

Triumph of life

Ponte City in Johannesburg is both a symbol of apartheid and failed urban living. Yet as an exhibition about the building shows, it's more complicated than that. By **Susan Mansfield**

Dominating the Johannesburg skyline is a towering, cylindrical edifice of concrete and glass. This is Ponte City, standing, unignorable, on the Berea Ridge. Fifty-four storeys high, the tallest residential building in Africa, Ponte is iconic, notorious. In its 40-year history, it has encapsulated something of the history of South Africa itself.

Finished in 1975, Ponte was the ultimate in chic urban living for the white middle-classes, with a built-in shopping mall, art gallery and swimming pool. But it never quite fulfilled its potential, and as apartheid crumbled, it became a refuge for black people leaving the townships. By the 1990s, it was a notorious no-go area, infamous for drug-dealing and prostitution, a symbol of urban decay. In 2001, it was named as one of the most dangerous places to live in South Africa.

When photographers Mikhael

Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse began a documentary project in Ponte City in 2007, the building was on the edge of another renaissance. Developers had evicted many of the residents – mainly immigrant families – in order to undertake a high-end refit of the apartments, and aim them at a new multi-cultural generation of young professionals looking to live close to the city centre. But as the financial crisis took hold, the development ran aground. Squatters moved in to empty flats and rubbish piled up several storeys deep in the cylindrical building's empty core.

"Ponte is something you can't avoid when you go into Johannesburg, it's so prominent on the skyline," says Waterhouse, the British editor-in-chief of *Colors Magazine*, and an artist working in a range of disciplines, who met Subotzky, a documentary photographer, at an artists' residency in Italy. "It's a building with a chequered history, a complex

history, both relating to ideas around utopia, dystopia, failed ideas of modernism, which is quite a universal story, and a very specific history relating to South Africa. In Johannesburg, most people have a Ponte City story."

Their project, which is to have its only UK showing in extended form at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery this winter, takes an innovative approach to social documentary photography. It is the result of six years of work, exploring a moment in a nation's history through an in-depth study of one building. "The developers had an ambitious plan, to try to turn Ponte into a new kind of utopia, a multi-cultural building for the new South Africa," says Waterhouse. "We thought it would be interesting to follow that. Then the financial crisis came and the developers went bankrupt, but the project had already begun, we were already engaged in trying to understand the building."



Their work began – as every visit to Ponte does – in the lifts, which they made into a makeshift photographic studio for a series of portraits of residents. Subotzky and Waterhouse then knocked on the door of every apartment, asking to photograph the door, and the view from the window. “Because the building has such an incredible view of the city, people understand why you want to take a picture out of their window. They could be in the picture if they wanted, or not if they didn’t.” As they visited apartment after apartment, they also began to photograph the televisions. These – whether tuned to commercials, the God channel, American soaps or French-speaking programmes from Congo – told their own story about the residents of Ponte. The work looks outwards – through the windows, and the television screens – and inwards, turning the lens on the families who inhabited the building.

Set against sweeping images of the towering building, the heap of detritus at its core, and the brutalist beauty of its concrete construction, are images of children playing, a woman sweeping up, a man at a sewing machine.

They quietly challenge the myths of Ponte. “I’m not sure it was ever as bad as people said,” says Waterhouse. “What we found was not abject poverty, but a lot of immigrant workers and families trying to work, get a bit of a life for themselves. Our experience of people was overwhelmingly warm and positive.”

The building was the work of young architect Rodney Grosskopff in the early 1970s. In many ways, it was an idea ahead of its time, and is not unlike the apartment blocks

with self-contained shops and facilities which characterise more recent urban developments. But the sheer scale of it meant that it quickly became a symbol of all that was wrong in South Africa. In 1996, there was even a suggestion that it could be turned into a high-rise prison. The joke was that all you’d have to do was lock the door.

Waterhouse says: “At the time it was built, it was the tallest residential building in the Southern hemisphere. Like a lot of modernist buildings there is something epic about it. When you stand in the hollow core, it looks like something from *Star Wars*. Margaret Atwood said that within every utopia is a dystopia, and within every dystopia there is a utopia. That’s true of Ponte, you see both the utopian aspect of building a tall building, there is always a dream within that, but it also looks quite imposing, you see the inhumanity of it as well.”

The exhibition, and the accompanying large-format publication, explores the building in all its aspects, from its architectural plans to the newspaper stories which helped make it infamous, and even the geology on which it is built. Subotzky and Waterhouse combed the vacated apartments for objects which had been left behind: a cassette tape, a religious magazine, a family photograph, an intimate archive of found objects. Their photographs of the doors, windows and televisions are displayed in grid structures, reflecting the construction of the building itself.

The work made a big impression on Anne Lyden, international photography curator at the SNPG, who saw it exhibited in South Africa in 2011. “It wasn’t just a straightforward documentary project, it was approached in a very creative, very collaborative way. The rigour and tenacity of Mikhael and

Patrick in how they went about this project was so new and engaging. It has resulted in an exhibition which is quite unlike a traditional photography exhibition. Both the exhibition and the book are very indicative of their partnership and the creative synergy that exists between them.

“There is a sense that this is very much not a removed perspective, that people and life are very much attached to this building. It’s that human compulsion, to make a home, to still have the rituals of meal times and creating a safe environment, even if you’re on the 54th floor of this notorious building. For documentary photography, the multi-layered approach is a fresh take on a very long-standing tradition. They’re creating a complex, multi-faceted picture of this one structure.”

Its second attempt at utopia came to an abrupt end, but Ponte has nonetheless undergone a slow transformation in the years since Subotzky and Waterhouse began to work there. The original owner took the building back and made basic refurbishments, apartments were leased, the swimming pool, creche and other facilities reopened. The building is now fully occupied.

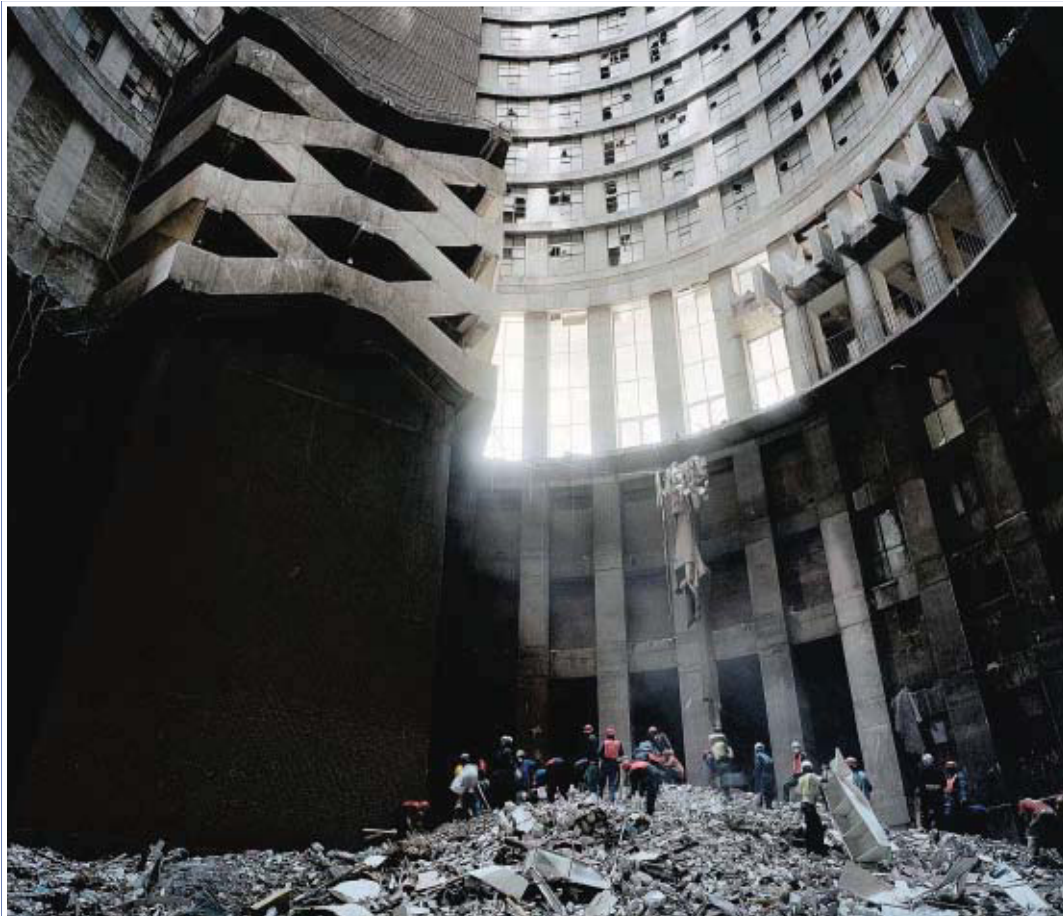
Waterhouse said: “We were there in the summer doing an exhibition in the building and showing the book there. The development hasn’t happened in the way it was planned, but in some ways the building has moved on. More recently, some white people have moved in for the first time. In a way, the idea of it being more of a multicultural place has happened after all. The building is full again and buzzing with life.”

Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse: Ponte City is at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, from 6 December until 26



April 2015. A Question and Answer session with both artists will take place in the Photography Gallery in the SNPG on 6 December at 2pm.

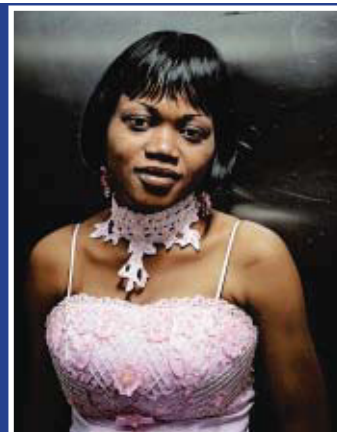
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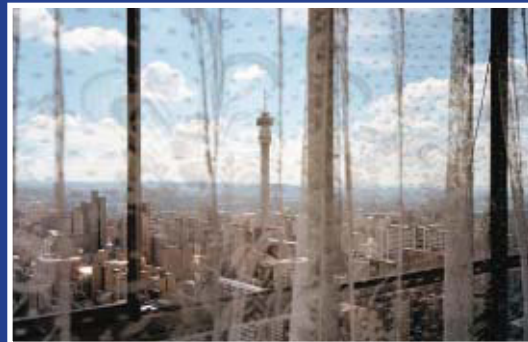
PHOTOGRAPHS: MIKHAEL SUBOTZKY AND PATRICK WATERHOUSE, COURTESY GOODMAN GALLERY © MAGNUM PHOTOS

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Clockwise from main: workers clear the core of debris; inside one of the Ponte flats; a lift portrait; view from the Ponte; the iconic building as seen from Yeoville Ridge, Johannesburg



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