

CITY AT PLAY

Finding himself in an unusual frame of mind about his home city of Joburg, **Ryan Enslin** went in search of hope beyond dysfunction, seeking out fellow Joburgers determined to transform the inner city into a place worth fighting for



Braamfontein as the early morning sun rises. Just beyond the static trains, there's lots of movement and growth taking place. Pictures: RYAN ENSLIN

I started falling out of love with Joburg last year. The city that once mesmerised me with her textured, multilayered existence – the one that demands you look beyond the chaos to find her raw beauty – felt like it was slipping away. This is the Joburg where, if you live here, the odds are stacked against you before your day even begins. The city where stepping onto her streets feels like an act of defiance. That Joburg.

Three years ago, I chose to live in the city, eager to immerse myself in its energy. But each day, it gets harder. A sinkhole opened up on the main road behind my building two years ago; the road remains

permanently closed. Now, Putco buses barrel past my window each morning, their air brakes and exhaust fumes replacing the once gentle wake-up calls of the laughter and morning chatter of people making their way to work.

That's just the start. There were 21 days without power this past December. And there was that time when someone stood at my car window around the corner from my home, threatening me with a gun and demanding my phone, only to look at it and hand it back. Not to mention the countless tyres I've lost to Joburg's infamous potholes. That Joburg.

Lately, I've found myself flirting with

other cities, considering a life split between here and elsewhere. But what did it mean that I no longer wanted to live here?

Then, something made me pause. Kitchener's Carvery Bar, a legendary Braamfontein institution, had just reopened after some restoration work. It made me wonder: what if Joburg's story wasn't just one of decline? What if, beyond the dysfunction, I sought out the Joburgers actively working to reclaim the city? What could the future look like? And, as it turns out, there are quite a few such folk.

BRAAMFONTEIN'S REVIVAL
Kitchener's, now part of Adam Levy's Play

Braamfontein portfolio, has been a city staple since 1902. Housed in the former Milner Park Hotel where Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener signed the treaty ending the South African War, it's long been a celebrated meeting place for locals.

Levy acknowledges Joburg's dysfunction – service delivery failures have driven people away – but he remains undeterred. "I know what I can produce here," he says, referencing past projects including the Neighbourgoods Market, Anti Est and Great Dane. His vision remains unchanged; it's merely adapted for life in the Joburg of 2025.

His approach remains entertainment



The refurbishment of Kitchener's Carvery Bar has seen loving restoration and improvements to this legendary go-to space in the inner city.



Fun times at Kitchener's. Picture: SUPPLIED



With wallpaper recreated from the original design and more light in the refurbished Kitchener's Carvery Bar, the space is open and inviting to all Joburgers, as it has been since 1902.

focused, but now with a heightened emphasis on security. Levy is working with fellow city activist Jozi My Jozi to revitalise Smit Street, the key access point to his properties, through infrastructure upgrades and clean-ups.

"Our goal is to safeguard our patrons through a journey," he explains. "Once inside our precinct, they're free to indulge their creative selves."

I press Levy on what this offering will be. The refurbished Kitchener's is clearly undertaken with love and respect for the heritage of the property. There's a sense of celebration of the heritage embodied in the new incarnation of the legend, and Levy tells me that this will be a hallmark of all his future offerings. We spend time talking about a traditional South African steakhouse, a new jazz club, a co-working space with breathtaking views of the inner city decorated with items from his extensive personal art collection, a coffee shop of a standard not seen before and a skate park.

What if Braamfontein could become the place for locals to fall in love with the city once again, I think to myself. With Levy's vision taking shape, it just might – if the city plays its part in the deal. Private investment can reignite the space and light the way forward, but service delivery remains an unpredictable force. Hope in Joburg is a delicate thing. It needs more than ambition: it needs action, commitment and follow through from all stakeholders, the city's authorities included.

Still, if Levy's efforts over the last 20-something years prove anything, it's that this city isn't beyond saving. He sees Braamfontein as a place for creative expression. It excites me and I feel a sense of hope touching my weary soul.

OTHER BRAAMFONTEIN PLAYERS

Another key player in Braamfontein's evolution is property owner South Point, with 17 student buildings in the area. Their offerings once included high-end retail stores such as Puma, Clinique and Converse, but shifting dynamics, largely due to poor service delivery, have altered its commercial landscape.

Joseph Talotta, head of South Point's Retail Commercial Business Unit, shares its vision with me: "Students are our base, but we're building an ecosystem that benefits everyone walking these streets," he says. The latest initiative is a building dedicated to NGOs, supporting a broader social impact.

South Point envisions Braamfontein as a personal development space for students,



The refurbished Kitchener's Carvery Bar stands as a testament to, and celebration of, its heritage in the heart of Braamfontein.



Adam Levy of Play Braamfontein. Picture: SUPPLIED

with a curated tenant mix that ensures access to a variety of experiences, all within walking distance. "They are future Joburgers, after all," Talotta notes.

Meanwhile, the Braamfontein Improvement District (BID), a voluntary association of property owners, works to keep the area clean and safe.

Precinct manager Kelvin Tshabalala attributes much of their success to strong relationships with key champions identified within city government structures, allowing BID to proactively address urban challenges. Signs of green shoots are everywhere.

NEW KIDS ON THE CITY BLOCK

The latest addition to Joburg's active citizenry is Jozi My Jozi (JMJ), formed after Anglo

American's exit from the inner city. Their first project was crucial in establishing JMJ as a force for urban renewal.

Stephen du Preez, a JMJ partner, recalls: "We wanted something high impact to prove we were serious." Their answer? The refurbishment of Nelson Mandela Bridge, a structure that had become synonymous with neglect and crime. The transformation included solar-powered street lights, glass panel replacements and restored laser lighting to bring the iconic bridge pylons to life at night. I attended the opening of the bridge last year and it was a remarkable moment for the city as the iconic structure was returned to its former glory.

JMJ has since tackled major urban upgrades including the Emirates Airline Park [Ellis Park Stadium] precinct. The project, executed in collaboration with multiple city stakeholders, now serves as a blueprint for revitalising similar spaces across the city and South Africa.

JMJ is busy rolling out the Inner City Gateways project, which involves the revitalisation of 12 key access points into the city. Cleaner spaces, street art and upgraded infrastructure await those who traverse these roads.

Other projects among the many on JMJ's agenda include work on the Johannesburg

City Library, the badly neglected Johannesburg Art Gallery and increased lighting on key arterial routes in the inner city. The full project list is extensive and leaves me with a sense of comfort in its bold, unwavering commitment to revitalising the inner city.

But sustainability remains key. "We implement a project, then hand it over to the relevant stakeholders," says Du Preez. Ensuring community inclusion prevents gentrification and fosters long-term urban renewal.

A CITY FOR ITS PEOPLE

The past 30 years have seen the Johannesburg Inner City Partnership (JICP) at the forefront of urban regeneration in the city. CEO David van Niekerk emphasises that their approach puts people first. One of their current standout projects is the Walkable Network.

Inspired by New York's High Line project, which saw a vibrant urban green space built on a historic abandoned elevated railway line, the Walkable Network maps key pedestrian routes – from transport hubs to workplaces, markets and homes – and transforms them into safe, clean and vibrant public spaces. Think green corridors, well-lit pathways and community-friendly "pocket plazas" with nature-based upgrades to city infrastructure.

For a moment I think of the possibility of the spillover from this project to the areas adjacent to the Walkable Network and realise that Joburg's story isn't just one of crumbling infrastructure and crime. It's also a story of resilience, where small acts of renewal – one lit walkway, one repainted bridge, one safe pedestrian corridor – are like green shoots forcing their way through a cracked pavement, each one a promise, fragile but alive.

MORE THAN JUST SURVIVAL

Joburg isn't an easy city to love. She makes you fight for her. But as I listen to those working tirelessly to reshape her, I realise that the Joburg of the future isn't just about survival – it's about possibility.

As I step onto the streets of my city once more, I realise something has shifted, not in the city itself but in me. The potholes remain, the air brakes still jolt me awake, and yet, the green shoots I've seen are impossible to ignore. If others are willing to fight for this city, maybe I am too.

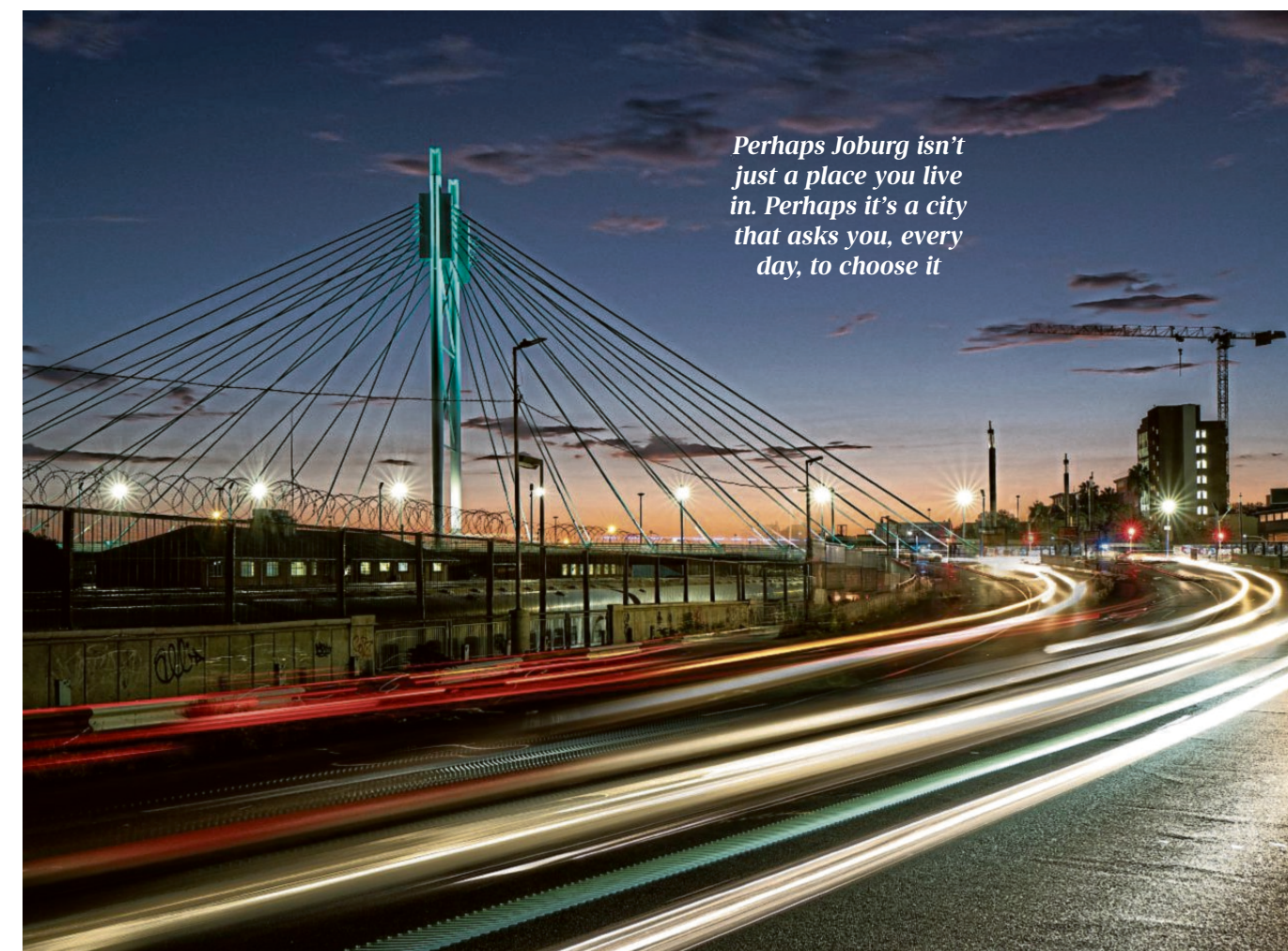
Perhaps Joburg isn't just a place you live in. Perhaps it's a city that asks you, every day, to choose it. And today, I choose to stay.



AUTHOR PROFILE

With a fully packed camera bag always within reach, Enslin journeys through life as a global communitarian, embracing the vibrant tapestry of cultures, landscapes and human connections that define our world. His camera is more than a tool, it's an extension of his storytelling soul.

Through every photograph and sentence, he breathes life into the stories that capture his imagination, offering glimpses into worlds both familiar and unknown. With an intuitive ability to forge meaningful connections, Ryan transforms his subjects into living narratives, leaving an indelible impression long after the final word is written.



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Jozi My Jozi's first project in their programme of urban renewal was to revitalise the Nelson Mandela Bridge, and relight her pylons, restoring the structure's iconic status in the city.