

Reviving Johannesburg's inner city: A resurgence of history and hope

By [Mercy Maina](#), issued by [Pareto Limited](#)

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Johannesburg CBD, a once-thriving economic epicentre, stands as a testament to the ebbs and flows of urban development. Founded in 1886 upon the discovery of gold in the Reef, it burgeoned into a global metropolis, attracting businesses, residents, and wealth. However, over time, a shift occurred as affluence gravitated towards the northern suburbs, leaving the city centre struggling with dilapidation, crime, and neglect. Yet, amidst this decline, a dedicated group of stakeholders has emerged, each contributing their efforts to breathe life back into the heart of Johannesburg.



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A resilient legacy

The Johannesburg CBD encapsulates the rich tapestry of South African history. Its origins trace back to the gold rush that transformed the region, evolving into a vibrant hub that hosted the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) and a multitude of thriving enterprises. In its prime, it was the economic heartbeat of the nation. Today, however, it bears the weight of tarnished memories — crime, decay, and a landscape scarred by tragedy.

Banking on revival

Some institutions have remained steadfast in their commitment to the CBD's resurgence. Major banks like FNB, ABSA, and Standard Bank continue to maintain their properties within the city. Bank City precinct, in particular, offers a sanctuary for businesses, meticulously maintained and safeguarded for the benefit of both commerce and the public. Their presence serves as a reminder of the potential that still lies dormant within the city's core.

Government's pivotal role

While private entities have demonstrated their dedication, the Gauteng Provincial Government holds the key to unlocking the CBD's full potential. The Kopanong Precinct, envisioned since 2003, aspires to consolidate provincial departments and stimulate construction, businesses, and job creation. This ambitious project, however, has been marred by irregularities and bureaucratic hurdles. Consequently, iconic landmarks like 78 Fox Street languish in neglect, ghosts of a bygone era. If realised, the Kopanong project could ignite a renaissance within the inner city, infusing it with fresh purpose and vitality.

Corporate citizenship in action

Corporate giants, too, recognise their responsibility in revitalising the CBD. Anglo-American's generous donation of their Main Street campus buildings stands as a beacon of hope. The 45 Main Street building, now home to the Maharishi Invincibility Institute, empowers students with practical skills and secures their path to sustainable employment. This act of benevolence not only benefits the community but also sets a precedent for others to follow, highlighting the potential for collaborative change.

A coalition of hope

In the face of adversity, a beacon of hope emerges in the form of "Jozi My Jozi", a non-profit coalition with a singular mission: the rebirth of Johannesburg's inner city. This collective of dedicated individuals and organisations is poised to catalyse a "Phoenix Moment" of renewal, breathing fresh life into the city's veins. Their tireless efforts serve as a testament to the enduring spirit of Johannesburg and its capacity for transformation.

Global inspirations

Johannesburg is not alone in its quest for inner city rejuvenation. Successful cases from around the world serve as inspiration for this revitalisation journey. Consider New York City, which underwent a similar transformation. The Big Apple's revival from a period of decline and urban decay to its present-day status as a global icon demonstrates the potential for inner city renewal.

New York City, for instance, faced significant challenges in the 1970s, including high crime rates and a declining economy. However, a combination of factors, including innovative public-private partnerships, aggressive crime reduction strategies, and targeted investment in infrastructure, led to a remarkable turnaround. The implementation of practical programmes like the 'broken windows' theory, which focused on addressing minor offenses to prevent more serious crimes, played a pivotal role.

Detroit's revival, on the other hand, was driven by a renewed focus on diversifying its economy beyond the automotive industry. The city attracted creative industries, invested in arts and culture, and encouraged urban farming initiatives. Community engagement and the revitalisation of historic neighbourhoods were key to Detroit's resurgence.

Conclusion

Johannesburg's CBD, with its illustrious past, has faced many trials and tribulations. It may have fallen from grace, but it has not lost its spirit. The determination of businesses, the vision of government, the generosity of corporations, and the grassroots efforts of the community all converge to chart a path towards inner city rejuvenation.

While challenges persist, history has shown us that cities can rise from the depths of neglect and despair. Johannesburg has all the elements required for a renaissance: a rich heritage, dedicated stakeholders, and the potential to once again become a thriving economic hub. The journey may be long, but with each investment, each renovation, and each act of goodwill, we inch closer to a brighter future for the Johannesburg CBD.

As we look ahead, let us draw inspiration from our own history and the global success stories that remind us that no city is beyond redemption. Together, we can turn the page on the Johannesburg CBD's tumultuous past and write a new chapter of prosperity and vitality for generations to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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