

# Ponte City and the urban myth

Alexander Matthews

"Everybody's got a Ponte story," says photographer Mikhael Subotzky. Many of these can be found in *Ponte City*, his book collaboration with British artist Patrick Waterhouse, which weaves photography, essays and found documents to showcase a visually rich and complex history of the iconic Jo'burg building.

The book launches with an installation of some of the works at Ponte City itself and a panel discussion and book signing at the FNB Joburg Art Fair this weekend.

When Subotzky moved to the city in 2008, he deliberately avoided Ponte in his search for a new photographic project. Looming over the skyline, the modernist tube was "Jo'burg's biggest cliché"; every photographer "worth his salt" had taken a picture inside its core. When a journalist friend persuaded him to go to the tower to take a few snaps, though, he realised that, although images of the building's core were common, nobody had "really engaged with the people and the history of the building in a thorough way".

Ever since its completion in 1976, Ponte has been "a crucible for people's mythologies," Subotzky says. "The best and worst of Johannesburg has constantly been projected on to this building. It's like a roller-coaster of myth" reflecting "a metaphorical history of Johannesburg and South Africa".

Ponte was initially presented as "the ultimate in upwardly mobile, aspirant white South Africa", embodying the synthesis of urban modernity with apartheid's "twisted utopian project". Later it became notorious for drugs and overcrowding — "a symbol for the decay of Johannesburg", which Subotzky believes was as exaggerated as the perceptions from its heyday.

In 2007 and 2008, new developers projected dreams of "inner-city



View finder: Mikhael Subotzky photographed every window, TV and door in Ponte City as part of his project with British artist Patrick Waterhouse

chic, New York-style city living". With plans to create luxury apartments, their attempt to gentrify the building — which resulted in tenants being evicted from the derelict bottom half of the building — was scuppered by the global financial crisis. The owners took the building back and did a basic refurbishment.

Today Ponte is home to working- and middle-class people; there are no prostitutes or drug lords, Subotzky says — the building is "just normal now". "That feels like a very appropriate place for the project to end, in relation to all that exaggerated mythology."

Subotzky and Waterhouse spent the first three weeks living in one of the developer's show flats as part of what would become a six-year project living in the show flat.

"I was nervous. I had heard all the

stories about Hillbrow and Berea," Subotzky says. Residents were "remarkably open", however, and the pair eventually got into every apartment.

"People see a camera and think you're photographing for the *Daily Sun*," he says. So it was essential to explain what they were doing. Photography has always been about relationships for Subotzky anyway — "the pressing of the button is almost a by-product of engaging with people".

Inspired by a Corbusier quote that claims the apertures or negative space of a building express its essence, they photographed every TV, window and door in the building in what became the project's backbone. "This flattened out the round building," Subotzky says: it showed the relationships between people living on top of each other.

Picking through the detritus of emptied apartments, they kept encountering photographs and documentation left behind by evicted tenants. "We realised that these things could tell a whole history that we couldn't with our photographs — of all the people who had been there, in a kind of psycho-geographical sense," he says. Like archaeologists, they started "trying to piece the narrative together from fragmented documents".

Subotzky wanted *Ponte City* to be "a historical document" — an attempt to make sense of the building as a metaphor, a structure, a home.

A hardback book of photographs is accompanied by 17 booklets featuring essays meticulously edited by Ivan Vladislavic: "A way of floating different layers of narrative on top of each other."

Vladislavic's "Flat 3607" recounts

the story of two Congolese cousins, using the documentation found in the room. Harry Kalmer's fictional piece imagines a visit by the Italian journalist Italo Calvino to the tower. Melinda Silverman's essay explores Ponte City's design and construction.

"Ponte is the centre of Jo'burg but so many people in my circles wouldn't go there," Subotzky says.

Saturday's book launch at the tower aims to lure an art fair crowd to the building, and is "an honest attempt to take the work to a broader audience". "It's just making the effort to build little bridges," says the photographer.

*Ponte City* is published by Steidl and the Walther Collection with the support of the Goethe-Institut. The book launches on Saturday August 23 at 11am at Ponte City, and at the FNB Joburg Art Fair at 5pm.