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Futuristic skyscrapers to transform Gauteng into utopian megalopolis

FORGET Sandton, forget Rosebank and Hillbrow – Gauteng is set to transform into Africa's skyscraper capital if investors and urban planners will have their way

By [Sertan Sanderson](#) on 29 January, 2014 12:35 pm in [Business](#) / [no comments](#)



Have you ever heard of Modderfontein? Long considered a post-industrial wasteland sandwiched between the outskirts of Sandton to the west and [O.R. Tambo International Airport](#) to the east, it might just become your favourite new hotspot in Johannesburg, as Chinese investment firm Shanghai Zendai group is about to invest tens of billions of rands into transforming this no-man's-land into a city of the future, leaving neither 'modder' nor 'fontein' behind.

A 15-year development plan has been outlined and approved for the unassuming 16 hectares of land bordering the East Rand, turning it into a city in its own right following the purchase of the land from its current owner, the AECI chemicals and explosives company. Several shopping malls, a theme park, a sports stadium, ten hotels, a conference centre, 35,000 residential units as well as copious amounts of commercial space, all enveloped by a unique landscaping approach, will all provide bookends to the ambitious project that is set to transform Gauteng for good. The acquisition of the property alone amounts to the largest single foreign investment in South Africa, and to the greatest single property transaction in the history of the continent.

Not everyone is pleased with the Shanghai Zendai group's vision for Modderfontein, however; some alarmists have raised concerns that the development could be interpreted as part of a global Chinese conspiracy to economically colonise Africa, as [investments by Chinese conglomerates](#) have shifted in the past years from Western countries over to focusing on Southern Africa. Others are worried about looming pollution as part of the heavy engineering involved in carving out this new metropolis from the ground up, and some are unhappy about a lack of plans for affordable housing in the futuristic city designed by the Chinese investment group.

Concerns have also been raised that the Modderfontein super-city might be nothing but a vanity project of the Shanghai Zendai group's billionaire chairman Dai Zhikang, who owns 39 per cent of the investment firm. However, Shanghai Zendai has already been involved in other urban regeneration projects in 12 Chinese cities over the past two decades and has a similar plan underway in Auckland, [New Zealand](#), as well.

Up to 24,000 jobs are expected to be created as part of the development, fuelling the local Gauteng economy at a time when the weak exchange rate is the main motivation for many investors to come to Mzansi. South Africans are encouraged to find a new name for the development, which the investors say is to be built on the Chinese values of living in harmony with nature. Dai Zhikang, however, stressed that the development will turn [Johannesburg into a world-class city](#), able to compete with the likes of New York and Hong Kong: "It will become the future capital of the whole of Africa," Dai said at a press conference, emphasising that this is his personal vision for the next 100 years of Gauteng.

But Dai's investment group isn't alone in its hope to transform Gauteng into an urban metropolis of the future. Not too far from Modderfontein, just 30 km up the N1, [Centurion](#) awaits in all its post-modern glory. It's known for SuperSport Park cricket stadium and the colourful water fountain welcoming visitors to its somewhat depressing mall. But a proposed new development may finally help to propel the apartheid-era leftovers of Verwoerdburg at last to move into the '21st Centurion' by 2022. The tallest buildings in Africa, comprised of two office towers and one residential high-rise, are poised to spring up as part of Tshwane council's "Centurion Symbio-City" project – to a tune of R17 million. The proposed [office space alone will rival any other development](#) anywhere in Gauteng. The structures are even bound to make the Top 15 list of the tallest buildings in the world (at 110 stories high and just short of 450m tall) - a major feat considering that at present, Africa isn't even represented in the world's Top 300 skyscrapers list.



With several other structures proposed for the nouveau riche enclave of [Sandton](#) as well (such as the International Finance Centre and Kgoro Towers), "Randhattan" is going to keep many architects, engineers, designers, landscape artists, and urban planners busy for decades to come – an incredible fact considering that merely a century ago, the [Union Buildings in Pretoria](#) were the tallest structures on the entire African continent.

By [Sertan Sanderson](#), 2014