“Highveld Dreamworlds”
By Bubblegum Club for “Infinity Studio”

For the Live Art Festival #8: SUPERSPACES (07. – 16.06.2018) Johannesburg based creative platform Bubblegum Club opens the “Infinity Studio” at Kampnagel. The interdisciplinary program occupies various locations of the former factory for three nights and introduces 17 artists from South Africa.

The urban sprawl of Gauteng is defined by gated communities and enclaves, high walls and barbed wire. From the palatial estates of the elite to modest apartment complexes, living spaces are organised for security and against the perceived dangers of the surrounding cityscape. The proliferation of these spaces responds to pervasive fears about crime and violence, and has become a central component of the real estate market.

As a consequence, the simple act of visiting a relative or friend can become a strict ordeal of pin codes, guard posts and surveillance technology. The geographer Stephen Graham refers to this as “militarised urbanism”, with the city engineered like a vast airport of fortified spaces linked by checkpoints.

These hostile exteriors are intended to sustain a happy prosperous lifestyle inside the walls, free of the dangers of outside. The promotional material for the exclusive Steyn City development promises its elite customers “something that up until this point did not exist anywhere on the African continent - a parkland residence founded on the principle of community, and the quality of life. An ideal lost in today's urban living. On offer will be a unique village lifestyle, centered on quieter and simpler times not yet seen in Johannesburg's fast paced and high-pressure environment”.

A similar language is used to promote more humble dwellings. Cosmopolitan Projects, which markets bottom end property developments, promises “world-class model cities… great security and a friendly suburban lifestyle- a place to call home”.

The term security estate is loosely used in South Africa to define a range of spaces, from huge private developments to small housing and apartment complexes. But they are all sold on the premise that they offer not merely a residence, but a packaged lifestyle. Developers have coined numerous terms to describe the experience on sale. Listing sites for housing in Gauteng promote golf estates, urban estates, residential country estates, equestrian estates and mature lifestyle estates. A prominent variation is eco-estates, marketing proximity to endangered plant and wildlife.

Developers promote the idea that they are building spaces which reflect the profoundest desires of their clients. To entice buyers, visual simulations are offered of the kind of lifestyle they can expect to enjoy. Cosmopolitan, (with the slogan "real houses for real people") uses composite images of couples or families striding confidently into their cozy new homes. The sky is always blue, the grass abundantly green and the children playing.
Enclaves are given mythical titles like "Avalon" to hint that they are a paradise of sorts, or named for real world aspirational locales like "Palm Springs" and "Beverley Hills". In their introduction to the collection Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism, Mike Davis and Daniel Betrand Monk write "today’s luxury-themed environments—including city sized supermalls, artificial island suburbs and faux downtown lifestyle centers—function as alternative universes for privileged forms of human life". Such "dreamlands" of consumption and exclusion are iterations of an imagined "California lifestyle as a global phantasmagoric ideal, which the noveaux riches pursue with the same desperate zeal in the deserts of Iran and the hills of Kabul as they do the gated suburbs of Cairo, Johannesburg and Beijing". However, the pursuit of the walled lifestyle crosses class lines. Developers like Cosmopolitan increasingly incorporate aesthetics and organisational models from the elite enclaves, promoting a mass market version of the security estate.

But these dreamworlds are stalked by nightmares, with the threat of violence from the outside a constant threat. While estates are sold as oases of tranquility and freedom, the marketing makes sure to let buyers know that they are under the protection of military grade technology and constant guarding. Rather than downplaying this, developers actively highlight it with G4S, an international company which guards many South African estates, offering “bespoke systems” for the market. Another newspaper report noted that Steyn city is where “children will be able to play without any fears” thanks to” high tech security systems as well as a large deployment of security personal”.

The Underside of Paradise

The estate market grows off the back of legitimate concerns about the sudden, brutal violence which haunts South African society. But, beneath the talk of community and play, the fusing of security paranoia and conspicuous consumption reflects its own disturbing social trends.

During the colonial and Apartheid past, racial segregation was brutally enforced through pass laws and other measures to restrict public access to urban space. Writing in 2005, Richard Ballard observed that security estates effectively privatised tactics used by the Apartheid state for commercial ends. But rather than enforcing racial segregation, the upper and middle classes are now shielded from the poor. As journalist Lynsey Chutel puts it, this creates "pockets of development walled off from South African socio-economic reality". While the more lavish estates now even offer on-site schools and clinics, the majority outside struggle to access basic services from government. The effect is to further entrench economic Apartheid, and erode a sense of shared citizenship.

While class stratification is especially blatant in South Africa, it is also indicative of a global shift towards what sociologist Bryan Turner calls the “enclave society” where governments and private agencies fixate on regulating and immobilising the movement of people. This resonates with dark cultural visions of cities as dens of dysfunction and disease, the home of the dangerous racial or class 'other'. Marketers have cannily exploited these fears. For example, Sports Utility Vehicles (SUV's) are in the US presented as mini-tanks which safely move their drivers from workplace to lifestyle estate, without ever having to step into the dangerous outside. Politicians have equally tapped into the nightmares of their target audience, with Donald Trump energising the racism and xenophobia of his support base with the slogan "build the wall".
In the wake of climate change and growing economic inequality, this fortressing can only intensify. Peter Frase starkly argues that already "gated communities, private islands, ghettos, prisons, terrorism paranoia, biological quarantines- amount to an inverted global gulag, where the rich live in tiny islands of wealth strewn around an ocean of misery".

The end point of this enclaving was bleakly portrayed in Johannesburg raised filmmaker Neill Bloomkamp's Elysium (2013). In this future, the elite orbit Earth in a Beverley Hills- style space habitat, while the surface has become an endless global slum. While a fictional extrapolation, this scenario has a disturbing plausibility. In 2017, the New Yorker published an expose on the new trend of rich survivalists buying luxury converted nuclear missile silos and remote land in New Zealand to survive the possible collapse of civilisation. In Nigeria, construction is underway on Eko Atlantic City, a private development intended to shield the elite of Lagos from the effects of global warming. Most ambitiously, South African-born billionaire Elon Musk has announced plans for creating a colony on Mars to escape mass extinction down here.

Such a grandiose scheme may appear literally a world away from small residential estates in Gauteng. However, the desire to escape from the chaos of the wider society has the similar solution of walling off into a secured space which offers community and peace of mind. But, as Will Davies observes, "In our age of rising resentments, racisms and walls, the utopian desire to escape can be subverted in all manner of dark directions".

The security community is offered as a solution to social ills- for those who can afford it. But the retreat into them may be actively eroding empathy with the poor majority and preventing integrated solutions to problems of violence and socio-economic exclusion. Creating a country of enclaves prevents us from thinking of creative forms of mass joy and communal luxury. The acceptance that peace and order can only be obtained in privatised, securitised and curated spaces builds a bunker around the social imagination.

About
Bubblegum Club is a cultural intelligence agency, based in Johannesburg. We work to help brands and organizations understand and engage with contemporary South African youth culture. Along with identifying trends, we take the holistic approach of interpreting and explaining them. Through conceptualizing the broader social context of trends, our projects and activations help our clients to organically access youth culture.

Reflecting this mission, the company is divided into two interconnected divisions- an online magazine and an agency.

Our Online Magazine is a compendium of images, news and opinion which presents our perspective on the people and production defining South African youth culture. Its vision is to present an alternative narrative on South African art and society, by showcasing cutting edge creators and their work. The magazine is not based solely on popularity or visibility, but aims to give exposure to individuals and groups who embody passion and innovation. As well as being a showcase, the magazine is a platform for ideas and commentary which frame and advance cultural trends.

Our Agency produces regular reports which identify and interpret emergent trends. The reports are thoroughly researched and theoretically sophisticated, and offer our clients a rigorous analysis of the ideas and aesthetics driving these trends.
Links
Bubblegum Club
CUSS Group:
“Infinity Studio” at Kampnagel