

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate ritual in order to establish an intimacy between architecture and its users. The liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church is used as a point of departure, but the study is especially concerned with personal secular ritual.

The project directly addresses urban issues as well as spatial and emotional ones. The intervention is seen as part of a process of architectural proliferation. It takes the existing fabric and current conditions and rather than replacing them, creates a synthesis of elements so as to evolve a new urban condition; i.e. how to grow a piece of city rather than how you build it. The dominant trends of town planning have been based on strong strategies and strong urban form. The medieval townscape as well as the urban settings of traditional communities grew on the basis of weak principles. Strong strategies are reinforced by the eye, the sense of distant control, whereas weak principles give rise to the haptic townscapes of intimacy and participation (Pallasmaa, 2000; 82).

Design decisions were influenced by Pallasmaa's ideas on fragile architecture: it is concerned with real sensory interaction instead of conceptual manifestations. Problems and opportunities are identified on a small scale and the response is focussed on these: it is an architecture that grows and opens up.

The retreat provides a sense of calm in the middle of the bustling city. Our culture aspires to power and domination and this quest characterizes Western architecture as well; architecture speaks a powerful image and impact (Pallasmaa, 2000; 81). The design is seen as a piece of fragile architecture in the sense that it exists quietly within a city block. The design is knitted into the urban fabric and flow patterns of the CBD, especially the pedestrian networks. The architecture of weak structure and image is contextual and responsive. It is concerned with real sensory interaction (Pallasmaa, 2000, 81).

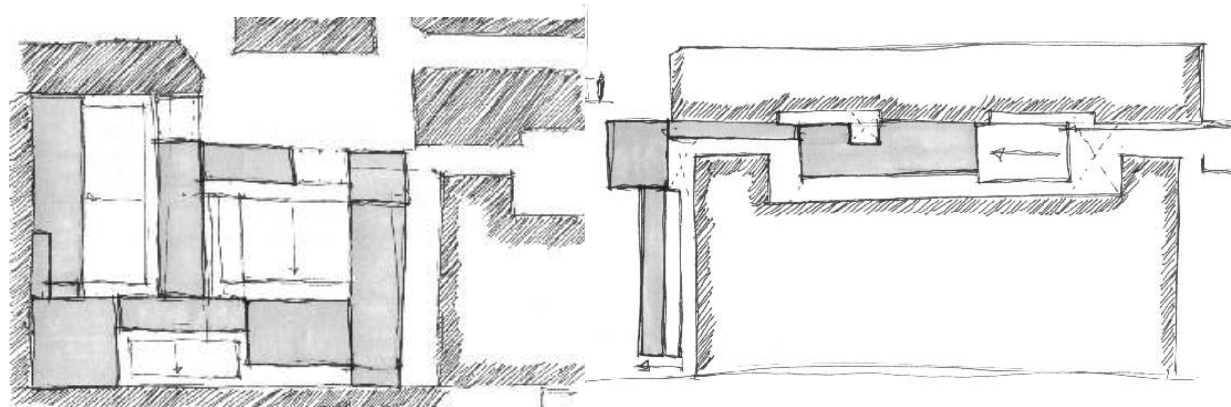
Ritual

Certain activities have an intrinsically ritualistic quality, such as the rites of religious practice. For others, the qualities associated with rituals are imbued by external factors. These activities are the rituals that give shape to our lives (Pawson, 2002; 21). Users make up their own rituals, suggested by existing religious rituals or by intimate experiences suggested by the architecture. Even ordinary daily rituals are carried out with a sacramental attitude.

Rituals gain their power from the act of performance. Unlike the currency of ideas, they do not grow in value or importance by being taught or read about, or discussed. It is the act of doing that we invest with significance (Pawson, 2002; 21). The design forms a stage architecture where an element of tension is introduced by users, or more subtly, by their absence. The relationship between individual and place acquires ritualistic characteristics.

Architectural meaning resides in human experience. It is evoked in the acts of occupying and inhabiting space, in experiences of space, matter, gravity, and light (Pallasmaa, 2001, 51). The role of architecture is not to entertain or thrill but to structure our understanding of the world and of our very existence; to articulate how the world touches us (Pallasmaa, 2001, 51).

63_ Concept sketches of masses and voids, and intervention in pan-handle.

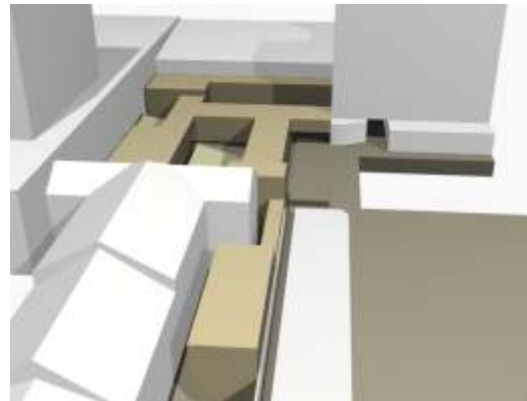


Design

The architecture of the eye detaches and controls, whereas haptic architecture engages and unites. Tactile sensibility replaces distancing visual imagery by enhanced materiality, nearness and intimacy (Pallasmaa, 2000; 79).

The design has a purposeful modesty of scale in relation to the neighbouring building, placing greater importance on the activities within. An architecture of courtesy and attention, it invites us to be humble, receptive and patient observers (Pallasmaa, 2000; 82). The design consists of layers of secrecy, the first being the position of the site, that slowly reveals itself as routes are followed and rituals performed. The idea of secrecy links to the traditional monastery where the architectural work and the life of the monks are essentially hidden from the world. The insertion of the chapel into an existing structure (NLSA), with only the tower suggesting a religious function, places it in the most sacred position on the site.

The design was conceived of ideas based on simplicity. Especially in the meditative spaces (e.g. Chapel and chapter room) a process of reduction was followed to create simplistic and silent spaces that draw visitors towards their own inner thoughts. The retreat is made up of simplistic spaces which are layered to create a multi-sensory experience. Contrast exists between the textures created by a timber and steel screen and the smooth off-shutter concrete walls.



64_ Concept image of the Retreat within the cityblock. 65_ Concept model indicating main public open space.

The design was conceived as a single articulated entity of coherent spaces. The whole is held together by the constancy of an emotional atmosphere. Routes throughout the design are constructed of brushed concrete, with illuminated balustrades where needed. The exterior route that cuts through the common room and chapter room directly links the most sacred space (chapel) and the most private spaces (cells).

In the design there is an interplay of positive and negative volumes, of masses and voids. The void is a vessel for light and shadow, and it also serves as a compositional nexus binding the different masses (Ambasz, 1986; 106). Containment and openness reinforce each other.

Layout and function

Any work of architecture which does not express serenity is a mistake. That is why it is an error to replace the protection of walls with today's intemperate use of enormous glass windows (Ambasz, 1986; 8). The proposed site is surrounded by walls, most notably the 12 m high boundary wall of the Old Mutual Building. The design is respectful of the existing urban fabric by positioning the courtyards adjacent to the boundary walls. In this manner the design becomes interwoven with the city block, forming a continuous and homogeneous urban fabric.

The design acknowledges the typologies of the monastery, specifically the historic ground plan of the quadrangle surrounding an inner courtyard. The design was further influenced by the courtyard typology of the Islamic Medina, specifically how a tightly knit urban fabric that is based on interdependence is formed.

Entrance to the retreat is from the middle section of the Noordvaal Thoroughfare (Level 0). This section of the Thoroughfare is open and is enlarged to form an area for informal trading. This level is a storey higher than the northern edge of the site. All the public functions of the retreat (i.e. multi-use hall, seminar room and offices) are located on the lower level, while the retreat occupies the levels from the mid level and up. On entering the building, visitors may choose between the public and retreat sections.

The ground floor of the currently disused NLSA building is dedicated to public functions, with a multi-use hall and ablution facilities inserted into the southern section. The first and second floors will be used by a School for the deaf. Further public facilities are located in the pan-handle to extend the available space.

The retreat exists around a public open space. This open space has a more intimate scale than Church or Strijdom Squares. Access is controlled through a series of pivot screen doors that may be kept open during the day, giving full public access to the open space. When these doors are closed they form the western edge of the retreat and the open space becomes an exclusive part of the retreat. This space now becomes accessible through various openings in the retreat, most notably the refectory that opens up completely to the open space.

The meditative spaces are grouped together in the middle section of the retreat, with the living areas (refectory, cells, and ablution) on the southern edge of the public open space. In this manner there is a gradual movement from the most sacrosanct space to the meditative spaces and on to the living spaces. At the same time there is a transition from religious ritual to ordinary daily rituals. The repetition of the cells stands in direct contrast to the uniqueness of the meditative spaces. Without similarity we cannot know difference, and repetition is simply comforting (Pawson, 2002: 41).



66_ Concept model indicating the positioning of the courtyards adjacent to the existing boundary walls. 67_ View of the Retreat as seen from the Noordvaal Thoroughfare.

Contextuality

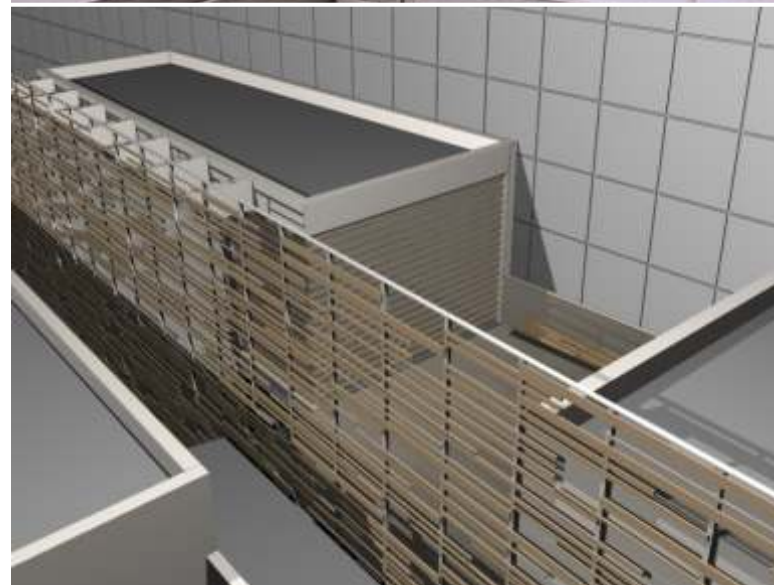
The idea of fragility suggests listening and dialogue (Pallasmaa, 2002: 82).

The design creates awareness of the existence of the site and its surrounding fabric. Historical layering is applied; traces of demolished structures are incorporated into the design. A historic layer of the demolished buildings exists in the traces it leaves on the boundary walls of the neighbouring buildings. In this manner there is a connection to deep time in the design. The design further reveals previously unseen elements. The southern facade of the NLSA building is exposed and becomes the main facade to be seen from the open space. This facade gains added importance as it forms the external skin of the chapel.

Throughout the design, distinction is made between new and existing, but with no unnecessary drama at the junctions. Simple shadow lines distinguish floor slabs from existing facades. However, an interdependence exists between the design and the existing urban fabric. Existing boundary walls are drawn into the site; at some places they become internal walls and new facades are only completed by these existing walls.

The scale of the existing off-shutter concrete wall is not agreeable in proportion to human scale. To make the wall a readable surface, building masses are situated right against it, breaking it down into smaller pieces that are seen from the courtyards and library. Furthermore, in the library a glass facade, that runs parallel to the concrete wall, begins to define the wall as a piece of abstracted nature (SEE FIG. 68).

From the Noordvaal Thoroughfare the full scope of the off-shutter concrete wall is still visible. The western facades of the retreat form continuous, abstracted planes that begin to compete with the scale of the off-shutter concrete wall. A timber and steel screen runs the length of the chapter room and audience room, and extends above the roof, while the facade of the common room and library is treated as a single plane by means of a Corten screen that covers the whole facade.



68_ Image of the library situated against the Old Mutual boundary wall. 69_ Image of the courtyard situated between the Audience and Chapter Rooms.

Courtyards

The courtyards are enclosed on all four sides with high walls, forming deep spaces which force a connection to the vertical. They form open enclosures or secluded gardens, which relates to the Islamic notion of compartmentalized and successive garden spaces (Ambasz, 1986; 105). The resulting outdoor spaces each have their own character and varying degrees of privacy. The largest courtyard is an open public space.

The second largest courtyard is surrounded by cells on three sides, with the red face-brick wall of an existing building forming the fourth. The entire courtyard is covered in timber decking, with a curved off-shutter concrete bench situated near its centre. This curve establishes a link with the semi-circular wall in the chapel, visually linking the most sacred and private areas in the retreat.

The more private courtyards are situated adjacent to the off-shutter concrete wall. This is visually the most secluded area on site, providing privacy from even the adjacent office buildings. The courtyard which is formed between the chapter room and audience room is further screened from movement in the retreat by a timber and steel screen to become the most private courtyard. In this courtyard the floor surface and balustrade is treated as a single element as the Cor-ten strips on the floor continue in the vertical direction. The Cor-ten strips further conceal a skylight that brings light into the Library

70_ Concept image of a courtyard indicating the response to the existing fabric. 71_ Image of model indicating a courtyard space surrounded by the accommodation area.



The building was designed as an open structure where intimate interior spaces relate to the existing exterior. Indoor spaces flow out into the decked courtyards without level changes, creating a strong indoor - outdoor connections. The same materials are used inside and outside where possible. To do so prevents the junction between one material and another from stopping the eye. In this way, a further connection between the interior and exterior is created. Concrete is used as a seamless surface; floor slabs rise up and become balustrades.

Courtyards are specifically not shaded to address winter conditions and to force visitors to move between courtyards. Through the process of diurnal rotation, a strong secular ritual occurs with opposite patterns followed during winter and summer months. The curved bench in the courtyard further acts as a large sun-dial, as a shadow progresses from its one end to the other.

Transition

The tower, together with the steps leading to the lower level, has the added function of providing a moment of transition away from the transience of the outside into the stillness of the retreat. The tower is situated in the traditional position, but is visually separated from the chapel to serve as an announcement of the intervention to persons using the arcade. At the top it houses a bell that signals the opening and closing of the retreat, and announces religious services. This creates a sense of structure or order for both the inhabitants of the retreat and people in the surrounding areas.

A continuous concrete floor surface, leads visitors from the tower, down a flight of stairs into the entrance area, then gradually up the cloister ramps and finally into the chapel. The seamlessness of the floor surface functions as a city carpet that draws visitors from the outside into the most sacred space. Illuminated balustrades that wrap around the multi-use hall and chapel further encourage visitors to explore the secrecy of the place.

Movement

The different route possibilities in the design add another layer of secrecy to the building. Visitors discover options as they move through the retreat. Different movement tempo's exist, with some routes linking directly to the chapel and others offering the possibility of wandering through the building with places to sit and rest or contemplate.

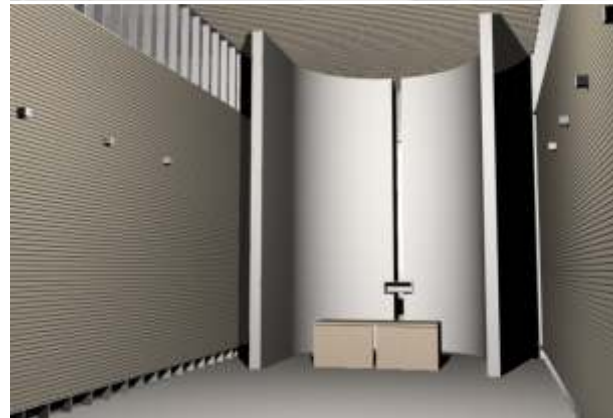
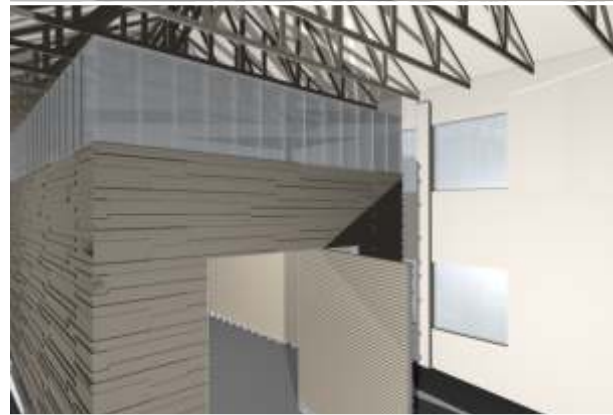
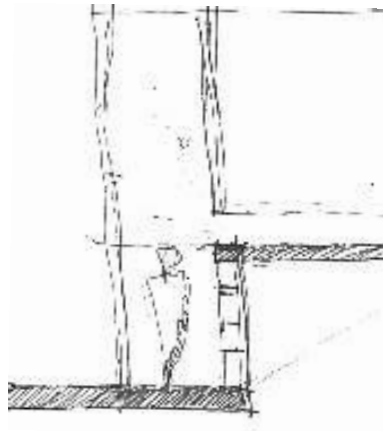
Routes throughout the design directly address the human skeletal and muscular system. Movement along stairs or ramps focuses the vision of the user on that which is in front of him. Moving down the stairs in the narrow slit between the chapter room and common room, the user's vision is led directly towards the chapel and, more specifically, to the tabernacle.

Chapel

The garden is the myth of the Beginning and the Chapel that of the end (Ambasz, 1986; 108).

The insertion of new functional and symbolic structures short-circuits the initial architectural logic and opens up the emotional and expressive range (Pallasmaa, 2000; 82). The chapel is conceived as a box inserted into the NSLA building. The western facade wraps around the sacristy in a semi-circle of translucent glass. This curve is a deviation from the linear lines of the chapel and the rest of the retreat. In this manner the focus is placed on the altar and tabernacle, while in the cloister the curve draws visitors around to the next ramp, which leads to the entrance of the chapel.

The interior of the chapel is simplified as far as possible, reducing the elements within the space. Paradoxically, this process of simplification increases visual impact. The rituals performed in this space are allowed to come to the foreground and to become exceptionally meaningful and valued. Users are further drawn towards their own inner thoughts and introspective experiences.



72_ Interior view of the Cloister. 73_ Entrance to the Chapel. 74_ Interior view of the Chapel.

The walls of the chapel consist of three planes of timber cladding that seem to float above the concrete floor. This is achieved by placing a band of strip windows around the base of the chapel. The glass sections are divided by structural stainless steel fins which disappear on elevation. Concealed down-lighters further throw a soft light around the base of the chapel. Another band of strip windows is situated at the top of the chapel space. The idea of verticality is further strengthened by the walls ending just beneath the exposed roof trusses of the NLSA building. Where the chapel is concealed in mystery from outside the retreat, the opposite is true from the cloister, where the strip windows allow views into the retreat and the translucent facade of the sacristy begins to reveal activities within.

The apse wall of the chapel consists of two free-standing white planes forming a semi-circle that projects out around the altar. These two elements reflect the morning light that enters through the translucent wall of the Sacristy, light is then diffused around the tabernacle and altar. The planes are separated by a tall slot, and unified by the tabernacle that is inserted into this slot. The altar is made of roughly hewn stone slabs and the tabernacle of stainless steel sheets. The chapel is devoid of imagery, to make allowances for visitors from various religious backgrounds, but abstraction is used to communicate with Roman Catholic visitors. The stations of the cross are formed by white pre-cast squares that project out of the timber clad walls.

The exterior walls of the chapel are textured through the use of timber sections of various lengths and depths, creating a tactile experience. The interior walls consist of timber sections, which through their precise spacing become smooth and readable as single planes.

Conclusion

Buildings attempt to conquer the foreground instead of creating a supportive background for human activities and perceptions. Architectural projects of our day are often impudent and arrogant, and seems to have lost the virtue of architectural neutrality, restraint, and modesty (Pallasmaa, 2000; 84).