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## Book review

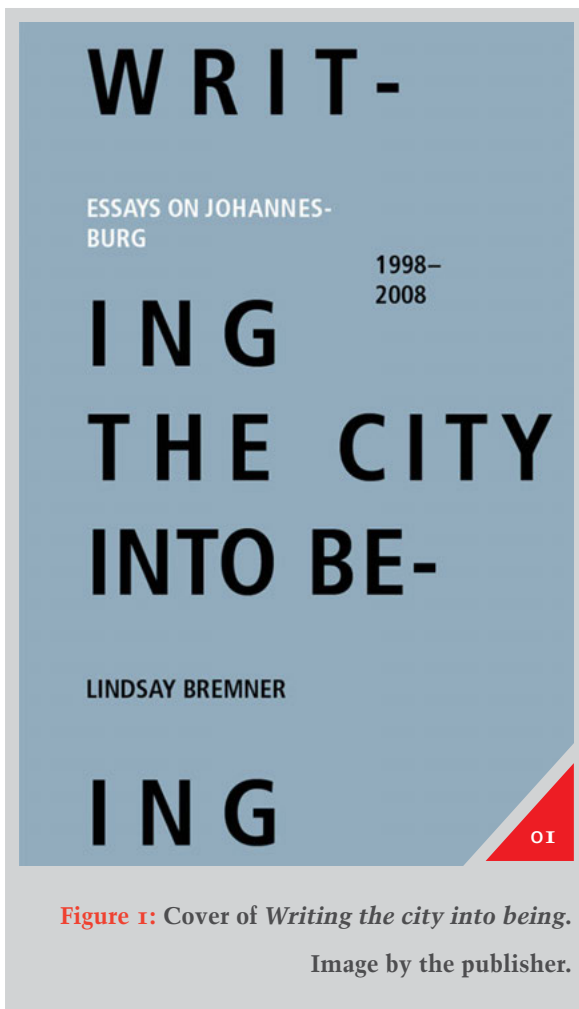
# *Writing the city into being. Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008.*

Lindsay Bremner. Fourthwall Books, 2010. ISBN 978-0-9869850-0-3.

Price: R250-00 softcover. The book can be ordered from the publisher.

Reviewed by Amanda du Preez

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Lindsay Bremner's volume of essays on Johannesburg's transformation after the demise of apartheid received the prestigious Jane Jacobs Urban Communication Book Award in 2011. The award – named in honour of the late social activist and author of *The death and life of great American cities* (1961) – is made annually by the New York based Urban Communication Foundation and aims to recognise outstanding books that exhibit excellence in addressing issues of urban communication. It is not difficult to surmise why *Writing the city into being* received the award for it contains an impressive collection of reflections both intellectually and visually on the city of Johannesburg. Currently employed as Director of Architectural Research at the University of Westminster, London, Bremner used to be the Chair of Architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand. As an acclaimed architect this volume is by no means Bremner's first attempt to tackle the enigmatic topic of the city of Johannesburg and she has previously published, amongst others, *Johannesburg: one city colliding worlds* (2004) and chapters in *Johannesburg – the elusive metropolis* (2008), *Desire lines: space, memory and identity in the post-apartheid city* (2007), *Under siege: four African cities. Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* (2002), and *blank\_\_architecture apartheid and after* (1998). Her projects and designs

have been exhibited widely such as the *Sans Souci rebuilding project* in Kliptown, Soweto (2007), as well as contributions to the Rotterdam and Venice Architecture Biennales in 2005 and 2006 respectively.

This volume can in some ways be viewed as the culmination of all Bremner's previous endeavours. It consists of three distinct sections, the first being a theoretical expose entitled, *Proposal: writing the city into being* wherein Bremner posits her broader philosophical and reflective ideas about experiencing the city. This is followed by four photographic essays and the volume concludes with ten essays on Johannesburg that have been unpublished or previously published elsewhere, spanning the period from 1998 to 2008.

After reading the first section one cannot but marvel at Bremner's ability to sensibly draw together an extensive array of literature from different disciplines and inventively applying them to her unpacking of walking, writing and listening to the city as a live entity or what she terms 'a mode of city-making' (p. 1). She seamlessly incorporates strategies from current philosophies (Blanchot's language theories, Deleuze and Guattari's idea of smooth spaces), to urban theorists (De Certeau, Lefebvre, and AbdouMalik Simone) and cultural theories (Mbembe and Nuttall). Clearly, her thinking about the city is an intellectually engaging affair as well as a concretely embodied experience, as she insists that writing the city is also to create the city or as she phrases it 'a way of writing the contemporary city into being and a mode of self-writing' (p. 3). Furthermore, Bremner is acutely aware in her analysis that '[t]he city of Johannesburg ... is a multilayered landscape of intersecting, overlapping, and conflicting geographies, place and identities' (p. 172). This means that the author is particularly attuned to the evasive nature of the city that 'never reveals itself all at once' (p. 1) that she is attempting to write and walk into being.

In the photo essays the notions of 'writing the city', 'smooth space', 'immaterial architecture' and 'terror' are captured in full colour. Bremner shows a keen observant eye here for the themes that she identified earlier in *Proposal: writing the city into being* are expanded on through visual presence.

Finally, the collection of Essays: Johannesburg 1998 – 2008 spans an array of themes such as strangeness, dirt, skin, boundaries, desire, fear, transition, catastrophe, criminality, memory and public life. In the essay 'Bounded spaces: democratic anxieties in post-apartheid Johannesburg', she for instance attempts to provide a sociological interpretation as to the nature and reasons for the violence that still plagues Johannesburg, and most other bigger cities in contemporary South Africa. She suggests that it can be attributed in part to the lack of a sense of being that young black men particularly experience while still being locked outside the white man's world. She notes that 'their crime is an attempt at inner reparation' (p. 201). Clearly, the search for a meaningful existence and to make sense of a problematic past provide some answers to the violent crimes but one cannot but wonder, almost twenty years into democracy, whether a more comprehensive and multifaceted explanation is not called for at this juncture? Perhaps Bremner's next volume would move towards such an investigation.