



A Cultural Oasis

Embracing the idea that artists are often the catalysts for urban regeneration, an interest in gentrification has seen the private sector investing in the cultural economy of Johannesburg. CLASSICFEEL's Lara Koseff speaks to one such visionary, Jonathan Liebmann, developer of the new Arts on Main inner city complex

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One winter night a friend and I navigated the bleak, deserted streets of Jeppestown in search of a development called Arts on Main. It was the day of the official opening of the new multi-use art space and by the time we entered its tranquil, manicured courtyard, abundant with lemon and olive trees, the festivities were almost over. Having arrived late, we wandered into the warmth of the elegant bar, and after absorbing the bubbly conversation from the remaining drunken loungers, my friend turned to me and said 'I feel like we're in Hyde Park'.

Property developer Jonathan Liebmann and architect Enrico Daffonchio established this highly sophisticated development – an ostensible oasis of upper class ideals within a sea of metropolitan decay – with visions of gentrification and sensitively executed urban renewal. And at the same time Liebmann has striven to create, not only a space, but a district

within the inner city that is open to those who live in the area and secure and compelling enough to attract the middle to upper class citizens who don't.

Arts on Main is not self-contained. It is based on a series of multifaceted commercial partnerships, providing space for a restaurant and bar, artist studios, galleries, cultural organisation headquarters, advertising agencies and designers in various disciplines. Among these are William Kentridge, the Goodman Gallery, David Krut Publishing and Printmaking Workshop, the Goethe Institut and Bailey's African History Archives. Yet the prestige of these entities is not envisioned to make the development exclusive. It is, in essence, open to all.

'We generally have very high calibre tenants,' Liebmann says, 'but we haven't created an elitist feeling... we keep the place very open. There are no physical barriers for coming in here. They are public spaces. The tenant that's dealt with that



most effectively is Goetheonmain, the Goethe Institut. They've literally opened their space up to the public. People staying in the local hostels, in Jeppestown etc, have participated in some of the events and have come there as spectators.'

Arts on Main visited in daylight is a somewhat different experience. It is slightly less enchanting than at night, but it is easier to pick up on its integration into the area. The surrounding block, while still retaining the weathered look of the inner city, is litter free and well maintained. One of the reasons Liebmann was drawn to area was the fact that the Johannesburg Development Agency has been progressively developing and maintaining the infrastructure and quality of sidewalks in districts surrounding the Ellis Park. Along with the plush sidewalks, flags on the street lamps say 'Arts on Main' as well as 'The Maboneng Precinct', Liebmann's name for the surrounding area. Maboneng is a Sotho word meaning 'place of light' and is often attributed to Johannesburg.

Liebmann has already invested in another building in the area – forming part of this envisioned precinct – which he plans to convert into a hotel in line with the art-themed boutique hotels that have sprung up all over the world. His idea for this hotel is that each floor will be decorated according to an aspect of the city of Johannesburg's heritage.

Liebmann's interest in heritage extends beyond that. Another reason for Arts on Main's location is the old industrial buildings in which it is situated. Daffonchio and his firm have perceptively reconstructed the buildings, which date back to 1911 and still maintain the original façades. At the same time Liebmann feels

that, because of vast space and triple volume ceilings, the site 'lends itself to an artistic conversion'.

Which brings up the question of why Liebmann, a property developer obviously interested in making a sound investment, would want to establish a culturally driven centre, which even in the most flourishing economic times is heavily dependant on an audience with a fairly substantial disposable income. 'Artists,' Liebmann asserts, 'have historically always pioneered and been the catalysts for urban regeneration, if you look at Soho and Shoreditch in London, and the Lower East Side in New York they're all is being gentrified by artists.' In these major cities artists have often sought out more industrial, outer lying areas that offer bigger, older spaces and cheaper rent. And where these artists have gone, the masses have often followed, turning the peripheral into the central, the unorthodox into the fashionable. The throngs of curious northern suburbanites that frequent Arts on Main events appear to support Liebmann's argument.

At the same time Liebmann believes that where foreigners go, locals will follow. He intends to establish a shuttle service from major hotels to Arts on Main. He also believes in the viability of establishing a hotel in the Maboneng Precinct due to the proximity of the airport and the way in which, 'it lends itself to being a gateway into the inner city' as Jeppestown is fairly accessible coming from the east and the north.

While Liebmann's vision is certainly ambitious, there is no doubt that Arts on Main is already attracting diverse crowds. This is an interest generated by its prestigious tenants, and propagated by the general view that a visit to the multifaceted site, no matter the hour, is nothing less than a charming, one-of-a-kind experience. **CF**