

PORTRAIT OF A SUBURB: HILLBROW

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ONE can conjure a certain symmetry out of it. On one side of Johannesburg they piled the exhausted sand from the gold mines in great pale dumps; and later, those who prospered by the gold piled themselves up in tiers on the other side. This is Hillbrow, the nearest thing in Africa to a residential concrete jungle. It grows squarely on the Witwatersrand itself, the rocky ridge half a mile north of the city which marks the line of the gold reef. Here the pioneers set up Johannesburg's first suburb at a respectable distance from the dust and din of the mining camp. Soon the city became bigger and richer, and they moved on further out of town. And next, when Johannesburg had to grow vertically as well as laterally, Hillbrow came into its own again, and tall buildings crusted the ridge in crossword patterns. This, then, was the evolution of half a century: first a fashionable suburb, then an unfashionable one, and, finally, a middle-class, mass-produced warren.

Johannesburg people are given to pointing out that Hillbrow is the most densely populated square mile in the British Commonwealth. It is also the most insecure part of an insecure city. Its culture is cosmopolitan and unclassifiable. The main thing its inhabitants have in common is that they all live there for reasons of convenience, and none of them very permanently. You have a flat or a room in Hillbrow if you are young and foot-loose, old and lonely, or middle-aged and put off by the crime rate from taking a house in the suburbs. You live there if you are an immigrant, a student, a divorcée, an intellectual, a hospital nurse, a bachelor girl, a ducktail boy. Young, moderately-off couples start their marriages in a flat in Hillbrow and push prams on Sundays through its crowded streets.

Hillbrow's biggest boom days are over now, the post-war years when building owners could ask what key-money they liked, and lower-floor flats already had curtains up while the top floors were still grey uncovered skeletons. But new buildings still rear and jut, as high as the town planners will let them go, filling in the blank squares and shutting off someone's last segment of view. The urgency and instability persist. There is a regular shift of population: on the last day of the month

you can usually see removal vans standing at entrances, furniture arrayed on the narrow pavements. Among Johannesburg's more settled suburbanites Hillbrow has a certain name for fast living. Living in Hillbrow carries vague connotations of Bohemianism and night life. Certainly its cafés close the latest in town, and its streets are more animated at night than any other part of the city. By and large, this is the result of a lot of unattached people having nothing much to do in the evenings. Most of Hillbrow's population is young, nearly all of it English-speaking, and probably a good quarter of it Jewish. Perhaps it was this combination of circumstances that once gave the Liberal Party here its biggest-ever number of White votes. But the Liberals still came a long way from capturing the seat. Hillbrow is hardly a typical South African suburb, but it is not as untypical as all that.

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Hillbrow divides into three strata. Its core consists of flats, hotels, some office blocks, nursing homes, and more flats. The base is variegated: restaurants, bazaars, delicatessen shops, garages, radio shops, fruit shops, milk bars, coffee bars, "Greek shops," and umpteen pharmacies selling fancy goods in cut-throat competition with one another. (One chemist, aghast, once counted a dozen rivals in some 300 yards.)

The top stratum is the most homogeneous. Denoting it are rows of small windows at the top of each building, among the radio aerials and thin iron chimneys. These are the quarters of the servants who keep the flats clean, the "Locations in the Sky." Hillbrow is a classic example of Dr. Verwoerd's famous horror-tag. It is one of the many conveniences of the suburb that every Hillbrow flat is a service flat. And it is one of the fewer conveniences of being a "flat-boy" that you live on the premises in some relative measure of comfort. So the prospect of these servants' enforced removal to ordinary terrestrial locations appeals neither to them nor their employers, and produced a fury of practical, property-owning opposition from the City Council. In Hillbrow, for the moment, most of this penthouse proletariat stays on. They are tribal Africans for the most part, largely Zulus, supporting one or more wives in the reserves and departing intermittently to cultivate their patch of ground; "good workers" who worry few people apart from Dr. Verwoerd. It is only on week-ends and public holidays that there may be occasional trouble upstairs, when sounds of

drunkenness and fighting may echo down the lift shafts and make fearful caretakers ring for the Flying Squad.

Week-ends, indeed, are the only time one is really conscious of the roof dwellers other than as an army of flat cleaners. On Sundays one meets them at street level, gazing at the shop windows, lounging in the back lanes between the buildings, gathering at street corners. They even look different. The rest of Hillbrow dresses for sport or leisure in shorts and sweaters, slacks and sandals. But the Zulus from the flats discard their standard "boy" uniforms and dress up in long trousers and suits and hats. And there you can see one of the undeniable tokens of progress: a primitive people puts on its best clothes on Sunday, an advanced one puts them off.

With their strong tribal roots the roof-dwellers live, in this concrete heart of the city, lives that are strangely insulated from many of the tensions and hardships that are the lot of the average urban African. That is why Hillbrow is a place where, probably less mutedly than elsewhere in Johannesburg, one still hears music in the streets. On Sundays jiggging, jiving groups stroll past the flats with guitars, concertinas and the penny whistles that have become all the rage in Black Johannesburg. The penny whistle's fluting, a reedy obbligato to the city noises, somehow seems peculiarly fitted to Hillbrow. It could make an apt enough symbol itself of a contradictory society—a throaty, woodland note produced out of a bit of scrap tubing or curtain-rod.

The "flat boys" are less sophisticated than their girl friends, the nursemaids and cook-girls of the area, who are permanent city dwellers. And generally they have but a limited and superficial contact with city life as lived communally in the townships. Thus the bus boycott had little meaning for them, the June 26 protest strike even less. But their world is going to widen now. In terms of the "Locations in the Sky" edict, most of Hillbrow's roof-dwelling Africans will eventually have to move out to municipal hostels, or huge barracks, 12 miles or more from the city. There they will meet city Africans of other backgrounds; there they will become a part of township life with its squalor, its raids, its daily hours wasted in bus queues and overcrowded trains. Increasing awareness must result, whether through exposure to "agitators" or simply through keeping their eyes and ears open. And so, once again, apartheid marches blindly towards the same end as the forces

that oppose it. It is difficult to see the flat cleaners being unaffected by future boycotts or strikes.

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Hillbrow's tensions are of a diffuse kind, not so much evident between the races as inherent in its whole *raison d'être* and way of life. The pace of Johannesburg life is conducive to divorce and neurosis and delinquency; and Hillbrow, if only by reason of its concentrated thousands, seems to distil an essence of all these. Hints of violence underlie its prosperous, ultra-modern façade. There is the violence that comes with the servants' holiday drinking; naked violence sometimes at evening at the non-European bus stops and in the dark back lanes, where African thugs wait for victims, township style. Violence simmers, too, in Hillbrow's neon-lit, juke-boxy café life. In the last year or two the suburb has become celebrated as the haunt of "ducktail boys." Already they are so much a part of the local scene that the newspapers have dropped both the "boy" and the inverted commas. Ducktails, then, are blamed these days for almost everything that is going: assaults, car thefts—always at their peak in Hillbrow because garage space is at a premium—dagga smoking, and worse. Certainly they are beginning to appear now as something more serious than a Sunday-paper catchline. The problem is to-day's universal one of the teddy-boy, the rock-'n-roller, the teen-age delinquent. The name is new, but the hair-style, with the draped jacket, the drainpipe trousers and the rest—these are standard. Outwardly the Hillbrow kind are just unhappy-looking youths. To put them in their local perspective, one might call them white "tsotsis". They are expressing a similar rebellion and are the product of similar social change and disruption. It was the same pattern of post-war forces, indeed, that threw up the Newclare and Moroka slums on the one hand, Hillbrow itself on the other.

Anyway, the local ward councillor denies strongly that the ducktails live in Hillbrow; they are simply attracted from other suburbs, he says, by the bright lights. Be that as it may, Hillbrow's respectable folk are worried and are asking anxiously why there are not more police in the streets. (They were there all right during the bus boycott, and five hundred of them were on hand at the Drill Hall down the road on the first day of the Treason Trial.)

Flat life is cramping, unhealthy, probably un-South African.

The Union is a country of wide open spaces; Hillbrow has none at all. From a lower storey your standard view is of the honeycombed flat life across the road. From higher flats there are superb squared-off skylines, brilliantly-lit night views, and sometimes a fine panorama of the city's white towers below. Best view of all is from Hillbrow's tallest building, the 17-storey Metropolitan Heights. No doubt recognizing its pre-eminence, a young woman not long ago went to the top floor and threw herself off. The next day, among the curious and the morbid, came another girl. She asked where the woman had jumped from and then did the same herself.

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Morning and evening, Hillbrow's streets choke up with traffic to and from the city. There are long pastel-coloured cars from the northern suburbs, all fishtails and chrome, and big roaring PUTCO buses from Alexandra Township. The old, rattling red trams that serve Hillbrow itself are the most incongruous things among all its modernity. They are the sole relics of anything like a past; these, and the old double and single-storeyed houses whose tin roofs are shadowed and overtowered by the flats. Edwardian derelicts, some of them still display forlorn nameboards like "Kopje's View" and "The Look-out." To-day most of them are occupied by poor Afrikaner families; others have been turned into forbidding rooming-houses. One or two are said to be not of the best repute. On Hillbrow's busiest corner, where to-day the biggest chemist shop of all prospers, used to stand a little house once occupied by the young Smuts, then newly married and just starting out as the Transvaal Republic State Attorney. This chemist, hearing the story, had Smuts's widow unveil a small plaque. But nobody remembers the house and scarcely a soul notices the plaque. Attuned to the surge of the traffic and the bustle in the supermarket, people haven't the time to stop. Hillbrow impatiently thrusts aside its corrugated-iron past. The old houses become steadily shabbier—why spend money on them when their flat rights will bring in so much more?—and steadily they vanish.

The flats surmount and swamp them, five, ten, fifteen storeys, shoulder to shoulder, face to face. In staggered rows they breast the steep hill of the Witwatersrand and sweep down the other side. The blocks that date from the thirties, cheaper to live in, have some air of solidity despite the drabness of their

grey-plaster-and-face-brick exteriors. Their tenants are as a rule older and more settled. But it is the others that set the character of Hillbrow: luxury flats, bachelor flats, all uncomplacably "contemporary." They are filled with contemporary furniture and peopled by contemporary South Africans. Few window boxes, sun blinds, washing-lines, interrupt their clean dimensions. Their façades are gay with checks of colour, towering columns of glass, infinite repetitions of level and module. A shadow draws an identical diagonal across each identical balcony; they are bright and brave in the highveld sunlight.

Behind the buildings, though, or in the shadowed chasms between them, there are glimpses of uncovered concrete frames, exposed plumbing and spidery zig-zagging fire escapes. Some of the blocks put up scarcely five years ago already show cracked plaster and discoloured paint. In any case it is the newest, fanciest, glossiest of these buildings that have the most impermanent air. This may be a little Manhattan or a little Brazil, but it all happened too quickly, and the future of all this wealth is too uncertain. Seventy years ago it was bare veld, but what of seventy years hence? Even in a quarter of a century, some predict, Hillbrow will have turned into a vast multi-storeyed slum. Need one look very much further ahead than that, though? Sometimes it does not feel like it.

Johannesburg is the world's largest city among those which have neither river nor ocean to sustain them. Its only roots were in that uncertain yellow gleam far below. Life at 6,000 feet above sea level is both stimulating and enervating. If South Africa is a volcano, then Johannesburg is its summit, with Hillbrow at its uneasy, heaving brink. Dark stirrings from below are starting to reach even those topmost levels. . . . Meanwhile the new Hillbrow is like a giant cardboard world, made for cardboard people to live in. It was designed to give them a glitter and a show for just so long, a 20th-century backdrop against which to act out a last scene of delayed history.

Look across, from a Hillbrow rooftop, to those worn and wrinkled mine dumps on the other side of the city. They at least would preserve more substance as monumental ruins. . . .