200_ **THEORETIC EXPLORATION**

- Synthesizing Architecture and Visual Communication

Fig 2.1 and 2.2: Image and text combined to form a powerfull tool for communication.

Introduction:

'Visual messages are a powerful form of communication because they stimulate both intellectual and emotional responses-they make us think as well as feel. Consequently, images can be used to persuade and to perpetuate ideas that words alone cannot' (Lester: 57).

In modern society, communicating through the medium of image has become the most powerful method of conveying ideas or emotions. Since the 'image' (still or moving) has become the prevalent method of communication in modern times, it can be said that it has become the medium best understood by 21st century society. It allows us to convey ideas to society and fellow citizens in a way commonly understood. Visual communication uses methods of description through concepts of topics and themes which people can relate to or identify with.

In architecture, and in South Africa particularly, the debate on cultural identity is one, amongst many, that is enjoying much attention. It is concerned with the development of identity in the landscape and urban environments of South Africa. It searches for methods by which our environment is visually communicated relative to the social, economic and political status of the country, as well as defining our identity in a global society. Thus, it is concerned with the way in which our environments are visually comprehended.

Within both architecture and visual communication, theorists are sharing their frustration on the issue that produced works are becoming too concerned with instant manipulation which feeds off of the desires of a consumer-driven society.

Architecture and Visual Communication:

Architecture, in the traditional sense, is a tool used to accommodate all the activities of a specific society. Thus, architecture is a projection of the distinctive characteristics of a specific place, space or institution, and as such has already achieved a state where it has become a very powerful tool in communication. Both architecture and visual communication utilize a process of design in developing and bringing into play the desired ideas and notions that are to be projected. Many theorists in the architectural field have expressed their concern regarding the role of the visual in architecture of buildings becoming a mere vehicle for visual sensations.

This concern has also been raised in the field of visual communication. Visual communication is a design discourse where images and text are carefully composed to form messages. Advertising is directed to specific target markets, and thus makes use of images and texts that are familiar to the targeted viewer. It is therefore a re-showing/ representation of the viewers' past experiences, desires and needs. In the field of advertising, symbols are used as bait for the desires of individuals. In *south african visual culture* (2005: 14), Michael Herbst explains that often, only representation allows us to convey and articulate our greatest aspirations and ideals, and that in many cases it is the only way for these ideals and aspirations to be translated into visual form. A strong and compelling concept is all that is necessary for anything imaginable to be translated into visual form through media technology.

We find that in advertising, represented worlds are formed through combining imagery and texts that represent the actual, concrete things found in the 'real'. However, the advertisement does not always represent a world that one can fully recognize. This world is usually a theatrical staging of an idyllic and enhanced world. The dilemma here is that, through constantly representing what has previously been represented, all connections to the 'real' are eventually lost. The representation is therefore no longer an accurate depiction of the real.

This brings me back to architecture. The notion of 'staging ideal worlds', is one that creates major tension within the architectural profession. Architecture has in many cases, become, concerned with shaping 'perfect' environments regardless and ignorant of the context. In *Supermodernism: Architecture in the Age of Globalization* (1995: 18), H. Ibelings describes this '…Buildings started to act as vehicles for ideas that had nothing to do with architecture'. It is through the mere re-representation of 'ideal' architectural works, regardless of context, that meaning in architecture is lost: ' a "non-place urban realm" where the packaging of cities as commodities produces a city as a set of scenographic representations' (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga: 33). In *Polemics: the Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*: J Palasmaa (1996: 19) expresses his concern on the role of the visual in architecture by stating: 'Architecture has adopted the psychological strategy of advertising, of instant persuasion,

and buildings have turned into image products detached from existential sincerity'.

In pursuit of meaningful architecture:

In light of the above discussion, I argue that architecture should be driven by the needs of the users rather than their desires. It is only through providing places where people can interact and have their requirements fulfilled, that meaningful places are created: 'Because social practice activates spatial meanings, they are not fixed in space, but are evoked by actors, men and women, who bring their own discursive knowledge and strategic intentions to the interpretation of spatial meanings.' (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga: 10). Interaction is the life force of meaningful places: 'Space can have no meaning apart from practice; the system of generative and structuring dispositions, or habitus, is constituted by actors' movement through space.' (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga: 10).

It is therefore safe to say that the programme should be the force behind any architectural project. Only through satisfying the needs of people, can they - the people - bring life to an environment. After all, architecture is an art form that incorporates the theories of spatial experience with a functional and tangible, three-dimensional object. The programme can be defined as the context- or site-specific needs of an environment. The programme is specific to the needs and abilities of the community or users of a place and aims at solving the problems encountered in a context.

However, even if a building, or any environment for that matter, provides all the spaces necessary in fulfilling the needs and requirements of its users, these spaces are condemned if the environment is illegible. What then, if there is such a thing, is the rightful position of the visual within architecture? Since visual media permeate all facets of modern society, how can visual media be incorporated into architecture in a positive way? These questions are what this thesis aims to answer. It is through the exploration of the theories discussed above that I was able to identify an area where the fields of architecture and visual communication overlap.

The role of the visual in architecture – Way-finding:

It was Kevin Lynch who first introduced the idea of 'Way-finding' in his 1960's book '*The Image of the City*'. His work was based on the idea of being able to orientate oneself in a space by means of generating a cognitive map through the understanding of an environment. In visual communication, strong concepts are translated into memorable images that convey messages. If the concept is strong, but the execution into visual media is weak, the work fails by not making a lasting impression on the viewers' memory. This can be said of architecture too. The needs within a specific place give rise to a programme. This programme gives rise to the concept. Even if the physical requirements of the concept and programme are fulfilled, but the execution is weak, the environment will not leave a memorable impression on the user. When this happens, the user is unable to form a cognitive map of the environment, and is therefore unable to orientate him- or herself spatially, within it.

The concept of spatial orientation needs to be applied at all scales of the environment, and there are many factors to consider in creating understandable environments. Some of these, as set out by Lynch (1960), are: paths, edges, landmarks, nodes and districts. In *Responsive Environments* (1985) the authors approach the built environment as one that needs to respond to human needs instead of humans having to respond to the needs of the building. A place needs to offer its users a democratic environment which maximizes choice and opportunity. If an environment is able to do this, it is called 'responsive'. There are seven principles that cover the key issues which need consideration in the design process, in order to create a responsive environment. These are:

1. Permeability: this influences where people are able to go.
2. Variety: the range of uses available.
3. Legibility: understanding the opportunities offered by the environment.
4. Robustness: the range of functions that one particular place can be used for.
5. Visual appropriateness: how the appearance of a place creates awareness of what the place offers.
6. Richness: choice of sensory experiences.
7. Personalization: the degree to which people are

Fig 2.3: Wayfingding signage on steroids.

Fig 2.4: New York Times Square - an information overload.

Fig 2.5: The cognative map.

Fig 2.6: The Guggenheim Museum - New York City - the 'spiraling' layout sends the user on a defined journey through the building.

allowed the freedom of putting their own stamp on the environment.

These elements could add to the design of environments that people are able to read and understand more effectively. Only when people can truly understand an environment and then use it efficiently, can the environment be adapted to their ever-expanding or changing requirements.

Paul Arthur and Romedi Passini, authors of *WAYFINDING: People, Signs and Architecture* (1992) express their concern that architecture and visual media need to fuse in the process of design in order to create more legible environments:

'*Cognitive map*: an overall mental image or representation of the spaces and the layouts of a setting'

'*Spatial orientation*: the process of devising an adequate cognitive map of a setting along with the ability to situate oneself within that representation'

Paths, edges, landmarks, nodes and districts are the essential elements, according to Kevin Lynch, necessary for highly legible and 'imageable' (cognitive mapping) environments.

Way-finding is primarily concerned with the legibility of environments. It must be understood that it is not simply the design of signage, by graphic designers, which is added to a building or urban environment after completion, but the design of a total environment, by the architect or urban designer, in order for the built form to be readable. Way-finding requirements are therefore integral to all scales of the environment, whether regional, metropolitan or local. Moreover, when designing way-finding-friendly environments it is of extreme importance to consider that these environments also need to be legible and usable for the disabled.

The main principles of way-finding design used to enhance the legibility of an environment (*WAYFINDING: People, Signs and Architecture*: 1992) are:

-   **Spatial planning** – Logically organized spaces where different functions feed off, or complement, one another, aid in the understanding of an environment.
-   **Architectural communication** – The physical, built form needs to communicate function, movement and circulation, access and entrances, destinations, hierarchy of space, etc.
-   **Graphic information** – Visual media form an integral part of the understanding of an environment allowing one to make decisions on destinations. Visual media can also communicate and thus create awareness of the function of an environment.

Conclusion:

It can be argued that the architect has always been concerned with spatial planning as an essential, if not the most essential, part of the design process, so as to create spaces that offer maximum choice. It is no doubt the intention of the architect to design environments that are able to stand the test of time. However, the built environment is cluttered with underutilized space and this is a serious issue when considering land value and resources. The environments or buildings that architects and other designers produce cannot be used as a testing ground for the uncertain. It is the aim of this thesis to highlight the importance of design processes that concern themselves with generating environments that clearly communicate structure, materials, function and - most importantly - how an environme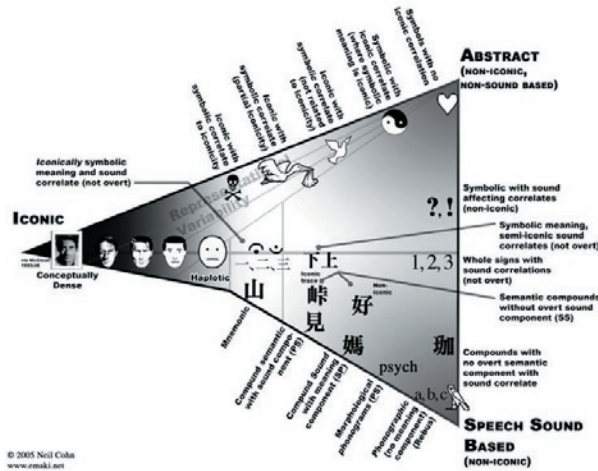nt or building should best be put to use.