

Tara Weber (Johannesburg Art Gallery)

Tara Weber currently works as a registrar at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and has curated a number of exhibitions from this collection. She completed a BA at the University of Cape Town with majors in Art History and English Literature in 2012 and completed her Honours at the Centre for Curating the Archive (UCT) in 2013. She is currently operating as part of the collective Johannesburg Lasts, whose practice lies in creative responses to ‘the last, lasts, lasting and losts’ that make up Johannesburg. Her personal research interests are with ruins, the shifting ideologies of museums and the preservation of diversity of food culture through plants.

Living ruins: botanical resistance In Johannesburg’s colonial infrastructure

In discussions around the legacies of colonial infrastructures in Africa, the focus often revolves around large scale industrial structures and transportation systems. However, there are less conspicuous sites of imperialism and colonial interference, where silent conflicts and negotiations now play out between local communities, new flora, and the last vestiges of both colonial architecture and botanical can be traced. The Joubert Park Greenhouse, once a marker of British ‘civilization’ in the dusty mining town of early 20th-century Johannesburg, and the Drill Hall, a symbol of Britain’s victory in the South African War, now exist almost in spite of themselves in the busy commuter district that surrounds the Noord Taxi Rank in the Johannesburg CBD. Broken windowpanes, makeshift planting containers, and a seemingly chaotic mix of plants in various stages of flowering and seeding bely what is in fact a complex subversion of colonial intent.

Botany not only has the potential to alter food practices, but continues to shape entire cityscapes and the ways in which people interact with these spaces. In examining the concept of a Eurafican present and indeed iterations of migration, plants and their associated infrastructure are fascinating microcosms. Using the both the Joubert Park Greenhouse and the neighbouring Drill Hall as primary research sites, this paper will examine how European ‘ruins’ in the context of Africa in particular are frequently productive, living sites of imagination and transformation, that resist their original functions. New botanical negotiations are evidence of the potential that ruins hold for repurposing and reimagining, and these pragmatic engagements present poetic and unusual opportunities for exploring relationships between Africa and Europe – both historical and current through a post-colonial lens.



Building of the Conservatory in Joubert Park. Image courtesy Museum Africa archives.



Pumpkins, squash and heirloom corn in the Joubert Park Greenhouse, 2020. Copyright Tara Weber.