

# CITIES IN CRISIS COMMENTARY

→ **Matthew Barac**

Cities in South Africa are changing. Change is due – as we saw and felt long before 1994 – to local and national forces of transformation. These forces, anchored to our time and place, are forces of history. But they are also joined to individual biographies. People write themselves into the story of South Africa through their experience of the changing city, changes in which many, through their votes, their work, their resistance and their imagination, have played a role.

Change is also due to forces less grounded in everyday life, forces – unbound from place or state – over which it is more difficult to claim ownership. Transformation's historical promise positioned South African cities in a moral trajectory, a passage from apartheid to democracy. But recent years have witnessed the rise of a change less easy to grasp. This change is massive and global, unconstrained by the ethical and political ties that orient the narrative of transformation. It is a worldwide category of change, one that entered the mainstream when humanity became decisively urban; over half the six billion people on the planet now live in cities that are growing. And most of the growth is happening in cities like ours.

World scale urban change has mobilised a range of sectors charged with planning for, profiting from and dealing with the effects of so many people living together: the dangers, benefits, anxieties, possibilities, challenges and continuities that the urban future holds. But what is this new kind of city? How do we understand or depict it? Innovative ideas are emerging in artworks, exhibitions and books. Global urban change has begun to differentiate: into 'shadow cities', 'mega-cities',

'world cities' and, most tellingly of all, author Jennifer Robinson's 'ordinary cities' – a formulation that would reclaim the common ground in debate. Images of urbanity frame the question of the urban future as a play between conditions and possibilities.

Real life situations frozen in a photograph invite interpretation as an assemblage of conditions which, captured in the form of a moment, point to their possibilities. The picture offers a surface against which reality's circumstances stake a claim, gathering the given conditions into a unity expressed as a place. Meaningful places resonate, linking the corners of the world to what matters here and now. In this way, images frame mediation between a situation's conditions and possibilities. Such mediated experience confers knowledge of where you are and where you have been; place is thus a venue for history-making. The artworks in *Cities in Crisis* toy with the promise of place, exploiting tension between the particulars of a setting and its universal dimension: the horizons of the city which are common to all.

## Biography

Matthew Barac is a London-based practicing architect with a background in research and teaching. His Doctoral study on urban change in South Africa 'From Township to Town' received the 2007 Royal Institute British Architects award for best PhD. A regular contributor to mainstream and academic publications, he recently edited a special issue of the *Architectural Review of South African Architecture* (June 2007). In 2004 he won the international Bauhaus Prize jointly with David Southwood and Simone le Fèvre.