

A call to arms

Sarah Calburn of Sarah Calburn Architects has her say

Consider architecture to be an art; a complex technical, cultural and philosophical spatial language. However, when you look around at how it is making – or un-making – the landscape of our South African cities and suburbs, you can see that it has mostly fallen foul of the inanities of 'style' (often warped beyond recognition – think 'extreme makeover'), coupled with the lowest common development denominator.

People are unaware of architecture's complex power. Its vocabulary has become weak and emasculated. In urban terms, its most complex and simultaneously most basic function is as the unit of urban strategy, but the strategic problems of street, of a poverty-stricken public, as well as the enormous possibility architecture contains for reframing humanity at large, appear to be going unaddressed, and unexploited. The basic unit of urban strategy in Joburg seems to have become the palisade fence, the weakest, most unspatial and the most divisive of all devices. Quite apart from a simple 'avoidance of architecture', what attitude does this strategy demonstrate in our fragile democracy, I wonder?

I would say that South African architecture is on the whole extremely weak, particularly in the extremely shallow "give the client what (s)he wants"

aspect of most architectural practices. South African architecture does not yet seem to have evolved to a point where we as architects see ourselves as the active makers, thinkers and challengers of our rapidly weakening urban environments. This is highly ironic, given that architects in the global context are currently raised to the most public profiles as city-space-makers.

Architects in SA are generally seen to provide some sort of trade-related service, and seem to have handed over their historic prerogative as "urban visionaries" to developers and urban managers who rarely have any sort of architectural backgrounds or training. Architecture is a highly specialised spatial language which essentially frames both our lives and our attitudes. As such, South African architecture could be seen to deliver an extremely weak and defensive self-image, and resorts to infantile discussions of 'style' because it has no real conceptual underpinnings.

We are nowhere near any sort of experimental re-imagining of ourselves as 'new' South Africans, or of ourselves as thought-makers against, or in, the world at large. Yet we are undoubtedly both, and have to read ourselves in both lights all the time.

What exactly are our positions in relation to our many selves? Do we



still work in an apartheid (and thus binary) paradigm, where everything is given, nothing is challenged or considered open to experimentation? I think that we are still trapped in both apartheid acquiescence and apartheid aggression – a most unhealthy combination.

Unfortunately, architecture is not regarded as one of our most revealing and creative human manifestations. By and large, it is not seen to be a fertile ground for experimentation. I would advance the idea – hardly new in the world – that design should be considered a form of research. I believe that architecture, like science or philosophy, should be able to experiment within its field, taking on conceptual problems and interests much larger than itself. We are, after all, the specialised operators of the many tools of architecture, all of which add up to an act of translation: not the client, not the developer. We as architects need to offer the vision of an optimistic and vital world which is able not only to shelter and sustain us, but to inspire us. We make our (built) world, after all, and we should be held accountable for the envisioning of that world.

As I see it, the only way to start these processes of re-imagining is by lively experimentation – with ourselves, with our received modes of thought and inaction, with our possibilities, with our hopes and with our fears. Rise up and experiment. Be critical. Do not – ever – regard a site, or a client, or a city as a given. Regard these things as potentials for rebellion and real thought, only.

For these reasons, and from my position on the Habitat desk of the Gauteng Institute for Architecture, I have initiated a series of design masterclasses. SAIA Category 1 'Continuing Professional Development' points will be earned in an atmosphere which concerns itself with design

and design-thinking, rather than with the usual 'professional practice' or trade-related topics.

The masterclasses will run as a monthly series over 2009, each led by a different practicing design-orientated South African architect or artist, and will culminate in a publication which aims to project an alternative, experimental view of contemporary Joburg. The series is entitled 'Rapid Thought Transport – Architects Re-imagine Joburg', a reference to one of our most optimistic urban becomings: the implementation of the Bus Rapid Transport system. In combination with the Gautrain, this could be seen to lay down the most potentially powerful public platform we have seen in the last 75 years in what is, we contend, the rapidly weakening public environment of Johannesburg.

The series will take the position that the time is ripe to experiment with architectural alternatives for Joburg, the time is right to explore an alternative vision: a challenge to the endless unrolling of a privatised, repetitive and franchised urban environment. Joburg is losing, continuously, any meaningful architectural and urban intimacy and real access. It is failing to realise any ground breaking experimentation with itself and with its histories. We will aim, crucially, to deliver a landscape of critical thinking, action and debate around these issues.

Leon van Schaik once said that there is only a living culture when at least three schools of thought can be identified. We need to expose as many concepts and viewpoints as we can. We need to start from a willing position of mind and hand towards experimentation with, and re-reading, of ourselves. 

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