

November 2008

The renaissance of Jozi

The City of Johannesburg is pulling itself together after years of neglect, and people are noticing. The city centre is once again filled with young professionals, and many of them aren't leaving at the end of the day.

Nokwazi Shongwe (25) is one of the growing number of trendy young people who find city living is just up their street. A sales and accounts manager at an events company, she moved into the city when she relocated from Durban.

"I like living in the city, because I have access to everything I need," she says. "I don't drive, so I like to be close to the taxis and bus stops. And since I don't have to battle the traffic, like I would if I lived out in Midrand, I get to my office in the CBD in just 15 minutes."

She can also walk to Wits, where she's studying part-time. Add to this the hospitals on her doorstep, and shopping centres dotted all around, and she's got everything she needs at her fingertips.

The Joburg CBD is slowly coming back to life. Building by building, the city is shrugging off its dirty, neglected face. It's still far from being another London or Paris, but big things are happening in Jozi.

"Urban regeneration is nothing new, it's happening all over the world," says Richard Rubin of Aengus Property Holdings, one of the many commercial developers powering Joburg's turnaround. "The pace of change in Johannesburg however, is incredible, and this is what is attracting attention. Rejuvenation of the city is gaining momentum...fast."

Developers like Rubin are rapidly undoing the damage done when retailers and businesses moved out of the CBD en masse in the 80s and 90s, heading for the city's northern suburbs. As big business emptied out, crime and grime rushed in, turning what was once a thriving hub into a place where people feared to tread.

"The property boom of a few years back, and the escalating costs of rentals, have got people relooking the opportunities to be had in the city centre," says Rubin. "Since 2001, the private and public sectors have invested around R9-bn in various urban renewal projects in and around the city. With 2010 almost upon us, you can expect to see even more money being channelled into rejuvenating the CBD."

If you haven't been into the city for a while, you'd be amazed at the changes which have already taken place. The City of Johannesburg has given its full support to inner city renewal, with executive mayor, Amos Masondo, making it one of his priorities.

The Newtown Cultural Precinct, one of five new tourism developments, is an upmarket precinct enticing people into the CBD. The Johannesburg Development Agency, a leading force in the city's rejuvenation, and Blue IQ, have turned this area into a safe, vibrant cultural experience.

Once-dangerous areas have been rehabilitated, creating tree-filled havens like the Main Street Mall and Gandhi Square, where office workers can spend a peaceful lunch hour in the shadow of some of the city's most beautiful art deco buildings. Taxis, buses and informal traders have found a new home at the Metro Mall, the largest market in the city.

Everywhere you turn there is another rejuvenation project underway. There's the restoration of sites around Constitution Hill, built to house the Constitutional Court, and the Braamfontein Precinct Regeneration Programme, which will turn Braamies into a welcoming corporate zone. Look east, and the Fashion District is in the throes of a makeover, hoping to become the fashion hub of the country. The area around Ellis Park is getting a R600m boost, and the Gautrain will see the Park Station precinct being rejuvenated.

“These regeneration projects are bold statements of faith in the future of the city, that together we can create a secure and thriving Johannesburg,” says Rubin. Increasingly, people and businesses are echoing that faith.

In 2004, SARS relocated to the Carlton Centre, making clear its confidence in the inner city’s rejuvenation plans. Other major organisations like BHP Billiton, Anglo Platinum, Anglo Gold and Goldfields have also joined the return flood into town.

Not just big business is once again calling the city home. Already, over 250 000 people live permanently in the CBD, and developers are scrambling to meet the growing demand, as the city finds itself becoming first choice for aspirant, young people looking to move into Joburg.

The City’s JDA and Johannesburg Housing Company, as well as private sector developers, have transformed dozens of derelict and malingering buildings into affordable, secure places which people are proud to call home.

Old office blocks, hotels and warehouses have been converted, and new developments have joined the skyline, opening up around 10 000 more residential units. Conservative estimates are that another 55 000 units are yet to be built, which will no doubt be snapped up just as fast as previous new units have been.

Rubin recalls when converted office blocks, the Tribeca Lofts development and the luxury Lofts@66, were put on the market – the units sold out in a matter of days. Many of the renovated apartment blocks around the city have 100% occupancy, and arm-length waiting lists.

Affordability and accessibility are the main reasons why young people like Nokwazi are pouring in. City living boasts many pluses, least of which is not having to mow the lawn. Several of the residential developments offer facilities like on-site cinemas, laundry facilities and convenience stores. Major employers are within walking distance, and it’s but a short taxi ride to hospitals and suburban malls. If you’re young and unencumbered, it’s the ideal lock-up-and-go lifestyle.

Only one thing is still holding back a complete deluge of potential residents. Crime. Compared to a few years back, life in Joburg’s CBD has become a lot safer. While it’s no longer the Wild West, it is also no Utopia. Nokwazi doesn’t let the threat of crime keep her indoors, but she’s very wary on the streets, especially after she was mugged recently in a park. “I am very careful when I’m walking, particularly near parks, as not everyone who’s there has good intentions. I also make sure I’m not out late. If I’m at ‘varsity, I’ll leave by 5:15,” she says.

Like all South African suburbs, crime is an ever-present element. The City is not unique in its fight. It has however, taken a proactive stance. It is adding another 200 CCTVs to its multi-million rand CCTV network, which monitors known crime hot-spots, and has stopped many criminals in their tracks. Security guards patrol numerous city blocks, giving a visible face to crime-fighting. Central Improvement Districts have also been established, where property owners, both corporate and private, fund additional security measures.

This sort of co-operation between business and people, between companies, developers, and the City, is helping recreate the Johannesburg of old. It’s still a long way from being able to emulate the tree-lined beauty of Chicago, or the lights and frenetic gobsmacking energy of New York, but make no mistake, Joburg has its eye set firmly on becoming a world-class city, a safe and welcoming place not just to work, but to put down roots.