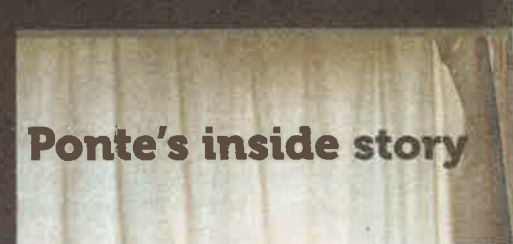


LS

INSIDE: Travel, Food,
Fashion, Home weeklies
plus Television

Sunday Times Lifestyle Magazine
August 17, 2014





THE TOWER OF FABLE

Photographer Mikhael Subotzky and illustrator Patrick Waterhouse have made the definitive book about Ponte City — an insider's view of Joburg's monument to urban delusions, writes **Tymon Smith**

PONTE City has been a constant part of my life in Joburg, even though I've never been inside it — a common experience for middle-class inhabitants of the city.

I was born in its shadow, and then grew up with it on a distant horizon, its Coca-Cola sign blinking in the darkness across the veld. I've been skirting around it, sometimes tantalisingly near to it, ever since.

Perched on the Berea Ridge, isolated from the rest of the Joburg CBD skyline, Ponte would hardly be notable if it were replicated in Manhattan or São Paulo. Even in Joburg, were it to stand closer to the Carlton Centre and the other towers of the CBD, we wouldn't make such a fuss about it. But Ponte was always meant to stand out, be seen, be thought about. And the further you live from it, the more fantastical the ideas about it you project onto its concrete mass.

When you drive to Joburg from the south or east, it's the first sign of

the city. As Ivan Vladislavic writes in his introduction to Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse's new book on the building, Ponte has been "a lightning rod for society's hopes and fears, and always a beacon to navigate by".

Over the years, umpteen tall stories have been circulated (often by those who haven't even ventured into Ponte) about what goes on inside. But it's never been suggested that Africa's tallest residential building be destroyed, only that it be repurposed and reinvented. It is an essential organ in the body of Johannesburg and, yes, the choice of organ is obvious.

When it opened its doors in 1975, the city's phallus was a crude and hubristic symbol of white privilege — offering modern luxury living to white families and bachelors with money. Ponte offered an earlier version of the "live, work and play" dream sold by Melrose Arch.

In the '80s and '90s, Ponte became a symbol of a radically chang-

ing city, and of the rise of Africa in Joburg — regarded with perplexed impotence by those who had thought the order it glorified would never end. Suddenly Ponte was feared as a giant drug den full of immigrants, with a central core rumoured to be filled with five floors' worth of rubbish.

A 2007 insurer's letter, included in the book, shows that negative

Architect Paul Silver said the building made for 'lousy apartments but a perfect prison'

perceptions lived on. Headed: "20 reasons why we should NOT insure Ponte," it points out that "Ponte is a legendary drug haven," and that "the centre core of the building is a popular suicide spot".

Ponte's low point came in the mid '90s, when an American archi-

tect named Paul Silver tried to convince the government that the building made for "lousy apartments but a perfect prison".

With a little tinkering, Ponte could have become the perfect embodiment of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Luckily, no one wanted a prison looming large on the city's skyline. Now, thanks to a failed redevelopment and some attitudinal Viagra, Ponte has evolved into a more balanced, natural community befitting the democratic age over which it towers.

Subotzky grew up in Cape Town, a city organised not around a man-made structure but a geological one. Brutalist architecture never got as far in the Mother City as it did in Johannesburg's nakedly capitalist self-image.

Subotzky has risen fast to global acclaim with photography that is fascinated with demarcated spaces — prisons, the Cape Flats, the small Karoo town of Beaufort West. When he moved to Joburg in 2008 his instinct

was at first, he says, to "avoid Ponte at all costs because it's such a cliché, everybody's taken that picture".

"Shortly after I moved to Joburg, a journalist friend insisted on taking me there and then I realised that everybody had reduced the building to the view of it in the landscape or that iconic view up it. Originally, I thought, 'OK, I'll take a couple of pictures that try to get beyond that and do a simple before-and-after kind of thing'."

Five years later, the project that has emerged in collaboration with his friend and illustrator Patrick Waterhouse is much more than "a simple before-and-after kind of thing". It's a rich examination of Ponte's realities, its mythologies and its history, consisting of a book of photographs accompanied by 17 smaller booklets all packaged in an archive file box. A one-stop shop for pondering Ponte.

In 2007 it was announced that Ponte was to be redeveloped, returning it to a more cosmopolitan,

democratic version of its original conception — executive apartments for young urbanites with money for spectacular views and furniture packages advertised under titles such as “Future Slick”, “Global Fusion” and “Zen-Like”.

The developers started from the bottom up. Residents were forced to leave, flats were gutted and debris was thrown into the core. Those on the top floors stayed on until construction reached their flats.

Camping out in a showroom on an upper floor for three weeks, Subotzky and Waterhouse spent days riding the lifts, asking to take portraits of residents, getting to know who was who and piecing together a narrative of the concrete beast’s limbo.

In abandoned apartments, and in amongst the rubble at the floor of the core, they found and collected scraps of documents, visa applications, letters, photos, magazines and other ephemera.

“It was quite a strange time,” says Subotzky. “Half the building was empty, yet the top half was occupied. I have fond memories of looking out at the city, but I also had all the stories about Ponte in my head. I was a bit nervous and didn’t know the city very well back then.”

In keeping with Subotzky’s idea that the project should document the view from inside the building, and seizing on a remark by modernist high priest Le Corbusier that “the essence or spirit of a building is defined by its apertures”, the two artists decided to create typologies of every window, door and TV set in the building.

When it was built in 1975, it was touted as the largest building in the southern hemisphere: 162 metres high with 54 storeys and 464 flats. That’s a lot of pictures and a lot of ground to cover, but they did it.

Denis Hirson, in his essay for the project, describes the resulting trove of images as “thresholds for our coming and going out, little frontiers of everyday life”. Subotzky and Waterhouse flattened them out to produce a triptych of the world as seen from within Ponte: a simple yet strikingly effective and intimate antidote to the building’s failed, apartheid-infected modernist ambitions.

When the world shook in 2008, Ponte felt it. The developers ran out of cash,



In 2008, furniture packages were titled 'Future Slick', 'Global Fusion' & 'Zen-Like'

abandoned the plan and Ponte returned to ownership of the Kempston Group.

Exaggeration and failure have always,

as Subotzky points out, gone hand in hand when it comes to Ponte. “As a 1970s modernist structure built for whites only, it was always an exaggeration, it couldn’t exist as that, both in terms of the city-in-the-sky architecture and also the falsely promised divisions of apartheid. It was an exaggeration that couldn’t ever be reality.

“In the same way in the late ’80s and ’90s, when Ponte was seen as the most dangerous building in the world, that was a different kind of exaggeration. It was said to be far worse than it actually was, even though there were times when it was quite overcrowded and stuff.

“And the redevelopment of 2007 and 2008 was all about city living, New York style. Let’s sell it off to trendy interracial couples and this and that. It was again an exagger-

ation of where the city was at that stage.” But now all the waves of hyperbole have subsided. “It’s a very nice way for our project to end, that Ponte has settled back to normality,” says Subotzky.

It took five years for Subotzky and Waterhouse, while working on other projects, to figure out how to put the book together. And Vladislavic, with his eye for the details and rhythms of the city’s transitions, made the perfect editor.

Subotzky says they produced 25 book dummies before arriving at the final product. They were “always very clear that we wanted it to be both an archival project and a photographic project and a research project — which is a bit megalomaniacal, but it felt like the only way to approach the subject.”

Each booklet fits into a space in the main book, so the reader can pause and investigate an aspect of the building: from its public perception, to the story of its construction, to a story imagining Italian novelist

Italo Calvino in Johannesburg.

For Subotzky, this marks the end of a period in his work about controlled or confined spaces. His new exhibition opened this week at the Goodman in Cape Town and continues his interest in representation and the limits of photography. Ponte seems a natural full stop to his early work, and a fine jumping-off point for a new series of concerns.

Who knows what Ponte will become 40 years from now? All we can be (nearly) sure of is that it will still be there. Someone else will rewrite its story — and they will need this book as their starting point. **LS**

• *Ponte City* is published by Steid and will be launched at Ponte on August 23 at 11am. Copies can be bought for R1500 plus VAT at the Joburg Art Fair, and at Subotzky’s exhibition, “Show ‘n Tell”, at the Goodman in Cape Town until September 13, and at the Goodman in Joburg. All pictures copyright Mikhael Subotzky & Patrick Waterhouse, courtesy the Goodman Gallery.

