

City memories

Going back to my routes: Finding

Mark Gevisser takes a roadmap back to the Johannesburg of his childhood — filling in the gaps on the way

When I was a boy in the 1970s I used to play a game I have retroactively called “Dispatcher”, for hours on end, using my parents’ street-guide. The *Holmden’s Register of Johannesburg* was ringbound, with a blue cloth cover, its whimsical title and archaic typography conjuring a nostalgia for less turbulent times — although I knew none of that, of course, aged seven or eight, when I found a whole world between its covers, from The Old Cemetery and The Fort on page three through to a seemingly isolated island called Riverlea on page 105.

We lived in Hurlingham, on page 79, and it was from here that I would dispatch imaginary couriers across the world of the Holmden’s. I would open the *Johannesburg Telephone Directory* at random and settle on a name and an address, look for the address in the *Holmden’s* index, locate it on the map pages, and then give my man intricate directions on how to get there.

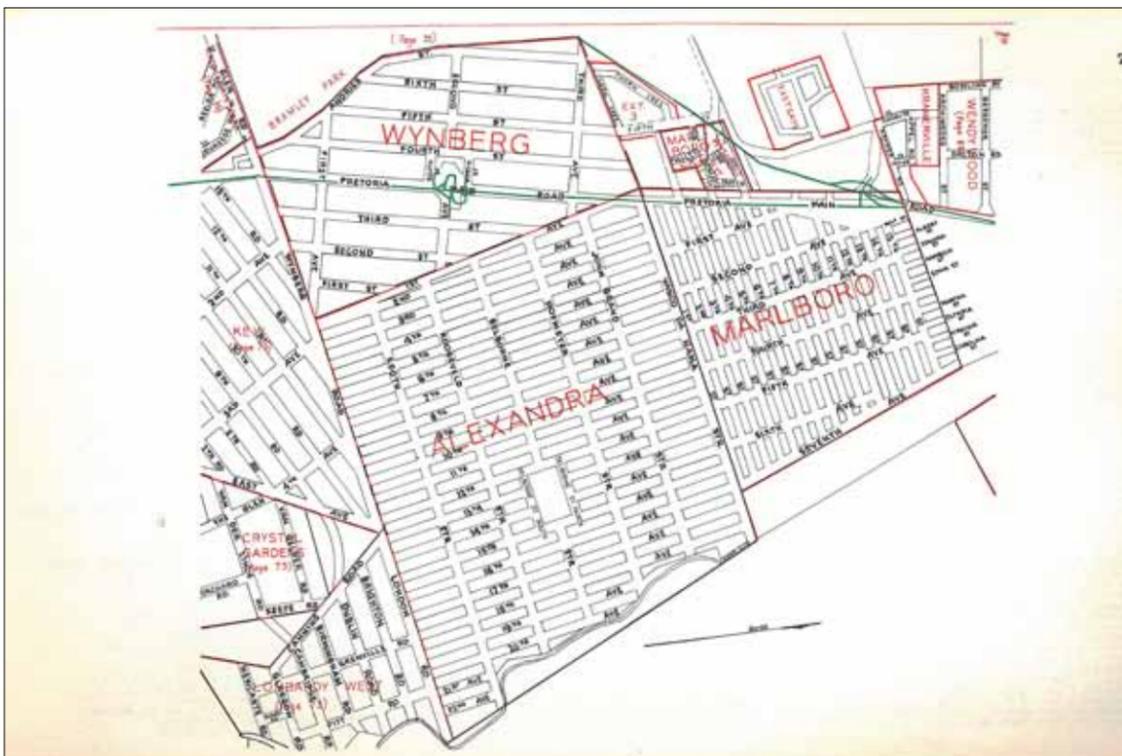
Other map-making activities derived from Dispatcher, such as plotting new suburbs in the white spaces of the Holmden’s, or designing the floor plans for houses at the addresses I found. All of these activities conspired to create an obsessive attachment within me to the *Holmden’s*, which I would spirit out of the car and into a quiet corner of my rambunctious house: by the time I was seven I had three younger brothers.

I would forget to return the book to its cubbyhole, an oversight that would be discovered only once it was needed on a real journey, and thus did a strict rule come to be made and vigorously enforced: the *Holmden’s* was not, under any circumstances, to leave the car. This meant that I would spend much of my childhood sitting in my father’s Mercedes, stationary in the garage, busy with my routes and my drawings.

One of my strongest memories is asking to be excused from the Sunday lunch table and rushing off to the garage with a telephone directory to spend a happy afternoon of Dispatcher and associated activities. In the memory, it is always grey and rainy — although, in fact, it seldom was in Johannesburg — and I am enfolded by the perforated leather, lost between the infinite blue of the *Holmden’s* covers until someone comes to fish me out for my bath, or tea.

Nostalgia, as they say, isn’t what it used to be. Originally coined by a Swiss doctor to describe the deep yearning of homesickness, the term now carries the implications of excessive sentimentality, or an impossible desire to reconstruct a lost past. It tells us more about ourselves than about the past for which we seem to yearn.

I have decided to look at my nostalgia for the *Holmden’s* in an attempt to understand it more critically and, in so doing, I have had the eerie but illuminating experience of viewing my childhood from above, as if it were a map itself, along which I have been able to plot my route to the present alongside



that of my hometown’s growth.

I don’t believe Dispatcher was flight-fantasy: I always talked my couriers home from their expeditions. Was it, then, a route into the troubled world of Johannesburg of the 1970s, a way of crossing the impermeable boundaries that were set around the life of a little white suburban boy? Or was the game a fantasy escape from these troubles, into a cartography that could not even begin to represent them? Why, as an adult, do I yearn for it so?

It is only with hindsight that I realise how bizarrely eccentric the *Holmden’s* was, and what the ideological basis for this might have been. The hand-drawn maps were not continuous. There was no logic to the pagination, no standard scale, there was no consistent north (some pages had the compass arrow facing left, or right, or even down), and suburbs were grouped as if discrete countries, often with nothing around the edges to show that there actually

was settlement on the other side of the thick red line. It is quite extraordinary, I think now from my globally positioned perspective, that people actually used a map like this to find their way around.

Inevitably, I stumbled across one of the few black names in the Johannesburg telephone directory and discovered how intent my wayfinder was on actually losing me. I had, of course, heard of “Alex” — it was the place where the black people who worked for us would go to church or to visit family on their days off. It would function in adults’ conversations as a trigger not only for pity and concern. It was a place where blacks lived, and as such it was unknowable — difficult and dangerous, not least for the poor people who had no choice but to live there. It was on another planet — and it must not have occurred to me that it would actually be in the *Holmden’s*.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered that it was only two pages away from us. I can recall my frustration at trying to get my courier there — there was no possible way of steering him from page 77 across into page 75. Sandton just ends at its eastern boundary, the Klein Jukskei River, with no indication of how one might cross it, or even that page 79 is just on the other side. The Key Plan might connect the two pages, but on the evidence of the maps themselves, there is no way through.

More was to come. It was June 1976 and I was 11 years old. We were sent home from school because of the riots. I rushed to the *Holmden’s* to glean more information — and was thwarted. Even though (I was later to discover) it had always been part of Johannesburg, Soweto wasn’t there! It was a phantom in that bottom left hand corner, in that white space where I had insouciantly plotted so many of my own fantasy suburbs, unmarked and unheeded.

On the road again: The city has certainly changed since Mark Gevisser (above) was a child, when he used *Holmden’s Register of Johannesburg* to plot routes to random Johannesburg addresses. Alexandra (left) was one of the few black areas to feature in this selective record of the city.

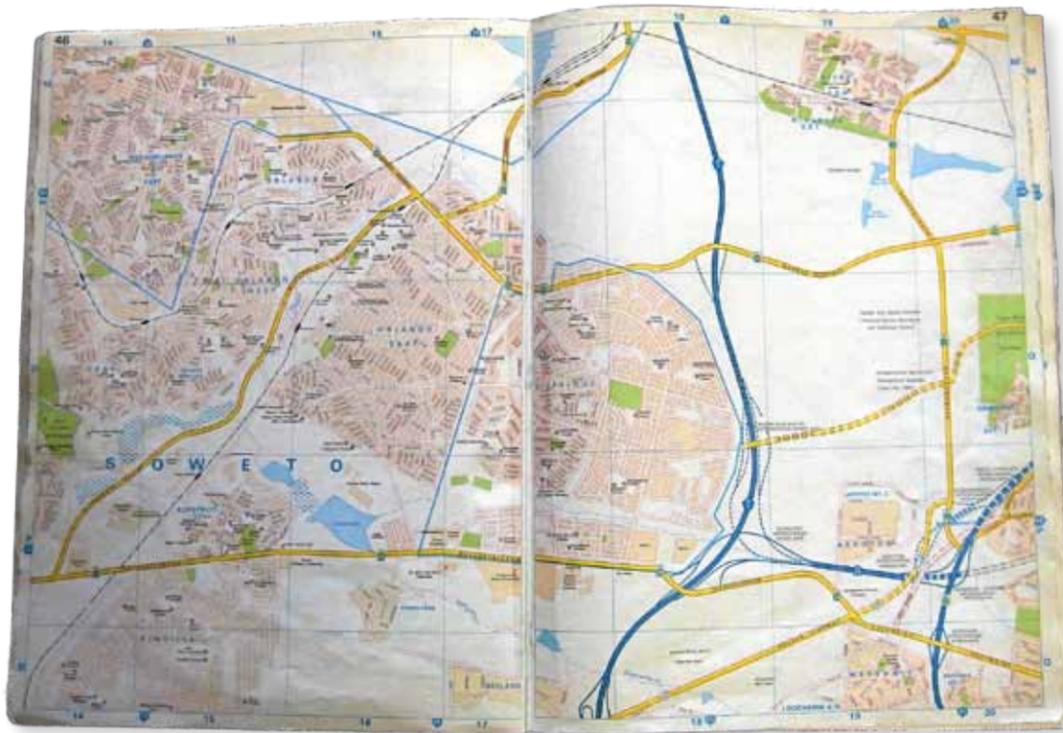
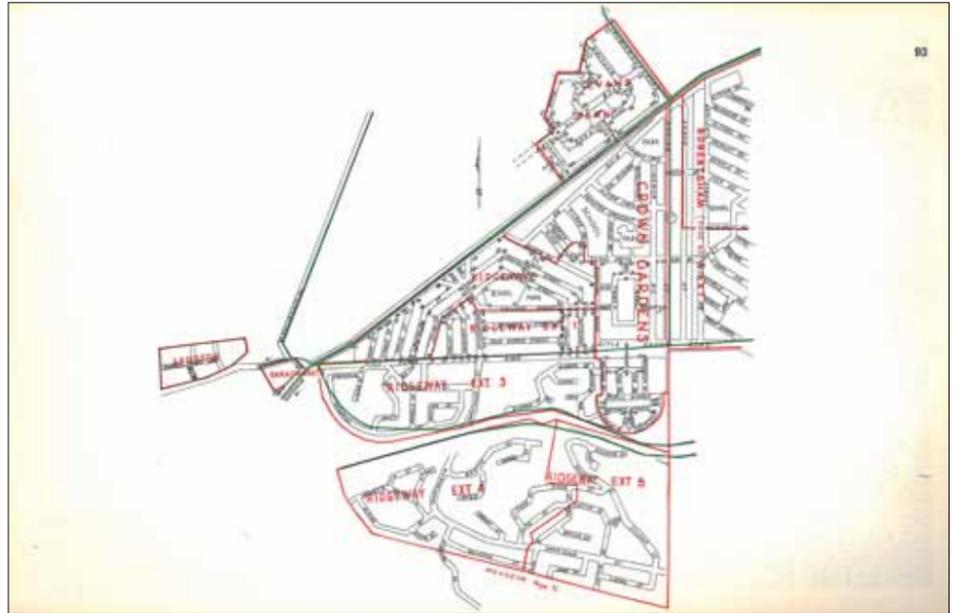
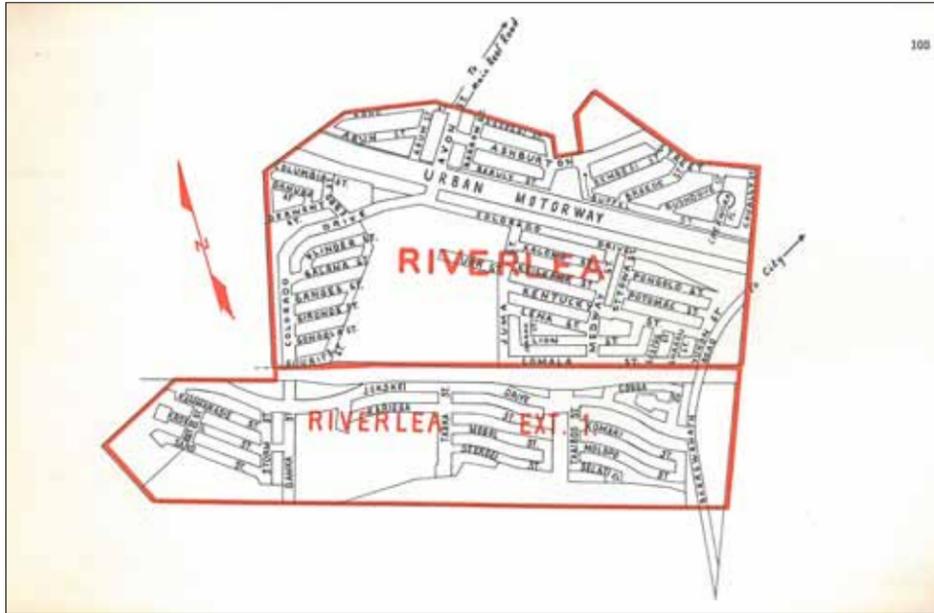
Photo: Paul Botes

Luckily I was not the only one to begin thinking about Soweto in 1976: that was the year Map Studio published the first-ever commercial street guide to the township. Shortly thereafter it brought out its street guide to the Witwatersrand, which integrated Soweto and the other townships into its cartography, and rapidly rendered the *Holmden’s* obsolete.

This explosion into colour and continuousness seemed to mirror other awakenings in me, sexual and political. Suddenly, there were whole fields of data across double pages that ran into each other, with roads in yellow and parks in green and industrial areas in grey, with schools in ochre and rivers in blue, and police stations marked with blue dots and hospitals with red crosses — fields of symbols as expansive as the terrain they now populated. Central Johannesburg was still the centre, but it seemed so tiny now, as did our little corner of Sandton. Soweto was mapped. Soweto! It was a city. It took up almost as many pages as Sandton. It was a revelation.

The previously undifferentiated notion of the township came into focus as a complex sequence of suburbs, some with familiar names, such as Orlando and Meadowlands, and others totally new to my ears: Zola, White City Jabavu. They were all mapped with exactly the same symbols as the white suburbs, even if in different patterns. They were not unknowable, not unimaginable: they had streets and parklands, red crosses and blue dots and yellow lines, just like anywhere else. This became the cartographical expression of some-

a way to call Jo'burg home



Mind the gaps: The *Holmden's Register of Johannesburg* version of the city (above) had suburbs existing as islands with plenty of white spaces — normally where the black areas were; from 1976, Map Studio integrated Soweto (left) into its street guide of the Witwatersrand

to understand, too, how a police state worked; how the primary logic in the planning of townships was control.

it draws its energy precisely from its atomisation and its edge, its stacking of boundaries against each other. It is no place to wander.

As an adult I have come to know Johannesburg; I have been to many of the places to which I once dispatched my imaginary couriers. My years on the job have meant that I often have the uncanny experience of knowing how to get to a place I have never previously visited. I have put my body in those places I dreamed of, and yet I have found, to my perpetual surprise, that however hard I try to get to know my home town it eludes me. There is always a suburban wall, an infra-red beam, a burglar bar, a thick red line, a non-continuous page break, between the city I think I know and the city that is.

But even though there are specific social and cultural reasons why Johannesburg remains an elusive home town, there is a personal dimension to this, an existential dimension and perhaps a moral one too. All maps awaken in me a desire to be lost and to be found — to find myself — at the same time. This desire is particularly intense with the *Holmden's*. My nostalgia for the map-book of my childhood is, of course, one for the certitudes of its bounded cartography; the comforts of my generally easy and happy childhood. But it also triggers a thrill, a thrill at the prospect of crossing these boundaries. I find myself going back to the *Holmden's* because it forces me to remember something I must never allow myself to forget: Johannesburg, my home town, the city I think I know, is not the city I think I know. That is why I have to keep on playing Dispatcher.

Of course, this condition is specific to Johannesburg itself — its history and its current inequalities. Recently, I have been reading a brilliant new novel about New York by the Nigerian-American author, Teju Cole, in which he records his wanderings around the city in the way Baudelaire was a *flâneur* (stroller) in Paris or James Joyce set Leopold Bloom around Dublin in *Ulysses*. Cole's novel is called *Open City*, and it leads me to think that Johannesburg is anything but that —

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thing I had come, fervently, to believe — even if we were forced to live in different places under different conditions, we were all the same.

As I grew older and learned more, it also became evidence, too, for the exact opposite: “they” wanted us to believe that Soweto was “separate but equal” to Johannesburg, a fully serviced city, when anyone could see, looking at the maps, that it was not. As I studied the *Street Guide* more closely, I was struck more by

the townships’ difference from the suburbs of my childhood than by their similarity — thus was I able to plot inequality and make sense of it. The blocks of land were such tiny slivers that one could hardly imagine houses on them, and the streets were set out in dense, oppressive grids, often identified by bureaucratic strings of letters and numbers rather than the alluring names to be found in white suburbs, if identified at all. I grew sceptical: I knew there

were parks in Parktown and oaks in Oaklands, but could there possibly be meadows in Meadowlands?

The *Holmden's* had not been entirely wrong: townships were indeed islands, like Riverlea, surrounded by empty white space, and often with only one access road. This, coupled with the lack of street names in wide swathes of the township, made a dispatcher’s job more frustrating, and more interesting; thus, through the *Street Guide*, did I begin



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