

Ponte City, Johannesburg: A history of appropriation and the appropriation of history.

It is Sunday evening, December 13th, 2020 and the dusk sky is darkly heavy; a foreboding mood hangs over Johannesburg. Where else would a summer sunset be charcoal-colored? In contrast, Happy, my driver, inured through familiarity to the brooding cityscape, cheerfully points to this or that landmark: here, the FNB stadium built for the 2010 soccer World Cup, there, Hillbrow Tower. My Uber car windows are rolled down as far as their long-since defunct mechanisms will allow; peering through the hot dust blowing in from the road, there is really only one landmark that interests me: Vodacom Tower, or to give the building its proper name, Ponte City Apartments. [Fig 8.1]

Built in 1975 in Johannesburg's downtown Berea district, Ponte was designed by Mannie Feldman, Manfred Hermer and Rodney Grosskopf of Feldman and Hermer Architects as a glamorous complex to house wealthy whites. Organized around a vast open core and 54 stories (or 568 feet) high, it contains 464 flats with parking for 550 cars; when first built it was Africa's tallest building and remains the continent's tallest residential building.¹ [Fig. 8.2] The tower's first residents began arriving in June and July 1976, during the South African winter. The popular account of the building's subsequent history (both presented and questioned in this chapter) relates that as a result of mounting unrest and violence in the face of the apartheid machine, Ponte's original occupants left over the following months. A decade later the building had been "hijacked" (the South African term for squatting) and its central well became a repository for all manner of detritus piled several stories high, including, if urban legend can be believed, human corpses. "South Africans," the *Mail & Guardian* commented in April 2012, "continue to see the block as a dangerous den of sex and drugs managed by pimps and tsotsis (thugs) where only the brave, desperate or stupid would dare to tread."² Ponte's riches to rags history continues to give rise to such disapprobation yet Ponte's complex and contested history

¹ Anon, Ponte- The tallest residential building in Africa, *Planning & Building Development*, November 17th 1975, p.16

² *Ponte: An icon reborn*, 23 April, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ay_jmWb4Nek&t=147s, accessed 20 December, 2020

is not simply another all-too-familiar tale of the decline of a metropolitan centre Ponte's more profound story tells of appropriation and reappropriation, of a building, its interiors, histories and their reuse.

Remembering the many newspaper indictments and salacious anecdotes about Ponte, I strained my eyes that Sunday evening to look for lighted windows as signs of domesticity in the looming tower, but from the distance of the M2 motorway its thousands of windows offered resolute, even aggressive darkness.³ Only the glowing red of Vodacom's neon advertising sign atop the building registered any electrical life. Against thunder clouds gathering in the distance Ponte City stood as an omnipresent, giant, upright cigarette stub that even God has not dared to extinguish. For a moment, exposed again to Ponte's looming presence, cast all the more threateningly by the thunderous sky, I wondered whether I, like so many others, had succumbed to the neverending stories of Ponte City as a dreaded "Tower of Terror"?⁴ The building's reputation as a forbidden zone survives; "You'll need a body-guard" the couple in the Heathrow check-in queue told me with serious concern when I mentioned that I was flying to Johannesburg to meet colleagues and Ponte residents. Yet I also knew that in their homes at Ponte this Sunday evening would be hundreds of ordinary families doing ordinary Sunday evening things: cooking, watching television and coaxing children into bed and all without any menace from the building they inhabit.

Used both popularly and by scholars as a metonym for the wider metropolis, Ponte's decline is frequently mapped onto that of the wider city.⁵ From the 1980s through the 2000s Johannesburg's

³ While Ponte has received scant academic interest, it has been the focus of numerous newspaper and internet articles, blogs and other media attention. Sifting out any particularly salacious and therefore less useful pieces from this material uncovers the work of serious journalists, filmmakers and academics and provides a rich seam of documentation and interviews which have supplemented information gleaned from my own exchanges with residents. Largely taking place in the decade leading up to the time of writing in 2020 such material includes for example, Illinois's Northwestern University, Johannesburg, The African City project for the programme of African Studies, 2017, <https://sites.northwestern.edu/exploresouthafricanlit/about/>, accessed 29 December, 2020 and Philip Bloom's 2012 documentary, *Ponte City*, available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ekDvKfQSaY&t=35s>, accessed 29 December 2020.

⁴ A typical popular media piece acknowledging this trope is YouTube video *Inside South Africa's "terror tower"* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoWMqdcyxdo>, accessed 29 December, 2020. Elsewhere bloggers remind readers that Ponte was the film set for Neil Blomkamp's dystopian sci-fi *Chappie*; for example, see Ryan Lenora Brown's piece *The South African Building that came to Symbolise the Apocalypse*, The Atlantic, February 21, 2017

⁵ For example the photographer behind the fine-art book and exhibition *Ponte City* (2014) Mikael Subotsky is quoted by a staff reporter for the Mail & Guardian as saying "Ever since its completion in 1976, Ponte has been 'a crucible for people's mythologies' [...]" "The best and worst of Johannesburg has constantly been

reputation was as a global centre but for the disorderly, the squalid and the violent.⁶ Parallel urban myths and news items about Ponte have created an uncomplicated narrative of dereliction which has all too frequently been racially biased. Thus Ponte, onetime epitome of law-abiding, luxurious white living experiences a downfall (so this narrative would have us believe) at the hands of impoverished, unlawful, black South Africans arriving from Soweto and other outlying townships whose illegal occupation of the building leads to its downfall. Post apartheid, once the nation's international borders open, Ponte falls victim a second time to misuse by African immigrants from elsewhere on the continent, or so the stories surrounding the block would have us believe.

However, to choreograph its history too strictly, whether according to the dominance of one set of occupants or another or political and economic timelines, is misleading and reductive. It also feeds the narrative that with appropriation (that is, a takeover by black occupants, in the case of both the building and wider city) comes disintegration. Not only is this version of events at odds with lived experience, as will be shown, but it ignores the fact that in the first instance, Johannesburg, and thus Ponte City, were built upon appropriated land. Johannesburg is situated in the province now known as Gauteng (Gauteng meaning "place of gold" in Sesotho, one of the region's languages.). First populated by the San, in the 18th-century, the region became home to the Sotho and Tswana. By the 1820s the legendary Zulu King Shaka reigned. and by the mid-1830s his nation increasingly found itself in conflict with the incoming Dutch-speaking *Voortrekkers* (pathfinders) who were journeying inland in their bid to colonize the South African interior and escape British rule at the Cape. Thus the white-settler ousting of indigenous South African peoples from their lands began; this; the 1884 discovery of gold, along a 40-mile ridge led to colonizing what became Johannesburg. The 20th-century apartheid regime's appropriation, that led to legalized white

projected onto this building[...] a metaphorical history of Johannesburg and South Africa.'" Ponte City and the Urban Myth, Mail & Guardian, 22 August 2014, <https://mg.co.za/article/2014-08-22-00-ponte-city-and-the-urban-myth/>, accessed 22 February 2021. The relationship between Ponte City and Johannesburg and the possibility of being able to read the latter in terms of the former is cleverly unpacked Svea Josephy's article, Acropolis now: Ponte City as 'portrait of a city', Thesis Eleven, Volume: 141 issue: 1, page(s): 67-85

⁶ Paddy Wivell, (Dir.). Louis Theroux. *Law and Disorder in Johannesburg*, Johannesburg, BBC, 2008

minority rule of disenfranchised non-white majority population arguably finds its roots in these earlier land battles and in British treatment of the Dutch-speaking, Boer settlers.⁷

By 1948 the party that represented the Boer or Afrikaner descendants of these first settlers, the Afrikaner National Party, came to power on a pro-apartheid ticket. The regime was to remain in place until 1994 when Nelson Mandela, leader of the African National Congress was voted to power in the nation's first democratic elections. Before becoming President, Mandela had famously spent 27 years in jail but shortly before his imprisonment he had spent time in Johannesburg.

Following the issuing of a warrant for his arrest in June, 1961, Mandela had hidden in a flat in Berea with a friend. In his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* Mandela remembered the “quiet white suburb a short distance from downtown”.⁸ By the late 1970s suburban housing had given way to newly-built tall apartment buildings (Fig. 8.3). Sixteen years on from Mandela's covert stay, wider Johannesburg's economic strength and white confidence in the apparently, not only workable, but seemingly unstoppable, apartheid regime fuelled the creation of flats throughout Berea for new socio-economically mobile white South Africans and European – chiefly British – whites. A postcard sent from Johannesburg to San Rafael in California in September 1978 depicting high-rise apartment blocks illustrates the extent to which Berea had become populated by clusters of these buildings. In neighbouring Hillbrow, newly filled with the same building stock as Berea, “young white couples moved out of their parents' homes and lived in the relatively cheap apartments until they had saved sufficient money to buy a house in suburbs further from the city centre.”⁹

Ponte too had been built, less for families than short term “bachelor” living. Perhaps that made it easier for what appeared to be “white-flight” from the city centre to Johannesburg's safe northern suburbs that is popularly thought to have emptied Ponte of its white occupants almost as soon as they had arrived. This dramatic *volte-face* is often tied specifically to the violence following the

⁷ See for example, Harriet McKay. “It's Fun in South Africa”, in *Design and Apartheid*. 2021. Johannesburg, University of Johannesburg / Jacaranda and Opperman Lewis, H., *Apartheid: Britain's Bastard Child*, 2016, Reach Publishers Wandsbeck, ZA

⁸ Nelson Mandela, Rolihlala. *Long Walk to Freedom*. London, Abacus, 2004. p. 328

⁹ Stadler, J., Dugmore, C. “Honey, Milk and Bile”: a social history of Hillbrow, 1894–2016. *BMC Public Health* 17, 444 (2017), <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-017-4345-1>, accessed 25 February, 2021

June 1976 Soweto Uprising.¹⁰ Residents with flats facing southwest would have seen smoke rising from behind the yellow mine dumps that marked the edge of the city. Just beyond these, Soweto was on fire. By the 1980s, Ponte had all its services cut by the city government.¹¹ Without the loathed *dompas* (indicating their right to live in what was still a designated white area), Ponte's residents, according to popular legend, appropriated the block illegally.¹²

After Mandela's 1994 reopening of the South African borders Ponte became a hub for economic and political refugees from elsewhere in Africa. Thus a building designed to house around 2000 people, reputedly became the domicile for 10,000 or so occupants but now without any services.¹³ With more than a degree of xenophobic disparagement Ponte became known at different times as 'Little Zaire' or 'Little Lagos',¹⁴ According to popular accounts, it was during this period that floors 11-14 reputedly became the domain of sex-workers, pimps and drug dealers and in which Ponte became known as a "vertical slum". In an April 2012 interview for the *Mail and Guardian*, Philemon Thwala remembered,; "Drugs, it was a major problem around this place and then prostitution and robberies especially, it was very, very, very bad." In the same interview Rams Magadi recalled having been too afraid to use the elevators, even when they were working, and walked up and down stairs between the ground and the 37th floors.¹⁵ However, these histories that concur with the popular and news media's views of Ponte as a "Tower of Terror" do not present the full picture.

Aware that I was interested in researching Ponte's polarised reputations -white luxury living / black slum, Gilbert Mwape at Dlala Nje introduced me to Mbabazeni "Hallelujah" Madlala.

¹⁰ Attributed by some commentators as the beginning of the end of apartheid, the Soweto Uprising which began on June 16th 1976 arose as a series of demonstrations by township school children protesting the law that they be taught in Afrikaans. Among the hundreds of protestors gunned down by the police was the 12-year old Hector Pieterse. The moments after his shooting -captured by local journalist Sam Nzima and printed in global newspapers- sent shockwaves around the world giving rise to widespread condemnation of South African socio-political policy.

¹¹ Interview with Siphiso Zikhali, March 30th 2019, Ponte City apartments.

¹² The legally institutionalised system of Grand Apartheid, prevalent in the 1960s and '70s stipulated the removal of non whites from designated whites-only areas. Accordingly, non-whites with permission to work in white areas -as domestic workers for example- were required to carry a passbook or *dompas* detailing their rights to movement.

¹³ Interview with Siphiso Zikhali, March 30th 2019, Ponte City apartments.

¹⁴ Interview with Siphiso Zikhali, March 30th 2019, Ponte City apartments.

¹⁵ The film accompanying the article is available on YouTube, as Ponte: An icon reborn, 23 April, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ay_jmWb4Nek&t=147s, accessed 20 December, 2020

Hallelujah arrived at Ponte in 1982 and took a maintenance job, first filling in for his uncle but becoming a permanent employee. His account of the building's past contrasts the grim accounts mentioned above. During the 1980s and '90s, Hallelujah explained, the building was not, in fact, devoid of white occupants.¹⁶ Since its small apartments lent themselves - as originally envisioned- to short-term occupation these were often rented by European and, particularly frequently, British tourists and visiting business people.¹⁷ It was they, rather than, Ponte's black population who brought sex-workers into the building. This counter - or perhaps more accurate - narrative also is supported by Bruna Levitan who occupied one of the building's penthouses from 1978. Moving to Ponte at a time when whites are usually described as having left the building, she not only recalled her top-floor neighbours setting up a brothel but also that, "the ground floor area had a lot of riff-raff...when we stayed there the rough crowd, the *rough-ish* crowd was white...There were a lot of rowdy teenagers and working guys."¹⁸

Given these contrary histories, how should one make sense of Ponte? Frans Cronje, CEO of the leading South African think-tank, Institute of Race Relations (IRR), unpacks implications for the nation of South Africa's proposed (and opposing) modes of government in *The Rise or Fall of South Africa*.¹⁹ His polemic provides a useful model for analysis of the many conflicting commentaries about Ponte City and for understanding lives lived in this troubled building. Cronje depicts South Africa's future as ranging across "four great forces that have the country in their grip"; revolution versus reform and glory versus trauma. (Fig 8.4).²⁰

The north-south axis of Cronje's diagram runs from a society that adopts a "chosen glory psyche" to one that adopts a "chosen trauma psyche".. In mid-1970s Johannesburg - the period of Ponte's

¹⁶ A view endorsed for the population of neighbouring Hillbrow's apartments in Jonathan Stadler and Charles Dugmore's article on the area's social history; "By 1985 an estimated 70% apartments were occupied by whites, 25% by coloureds and Indians, and 5% by blacks". Stadler and Dugmore, accessed 1 March, 2021

¹⁷ Zoom interview with Hallelujah Madala, February 13th, 2021.

¹⁸ Straight to the Top, from an interview with Bruna Levitan, pamphlet X, African Queen, p. 4, in Mikael Subotsky and Patrick Waterhouse, *Ponte City*, 2014, Gottingen, Steidl

¹⁹ Frans Cronje. *The Rise or Fall of South Africa*. Cape Town, Taffelberg, 2020.

²⁰ Cronje, p. 13.

building - its townships occupied a place of trauma, and the tower block can be read as occupying a place of glory. However, attitudes towards living at Ponte, past and present, do not fall at either end of Cronje's glory-trauma spectrum but along a continuum between the two. The architects of Ponte (from the Latin, *pontem*) chose the name as its height was to suggest a bridge to heaven: hence, the higher one lived, the greater one's potential for a royal and paradisiacal lifestyle. This mythical implication appeared in the name given to the residencies on the highest floors, "Palazzo-en-Paradiso." as outlined in a table included in an anonymous article produced for the journal Building & Planning Development shortly after the tower opened to residents in November 1975²¹ (Fig 8.5).

In his survey of the city's socio-architectural landscape, Clive Chipkin points out that;

Johannesburg in 1975 did not possess the skyscraper crowdedness of congested island sites like Hong Kong or the Manhattan cynosure...situated on flat Highveld interior plains... there were few ... [geographical] barriers to constrict urban growth.²²

Noting there was plenty of space in which to build horizontally rather than vertically, Ponte's design can be seen to have reflected its status as a vanity project. Indeed for the site Ponte was built on, the building acts as visual synecdoche, that is, Ponte as *eGoli* (isiZulu, "place of gold"). Housing whites indirectly reaping the benefits of South Africa's extraordinarily lucrative mining industry, Ponte is situated on a hilltop, the Hillbrow Ridge. The tower block and its occupants thus dominated Johannesburg's lower lying city centre. This was itself surrounded the lowest terrain of all (both topographically and according to apartheid, socially), the city's perimeter townships, these housing the miners of the appropriated wealth that were South Africa's gold and diamond mines.

While Ponte's story seems irresistibly drawn to polarization, paradise or netherworld, Ed Charleton's analysis presents a more nuanced and sympathetic position, his 2020 London School of

²¹ Anon. Ponte- The tallest residential building in Africa. Planning & Building Developments, November 17, 1975

²² Clive Chipkin, *Johannesburg Style. Architecture and Society 1880s – 1960s*. 1993 Cape Town, D. Philips Publishers. p.162.

Economics paper, *Trashing Johannesburg: Ponte City-as-archive of everyday loss*, that relies on the eponymous work by Mikhael Subotsky and Patrick Waterhouse, *Ponte City* (2014).²³ Part artwork, part textual commentary, Subotsky and Waterhouse's photographic essay and accompanying commentary by others provides a multi-layered account of the tower that bridges the gap between journalistic and academic accounts.²⁴ *Ponte City's* images, though compelling, often depict fragments rather than entire views of rooms. Additionally, while it includes abundant views of Ponte's infamous central well or "nucleus", as the architects referred to it, [See again Fig. 8.2] photographs of whole interiors, (as opposed to portraits of inhabitants featuring incidental background interior details) beyond the front doors that face onto the well are noticeably absent. This partial picture, and consequent wonder about the interiors appears in acclaimed South African author Ivan Vladislavić's contribution, "Flat 3607" that hovers between the known and the surmised in tracing a biographical account of the occupants of this particular Ponte apartment. As Charlton comments:

...his [Vladislavić's] essay exploits the lateral patterns of accretion and collocation defining *Ponte City* [that is the book] -as - archive- more broadly. But here text and image also abet the provisionary status of the other, each refusing to overcome or diminish the basic loss of ordinary history that now defines the building.²⁵

The liminal terrain occupied by Vladislavić's essay, informed both by hard evidence and hypothesis, illustrates one's position as researcher of the design of Ponte's apartments. Given the building's reputation for short-term housing of refugees, illegal occupation, brothel site or drug den, perhaps few residents would be available or inclined to allow photographs of their apartments. Equally, cameras might have been a luxury most Ponte's residents could not afford. For a variety of reasons, known and unknown, then.²⁶

²³ Ed Carleton, *Trashing Johannesburg: Ponte City-as-archive of everyday loss*. *Cultural Geographies*, 27 (2). 277-292

²⁴ Mikhael Subotsky and Patrick Waterhouse, *Ponte-City*, 2014, Göttingen, Steidl

²⁵ Subotsky and Waterhouse, p. 12

²⁶ Although this is again my conjecture, since Ponte City nowadays acts as a permanent home for many families, photographs of interiors may have become far more common. I have yet to test this idea however.

It is strange that for such a showcase, so few interior images of Ponte as “paradise” (whether plans, renderings or photographs) exist, even from its opening. Other than two darkly lit photographs of the signage for the shopping and entertainment mall on the ground floor no interior images were published in the extensive article about Ponte in the journal *Planning & Building Developments*, November 1975²⁷ (referred to above- see again Fig. 8.5). The article does provide some description of the mall;

THE CREATION OF NUCLEUS

The design of the shopping centre at Ponte presented an unusual challenge: to create a facility which would realize the potential of the location and the building...[with a] potential market from the Johannesburg region and from tourists.

To obtain the greatest possible impact the centre is treated as one large space...with retail trading contained in free standing units....

To enhance the shopping experience, the interior walls, floors and ceiling of the overall space are finished in dark brown, the trading kiosks and shops painted with bright colours in a high gloss epoxy, and signing is applied to different coloured illuminated perspex cubes suspended from the ceiling.

As one walks through the centre, the overall effect expresses the quality of sophisticated fun and play which is the essence of the Nucleus at Ponte.²⁸

Curious as to why so little visual evidence of the building interior exists, I reached out to Rodney Grosskopf and was kindly put in touch with his daughter Bridget (now a Director of Grosskopf, Lombart and Huyberechts and Associates (GLH+) Architects) who sent me a rendering of the mall concept (Fig 8.6)²⁹

The construction of appropriate dwelling spaces for a new socially and economically mobile élite needed to be reflected in an infrastructure which, alongside retail spaces included a hairdresser, a bowling alley, a concert venue, two tennis courts, a playground and swimming pools.³⁰

Interviewed for *Ponte City*, House of Africa, Pamphlet X, Bruna Levitan records “The best thing

²⁷ Anon. Ponte- The tallest residential building in Africa. *Planning & Building Developments*, November 17, 1975, p. 35.

²⁸ Anon. Ponte - The tallest residential building in Africa. *Planning & Building Developments*, November 17, 1975, p. 37.

²⁹ These confirm the vision laid out in the *Planning and Building Developments* article of November 1975.

³⁰ On my first visit to Ponte in June 2018 I only noticed one open shop, most of the retail space lying vacant though now renovated following its abandonment through the 1980s. Visiting in December 2020 a hairdressers salon is now also open alongside a couple more general grocery shops.

about living in Ponte was the facilities and the view;” she also provides rare commentary on one of the block’s interior’s, in this case, of her family’s penthouse flat.

We drove our car into the garage and went straight to the top [into the penthouse apartment]. Either the lounge or the dining area was raised, you went up a couple of steps. It was quite cosy. There were two staff rooms. My maid Beverly must have had one of them. The flat was fully furnished, very nicely furnished. We had brown shaggy carpets and we had a brown leather sofa. The kitchen was nice and big, there was a laundry on the third floor...And it had- I wouldn’t call it a patio- it was a deck, I suppose.³¹

Although unusual, given the emphasis on single unit living for unmarried occupants, the family life that Levitan describes was to resurface at Ponte in the 2000s. When Subotsky and Waterhouse documented Ponte between 2007 and 2011 they photographed everyday family life and thus illustrated the extent to which the block’s inhabitants, while by no means wealthy, were reclaiming its apartments from drug bosses and pimps. Kelly Sindi moved into Ponte in 2006 and remembers the years around 2010–2015 as being particularly significant for the upgrading of flats at the instigation of manager, Ria Breedt and her husband. In Breedt’s spirit, Sindi now runs a community building organization that has 122 members.³² A devout Christian, Sindi views Ponte as at the peak of Cronje’s chosen glory axis. While acknowledging the building’s past, she sees her immaculate, well-appointed fifty-fifth floor apartment as a safe, peaceful and perhaps even privileged, sanctuary(Fig. 8.7). This is not to say that Ponte has provided such domestic bliss and security for every resident; Ntandiso Pilime (Fig. 8.8) first came to Ponte in 2009 when visiting her sister. Although she and her daughter are settled in a one bedroom apartment on the thirtieth floor, Pilime who works for Dlala Nje has an equivocal view of residency: “The apartments are nice, the security is good. But the management are failing us. Year after year it’s getting harder” by which she meant that she felt that service charges were rising but management failing in its duty to maintain the building.³³

³¹ Straight to the Top, from an interview with Bruna Levitan, pamphlet X, African Queen, p. 4, in Mikael Subotsky and Patrick Waterhouse, *Ponte City*, 2014, Gottingen, Steidl

³² Interview with Kelly Sinidi, Ponte City apartments 15th December, 2020

³³ Interview 15th December with Ntandosi Pilime, Ponte City apartments

Despite the successive turnaround of Ponte's series of bedevilled owning companies, Dlala Nje, receives overwhelming approval from Ponte's occupants. Dlala officers (Fig. 8.9) organize empowering projects that will unlock creative talent, but also, as Zeluleko Nkomo, Programme Facilitator, commented in March 2019, "we always try to keep them [Ponte's children] very busy, off the streets."³⁴ The organization's ground floor office serves as a children's play space and its converted penthouse area provides space for visitors on tours of the building as well as a bar and rentable event space. That Ponte offers such a space to the public illustrates the evolution generated by the improvements initiated by Dlala. On my most recent visit to Ponte in December 2020, Gilbert Mwape showed me around the new Dlala teen space that offers Friday pizza nights among other activities.

If each of the stories of the flat occupants were told, the composite account of the building would be messy and contradictory but more authentic. In another photographic project allied to *Ponte City*, Subotsky and Waterhouse documented images of thousands of TV screens, doorways and windows around Ponte. Composing an equally patchworked set of intertextual representations, this account attempted to claim a new human narrative for the tower block that rejected the polarities of vilification and redemption, as well as the dehumanized, monolithic image seen from the distant window of a moving car on that hot December 2020 Sunday evening.

Visiting Ponte at that time of that trip to Johannesburg countered this disquieting view however and confirmed, instead, a rather more appropriately realistic image of the tower in my mind. I reflected on visiting under joyfully bright winter skies (Fig. 8.10) and in spring when the neighbouring streets light up this barbican with Barbie-doll pink jacaranda. I witnessed the camaraderie of the Dlala Nje team, stationed under their glorious recycled-plastic chandelier and realised that the only way to do justice to this extraordinary building's story was to attempt to reclaim its histories. Neither heaven nor hell but somewhere in between, as Ntandosi Pilime says of her home,

³⁴ Interview 30th March 2019 with Zeluleko Nkomo, Dlala Nje office, Ponte City apartments

Ponte; either way ‘it’s fine’.³⁵ Like its residents, and the city that it towers above, Ponte and its inconsistent stories persist despite any attempt to legitimize or hide any one history.

Johannesburg confronts us with all the contradictions and tensions of post-apartheid reality at their most intense. By virtue of its dynamism and scale, the city serves to refract them so that the dynamic interaction between order and disorder, between multiple orders and the jagged edges of ruin, become most visible and most intense in this place... New forces, new problems and new questions come to the fore as we emerge from the ruins of the old. Many of our assumptions are questioned and much of what we took to be true breaks to pieces. We find we have to think again.³⁶

For every narrative that Ponte either conjures or receives, an equally viable counter-narrative can be found. As Mikael Subotsky comments;

The reality of the building and its many fictions have always integrated seamlessly into a patchwork of myths and projections that reveals as much about the psyche of the city as it does about the building itself [...] And yet, one is left with the feeling that even the building’s notoriety is somewhat exaggerated – that its decline is just as fictional as its initial utopian intentions were misplaced and unrealized.³⁷

Getting behind Ponte-as-drama has been the theme of this chapter. The many hiatus of historical evidence about the apartment block arise from, and have also, so often erroneously, contributed to its story. Ponte, as does Johannesburg itself, attracts hyperbole. Steering a path through historical rumour and urban myth is bound to be an element of any attempt to stitch together a more nuanced account of Ponte as appropriated and reappropriated space within a city whose zones are also redolent of the incoherence of a challenging/challenged past. Just as Ed Charlton’s characterisation of Subotsky’s book *Ponte City*, aims to do, this chapter has sought to “contain, rather than fix, and make inert the building’s fugitive everyday”³⁸

³⁵ Interview 15th December, 2020 with Ntandiso Pilime Ponte City apartments

³⁶ Burawoy and von Holdt, p. 4.

³⁷ Ponte City, Mikhael Subotsky Archive, <http://www.subotzkystudio.com/ponte-city-text/>; accessed January 8th 2021

³⁸ Carleton, 12

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