

CHAPTER THREE

Shrine

A Discussion of the
New Memorial

Chapter Three provides a discussion of the new Women's Memorial which is currently under construction on Lillian Ngoyi Square. The museum commemorates the women's march of 1956 and provides a local precedent for the discussion of architecture that addresses the feminine from a programmatic as well as spatial perspective.

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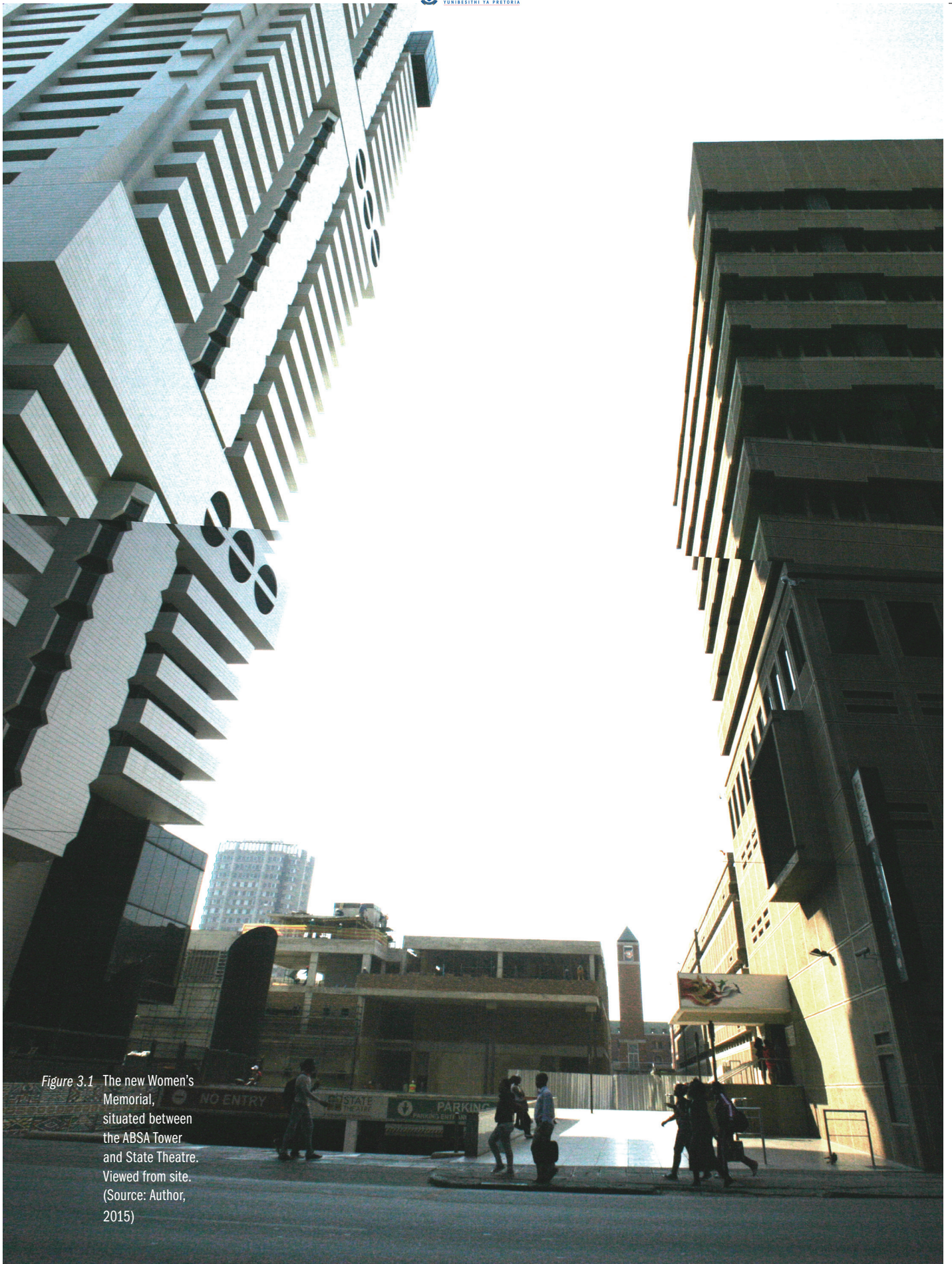
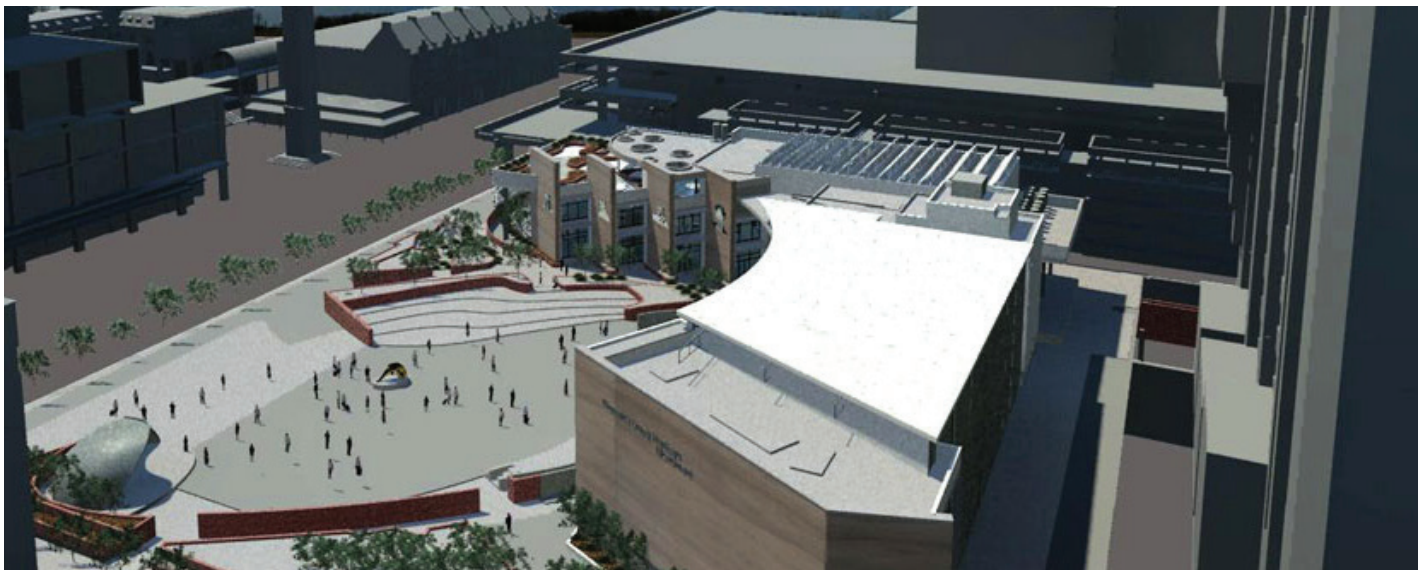
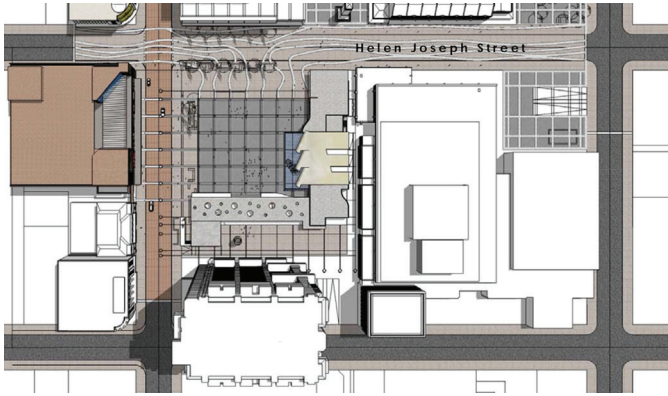


Figure 3.1 The new Women's Memorial, situated between the ABSA Tower and State Theatre. Viewed from site. (Source: Author, 2015)

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Figure 3.2 Initial masterplan proposal by Mashabane Rose Architects. (Source: dbm Architects, 2015)

THE WOMEN'S LIVING MEMORIAL: A DISCUSSION

Figure 3.3 The Women's Living Memorial with public square (Source: dbm Architects, 2015)

Introduction

The new Women's Living Memorial, currently under construction at the time of writing, provides a starting point for discussions related to the expression of the feminine in architecture. The museum commemorates the women involved in the march against the pass laws during the Apartheid regime in 1956. The building presents an opportunity for the creation of an 'other' architecture through considerations of the feminine in space-making but despite these intentions, the building's success in translating notions of the feminine into architecture have not been successful. This is a disappointment in the context of post-Apartheid memorial architecture in South Africa. An analysis of the building from an architectural and programmatic

perspective is provided in order to understand the thinking behind decisions that were made.

Background

The Women's Living Memorial is located on Lillian Ngoyi Square, previously called Strijdom Square. The square served as the meeting point for a protest march in 1956, during which four women, including Lillian Ngoyi, led a group of 20 000 women to the Union Buildings. There, the women handed a note of resistance to the then Prime Minister, JG Strijdom in protest of the pass laws. The new museum has been dedicated to the memory of this march and to the women who participated in it. Construction began in mid-2014, with completion estimated for the beginning of 2016.

Figure 3.4 The Women's Living Memorial: View of the fifth elevation (Source: dbm Architects, 2015)

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Unpacking the architecture of the new museum

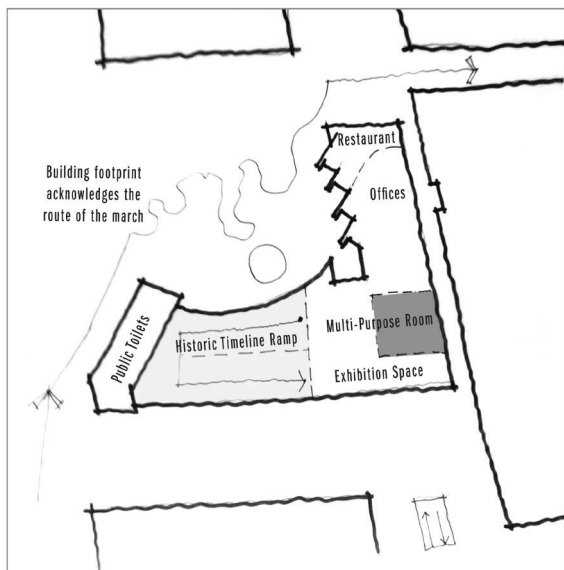
The museum is a three storey, white painted building with a glazed north facade. It has four western facing rammed-earth wall panels, each imprinted with the face of a different woman leader of the march.

An interview was undertaken with the architects of the new museum in order to better understand the architectural intentions (Goosen, 2015). Architecturally, the building is intended to create an edge to what has always been the awkwardly defined open space of the square. The inner curved wall is intended to be representative of the female as an organic and encompassing shape. Conceptually, the notion of time underpins the design,

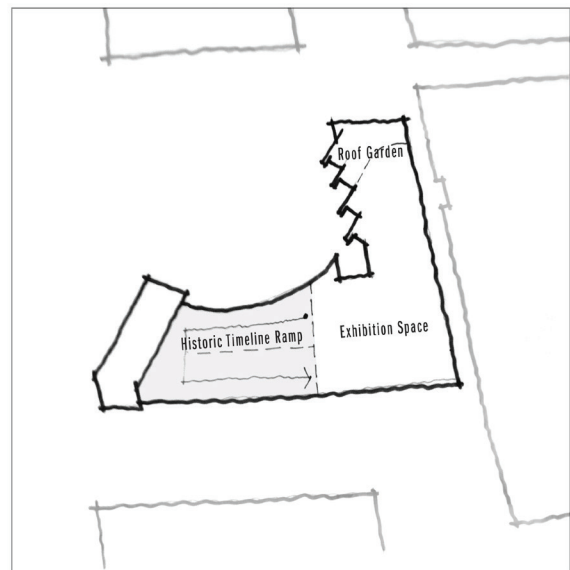
beginning in the new square and moving into the building. Starting at a speaker's corner at the edge of the site, the journey circles into the square, pulling one towards the entrance where a ramp moves through all three levels that contains exhibitions telling the stories of the women involved in the march as well as a chronological account of the plight of black women during the Apartheid Era. The ramp contains the main exhibition spaces with secondary, interactive exhibition spaces located on the ground floor (Goosen, 2015).

Community meetings were held to determine the best programmatic resolution of the building and the women involved expressed

Figure 3.5 A sketch analysis of the spatial arrangement of the memorial. (Source: Author: 2015)



Ground Floor Layout



First Floor Layout

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Figure 3.6 Construction of the Women's Living Memorial, March 2015. (Source: Author, 2015)

the need for training spaces in addition to the exhibition spaces. A lecture room is provided, along with four retail stands intended for sales of goods created in the seminars. The aesthetics, design and construction time-frame as well as the programme of this building were all highly influenced by political and bureaucratic agendas.

In his book, *African Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Jonathan Noble discusses the need for African architecture to address new 'spatial types which

dethrone... symbols of power; as well as forms of public transparency through the creation of inclusive public spaces and participatory discourses' (Noble, 2011:264). The architectural resolution of the new memorial has not managed to convey the highly specific character needed for this subject matter. A building such as this, which is representative of a marginalised and delicate part of South Africa's history, should not have such a dominant yet generic character. A highly specific aesthetic and approach to space-making needs to become evident.

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Figure 3.7 Construction of the Women's Living Memorial on Lillian Ngoyi Square, March 2015. (Source: Author, 2015)

The buildings in the immediate context of the new museum have hegemonic, oppressive natures. These surrounding buildings (the State Theatre, ABSA Office Tower and the Sammy Marks Shopping Centre) were all built with the intention of displaying their patron's economic or political power and each building asserts a strong agenda with a singular perspective. The Women's Memorial appears to

have continued this tradition. Its character is as dominating as that of its neighbours without fostering any kind of individual identity. The history of the square itself is one that is politically charged but the architecture of the new museum pays little attention to the events that have occurred here before, choosing instead to propagate the tradition of imposing a grand national narrative onto this space in the

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centre of the city. The edges of the square were often seen as problematic, providing little activation for the open space. While the new museum intends to create an active edge to the square, the rigid boundary between inside and outside means that little activity occurs on these edges. What is created in reality, is another square with little programming and no edge conditions as means of activation.

In order to create a space of relations and interactions, the inner functions should extend outward and embrace the public realm, creating graded thresholds that invite the passer-by to enter. The new building's footprint on the square creates uncomfortable alleyways between the existing buildings and itself. Conceptually, the building has made use of generic tactics to resolve a brief with such a

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Figure 3.8 Uncomfortable alleyways are created between the new memorial and the State Theatre and ABSA Tower. (Source: De Verediciis, 2015)

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specific history and agenda. The lecture room and retail spaces do not interact spatially with the exhibition side of the building. In fact, the two wings seem to be unrelated to one another. Without a more established system of management for this section, the lecture rooms and retail spaces could easily lose their original intentions, appearing to be political lip-service rather than true agencies for change. In comparison to the rigorous process that was undertaken for the selection of the design for the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg, it is of great concern as to why a national design competition was not also held for this building. Lacking the input from appropriate and experienced architects, this museum is a missed opportunity in the context of memorial architecture in South Africa.

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Programmatic Analysis

‘Post-modern perspectives in contemporary critical philosophy have wished to oppose grand and totalising narratives of history, [politics] and society’
 (Noble, 2011:263).

The women’s struggle during Apartheid must be understood as a sub-narrative to the grand narrative of Apartheid and it is essential that these sub-narratives are acknowledged when telling the stories of our past. The memorial does well to acknowledge this marginalised narrative and these intentions should be commended while more is done to expose the sub-narratives of our history for the future.

The predominant concern regarding the memorial is therefore the manner in which this narrative is expressed and communicated through the architectural and programmatic resolution. While it is of great importance that the (his)story of the women is told, memorials, by their very nature, do little to change the current condition or provide solutions for the future. The museum does well to shed light onto experiences of the past but this sub-narrative is told through a single, permanent exhibition. This kind of exhibition is not an activity that engages with the everyday activities of

city dwellers and it provides little invitation for repeat visits. While this is problematic, it also presents opportunities: The location of a memorial in such a central part of the city could create a place of memory that is easily accessible to city-dwellers. Many people cannot afford to take a trip to the outskirts of a city to visit a museum such as the Apartheid museum. By placing a museum in the city, it provides the opportunity for chance encounters that would have a broader effect. But through further analysis, the museum does not provide an holistic representation of this sub-narrative:

In her article about the memorial, Gail Smith of the Mail & Guardian discusses Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi’s TED talk (Smith, 2014). In the talk, Ngozi explains that reducing complex people, places and situations to a “single story” diminishes their complexity and thwarts our capacity to connect as human equals. In repeatedly telling a single story, she says, we “... *show people only as one thing, and that is what they become. Stripped of the complexity of their histories, their contexts and their other struggles, the full story of the women of 1956 has been rendered incomplete*” (Ngozi, quoted in

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Smith, 2014). Jonathan Noble discusses how it is essential to realise that functionality in architecture is open to social contestation and it therefore becomes 'complex, multiple and divergent' (2011:263). The contemporary architecture of South Africa needs to acknowledge these multiplicities within its space making. Other stories that relate to the women's narrative should also be addressed by the memorial: In the Strydom massacre, which occurred on the square in 1988, the first person to be shot by Barend Strydom was a woman. This presents the opportunity for discussion of other factors that affected women in South Africa. This has the potential to be done through an event that occurred in the same space as the women's march but these other narratives are ignored. The building therefore does little to acknowledge the multiplicities of experiences of women in South Africa and it does so by creating spaces that are inflexible to future needs that the programme might require. Addressing space as a consequence of interrelations between people would have brought richness to the spaces which feel, instead, to be static spaces representing a singular, static story.

And so it is from this standpoint that this dissertation defines the primary questions for investigation.

How is architecture able to represent the feminine by addressing the ways that women use and understand space in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa? How does this building address these concerns programmatically, so that it is able to impact the future experiences of women in South Africa?





Figure 3.9 Construction of the memorial, April 2015. (Source: De Veredicis, 2015)