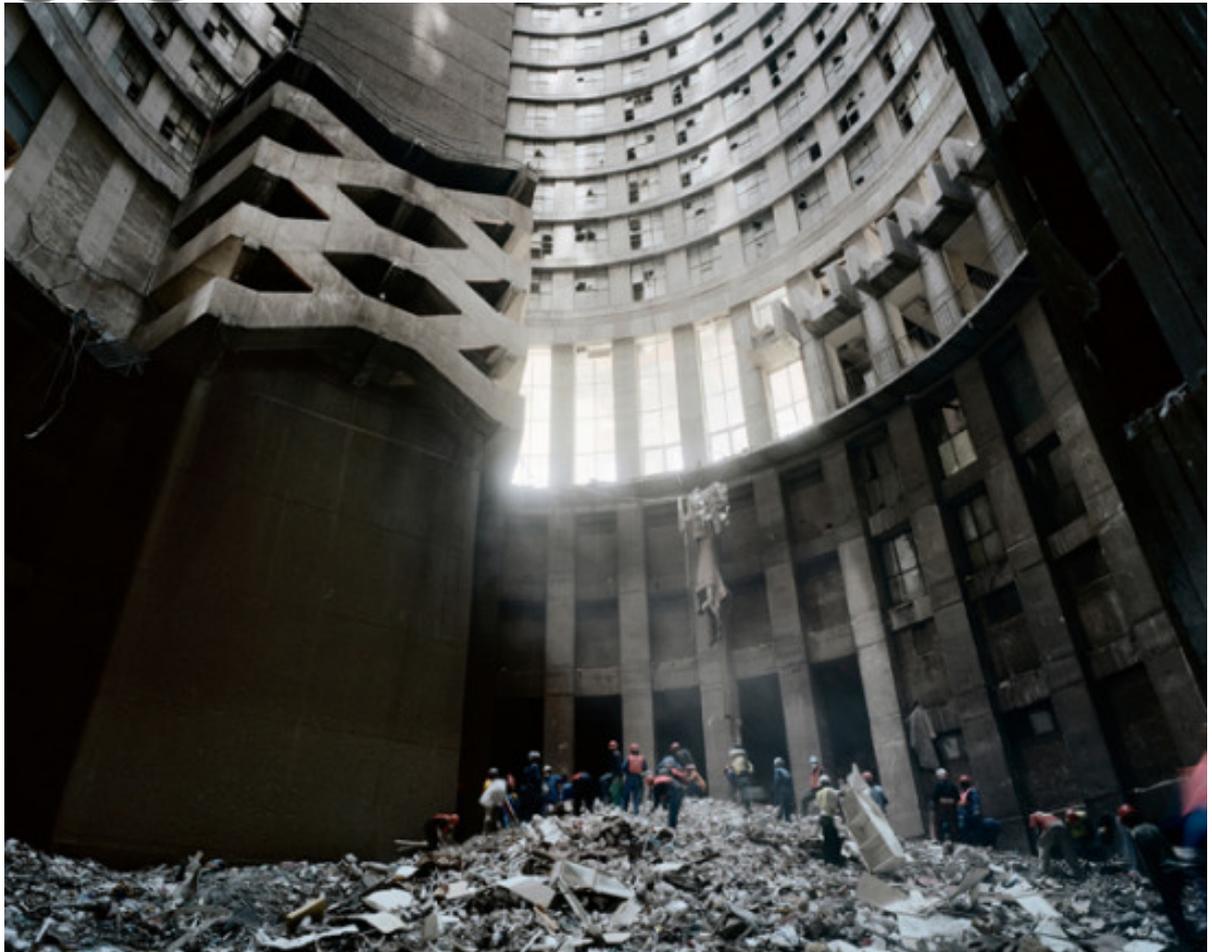


Aesthetica

Blog



[Ponte City: Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse, Scottish National Portrait Gallery,](#)

[Edinburgh](#)

Featuring the work of South African photographer Mikhael Subotzky and British artist Patrick Waterhouse, this photographic project documents five years in the lives of the inhabitants of Ponte City: an iconic Johannesburg landmark and the tallest residential skyscraper in Africa. This 54 storey building has dominated the Johannesburg skyline since 1975. It originally offered luxurious living to the wealthy white elite, but with the end of apartheid in the 1990s the building became a refuge for black newcomers from the townships and rural areas, and then immigrants from elsewhere in Africa. After entering into a period of decline, it had come to symbolise urban decay by the turn of the century. In 2007 a large scale refurbishment project saw residents evicted, the apartments gutted and Subotzky and Waterhouse begin to create a visual “before and after” of the building. However the collapse of the real estate market put a brutal end to the renovation plans, and the building was left in a semi-destructed state with tenants squatting in the block.

Subotzky and Waterhouse continued their project to record the rise and fall of what had served as a symbol of prosperity; they interviewed the remaining tenants and photographed the half-occupied building to capture the stark contrast between the original plans and the now half-derelict structure. Striking photographs show the cylindrical building's central atrium, originally intended to allow light to enter its 500 flats from both sides, now turned into a rubbish heap; meanwhile debris from the short-lived renovation work now reaches the fifth storey and fills the space once planned for an indoor ski slope.

Subotzky and Waterhouse photographed every door in the multi-level structure, the view from every window and the tenants of the half-occupied block. When they knocked on doors to ask permission to do this work, they were often invited in, leading the artists to photograph their homes. Through their typologies of doors, windows, and TVs, the artists created new structures of narrative and representation for this landmark building, as well as recording the intimate lives of the many tenants through a series of remarkable portraits: a woman photographed in a lift, which often served as a make-shift studio for example.

The photographic series will be presented unglazed and pinned to the wall, arranged in sections that explore the architecture of the building, and the personal stories of inhabitants. The photographs will be complemented by archival documents such as newspaper clippings and architectural sketches, and items left behind by the evicted tenants; from haircombs and mixtapes to mail and family snapshots these objects will offer another dimension to this compelling documentary project.

Ponte City: Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse, until 26 April, Scottish [National Portrait Gallery](#), Edinburgh.

Credits

1. Mikhael Subotzky & Patrick Waterhouse, *Cleaning the Core*, Ponte City, Johannesburg, 2008, Mikhael Subotzky & Patrick Waterhouse, courtesy Goodman Gallery © Magnum Photos.