to enjoy and take ownership of Maboneng.

The precinct as a whole is entirely permeable for the rest of the city’s population, irrespective of race, class, education or usage, setting it apart from previous developments such as 44 Stanley. While the environment outside of Arts on Main was once an uninspiring, multi-story, derelict context, it has been transformed into a creative development. Maboneng draws the community in to enjoy the local artistry, essentially making it a non-exclusive public gallery³⁶. Furthermore, Propertuity has worked to improve outside conditions within Maboneng by providing a full pavement upgrade and landscaping a full section of Fox Street. Liebmann explains this phenomenon by pointing out that, “the intention is for the typically poor urban users and the middle class users of Main Street Life to share common space³⁷.”

Security

Given the circumstances of the surrounding community and Liebmann’s dedication towards an open street environment in Maboneng, security has become a major and immediate concern. To address this concern, Propertuity has adopted a multipronged approach intended to address the immediate need and establish a culture of support and safety. This approach includes building positive relationships with the urban poor by ensuring their ability to access Maboneng and share in its opportunities. Meanwhile, private security guards and ‘car watchers’ roam the streets visibly while CCTV cameras capture and record individual movements in and around the precinct allowing residents and visitors to feel comfortable in engaging with the community³⁸. Most importantly, however, is the presence of people walking on the streets that contributes to a sense of security for Maboneng’s visitors. This final factor is what distinguishes Maboneng from other urban development plans like gated malls and even 44 Stanley. Maboneng has created a culture of ‘eyes on the street’ supported by security guards who act as the first pair of eyes but also encourage others to be mindful of everything that is happening in the Precinct. By empowering the people to be cautious and supportive of each other, Mabo-

neng has created a sense of ownership among its visitors and this sense of safety and security is strikingly different from other areas. Whereas Maboneng might be more susceptible to crime than a gated community, entering Maboneng feels safer because it breaks down the wall between ‘them’ and ‘us’. While visitors to 44 Stanley feel like they are protected by formal security in an unsafe environment, Maboneng’s visitors feel safe as part of a community to which they now belong.

Moving Forward

Expanding Maboneng

Maboneng’s rapid success has led pundits to inquire about Liebmann’s vision and plans for the future. Liebmann has moved quickly to vocalize his vision explaining, “five buildings isn’t going to bring about enough change that we are all looking for. It’s going to need to be 50 maybe 100 buildings; it’s going to need to be an entire neighborhood that sets the example for that environment that we are all seeking³⁹.” To fulfill the change that he is looking for, Liebmann plans to house 3,000 people in the next five years through five new developments. Meanwhile, the University of Johannesburg’s planned nearby expansion will provide Liebmann with a market boom as he aims to cater to a larger demographic.

Currently, Maboneng is seen as an entity that has built and encourages a relationship with the street. It is currently seeking to expand into neighboring New Doornfontein, a district with a similar post-industrial emptiness. The team expects New Doornfontein to develop in a similar way though it expects it “to have a different vibe than Maboneng and a different character but will find its identity with time⁴⁰.” As Maboneng continues to expand, however, it will quickly run into the neighboring community. This means that expansion plans will either have to buy out or enfold the existing population. This calls for a renegotiation of space and provides an opportunity to encourage increased interaction across various socioeconomic groups. As Maboneng expands it has the potential to begin excluding a certain demographic from accessing the area. This poses a unique dynamic for Maboneng and an opportunity to prove that everyone belongs within the CBD and can share the same space. Given Liebmann’s vision of an open and un-gated urban community, keeping the precinct accessible to all is an important pillar to his success. If Liebmann can strike the right balance between profitability and sustainable development, however, he can create a truly diverse community that goes beyond a

homogenous socioeconomic population.

Exporting the Maboneng Model

Maboneng has been met with great enthusiasm within Johannesburg, throughout South Africa, and from the international community. Leading city planners and governments across the world have sought out Liebmann and his team to replicate Maboneng's success in other cities. Already, Propertuity has mentioned Durban, Cape Town, and Accra, as potential sites for future Maboneng-style projects. Would an expansion take a toll on Liebmann's focus and Propertuity's allocation of resources? Does Liebmann define success as creating a sustainable Maboneng or does he require also expanding his model throughout Johannesburg and beyond?

Urban Regeneration Thought-Leader

Finding itself in the center of a global conversation on urban regeneration, Propertuity has decided to take on a leadership role. Liebmann has spoken at numerous international events and conferences such as the TedXStellenbosch Conference and the World Economic Forum on Africa, telling the world of his vision. Furthermore, Alice Cabaret, Propertuity's Head Urban Strategist, has founded the Global Regeneration Initiative for Neighborhood Development (GRIND). GRIND is a knowledge platform that connects communities across the globe in order to facilitate the sharing of urban regeneration best practices, knowledge, resources and skills. In just six years, Liebmann and Propertuity have become highly visible and vocal thought-leaders on urban regeneration. Should the team continue to focus on leading a global movement or will this take away from Maboneng's impact on Johannesburg?

Liebmann's Next Step

With the sun going down behind the Johannesburg skyline, Jonathan Liebmann brings his gaze back down to the festive atmosphere on Fox Street. Excited by the potential for catalyzing greater change in Johannesburg and cities around the world, Liebmann is faced with a crossroads. Should he respond to requests to set up the Maboneng model in new cities or should he focus solely on expanding Maboneng and reviving Johannesburg's CBD? Should he continue to act as a voice for urban regeneration or bring his focus back into

Propertuity?

“A trickle of impecunious artists hungry for space and light is one thing; a flood of lawyers with a hankering to renovate is quite another. The difference may be just a matter of time—but when it comes to gentrification, time is all. [...] Economic flows can be reversed with stunning speed: Gentrification can nudge a neighborhood up the slope; decline can roll it off a cliff. Somewhere along that trajectory of change is a sweet spot, a mixed and humming street that is not quite settled or sanitized, where Old Guard and new arrivals coexist in equilibrium. The game is to make it last.”¹

—Justin Davidson. Journalist, *New York Magazine*

“Residents do not necessarily react to gentrification according to some of the preconceived notions generally attributed to residents of these neighborhoods. Their reactions are both more receptive and optimistic, yet at the same time more pessimistic and distrustful than the literature on gentrification might lead us to believe. Residents of the ‘hood are sometimes more receptive because gentrification brings their neighborhoods into the mainstream of American commercial life with concomitant amenities and services that others might take for granted. It also represents the possibility of achieving upward mobility without having to escape to the suburbs or predominantly white neighborhoods.”²

—Lance Freeman. Assistant Professor of Urban Planning, Columbia University

¹Justin Davidson. “Is Gentrification All Bad?” *New York Magazine*. 2 February 2014. <http://nymag.com/news/features/gentrification-2014-2/>.

²Lance Freeman, *There Goes the Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press: 2006.

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