

PHOTO ESSAY: Internet cafe's in Braamfontein Johannesburg SA

JUNE 2006

By jh-01 and Tegan Bristow



There are 4.7 million Internet users in South Africa (1). That's roughly 10% of the total population. This photo essay was a look into the use of the Internet in spaces other than the home or office. It is unclear whether these users have been included or considered in the current available statistics.

The Living Standards Measure, the most used market research tool in Southern Africa, "...cuts across race and other outmoded techniques of categorising people, and instead groups people according to their living standards using criteria such as degree of urbanisation and ownership of cars and major appliances." (2) The majority of targeted Internet based marketing tends to focus on customers within LSM's 6 – 8 (eight being highest, one, the lowest)

At an industry level people at the lower LSM levels do not meaningfully enter conversations around Internet use or Web based business. This photo essay begins an exploration into such users and spaces of connectivity.

THE PROCESS

There are 15 Internet cafés situated in a two block radius within Braamfontein (along Juta street, Biccard, De Korte, Simmonds, Jorrison and Stiemens street) an area that sits adjacent to the CBD of Johannesburg. Braamfontein is a thoroughfare for many people who commute in from the South Western Township (SOWETO) into the city and surrounding suburbs.

Although there are many Internet cafés in and around Johannesburg our plan was to spend an afternoon simply photographing this particular area because it is such a hub. Such spaces have received little attention so beyond the photographic documentation we had no other expectations or research plans.

THE EXPERIENCE

Reflecting on the photographs we took there are four main themes that emerged: exteriors, interiors, proximity and signage.

While taking the photographs permission from shop owners was required and thus a good deal of conversation emerged. In addition while walking from shop to shop customers from the cafés approached us to make conversation. None of these conversations were documented.

Not all the cafés have been documented here. In some cases we were not granted permission and some of the photographs have been omitted due to poor quality or repetition.

(1) The World Wide Worx 2006.
(2) The South African Research Foundation 2006.

It is clear from the signage that in many cases “Internet café” is a misleading term as the shops offer multiple services and products and may even have started out offering other services (for instance, as a hair dressing salon or video / DVD shop).

There is a strong emphasis on business use. Multiple Internet and software based services are offered (word processing, emailing, Web browsing, business cards, etc). Signage often speaks to specific needs rather than technology service. For instance, “CV”s as apposed to “word processing”.

Secretarial services and the teaching of software skills are offered hinting at the need for services but a lack of either skills or resources.

The great number of shops offering these services in such close proximity has lowered the cost of Internet access (they all charge R5 an hour) which, we were told, is cheaper than the access offered in SOWETO itself (R20 an hour on average in SOWETO according to one shop owner).

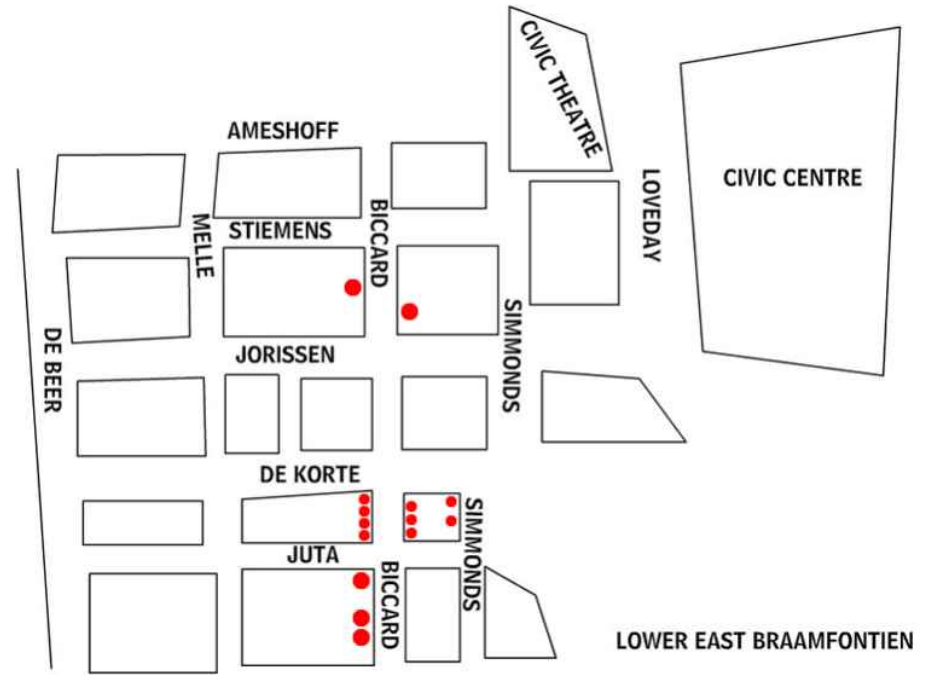
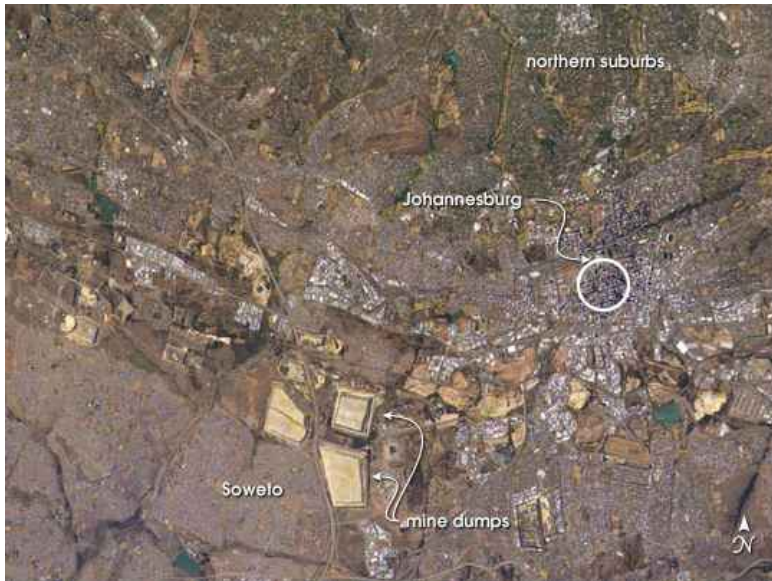
The great number of cafés is in and of itself surprising and clearly hints at the demand for access. Although no figures are available the shops experience much traffic and have many repeat customers according to the owners.

In the Braamfontein area some shop owners referred to high numbers of students using their computers. Braamfontein sits between WITS University and the University of Johannesburg Technical Campuses and other city based campuses.

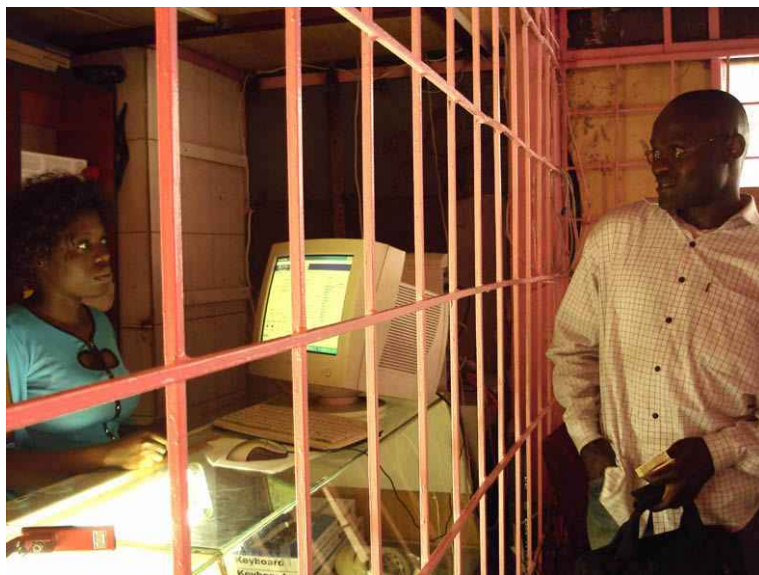
An Internet café customer who we spoke with remarked that most people living in the townships knew of the Internet and understood what it was.

We have noted large numbers of foreign African Nationals using these spaces. It is possible that business is being conducted or family and friends contacted elsewhere in Africa.

Although there are Internet cafés in higher income areas there is nothing on this scale of concentration that we know of. In lower income suburbs which are becoming more integrated with people moving in from the townships we see this proliferation of Internet cafés, for instance along Rocky Street in Yeoville and along Louis Botha Avenue (from Orange Grove moving Northwards).













Clearly there is both a great demand and use for and of computer software and Internet based services in this context. The geographic movement of people being followed by the emergence of Internet cafés also points to some form of supply and demand relationship.

Broadly speaking there is an emphasis in answering very specific needs, often with a business focus. The signage indicates that these services are marketed as relevant through answering very specific needs, often with a business or vocational focus. Multiple needs are addressed in one location.

We are led to believe that there is an understanding of the Internet or Web. This certainly needs to be validated but from what we have seen, even at this level of investigation, there may well be a large body of people who are keen and ready for the uptake of Web based services.

It would be interesting to know how different this nomadic or communal user is from the, marginally, better documented home or business user.

Is their idea of the Internet and World Wide Web the same?

Is its purpose and potential understood the same way?

When and why are people drawn to use these services?

Of the broad mass without access to computers or Internet which people are quickest to approach or find the means? Who is on the periphery?

What is being used in the way of software and what is browsed on the Web?

Where is data stored and how (if at all) is it stored?

What is the user's relationship to the café? Do people tend to choose

and return to a particular café?

What is the perspective of the café owners, their relationship to their customers and what do they see?

Where else other than Internet cafés are people without access getting connected?

Is there any more insight to be gained from the movement of individuals and families geographically and the way Internet Cafés are tending to follow this movement?

What we are seeing in Johannesburg is very interesting and largely unexplored. It could be valuable to know if what we see here occurs in other cities in South Africa and in developing countries elsewhere in Africa and around the world.

Understanding the motivations, style and context of use could help us in many ways

- + It could expand our notion of potential audiences
- + It could increase use through targeting these audiences through marketing for the uptake of services
- + We may be able to design applications better suited to these environments
- + We could design content & functionality that answers users needs in these environments more effectively
- + We could use the environments themselves more effectively to communicate Web based services and understandings
- + If there are similarities between other cities and locations world wide the benefits of insights, tools and approaches could be shared