
Michael Godby

**CONSTRUCTIONS: CHANGES IN THE
VIEW OF THE CITY IN FIFTY YEARS OF
DAVID GOLDBLATT'S PHOTOGRAPHY**

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Godby is Professor of History of Art at the University of Cape Town. He has lectured and published on a wide range of topics, including Early Renaissance Italian art; 18th-century English art, especially the work of William Hogarth; 19th-century South African art; contemporary South African art; and the history of photography in South Africa. He has also curated a number of exhibitions, most recently *Is there Still Life? Continuity and Change in South African Still Life Painting?* at the Iziko Museums, Cape Town and, with Dave Southwood, *Cities in Crisis: Photographs of the South African Urban Landscape* at the FADA Gallery, University of Johannesburg.

→ **David Goldblatt** has been taking photographs of South African cities, particularly Johannesburg, for over 50 years. Whether as subjects in their own right, as *In Boksburg*, or as essential background to parts of other essays, cities are always interpreted by Goldblatt as having a profound impact upon their residents. But the idea of the city has changed several times over Goldblatt's long career. In this essay I seek to trace these changes and to explain them in the context of Goldblatt's developing career as a photographer.

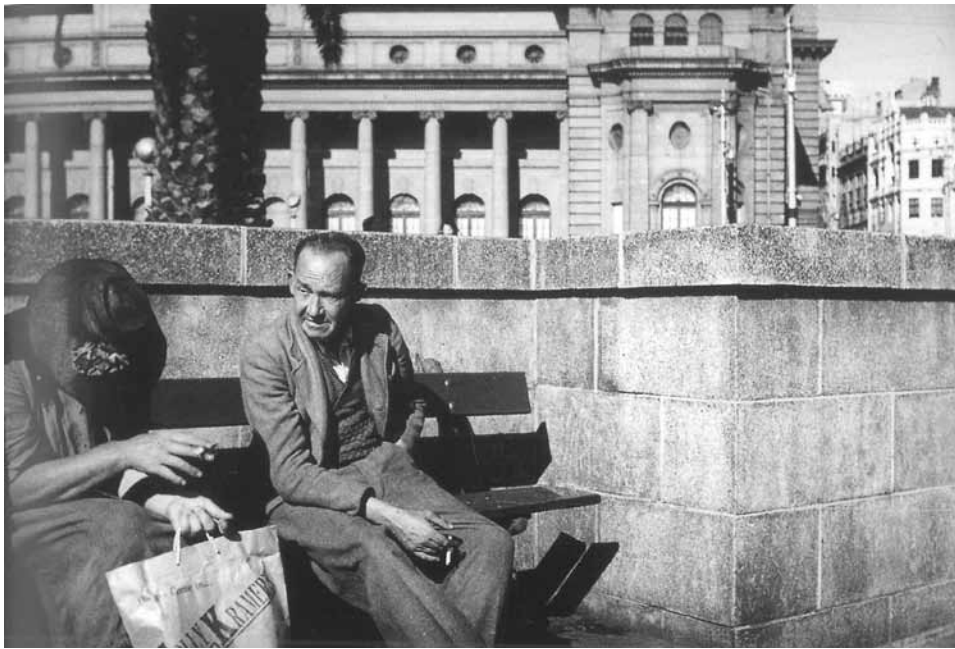


fig1 In the Library
Gardens, 1949
(51 Years: David
Goldblatt)

As part of his project of recording the South African condition, David Goldblatt has been taking photographs of the urban environment in this country for over 50 years.¹ On one level, this work constitutes a precious archive of the many changes that have occurred in South African cities during this time, both in the architectural structures themselves and in the ways they have been used. However, in this essay I explore not changes in the South African city itself, but rather the changes in the ways Goldblatt has looked at the city.

Goldblatt's project, like any photographer's, is shaped by two inter-related conditions. On one hand, the way photographers take pictures is determined by their understanding of their identity as a photographer, for example, whether they consider themselves documentary photographers, fine art photographers, ethnographic photographers, photo-journalists, and so on. And, on the other hand, the photographs will usually differ according to their likely outlet, in other words whether they are intended for a newspaper, a scientific publication, an art gallery, a book, or a magazine. Both these conditions have their own histories: a newspaper photograph now looks very different from its equivalent 30 years ago, and documentary projects at different times similarly involve not only different technical equipment – for example, digital as opposed to analogue, colour as opposed to black-and-white film – but also different attitudes to the photographed subject, among other changes: consider for a moment the effect on documentary practice of the critique of so-called victim photography led by Martha Rosler and others in the 1970s (Rosler 1981). As for the institution of art, the current renaissance of South African photography

both locally and internationally, would never have been possible if both commercial and non-commercial galleries had not found new ways to admit this erstwhile neglected method of representation into their precincts. Over a very long career, Goldblatt has demonstrably worked not only with different techniques, and different media outlets, but also within different conceptions of art. In this essay, I look beyond these physical and institutional constraints and explore the different attitudes he has brought to bear on South Africa's urban landscape.

The issue is perhaps most clear-cut at the beginning of a photographer's career, at the point when they are trying to decide what it is that they want to become. Goldblatt has been very clear about the type of work that impressed him as a teenager: this was the period of the great international picture magazines of *Life*, *Look* and *Picture Post*. These magazines suggested both a life of glamour and a way to escape the small-town restrictions of Randfontein on the East Rand, perhaps even to move overseas. Moreover, they seemed to offer the possibility of critical engagement with important social issues. However, if these magazines provided the model of the kind of work he would have wanted to do, they simultaneously made it cruelly apparent that there were no comparable media outlets in this country. The few illustrated magazines that were published locally, such as *Huisgenoot*, simply did not offer the possibility of this type of work; the newspapers of the time, such as *The Rand Daily Mail*, *The Star* and *The Sunday Times* carried very little photography – and, in any event, Goldblatt decided early on that he was not temperamentally suited to newspaper

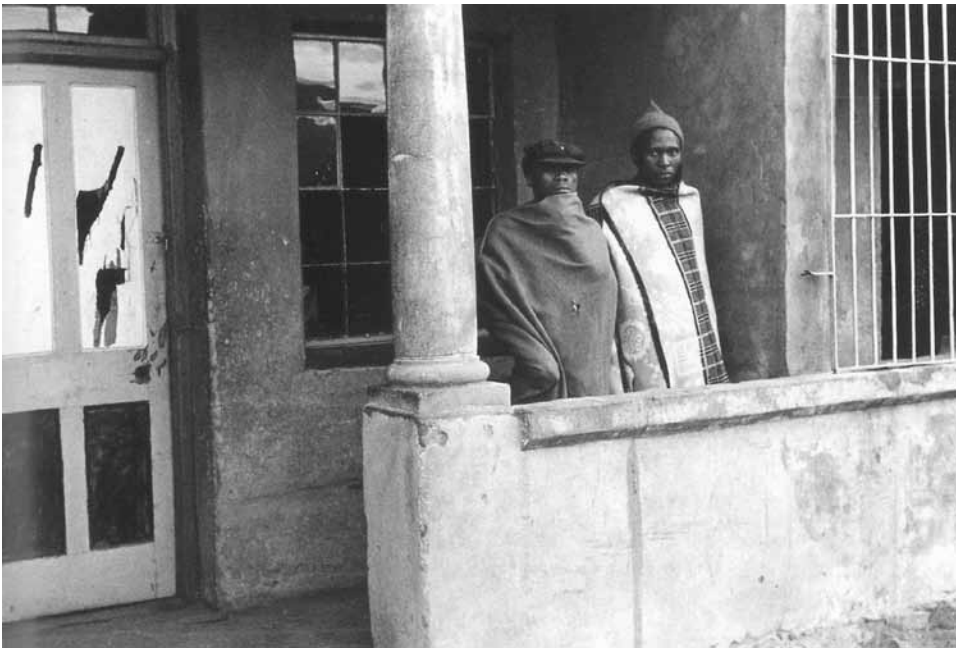


fig 2 Newclare
Gangsters, 1952
(51 Years: David
Goldblatt)

work; and a single visit to the Randfontein Camera Club convinced him that he was not interested in academic formulations of subject-matter and finish. Thus, on leaving school, and a brief and humiliating experience as an event photographer, Goldblatt opted to work with his father in the family outfitting business and to study part-time for a Bachelor of Commerce degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. Yet the drive to take photographs survived, and the images he sought out when he was able to escape from his job were modelled on the example of the international documentary tradition. On trips to Johannesburg at weekends, and even at night, Goldblatt photographed such quintessentially urban subjects as vagrants and prostitutes, children mixing across colour lines, and manifestly alienated people in the city parks (Figure 1). Goldblatt's interest at this time, in other words, was in strong narrative content communicated through the human figure. As with his role models such as Brassai in Paris, Walker Evans in New York, Bill Brandt in London, and others, the idea of the city that may be perceived through these images is a metropolis that is both compelling and glamorous by virtue of its sheer power.

Through the 1950s, while still working in the family business, Goldblatt continued to take photographs as opportunities arose in this same documentary vein that he seems always to have intended for an international readership: significantly, the first consignment of pictures he sent to a publisher was to a London-based magazine, not a local outlet. His subjects at this time included gangsters in Newclare, moments in the African National Congress's Defiance Campaign, the

Kliptown Congress of the People, and the first appearance of apartheid signage at Johannesburg Railway Station, all of which use the city as backdrop to significant historical events (Figure 2). Then, when his father died in 1962 and he was able to sell the business and finally commit himself to a career in photography, Goldblatt joined the Londoner Sally Angwin in a project to transform the provincial *South African Tatler* into a radical, stylish cosmopolitan publication. The image of the city that pervaded Goldblatt's work in devising and producing fashion shots, advertising features and illustrations to feature articles was still metropolitan and glamorous but it quickly took on the distinct features of swinging London. Drawing on the work of Terence Donovan, David Bailey and others who were defining the era of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Carnaby Street, and so on, Goldblatt used high contrast paper for exaggerated qualities of grain and dramatic chiaroscuro effects, a 21mm wide-angle lens to introduce radical perspectives on his subjects, and brutal cropping and scale juxtapositions in his layouts to give a sense of sophistication and visual excitement to his images. It was from this decidedly urbane vantage point that he scrutinised the peri-urban phenomenon of *People of the Plots* (1964) (Figure 3) – Afrikaners who had been displaced from the land and yet were not able to identify with the city – for his first major photo-essay in the *Tatler* (April 1964). In the book *Some Afrikaners Photographed* (1975) that eventually grew out of this essay, Goldblatt (1975: 7) was able to remark on such Afrikaner qualities as “austerity of spirit and lifestyle ... tenacious conviction of rightness, and an almost visceral bond with the soil”, precisely because he himself identified

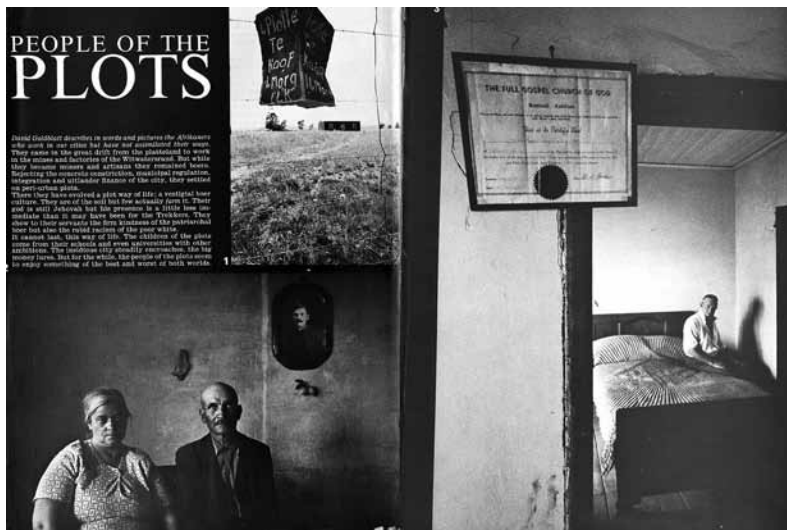


fig 3 *People of the Plots*,
1964 (South African
Tatler)

so completely with the city. For Goldblatt at this time, evidently, the city represented a powerful cultural identity from which other conditions could be measured.

In later parts of the *Some Afrikaners* project, Goldblatt represented the generation of young Afrikaans-speaking professionals - putatively the very children of the *People of the Plots* - who had left their rural pasts behind them and made a new and uneasy start in the city. Without rhetoric or drama Goldblatt created the sense of alienation in the city, a quality of isolation in relation to the sheer scale of the urban enterprise. This sense was clearly important to Goldblatt because it also pervades the essay he composed for the *Tatler* with the poet Lionel Abrahams that deals with the experience of children in the high-rise suburb of Hillbrow (September 1964) (Figure 4). And it also underlies the project he devised of photographing people in their own environment after they had answered his advertisements in the city's newspapers (1973); although

the situations represented in this essay are domestic, they clearly indicate the transient, unsettled quality that only a large city environment can generate (Figure 5).

The history of the *Some Afrikaners* project, which started with *People of the Plots* in 1964 and culminated in the publication of the book in 1975, is one of Goldblatt's gradual development from a highly expressive style, of both photography and page layout, to a less rhetorical method of presenting the world. To be sure, Goldblatt would call on his dramatic vocabulary when occasion or circumstances seemed to demand it, for example in his original essay on Soweto that was published in *Optima* in 1973 (Figure 6) and, because of difficult lighting conditions, in his powerful essays on *Shaftsinkers* (*Optima* 1969) and, as late as 1983-1984, in *The Transported of KwaNdebele*. But, already in his second essay on the Afrikaner subject, *Bosman's Bosveld Revisited*, which was published in the *Tatler* in September 1965, Goldblatt had discovered the

24 S.A. TATLER SEPTEMBER 1964



Is she almost smiling or almost frowning?
Is her dress dark stripes on light or light on dark?
Even the parting in her hair is uncertain.
But Hillbrow boxes her in, in a box within a box,
with the same strict lines that box in the sky.
That much is certain.

fig 4 Children in
Hillbrow, 1964 (South
African Tatler)



*fig 5 J.M.Dippenaar,
1975 (51 Years: David
Goldblatt)*

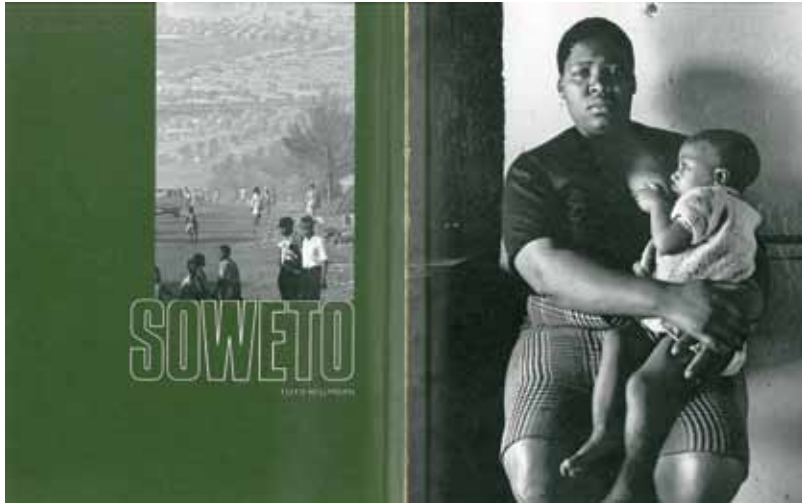
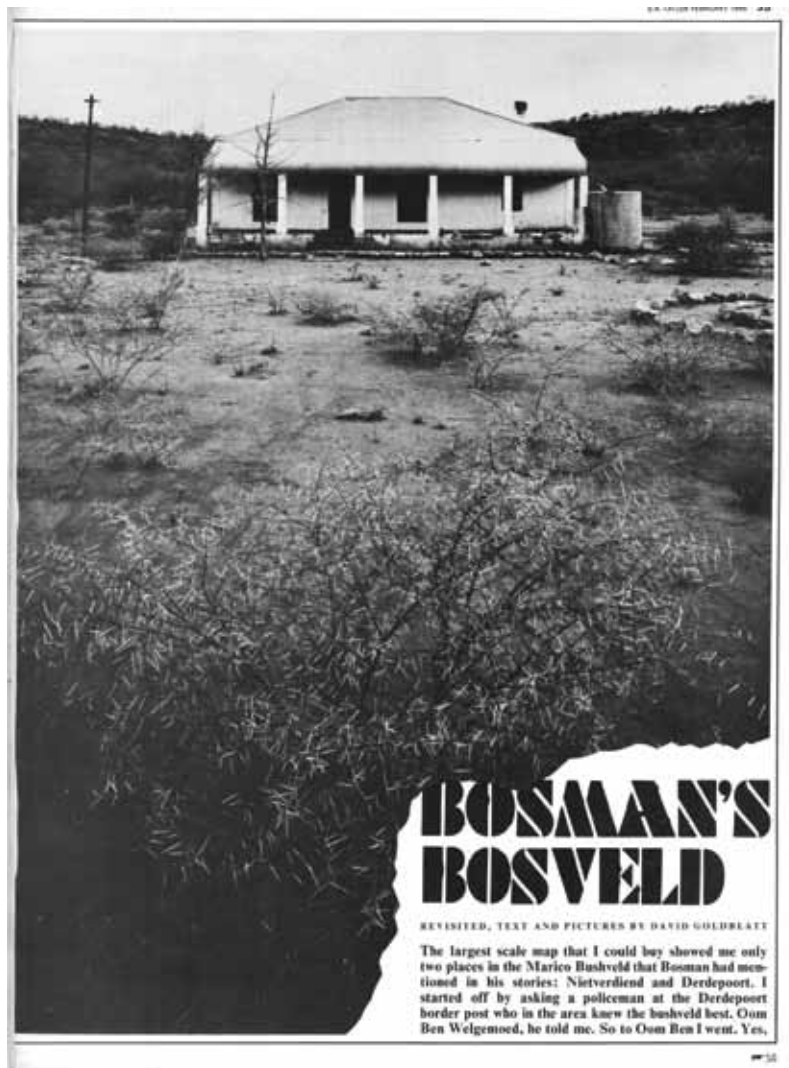


fig 6 Soweto, 1973
(Optima)

fig 7 Bosman's Bosveld
Revisited, 1964
(South African Tatler)



properties of the large-format camera that allowed him to focus attention on the physical fact of his chosen subject, and dispense with the need to impose an interpretation of it for the viewer: Goldblatt (cited in James 1966:vii) called this later style “the contemplative approach” (Figure 7). As this way of seeing superseded his original rhetorical style, the image of the city in Goldblatt’s work appears to change from being simply a powerful presence in the lives of its subjects, to a form to be read and interpreted in its own right. In this development, buildings and urban spaces become the subjects of Goldblatt’s work, even replacing the human subject entirely in some projects.

As early as 1966, Goldblatt (cited in James 1966:vi-vii) stated: “I found after a time that in both economics [which he had studied in the 1950s] and photography, I was looking for the same sort of thing: a grasp of social reality; the means of comprehending its complexity and of reducing that understanding to communicable statements”. A series of commissions for *Optima* magazine in the 1970s, which he formulated with the editor Charles Eglinton, provided one approach to this “social reality”, although the style of these essays was still influenced, to an extent, by the rhetorical demands of the magazine format. His essays on *Soweto* (1973), *The Transkei* (1975), on which he worked with Donald Woods, and the Indian residential neighbourhoods of Pageview and Vrededorp (1976-77) (Figure 8), shortly before they were expropriated under the Group Areas Act provided Goldblatt with direct experience of apartheid segregation and the political construction of South Africa’s human geography.



fig 8 Fietas' Butchery,
1976
(David Goldblatt, 2006)

Significantly, in these essays Goldblatt exchanged the literary account, his own or Nadine Gordimer's, which had embellished earlier essays on the Afrikaners and *On the Mines* (1974), for political analysis; he also introduced the idea of supplementing his images by the use of maps and diagrams, for example, the map of the apartheid homeland system in the article on *The Transkei* (Figure 9), and the diagram charting the several bus routes between Pretoria and kwaNdebele that was used when *The Transported* was published as a book in 1989. Thus, when the new editor of *Optima* overruled the decision of his predecessor and rejected his proposal for an essay on South Africa's White electorate, Goldblatt carried these new devices into the expanded version of the project that he published in 1982 under the title *In Boksburg*. (Goldblatt 1982)

In spite of, or perhaps even because of, its autobiographical dimension, *In Boksburg* represents an extraordinary attempt to provide an objective account of South Africa's civic landscape. Goldblatt signals his intentions in the project by including as an appendix the boundaries of the city and its townships, as they were promulgated in government gazettes over the signature of the state president (Figure 10): whatever else it may be, for Goldblatt at this time, evidently the South African city is fundamentally a political construction. In line with this definition, Goldblatt appears to have divided the city in terms of suburb, class, ethnicity, political affiliation, and even religious denomination, presented in the collection without order or hierarchy. Moreover, in all his movements around Boksburg, Goldblatt attempted



fig 9 Apartheid Map
from *Optima*, 1975



fig 10 Boksburg
Proclamation from *In*
Boksburg, 1982

to preserve the sense of objectivity in his representation by refusing direct interaction with his subjects, thus effectively removing himself from the scene.

The idea of the city in Goldblatt's work clearly developed over the first 20-odd years of his career. In his early work, perhaps precisely because of his provincial upbringing, the city of Johannesburg appears to have represented a cosmopolitan centre, where major events happened, where success was defined, and with which one should seek to identify or risk some or other form of cultural alienation. By the time of *In Boksburg*, however, Goldblatt had clearly come to understand the city not as some force with a personality of its own, but as a political construction in every aspect of its being. However, the Foreword to the book makes clear

that even at this time, Goldblatt had not entirely abandoned the more romantic understanding of urban spaces. While pointing to the political reading of the project, he also lamented the loss of identity of South Africa's cities through the wholesale spread of corporate signage in the high streets, and the construction of identical featureless developments in the suburbs. In expressing this sense of loss, Goldblatt was proclaiming not a love for old buildings for their own sake, but the importance of the history that they embody and of the collective memory that lives through them. In this parallel project in the book, he used the large-format camera to invite scrutiny of the built environment as a monument to South Africa's values and aspirations. Thus in Goldblatt's imagination, the town of Boksburg – and, with it, the entire South African urban fabric – appears as a construction, not



only politically but also as a concrete expression of this country's cultural values.

The idea that buildings can signify in this way is apparent in a photograph from the *Boksburg* series that includes neither real people nor real buildings, but rather a developer's advertisement designed to sell real estate in the suburbs (Figure 11): acquisition of such property is suggested to realise the suburban dream. On the understanding that architecture – civic, ecclesiastical, and even domestic – necessarily represents something of the society that constructs it, Goldblatt spent much of the decade following *Boksburg* cataloguing the national spirit as it is expressed in its buildings and monuments. *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then* (1992) is a massive undertaking that was completed over many years of travelling through the country, and several more researching both South African political history and the stories of the individual buildings that he photographed (Goldblatt 1992) (Figure 12). *Structure*, therefore, is not actually about cities, and its insistent focus on individual buildings might even suggest the absence of a coherent image of cities in Goldblatt's imagination at this time. But the project does establish a new vocabulary for the understanding of the buildings that populate South Africa's landscape, whether rural or urban, in both cultural and historical terms.

Like *Boksburg*, *Structure* was conceived and produced as a book: Goldblatt's ambition to capture the diversity



fig 11 Sunward Park Advertisement, 1982 (In Boksburg)

fig 12 Dutch reformed Church, Quellerina, (South Africa: *The Structure of Things Then*, 1992)

of South African experience could be communicated only in this discursive format. These projects differ from the largely magazine-orientated work that preceded them, especially in Goldblatt's consistent use of 'the contemplative approach' in place of his earlier rhetorical manner. Indeed, only this calm, thoughtful style is practicable when applied to the large number of photographs he needed to substantiate his arguments. This insistence on thoughtful looking, however, is also the principal demand of the art gallery. The completion of the *Structure* project coincided with the political transformation of South Africa, the end of the cultural boycott, and the sudden precipitation of Goldblatt, among other South African photographers and artists, into the international art market. This new appeal represents another significant moment in his work, for it is from this time that the majority of Goldblatt's work has been made with the specific criteria of the art world in mind: he works on a large scale, in colour, and in limited edition prints. As far as subject-matter for this new contemplative gaze is concerned, one could suggest that Goldblatt is extending his representation of South African cultural values from the buildings that had been his focus in *Structure* to a scrutiny of such forms in their social environment.

On another register, Goldblatt emerged from the *Structure* project to become suddenly aware of the profound social changes that were overtaking his familiar Johannesburg landscape. He (cited in Lawson



fig 13 Bree Street,
Johannesburg
(David Goldblatt, 2006)

2000:25) was appalled by the “air of devastation” he perceived in the city, “the urban degeneration”, the “garbage in the streets” and “buildings in disrepair”. He recognised, of course, that these were the signs that the Black population, long excluded from the city, was effectively taking possession of its own, and he used colour and other devices to capture this sense of chaotic energy (Figure 13). However, for him the degradation of city spaces represented a significant loss of history and collective memory. Moreover, the simultaneous elaboration of security arrangements and the ostentatious display of wealth in the suburbs also militated against the sense of community that Goldblatt had prized since childhood (Figure 14). In terms of his image of the city, therefore, his current work in Johannesburg seems altogether pessimistic (Goldblatt 2005). Indeed, his many journeys through the countryside, and the rough way in which he chooses to travel, suggest that in his senior years Goldblatt may himself have discovered some “visceral bond to the soil” that he had earlier recognised in his Afrikaner subjects, and that he is now tending to judge South Africa’s urban spaces by the standards and values of the *platteland* (Figure 15).



fig 14 Struben's Valley,
Johannesburg
(David Goldblatt, 2006)

Endnote

1. For a critical biography, see Godby, 2001. See also Rory Bester, 'David Goldblatt: One Book at a Time', and Alex Dodd, 'A chronology', both in Goldblatt, D. 2006(i). This essay was written before Goldblatt's *Joburg* exhibition opened at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, in April 2008. Seeing the show at that time tended to confirm the readings suggested below.

All photographs courtesy of David Goldblatt.

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fig 15 Deserted Farmhouse, Molteno
(David Goldblatt, Hasselblad Award, 2006)