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### Can slum tourism reverse the plight of Johannesburg's marginalised communities?

*As slum tourism takes off in inner city Johannesburg, Fabian Frenzel asks whether it is enough to break the cycle of advanced urban marginality. This post is part of our joint series with the [Africa at LSE](#) blog on [Social Development Challenges for Africa](#).*



Ponte Tower apartments was once part of the most valuable real estate in Johannesburg. Photo: Fabian Frenzel

The view from the 56th floor of Nicolas Bauer's [Ponte Tower apartments](#) is breathtaking. On a good day, one can spot the Voortrekker Monument on the outskirts of Pretoria from here, Bauer claims. Ponte Tower is a landmark building in the city of Johannesburg and a somewhat unusual starting point of a tour through an area that many consider a slum.

Right below us lies Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville, three neighbourhoods just north of the Johannesburg's Central Business District (CBD). In 1975, when Ponte Tower was built, these neighbourhoods had some of the most valuable real estate in the whole of the country. By law they were reserved for white residents only.

When apartheid crumbled in the 1980s under increasing resistance, the authorities rezoned Hillbrow, Brea and Yeoville as grey areas in an amendment to the [Groups Areas Act](#), leading to the immediate redlining of the three neighbourhoods by banks and the spurring of white flight. While the whites settled in the newly developing suburban sprawl of Johannesburg, urban policy entered a period of neglect and divestment from the inner city. An informal rental real estate market developed in often abandoned and hijacked dwellings, catering for rural to urban migrants from within South Africa and increasingly for migrants from other African countries.

Ponte Tower, like many surrounding high rises became a vertical slum. Today there are still some hijacked buildings in Hillbrow and policy neglect and inaction remains a central problem. But this is compounded by a prevailing negative perception: considered a no-go area since the late 1980s, few better-off South Africans, whether white or black, dare to set foot here.

In the words of the French sociologist [Loic Wacquant](#), these areas suffer from advanced urban marginality. Its central component is territorial stigma which leads to low esteem among residents, further neglect from the policy and private sectors and a high level of mutual distrust among residents that undermines political organisation and collective claims making. Material deprivation leads to symbolic exclusion which effects further material deprivation, a downwards spiral.

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#### Book

*Underground Sociabilities* was published by [UNESCO](#) in 2013. Click on the image for [free download](#).



#### Social media



One aspect largely overlooked by Wacquant is the fact that territorial stigma creates curiosity. Nicolas Bauer moved to Hillbrow in 2013. With a partner he set up the children's charity [Dlala Nje](#) and while looking for funding they turned to tourism. Bauer told me that he felt it was a duty to show others that being in Hillbrow was ok.

*"For far too long Hillbrow was just forgotten. People said: never ever go there, just leave it, leave it, let it go to the dogs. Nobody cares. And that – I think – is changing".*

In the meantime hundreds of South Africans and foreign visitors have been on tours with Djala Nje in Hillbrow and Yeoville and the tour is now ranked the fifth most popular activity on [Johannesburg's trip advisor page](#). Comments and reviews seem to confirm the tours' impact on perceptions.

*"I have lived in Johannesburg for my whole life and had never ventured into Hillbrow until I heard about Dlala Nje. There was a group of 15 of us and while walking through the streets of Hillbrow the locals were very friendly and we didn't experience anything bad at all. (...)I would say that all South Africans need to experience this tour to understand what the people of the area have had to survive. Thank you for changing my perceptions Dlala Nje :)"*

But is the curiosity of better-off tourists enough to break the downward spiral of territorial stigma, policy neglect and material deprivation? Can tourism be an answer to advanced urban marginality?



This view over Hillbrow is a compelling one for slum tourists.

Photo: Fabian Frenzel

There is little doubt that [tourism in slums, townships and favelas is a growing trend in international tourism](#), predominantly occurring in some cities of the global south. An estimated one million people went on a slum tour globally in 2013, mainly in South Africa and Brazil.

We may add to this headcount a growing number of tourists who spent anything from a few days to several months volunteering in marginalised communities, slums and ghettos across the world.

What difference do these visitors make? There is no easy answer to this question. Economically slum tourism predominantly benefits the operating tour companies. Some are charities, others share some of their profits with charities, or create local employment but the overall direct economic effects of slum tourism to address poverty are small.

It is the symbolic domain that is more interesting. Territorial stigma leads to invisibility. Expressions like "no one lives in the centre of Johannesburg" frequently heard in the suburbs allow policy and society to turn a blind eye. Slum tourism, particular if taken up by local elites, may provide increased visibility to neglected areas, scandalise the neglect and give voice to residents.

Beyond this direct political role of tourism, there is the curious interest and value tourists see in

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difference. Behind territorial stigma looms urban life, diverse and complex. In Hillbrow streets are busy, markets, street vendors and bars make a vibrant urban culture, in **Yeoville** restaurants from the whole continent cater for the diverse population. Such life is largely absent from the fortified enclaves of suburban Johannesburg.

In Rio de Janeiro tourism has triggered gentrification processes in some favelas and Johannesburg's inner city neighbourhoods may follow a similar path. To residents this might turn out to be a mixed blessing. The economics of gentrification are well rehearsed: rarely do they favour the poor.

For an academic article elaborating on the issues discussed in this post, see Frenzel, F. (2014). **Slum Tourism and Urban Regeneration: Touring Inner Johannesburg**. *Urban Forum*, 25 (4), 431-447.

### About the Author

**Dr Fabian Frenzel** is lecturer in the political economy of organisation at the School of Management, University of Leicester, UK. He has just finished a two year comparative research project on slum tourism in Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg and Mumbai. More information can be found on the project website [www.qualpot.eu](http://www.qualpot.eu). Follow him on Twitter @fabnomad.

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