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The king and his castle: the construction of private-public spaces and their implication for the transformation of Johannesburg

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Johannesburg is a city in transformation and filled with expectation. Since 1994, Johannesburg has had three main vision documents: Joburg 2030; the Human Development Strategy (HDS) and the Growth and Development Strategy. The first emphasizes the establishment of Johannesburg as a World Class City through building the urban economy. The second developed a few years after Joburg 2030, could be read as a response to criticism from a number of social movements and academics of the staunchly neo-liberal vision Joburg 2030. The third seeks to provide a “middle way” between the first two vision documents. One of the vision statements of the HDS is to build social cohesion through “public spaces so that they become comfortable venues for the public to interact in its *full diversity* [emphasis added].” While there are a few spaces (notably Mary Fitzgerald Square and Zoo Lake), for the most part public space (and by extension public life) in Johannesburg has become increasingly privatized and a large number of these spaces are highly exclusionary especially in terms of class. “*Diversity*” has become a very qualified term denoting complex politics of inclusion and exclusion. While the city has developed largely in relation to apartheid planning, old and new forms of exclusion are being established through the privatization of public space. In this paper, I will examine a space which is regarded as a more liberal private development, 44 Stanley Avenue. This is an urban regeneration project which has utilized rundown industrial storage for a small shopping complex. While purporting to serve a range of people and tastes, the people who frequent the complex are limited for the most part to a tiny fragment of Johannesburg society. Predominantly white, well-off, but also liberal minded – so, for example, while there is a fair trade toy shop, the space maintains a certain level of exclusivity and is inaccessible to a range of urban ‘others’. Through an analysis of the different discourses presented by the shop owners and those who frequent 44 Stanley Avenue, I will investigate how this space is imagined and constructed and how these discourses shape a space discomfiting to others. Finally, I will reflect on the implication of the burgeoning of this type of private-public space for Johannesburg’s transformation into a socially just city.