

Witsfontein

Uniting Wits and Braamfontein

BY HEATHER DUGMORE



In this, our third feature in the Joburg series, the *WITSReview* team browses the University's precinct of Braamfontein.

Like a pair of odd shoes, that's what Braamfontein and Wits University were 10 years back. It did not make sense because Braamfontein and Wits are one. Braamfontein is to Wits what Greenwich Village is to New York University, or what Bloomsbury and Camden are to the University of London.



A VIEW OF BRAAMFONTEIN

But the mismatch was real and, instead of Braamfontein being a place of vibrant student and business activity, it had slumped, with growing signs of inner city decay. In this atmosphere of neglect, only the very brave were investing.

One such person was Wits alumnus Andrew Bannister, who bought a building in De Beer Street in 2002 where he had his photographic studio. He also rented out space to fellow creatives and cross-border traders who stored their wares there and used it as an overnight stay.

Some day the down-and-out precinct would rise

Many thought Bannister was making a bad financial move in buying the building; such was the pessimism of the times. But he had two motives for doing so: his grandfather had built it, and Bannister believed that some day the down-and-out precinct would rise.

"It was naïve faith more than anything else and I went through some very rough times, including the murder in my building in October 2004 of a close friend and fellow photographer, Andrew Meintjies, who had his studio here," Bannister explains.

A week before Meintjies was shot dead, the manager of the Braamfontein Recreation Centre, Louis Ngcobo, had also been shot dead in the centre's offices. Braamfontein did not feel like a safe space. But better times were ahead.

A sign of better things to come

"For me, a sign of better things to come was when Wits alumna Lael Bethlehem became CEO of the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) around 2005," says Bannister.

Bethlehem was CEO of the JDA until 2010 and her contribution to the inner city upgrade, including Braamfontein, was considerable. This included buildings, parks, museums, public artworks and public transport. The Rea Vaya Bus Rapid Transit system was one of her projects, and something she described as "a key element in the process of democratisation of the city".



"... SOME OF THE TRADERS WHO USED TO SLEEP ON MATTRESSES IN MY OLD BUILDING ARE NOW THRIVING ENTREPRENEURS WHO BOOK INTO MY HOTEL"



The most fashionable part of Braamfontein today

During this period Bannister developed his building into a boutique hotel and venue called The Bannister Hotel, which is situated in the most fashionable part of Braamfontein today, with over 70% occupancy.

“What really pleases me is that some of the traders who used to sleep on mattresses in my old building are now thriving entrepreneurs who book into my hotel,” he says.

Young, old, student, business person, traveller, artist, entrepreneur, local, foreigner ... a wonderfully diverse cross-section of people can be found hanging out at The Bannister or across the road at Anti Est., a new establishment, where you can catch up on what’s trending in music anywhere in the world and meet people from everywhere.

Anti Est. is one of the brainchildren of Wits alumnus and entrepreneur Adam Levy, the creator behind the Braamfontein-based property development and urban regeneration company Play Braamfontein.





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Living like most people can't

On the wall of Play Braamfontein's offices in De Beer Street is an anonymous ode to the entrepreneur, which reads: "Entrepreneurship is living a few years of your life like most people won't so that you can spend the rest of your life living like most people can't."

Levy lives this code and has been instrumental in transforming Braamfontein over the past 10 years. He has bought and renovated buildings and opened a string of exciting entertainment, business and accommodation spaces, art galleries and restaurants. He also founded the Saturday Neighbourgoods Market in a building in central Braamfontein. Now in its fourth year, it is one of the biggest attractions in Joburg, with 4 500 to 6 500 people visiting every Saturday.

Why did he choose Braamfontein? "I could see what it could become and I wanted to live here, but 10 years ago it wasn't anywhere near the kind of environment I envisaged for myself," he explains.

His response was to build the world he wanted to live in, "where diverse groups of people come together, mix and mingle, break down boundaries and develop innovative ideas and projects."

Tearing down the bricked-up ground floors

This meant tearing down the bricked-up ground floors that characterised derelict Braamfontein and replacing them with inviting businesses that open onto the streets.

"It's all about restoring engagement in the city, where I can see you and you can see me, and we can stop and have a chat."

Walking the streets here today, we get a strong sense of this. People are out and about on this beautiful Joburg afternoon, getting on with their day. We're alert because that's how you have to be in SA, but the fear factor we once felt when walking these streets is no more. In its place is a tangible friendliness and high-spiritedness that you don't often find.



A crisp, sleek, high-rise penthouse

"I believe that from this new energy in Braamfontein we are going to see great innovation coming out of here," says Levy, who has redeveloped 10 buildings in the past 10 years, including his home building, where he has a crisp, sleek, high-rise penthouse with big-screen views of the city.

Down below are the railway sheds where a large billboard speaks of a different reality: "No condom. No sex. 4 million people tested in Gauteng. Wena?"

"In a different way, I keep pushing for this concept of critical mass. If 10 000 people come to Braamfontein and enjoy the experience, that soon grows to 20 000 and so on. That's how you have a shot at changing culture and that's what we're seeing in Braamfontein," explains Levy, who regards Braamfontein today as "South Africa's pre-eminent creative and cultural hub".

A VIEW OF BRAAMFONTEIN

The first inner city steakhouse in 30 years

We head back into the street and he shows us around. We take in a choice of designer clothing and interiors stores, art galleries, like the Kalashnikov Gallery, trend forecasters like Instant Grass, and the Smokehouse and Grill – the first inner city steakhouse in 30 years.

He takes us to his latest project, 73 Juta Street, with its 1970s concrete brutalism façade by famed South African sculptor Eduardo Villa. This 1970s high-rise is being redeveloped into office space with a difference, including a rooftop venue with a garden and rim-flow pool. It will be ready at the end of this year and tenants that have already booked space at approximately R100 per square metre include Google, the British Consulate, *Vice* magazine and Motif Records.

An exciting time to be in Braamfontein

"It's an exciting time to be in Braamfontein. When we started, no one wanted to be here. Now we can choose between 50 excellent tenants," says Levy, who has been featured in media including the prestigious *Wallpaper* design magazine.

He attributes his success to his upbringing. "My late father, Ivan Levy, a self-made man and a great corporate attorney, taught me compassion and to think clearly. My artist mother, Barbara Levy, gave me creativity. I could be brave in life because my parents supported me and encouraged me to be different – that's what enables the Davids to take on the Goliaths."

Bureaucracy and blockage

His Goliath is the bureaucratic and obstructive City of Joburg municipality.

"What we're doing in Braamfontein is supposed to be a partnership with the City, but they don't give you this feeling. I've never been invited to meet the mayor, despite being one of Braamfontein's key developers," says Levy.

"Instead, I'm constantly in legal battles with the City, and I'm facing the most unbelievable hurdles to get plans approved or to get assistance with basics, like fixing broken street lighting.

"After repeatedly contacting the City of Joburg about this, I fixed the street lighting myself. I bought and installed 80 giant fluorescent lights in the neighbourhood, for which we pay hefty electricity bills. If we want a great neighbourhood we can't be held back by the City. It's frustrating but we all have to choose our battles, and I choose the City of Joburg."

Urban ocean retreat: The Beach is one of Levy's entertainment options





“WE’RE IN THE PROCESS OF RESTORING ITS PRESTIGE, BUILDING BY BUILDING”

The bars and music venues

Back in the streets we seek out the bars and music venues, without which no reimagined village can succeed.

Witsies will be happy to hear the old Devonshire Hotel is being redone and any of you who have old photos from the Dev must please send them to us.

A current student favourite is The Great Dane, with its remarkable floor made with thousands of 5c coins, as a statement about the loss of monetary value.

DJs abound here but if this is a bit too trendy for you, head next door to Kitchener’s, one of Joburg’s oldest bars, where they have comedy nights and bands, and where you can philosophise with fellow hipsters.

There’s also a new jazz venue, The Orbit, and an ubercool rooftop venue called The Beach, with real beach sand, where patrons can relax on deck chairs and create sandcastles in the urban sea.

Randlords on the 22nd floor

Where rooftop venues are concerned, you have to experience Randlords on the 22nd floor of South Point Towers in De Korte Street.

Wits architects Lesley Carstens and Silvio Rech gutted the top three floors of an office building to create this bar and dining facility with beaded swings and giant resting beds set in a 360-degree view.

Even the men’s urinal is a talking point. Positioned in front of wall-to-floor glass, men without a fear of heights can peruse the northern lights of Joburg.

South Point Towers is owned by South Point, a major property development company in Braamfontein, which is considering converting some of the other floors into high-end apartments.

A VIEW OF BRAAMFONTEIN

Secure, trendy, well-managed student accommodation

South Point has made a considerable contribution to Braamfontein since 2003, when it started renovating a number of office buildings into secure, trendy, well-managed student accommodation. It worked wonderfully for Wits as the residences could not accommodate the growing number of students, and it also nurtured the student village atmosphere in Braamfontein.

“We currently accommodate 5 000 students in Braamfontein, predominantly from Wits, in a range of undergrad and postgrad accommodation options. We also have apartments and penthouses for academics and business people,” says Josef Talotta, Executive Head of Precinct Development for South Point. The accommodation ranges from R2 700 to R7 500 per month.

“On the retail side, we have a range of desirable new tenants, such as Puma and the Branson School of Entrepreneurship. At the same time we make sure that we look after our longstanding tenants – from tailors to takeaways – who have been here for decades,” Talotta explains.

South Point owns and rents over 30 buildings. It made the rare exception of selling one of them to World Wildlife Foundation -SA, which has renovated it and will be opening its Joburg offices here this year.

The Madison Avenue of Joburg

“Between the 1950s and 1970s, Braamfontein was the Madison Avenue of Joburg, with prestigious law firms and advertising agencies. We’re in the process of restoring its prestige, building by building,” says Talotta.

“Together with Wits and Play Braamfontein, we collectively own over 50 buildings here. We are partners in the precinct’s rebirth, together with the JDA and a handful of other privately owned property groups.”

The JDA is currently leading what is called a “complete street” project in Braamfontein, with bicycle lanes, public transport, public art and street lighting.



Accommodating: South Point develops properties that house, feed and entertain thousands of Witsies

“COME BACK TO BRAAMFONTEIN.
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Love Food, Father Coffee, Vuyo's

Another essential element in the rebirth of the precinct is a choice of coffee shops, delis and restaurants for all pockets. Braamfontein has burgeoned with some excellent venues, including Love Food, Post, Father Coffee and Daleah's. Wits alumnus and gastronomist Miles Kubheka owns Vuyo's.

We join Kubheka for a cappuccino at Vuyo's before heading for the Neighbourgoods Market, which attracts thousands of visitors every Saturday.

It feels like the whole of middle class Joburg and beyond is gathered at the market, tucking into everything from eggs benedict to paella, cooked in enormous pans imported from Spain and overseen by yet another Wits entrepreneur, Daniel Forsthofer of the Tutto Food Company. His goal is "to feed the world, one paella at a time".

Come back to Braamfontein

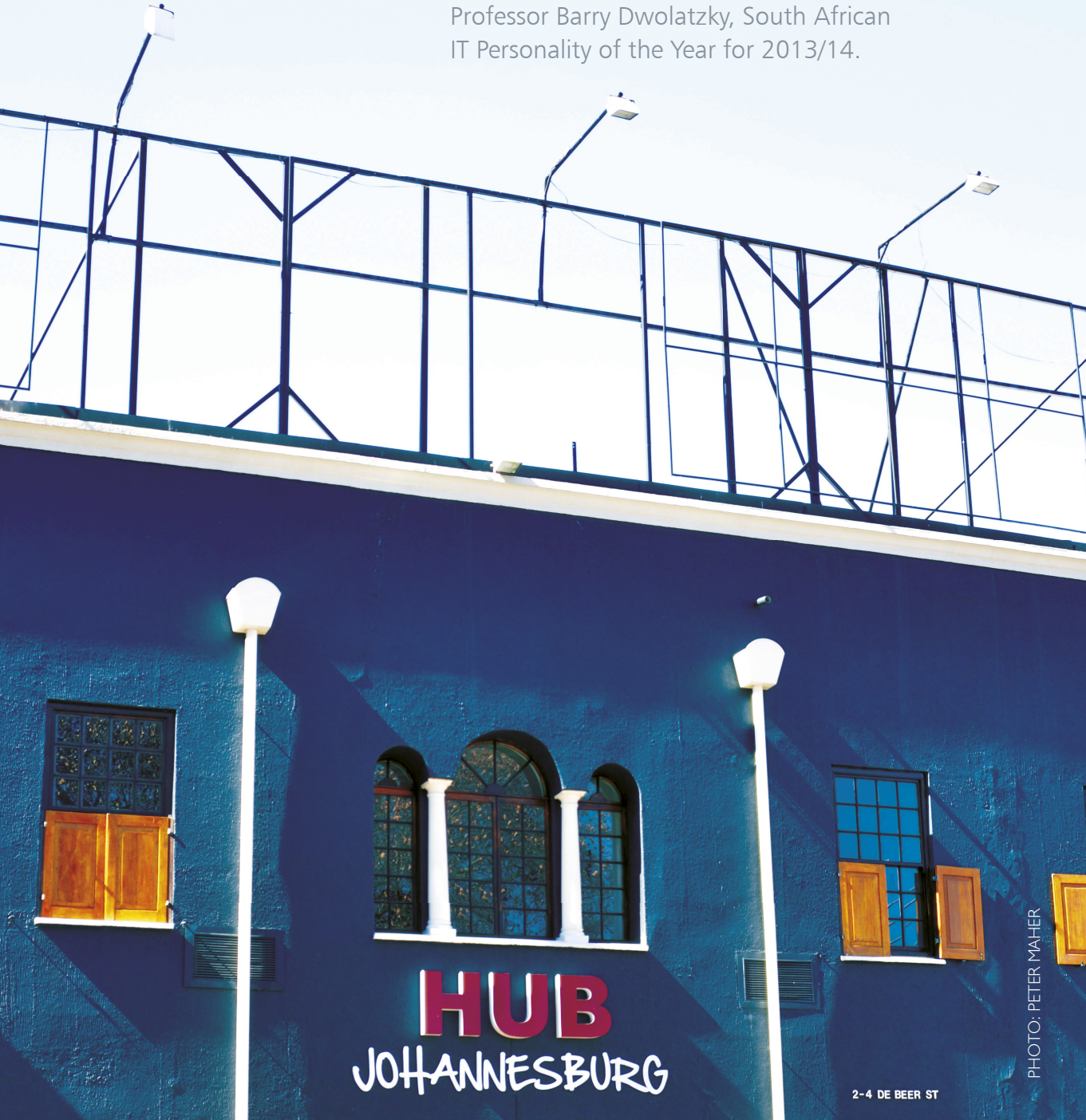
Wits and Wits alumni have played a major role in the rebirth of Braamfontein and are meeting with each other and with Vice-Chancellor Adam Habib and other leading members of the University to escalate the growth and reunion of Wits and its precinct. A pivotal new Wits-led development is the IT Hub, driven by Professor Barry Dwolatzky, which promises to become Africa's Silicon Valley.

All that remains to be said is: come back to Braamfontein. It's alive and exciting, it's on the up and up, and the shoes are starting to match beautifully.

Silicon Valley of Africa

in Braamfontein

The Institute of Information Technology Professionals South Africa named the head of Software Engineering at Wits, Professor Barry Dwolatzky, South African IT Personality of the Year for 2013/14.



HUB
JOHANNESBURG

PHOTO: PETER MAHER

2-4 DE BEER ST

Dwolatzky is also the Director of the Joburg Centre for Software Engineering, a joint venture between Wits and the City of Johannesburg. As part of this, he is pioneering the so-called Silicon Valley of Africa – what promises to be the most important digital technology hub in Africa, right here in half a city block in Juta Street, Braamfontein. It's been named the Tshimologong Precinct.

Wits University owns the buildings in this precinct, formerly used as warehouses and a nightclub. They are being renovated and redeveloped into the hub from October 2014. Wits alumnus Jon Jacobson is the architect.

Dwolatzky explains:

"South Africa is facing the bizarre situation of a skills shortage on the one hand but approximately 600 000 unemployed graduates on the other. This is a huge resource of bright, energetic young people. What we are doing is channelling these young people into digital technology to develop hardware, software and content. Where these three meet we are going to see huge and rapid innovation that will underpin all aspects of economic and social life in the 21st century, and we want our youth to be at the centre of this.

"Once this happens it will make a reality of the 'Africa Rising' concept because we will be bringing large numbers of young South Africans and Africans into the mainstream economy.

"If you think what digital technology has done to our world in the last 20 years, the future in this field is wide open, with technology hubs driving this all over the world, including several in Africa, such as the extremely impressive iHub in Nairobi.

"The hub we are creating here in Braamfontein is an open-plan co-working space for 350-400 IT interns, postgraduates, innovators and entrepreneurs.

"One of our projects is an app development factory sponsored by Microsoft. Another is a project funded by the Department of Trade and Industry to create high maturity software development teams where we train interns in high-level software development methods as they work on a range of projects. An example is our partnership with researchers from Wits and Oxford University to develop a software system that collects data from meters providing real-time measures of domestic electricity use. The system will improve our understanding of how different communities can use electricity far more efficiently in the future.

"We also have a postgraduate leadership development programme in ICT-related disciplines called CoachLab. The hub will provide space to IT start-up entrepreneurs who work from here for a nominal monthly fee.

"The name for the hub has not yet been finalised, but given the support we received from our Vice-Chancellor, one of the names that came up is Hub-bib!"

PROF DWOLATZKY IS CURRENTLY SEEKING SPONSORS AND FOUNDING PARTNERS FOR THE TECHNOLOGY HUB.

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A NEW ENERGY EMERGING IN BRAAMFONTEIN



WITS UNIVERSITY'S VICE-CHANCELLOR,
PROFESSOR ADAM HABIB,
ON BRAAMFONTEIN:

"There is a new energy emerging in Braamfontein, sparked by a range of public and private stakeholders, including the University. For us, this is essential because a university needs to be immersed in society, and the environment around the university is key to its success.

"In South Africa, given the challenges of crime and service delivery, universities have tended to block themselves off from the very societies and environments in which they are located. This is not sustainable because if you want to attract top staff and students, you have to ensure that the university is situated in an attractive, safe, inviting precinct.

"Towards this we are discussing our strategic role in Braamfontein, in partnership with the City of Joburg, the JDA and private investors and entrepreneurs.

"From Wits' side, some of the initiatives we are wanting to pursue include:

- Partnering with investors and developers to re-energise the entire area between the Wits Art Museum and the Origins Centre – from Jan Smuts Avenue to Yale Road. This would include developing student and staff accommodation, retail spaces, restaurants, music clubs, bookshops and other offerings that would be attractive to our staff, students and members of the public.
- Supporting Prof. Dwolatzky in the development of the technology hub.
- Creating a safer, more attractive precinct in partnership with the City of Joburg and the JDA, including assisting with lighting, security and the general upliftment of Braamfontein.

"In the medium term we may start considering dropping our fences and integrating the university into Braamfontein where we already own a significant amount of property.

"Just as New York University played a pivotal role in the revitalisation of Greenwich Village, and there are many other similar examples from other universities worldwide, so too does Wits want to do the same in Braamfontein."