

TRAIN OF THOUGHT

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"Of all modes of transport, the train is perhaps the best aid to thought: the views have none of the potential monotony of those on a ship or plane, they move fast enough for us not to get exasperated but slowly enough to allow us to identify objects."

(De Botton², 2002:57)

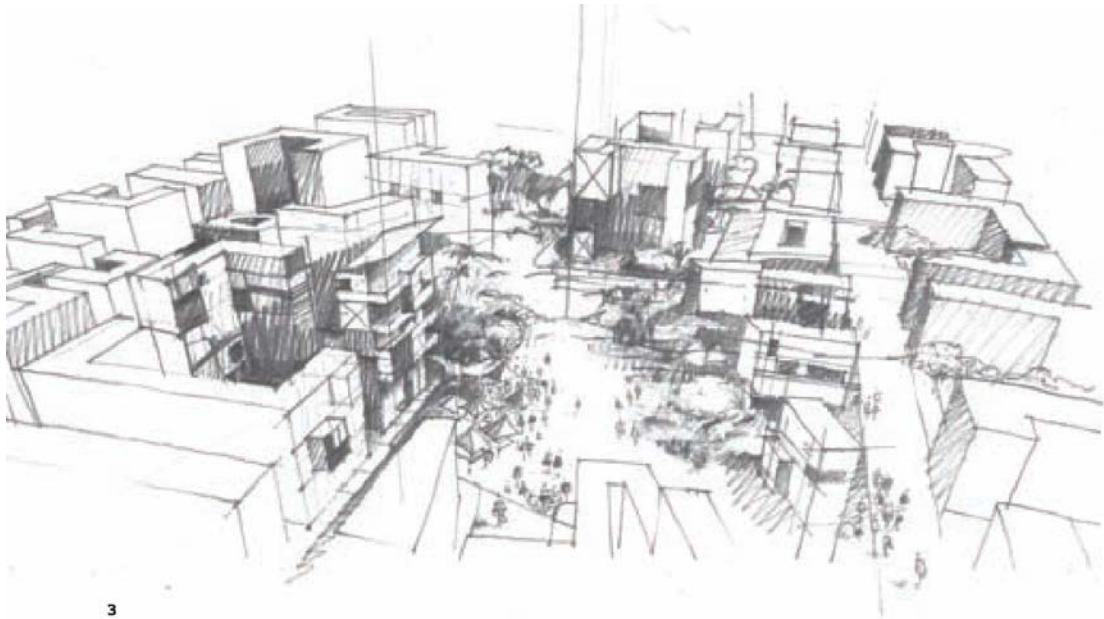


Gautrain Sandton station

Visitors arriving at our up-to-the-minute OR Tambo International Airport ought to feel at home in the new state-of-the-art Gautrain stations, complete with their stainless steel and white powder coated trimmings and tree-like roof structures. They offer a seamless continuation of the international travel experience and beckon the same choice and effervescent urban experience of "overseas" cities. Or do they?



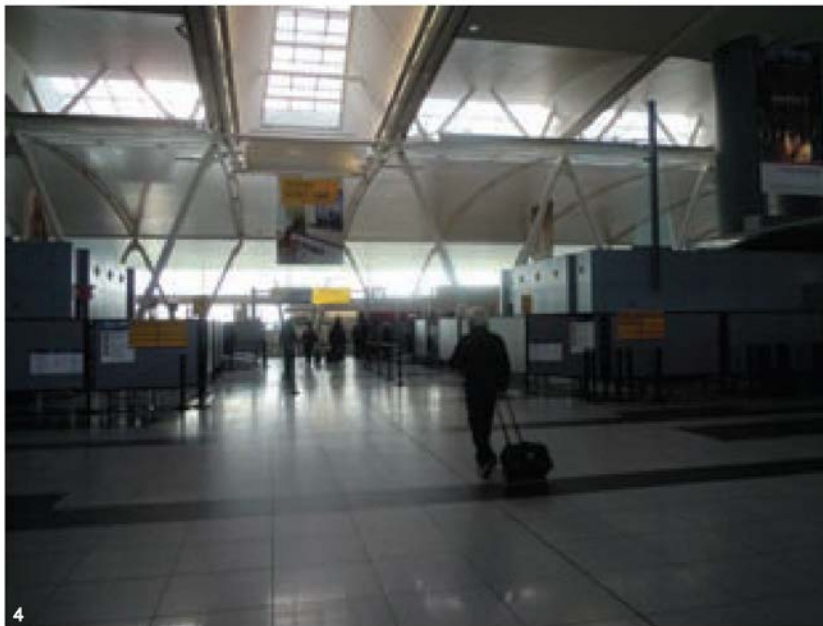
Gautrain carriage



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View B

These stations, perched unceremoniously disjointed from their urban contexts (except for the Sandton station, where StudioMAS proposes a comprehensive urban integration⁵) offer only a very limited access to the most privileged parts of our economic heartland. Carefully and strategically positioned and crafted to maintain the segregation of classes in our society.



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JFK Terminal



Gautrain OR Tambo Johannesburg

Whereas high-income earning executives can now choose to travel to work either in their Mercedes Benzes or on the Gautrain, while either talking on their I-Phones or e-mailing on their I-Pads, the other 99% of our society continue to experience the glass ceiling of immobility.

No electricity to charge a cell-phone, no airtime, no Internet access. Transport money accounts in many cases for more than 70% of income. A gardener earning R120 a day, must get up at 3 in the morning to be at work by 7:30, knocks off at 4 to be home by 7 or 8, having spent around R70 on transport and airtime to secure the job⁷. Whether the Gautrain station is white and stainless steel or blue and purple, makes no difference to him.

Not that there is no infrastructure towards Soweto, Mamelodi and Shoshanguve. The tracks are there, the Metro rail carriages trundle along, slowly, unreliably and dangerously. There are platforms, there are even some stations in various states of disrepair and abductions where you probably risk your life by entering them. Informal vendors ensure an organic integration into the vibrant urban fabric, despite the obvious lack of consideration in the planning of these nodes of interaction.

On the one hand, one can imagine people being offended by the amount of money and “bling” spent on the Gautrain, with its beautiful, clean, punctual, quiet carriages, while so many people do not have this luxury. The architectural neutrality of the stations, where no concern for the surrounding context is displayed, can be considered no less than rude — blatant pretext for the continuation of oppression and segregation, an economic apartheid.

On the other hand, however, one may perceive the value of the Gautrain and its single-minded, flashy depositories as being inspirational in reviewing the capital asset of our burgeoning African urbanism. In the work of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, the notions of perception and participation are interrelated⁴. The interchangeable power of perception and participation therefore become valuable tools in the re-imagining of our society. As much as we all know that we need to grapple with the most challenging aspects of development, the overcoming of poverty

and the radical deployment of services to alleviate inhumane living conditions, we also know that human motivation plays an important role.

Inspiration and motivation often follow the visions held in the imagination. The success of the 2010 World Cup bore testimony to such inspiration and vision. The aftermath and consequences of the energy created is still being digested. For a moment, however, South Africa felt that it could overcome its obstacles. The euphoria of '94, the result of a vision is to be seen as the beginning of transformation.

It may be attributing too much credit to the Gautrain project to cast it along with such examples, but it may very well prove to become the starting point, or as Nabeel Hamdi ³(2010: 64) puts it, the point of “urban acupuncture”, from where the body uses its own energy to heal itself.

If the Gautrain is to serve as an example, it is quite conceivable that the existing railway lines linking our townships to the CBD's could become vibrant commuter arteries: High-tech, affordable, fast and reliable. The train stations could become hubs of activity, where retail and micro-industries can benefit from the access to resources, whilst serving thriving mixed-use centres. Such notions are being supported by the Department of Human Settlements, who are collaborating with Transnet⁶ to make large tracts of land around stations available for housing, retail, civic functions...mixed use neighbourhoods.

Such approaches to the revitalisation of our urban areas bodes well for the prevention of further urban sprawl and the re-investment potential of the blight that has led to the vast *drosscapes*¹ of our neglected centres.

Student projects⁸ reflect the potential of such interventions, becoming the vehicles of imagination that presuppose a youthful energy and exuberance of an urban renaissance.

The possibilities of urban confidence brim with excitement. I love going home. I love the smell, the taste, the sounds of South Africa. The Gautrain is a wonderful addition to our country's experience. One just wants more of it, for more of us.



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Proposed framework

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2. De Botton, A., 'The Art of Travel', London: Butler and Tanner, 2002
3. Hamdi, N., 'The Placemaker's Guide to Building Community', London: Earthscan, 2010
4. Merleau-Ponty, M., 'Phenomenology of Perception', New York: Routledge, 1962
5. StudioMAS proposals: <http://www.studiomas.co.za/sandton-id.php>
6. The Housing Development Agency's OBJECTIVES, ASSISTANCE TO THE PROVINCES, CHALLENGES AND SERVICE DELIVERY
28 JUNE 2011
 - *The HDA has subjected 6 692 Transnet non-core properties to land identification criteria to test suitability*
 - *1 591 properties have been identified as suitable for human settlements development*
 - *Transnet has been formally approached by the HDA to release 309 properties measuring approximately 812.6267 hectares*
7. Information derived from participative research undertaken by the B.Arch (Honours) students at the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria, July-September 2011.
8. Urban Design Framework around the development of Pienaarspoort railway station developed by Honours students of the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria: Walter Raubenheimer (B.Arch. Hons), Johann Matthyssen (L.Arch HONS) & Werner Landman (B.Arch Hons)