

Narrative shifts in architecture¹

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Attend a guided tour of the new Constitutional Court building in Johannesburg. At some stage or other the well-trained and polite guide will ask you whether you have seen any court building like this. Then, listen to the visitors unanimously respond, "no!" Why? Jean-Francois Lyotard maintained that in a multicultural and multiethnic society grand narratives are out of place and what we need is a proliferation of small narratives. Post-apartheid architecture of South Africa seems to be not only in tune with Lyotard's view but extends it to include inverse narratives as well. The difference between our Constitutional Court and others of its type is due to its implicit small and inverse narratives. Another matter which this paper will take in its stride in a positive way is the notion of African Renaissance. The course of action it will take is to go to the primary source or first principle and set the scene by looking at a quintessential example of Renaissance architecture containing small and inverse narratives. The assumption behind this strategy is that whenever there is a political and cultural change, there is a corresponding narrative shift. Using the principles contained in this example as yard-sticks, this paper will then examine a selected number of works of South African architecture since 1994, delve into their narrative contents and identify their place in the international evolution of contemporary architecture.

Key words: narratives, paradigm shift, post-apartheid architecture, inversion, genius-loci, architectural values, euro-centrism

For three very good reasons this article will begin by looking at narrative shift in a particular work of European Renaissance architecture and then move to consider move to consider selected contemporary South African works. These are: 1. The term Euro-centrism had increasingly become a double edged sword. On the one hand it has helped non-European scholars to think out their own ideas rather than being conditioned by the West and on the other it has also tempted many of us to overlook the intellectual contribution of the West. Therefore, it is important that we accept enlightenment ideas regardless of where they originate and examine their relevance to our context. 2. As Ivan Illich, that prolific, radical and energetic theologian once put it (1981:79):

"As a historian, I am very suspicious of anything which pretends to be totally new. If I cannot find precedents for an idea, I immediately suspect that it is a foolish one. If I cannot find anyone in the past with whom I am acquainted, and in my fancy can share with them what surprises me, I feel very lonely, a prisoner of my own present-day and parochial horizon." Could we therefore relate any narrative shifts in today's architecture to events in the past? One example, that of developments in Renaissance Urbino, familiar to the author provides him with a point of departure for his exploration. Point 3 naturally follows from this.

3. In our cultural and political debate talk of African Renaissance is always in the air. Instead of the usual skepticism, can we take the possibility of a Renaissance in contemporary South African architecture and urbanism seriously? If we do, then radical narrative shifts are what will define the trajectory of works emerging from that outlook².

In the last analysis, the skepticism of the idea of an African Renaissance among liberals can be attributed to Euro-centrism. How easy it is for many scholars brought up in the European tradition to argue that conditions in Europe and Africa are never equitable! How easy it is for them to forget that the main thrust of Renaissance in Europe was one of looking back in order to move forward which is a real possibility for Africa now. But move forward we must and the African Renaissance is not about taking the past and sedimenting them into the present but it is about building on them to develop new modes operation that is consistent with the temper of our times.

Small and inverse narratives

There is a whole field called narratology to which distinguished linguistic philosophers such as Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco have contributed (Rimmon-Keenan, 1983). The scope of this paper does not allow us to get into this complex field but the distinction Jean-Francois Lyotard makes between grand and small narratives provides us with points of departure (1979). Lyotard's position is that grand narratives legitimate authority, suppress dissent and are increasingly becoming out of tune with the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nature of our society. They need to be replaced with a multitude of small narratives. To this argument we can add inverse narratives as another element to our scheme of shifting narratives in times of socio-cultural change. A perfect example of small and inverse narratives is provided by an anecdote from Mahatma Gandhi's life: At some stage before the independence of India, Gandhi was in London and the King of England then was about to give him an audience. Gandhi was in his usual loin cloth. The journalists asked him whether he was going to dress up before the meeting the King. Gandhi replied "no, as the King will be wearing more than enough for both of us."

Let us now begin with a look at a historic example in which small and inverse narratives" may be found in abundance so that we may escape temporal parochialism to which Ivan Illich alludes in the quotation cited above.

The artistic and architectural *genius-loci* of Urbino

The move away from medieval spatial and representational mode during the Renaissance is too well-known to be repeated here. However, it is necessary to note that in the artistic productions of Urbino of that time, that shift was doubly significant and perhaps undervalued by scholars. If we discussed developments in Urbino as mere variations on major themes of the Renaissance, we would get a certain picture. But if we considered them in terms of differing narratives, a more discriminated and discerning view emerges. To begin with the Duke of Montefeltro handled authority with more understanding and responsibility than any of his Renaissance counterparts. Francois Rabelais wrote a master-piece called *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1534). It was primarily a utopia for aristocrats urging them to develop a peaceful rule based on culture and learning rather than authority and greed. How one wishes that politicians and technocrats of today would follow this ideal! However, it is frequently argued that this joyful vision did not translate into practical action. But the Duke of Montefeltro (1422-1482) anticipated much of this and went further. We read in Burkhart (1945), that the Montefeltros "...erected buildings, furthered the cultivation of the land, lived at home, and gave employment to a large number of people; their subjects loved them." Here one can sense a corollary of Lyotard's view that grand narratives reinforce authority. If one moves away from being authoritarian to being authoritative and considerate, it stands to reason that small narratives are the natural outcome. Figure 1 is the well-known portrait of the Duke of Montefeltro in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (Figure 1) by Piero della Francesca. Narrative myths about the nasal profile of the duke are many, but these are not our concern here. But, quite unusually and perhaps for the first time in the history of portraiture, landscape is an integral element which points to the importance, both the patron and the artist, attached to landscape. This becomes clear when we consider the surrounding landscape of Urbino (Figure 2), its relation to the city in it (Figures 3 and 4), more particularly the place of the ducal palace in that landscape. The reciprocity between landscape, cityscape and architecture, makes it difficult to know where architecture stops, where cityscape begins, where it ends and where the countryside begins.



Figures 1 and 2

When the duke came to power, he quickly realized that economic power alone was not enough and it had to be followed by cultural renewal. The artists and architects who frequented his court are legion. He gave the first part of the work to local architects instead of, say, Alberti who was a frequent visitor to Urbino then. This in itself was a small narrative. When his plans for the palace became too ambitious, the local architects began collaborating with experts such as Luciano Laurana from Dalmatia who was then a renowned expert of vault building and the engineer/architect Francesco di Giorgio from Siena. As a soldier, the duke favored practical men of this caliber rather than Alberti, an architect of immense stature but an intellectual too. Is this an inverse narrative? The ducal palace (Figure 5 and 6) built from the joint endeavor of these architects, translating the duke's values as architectural values, provides us with an example of paradigm shift and a reservoir of further small and inverse narratives.



Figure 3

If we compare the medieval painting of *Buon Governo* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (Figure 7) and the famous painting of the Ideal City (Figure 8).³ the paradigm shift in the concept-

alization of what a city is becomes clear. While Lorenzetti's painting conveys the idea of a utilitarian city which is intensely used for practical purposes and enjoyment by its citizens, the Ideal City depicts a symbolic city and this may well be the reason why there is such a striking absence of human presence in this painting. The paradigm shift from Renaissance to medieval conception is obvious but there is an even more of a telling shift in Urbino as shown by Piero della Francesca's painting of the Flagellation of Christ (Figure 9)⁴. Its juxtaposition of two narratives with corresponding double vanishing points in the perspective, the way it allows light to penetrate and the manner in which it organizes the presence of human beings in the composition have all been the subject of considerable analyses by scholars. It does not seem to take a position of 'either symbolic city or a utilitarian city', but a combination of 'both', and, Urbino certainly is such a city. Furthermore, we know that the artistic and architectural genius-loci of Urbino owes a great deal to the distinguished presence of Piero della Francesca there

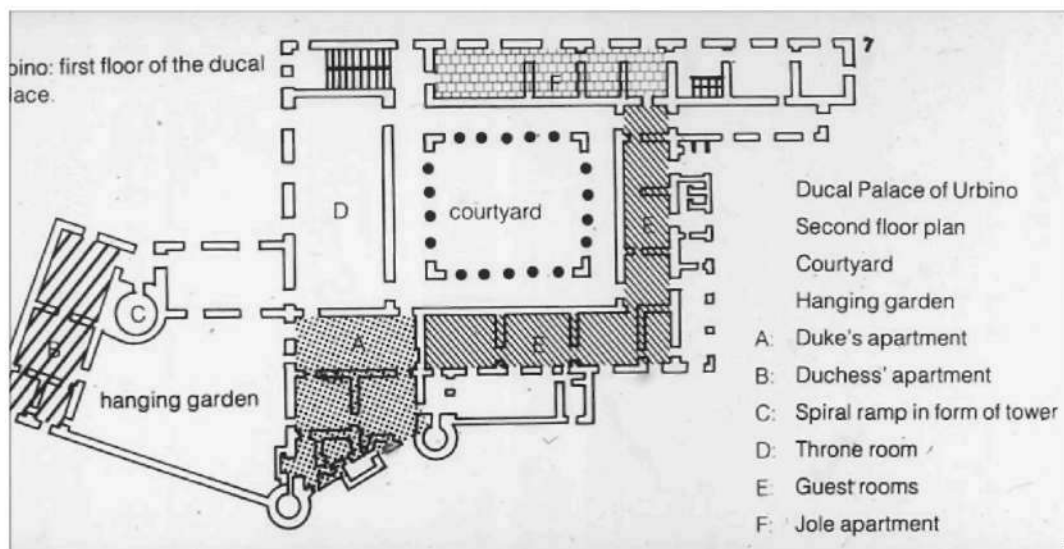


Figure 4 and 5

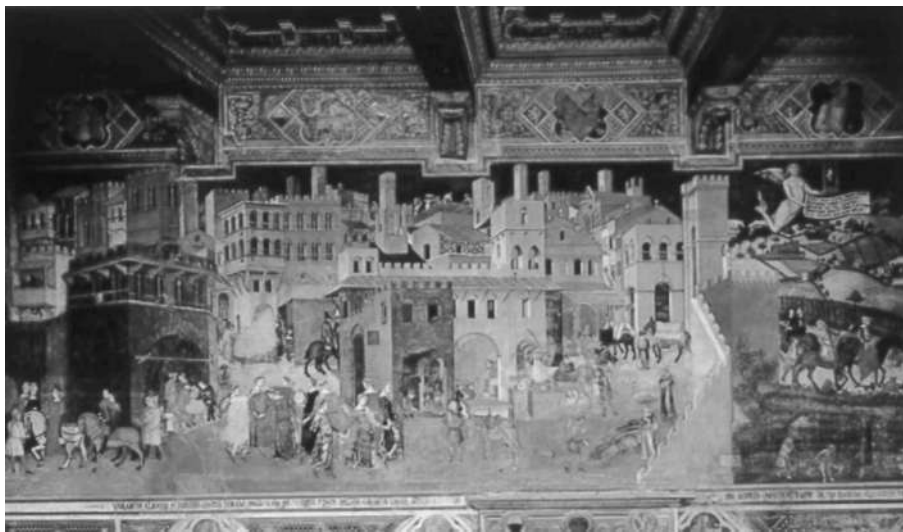
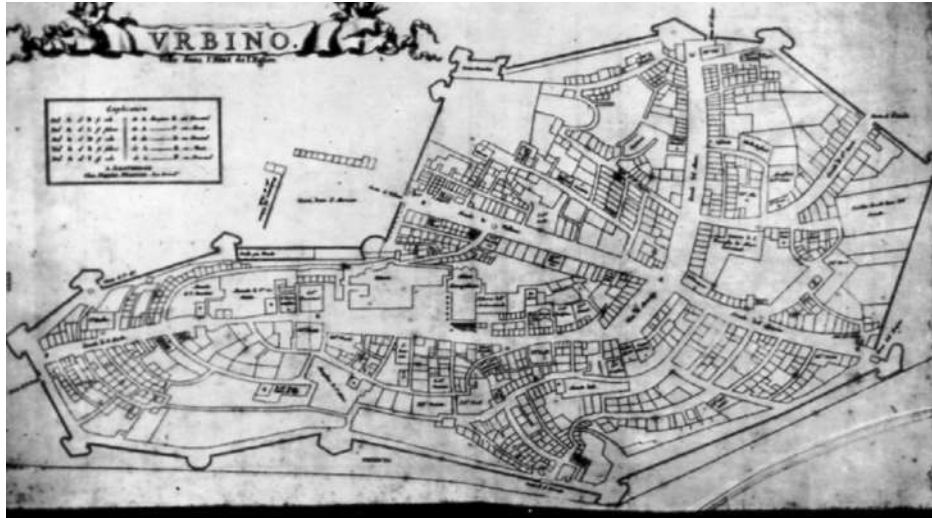
It is instructive for us to look at a few narratives that make up the architectural ethos of the period. In doing so, we will confine ourselves to three aspects of this building, namely: the piazza facade, the interior court and the exterior facade of turrets (See plan in Figure 11). For all intents and purposes one can regard something like the Medici palace (Figure 12) as a representation of manifesto classicism as far as the *palazzo* typology is concerned. Notice how different the piazza facade of the Ducal Palace in Urbino is (Figure 13). While all the openings are presented as if they are windows, the corner one is the access door to the palace. There is thus an asymmetry introduced but it is resolved in the courtyard as one enters the latter symmetrically. The *piano nobile* windows are not located immediately over the ground floor openings but in between them, in a zigzag pattern producing a dynamic movement in the facade. The top storey was added at a later stage and so was not part of the original composition. Moving to the interior court (Figure 14) the arrangement of arcades with entablature above them is obviously an adaptation of the system devised by Brunelleschi for the Foundling Hospital in Florence (Figure 10). But the architects in Urbino went further than any Florentine architects. They did so, not in any grand and monumental ideas about composition but in a number of small details. Two instances illustrate this. Columns are not placed at equal intervals but in progressively diminishing spaces between them towards the centre so as to accentuate the sense of perspective. The other example is the turning of the arcade in the corner. Quite obviously, when one naturally places the window symmetrically over the arches of ground floor, the windows at the corner above seem crowded as it can be seen in Figure 15 which is the court yard of Medici Palace in Florence. The solution to this conundrum is to place 'L' shaped piers in the corners and decorate them with half columns at the edge (Figure 16). Finally, consider the turreted facade (Figures 17 and 18). Many scholars, conditioned as they were by the classical precedent of *Castel Nuovo* in Naples with its massive round towers, consider the turrets here as being rather thin and unsatisfactory. But the intention of the Urbino architects was gradually to move away from the accepted way of doing things. Hence there is a narrative shift here too. Laurana came from Dalmatia and was quite familiar with the Ottoman architecture of his native land. Further more, the Duke had purchased many books from Constantinople which included ones on Islamic architecture. All this would suggest that the thin towers were inspired by the minarets. Incidentally these turrets, like vast banners, also assert the power of the duke. This lavishness in the rear facade can be explained by this need to be assertive, especially towards Rome, as the Vatican was seen by the duke as a potential threat. All these elements go some way towards illustrating the ideas of paradigm shift, small narratives and inverse narratives.

By no means can these features described so far be regarded as minor deviations from the mainstream of Renaissance architecture. They are narratives, minor but telling and well considered strategies that gently challenge what was happening elsewhere at the time. Neither can they be dismissed as mannerisms or as *maniera* in Italian which is the tendency among a small number of scholars. Nearly all of these features are either solutions to conundrums or fresh ways of looking at emergent ideologies.

The fact that these shifts can happen and it does happen in the new socio/cultural context of South Africa now needs to be probed with some telling examples of contemporary architecture.

It is well worth noting that in terms of artistic flowering there is similarity between the Renaissance period in Italy and South Africa at present. In our terms rather than in the terms of Renaissance the meaningful work produced by our artists and architects have considerable standing, artists output perhaps enjoying more of an international standing than architects.

Architecture certainly suffers more from Euro-centrism than architecture. Twentieth century Europe always looked to Africa for freshness of conception as revealed by for instance the work of Picasso and indeed the recent exhibition Picasso and Africa is an illustration of this connection. But no such links exist in architecture. One other factor worth remembering is the fusion of conceptions in art and architecture during renaissance and the potential of that fusion for today. This is analyzed in the final section of this paper



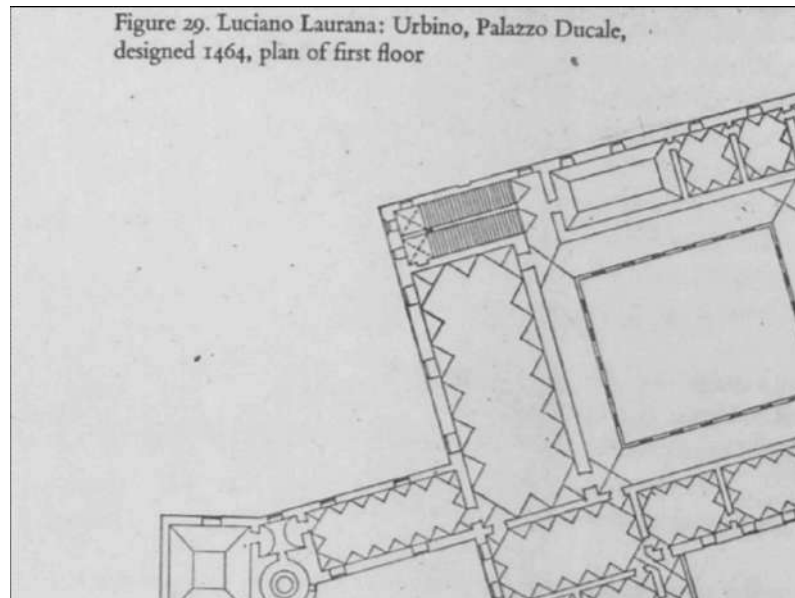
Figures 6 and 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figures 10 and 11



Figures 12 and 13

Figure 14

Figures 15 and 16



Figure 17 and 18



Figure 19

The ad-hoc and the gestalt and the building as place

Universities, even the planned ones, do not seem to escape 'the ad-hoc'. All over the world, university campuses face a number of problems. They include clarity in internal movement systems, integration of town and gown, the creation of a sense of urbanity in programmes, layout and building design. A university like that in Free State has had its fair share of expedient additions of buildings and car parks over many years. Bannie Britz's spatial development framework sought to create a sense of order by overlaying a strong north-south and east-west pedestrian axis (Figure 19). Of course, this way of urban-ordering goes back to Roman planning but it is adapted and extended here to pedestrian route with a view to taming the inevitable presence of cars. Through the creation of a hierarchi-

cal network of pedestrian routes and reinforcing them with proper streetscapes and urban furnishing, the latter being seen as a kind of gift from the architect-planner to staff and students, the attempt here is to found a gestalt configuration for the campus, a configuration that is more than a sum of its parts. The problem of the integration of the city and the university is a complex one in our security-conscious times and it is difficult to convince all concerned that security by design and natural surveillance is possible but the architect is trying hard. Of course, planning ideas take a long time to yield results and they are beginning to show now. Interestingly, architectural projects, since they respect the principles of the spatial development framework, enable one to test them⁵. The new student centre by Anton Roodt to some extent deals with security problems by ensuring surveillance by the constant presence of interacting users (Figures 20, 21 and 22). Most importantly however, it addresses the issue of urbanity. The project is an inhabited bridge containing restaurants, commercial facilities, conference rooms and an amphitheatre at ground floor and student centre offices on the top floor. This bridge over DF Malherbe Drive connects the University library with the rest of the campus. The inhabited bridge has its illustrious urban pedigree in Ponte Vecchio in Florence. But to have executed a successful one over a non-descript road is an achievement. Apart from Bernard Tschumi's narratives for such bridges and Hans Scharoun's proposal of a bridge for the foyer of his Casall's theatre, there really have been no good modern precedents for this kind of building. But the typology in its modern guise has considerable potential and this project is one of the few realizations of that potential. The architect here has created a little fragment of the city with intertwining and overlapping functions. The language is modern; a single mono-pitch roof for the main bridge structure across the road and a series of distinct mono-pitches for accommodation that lies perpendicular to it at embankments. Like in many lively districts of a city, varying public realms of streets, squares and fore-courts are intricately knitted together. In order to counter the amorphous structure of the existing university lay-out, the architect has set up parallel walls and beams, a continuation of the theme of the bridge, and uses them as a back-bone to attach varying functions. This structure is extruded outwards to public open spaces in a skeletal form by way extending the walls, again providing pleasant, sheltered corners for students to congregate in groups of different sizes. The project emphatically demonstrates how architecture can enable human interaction in a flexible way without regimenting it by conceiving the building as a place in effect.



Figure 21



Figure 22

The Constitutional Court, Johannesburg: a typological mutation

This project has already received considerable publicity and wide professional acclaim. It was also the subject of an article by Anita Grobler and Schalk Le Roux in *South African Journal of Art History* (2006) which points out in considerable detail the nature of the architect's design transcript. Therefore, one only needs to highlight its key themes and perhaps link them to emerging international views on public works of



this kind (Figures 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29 and 29). The constitutional court is a remarkable realization of the essence of small narratives and it also incisively suggests that the South African past also requires inverse narratives. It takes the South African judiciary's collective views expressed in the competition brief as absolute architectural values. A direct result of this is the airy, light, transparent and open feel of the building. Lightness of touch, not being stuffy and over-bureaucratic, transparency and openness are also the ideals of the judiciary of new South Africa. For once, urban design, planning, architecture and interior architecture are not seen as separate processes but as one single unified process.

The fusion of small and inverse narratives is what produces the freshness of conception. The project is an ensemble of modest but dignified new buildings, all connected of course, and a few old buildings as opposed to a civic building of 'monumental isolation'. It is non-exclusive in the sense that even a minor building like the existing transformer is brought into compositional play to create a sense of enclosure for the recreational garden for the staff at the rear. The notorious prison blocks of 4 and 5 are opened up as museums of history with permanent as well as periodically changing exhibitions of topical interest. They are integrated into the court complex by a gently ascending series of steps, intended not to present a monumental building on a podium but to provide the possibility for a gentle promenade. Modernism has many enlightenment ideas which are yet to be realized fully. One of these ideas is the flow of outdoors in and not just the reverse. Here the gentle African steps (perhaps the architects should not call them as the Great African Steps, as this would imply a grand narrative) flows into the foyer then becomes the exhibition gallery to be viewed from inside and outside from the steps and eventually culminating in the library. The only hiccup in this flow is the inevitable security check. The old isolation block in front of the present foyer was, amidst controversy demolished to make way for the forecourt. The bricks from the isolation block were recycled to provide a rough wall surface for the court chamber. The forecourt enables the gathering of people right in front of the court, the guardian of justice, to protest if necessary - a right that was denied under the apartheid.

The foyer is a gathering space with inclined columns, intended as metaphors for trees, hinting at traditional ways in which elders and the community met under a tree and dealt with matters of justice. However we need to ask whether this should have been the theme for the court chamber rather than the foyer. Of course, this would affect the formality that dignifies the court proceedings, but then is it not true that African tradition fuses the informality and dignity in telling ways? Is it also not true that in so many public buildings of today, architectural bravura is lavished on incidental spaces such as the foyer and coffee bars rather than on major spaces? This certainly is not the case here as the court chamber does present a robust hybrid, with its rough brick surfaced walls juxtaposed against many modern fea-

tures. One could argue that South Africa at large is such a hybrid. Never the less, the foyer remains the *tour de force*.



Figure 25



Figure 26

The forecourt, the African steps, the transformed cell blocks 4 and 5 into a museum, the entrance foyer and the exhibition area are all effortlessly linked together to provide an enjoyable experience for the users as they move through these urban groupings. The same feeling with subtle modifications persists when one moves along the judges' chambers and the library. In the layout plan, future buildings are shown essentially as blocks.

One hopes that they do not freeze and eventually end up being just that rather than a richly ordered group of interrelated exterior and interior spaces as the present ones undoubtedly are



Figure 27

There is an indirect link between the freedom the constitutional court seeks to protect and free design spirit of the architects. Every decision, ranging from urban design, conservation, the choice of materials and the inclusion of the works of others, seem to have been taken openly and carefully. Freedom is of course different from license and involves self-control on the part of all concerned in the interest of a desirable final outcome. Freedom also entails assertiveness when something that one values is about to be compromised. According to Albie Sacks the conception of the inclined concrete columns faced a threat but only the architects' assertiveness saved it and the project is all the better for it. The administrative block serves as a buffer, or rather a transition, between the public exhibition area and the judges' chambers. Unfairly, critics have expressed doubts about the number and the manner in which art works are incorporated. In this regard, one only needs to compare the efforts made in Canberra parliament and here. The art works in the court are that much more integral to the space, both internal and external, and the fabric of the building. They present an inverse narrative of classical arcadia where poets and philosophers strolled through nature reflecting on the nature of art. In theory at least, the judiciary here is offered the possibility for reflecting on society as they move through arts collections. After all, as Adrian Stokes, the English art critic pointed out: "if you want to know what is happening in society, ask not the sociologist, ask not the politician but ask the artist" (1965). The possibilities this project offers for prodigious interpretation are immense as the collection of small and inverse narratives embraced by the project ensures that there is an excess of meaning to be discovered as one studies the project.

The Origins Centre, the University of the Witwatersrand — a virtual Uffizi

The narrative shift in the Origins Centre is not in its architecture but in its museology (Figures 30 and 31)⁶. Its success is due to the inspiring story-line, appropriate displays and its layered presentation to suit the different requirements of the audience which range not only in age but also in the extent to which they want to engage with the subject matter. In most museum and art gallery projects, there is a tendency for architects and exhibition designers to work in isolation of each other, the former suggesting that our area of expertise in space design and the exhibition designers to suggest that architects simply need to provide black boxes in which they can do what ever they wish. Furthermore there is also a tendency for architects not

to be interested in the storyline of presentations. In many ways this project strongly suggests that there is a need for close collaboration and a commitment to the exhibition themes by all concerned.

The narrative strategy in this project has a rare force of its conviction. It is important to look at these strategies critically and in sufficient detail.



Figure 28 and 29

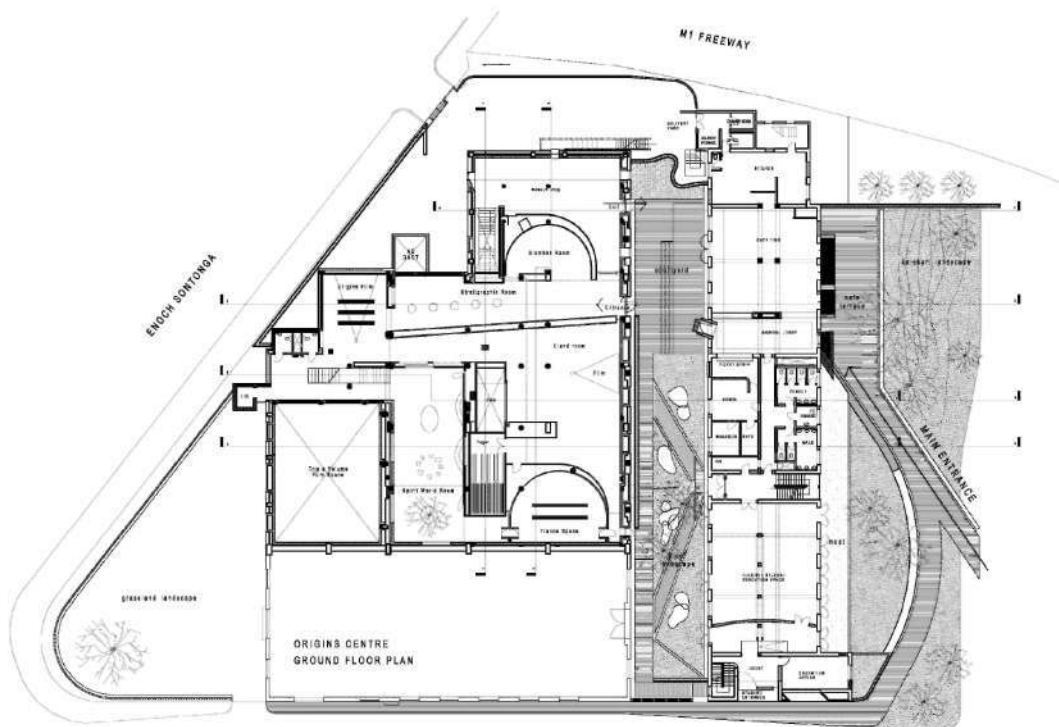


Figure 30

The themes of Origin Centre display are as follows:

- a) Convincing archeological and geological evidence showing that African history is the most ancient in the world, between 2.6 million to 60, 000 years. This is presented in the form of five transparent columns containing stratigraphic archeological sequences

from five areas of the world considered significant for an understanding of the origins and development of humankind (Figure 32).

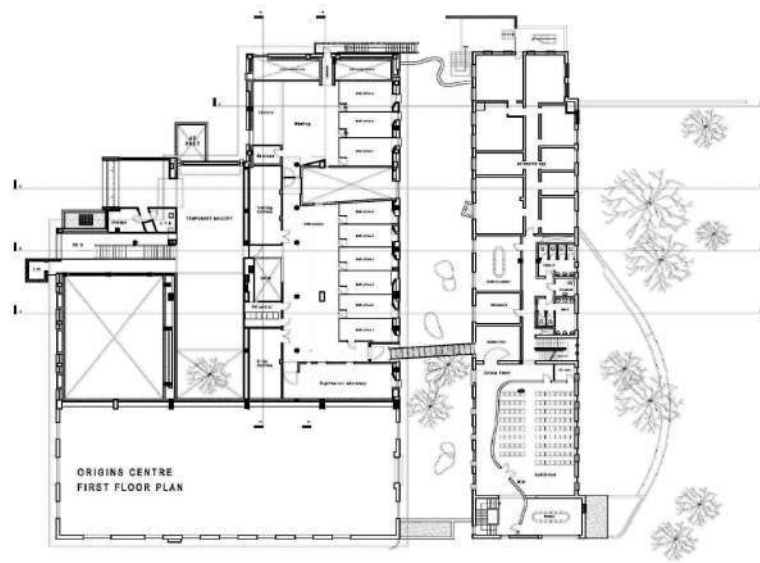


Figure 31



Figure 32

- b) A hand-woven wire map of the world that shows the movement of the human kind from southern Africa to other parts of the world (Figure 32).



Figures 33 and 34

Both these exhibits are relatively unrefined for a museum that sets itself such high standards. In content however, they single-mindedly try to overcome the smugness and banality of conventional approaches to museology. The workmanship of the hand-woven map could be better and perhaps, it suffers from the gigantism that seems to be the fashion in the design of museum displays today, making it appear less precious. Furthermore, its location could be more thoughtful and its display less arbitrary than it is. One simply stumbles into this piece and wonders what a display architect like Franco Albini or Carlo Scarpa would have done in terms of location, impact and the organization of the movement of visitors.

- c) An effective make-believe film of the Blombos caves with a persuasive archeologist emphatically explaining that the origins of humans and humanity is to be found in Southern Africa.
- d) Tools that go beyond utilitarian requirements in their design are then presented as the beginnings of symbolic representation which distinguishes human kind from other species. A hologram of an early African lithic tool keeps the visitors interested in the topic. A short film then summarizes the story so far.

- e) The sophisticated technology of hunting and gathering used by the San people of the middle and late stone ages and their artistic innovations in producing objects that were often exchanged as gifts are presented.
- f) The role played by eland in ritual, belief and art of the San people is conveyed in paintings and a beautifully-made film of an eland hunt. The display of a stuffed eland (Figure 37), impressive though it is, is controversial. The intention here is to show the size of the animal and give the visitor a feeling for the textures etc. One cannot help feeling that the film does this very well and again the tendency towards gigantism of this display is unnecessary.
- g) The dance rituals of San are shown in another beautifully-shot film on location with hallucinatory images of skeletons overlaid on it. These overlays are attempts to represent the verbalized sensations of San people during the ritual. Responses of visitors to the film, especially the overlays, vary from a comment that they add authenticity to that the approach is somewhat Hollywood. The latter is certainly unfair.
- h) San people are believed to access the spiritual world through certain features in the landscape, such as water holes, termite mounds and crevices in rock formation through which the spirit in the form of a mythical snake passes from time to time. This aspect is powerfully captured by Russell Scott's transmuted representation of these features in the landscape (Figures 35 and 36).
- i) Eleven mightily scaled and beautifully executed embroidery panels by South African artists presented in a perfectly calibrated space depict the history of the San people from the origins of San mystery through their brutal treatment by the Europeans to a sense of optimism in the present.

These works and that of Scott raise the question of representation in a media that is drastically different to those used by the people whose stories the new work conveys. Could this be an effective way of overcoming the issues of authenticity raised by crude reproductions and at the same time using the artistic talent available to us today? The paradigm shift in museum display here is certainly obvious.



Figures 35 and 36

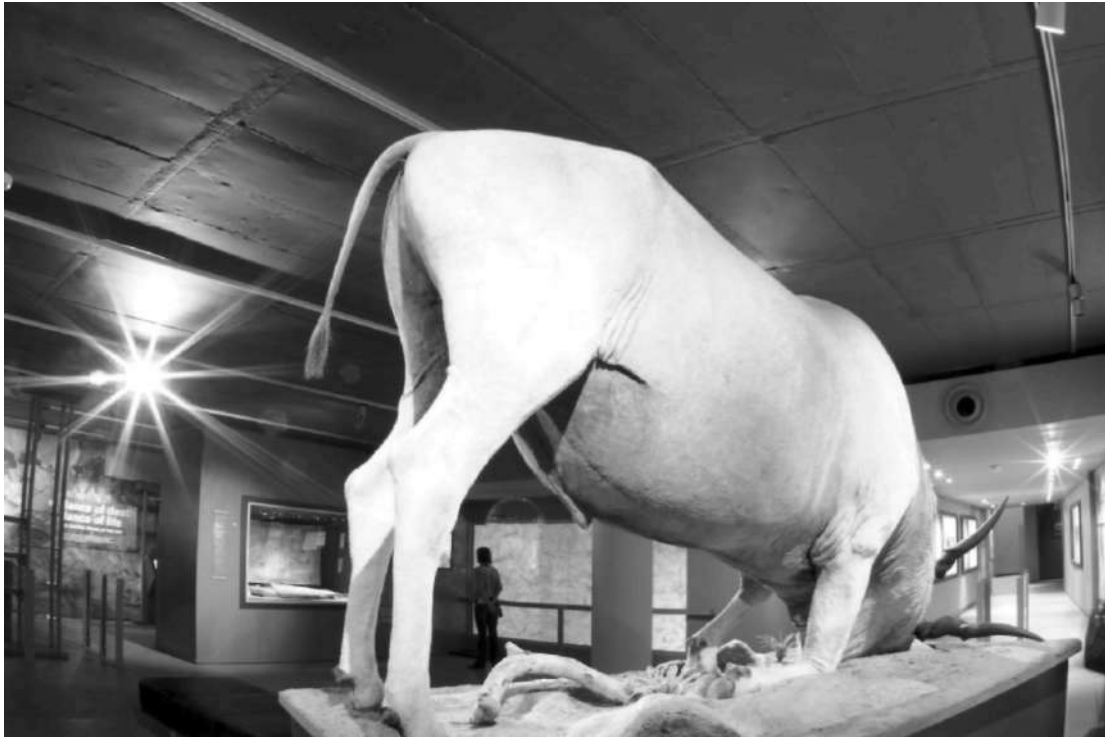


Figure 37

In this connection the attempt to reproduce carved rock art surfaces of the Wildebeeskuil in concrete is less successful. The difference between this and the embroidery or the anthills is that the latter are representations whereas the former verges on the reproduction despite the change in the media. The idea of representation is carried to the ultimate in Willem Boshoff's work (Figure 38). It is an artistic comment on racism, ethnic stereotyping, name calling and exploitation. All in all it is difficult to think of another museum which puts artistic talents to such effect.

The late Michael Brawne used to argue that the Uffizi gallery in Florence designed by Giorgio Vasari as an office for the Medicis and later on transformed into an art gallery has never been surpassed as a model for a museum (1999). The plan of Uffizi just has groups of three or four interconnected rooms but the ensemble is linked by a corridor which overlooks a square. This organization enables the presentation of exhibitions thematically in groups in the interconnected rooms and yet allows the visitor to bypass a theme that may not be of interest to him or her. Since the corridor gives on to a lively public square, ones bearing in the complex is always clear. Furthermore, this strategy provides a valuable relief from what is referred to as museum fatigue. Thanks to the well constructed electronic audio guide which enables one to bypass any particular exhibit at the touch of a button, the Origins Centre is almost a virtual Uffizi. It goes even further in providing a concluding summing up of exhibits for each theme, mostly in the form of a film, for instance the eland hunt and the San spiritual dance. Technology is thus used to effect yet another shift in museology

Interrogating the idea of house, garden and land art

'Architecture is in deep trouble, whereas landscape architecture thrives' wrote the late Geoffrey Jellicoe, a distinguished English architect/landscape architect (Spens: 1992, 12). Since the days of Jellicoe, cursed as it were by the gardening fetish, contemporary landscape design too would appear to be in trouble. With a few exceptions, we seem unable to escape

the manicuring mindset in contemporary landscape architecture. On the other hand, Jellicoe is certainly right in arguing that our object-fixation prevents us from conceiving architecture as a dignified figure in the ground. It is in this respect Wendy Vincent and Geoffrey Armstrong suggest ways in which we can effect a paradigm shift. It is indeed difficult to think of a project which teaches us that landscape, land art, architecture, both interior and exterior all constitute, not several processes, but one continuous process (Figures 39 to 47).



Figure 38



Figure 39

Geoffrey is a land artist working with any material that is readily available. Wendy is a painter, highly knowledgeable about indigenous plants and uses them as an integral element of their land art. The materials used include large rocks that are already embedded in the site, rocks that the neighboring farmers discard, trunks from dead trees or from those that are cut down, often for ecological reasons. Geoffrey sculpts the wood. He identifies the large rocks, excavates around them to reveal their form, and animates them by giving them space. In parallel, he then delicately but single-mindedly, marshals the small stones into extraordinary forms. Here, an existing donga too proved to be an inspiration. These constructions pay indirect homage to primordial geology of the area and the historic constructions of the continent, not to their content but to their unspoken and unwritten language which in many ways is less ambiguous than when spoken or written. The house too is simply another such construction. Operation Wildflower and their artist and horticulturalist friends are their sources of indigenous plant materials. Terraces are formed to tame the steep gradients. An existing stream on the site is also modeled into a variety of water features to irrigate as well as to form marsh and lily ponds and where appropriate rivulets, spouts, gushes and small whirlpools, all with a view to using the sound they make to enhance the totality of the setting rather than just their visual impact. They all seem to lie naturally. There are no pumps, only gravity is used and the water that leaves the site is used by the neighboring farmers for irrigation. The planting has been consistent throughout. Commiphoras, aloes, euphorias, acacia trees, plectranthis (plants that grow in the shade), eucomis (pineapple plant), haemantus (paint brush plant), cotyledons, brachystelma, huernia and stapelias all take their place. The ecology welcomes considerable bird life. Every plant's habitat and micro climatic requirements are carefully considered and placed not to fill spaces but to compose plants, space and the stone and wooden installations to work in a reciprocal way. Space and plants - one is the foil for the other. Ground here is not just the horizontal plane but it is also the vertical plane, in short space in which the installations, water bodies, the house, and the plants are all figures.



Figures 41 and 42

Rarely does one come across a landscape conceived in this spatial way. Layers of plants and installations do not confine the matter beyond, they do not frame them either in a willful way, but achieve what Colin Rowe called phenomenal transparency as opposed to a literal one, the former arouses your curiosity about what is beyond whereas the latter presents it in a plate, in a frontal way (Rowe: 38-43, 60-61).

The house of the two artists is not a machine to live in but yet another plant forming a habitat. So are the furniture/sculptures made of discarded wood. The plan of the house could not be simpler. There is a core of kitchen and bath on the south. On the north are bedrooms, living room/dining connected to the terrace by the most basic of sliding doors and the studio going across the whole depth on the west and is graced by an exquisite lily pond, the entry is on the east between the core and the habitable rooms. The house is visually supported and stabilized by the immediate presence of trees. It is indeed difficult to know where the house begins, where it ends and where the landscape begins. Tectonic qualities of some of the plants, for example the succulents, are allowed to cohabit with the built landscape of the house. In many places they and the furniture/sculptures are allowed to be the protagonists.



Figure 43

The water bodies are not simply arbitrarily shaped-landscape features, each one of them (including the swimming pool) is simultaneously tectonic, framed as they are by either robust concrete or stone or channeled by sensuously carved wood. It is, therefore, possible to imagine a future where more water bodies of different nomenclature being spawned. Landscape here is not maintained but edited as it were, from time to time. This in a sense is the extension of good house-keeping to outdoor rooms. These are acute shifts in the way in which we think conventionally about house and garden.



Figure 44

There is no attempt to unify the disparate elements of the project in any forced way. On the contrary, there is a great deal here that celebrates the heterogeneity. Nevertheless, there is an eagerness to seek out the big picture and ultimately to communicate with the whole world as each mind constructs a different unity. This is nothing short of a gestalt switch. Vincent and Armstrong do not claim much for their work but allow the work to speak for itself. Many who have visited the work simply see it as an important South African heritage. Some see an ecological concern with recycling everything including discarded plants. There is a ritualistic aspect to the way the stones are assembled and to some of us there is also a spiritual content in the sense that there is an attempt to animate inert materials like stone and wood and bring them into beings of some sort. The idea of making evokes in one the phenomenological suggestion that in making, one makes oneself. One would never know who the audience of this landscape is. It is, at the same time, nobody except the artists and everybody as we become willing eavesdroppers in this private world of the artists. Undoubtedly Armstrong and Vincent show an enthusiasm for understanding the smallest of the small and an intense interest in the incident. Landscape here cannot be planned in a premeditated way as feeling is the determining factor. Do we not know that planning often becomes a cold, rational and even an uncreative process as it eliminates spontaneity and response to elements of surprise? Architects such as Le Corbusier and Carlo Scarpa understood this well. Le Corbusier once declared that in the Western World ... everything needs to be thought out in advance, it's fateful and sometimes fatal...⁷. Carlo Scarpa too, when it came to transforming old buildings, would get his assistants to draw the existing building as it is, overlay his intended modifications in colour, discuss the proposal with builders and artisans, revise the proposal in another colour to incorporate their suggestions, with the process continuing until the project is completed." In a similar way Wendy Vincent has mapped the progress of the garden so far in two drawings, one on graph paper and the other

on an overlay on a transparency, a palimpsest as it were, outlining the ethos of the plan and with a determination not to be trapped by an *idée fixe*. After all, as the American philosopher John Dewey put it, "An art form has neither beginning nor end, and the art itself is in the making and not the completion"."

Vincent and Armstrong remind us once again of the importance of art as a paradigm for making forms. Their work seems to transcend the dominant themes of the so-called land art too. Compare now their work here with that of the celebrated spiral jetty by Robert Smithson. Talented as Smithson was, it is no offence to the great man to suggest that the spiral jetty has been designed such a way as to be viewed only from above. Although side views of the jetty are available by boat, they do not provide any uplifting sensations in us. Every fragment of the garden in Magaliesberg can be viewed from everywhere - from above, from below, from the sides, from outside in and from inside out. This is what the late Peter and Alison Smithson would call conglomerate composition.

Armstrong and Vincent will never suggest that they set out to create an African work and it would indeed be a daunting task to convince black Africans or anybody else that this is an African work. But there is no denying that this type of work cannot be executed anywhere else, not because of any technical concerns but quite simply on the grounds of appropriateness and authenticity. Among all our recent attempts to create with locally available materials and indigenous plants, only Armstrong and Vincent have given us this working poetry. Certainly it is their inner necessity which is the main driving force. However, can the forms and content of their land art by osmosis or synchronicity at least be African? Indigenous knowledge is justly receiving considerable attention today. Studies range from African stories of creation, comparative studies of religion, African philosophy, rites of passage and theories about divination. More narrowly focused than these studies, this section of this essay is a modest offering of how indigenous wisdom can have a practical expression. Think of the following lines from the African Story of Creation as outlined by the Chief Executive of the Freedom Park⁸:



Figures 46 and 47

"...The diviner asked the creator about the value of creation. The creator replied by creating the rock. When the diviner returned she felt the rock was not aesthetic enough. The creator replied by creating fire which engulfed the rock. The diviner on returning said rather than the fire and rock expressing aesthetic, they were expressing violence. The creator replied by creating water. The rock, the fire and water produced a big explosion.

As the explosion happened, the fire ran away, to become the sun, the stars, electricity, lightning; the water ran away to become rain, rivers, lakes and oceans and the rock became stones, mountains, the earth. This was the result of creation."

The story goes on in a fascinating way until a paradise has been proclaimed. One does not have to be other-worldly, religious or even spiritual to share in the basic humanity of this joyful description of creation. For our purposes, what is important is the way the project of Armstrong and Vincent resonates with the spirit of this typically African discourse. It also has a family resemblance to the work of artists like Jackson Hlungwani but without the latter's religious overtones.

Their work is paradise found - if not created or proclaimed.



Figure 48

Concluding reflections

Narrative shifts occur under conditions of political and cultural change but telling ones always seem to relate back to history either in the form of completing the incomplete from the past or in the form of inversions. Curiously these inversions do not always represent a rupture - or a violent break with the past or at least in time they are not seen as such. Inversions are more in the form of counterpoints rather than contrasts, with a sense of accelerated but harmonious evolution rather than revolution being the ultimate result. These are the conditions and architectural outcomes that prevail in the present-day South Africa and hence our

reading of substantial narrative shifts in our architecture and urban design. After all, in all aspects of visual culture scholars see in the best of postmodernism continuity between it and the best of modernism. Thus, the incomplete constructivism is rightly upheld as the spiritual progenitor of good examples of today's deconstruction. To refer back to the one-off classicism of Urbino, it owes a great deal to the mainstream evolution of classicism elsewhere, especially in Florence, particularly in the hands of talents such as Brunelleschi. In the calm and un-sensational reversal of ad-hoc planning by the Spatial Development Framework of the University of the Free State and the ability of the younger generation of architects to build on the principles of the older revealed in the student centre there are instances of small and inverse narratives. Likewise, the contrapuntal aspects of Constitutional court in Johannesburg relates at least by professional osmosis to the so-called high-technology court buildings of Richard Rogers. It is almost possible to argue that a number of small and inverse narratives well up and cause something of a typological mutation of court buildings. The phrase 'design influence by osmosis' rather than 'mimicry' is the key to our understanding. The Origins Centre at the University of Witwatersrand shows that such an outlook can be extended to storylines, the inventory of exhibits and their design. Furthermore, there is willingness in our cultural ethos to blur the distinction between arts and craft, academics accept the need to disseminate outcomes of investigation to the public at large, clearly but without dumbing down. Perhaps because of the availability of talents, there also seems to be a preference for representation through artistic reinterpretation as opposed to reproduction. This is in the interest of authenticity. In other words there is merit in an honest and skillful abstraction of the central qualities of indigenous art, using different media such as embroidery, sculpture and installation than in crude reproduction. Finally the work of Geoffrey Armstrong and Wendy Vincent refreshingly interrogates the very idea of garden, land art, and house as being distinct entities. All these are a multitude of small narratives suggested by Lyotard, supplemented by a fair share of inverse narratives.

Notes

- 1 The author is grateful to Raymond Quek for his searching and critical comments. By no means has the author agreed with all of them but has taken on board most of them in revising the article. Where he disagrees with Professor Quek, he has explained the reason for his difference of opinion.
- 2 The word narrative is sometimes translates into *istoria* which is different from *storia* or history. In fact the use of *istoria* in the noun form is very much an Anglophile interpretation whereas the verb form *istoriare* or the past participle *istoriato* is more common in proper Italian usage. In art it denotes decorating a work with historical scenes. So it is a process of telling stories. When the term is extrapolated to architecture it legitimately becomes narrating the story behind various technical, expressive, or formal moves made by the architect.
- 3 There is also a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of art too, but that is a separate issue and will need yet another article. Therefore we confine ourselves to conceptual shifts in the making of city-form.
- 4 This painting is often attributed to Piero della Francesca, but the author for reasons hinted at in the later part of this article does not believe this to be the case.
- 5 To build on the principles of work begun by others is rare in the West and to realize this one simply has to consider the new insertions in the University of East Anglia in England or those in Jefferson's University of Virginia in Charlottesville
For an architectural criticism of the building see, A Museum of Difference, in Architecture South Africa, May/June 2007, pp 82 - 86.
- 7 Quoted in Le Corbusier, Architect of the Century, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1987, p. 285 "See G. Zambonini, Process and Theme in the Work of Carlo Scarpa, Perspecta 20, 1983. " Quoted in Gardens of the Mind, op. cit, p. 95.
- 8 A Freedom Park Trust Document entitled The Story of Creation, 2007, at present in manuscript form

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