Johannesburg’s Babel Falls

In a city where xenophobic violence turned deadly, Johannesburg’s most iconic skyscraper showed that South Africans and foreigners could live together in peace. But that is all changing.

By James Kindle

This is a story about a building in South Africa named Ponte, a towering cylinder of concrete, steel and glass. It stands 54 stories on a rocky outcropping on the edge of Johannesburg’s notorious Hillbrow area. Four-hundred sixty-seven flats. Formerly about 4,000 residents. For a time it was the largest residential structure in the Southern Hemisphere; in South Africa it still is. These are the facts.

After that, things get a little murkier.

Because within Ponte’s 54 stories and 32-year history is a maze of interpretations and contradictions that mirror the recent history of the country that surrounds it.

For its architect, Ponte was going to be a showpiece building to house Johannesburg’s white elite.

For the drug dealers and prostitutes who began living and operating in the building once most of the whites moved out after apartheid ended, it became the perfect center of operations.

For Danie Celliers, who now manages the building and worked to decrease the lawlessness inside, it was a problem to solve.

For the thousands of diverse Africans who remained after Celliers had forced out the criminals, it was home.
And for the developers who recently bought the building to turn it into a luxury condominium high-rise in time for the World Cup and forced the current tenants out, it was a vision of rejuvenation—growing fainter as land deal difficulties threaten development.

Despite these differing views, another fact remains: For a time in Ponte, South Africa’s own version of the Tower of Babel, an entire continent’s worth of nationalities formed a world where they could live together in relative peace while xenophobia and violence plagued the area around them. And at least for now, that world is ending.

The rise, fall and rise again

From the beginning, Ponte was going to be something spectacular. Designed by renowned South African architect Rodney Grosskopff and built in 1976, Ponte City, as it’s formally called, was to be South Africa’s first circular skyscraper—a 568-foot hollow tower with a bare rock floor at its base. The building was to be a symbol of the vitality of cosmopolitan Johannesburg, Grosskopff told the Christian Science Monitor. (The architect spends half the year vacationing and was unavailable to comment for this article.) And, with apartheid alive and well in South Africa, Ponte (which means “bridge” in Portuguese) would be for whites only.

That changed in 1994, with apartheid’s fall. As black South Africans began living in formerly segregated inner-city areas, including Ponte, whites vacated the city.

This vacuum left room for unsavory characters to move into Ponte, says Danie Celliers, who took over its management in 2002, when the Kingston Group acquired the building. When Celliers arrived, crime was rampant. Drugs were sold in the building, and prostitutes from Ponte worked in a nearby rugby stadium. Trash was piled four stories high in the core of the building. The surrounding area of Hillbrow had huge crime rates.
“I used to patrol the floors at night because in the passages [where] pipes and electrical
cables were running, they would hide their drugs in there,” he says. “I found knives and guns and
even [a] bow and arrows.”

Celliers, a wiry man with gray hair flopped across his head and spider webs of wrinkles
creeping from his eyes, instituted a series of reforms. He replaced the building’s magnetic key
access system with a biometric fingerprint system because the cards were being sold and
used by outsiders. He banned student tenants, who he says were more likely to vandalize the
rooms. And Celliers did simple things like removing a bulletproof glass pane from the front
desk. “People get more confident and more respect if you properly face them face to face.”

In 2005 Celliers began banning foreigners from other African nations because they
couldn’t be looked up in the complex’s new computerized criminal background database. But
longtime tenants who had proved they didn’t cause trouble were allowed to remain.

“I couldn’t just evict them. If they’d been living there for a while, I allowed them to
stay,” Celliers says. “They were very trustworthy. They weren’t tenants giving us any hassles. I
would have preferred to have family people. I don’t care who they are. All they want is a clean
and safe environment to live in. There’s no reason to kick them out.”

Though the number of foreign Africans dropped from a high of 60 or 65 percent, Celliers
estimates that 20 percent remained even with the ban. Among them were Congolese,
Cameroonian, Ghanaian, Nigerian, Zimbabwean, Mozambican and Angolan. “It was sub-
Saharan south Africa. It was all of them,” he says.

And while the number of African immigrants in South Africa has caused difficulties in
other parts of Johannesburg and the country, Celliers says Ponte was an exception. “This was
amazing actually….Between different countries I never had any problems.”
Ingrid Martens, a journalist for Al-Jazeera and documentary filmmaker who spent two years in Ponte working on her movie “Africa Shafted—Under One Roof,” says she encountered xenophobic attitudes among only a minority of Ponte’s residents. Most residents, she says, had learned to get along with other nationalities.

“We all have a dream,” Martens says. “We all want a better life for our families. We’re all human beings. That’s all, really.”

Martens, whose film shows residents referring to the building as “Africa under one roof,” attributes this greater understanding to multiple factors. Poor South African nationals and African foreigners were forced to share rooms and had to try to get along with their flatmates. Martens says that many of the South Africans who came to Ponte were also from more rural areas, like the northern Limpopo region along the Zimbabwe border, and the strange world of Johannesburg made them feel as foreign as the non-South Africans.

“They were all pretty much foreigners in Johannesburg,” Martens says. “[There was] one guy who talks about [speaking] Zulu. He’s South African, and he’s also treated badly. He feels the prejudice is against [rural South Africans]….Everyone had a different relationship with each other, not a blanket one.”

So in the elevators and in ground-level shops and even in Ponte basketball leagues, South Africans interacted with Zimbabweans, and Congolese learned to get along with Burundians until, in mid-2004, a momentous announcement would change everything.

**Looking toward 2010**

It was May 16, 2004, and the streets of Johannesburg were jubilant. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association had just announced that South Africa, and Johannesburg
specifically, would host the 2010 World Cup. And Ponte, unbeknownst to its residents, would face a transformation as well.

Because the main stadium for the World Cup is located in the Nasrec section of Johannesburg, just a stone’s throw from Ponte, upward of 700 million rands (nearly U.S. $90 million) in public construction money started pouring into the area for renovations.

Ponte itself, which takes in views of the nearby main stadium, drew the attention of Belgian investor Nour Addine Ayyoub and South African developer David Selvan. In a deal reportedly worth U.S. $12 million, the pair agreed to buy the building and refurbish it as a chic condominium tower, with granite-countertopped, chrome-applianced units. Wireless Internet would be building-wide. Units could be purchased for six-figure rand sums in styles with names like Old Money and Glam Rock.

During the first week of sales in July 2008, Selvan says 16 condos were purchased and 13 were reserved. “Everybody loves it,” he says.

But before the new furnishings and new styles and new owners could go in, the old residents would have to go out. In late 2006 the floors began to be cleared from the bottom up. Selvan guesses that by November 2008 the building will be fully vacated.

On a Friday morning in June 2008, that was just what Jean Marie Kalonda was doing—moving out. Kolonda, a large man with a round, smiling face and short, dark hair, is an engineer from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) who now has to work at a metal plant to support his wife and seven young children. Kalonda was standing just outside Ponte tower among a mishmash of couches and boxes of toys and clothes that had turned his small flat on the 44th floor into a home.

“The place was safe inside, despite outside,” he says. “No one can get inside.”
By the time widespread xenophobic attacks struck Johannesburg in May 2008, most of Ponte’s residents had been moved out. Kalonda and his family were still living in the building, their home since 2006. They viewed Ponte as a citadel.

“It was painful,” Kalonda says of the attacks. “Every day when I was going to work, my wife wasn’t happy. She said, ‘Why don’t you just stay home?’”

Kalonda’s family is moving to a home in the Rosettenville area of Johannesburg. All that remained on his apartment’s blue carpet was a small computer desk, a freezer, upturned metal bed frames and a washer, plus wood splinters and dirt.

His young boys, barefoot or in green flip-flops, played with a Matchbox car or toilet paper roll and turned the bed frames into a play fort. The place was dirty, but in an orderly way that showed someone took care of it.

The parents stayed in the probably 10-foot-by-10-foot bedroom; the children had bunk beds in the slightly larger living room. Two other DRC residents, who were living on the 21st floor before it was cleared, paid to live in the apartment’s second bedroom.

On the same day as Kalonda’s departure, William Mbouma, an electrician from Cameroon, came back to inquire about returning to Ponte. Mbouma, slender in a red-and-blue-striped long-sleeve polo with a head shaved and shiny, had lived on the 30th floor since 2004, interacting with two dozen other Cameroonians as well as other nationalities. He was told he had to move out last year.

“I was sad,” he says. “I didn’t know where to go. A safe place was too far….I wish I could move [back] in tomorrow.”
Mbouma moved to a nearby location but doesn’t feel safe because he’s a foreigner in a place where he says foreigners aren’t liked. “This is [a] bulls__t country. Every country has foreigners. Why are South Africans doing this?” Mbouma says of the xenophobic attacks.

He misses Ponte. And, according to Martens the documentarian, he’s not alone. “The people I speak to, they really miss Ponte. For the people I’ve spoken to, if it’s possible to go back to Ponte, they will.”

A 54-story question mark

But what exactly will happen to Ponte is, fittingly, unclear.

Though Selvan and Ayyoub began making payments in June 2006 and started renovations a year later, only one floor has been completed. Payments weren’t coming in on time, Celliers says, and Selvan and Ayyoub were notified by the current owners at the end of July 2008 that the “sale is cancelled with immediate effect.”

Selvan declined to comment on the negotiations, saying only, “We’ve been inundated with all sorts of things. It’s not what I want to discuss.” However, he says both he and Ayyoub are moving forward with plans for the building.

How Ponte will end up and who will be in charge remain up in the air, but it’s almost certain that Ponte will never again look the same. If Selvan and Ayyoub’s plans go forward, the prices of Ponte flats will rise to 420,000 to 950,000 rand (U.S. $52,500 to $119,000) for the cheaper lower levels. For the more expensive penthouses on the upper floors, units will likely cost hundreds of thousands of rand, with prices at 12,500 to 14,500 rand (U.S. $1,600 to $1,800) per square meter.
Though Selvan says one or two former residents have expressed interest in moving back, the target market is upper-middle class and doesn’t include most former residents. “It’s price,” Selvan says. “They were working class people, and they simply can’t afford it.”

If the Kingston Group retains control, as Celliers suggests, the monthly rent will also go up, though not nearly as much as Selvan and Ayyoub’s plan. The increase will be modest but still nearly 50 percent higher—perhaps 2,500 rand (U.S. $312) rather than 1,700 rand (U.S. $212) a month for a two-bedroom flat. New regulations will prevent multiple families from sharing flats. Ponte’s rooms were just barely within the budgets of many tenants when three or four families shared rooms, Martens says, so these former residents won’t be able to return.

“There’ll never be another Ponte, all those people living in one place,” Martens says. “In one building we had 4,000 people from across the continent. That would have been a lesson to other places.”

And so Ponte, the ever shifting column on the Johannesburg skyline, remains nearly empty, its dirty windows dark, its future as uncertain as Kalonda and his family’s, or Mbouma’s, or the thousands of other diverse Africans who used to call it home.

“[Here], they managed to live together, different nationalities,” says Mbouma, looking up at his towering former residence. “Outside maybe it was a different story. Here, it was a family.”